

**Technoference: what drives
our smartphone addiction,
and how is our increasing
dependency on these devices
affecting the quality of our
relationships?**

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This essay will pose the question: what drives our smartphone addiction, and how is our increasing dependency on these devices affecting the quality of our relationships? I will investigate the growing concerns caused by our ongoing endeavour to absorb the relentless bombardment of notifications ceaselessly vying for our attention, looking at how our obsession with these devices is bordering on an epidemic, and what the ramifications of our excessive use can lead to. I will explore the psychology behind why we are becoming transfixed by smartphones, and as a result, momentarily disengaging with the people around us. Ultimately, I will argue why it is that instead of keeping us connected, this very technology may perhaps be disconnecting us from one another, and subsequently posing a threat to our relationships.

However, we must first acknowledge that the advent of smartphones has brought with it a multitude of benefits. Never before have we possessed the ability to instantly access news, consume content on the move, or search for answers to practically any question we can possibly think of, all from a portable device small enough to fit into our pockets. One could also argue that our smartphones have afforded us the opportunity to communicate with people across the world, and are therefore actually keeping us more connected to one another. In fact, a smartphone survey of more than 14,000 participants, conducted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in 2017, indicated that 82 per cent of people aged over 66-75, and 79 per cent of people aged 76 and over, find their phones keep them connected, and aren't a distraction (Kylie Andrews, 2017). There are numerous other benefits to owning this now-ubiquitous device. An anonymous participant in the aforementioned survey said, 'I need my phone so that I know my ageing dad, single parent brother, Aspergers brother, teenage children and cycling husband can contact me. My partner and I often use our smartphones together ... So our phones don't always isolate us from each other but become points of connection in real life.' (Anonymous, Kylie Andrews, 2017) This technology has created opportunities to easily maintain

communication over long-distance relationships, and the ability for anyone to be immediately contactable, regardless of where they are. When looking at statistics such as these, and the positive attributes that smartphones can provide, it seems that they should instead be positively affecting our relationships. However, in his essay about the everyday intrusions and interruptions of technology in couple and family relationships, Brandon T McDaniel says, “although there is no doubt that technology can be used in a variety of positive ways (e.g., communication, shared leisure time, life management), with so many technological devices in and around family life, it is likely that negative effects will emerge – even from normative use.” (McDaniel 2015, p. 232)

The negative impact that smartphones pose on relationships is the potential for a disruption in our real-world interactions, and a breakdown in face-to-face conversations. This is due to the situations in which we choose to turn to these devices, and the moments that they are potentially disrupting. The Deloitte Mobile Consumer Survey of 2017, which polled a nationally representative sample consisting of over 2000 consumers aged 18-75, says that our smartphones are ‘the first thing we touch in the morning and the last thing we see before bed – our smartphone use remains high, but how we use them is changing.’ (Drumm, White, Swiegers, Davey, 2017, pg. 23) The real problem is not necessarily with the actual devices themselves, but instead with the way in which they have the capacity to cause interruptions, and distract us from those whom we might choose to ignore in favour of our phones. And so the reality is that smartphones may have the potential to create fractures in relationships, and leave people wishing their partners could be more emotionally available. (McDaniel, 2015) One person in the ABC survey stated, ‘I feel my marriage has suffered due to the smartphone and my partner’s constant use of it – she uses it in front of the TV, immediately gets up to check a text when the ding goes, even if we are sitting down as a family and having a meal.’ (Anonymous, Kylie Andrews, 2017) The resulting interference sees people squandering time that could instead be spent on their relationships, and even worse, ‘losing the art of conversation and real human interaction.’ (Mescall, 2017) Our smartphones also increase the likelihood of constant interruptions between couples. Another anonymous participant in the ABC survey said,

'My 30-year-old children and their partners are too distracted by their phones and often are not listening to conversations.' (Anonymous, Kylie Andrews, 2017) Simply put, turning to one's smartphone at the expense of real-world social interactions has the potential to negatively impact on our relationships.

This impact is partially due to the fact that we often believe we can maintain a social interaction while also dividing our attention to our phones. However, despite thinking we can multitask, we actually can't. 'Much recent neuroscience research tells us that the brain doesn't really do tasks simultaneously, as we thought (hoped) it might. In fact, we just switch tasks quickly.' (Nancy K Napier, 2014) This means that because the brain isn't actually capable of dedicating its resources to both tasks simultaneously, we're not completely paying attention in these social situations. McDaniel states, 'The present-absent paradox points to how we cannot engage in a conversation and simultaneously text or call someone else.' (McDaniel, 2015, p. 233) So then how exactly are smartphones affecting the quality of our relationships?

Psychologist Dr Guy Winch Ph.D. says, 'When a conversation, meal, or romantic moment is disrupted because of a text, email, or any other task, the message is, "What I'm doing on my phone is more important than you right now," or, "I'm more interested in my phone than in you," or, in some cases, "you're not worthy of my attention."' (Guy Winch, 2015) The term for this 21st century problem is known as technoferece. This describes the interference of technology in relationships due to everyday intrusions and interruptions caused by these devices. This behaviour is more colloquially referred to as phubbing, a term coined by a team of language experts in May of 2012 at the University of Sydney, Australia. Phubbing describes 'the act of snubbing someone in a social setting by looking at your phone instead of paying attention.' (Mescall, 2017) By giving this recent phenomenon a more accessible name, it has entered the mainstream, and raised awareness of this growing concern. The reason why this is such a problem, Winch explains, is because 'the other person is likely to experience such moments as rejections that technoferece can literally impact their psychological health.' The more we continually experience these moments, the more they impact on

our mental health, because these rejections ‘tend to be extremely painful, as your brain responds the same way it does to physical pain.’ (Guy Winch, 2015) This suggests that an action as ostensibly insignificant as a partner or friend checking a message mid-conversation can greatly impact the other person’s feelings. This can in fact result in a drop in mood, a blow to one’s self-esteem, or even lead to anger and resentment. When talking about their family, one anonymous participant in the ABC survey said, ‘Now when they reject me for their phones, by pretending interest in my own, I can better hide my sadness and maintain my dignity. I was happier and more fulfilled before they were invented.’ These rejections are very real, and can pose a significant emotional impact to our loved ones. What’s worse, the longer these moments are left to proliferate, the more they can lead to conflict, dissatisfaction in relationships, and even symptoms associated with depression. ‘Most likely, such conflict and relational aggression emerge as partners become upset with how the time spent on these media displaces time that could be spent on the relationship, as well as increases the chance that use will interrupt interactions between partners.’ (McDaniel, 2015, pp. 232-33)

Perhaps we are jeopardising our relationships in favour of a new, and very different kind of relationship – an almost symbiotic relationship that we are forming with our smartphones. Our lives have become so phone-centric that we feel genuine anxiety when we reach into our pockets only to find them empty. In some instances, we even experience phantom vibrating in our pockets when our phones aren’t even there. In a sense, our smartphones have practically become an extension of ourselves. We love them to the point where we keep them within reach at all times, and quite often will sleep with them beside us, putting us in a state of perpetual contact. (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). In a Digital Detox run by Life Matters on the ABC Radio Network, participants were disturbed to discover that they significantly underestimated how excessively they used their phones on a daily basis, often simply because they subconsciously reached for their phones out of habit. Unsurprisingly, younger generations, in particular young adults, are much heavier users, and admit to constantly checking their phones. The ABC Smartphone Survey shows that young adults spend more than three hours a day on their phones. They check their phones

every 15-30 minutes, and 42 per cent of them use their phones while simultaneously looking at another screen. (Kylie Andrews, 2017) These statistics are quite alarming, as they indicate just how much time is spent disconnected from those around us. However, somewhat reassuringly, many people can at least recognise that their smartphone use is problematic. Almost 70 per cent of young adults who participated in this survey admitted to excessively using their phones. In 2017 alone, results indicated that Australians checked their phones an unfathomable 80 million times more than the previous year. The number of young adults using their phones during mealtimes is 70 per cent, and the total figures combined equate to 1.2 million household meals that are interrupted every single evening as a direct result of smartphone use. (Drumm, White, Swiegers, Davey, 2017) The fact is, these devices have become so intertwined with our everyday lives that, despite the fact that smartphones are still a relatively new technology, we have become so reliant on them that they have become practically indispensable. We honestly believe that we couldn't live without them to the point where our use is perhaps becoming addictive. So why do we use our phones in this way if we know they pose the potential to be disruptive or harmful? Where does this addiction stem from? The answer may lie deep within the brain.

Until now, science has shown that dopamine is a chemical produced by our brains, which can be linked to an increase in pleasure. However, new research shows that 'dopamine causes seeking behaviour.' (Susan Weinschenk, 2012) This results in a desire to seek out information. By making you curious, dopamine sparks the desire to explore new ideas. And of course, smartphones have given us the ability to do so with great ease. In an interview for View From The Top, a talk presented by the Stanford Graduate School of Business, former senior executive for Facebook, Chamath Palihapitiya, stated that 'the short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works,' (Palihapitiya, 2017) While the release of dopamine that a smartphone can trigger may not be as intense as that of a narcotic substance, or the addiction a gambler may experience, the results are actually quite similar. (Trevor Haynes, 2018) There is an increase in positive social stimuli, which in turn reinforces the very behaviour that led to it. By providing us with limitless

access to social stimuli, smartphones have effectively created a machine capable of producing a constant influx of dopamine. The problem then is that 'it's easy to get in a dopamine-induced loop. Dopamine starts you seeking, then you get rewarded for the seeking which makes you seek more.' (Susan Weinschenk, 2012) Social media platforms in particular will feed this addiction by leveraging 'the very same neural circuitry used by slot machines and cocaine to keep us using their products as much as possible.' (Trevor Haynes, 2018). In his talk, Palihapitiya describes how these social media tools are 'eroding the core foundations of how people behave by, and between, each other.' (Palihapitiya, 2017) Platforms such as Instagram are exploiting this by employing questionable techniques such as withholding a person's notifications, and then releasing them all at once in order to elicit a stronger response. This technique can manipulate our emotions, and reinforce this loop we find ourselves trapped in.

One could argue that the problem does not necessarily lie with the devices themselves. After all, these are amazing, powerful tools, which have opened up possibilities never before conceivable. We now live in a time when it is virtually impossible to consider disposing of something as indispensable as a smartphone. But we don't need to resort to an action as drastic as parting with our devices, when instead both the problem and the solution lie with how and when we use them. Smartphones don't necessarily pose as great a threat to the user as they do to the person being phubbed. They can be less intrusive and detrimental when used outside of social interactions, because they're not causing the interruptions that are capable of creating conflict in relationships. Instead, the danger comes from their use in particular social situations. This is due to how family, friends, and partners can perceive this use. Ultimately, in order to prevent our relationships from being affected by technoference, we must reconsider the situations in which we turn to our little, glowing screens. Since we now understand that we are at risk of becoming legitimately addicted to using our smartphones, which increases our dependency on them, we must break this cycle by limiting their use around others. Otherwise, this behaviour can affect our state of emotional wellbeing and mental health, and pose a serious threat to the quality of our relationships.

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