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RESEARCH

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Screen time: why we can't stop checking our phones

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Dr Maxi Heitmayer is a Social Psychologist and Teaching Fellow in the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science at LSE. His research focuses on the situated use of technologies and especially smartphones.

Our smartphones don't distract us, we distract ourselves by constantly checking them. This is the argument put forward by **Dr Maxi Heitmayer**, whose research investigates the unconscious habits we've developed when using our phones and how we can tackle them.

When was the last time you checked your phone and scrolled through your notifications? Chances are, the last time you did this, you didn't even realise it. "Lots of people have developed certain patterns and habits when using their phones. Some of these interactions are conscious but many are unconscious and automatic," explains Dr Maxi Heitmayer.

Now a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science at LSE, Dr Heitmayer started investigating how we interact with our smartphones as a PhD student who had grown up with the advent and boom of social media.

Against a maelstrom of media stories about the addictive nature of smartphones, Dr Heitmayer initially set out to study how people use their phones to gain insight into how technology firms could make them less disruptive.

However, he quickly discovered the issue was not with the hardware of smartphones but with the people using them.

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"Everyone believes their phone is distracting them but our research shows that, actually, users are distracting themselves. If you put your phone on to silent and then check it proactively there's no way for any designer to combat that," he says.

Getting a handle on our habits

In total, the research team surveyed 1,363 households, and the findings were presented to the Tanzanian government. These will be published in detail in an upcoming paper but, Dr Pani says that, overwhelmingly, people desperately want full regularisation of property rights and the title deeds for the land they live on.

In fact, Dr Heitmayer's research shows that a staggering 89 per cent of smartphone interactions are initiated by the user, with only 11 per cent prompted by an alert from the phone.

Further analysis shows that about a quarter of smartphone interactions are while the phone is on locked screen – with users frequently picking up or glancing at their phones to check for notifications.

Dr Heitmayer finds that people are more likely to check their phones when switching between activities. For example, in between sending out an email and moving onto the next task on their to-do list. They also check their phones more frequently during particularly stressful work "'to give their minds a break'" or during dull tasks such as commuting.

To carry out this research, Dr Heitmayer analysed the smartphone use of 37 participants aged 21 to 29 years old. Participants were provided with small cameras fixed on glasses enabling them to film their everyday phone use. Over 200 hours of video was recorded and analysed.

"I watched the videos back with the participants and saw their honest and frequent surprise at how often they were checking their phones. Often, they had no idea why they were picking them up. This led to a rerouting of my research. It's a fallacy to believe technology will solve this problem for us. Nobody is going to be able to design a phone in a 'better' way if we continue to use them the way we do currently; we need to develop ourselves and our habits to use these things more productively," he says.

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A mobile education

So how can we do this? Dr Heitmayer believes the answer is in digital literacy education from a young age. There's lots of information for younger people about not getting your personal data stolen or on how to protect against online grooming, but Dr Heitmayer also believes we need education on how to put our phones down and switch off from them.

"The analogy I often use is cars," he says. "Cars are really useful, but we don't just let anyone use them as they're incredibly dangerous, too. We make people get a driving licence and go through a training process which teaches them how to use cars in the right way. I'm not saying we need a smartphone licence, but we do need training on how to use these things and how to put them down – and this should be done at the earliest age possible."

Return of the brick phone?

But are we already taking matters into our own hands? With increasing talk of "digital detoxes" - where people take a break from technology - and **the comeback of more basic phones** with internet (often nicknamed "brick phones" after their cumbersome design), does Dr Heitmayer believe we will see large-scale backlash against smartphones?

In short, no. Although he has seen an increasing trend amongst some of his students to use two phones - a simple phone without internet for emergencies while out and about - and a smartphone to use for pleasure while at home, he doesn't think smartphones will see a significant drop in use.

"Smartphones are the single most powerful tool that we have invented. They serve all our purposes in our private lives and professional lives; we use them to pay for public transport, for our groceries, to organise a technician to fix the plumbing... smartphones are just too useful for us all to stop using them."

With smartphones seemingly here to stay, the next step for Dr Heitmayer is to identify and define the environmental factors that trigger us to pick up our phones so we can better understand our habits and ultimately become the master of them. ■

Dr Maxi Heitmayer was speaking to Charlotte Kelloway, Media Relations Manager at LSE.