

Smartphone usage: The era of the dashboard

On average, a smartphone user touches their device thousands of times a day. Over the course of a year that's over a million touches (consisting of taps, swipes and clicks), based on the average 2,617 touches per day.

Over the next week, the tens of millions of smartphone owners in the UK are very likely to spend in excess of one billion hours on their devices. Average usage per day is 148 minutes. The way in which this time is spent will span a range of activity as varied as Apple and Google's app stores: from productivity tasks to work communications, from self-improvement to self-promotion, to finding one's way via GPS or a self-help guide.

Smartphones have moulded our behaviours, for better and worse. Their impact, understandably, has become part of the national conversation.

The perception of smartphone over-use is mainstream

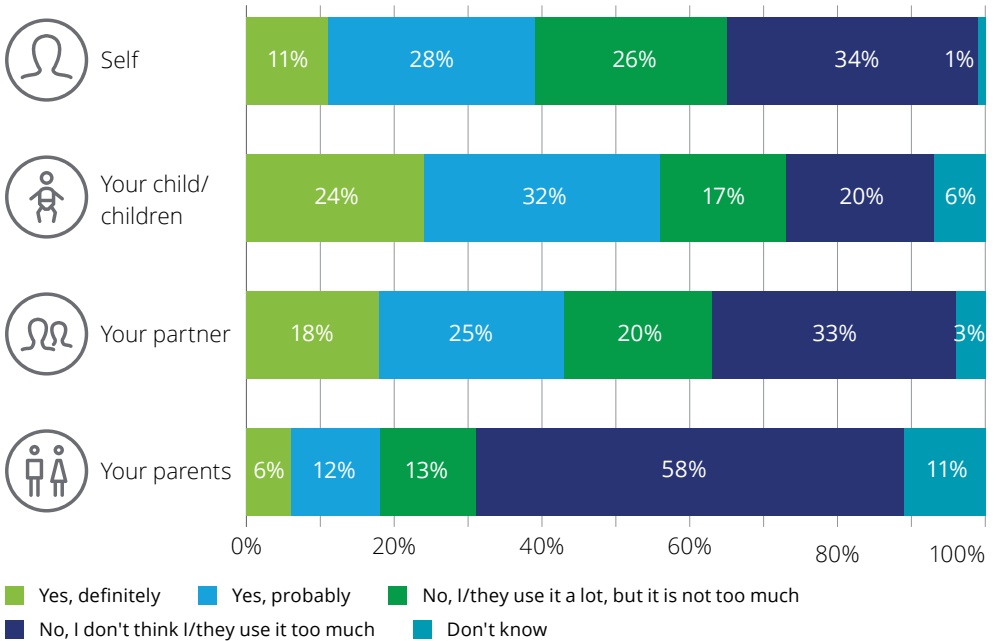
In June this year, for example, Simon Cowell revealed that he had abstained from smartphones for almost a year: "I literally have not been on my phone for ten months". He noted: "It's a very strange experience but it really is good for you".

Mr Cowell is one among many to be concerned about smartphone use. Thirty-nine per cent of 16-75 year olds Deloitte surveyed in June this year perceived they used their phones too much. Among 16-24 year olds, the proportion was much higher, at 61 per cent.

And smartphone users perceive others to be worse: 56 per cent of respondents with children thought they over-used their phones; 43 per cent of those in a relationship felt their other half used their phone too much (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Perception of extent of smartphone usage

Question: Do you think the following use their mobile phones too much?



Weighted base: All smartphone owners aged 16-75 years (3,637)

Source: UK edition, Deloitte Global Mobile Consumer Survey, Jun 2018. Note: Respondents for whom this question is not applicable are excluded from the analysis

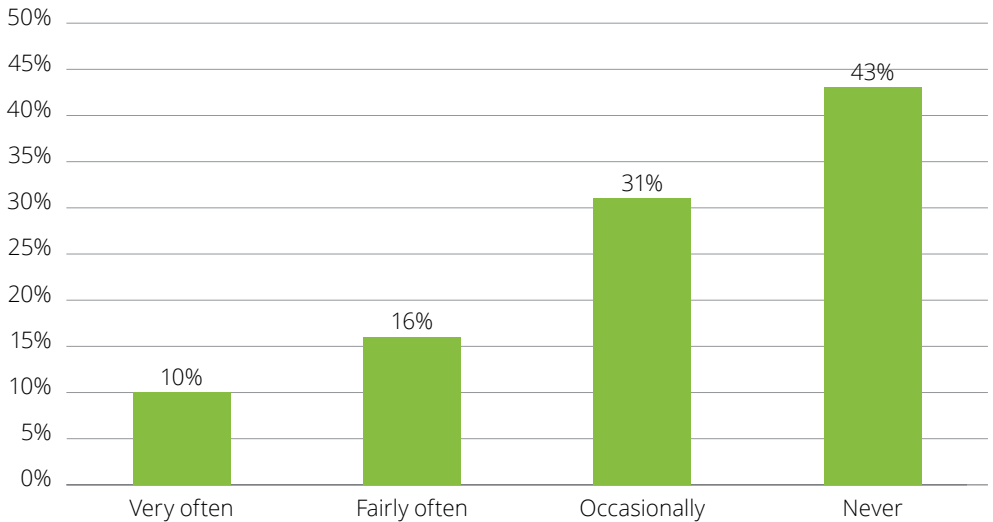
In all cases, every individual is likely to have a personal, qualitative assessment of what qualifies as over-use, both for themselves and those around them.

The impact of smartphones extends to the workplace, where they can be an intrusion, as Mr Cowell also noted: “The thing I get irritated with is when you have a meeting everyone’s on their phone”. A quarter of respondents who are in the workforce reported using their personal smartphone ‘very often’ during normal working hours. A further 30 per cent used it “fairly often”.

Smartphones also enable work tasks to intrude on personal time. A tenth of respondents in the workplace said they used their devices to work outside of working hours, and a further 16 per cent did so occasionally. Both are up by a few percentage points on last year (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Smartphone usage for work outside of normal working hours

Question: During a typical working week, how often, if at all, do you use your smartphone for business purposes outside of your normal working hours?



Weighted base: All smartphone owners aged 16-75 years and who work (2,317)

Source: UK edition, Deloitte Global Mobile Consumer Survey, Jun 2018

Work-related intrusions on personal time are never positive, but they may, on occasion be a lesser evil. Replying to a time sensitive email on a mobile may mean avoiding the lengthier process of switching on a laptop, or the even more onerous request of popping into the office.

Smartphones' capacity to distract can be anti-social and dangerous

There are multiple symptoms of smartphone use. Among those that report over-using their phone, a common theme is distraction. Forty-four per cent feel more distracted when trying to complete a task. A third are distracted when with friends and family, and have less face-to-face communication. Another common theme is the compulsion to check their device: almost a half feel they constantly need to check their phone; a quarter worry they are missing out when they cannot get to their device.

The capacity for smartphones to distract was noted by the German Lifeguard Association (DLRG) earlier this year, when they called on carers to focus on kids in their care, and not the screens in their hands. The (DLRG) lamented how: "In the past, parents and grandparents spent more time with their children in the swimming pool. But increasing numbers of parents are fixated by their smartphones." As a result, parents and grandparents did not notice when children were getting into difficulty. As of mid-August this year, 300 people had drowned in Germany.

Mobile phones of all types have long proven their ability to distract, and legislation has been used to guide behaviour. Bans on using handheld mobile phones while driving are in force in many countries around the world. In the UK, the fine is up to £200 and six points on the licence. In one city, Honolulu, using a phone while crossing the road is an offence.

Researchers have identified a condition named 'nomophobia' which relates to two behaviours. First, the anxiety felt when away from one's phone, and second the reliance on phones to complete basic tasks.

Students at two business schools in Italy and France were asked to live without a smartphone for a day as a course requirement. Most students felt anxious as a result, partly as they suddenly found themselves with spare time.

The 39 per cent of respondents that admit to over-using their phone (at least in their perception) would like to do something about it. A fifth make an effort and usually succeed; a third try and fail; 27 per cent would like to try, but do not.

Quantifying and managing smartphone usage

A key first step towards changing smartphone use would be to quantify and categorise usage. Over the next year, that should become easier to do, as screen time measurement becomes a core, default functionality within the two major smartphone operating systems: iOS and Android.

The next version of Apple's iOS, which launches this autumn, includes a dashboard that shows total time spent on a user's smartphone or tablet, and how that time breaks down by category of app (such as social networking, games or productivity) and individual app or website. Users can set limits by category of app as well as individual app. Users can also see other usage indicators, such as the number of times the phone was picked up, and the number of notifications received.

The next major Android update, which was in beta test as of mid-August 2018, also features a usage dashboard. Users will be able to deploy several tools to reduce usage and distractions.

Toggling a 'Do Not Disturb' option on will reduce visual distractions; selecting 'Shush' will turn off audio alerts when the phone is placed screen down.

Facebook and Instagram have also launched measurement tools. Users have access to a dashboard that shows how they have spent their time on these services.

Over the coming year, it should also become easier to control the online activity of others, including children.

The new iOS and Android operating systems should enable parents to monitor and place parameters on their children's smartphone usage. Children's usage dashboard can be monitored from their parents' device; limits can be placed on usage; blocks of downtime can be specified.

Quantifying time spent is one measure that should help users develop a more mature approach to smartphone usage. In a year's time Deloitte should have a better understanding of how these dashboards have changed behaviours.

Indeed, by next autumn people should have a far better understanding of their smartphone usage than of any other device. There is no measurement, at an individual level, of time spent on a TV set or a PC, even though many would likely spend more time on them.

And there will also be a lack of cross-platform measurement: is time spent reading a book or news story on a smartphone any better or worse than the unmeasured time spent reading the same content on a PC? Or, for that matter, reading a traditional paperback or newspaper?

Bottom line

Quantification of behaviour alone will not change behaviour for everyone. A user of a fitness app whose measurements show a lack of exercise will not necessarily change their behaviour as a result.

Most participants in the study that quantified smartphone touches were initially surprised by the number but admitted that they did not plan on changing their behaviours.

Over the coming 12 months, tens of millions of smartphone users in the UK will start measuring their usage. This is a significant advance in the maturing of the relationship between people in the UK and their favourite device; it is one of many steps that will take place over the coming years.

The smartphone is a relatively new device, which is still undergoing unrelenting innovation and iteration, with many new innovations yet to be deployed. We have yet to see the long-term changes that artificial intelligence (AI) will add, for example. Until the smartphone reaches a plateau in capability, users will remain in a constant process of learning and adjusting how best to use them. And each user's usage profile is likely to be unique, because each smartphone can literally be used in millions of different ways.

Smartphone usage is likely to remain part of the national conversation for years to come.

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