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The ‘Mastery’ of the Swipe: Smartphones, Transitional Objects and Interstitial Time

Sharif Mowlabocus

Abstract

Have you ever noticed people using their smartphones while waiting for the train? Or people reaching for their phones when suddenly alone in a restaurant? Or people staring intently at their screens before a meeting begins? In this article I seek to establish a dialogue between two critical methodologies—psychoanalysis and critical political-economy—in order to consider the role of this form of ‘distracted’ smartphone use in everyday life. The aim of this discussion is to broaden our understanding of ‘mundane’ phone use and suggest a way of conceptualising this behaviour at both an individual level and at the level of society.

Introduction

I would like to begin this article with three observations taken from my professional and personal life.

Observation 1: University students

Every term I teach classes that explore different aspects of contemporary digital culture. Each week my students engage in a range of small and large group discussions. They participate face-to-face, and via TEL¹ devices and discuss the political, social and economic aspects of our contemporary digital lives. The

beginning of each class offers the same scene, doubtless familiar to many educators today: a group of young people, their heads bowed towards the screens of their smartphones. In a 12-week term, teaching two different undergraduate modules, I witness the same activity at the start of every session.

Observation 2: Chillout parties

I've noticed a theme emerging in the research interviews I've been conducting with gay men about their use of social media and their attitudes towards sexual health. This theme concerns the use of smartphones during 'chillout parties'.² Several interviewees have independently commented on the "hypnotic" state that men seem to enter during these parties, as they scroll through databases offered by hook-up apps.³ While this activity ostensibly has a goal (finding guys to party with), my interviewees regularly state that the scrolling and swiping behaviours appear to surpass this aim, becoming a mindless activity: a distracted rhythm that appears 'meditative' and 'comforting.'

Observation 3: On the bus

Living in South London, my husband and I spend a reasonable amount of time traveling on buses. We always sit together and always on the top deck. The first thing my husband does when we sit down is pull out his phone. On occasion I engage him in inane chatter about domestic issues to see how long he can feign interest before he gives in to the temptation in his coat pocket. I am certain a therapist would question my behaviour. Then again, my husband knows the game I am playing. As he settles in to scrolling through the *New York Times* and *Twitter*, I go quiet, staring out the bus window like a tourist, reflecting on why I am the only person on the bus who isn't using their phone.

Here we have three very different contexts in which smartphone use appears to have become a habituated, almost reassuring activity. Three very different contexts are joined together by a temporal similarity—that of waiting; three different contexts in which we are in close proximity to others, but in which we choose to turn to our mobile devices, expressing a preference for digital networks over physical interactions (see D’heer *et al.*, 2012).

This article explores the enfolding of smartphones into the rhythms and routines of everyday life. It deploys two critical frameworks in order to analyse both our habitual use of the smartphone and the broader political-economic landscape in which this use takes place. The first framework owes a debt to the work of Winnicott (1953) and his work in the field of psychology. The second framework utilises writing on information economies and labour practices including the work of Castells (1996), Agger (2011), Hassan (2011), and Bauman (2013). The aim is to conceptualise smartphone use in a way that allows us to understand the intimate qualities of such activity, while simultaneously paying attention to the material circumstances that underpin that use. Through this analysis I hope to build on the work of earlier scholars of media technologies, including Modleski (1983) and Silverstone (1993), by offering a critical account of our daily interactions with these intimate and personal communication devices.⁴ As such, this article (somewhat boldly) seeks to provide an account of everyday phone use that attends to both the psychic and political-economic dimensions of such engagements.

Is that a phone in your pocket? A psychodynamic reading of smartphones

Child psychologist D.W. Winnicott introduced an array of concepts to the field of psychoanalysis in the latter half of the 20th century. His concepts of the “holding environment” (1960), of the “good enough” parent (1953), and of play, quickly gained traction in the broad field of psychology (see, for example, Greenacre, 1969; Busch, 1974; Modell, 1976; Slochower, 1991) and have subsequently been taken up as analytical tools in a range of disciplines and contexts (see Titmuss, 1970; Spector, 1988; Berg, 1998; Harrington and Bielby, 2005; Kuhn, 2013). It is Winnicott’s concept of the “transitional object” that I draw upon in order to begin my analysis of habitual smartphone use.

The transitional object—in its original context—is an object that provides a bridge between the emerging subjectivity of the infant child and the external world. Herdt describes it as follows: “The transitional object gradually assists the child in making the shift from narcissism to object-love—the valuation of others as full persons separate from the self” (1987, p. 42). The transitional object is the first “not-me” object that facilitates an awareness of the self and other, while simultaneously providing an on-going site of trust, security and comfort for the infant. Witness the crying child who quietens down when given their favourite soft toy, or the child who has to go to sleep with a particular blanket as a form of comfort. The transitional object not only helps the child embark on a process of self-identification and self-realisation, it also offers a site of comfort and stability; a sense of continuity and familiarity during times when the world seems unfamiliar, dangerous, or challenging.

Winnicott (1953: 89-90) developed a seven-point list summarising the “special quality” of the relationship a child forms with their transitional object. For instance,

the infant must be able to assume a right over the object, and that right must be acknowledged by others. The object will be “affectionately” held while also subjected to mutilation and damage. The object must survive “instinctual loving, and also hating and, if it be a feature, pure aggression.” It must seem to “move” to “have texture” and have a “vitality or reality of its own.” Importantly, the (first) transitional object—that of our early childhood—is subjected to a gradual deathecting:

[I]n the course of years it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo. By this I mean that in health the transitional object does not ‘go inside’ nor does the feeling about it necessarily undergo repression. It is not forgotten and it is not mourned. It loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between “inner psychic reality” and “the external world as perceived by two persons in common”, that is to say, over the whole cultural field. (Winnicott, 1953, p. 90)

This lack of incorporation has provided fertile ground for scholars seeking to utilise Winnicott’s ideas in cultural theory and analysis. Because we ‘disinvest’ rather than ‘destroy’ our transitional objects, what we might call the affective ‘charge’ that was once directed at these much-loved objects continues to remain open to us in our later lives. More precisely, the opportunities for future cathecting to other objects remains open to us throughout our lives (see Harrington *et al.*, 2011). Such emotional attachment can be found in culture, where culture becomes an “intermediate zone” between a shared empirical reality and a personal psychological reality (Burgin, 2013, p. 23). Here culture becomes a potential space that resides between the internal world of the self (psychic reality) and the external world of the Other (material reality).

As we grow up, so the objects of our attention/affection change. While the transitional objects of infancy are normally “soft” (Van Horen and Mussweiler, 2014), in adult life such objects can be “recoded” as “hard toys” (Hills, 2013, p. 114), providing a more “suitable” object for an adult to carry, while also offering a sensuous and familiar form.⁵ The concept of the transitional object within broader culture has been utilised in a variety of disciplines including Cultural Studies (Parkin, 1999), Art History (Pulham, 2008), and Anthropology (Herdt, 1987). In discussions of media, film and communication studies, Dovey (2006), Ribak (2009), Kullman (2010), Kuhn (2013), and Hills (2013) have all made use of Winnicott’s work including the transitional object.

Conceptualising phones (smart or otherwise) as transitional objects is not a wholly new enterprise. Ribak (2009) deploys Winnicott’s concept to examine the role that phones play in intergenerational familial relationships (see also Weisskirch, 2011). Meanwhile, Keefer *et al.* (2012) suggest that handheld devices can provide a sense of comfort and familiarity in situations of unfamiliarity. While such studies are beneficial, they regularly situate the phone as a mediating object that facilitates relationships between individuals. By contrast, in this article I propose a somewhat different reading of the mobile phone. This reading focuses on the individual relationship we form with the phone, in and of itself, perhaps at the expense of inter-personal relationships.

Silverstone (1993) was perhaps the first scholar to recognize the utility of the transitional object when theorising media technology use. He used Winnicott’s

concept to explore the ways in which television—both in form and content—operated as a constant within daily life, offering stability, comfort and routine, while simultaneously providing a link to the outside world:

Television accompanies us as we wake up, as we breakfast, as we have our tea and as we drink in bars. It comforts us when we are alone. It helps us sleep. It gives us pleasure, it bores us and sometimes it challenges us. (Silverstone, 1993, p. 575)

Silverstone's argument was predicated on three points. Firstly, television was (at that time) a constant and pervasive aspect of everyday life. Secondly, in offering a “dialectical articulation of anxiety and security” (p. 588), television mobilised the original ontological tension found in earlier infantile transitional objects. Finally, and while animating this ontological tension, television offered an opportunity for creativity, for illusion, and for a “dream-like” state that could act as a shelter from the world.

If these ideas seemed relevant to television two decades ago, I argue that they are defining features of our relationship with our smartphones today. Indeed, the intimacy of this contemporary relationship surpasses that between television and viewer. Often serving as our alarm clock, we wake up and go to bed with our smartphones. They accompany us to the breakfast, lunch, and dinner table. They are an integral part of our everyday lives, used when commuting, when in meetings, or when relaxing at home (often while we watch other screens). Smartphones are our constant companion and they remind us, constantly, of our place in the world, operating as they do in the “potential space” once afforded television.

The smartphone enacts a shuttling back and forth between our internal world and the external world, symbolising at once both the omnipotence we experience in our psyche and our incapacity to reconcile such omnipotence with our lived reality. To borrow from Dovey and Kennedy (2006, p. 32), they “facilitate exchange between the subject and the mediated environment.” Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this article, they provide a form of escape. In being constantly with us, smartphones also provide an opportunity to become immersed in the “dream-like” state that both Winnicott and Silverstone allude to in their writing. Gazing at our smartphones, we cease, momentarily, to be in the place where we are physically located and enter into another (more comfortable) space.

It is for these reasons that I position the smartphone as a form of transitional object; an object that is both ‘not me’ and operates as ‘a part of me,’ and which mediates between these two spaces. The smartphone, to borrow from Bingley (2003, p. 337) opens up a “space between Self and Other, which is regarded, in Winnicottian theory, as a potential space of creative interaction.” The echo of our earlier transitional object(s) lives on in our relationships with technologies. Arguably the similarity of the smartphone to those earlier objects (pervasiveness, security, illusion, disillusion, ownership) helps support the formation of this particular attachment. Turkle (2012) comments on the investments we readily make in the computer technologies with which we interact. She writes that,

our use of smartphones is not a symptom of a pathology (we are not deluded or diseased), but instead another example of wanting to “fill in the blanks”—of wanting to relate to these inanimate objects and wanting to form a bond with them. (Turkle, 2012, p. 24)

This “relating” is nothing less than an investment of power in our devices; a power to ‘hold us,’ to ‘know us,’ and to be there for us—in the same way that we invested in those now-forgotten childhood objects. Arguably this is the reason why we become so upset and agitated when our smartphones stop working, run out of battery, get stolen, or otherwise ‘abandon’ us.

Placing (transitional) objects in context

Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent.

(Thompson, 1967, p. 61)

The question remains as to why we form these kinds of attachments with our smartphones? Why do we seek to “fill in the blanks,” as it were? These questions require recognition of the material reality in which such relationships have been formed, and cause us to question how we might scale individual relationships up to the general level of society. If, as Durkheim claims, “personality is the individual socialized” (Durkheim in Lasch, 1991, p. 34), in order to fully conceptualise our relationship to the smartphone, we must simultaneously understand the role that the social plays in the development of this relationship. Cahir and Lloyd (2015, p. 707) suggest that mobile phone use is “underwritten by economic and social structures which are specific to particular historical eras.” It is therefore important that we explore specific social practices within the economic and social contexts in which they are produced.

Time is a key factor here. The temporal dimension of the question is key: why are we forming these relationships now? Within a Winnicottian framework of object-relations, two types of time compete for power: the time of the child and the time of the external world. As Ogden goes on to explain:

A principal function of the mother's early psychological and physical holding includes her insulating the infant in his state of going on being from the relentless, unalterable otherness of time. When I speak of the otherness of time, I am referring to the infant's experience of "man-made time." (2004, p. 1350)

Time intrudes into the perfect world of infancy. It is time that makes the child grow up and it is time that takes the parent away (to do other things, to go to work, to look after others). Time organises the child's life, giving it structure, meaning and deadlines. Transitional objects offer a support for this traumatic transition into 'socialised' time. Just as they create a bridge between an undifferentiated 'wholeness' and the difference created by identity, so they also traverse these different experiences of time that we move through in our early lives.

This is not to suggest that our understanding of time becomes fixed later in life or, indeed, in the social. As Hassan (2011, p. 8) writes, "temporality is rooted in the social, is subjectively and collectively experienced, is impressionably formed and reformed according to context and circumstance and ideological position." As ideologies, circumstances and contexts shift, so does our understanding of time. One need only consider the implementation of Greenwich Meantime (GMT) in 1844 to see this relationship between power and time laid bare (see Nanni, 2013). GMT was engineered by a colonial project reliant on long sea voyages, and which placed Great

Britain at the very centre of time, and of the world. The industrial age changed people's understanding of time once again as work came under the purview of new measurements of time, such as the time-card. Thompson (1967, p. 59) underscores this power of time over work when he writes that, "the essential conditioning in different notations of time [is] provided by different work-situations and their relations to 'natural' rhythms."

In keeping with Thompson's assertion, and running alongside an older industrial understanding, late capitalism has developed a new understanding of time in the late 20th and early 21st century, one that fits the demands of a post-industrial digital economy (see Hochschild, 1997; Wajcman, 2008; Agger, 2015; Colvile, 2016). New temporalities are required for new practices of labour and consumption, and for the production and consumption of new commodities, both material and immaterial. Time, it is said, has had to be refashioned to fit the needs of a new global economy (Hope, 2006). Instead of neat divisions of time (work time, sleep time, leisure time, lunch time), time is increasingly characterised by two distinct and yet interrelated forms of movement: flow and interruption.

Castells (1996) talks of "the space of flows" as a means of characterising the structure of the global information economy, identifying the ideal worker for this new post-industrial networked age as the "flextimer." Bauman (2013, pp. 23-24) echoes this thinking when he writes that we experience work today with a "short term mentality" in response to a labour market where "flexibility is the slogan of the day." In this culture of flexibility, work becomes increasingly precarious as long-term careers become replaced by zero-hour contracts. Labour can be turned on and off like a tap

according to the requirements of a market that might operate thousands of miles away, but which can impact us at the speed of an e-mail. The hallmark of this global economy—the outsourcing of labour—undermines older relationships between employer and employee, between labour and capital, between different understandings of time, and between the individual and their work.

This precarity is increasingly framed as an individual problem requiring an individual solution. The neoliberal project that has accompanied the global-digital revolution requires the worker to constantly be ‘upgrading’ and engaged in a process of self-improvement. Indeed, if there is any freedom in the system, it is the freedom to become ‘better.’ Media content invites us to be “agent[s] of [our] own success” (Ringrose and Walkderine, 2008, p. 227). We challenge ourselves to become ‘better,’ by which we mean more productive (Lavrence and Lozanski, 2014). We do everything we can to fit in with this new economic reality. We sleep less and work longer (Knutson *et al.*, 2010), we are connected in multiple ways via our mobile devices as we grab food on the go and exercise as efficiently as possible (12 Minute Athlete, 2016). When we sit still too long, our connected wearable technology (Millington, 2014) demands that we keep moving. We travel the globe for meetings at the drop of a hat. We are doing our very best to become as seamless, fluid and flexible as the economy that we serve.

Quick, quick, slow: The rhythm of smartphone use

Our smartphones fit into this economy, encouraging us to “upgrade ourselves” via brain-training apps and fitness tracking apps (see Bassett, 2009 for discussion). They remind us to be constantly doing something, to be constantly thinking and planning

and engaging. Indeed, at a surface level, they have become masters of our time. Witness our reliance on the mobile phone as our primary means of keeping time. Beyond the content of our smartphones, the relationship that we have formed with these devices also has a particular temporal shape. This shape also fits with economic landscape in which we find ourselves, and echoes the three observations that began this article.

The smartphone has become the technology of distraction par excellence. Within the endless ‘flow’ of the information economy, often the way we use our smartphones is fragmented and interrupted. This fragmented and interrupted use, alongside the distracted attention we give it, echoes Modleski’s (1983) theorising of daytime television consumption. Modleski argues that the housewife experiences television in a distracted fashion, grabbing a few minutes of chat show here, a segment of a magazine show there, a news bulletin over coffee, half a soap opera at lunch—all while going about her (unpaid) daily labour (such as caring for children, cooking, housework, shopping). Reflecting on this rhythm of consumption, Modleski (1983: 71) suggests that, “[t]he housewife functions, as many creative women have sadly realized, by distraction ... daytime television plays a part in habituating women to interruption.”

A similar rhythm appears to underscore contemporary smartphone use. The fragmented, distracted relationship we have formed with our devices shares much in common with Modleski’s earlier observations. What links these two relationships—what these two sets of subject-screen relations have in common—is their material basis. Both sets of relations have developed in response to a particular political-

economic situation characterised by a casualization of labour (Theodore, 2003), the precarious and networked organisation of work (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005), and the ongoing social reproduction of labour (Jarrett, 2014). Jarrett's work is perhaps most relevant here in that it identifies the relationship between ongoing modes of social reproduction and new forms of immaterial labour. Indeed, one might extend Jarrett's reading of Fortunati to suggest that the (M)other's distracted attention and multitasking habituates the child to a regime of labour that will go on to characterise their later life.

It is at this point that we would do well to remember that our smartphone use is often a form of labour. Agger (2011) refers to this as "iTime" and suggests that it is the dominant temporal force of our digital age. iTime allows us to send e-mails at dinner, to move between private and work chat instantly, and to create more and more work (as e-mail begets e-mail begets e-mail).

Beyond the intrusion of work into the private sphere, leisure time is also co-opted as a commodity. Whether we are 'liking' content on Facebook or uploading images to Instagram we are engaged in the production of data that has an economic value (see Coté and Pybus, 2007; Van Dijck, 2009). Labour is thus intimately tied up with the smartphone. And yet, while at one level, the boundary between work and leisure has been eroded, at another level, we do experience differences in time. Theories of "iTime," of "work time intrusion," (Jacobs and Gerson, 2001) and of "flextime" (Castells, 1996) fail to acknowledge the different *textures* of time that make up daily life. Indeed, much of our phone use appears to share one thing in common: it occupies a certain type of time, what I here refer to as '*interstitial time*.'

Towards a conclusion: Interstitial time

I use the term ‘interstitial time’ to acknowledge the fact that smartphone use regularly occurs during moments of the day when we are *between* activities. We turn towards our screens because we seem to have nothing else to do, or because we are waiting, or because we are not quite sure what to do. We may well be checking our e-mails, or performing another work-based activity. However, such labour happens during interstitial moments. It is happening *because* we have a gap in our schedule, or *because* we are waiting (for a meeting to start, or to get to our destination).

Sometimes we turn to our smartphones rather than risk engaging with other people, or the rest of the world. Our smartphones take on a particular quality in interstitial time. They come into focus, as they come to our attention. We seek them out in these moments of ‘in-between-ness.’ Arguably, at the heart of this behavior—this turning towards the screen—is a sense of *uncertainty*. In short, interstitial time marks moments when we become uncertain—about what to do next, about how to occupy our time, about how to ‘be’ in a particular space, perhaps even about our life trajectories.

This last claim sounds hyperbolic but it does have a strong intellectual antecedent. B. Neilson and Rossiter refer to the uncertainty of contemporary life, caused by the neoliberal environment outlined above as, a form of “ontological insecurity” (2005, np) and D. Neilson (2015, pp. 184-5) identifies an “existential anxiety” which gets “intensified by the reality of deepening social and material precarity.” Meanwhile, Hassan, suggests that the moments of distraction that, I would argue, characterize interstitial time are “in many ways a distraction from uncertainty, an uncertainty that

the unplanned trajectory of our late-modernity generates in its speed fetish” (2011, p. xv).

Echoing Hassan, I suggest that if the smartphone operates as a transitional object within an economy of distraction, it does so by distracting us from the increasing pace of our lives today and providing a site of comfort and reassurance. Paradoxically, the very same device that supports the ‘speed fetish’ of late capitalism also provides an escape mechanism from it (however illusory that escape might be). This paradox echoes the psychic shape of our earlier transitional objects, which similarly serve a dual purpose, commuting between the illusory world of the internal self and the reality of the external world. To return to Winnicott once more,

It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). (1953, p. 95)

Smartphones represent a contemporary example of this “relief” while also providing another point of strain between the inner self and outer reality. In short, they are both the solution and (part of) the problem.

Going beyond Hassan’s distraction thesis, I would argue that we actively seek out distraction precisely at the times when we reach breaks or interruptions in the ‘flow’ of time—this is the ontology of ‘interstitial time.’ It is at such points when the unnerving speed of our lives is in danger of being revealed to us. It is at such points that we turn to our technological comforters—our digital security blankets—and do our very best to lose ourselves in our screens. The mastery of the swipe I allude to in

the title of this article, then, is our adult selves attempting to momentarily wrestle control back from a system that we barely understand; a system many of us feel disempowered by, in spite of being told that we are masters of our destiny. In doing so, we move into a space of creative ‘play,’ where we are able to ignore the relentless pressure of ‘man-made time’ and engage in an illusion with our devices. This illusion is of course that we are in control of our lives and our trajectories.

Such play and illusion echoes our first transitional objects, which, as I mentioned earlier, serve a dual purpose: connecting us to the ‘real’ external world, and providing a sanctuary from that world during times of stress and anxiety. During times of fear and insecurity, the child will reach for their teddy bear or blanket in order to reassure itself of the illusion that it is in control. The smartphone represents a similar attempt at this mastery.

In this way, smartphones occupy an ambivalent position in our lives. They continue to hail us throughout the day, reminding us to be productive. They are the most ubiquitous signifier of all that late capitalism demands of us—as workers, students, parents, friends, consumers, and producers. Their constant notifications interpellate (Althusser, 1976) us into the contemporary political-economic structure from an ever-earlier age. Smartphone use is not only a tool of the neoliberal late-capitalist economy I have discussed above, it is also the training wheels for that economy. In the same way that the child draws upon the teddy bear to help negotiate the relationship between emerging self and Other, so we use our smartphones as means of engaging with contemporary contexts of labour – and of life. The teddy bear supports the infant in realising their own subjectivity (and their place in the world); the smartphone

supports the adult in realising the shape of that world, and their duties within it. All that we do on our smartphones is both distraction *and* production. Indeed, echoing the work of Coté and Pybus (2007), I would suggest that the smartphone helps us to ‘learn’ the new economics of immaterial labour.

At the same time, these handheld devices offer us a site of comfort and reassurance during moments of uncertainty and ‘in-between-ness.’ Amidst the business (or just busy-ness) of the day, our phones are what we turn to during those points of rupture. Witness the restaurant diner who immediately picks up the phone when their partner goes to the bathroom, or the strangers who thumb their devices while waiting for the elevator or bus to arrive. In such instances, faced with moments of uncertainty and scrutiny (one almost feels exposed to the eyes of others), our phones bring us a sense of security. They provide a carapace and a site of reassurance. We turn away from the reality of the external world and towards the reality of our inner psychic world. The smartphone spans these two worlds. It echoes other, earlier objects (now forgotten) that helped us learn to commute between such worlds. It is that which draws us into the world, and that which provides a refuge from it. In this way, our smartphones are our transitional objects. They are products of our environment, and they are the method by which we cope with that environment.

About the Author

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¹ Technology Enhanced Learning.

² In British gay male culture a 'chillout party' refers to an informal gathering in a private home where alcohol and various illegal drugs (and legal highs) are typically consumed. Chillout parties often begin after a night out and can last for several days. During this time, the number of attendees will vary as people leave and new faces join. See Gilét (2015) for a vivid description.

³ A hook-up app is a dating and sex sourcing application that runs from a smartphone. Applications generally allow you to create a profile, to access a database of other profiles, and to communicate with other users. A key attraction of hook-up apps is their exploitation of the geo-locative capacity of smartphones. This means that users typically see other users who are nearby.

⁴ This study locates itself in a primarily Western European context, although anecdotal evidence suggests that similar patterns of phone use can be found in North America, in Australasia, and in East Asia.

⁵ The work of Rouff (n.d.) and his discussion of rectangular forms in design is also of relevance here.