

Me & My Smartphone: A Study into the Well-being Paradox of Phones



Design by Matthijs de Koning

Text by Pieter Desmet

Hype of Revolution?

Twelve years ago technology-expert David Pogue described what was at the time a unique novelty in *The New York Times*¹. A three-in-one product: mobile phone, music player, and Internet device. Months before the product actually hit the shelves, it was already a huge hype, with over 11,000 publications and 69 million Google hits. The iPhone. Pogue asked the question: is it worth the hype? His answer was yes: 'It is the most sophisticated, outlook-changing piece of electronics to come along in years. It does so many things so well, and so pleurably, that you tend to forgive its foibles.' The iPhone, he wrote, is not a hype – it's a *revolution*.

The Downside

Pogue was right of course. Today as much as 95% of people in the Netherlands use a smartphone². Many consider their smartphones indispensable – an extension of their personality in fact. We can't bear to part with them. But this omnipresence has a downside. In addition to the convenience and entertainment these devices offer, we are now also discovering more and more about the risks to our mental and physical health.

It's for this reason that the World Health Organisation listed excessive use of smartphones as a serious public health problem last year. Designer Matthijs de Koning recognised the paradox of the smartphone: it's both liberating and addictive. Recently he made the bold decision to get rid of his smartphone all together, and his personal experiences inspired his project, 'Me & My Smartphone'.

Nomophobia

You might never heard of the term, but you may actually be suffering from it yourself. Nomophobia – an excessive fear of not being reachable by mobile phone all the time. About 50% of smartphone users suffer from this condition. For teenagers, it's as high as 77%³. Matthijs was awed when he looked into these kinds of documented adverse effects of smartphone use. These vary from more direct ones, such as getting distracted in traffic, to more insidious effects on mental health – reduced self-confidence, loneliness, trouble sleeping, and even depression. British philosopher Alain de Botton summed it up aptly: 'The challenge for a human now is to be more interesting to another than his or her smartphone.' Matthijs made it his mission to design products that demonstrate the paradox of smartphones. Products that inspire critical self-reflection

and awareness. What effect do smartphones have on our behaviour, our relationships, and our social identity?

The Smartphone Paradoxes

Matthijs created a list of the psychological and social effects of smartphones. He studied relevant literature and conducted a series of interviews with both experts and smartphone users. He summarised his findings into five well-being paradoxes of smartphone use⁴.

The Social Paradox Thanks to smartphones we're more hyper-connected than ever. But at the same time, the one device that keeps us connected with everyone, distracts us from real-life pro-social behaviour that initiates and develops the relationships we need for a healthy social life.

The Loss of Solitude Smartphones have opened the door to an endless stream of distractions, reducing the time we spend in solitude with our meandering thoughts; the moments we find ourselves and learn how to understand who we are. We have forgotten the importance of solitude and boredom.

Your Internal Friction Those apps we spend most of our time on, are also the ones that make us the



most unhappy. Wanting to be in control and realizing we are not always capable to be, creates negative self-judgments and feelings of guilt that feed our internal friction.

The Addiction Smartphones and social media are addictive. They are designed and built to create dopamine releases in the brain, playing a major role in reward-motivated behaviour. The result is called neomania – an addiction to receiving new stimuli at least every five minutes.

Your Divided Attention Smartphones and applications are engineered to compete for your attention, or in other words, for your time. The devices and software are becoming better and better at persuading you to use an application and to stay there for as long as possible.

Back to our natural smile

Matthijs developed a range of products to negate each of those five adverse effects. I'll describe three of them below: BlueSmile, CarePhone, and WakeUp. In order to explain how they work, Matthijs made an instructional video for each product.

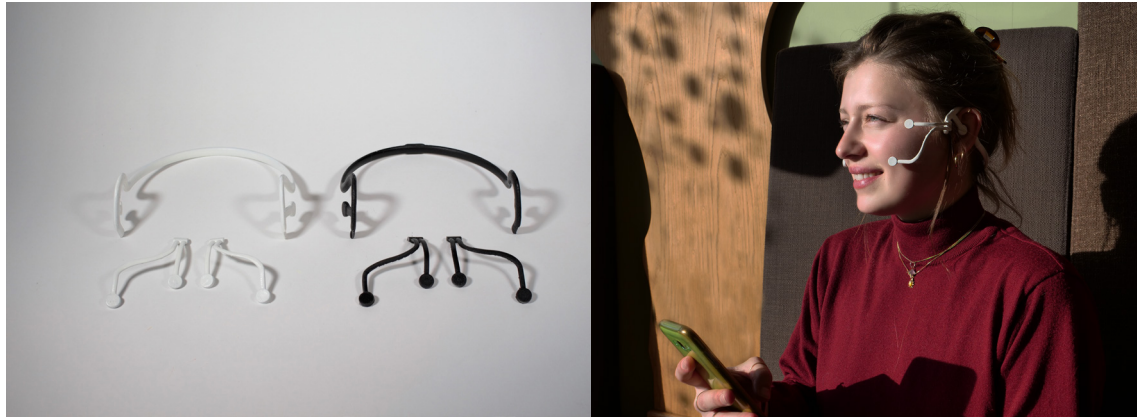
BlueSmile < link: <https://youtu.be/95FJTSTOzJI>>

A Bluetooth headset that reproduces a genuine smile using electrical muscle stimulation technology. By stimulating the zygomaticus major and orbicularis oculi muscles to contract, BlueSmile puts a natural smile on your face. BlueSmile helps you reconnect with people, paving the way for a more pro-social future.

CarePhone <link: <https://youtu.be/7hDndUroM4Q>>

A phone for emergencies. This surrogate distracts





BlueSmile: <link: <https://youtu.be/95FJTSTOzJI>>



CarePhone: <link: <https://youtu.be/7hDndUroM4Q>>



WakeUp: <link: <https://youtu.be/ndR7WsM4MaA>>

you and entertains you when you lose your real phone or it stops working. The buttons, colours, and sounds reward you with the same confirmation you've been conditioned to crave by your real smartphone. This way, you won't have to worry about the feelings of anxiety and restlessness you normally experience when you're without your real phone for a while.

WakeUp <link: <https://youtu.be/ndR7WsM4MaA>>

The first product that helps you to control the time you spend on social media. After your healthy social-media time expires, WakeUp wakes you up with a burst of confetti. This dramatic but also rewarding and joyful experience will pull you from your state of suppressed consciousness, and it will stimulate the people around you to also wake up.

The Problem and the Solution

Matthijs' products and videos aren't really effective solutions for the risks of excessive smartphone use, of course. But what they do offer is making those risks visible and, most of all, *letting the user experience* them. They help people take a moment to reflect with a healthy dose of light-heartedness and humour. This is also referred to as *Critical Design* – design as a means to get people to think, stimulate debate, and trigger reactions⁵. Matthijs got his motivation from his personal concerns about technology-driven social changes in recent years: 'It was nice to see that my project made people around me talk to each other about their smartphone behaviour. I hope to have made a small contribution to a healthier future.' I invite you to check out the videos and ask yourself the question: which of these three products might I need?



Matthijs de Koning designed the 'Me & My Smartphone' collection in 2019 as his graduation project for the master's programme *Design for Interaction* at TU Delft. The project was his own initiative and was supervised by Haian Xue and Pieter Desmet (TU Delft).

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Colophon

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2019

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Images by Matthijs de Koning and Shutterstock;

Graphic design by Jooyoung Park

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This article was originally written for the Dutch Journal of Positive Psychology (www.tijdschriftpositievepsychologie.nl).

All articles from the series can be downloaded at www.diopd.org

Reference

In communication, please refer to this publication as follows
Desmet, P.M.A. (2019). *Me & My Smartphone: A study into the well-being paradox of phones*. Delft, Delft University of Technology.

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