

Smartphone morality

A mixed-method study of how young adults judge their own and other people's digital media reliance

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ABSTRACT

Escalating smartphone reliance is a debated issue, especially when it comes to the digital wellbeing of young people. Hence, this article addresses smartphone use as a morally contested activity among young adults. We first analyse the existence of moral dissonance pertaining to one's own smartphone use – whether one uses the device according to internalised norms or not. Second, we explore moral distancing – to what extent morally problematic smartphone use is ascribed to others rather than to oneself. Combining survey results with focus-group interviews from Sweden, the study shows that moral distancing is less pronounced among young adults than in the overall population. It also shows that young people's capacity to domesticate digital media in a morally congruent way plays into the social reproduction of gender and class. While the smartphone is socially normalised, young adults, especially women, report a great deal of moral reflexivity and distress in relation to the device.

KEYWORDS: digital disconnection, digital wellbeing, media morality, media domestication, media reliance, mediatisation, smartphone use

Introduction

While the smartphone has become a life companion among people in digitalised societies, there are lively debates concerning various social costs related to the device. In public discourse, critical voices question the stress, distraction, and addiction that stem from people's everyday reliance on, and continuous exposure to, digital information (Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021). There are also counter-movements, as well as a growing commercial sector, prescribing things like “digital detoxing” and giving advice to people on how to “disconnect” or “unplug” from their devices (e.g., Rauch, 2014; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020; Zhang & Zhang, 2022). Typically, this is presented as a matter of taking control over one's life and learning how to manage digital connectivity in general, and the smartphone in particular, in ways that optimise “productivity”, “workfulness”, and “meaningful” leisure (e.g., Newport, 2019). Similarly, there is a political discourse that describes the ability to keep up everyday rules and routines that limit digital connectivity as a moral virtue. Even the tech industry itself has launched tools to enhance “digital wellbeing” through various means of temporary disconnection, though analyses show that such tools most likely have limited potential to empower users in the ways envisioned (Jorge et al., 2022). Across these discourses, individuals who can prevent their lives from being over-entangled with(in) digital infrastructures are held up as role models for the ordinary (implicitly less capable) digital consumer (e.g., Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021).

These debates suggest that the normalisation of the smartphone as a life companion has not unequivocally made the technology “disappear” (see Deuze, 2012), phenomenologically speaking. Smartphone use is both integral to the taken-for-granted “digital mundane” (Maltby & Thornham, 2016) *and* a problematic, morally contested activity. While the commercially imbued ethics of “selective unplugging” and “digital wellbeing” speak foremost to a relatively privileged group of knowledge workers, whose livelihoods are reliant on digital connectivity (Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2022), the overarching disconnection trend reflects moral tendencies that also pertain to a wider population (Fast, 2021). For example, the growing public awareness of “problematic smartphone use” (e.g., Elhai et al., 2017, 2019) and health-related issues pertaining to excessive “screen time” plays into how people judge what constitutes “good” or “bad” smartphone use (or non-use) (e.g., Bartsch, 2021; Syvertsen, 2022). Digital reliance implies that such moral considerations concerning one's own *and* other people's behaviour inevitably become *part of* the digital mundane.

These are the types of considerations we address in this article. Our focus is on young adults (operationalised as people between 20 and 35 years old) in Sweden, for whom the smartphone has played a key role since they were teenagers or younger. We are thus able to address how smartphone-related experiences and moral judgements fluctuate in a group where digital reliance is taken for granted, but not necessarily unproblematic. Recent studies show that young people find both digital availability norms *and* disconnection norms more important than older people (Geber et al., 2024).

We pose three research questions. First, how do young adults perceive their own smartphone use? For instance, what do they consider the benefits and costs of smartphone use and how do they judge their own ways of handling the device? This question opens up for an analysis of moral dissonances, meaning that individuals may feel that their smartphone use diverges from what they think of as “good” use. Second, how do young adults judge the same issues pertaining to smartphone use among people in general? Here, we analyse the extent to which there is a propensity to ascribe negative consequences of digital reliance to other people rather than to oneself. This phenomenon can be understood as a form of moral distancing whereby media users try to uphold role distance vis-à-vis a generalised type of imagined other (e.g., Nixon, 2020; see also Goffman, 1961).

These two questions comprise what we call smartphone morality, which points to people’s everyday concerns as to whether they, as well as others, are able to domesticate the smartphone in an appropriate way. Everyday morality is neither homogenous nor stable, however. It is shaped by social conditions such as class, gender, race, and generational differences, as well as by situational factors. This leads to our third question: How do various social factors play into smartphone morality among young adults? Based on our study, we assess the significance of smartphone morality in social reproduction.

In order to provide a deeper understanding as well as a general view of these things, we apply a mixed-method approach, combining the findings from a nation-wide survey with a strategically sampled focus-group study. Both studies were conducted in Sweden, one of the most connected countries in the world with 97 per cent of the population having access to a smartphone (Ohlsson, 2023).

Introducing a new angle on media morality in digital culture, this article contributes to two main research fields. First, with this study we assess a hitherto underexplored aspect of mediatisation, namely the moral ambiguities stemming from digital (smartphone) reliance. We argue that people’s everyday perceptions and evaluations of media reliance, notably what we refer to as moral dissonance and moral distancing, are integral to (deep) mediatisation, understood as a process of social normalisation (e.g., Hepp, 2019). Second, and relatedly, the study contributes to media domestication research. Smartphone morality concerns the challenges of everyday agency in the wake of deepening digital reliance and growing public awareness of the “costs of connection” (see Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Since our study provides a systematic comparison of moral judgements pertaining to one’s own *and* others’ ability to cope with media technology, it adds an important element to the pre-existing body of mostly ethnographic research on media domestication in general, and questions of digital unease and disconnection more specifically (e.g., Hartmann, 2009; Jorge, 2019; Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019; Nansen et al., 2010, 2011; Waldecker & Hector, 2023).

Conceptual framework and previous research

Mediatisation as context

Mediatisation constitutes the wider, transformative context in which the moral dynamics that we study play out. This does not mean that mediatisation is something abstract. Whereas mediatisation can be understood as a “complex meta-process” of change (Krotz, 2007), it is also possible to study mediatisation “from below” (Andersson, 2017). One way is to analyse mediatisation through people’s perceptions of intensifying or expanding media reliance across different parts of their lifeworlds. Previous research shows that perceptions of media reliance pertain to varying degrees to different types of human desires, as well as among different social groups (Bengtsson et al., 2021). To further such a view of mediatisation, in this study we address how people morally judge the social consequences of digital media reliance – in this case, the smartphone.

As the sociologist Andrew Sayer (2005: 139) has reminded us, people are “evaluative beings”, whose “streams of consciousness have an evaluative dimension which ranges from spontaneous, unexamined, unarticulated feelings about other people, objects and practices, and about what to do, through to more considered evaluations of those things”. Along these lines, we maintain that people in a mediatised society are generally destined to judge the benefits and costs of digital reliance and what should be considered “good” and “appropriate” media use, for oneself as well as for people in general. In other words, the mediatisation of everyday life entails a moral dimension, which is continuously invoked and negotiated as new technologies and platforms enter the lifeworld. One does not have to be a TikTok user, for example, to make a moral statement (whether casual or elaborated) about how people use this platform and how it affects social life.

Until now, however, the moral dimension of mediatisation has been studied to a limited extent. Whereas media studies generally entail much research on the moral aspects of media use and circulation, most mediatisation scholars have omitted people’s judgements of “good” or “bad” media use in their research repertoire. To the extent that morality has been addressed in mediatisation research, it has mainly regarded how mediatisation processes condition people’s ethical orientations and visions of the “good life” (Ess, 2014), and their moral judgements of specific aspects of the social world, or public culture (e.g., Cottle, 2006; Morse, 2018). In relation to “deep mediatisation”, there has also been much theorising around the “costs of connection” (see, e.g., Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Couldry & Mejias, 2019), focusing on how the extensions of connectivity and datafication, especially via smartphone apps, constitute an assault on human autonomy and privacy. But, again, this research does not consider how – or if – such tendencies also affect people’s moral judgements of their own and others’ media use.

Against this background, it is important to bring the issue of media morality into dialogue with mediatisation research. In the following sections, we outline two concepts for doing so – moral dissonance and moral distancing – and explore how related phenomena have figured in research on media domestication.

Moral dissonance through failed media domestication

As Hartmann (2009) argued, mediatisation and media domestication can be considered closely inter-related processes. While the former points to a complex agglomeration of long-term tendencies in society whereby social practices and behaviours become adapted to media and their affordances, the latter refers to micro-level, everyday processes through which humans appropriate, objectify, incorporate, and convert media and their cultural meanings (see Silverstone et al., 1992). If mediatisation regards how media “mould” society and culture (Hepp, 2012), domestication regards the social moulding of media.

Domestication is not without its challenges, however. As Roger Silverstone and colleagues (1992) pointed out in their ethnographic work on media technologies in British households, the way in which a new technology enters into a sociomaterial environment is negotiated through the moral economies of day-to-day living. It means that there are competing sociocultural norms as well as socioeconomic restraints as to what is accepted in a particular setting. In the early 1990s, television and VCR systems were examples of morally contested technologies. Many people experienced that they were not in command of the social impact of these devices, feeling perhaps that television viewing was not “time well spent” or that other social rituals were threatened by extended media consumption (see also Jorge et al., 2022). Such negative experiences stemmed from the expected detrimental influence of technology and from moral negotiations and adaptations vis-à-vis significant others (especially other household members). Television viewing was often classified as a “guilty pleasure” associated with a lingering sense of dissonance between actual behaviour and incorporated social norms (Morley, 1986).

The notion of moral dissonance builds on Festinger’s (1962) classical social-psychological theory of cognitive dissonance. In previous research, moral dissonance has been addressed, for example, in organisational research and psychological studies of individuals engaging in acts they deem as immoral (e.g., related to lying or violence) and how they try to solve such situations through self-justification, compartmentalisation of behaviour, or adjustment of moral standings (see, e.g., Burton & Vu, 2021; Te Brake & Nauta, 2022; Vasquez et al., 2019). In the current analysis of smartphone morality, we approach moral dissonance as individual experiences of failed media domestication. Due to social and technological changes, media domestication is deemed to be an open-ended process harbouring the risk of (partial) failure and frustration. This becomes a moral matter – and a dilemma to solve or cope with – inasmuch as people see it as a social virtue to stay in control of their media and utilise them in a sound way. Another way of putting this, following Ytre-Arne and Das (2021: 784), is that moral dissonance (in the current context) denotes a fractured sense of communicative agency, meaning that people feel that their “capabilities to meaningfully influence communicative interactions in their daily lives” (beyond interpretation) are hampered. As Ytre-Arne and Das have suggested, such capabilities ultimately point to sociocultural processes of identity formation, civic or political participation, creative engagements, or the general ability to connect with others.

If we look at the current landscape of connective media, there are significant threats to communicative agency. The smartphone constitutes an extraordinarily complex medium that encompasses a great variety of platforms and conflicting flows that drag the attention of the user (Lupinacci, 2021; Madianou, 2014; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). Key issues here are addiction (or, more generally, over-use) and distraction. Problems of addiction have mostly been studied from a psychological perspective, where problematic smartphone use is defined as “excessive use of a smartphone with accompanying functional impairments in daily living, and symptoms resembling those found in substance use disorders” (Elhai et al., 2019: 45). When it comes to distraction, Syvertsen (2022: 197) has distinguished digital ambivalence – “ambiguous sentiments over being reachable and (always) connected” – from screen ambivalence – “mixed feelings regarding the presence of smartphones and screens”. Along these lines, other scholars have shown that the mere presence of a smartphone may decrease people’s focus and lower the perceived quality of face-to-face interaction (e.g., Thornton et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2017). Such problems have been charted not least among knowledge workers, where “digital intrusions” are unavoidable due to the connected nature of their work, and where questions of whether to engage in or circulate certain information must be handled on a regular basis (e.g., Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2022).

Likewise, Bartsch (2021) found that negative experiences of smartphone use were foremost related to stress stemming from interruptions due to the continuous flow of messages and the strain to always be contactable. Interestingly, such negative experiences could not be explained by frequency of use, and negative experiences did not result in more restrictive habits. People explained their dissonant behaviour as caused by their felt responsibility to be available and in terms of mere habit. Thus, Bartsch (2021: 157) concluded that “the adaptation experiences occur in a manner that may not need justifications because they have become a norm”. In other words, the status of the smartphone as a naturalised element of everyday life leads to the mingling of different moral orders, which makes negative experiences like stress and guilt close to unavoidable (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2018). This is especially true among younger media users who are torn between the felt need to be available and updated, on the one hand, and emergent disconnection norms, on the other (Geber et al., 2024).

Besides generational differences, moral (as well as technological) orders vary depending on social conditions. Research on smartphone use shows that certain life circumstances more easily foster moral dissonance. For instance, Ytre-Arne (2023) has demonstrated that motherhood typically leads to a desire for public connection that smartphone use may solve, while potentially fostering a sense of guilt inasmuch as it also competes with other felt (family) duties. Such findings reverberate with media ethnographic accounts of media morality as an inherently gendered and class-based matter (e.g., Morley, 1986). It was shown already in the 1980s and 1990s that households with higher social status were more eager to restrict their television habits as a means of exposing social discipline and good taste (e.g., Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). Similar patterns have been

demonstrated in relation to the “connected home” and the furnishing of digital home offices (see Nansen et al., 2010, 2011). Likewise, analyses of smartphone attitudes show that people with larger amounts of cultural and economic capital are more concerned than others with keeping up routines for non-use (Fast et al., 2021). This does not mean that media morality is a concern just among well-educated and relatively affluent class fractions, however. As Madianou (2014) showed in her studies of smartphone use among transnational migrant workers, in complex polymedia environments, moral assessments are *always* part of the domestication – and sometimes avoidance – of media technologies and platforms (see also Foster & Horst, 2018).

Moral distancing and communicative agency as norm

The complexity of the digital media environment has thus fostered an inescapable social need to make moral judgements as to which media habits are desirable and which are not. For example, digital reliance has imposed more emotional work into family life, where parents “utilize interpersonal communication to mitigate the negative effects that they *believe* communication media have on their children [emphasis added]” (Clark, 2011: 323; see also, e.g., Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). This means that media morality involves not just considerations of whether it is possible to live up to one’s own moral standards; it also concerns how the benefits and costs of media are thought to affect other people – whether one thinks that other people are capable of upholding communicative agency or not.

To understand these mechanisms, we must consider that moral standards are not just private matters but are externalised (Stanford, 2019). Moral externalisation means that people ascribe a general legitimacy to some moral norms – for example, that one should not lie – meaning that these norms should provide moral guidance to people in general and not just to oneself. As Stanford (2019) has argued, moral externalisation is fundamental to social cooperation, making it possible for people to act in relatively congruent ways and resist oppressive relationships (see also Sayer, 2005: 139–141). At the same time, externalisation provides the basis for moral judgements regarding other people’s behaviour and (in)ability to act in morally sound ways, what we here call moral distancing.

There are studies showing that people have a tendency to be more judgmental when it comes to a specific behaviour if it is conducted by others rather than by themselves (e.g., Te Brake & Nauta, 2022). Notably, there are class and gender aspects involved here, which means that there can be double standards as to what type of activities are morally acceptable and to whom (Sayer, 2005: 165). A similar approach can be found in Goffman’s theory of role distance, which holds that people sometimes set up a “virtual self” (Goffman, 1961: 107), representing a generalised role – which in our case could be the “general smartphone user” – from which they can discursively withdraw in order to strengthen their self-identity. As Nixon (2020) showed in a study of non-consumption, this means that people typically construct images of others as possessing less individual agency in relation to social pressures to be, for example, a consumer. This social-

psychological mechanism has also been identified in research on “third-person effects”, holding that people assume others to be more vulnerable to negative media effects than they are themselves (e.g., Davison, 1983; Yang & Tian, 2021).

As mentioned above, there are longstanding norms in society stating that one should keep up communicative agency and not be addicted to or manipulated by media (as technology or industry). Recently, in the wake of escalating digital reliance, these norms have even been translated into a “disconnectivity imperative” related to discourses on digital wellbeing and the need to sometimes “unplug” in order to stay healthy and productive (e.g., Rauch, 2014). While such discourses are largely commercial and neoliberal in nature, launched by the tech industry as part of their service offerings and thus having a direct *and* indirect effect on ordinary digital consumers, there is also an academic discourse presenting digital wellbeing in terms of felt communicative agency: as the “subjective individual experience of optimal balance between the benefits and drawbacks obtained from mobile connectivity” (Vanden Abeele, 2021: 938), or as the “[perception of] agency over and functional support from the use of media” (Vanden Abeele & Nguyen, 2024: 122). To the extent that such discourses underpin externalised norms regarding smartphone use (Geber et al., 2024), it is important to assess in what ways they play into moral distancing and thus the reproduction of social power relations.

Data and methods

We apply a mixed-methods approach to shed light over variations in smartphone morality among young adults – a cohort for whom the smartphone is a thoroughly normalised element of everyday life. At the same time, the cohort is diverse not just in terms of gender and social background, but also since life conditions change during this period. The empirical foundations are 1) a survey targeting a sample of the Swedish adult population (18 years and older), and 2) six focus-group interviews conducted in a mid-size city in Sweden. The two sources were designed to provide complementary information about smartphone morality. While we use the survey data for identifying some basic demographic patterns and variations in smartphone morality among 20–35-year-olds (and to compare this demographic to all respondents above 20 years old), the focus groups provide more nuanced information about the reasonings behind smartphone morality.

The survey was carried out within the context of the research institute Kantar-Sifo’s web panel (respondents could answer the survey on a computer, smartphone, or tablet) in February 2021 and included 2,401 respondents (29% answering rate). Respondents were between 18 and 94 years old ($M = 49$) and the sample consists of 51 per cent women and 49 per cent men. The survey was part of the research project “Measuring Mediatization, Stage 2”, and contained a questionnaire that, among other things, included two sets of morally oriented questions about smartphone use. In the questionnaire, we used the term “mobile” instead of “smartphone”, but this should not affect the results due to

the high penetration of smartphones in Sweden (Ohlsson, 2023). Both sets were formulated as statements that the respondents were asked to agree or disagree with on a four-level scale, ranging from “do not agree at all” to “fully agree”. To capture aspects of moral distancing, the first set concerned judgements pertaining to “people in general”. The second set, in turn, asked about the same issues, but pertaining to the respondent’s own smartphone use (including only those respondents who had answered that they have a smartphone), thus enabling us to identify instances of moral dissonance. Each set contained thirteen items, where six (#1–6) concerned the perceived modus of smartphone use and seven (#7–13) revolved around the perceived benefits and costs of smartphone use:

1. Good at setting limits for how much the mobile is used
2. Behave in disturbing ways when using the mobile among others
3. Knowledgeable about how different mobile apps can be used in everyday life
4. Wasting one’s time in front of the mobile screen
5. Easily distracted by the mobile
6. Difficult being away from the mobile any longer time
7. Mobile use leads to buying things one doesn’t need
8. Mobile use leads to better quality of life
9. Mobile use leads to less loneliness
10. Mobile use leads to more stress
11. Mobile use gives access to important information about society
12. Mobile use gives access to meaningful culture
13. Mobile use gives access to relevant tips about goods and services

Statements #1–6 can be understood as moral judgements, since they refer to evaluations of whether people (oneself or others) are able to cope with their smartphones, that is, managing media domestication. Statements #7–13 capture smartphone morality inasmuch as respondents indirectly, by rating the perceived consequences of smartphone use, assess whether they think communicative agency is maintained. The items largely reflect the four aspects of communicative agency proposed by Ytre-Arne and Das (2021): sociocultural, civic-political, creative, and connective.

The quantitative analysis is rudimentary (cross-tables generated in SPSS) and intended to provide a context for the qualitative analysis. The focus group interviews were carried out in March–April 2022 and included 34 participants 20–35 years old (4–8 participants in each group). The interviews are part of a research infrastructure called the “Geomedia Panel”, governed by the Centre for Geomedia Studies at Karlstad University, Sweden, in which focus-group data are gathered biannually, addressing people’s everyday experiences of connective media and mobile platforms. In 2022, smartphone morality was one out of four themes that were specifically covered in the interview guide. The respondents were invited to discuss things like when and where smartphones should (not) be used; what they consider appropriate and inappropriate forms of use; how they

think people in general behave with their smartphones; and whether they apply any rules or routines for their use. The themes were designed to complement the survey material gathered one year earlier.

The focus groups were composed to reflect demographic variations. The respondents were gathered from three different neighbourhoods in Karlstad – a city of 95,000 inhabitants – reflecting different socioeconomic levels (based on public categorisations). From each of the neighbourhoods, two samples were drawn, consisting of men and women, respectively. We thus arrived at six groups with a certain degree of internal coherence. Each interview lasted for about 90 minutes and was accompanied by a questionnaire that charted background factors. The interviews were led by a professional interviewer who also transcribed the material. The quotes that appear in this article were translated from Swedish by us. In the text, we refrain from using names to protect the identity of our research subjects.

A quantitative overview of smartphone morality among young adults

Our analysis of the survey data confirms the existence of moral distancing pertaining to the modes or consequences of smartphone use that threaten communicative agency. People in general ascribe problematic consequences of smartphone use (e.g., stress and over-consumption) and less desirable behaviour (e.g., wasting time and disturbing behaviour) to others rather than to themselves, while no similar pattern exists for positive statements (see Table 1).

While the 20–35-year-old cohort is not less judgmental towards other people than the adult population in general, they are more inclined to articulate feelings of moral dissonance in relation *their own* smartphone use. Compared to the adult population at large, they feel more often that they are easily distracted and wasting their time on the device. At the same time, younger people think that more positive things come out of smartphone use, and that they are more knowledgeable about apps than people in general. This reflects that young people spend more time with media on a daily basis (Ohlsson, 2023) and that their lives are more entangled with the digital, which leads to more ambiguity (Geber et al., 2024; Vanden Abeele & Nguyen, 2024).

Table 1 Evaluation of smartphone use (per cent)

	All respondents 20+			Respondents 20–35 years old		
	Pertaining to people in general (n = 2,387)	Pertaining to yourself (n = 2,387)	Difference	Pertaining to people in general (n = 585)	Pertaining to yourself (n = 562)	Difference
Good at setting limits for use	6	24	18	7	13	6
Behave in disturbing ways	24	2	-22	18	4	-14
Knowledgeable about apps	25	30	5	26	36	10
Wasting one's time on device	50	25	-25	55	41	-14
Easily distracted by device	71	23	-48	78	41	-37
Difficult being away from device	71	19	-52	70	28	-42
Leads to buying unnecessary stuff	32	6	-26	41	12	-29
Leads to better quality of life	6	7	1	10	9	-1
Leads to less loneliness	13	9	-4	15	16	1
Leads to more stress	44	14	-30	45	23	-22
Gives important information about society	50	47	-3	56	56	0
Gives meaningful culture	17	16	-1	21	20	-1
Gives tips about new goods and services	34	28	-6	39	35	-4

Comments: Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding smartphone use? Figures indicate the share who “Fully agree”; “Don’t know” answers were excluded from the analysis.

Source: Kantar online survey, Sweden, 2021

Our findings also show that there are variations among younger adults depending on gender and socioeconomic factors. In the total sample, the connected lives of women are marked by a stronger sense of moral dissonance than the connected lives of men (not presented in the table). Women consider the smartphone to be more rewarding *and* more problematic at the same time, feeling that they have difficulties being away from the device and get distracted more easily. Among young adults, this gender pattern is accentuated (see Table 2). More than any other group, young women experience that the smartphone causes stress and leads to the wasting of time. Young women thus seem to pay the highest price for digital reliance, not least

when it comes to moral distress. This is interesting since there is a lack of evidence in previous research that digital-technology use per se would be more harmful to women and young people than to others (Sewall et al., 2022). Our results align with previous research showing that women experience moral dissonance as their smartphone use collides with internalised, and gendered, social pressures related to work, education, and motherhood (Ytre-Arne, 2023), which has also been shown in relation to other types of media use, such as watching television (e.g., Alasuutari, 1992; Morley, 1986; Steiner, 1963). It should also be reckoned that young women are heavier consumers than young men (in Sweden) when it comes to most types of online material, except for, especially, sports (Ohlsson, 2023).

Table 2 Evaluation of smartphone use among young adults (20–35 year old), by gender (per cent)

	...pertaining to people in general		...pertaining to yourself		Difference	
	M (n = 253)	W (n = 332)	M (n = 238)	W (n = 327)	M	W
Good at setting limits for use	7	7	16	11	9	4
Behave in disturbing ways	18	18	4	4	-14	-14
Knowledgeable about apps	22	29	39	33	17	4
Wasting one's time on device	48	59	29	49	-19	-10
Easily distracted by device	71	83	34	47	-37	-36
Difficult being away from device	64	75	20	34	-44	-41
Leads to buying unnecessary things	38	42	7	16	-31	-26
Leads to better quality of life	13	8	12	7	-1	-1
Leads to less loneliness	15	15	17	15	2	0
Leads to more stress	48	44	18	27	-30	-17
Gives important information about society	51	59	55	57	4	-2
Gives meaningful culture	21	22	19	19	-2	-3
Gives tips about new goods and services	35	43	33	37	-2	-6

Comments: Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding smartphone use? Figures indicate the share who “Fully agree”; “Don’t know” answers were excluded from the analysis.

Grey fields indicate statistically significant relationships between gender and the dependent variable on at least the 0.05 level based on a Pearson Chi-Square test. Numbers in bold indicate significance on the 0.01 level.

Due to the table only showing shares that “fully agree”, some effects of the independent variable may not be visible in the table, even though the relationship is statistically significant, for example, “Behave in disturbing ways”.

Source: Kantar online survey, Sweden, 2021

Table 3 Evaluation of smartphone use among young adults (20–35 years old), by economic background (per cent)

	...pertaining to people in general		...pertaining to yourself		Difference	
	Economy+ (n = 46)	Economy– (n = 70)	Economy+ (n = 42)	Economy– (n = 66)	Economy+	Economy–
Good at setting limits for use	13	3	19	10	6	7
Behave in disturbing ways	22	27	7	6	-15	-21
Knowledgeable about apps	48	39	43	29	-5	-10
Wasting one’s time on device	56	58	48	38	-8	-18
Easily distracted by device	72	86	48	46	-24	-40
Difficult being away from device	70	81	29	38	-41	-43
Leads to buying unne- cessary things	24	48	12	11	-12	-37
Leads to better quality of life	14	10	18	8	4	-2
Leads to less loneliness	13	16	28	16	15	-1
Leads to more stress	42	49	35	23	-9	-26
Gives important infor- mation about society	57	51	66	56	9	5
Gives meaningful culture	27	16	16	26	-11	10
Gives tips about new goods and services	40	38	44	36	4	-2

Comments: Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding smartphone use?

Economy+ includes respondents who “fully agree” that the household where they grew up was economically richer than others. Economy– includes respondents who do “not at all agree” that the household where they grew up was economically richer than others. The scale contained four steps. “Don’t know” answers were excluded from the analysis.

Grey fields indicate statistically significant linear relationships between perceived economic privilege (rated on a four-graded ordinal scale) and the dependent variable (rated on a four-graded ordinal scale) on at least the 0.1 level based on a Chi-Square test (Linear-by-Linear Association). Numbers in bold indicate significance on at least the 0.05 level.

Source: Kantar online survey, Sweden, 2021

Table 4 Evaluation of smartphone use among young adults (20–35 years old), by cultural background (per cent)

	...pertaining to people in general		...pertaining to yourself		Difference	
	Culture+ (n = 138)	Culture– (n = 37)	Culture+ (n = 135)	Culture– (n = 35)	Culture+	Culture–
Good at setting limits for use	5	6	13	0	8	-6
Behave in disturbing ways	17	17	4	3	-13	-14
Knowledgeable about apps	33	22	37	35	4	13
Wasting one's time on device	55	47	39	49	-16	2
Easily distracted by device	76	78	39	41	-37	-37
Difficult being away from device	66	81	27	32	-39	-39
Leads to buying unnecessary things	39	47	12	11	-27	-36
Leads to better quality of life	12	12	10	6	-2	-6
Leads to less loneliness	22	15	21	16	-1	1
Leads to more stress	46	43	23	19	-23	-24
Gives important information about society	62	49	59	43	-3	-6
Gives meaningful culture	23	18	24	23	1	5
Gives tips about new goods and services	38	41	34	35	-4	-6

Comments: Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding smartphone use?

Culture+ includes respondents who “fully agree” that the household where they grew up was marked by the presence of “books, music, art and other cultural expressions”. Culture– includes respondents who do “not at all agree” that the household where they grew up was marked by the presence of “books, music, art and other cultural expressions”. The scale contained four steps. “Don’t know” answers were excluded from the analysis.

Grey fields indicate statistically significant linear relationships between perceived cultural privilege (rated on a four-graded ordinal scale) and the dependent variable (rated on a four-graded ordinal scale) on the 0.1 level based on a Chi-Square test (Linear-by-Linear Association). Numbers in bold indicate significance on at least the 0.05 level.

Due to the table only showing shares that “fully agree”, some effects of the independent variable may not visible in the table, even though the relationship is statistically significant, for example, “Good at setting limits for use”.

Source: Kantar online survey, Sweden, 2021

We can also show that economic and cultural resources (*habitus*) to some extent play into smartphone morality (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). As an indicator of people's subjective experiences of economic privilege, we used a question in the survey where respondents were asked to assess whether they grew up in a household that was "economically more affluent than others". As an indicator of perceived cultural privilege, we used a statement measuring whether respondents "grew up in a household with many books, a lot of music, art and other cultural expressions". While the correlations with media morality are relatively weak in both cases, there are some significant, and linear, relationships. Comparing the groups of young adults stating the most and the least economically privileged backgrounds, moral distancing is somewhat more common in the latter group (see Table 3). Respondents stating that they have a privileged economic background are more inclined to think that other people are able to set limits to their smartphone use and avoid being addicted, that is, to keep up communicative agency. Likewise, the perceived inheritance of cultural capital fosters a predisposition to believe that other people are relatively knowledgeable and able to set limits (see Table 4). The latter relationship, however, is not evident in Table 4, since it plays out among those (with privileged backgrounds) stating that they "partly agree" with the statement.

In line with established models of *habitus* and social reproduction, a privileged background also conditions a sense of moral self-confidence and expertise (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Sayer, 2005). Respondents from culturally privileged backgrounds state that they are better at setting limits to their smartphone use and do *not* agree that it is difficult to be away from the device. The same thing holds for people from economically privileged backgrounds. Whereas the statistical robustness is somewhat limited in Tables 3 and 4, due to the restricted sample (young adults), the significance of economic and cultural capital as explanatory factors of smartphone morality increases substantially once we analyse the full survey sample (not presented in the tables). This can be seen as a validation of the above patterns. The findings also correspond with previous research showing that it is more common in privileged groups to have routines for smartphone non-use (Fast et al., 2021).

The moral implications of smartphone invasiveness and addiction

The focus group interviews provide a deeper understanding of the above results, notably related to gender. There is a consensus across all six groups that everyday life is intimately entangled with the digital, especially via the smartphone. Respondents compared the smartphone with "a body part" (2:2 – Female, 21) or a "body organ" (5:7 – Male, 27) and said things like: "When you think that you have lost your phone, it feels as if you have lost yourself" (1:1 – Female, 21). Many said explicitly that they use their smartphones too much. Some also told us, in one way or another, that they "would rather not have a smartphone" (4:4 – Male, 22), but that they feel they have to. Only a few respondents, whose

work does not allow private smartphone use, described a life situation where the smartphone is less central and moral dissonance relatively absent.

Although our interview transcripts are rich in utterances about the value of the smartphone in everyday life – thereby confirming key findings from our survey – they also shed further light on the different facets of moral dissonance and distancing that appear in the quantitative data. In congruence with previous research (e.g., Bartsch, 2021; Elhai et al., 2019; Lupinacci, 2021; Ward et al., 2017), our interviews indicate that the smartphone raises moral concerns for two main reasons: It is invasive or distractive, and addictive. These traits cause a negative spiral of anxiety and stress (see Pivetta et al., 2019). Reflecting key tropes in our interview data, the following sections deal with, first, the difficulties of keeping an “appropriate” distance to one’s smartphone (especially in social situations), and second, the troubles of escaping social media. In both parts, we reflect on moral dissonance and distancing.

Invasiveness: Balancing social presence and proper distance in smartphone use

When discussing what constitutes “inappropriate forms of smartphone use”, responses contain references to especially mindless, anti-social, and narcissistic forms of use. As to the latter, one respondent expressed concern with other people’s “self-obsessive” behaviours:

People get more and more self-obsessed with selfies and such and just look at themselves and at videos on TikTok. They look at celebrities and then feel that they have nothing to offer themselves, because they do not have what others put on display. That is a bad kind of use, I think. (6:1 – Female, 28)

While this is an expression of moral distancing – the identification of fractured social norms – many respondents also describe themselves as victims of invasiveness. By confessing to “bad” behaviours related to smartphone use, our respondents demonstrate that they know they have – or might be perceived by others to have – a problematic relationship with their devices. For example, checking the mobile first thing in the morning was described as “a bad habit” (1:3 – Female, 28), and chatting with friends before going to bed as “perhaps not very smart” (1:8 – Female, 21).

It is a common understanding that smartphone use should not disturb social presence, nor interfere with intimate life. Therefore, many respondents prefer to put away their phones – and expect others to do so as well – in certain places or situations. Libraries, public transit, and gyms were mentioned as such places, as were more private spaces like the TV-sofa (when watching with somebody else), the bedroom, and the dinner table. Talking about a friend of hers, one respondent exemplified what she understands as problematic smartphone use:

I think about a leisure trip I did with a friend. She had just met a new guy and was very much in love. She kept running around with her mobile all the time. It felt like we were three on that trip, although it was just me and her.

It was tough. I felt like I had wasted money on a trip that I was hardly part of. I felt deprioritised and sad. (6:4 – Female, 32)

The addictive smartphone use of a friend thus had a deeply distracting effect on the experience of travelling. Overall, the moral standards seem to be similar in all groups – thus cutting across class and gender structure – when it comes to the value of being socially present and keeping the smartphone at a proper distance in certain situations. However, gender seems to play a role in attitudes towards technology. In our data, media-related moral dissonance is most outspoken among the women, who more often acknowledge that their own – and not just others’ – agency to control their smartphone use is limited:

We become more dependent and we are influenced a lot by what the phone tells us. That’s a hassle, I think. [...] I know that I’m not the one who steers. I think I have control but deep inside, I know that I don’t. (2:1 – Female, 31)

This respondent explicitly associated herself with a general “we” – the opposite of role distance – considering herself part of a bigger problem, testifying to the gendered pattern we found in the survey. The gendered dimension of perceived failures in communicative agency becomes particularly obvious among those in a heterosexual relationship who live together with their partner. In our data, men appear to be more technologically interested and optimistic, while women are more likely to describe new technology as an intrusion, crossing the line of intimacy. With reference to her own home situation, one of the female respondents described this discrepancy as follows:

I could do without all this with the lamps we have at home in Google Home. It’s my partner’s idea. Another thing I could do without, that he wants to buy, are electronic roller blinds. He is very hooked on the Google Home assistant. “Stop!”, I feel. It feels like technology takes over. He is very technical and wants this and that [...] but I feel ensnared by the Google assistant sometimes. It steers the lamps, turns on the TV, yes it can do most things. It feels like I’m being surveilled. (6:2 – Female, 27)

In this case, thus, the respondent’s sense of moral dissonance stems from the experience of living in a smartphone-centric environment that somebody else has constructed. Similar tendencies have also been found in studies of “digital housekeeping” (Aagaard, 2023) and how people appropriate and handle streaming platforms in the home (Jansson, 2023). The quoted respondent evidently feels as if her home life is being “taken over” – rather than facilitated – by Google’s “smart” infrastructure, and that her ability to be part of domestication is disabled.

Addiction: The problem of being trapped in social media

In line with previous research, social media stand out as a particularly problematic aspect of smartphone use, often corresponding with negative feelings (e.g., Brailovskaia et al., 2020). Our focus-group conversations contain strikingly

many examples of how respondents have stopped using social media because they caused anxiety and feelings of wasting one's time. However, they also testify to the difficulties of avoiding these platforms, thus causing moral dissonance. The following quotes may serve to exemplify feelings of being trapped in – and forced to return to – “meaningless” social media platforms:

Well, I have stopped using social media. But it goes back and forth. Facebook, I don't have any more, Instagram I install back and forth. I feel that I want to do without them altogether. [...] The apps get better and better and, in the end, one has wasted an hour just to check Instagram. That's why I remove it. Then somebody says “check out what I posted”, and then I want to install it again to see, and then I'm stuck again. It's a trap. (4:4 – Male, 22)

I feel so much better when I'm not connected all the time. [...] I can feel so bad psychologically for having my mobile that it would even feel good if I lost it. But that is difficult too, because one always returns to it and then one is back at square one. I disabled push notices from Snapchat, because I mostly use Snap to stay in touch with friends. But, it's actually not necessary. One just says small things, nothing important really. (1:1 – Female, 21)

As with smartphone use in general, our respondents are concerned about not only their own social media habits, but also those of others. On the one hand, they talked about “other people” in a generic way, as if they were referring to a faceless “Other”. For instance, one of our respondents said that she “gets worried over other people who do not understand that they cannot control it [their smartphone use]” (2:1 – Female, 31). On the other hand, many also told us about people in their own life who suffer from problematic smartphone use. One respondent laughingly said that her parents are “worse” than she is because “they use their phones all the time without even noticing!” (1:6 – Female, 22). Another respondent testified to how the social media platform TikTok has “ruined” friends' lives:

I have many friends who feel bad because of the mobile. Then it is TikTok. They say it has ruined their lives; that they sit with it all the time. Some have started going to therapy because they sit with the mobile all the time. I don't have that problem, fortunately, but many people do. (6:3 – Female, 28)

Statements like these imply that the common inclination to ascribe failed media domestication to others may not just be about speculation. Evidently, our respondents have witnessed problematic smartphone use among peers and family. This problematises the survey results, since it is very likely that young adults have a more grounded understanding of matters related to digital (over-)reliance than older people (see, e.g., Agai, 2024). It points to the limitations of standardised questionnaires when it comes to explicating what expressions of moral distancing actually stem from (e.g., a feeling, hearsay, or personal observations).

Conclusion

To investigate smartphone morality, we undertook a two-part study, consisting of a quantitative survey targeting a nation-wide sample of the Swedish adult population and six focus-group interviews with young adults. Unlike most studies of media morality, ours was designed to inquire about what people think of their own, as well as other people's, media use. We thus operationalised smartphone morality based on a theoretical division between moral dissonance and moral distancing. While the former was defined as individual experiences of failed efforts to domesticate the smartphone according to internalised norms, the latter referred to critical evaluations of other people's (in)ability to cope with smartphone reliance. Throughout the study, we focused on a relatively young cohort of 20–35-year-olds in order to bypass generational differences and identify variations among people for whom the smartphone has been a normalised part of everyday life throughout their adult life.

There are two particularly important findings from the study. First, the survey establishes that moral distancing is less pronounced among young adults than in the general adult population. The reason is not that young people are significantly more optimistic than others regarding other people's ability to domesticate the smartphone, but rather that young people are more reflexive when it comes to their *own* smartphone use and its costs. In other words, they are more openly aware of their moral dissonance. We found strong consensus across our samples that the smartphone threatens communicative agency because it is invasive (especially in social and intimate situations) and addictive (particularly via social media) – leading many respondents to take measures to deal with what they perceived as problematic smartphone use (and thus handle moral dissonance).

We argue that this observation reflects an important and hitherto understudied aspect of mediatisation; namely that the normalisation of media in day-to-day life is far from friction-free but charged with moral concerns that ultimately define how people think and feel about media technology in their lives, and in society at large. While similar arguments were advanced in early media domestication research (e.g., Silverstone et al., 1992) and reiterated in different contexts more recently (e.g., Nansen et al., 2011), it is important to take this as a reminder of the phenomenological limits of “media withdrawal”. The sociocultural force of mediatisation, the accommodation of a “life in media” (Deuze, 2011), is something deeply felt not only through the practical labour of “digital housekeeping” (Horst & Sinanan, 2021) but also through moral reflexivity and distress. The normalised status of smartphones among young adults does not alter this condition – quite the opposite: Young adults are more self-aware and reflexive than older people when it comes to how well they think that they cope with their devices. At the same time, we should consider that these self-reflexive feelings may also reflect how many young people (more than others) *de facto* struggle on a day-to-day basis to tackle the pervasiveness of digital platforms and may yet have to develop efficient tactics to master this situation – psychologically as well as in practice.

Second, we conclude that young people's capacity to domesticate digital media in a morally congruent way plays a part in the social reproduction of class and, especially, gender. The survey showed that young women, more than young men, feel that they get stressed by, and waste their time on, the smartphone. In our focus groups, the women were also more inclined to admit that their control of their smartphone (use) was restricted, which fostered feelings of moral dissonance as reliance had escalated into something problematic. While men generally tend to report higher levels of self-efficacy in interview studies compared with women, the resonance between our two datasets is rather striking. We thus believe that our findings reflect a longstanding, socially constructed gender gap that goes beyond the "interview performance" and tells us something important about the continuity and compartmentalisation of "male" and "female" lifeworlds, also in times of intensified digital reliance. Such social gaps are particularly important to consider in light of new public (and academic) discourses promoting digital well-being, minimalism, and disconnection, which by acknowledging an increasingly important element of public health *also* impose a new layer of social and moral pressure on people to stay in control of their media use, notably their "screen time" (e.g., Albris et al., 2024; Geber et al., 2024). It is reasonable to assume that young women are more exposed to such pressures than many other groups, given their (on average) higher levels of social media use in combination with internalised social obligations related to, for example, education and family life.

The survey also suggested that socioeconomic privilege may foster a capacity to better cope with digital entanglements and avoid moral dissonances related to the smartphone. In Bourdieusian vocabulary, people with a more privileged habitus seem not only better disposed to feel at ease with their own smartphone use and more confident that they can find routines for domesticating digital devices (Fast et al., 2021), they also keep up a more optimistic outlook as to the social consequences of digitalisation in general. Potentially, we are witnessing the early signs of a post-digital divide here, separating those who are able and can afford to selectively disconnect from digital platforms and those who fall prey to digital pressures and enclosures. However, since this class-related pattern was difficult to fully unpack in our material, this is also where we identify a need for more research. It would take a larger research programme with fine-grained, intersectional analyses to come to terms with the complex role of smartphone morality – taken as moral dissonance and distancing – in social reproduction.

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