

Smartphones have led to the 'death of proximity'

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Credit: [Esther Vargas](#) via [Flickr](#)

A UCL study across nine countries shows smartphones are more than devices we use, they're 'the place where we live' and swap for close contact with others.

The most in depth study ever to look at how adults use smartphones reveals how we are 'homeless' when we lose them because they are where we increasingly express our personalities, interests and values. We adapt them to our needs and have swapped face to face time with family, friends and colleagues for hours spent 'at home' on our smartphones.

A team of 11 anthropologists spent 16 months documenting [smartphone use](#) in nine countries across Africa, Asia, Europe and South America, with a particular focus on [older adults](#). Their analysis is published in *The Global Smartphone: Beyond a youth technology*, a new book by an international team of researchers led by Professor Daniel Miller (UCL Anthropology) whose previous project on [social media](#), *Why We Post*, saw more than a million downloads of the open access books that detailed the findings.

Describing smartphones as devices that facilitate 'perpetual opportunism,' this new research shows how the creativity of users to mold their phones to meet their needs has far greater impact on their experience than the way the device adapts to them, through the algorithms or artificial intelligence that supposedly makes them "smart." This observation is defined as 'smart from below.'

Professor Daniel Miller said: "Our unique study comprehensively reveals how people of all ages across the world, and in particular older people, are creatively adapting smartphones to work for them, and the social, economic, cultural, educational and health benefits this brings.

"We also show how the [smartphone](#) is no longer just a device that we use, it's become the place where we live. The flip side of that for human relationships is that any point, whether over a meal, a meeting or other shared activity, a person we're with can just disappear, having 'gone home' to their smartphone.

"This behavior, and the frustration, disappointment or even offense it can cause, is what we're calling the death of proximity. We are learning to live with the jeopardy that even when we are physically together, we can be socially, emotionally or professionally alone.

"At the same time, the smartphone is helping us create and recreate a vast range of helpful behaviors, from re-establishing extended families to creating new spaces for healthcare and political debate. It is only by looking at the vastly different uses and contexts that we can fully understand the consequences of smartphones for people's lives around the world.

"We hope that everyone, not least politicians and policy makers, will learn from *The Global Smartphone*, which is part of UCL's Aging with Smartphones initiative. We need everyone to build

on the positives while urgently addressing the increasing discrimination and inequality that persist when people anywhere in the world are digitally excluded."

Whether it is access to health information in Ireland and Chile, the use of mobile money in Cameroon and Uganda, [visual communication](#) in China and Japan, or the differing ways older people in Italy, Brazil and Al Quds/East Jerusalem use their smartphones, there is evidence that smartphones are far from devices that create homogeneity.

Other findings suggest that rather than seeing something called smartphone addiction, we would do better to observe the way smartphones facilitate addiction to quite diverse forms of content and activity.

The study also highlights how the different ways 'track and trace' has been rolled out during COVID-19, exposes the fine line between care and surveillance, which largely determines its success or failure. This is an example of smartphones' potential for unique harm or good in different contexts.

The Global Smartphone reveals other ways in which smartphones are changing the way we live and behave:

- The extent to which the visual—through emojis, gifs, images etc—has extended human communication beyond the spoken or written word—whole conversations can now take place through images
- The creation of a new genre of 'functional photography,' where we take pictures to record and store information
- Social media is no longer limited to discrete activities on specific platforms—it is a thread running through a constellation of apps
- A shift in how we operate as families—the trend towards nuclear family units is being reversed as smartphones allow us to reincorporate our extended families into our lives and participate and 'live' in larger family groups
- We may no longer feel old—in many regions of the world the smartphone has helped

change the experience of aging, so people feel continuity with youth, feeling old is delayed and associated with frailty rather than age

- At the same time, smartphones have changed the dynamics of intergenerational relations as older people become dependent on the knowledge of younger people, often resulting in new tensions
- Learning from how people are currently adapting ubiquitous apps like WhatsApp to support their health could provide a valuable alternative to formal mHealth initiatives.

Findings and outputs from the project around the world include:

- In Uganda, mobile money remittances enable people to send money home to older relatives living in rural areas, contradicting the notion that smartphones are causing younger generations to neglect people in their old age.
- In Cameroon the smartphone is helping the middle class create a new public sphere for the discussion of politics
- In Chile and Italy, smartphones allow migrants to 'be' together with both people from their home country and where they live now, in the same 'transportal home'
- In Ireland, smartphones have helped invigorate older people's lives around a plethora of activities, as the average period of retirement has increased
- Observations in Brazil have led to the creation of a 150-page manual of best practices for using WhatsApp for health
- While many people may have smartphones, in the Palestinian field site of Al Quds/East Jerusalem, there are many other ways in which a digital divide remains based on language, different accessibility and other factors.
- In Japan, adding a visual component to digital communication has helped people to maintain social relations and care at a distance that is sensitive to local conversational etiquette/norms
- While in most countries older people

struggle with smartphones that they see as a youth technology, in China many older people positively identify with smartphones in support of a national drive to help China leapfrog other advanced economies through embracing new technologies

There is a growing appetite for in depth information on how we are taking control of our smartphones from policy makers and health and education bodies worldwide, as well as commercial interest.

The Global Smartphone: Beyond a youth technology is written by Professor Daniel Miller (UCL Anthropology), Laila Abed Rabho, Patrick Awondo, Maya de Vries, Marília Duque, Pauline Garvey, Laura Haapio-Kirk, Charlotte Hawkins, Alfonso Otaegui, Shireen Walton, and Xinyuan Wang.

It is accompanied by a series of books called [Aging with Smartphones](#), which includes [Aging with Smartphones in Ireland](#) and [Aging with Smartphones in Urban Italy](#) also published by UCL Press. All three are offered to download for free as an open access PDF, or to purchase in hardback or paperback [here](#).

To coincide with the research and publications, a free online course has been launched on the FutureLearn platform called [The Anthropology of Smartphones: Communication, Aging and Health](#).

More information: The Global Smartphone: Beyond a youth technology.
www.uclpress.co.uk/products/171337

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