Young peoples’ lived experiences of shifts between face-to-face and smartphone interactions: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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**Abstract**

Users of smartphones are finding new ways to shift between the online and the physical world, due to increases in the number of people who go online while ‘out and about’. This study focuses on youths’ lived experiences of using and managing their smartphones and how they navigate their shifts between face to face and digital interactions. Semi-structured interviews with seven smartphone users were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The overarching theme was how participants establish and experience presence through their shifts between face to face and digital interactions. Three themes were developed; constant availability vs be present with me; projection and protection of self; dystopian world: disconnection and separation. The study’s findings highlight that to be ‘present’ while physically with others is socially desirable. Participants depicted a dystopian world when others fail to manage their phone use. The study also highlights the complex identity work that participants engaged in as they navigate social norms around presence.

**1.1. Introduction**

Smartphones are “the world’s most popular consumer electronics device” (Deloitte, 2021, p. 79). Youths are the most intense users and across Europe. British young adults are particularly heavy users, ranking second only to Belgium (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2017). Although young people’s use of smartphones has become a focal point in youth studies, much of this work focuses on problematic smartphone use and its association with mental health. Few studies have focused on how young people navigate feelings of what is comfortable and uncomfortable through their shifts between face to face and digital interactions. In most countries in recent years the number of young people who go online while ‘out and about’ has increased and they are “finding new ways to be online and in the real world at the same time” (Vincent, 2015, p. 4). It is important to develop understanding of how young people manage their shifts between face to face and digital interactions, and how they experience presence in an environment in which mobile phones are increasingly within reach.

*1.2. Navigating interpersonal relationships*

Social and technological advancements have encouraged a shift towards a culture of being ‘always on’ and this has implications for expectations around communication. Gregg (2011) discusses how the emergence of new online technologies around the time that Wi-Fi demand was growing rapidly changed people’s sense of availability in professional information jobs. Gregg terms this presence bleed, whereby boundaries between personal and professional spheres are eroded. By the time of the publication of Gregg’s work in 2011, smartphones had been very popular for several years. The aspects of smartphones that are enjoyed by users also have negative aspects. For example, constant connectivity and accessibility provides convenience, however, the expectation of always being contactable may cause stress and new opportunities to be interrupted while physically present with others. According to Turkle (2011, p. 171), “young people are in a state of waiting for connection”. As Stald (2008) notes in their discussion of mobile identity in Denmark, modern people, particularly youths, may be physically present in one space and mentally somewhere else. This ‘absent presence’ is particularly invited by the mobile phone (Gergen, 2002).

The techniques used by young people to disconnect are well documented. Park (2013) describes “new types of involvement shields” (p. 189) that users in Australia develop to control when and with whom they communicate. In a Swiss context, Nguyen (2021) highlights wellbeing strategies that range from complete disconnection to nuanced ways of managing connectivity such as disengaging from specific apps. The present study builds on this work by exploring the emotional aspects of managing the demands of continuous connectivity and the identity work that users engage in as they navigate social norms around the desirability of presence.

Some users are increasingly prioritising smartphone use over offline activities and interactions. Turkle (2011) explores how technology has encouraged social isolation. This book was published during the time of late Web 3.0 (the third generation of the Internet, which permitted sophisticated interaction between devices and users) and highlights how American teenagers at this time were the first to grow up with an expectation of continuous connectivity. Phones can direct attention away from face-to-face interactions as people are drawn to online communications. More recently, the phenomena of smartphone users finding it increasingly difficult to focus their attention on face-to-face conversations has been dubbed as ‘phubbing’. This refers to snubbing physically present others in favour of one’s smartphone and has been described as a growing trend among youth (Khare & Qasim, 2019). Phubbing has negative consequences for communication, impacting negatively on relationship satisfaction and feelings of personal wellbeing (Roberts & David, 2016). Parental phubbing and its impact on adolescents has become a recent area of concern and is a predictor of anxiety, depression (Wang et al., 2020) and phone addiction in teens (Xie et al., 2019). Aagaard (2019) found that the students who participated in their study described phubbing as annoying and disrespectful, but that they often described instances where they had phubbed others. Much of the research on phubbing is focused on dyadic interactions where phubbing necessarily leads to an interruption of face-to-face interaction. These occasions may be perceived as moments of silent treatment, which is comparable to ostracism- the act of ignoring or excluding others (Nuñez, Radtke & Eimler, 2020). Feelings of ostracism may also result from decreased perceptions of being relationally valued (Hales et al., 2018). In a discussion of phone use in a small group setting, Roholt (2021, p. 285) theorises that such phone use can fracture a group’s context and negatively impact on the identity work of others. Roholt also notes that “there has not been empirical research conducted” in this area.

It has been argued that phubbing is transforming the norms of human communication, such that phubbing behaviour is coming to be understood as acceptable (Al-Saggaf & O’Donnell, 2019). Online and offline social spheres are becoming increasingly entangled. Echoing Turkle’s (2011) earlier arguments, it is increasingly apparent that smartphone users, particularly youths, may be more comfortable spending time in technologically driven worlds (Hunter-Brown, 2021). It is important to note that norms of communication are socially and culturally specific. Stald (2008) highlights how young people are constantly testing and modifying norms and that modification occurs as patterns of use around the mobile phone evolves and develops. As a result, norms are constantly in flux. Costa (2018) highlights the tendency to describe patterns of technology usage in particular Anglo-American contexts as if these are stable properties of a platform. Costa advocates for a shift to exploring the practices of usage within situated environments, as these practices can largely differ across social and cultural contexts. The present study explores the practices of young people at a University in England.

*1.3. Navigating identity*

The first camera phone was introduced in Japan in 2000 and it quickly became apparent that cameras were going to be a key feature of smartphones going forward. As photographs are now shared on social media, this implicates the smartphone as the device through which we now share our lives (Miller et al., 2021). A large body of work explores how people construct their identities the online world. Users of social media are aware of the potential to be seen by others and have developed nuanced strategies for navigating ‘imagined audiences’ (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Young people customarily negotiate, initiate and engage with surveillance practices (Gangneux, 2019). Studies have focused on the associations of self-presentation on Facebook with various aspects of mental health and personality traits. In a review of the literature, Twomey and O’Reilly (2017) found that users who engaged in inauthentic self-presentation are more likely to experience low levels of self-esteem and elevated levels of social anxiety. Much of this literature is focused on the authenticity of people’s online personas and the negative effects of inauthentic self-presentation. This research is important but offers little insight into the experiences of self-presentation and the emotional aspects as individuals navigate online identities.

Lincoln and Robards (2017) begin to address this by exploring how identity work is done by young people using Facebook over an extended period. They highlight how key transitions in participants’ lives, such as the breakup of an intimate relationship, prompts users to revise a Facebook profile and to edit content and realign identity. This reflexive project of self (Giddens, 1991) is multidimensional, shifting between digital and physical contexts and between different audiences. As Thomson (2007) notes, storytelling to ourselves and others is key to this project- as we rework existing narratives and produce new ones “we invent and reinvent who it is possible to be” (p. 8). According to Giddens space and time are embedded into this project of the self and self-actualisation implies the control of time. Berriman and Thomson (2015) present a ‘moral map’ of UK teenage social media use that captures the reported practices that users engage in. This map plots practices against axes of visibility and participation. The quadrant configured by low visibility and low participation, ‘the fan or lurker’ represents cautious practices of limiting online visibility. In contrast, the typical member of the category configured by high visibility and high participation, the ‘internet celeb’, is the ‘Youtuber’. The practices of ‘the geek’ typically involve the creation and sharing of content (high participation) that do not reveal the identity of the creator (low visibility). In identity terms, the space of ‘the geek’ is “uninhabitable: a space of bullying, exploitation and humiliation” (p. 595). Stald (2008) notes that young people are routinely teaching each other ‘good behaviour’ in their social networks and as such “every communicative exchange involves negotiating social norms and hence group identities” (p. 159). For example, in their work on the role of screenshots in peer surveillance and how experiences are gendered, Jaynes (2020) highlights how there was an implicit understanding of when it was acceptable to create or to share screenshots and that breaching this unspoken code meant that one was at risk of being outcast from the social group.

This study draws on interview data from seven individuals who use their smartphone daily and adopts an inductive, phenomenological approach. An overarching aim is to understand youths’ lived experiences of using and managing their smartphone and addresses several specific research questions. First, how do individuals manage their shifts between face-to-face and digital interactions? Second, how do individuals establish and experience presence as they navigate these shifts?

**2.1. Materials and Methods**

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, in accordance with the British Psychological Society’s Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021). Approval was granted by the Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee at The University of Derby (ref 88-1617-CCFHp). In line with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis’ (henceforth IPA) recommendations (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), purposive sampling was used. We invited young people (aged between 18 and 24) who owned a smartphone and used it daily to participate. All were recruited via email from a large post 1992 University in England. This provided a small, homogenous sample which allowed for in-depth examination of the phenomenon in question (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The seven participants were all undergraduate students. There were 5 women and 2 men. Additional demographic information was not collected. The researchers adopted a thoroughly inductive and inclusive approach and were open to exploring students’ experiences without making any assumptions about these regarding aspects of identity. Anonymity, confidentiality and data retention was discussed prior to each interview. Participants were reassured that their withdrawal from the study have no implications for their studies. No participants chose to withdraw. Face to face interviews were conducted, with the second author asking the participants a series of exploratory questions such as: How would you describe your relationship with your phone? Can you tell me about how your phone may have impacted on your relationship with friends and family? Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim with identifying features changed and names replaced with pseudonyms.

*2.2. Analysis*

The focus of IPA is on how participants make sense of their personal and social world and the meanings that events and experiences hold for them (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA draws on phenomenology and is interested in understanding the human experience. Rather than an attempt to provide an objective description of an event itself, individuals’ experiences, understandings, perceptions and accounts are honoured (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). IPA is consonant with Heidegger’s claim that phenomenological inquiry is an interpretative process. Understanding can only be achieved through the interpretations of the researcher (Eatough & Smith, 2017) and the hermeneutic tenets of IPA recognise the researcher as an integral part of the research process. It is acknowledged that experience cannot be simply revealed and there is a process of rich engagement and interpretation involving both the researcher and the researched. This two-stage interpretation is referred to as the double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2003), whereby the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant, who is making sense of the phenomenon, in this instance, their relationship with their smartphones. IPA’s idiographic focus, which involves detailed and nuanced analysis of the lived experience of a small number of participants, allows the uniqueness and richness of experience to be explored (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA has been used widely within the field of youth studies, for example experiences of school belonging from the perspectives of children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (Hammond, 2021), experiences of panic attacks in adolescents (Hewitt, Tomlin & Waite, 2021) and understandings of grief in children who have lost a parent to cancer (Flahault et al., 2018).

The analysis was carried out collaboratively following Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2009) guidelines. The authors independently read and re-read the interview transcripts while listening to the audio files to enter the participants’ world then made initial notes. The authors co-developed themes for each participant before moving to the next case and then looked for patterns across cases to establish inter-relationships. This led to the final development of interpretative themes that captured the essence of the participants’ lived experiences.

**3.1 Results**

The overarching theme was how participants establish and experience presence through their shifts between face to face and digital interactions. The first theme highlights the tension between the expectation of constant availability versus the expectation of being present during face-to-face situations. The second theme highlights the ways in which the phone was used to manage, conceal and extend the self and how participants do identity work to present themselves as mature, healthy phone users. The third theme provides insights into a dystopian world in which others are depicted as immersed in their phones, and how participants manage their identities as more evolved users who are outside of this world, looking in.

*3.2. Constant availability vs be present with me*

There were implicit social and behavioural norms around phone use that the participants all understood. One clear shared understanding was the pressure to be available to always communicate digitally (Constant availability). In contrast, there was a clear need for others to attend to them more fully in face-to-face interactions (Be present with me). The analysis explores how individuals navigate feelings of rudeness and awkwardness in their interactions with others as they manage these competing demands.

3.2.1. Constant availability

Most participants indicated that always being available to engage with messages and social media was expected. Their phones were always within reach “I do use my phone a lot, it’s always on me” (Eliza) and throughout the day “I check in the second that I wake up before I go to sleep” (Ged). Being constantly available was normal, expected and unquestioned. When participants wanted to disengage or were forced to step back from assumed constant online presence, this was burdensome. Dee reveals that the phone checking cycle occurs around the clock:

*Before I go to sleep I do check it and then depending on who it who's chatting I'll reply or leave it till morning and think I'll just reply in the morning and pretend I was already asleep.*

The need to ‘pretend’ reveals the pressure to be available at all waking hours, and Dee’s covert management of this. For Dee, pretending to be physically unable to answer messages is a strategy for managing possible rudeness. Her self-care (delaying the reply) is presented as being sneaky, and disruptive of the assumed pattern of communication that is expected by others. Female participants reported concerns around safety and for Eliza, her phone is a tool for managing this:

*You’re always updating people where you are and stuff, I think that’s like sort of like reassuring that people know where you are what you’re doing.*

Eliza’s use of ‘you’re’ as a collective pronoun implies that regular updates of one’s whereabouts are the norm. While this constant connectivity and the ability to keep others informed of ‘where you are’ provides a sense of security, some participants reported concerns from others when they were unable to keep in touch. When Becky’s phone was broken, her regular habits were interrupted:

*People would panic, they were like ‘she hasn’t been on social media for an entire day. Is she okay?’ I’m like and it’s only been one day in those two weeks [I: Yeah] I haven’t died or anything, my phone is just broken.*

Becky appears to be unconcerned, and she contrasts her more measured use of her phone with the ‘panic’ in her peers. This also reveals the constancy of expected engagement and presence on social networking sites (enabled by the ever-present smartphone). Disengaging created worry and concern for Becky’s health and safety amongst her peers.

3.2.2. Be present with me

The participants gave insight into expectations when they are face-to-face with others. Their need for presence and for friends and family to attend to them was apparent, and if these needs were unmet they experienced loss and frustration. For example, during face-to-face communication, if others disengaged to check their phones, this was experienced as a breach of their connection:

*If you’re out with someone it [phone checking] does hinder like it, it hurts your communication with them.*

Becky described her house mates’ phone use patterns as being constant, and at times inappropriate (such as Facetime conversations with family members in shared space). Her sense of loss around trying to forge friendships in her student house is clear:

*It seems like a waste of time uhm... like the people I live with now there is one person and she is always on the phone.*

The phone acts as a barrier for potential relationship building, and Becky expresses a sense of hopelessness. Her housemate’s lack of presence means that trying to build a connection is a lost cause.

Dee described typical interactions with her younger sister:

*She’d just like she’d be talking one minute and then she’d be on her phone and then you’d just be like you’d be speaking to a blank wall pretty much [I: Right] so she, you’d get nothing out of her until she’s finished that conversation and then she’ll be back and start talking again.*

Dee’s feelings of her sister’s phone use were those of it being ‘very frustrating’ and ‘quite rude’. Dee’s need to be seen and heard go unmet and leave her feeling a loss. Her sister’s zombie-like blankness leaves Dee in a ‘pause’ position, her needs dismissed in favour of the phone, leaving her dissatisfied and rejected. Carly discusses her response to a breach of an assumed understanding that a date should be a space where face-to- face connection should be prioritised:

*I’ve been on dates and the guys been on his phone and I’ve walked out uhm but then I’ve also been with people that I know that they have like work emails they have got to respond to so obviously that’s important, I’m not going to judge them for that but things that can wait until later I think should, [yeah] I always put my phone like away like out of sight so that I’m not distracted by it.*

The meaning-making around paying attention are nuanced. In some settings, specific reasons for phone checking, such as monitoring work emails are acceptable. However, with non-declared and non-rationalised checking at times such as during dates, the actions are interpreted as significantly detracting to relationship formation. Carly’s habit of ‘always’ putting her phone out of sight reveals the strong normative dimension that to be engaged with those with whom one is physically present is desirable. Carly also suggests that for her, friendships are precarious if phone use interrupts meaningful face-to-face time:

*I went out to a meal with a friend last night and they wouldn't start their meal or let me start mine until they had the perfect picture for Snapchat or Instagram. This definitely made me question her intention of being in her company.*

The friends’ prioritisation of taking photographs was interpreted negatively, with annoyance, and highlighted a difference in core values around the importance of presence. This created discord in the relationship for Carly, and the future of the friendship is experienced as being in question.

We see that across the accounts, there is fundamental desire to be attended to fully by others. There was tension between the norm of being available and included in online networks and the need for intimate connection in face-to-face situations. Participants experienced a sense of loss when their connection needs in face-to-face situations went unmet- they had a fundamental need to be seen and heard and for others to be present with them.

*3.3. Projection and protection of self*

The phone was used in a variety of ways to conceal and extend the self. Participants actively managed the projection and protection of their identity when using their phones (the phone as a means for projecting and protecting the self) and made conscious decisions about what could be seen and by whom when using their phones to post on social media (protecting the self on social media).

3.3.1 The phone as a means for projecting and protecting the self

Ged’s experience reveals how he used his phone to project a confident persona, particularly when navigating potential new dating relationships:

*Smartphone gives loads of confidence when you’re talking to even like a stranger because you wouldn’t talk normally face to face with- I would say like one hundred percent confidence but with any confidence we- you wouldn’t talk to a stranger face to face but like on the phone like I said if you wanna ask someone for date you can always message that kind of thing*

For Ged, messaging is a tool that provides a protective layer and allows him to approach strangers in a way in which he feels unable to do so face to face. He projects a more idealised self and opts for messaging over speaking or meeting in person.

In contrast, most of the participants, particularly the women, appeared to use the phone as a shield, a means of protecting the self and retreating from engaging in face-to-face contact with strangers. Becky stated:

*We’d rather to go on our phones than have to go ask someone, because it’s more of an antisocial way of doing it.*

This sense of social anxiety was apparent across the accounts as participants described the norms in their peer groups. Phones are used as tool to cope with an aversion to engaging in more involved communications via speech rather than text. The cocoon-like effect of the phone-world was depicted as insular, comforting and yet debilitating as it created a barrier to outside experiences:

*Like soon as you come off that phone like you have to go out to the world and a lot of people just don’t. They prefer to stay in that little bubble on their phone cause it’s a lot of safer, it’s a lot easier (Becky)*

Becky’s two extracts reveal the identity struggle she faces, she is part of the ‘we’ in the first extract, yet she positions herself as being different from ‘they’ in the second extract. She appears to be able to critique the world of the ‘we’ yet also continues to be part of that group too. In contrast, Dee has taken actions to clearly manage her phone to enable a more authentic self to be expressed:

*I used to be a very antisocial person in terms of my phone and stuff, but that’s because I used it as a coping mechanism for like anxiety and stuff like that so as soon I realised that I had this issue I was like maybe I can change that, maybe I can like change it a bit. And that’s when I was like I need to get off my phone, cause I’m just gonna rely on it too much now I need to find a different way of coping with my situation that I’m going through*

It seems that Dee is negotiating her feelings about a change in identity, from someone whose phone use exacerbated her fears around social engagement to someone who is more actively taking charge of her coping strategies. She experiences her current phone use as more mature, healthy and honest. She is clearly taking charge, has changed the ways in which she uses her phone, she is no longer an antisocial person and has found different ways of coping. However, this appears to continue to be a work in progress- her use of the word ‘now’ suggests that she is still having to pay attention to this change.

Becky also discussed a break away from her group of peers as a younger teenager:

*I just didn’t hang out with them as much cos I wasn’t constantly on my phone so I wouldn’t see the messages and stuff, I’d be out like doing something more like constructive and stuff. I have a younger brother so I was probably like taking him out or something cause he was four years younger so he would have been ten, eleven when I realised this, so I’d like to take him out in winter and stuff and… I think I spent a lot more time with my family and learning to be who I actually am rather than living on my phone and creating an image for myself*

Becky’s dismisses her friends’ prioritisation of managing their virtual selves and interprets her own priorities as being less narcissistic and insular. We see several ‘selves’ here, with a clearer sense of an authentic self emerging as she matures, manages her online projected identity, and has more agency around what supports her ‘real’ self. This contrasts with an inauthentic, carefully created digital self. The protection of the self and ‘learning to be who I actually am’, even if this meant moving away from peer norms of behaviour, was also revealed in other participants’ accounts.

3.3.2 Protecting the self on social media

Some participants highlighted their awareness of being ‘seen’ via social media apps that opened them up for unwanted scrutiny and had taken steps to control their exposure. Carly reflects on the distinction between phones and social media:

*I think maybe the issue isn't with phones, but rather with social media. I know that a lot of mental health issues can arise from the feelings of not feeling good enough or feeling like you constantly need to justify your life to people who don't or shouldn't matter, and this is amplified with social media, and certainly something I've felt in the past. I know that I am happier now that I don't post constantly and seek those 'likes'.*

For Carly, the ‘issue’ lies with social media, rather than phones. Of all the participants, Carly had reportedly restricted her social media presence the most and had disabled many of the most popular apps. Her negative past experiences of being judged on social media clearly impacted upon on how she now manages her public self and in doing so has prevented the negatively reinforcing cycle of seeking popularity. She understands herself to be someone with knowledge, with first-hand experience (I’ve felt; I know) of the damaging aspects of social media. By deleting these apps from her phone, she has taken back control.

Self-protection in this manner was prevalent across the female participants’ accounts of their social media use. Although Ged reveals concern about data protection and identity theft, the young women talked about their concerns for being judged via their social networking posts and images. Eliza revealed how, over time, she had become more guarded around who could see her posts. In doing so, her projected self (via social media) and her authentic self became more aligned:

*There's so many sides to me that social media wouldn't see so it's the opposite, uhm but I think that's a good thing because I'm holding on to the human part of it and not letting too much of it go onto the social media. So there's certain things about me or my personality that only people that are close enough to me should know, and anyone that isn't close enough don't need to know anyway.*

Eliza has stepped away from the norms in her group: “I think I'm a strange one in my generation” and in protecting her details from public scrutiny and judgement, she experiences her social media use as being more reasoned and mature.

This theme captures the challenges of self-hood as participants navigate shifts between face to face and digital communications. On the one hand, the phone is used as a means to protect the self, as a shield to avoid face to face interaction and, for Ged, as a means of enhancing interaction by projecting a more idealised identity. On the other hand, as explored in the previous theme, there is a strong desirability of presence when physically with others. Participants managed their identities as more discerning phone users, and as different to others in their peer group in this respect. This identity work is explored further in the final theme. In their discussions of social media, participants also demonstrated concerns around privacy and exercised agency as they navigated the affordances of a rapidly evolving technology environment. They reported how they have moved to a more mindful social media use to protect their identity.

*3.4. Dystopian world: Disconnection and separation*

The participants’ accounts gave insights into a dystopian world in which others are immersed in their phones and not present in the ‘real’ world around them. There is a sense of disconnection as others isolate themselves in the digital world. The participants managed their identities as more evolved users who can recognise this in others. Ade’s description of waiting for a class to begin reveals the norm of being detached from others in a social setting:

*I was sat at the seminar and I was waiting for the lecturer to sort of get things going and I just looked around the classroom and there was probably ten to fifteen people there and literally, everyone was just sat with their phone I mean I, for the first-hand experience I can’t say what it was like maybe twenty years ago where we didn’t have these like that I imagine people would just talk to each other*

Being engrossed in the ‘phone world’ rather than engaging with others who were physically present, but with whom one may not share a close connection (such as classmates) was depicted as the norm. Fellow students are characterised as passive, distracted and zombie-like. Ade envisions a previous social and friendly pre-phone era which reveals a contrast with current norms. He frames himself as not participating in this social norm, as though standing and questioning from the outside. Ade’s account reveals a sense of acceptance, and yet also a loss of bygone times of greater physical presence and interaction.

Becky also clearly differentiates herself from others who remain immersed in their phone world:

*Some people will just sit in bed and lie in there for like and sit there on their phone for four, five hours think about how much you can get done in that time you could do your work, you could go for a walk, you could get a plane somewhere [Becky laughs] and yet they would rather sit there on their phone looking at their newsfeed looking at cats or something. I mean I love cats but like it’s just different.*

Becky makes a distinction between being in the inauthentic phone world, where users lie passively on their beds and scroll on their phones, and the real, physical world where she, in contrast, is present, productive and active. For Becky these worlds are ‘just different’ and she conveys a sense of bewilderment that others would rather waste time passively and ‘sit there on their phone’. She also positions the phone to be a barrier to enjoying authentic, real-world experiences:

*It wasn’t the best concert I’ve been to because people just stood there on their phones recording it rather than just enjoying themselves, they paid twenty pounds just to record the concert.*

The experience of recording a concert is understood as being fundamentally different to ‘just enjoying’ the experience. Being surrounded by others who are not present and are instead using their phones to record the show impacts on Becky’s enjoyment. ‘They’ are a step away from the real experience, viewing through a lens and distanced from it. The repetition of ‘just’ dismisses others’ behaviour as being in bad form, and outside of appropriate behavioural expectations.

A similar sense of separation and shrinking of the world is depicted in Carly’s account:

*You do definitely see people sort of like isolated in their phone and they say social media is social but actually it narrows how social you are I think it stops you talking to people who are actually there*

Carly presents this using ‘you’; she has separated herself off from this group in her own rejection of the phone world and of social media. She depicts the lives of those who are drawn into the phone world as limited; they are not on their phone but ‘isolated in’ their phone. Similarly to Becky, Carly presents herself as a more ‘evolved’ user who is critical of this behaviour.

Within larger group settings, participants described having private conversations via text. Although initially these gave participants a sense of comfort, this also fostered a sense of unease as they questioned whether they could be the subject of others’ convert conversations. Florence described a scene in her student flat in which a group of her flat mates were all ‘texting’ with each other across the room, but no-one was physically talking to each other:

*I was like we're all in the same room what are we talking about [laughs] that we can't talk about together*?

Florence’s questioning reveals her realisation of how odd this scenario was; people gathered yet fractured by private conversations. We also see an element of distrust and the potential for exclusion and ingroup ostracism emerging as she added:

*If you're on the receiving end of that**so you see people texting you know they're texting each other it makes you feel a bit excluded sometimes cos you're like why can't you talk openly about whatever you're talking about.*

Later in her interview Florence describes a scenario in which she and two of her flat mates were talking on their phones about another friend who was in the room with them.She suspected that he knew they were talking about him and later explained to him that he had come up in conversation. She reflects on how:

*you don't know what they're saying about you to get to know somebody else, if that makes sense so it is, it's a weird feeling to be like, when you, when you know people are talking about you, like talking to each other you kinda get a bit paranoid you're like is it about me?*

There appears to be an ingroup-outgroup dynamic, and we see the emotional impact of ingroup ostracism. Florence’s account gives us insight into the precarious world of text communication by smart phone within social spaces as one can be covertly scrutinised and judged by others with whom one is physically present. Her sense of unease is apparent, and yet her own participation in this highlights the push and pull of this normative behaviour, one which disrupts accepted codes of communication, and leaves her feeling uncomfortable. Her account of never being able to know when people might be discussing others reveals a disconcerting sense of distrust.

In summary, participants revealed a problematic ‘dark side’ of smartphone use as they navigate feelings of disconnection and distrust. The accounts highlighted a dystopian world in which others’ immersion in the phone created separation. Most participants presented themselves as being outside of this dystopian phone world looking in, critically appraising it. They managed their identities and positioned themselves as more discerning phone users. Their sense of being ‘other than’ was clear as they depicted social spaces that were increasingly challenging to manage for them, leaving them with feelings of distrust, wariness and exclusion.

**4.1 Discussion**

Drawing on in-depth interviews with young people at a University in England, this study has examined how young people manage their shifts between face-to-face and digital interactions and how they establish and experience presence as they navigate these shifts. Norms are constantly evolving and are not all shared by all social groups (Stald, 2008). The analysis highlights the implicit rules amongst these young people in England. Participants did not perceive themselves to be addicted to their smartphones, yet all recalled high reliance on their phone throughout the day. The ever presence of the phone was considered useful, comforting and, at times also annoyingly distracting. This ubiquitous phone access was presented as being the norm in their peer groups, which supports findings that document high daily usage amongst young British adults (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2017). This created a tension for participants, as there is a strong normative dimension that to be ‘present’ while physically with others is socially desirable. While previous work has highlighted strategies that people use to disconnect from their devices while in the presence of others or while completing tasks that require undivided attention (e.g. Nguyen, 2021; Park, 2013), the present study highlights the dystopian world depicted when others fail to manage their phone use and the complex identity work involved as people navigate social norms around the desirability of presence.

Participants’ accounts depicted a dystopian world in which others are isolated in their phones and disconnected from the ‘real’ world around them. This absent presence (Gergen, 2002) was characterised as the norm, particularly when physically present with others with whom one does not share a close connection, such as classmates. An identity tension arose for participants, who recognised that they participated in these behaviours, but also understood themselves as operating outside of these norms. This was evident in participants’ discussions of phubbing and of having text conversations about, and which exclude, a person who is also physically present. The negative impact of phubbing behaviour (Haigh, 2015; David & Roberts, 2016) by others who had less phone management skills left the participants feeling isolated, dismissed and frustrated. On the other hand, participants reported reaching out to their phone to alleviate discomfort in some social situations. As such, our study supports the previous work by Aagard (2019) in that individuals’ experiences of phubbing were perceived to be negative, yet they reported engaging in these behaviours. There may be a gap between what young people say about their mobile phone use and what they do in practice (Stald, 2008). Participants managed this tension and understood themselves as more evolved phone users in comparison with others in their peer group. Some participants reported a shift in identity as they navigate the path from antisocial, anxious, engrossed phone user to a more mature user who can cope without the phone as a crutch. As participants reworked narratives regarding their phone use, they “invent and reinvent who it is possible to be” (Thomson, 2007, p. 8). These findings resonate with Berriman and Thomson’s (2015) moral landscape of teenage social media use, within which, in identity terms, the space occupied by ‘the geek’ is unhabitable. The typical phone user was characterised by participants as passive, distracted and zombie-like- an uninhabitable identity.

Being present was understood as a core value and mobile phone use was interpreted by some participants as a reflection of deeper values. Friendships are precarious if phone use encroaches on the space of meaningful face to face time. For some participants the time and importance that others assign to managing their virtual selves reveals foundational differences that result in the fracturing of friendships. A lack of control of time implies a failure of self-management and devoting excessive time to crafting the digital self was understood as disrupting the development of ‘real’ self. For some participants, moving on from these friendship groups has been part of the reflexive project of self (Giddens, 1991).

This article extends the literature on ‘phubbing’ and on phone use in small group settings. Previous research has focused on the behaviour of the individual, often described as ‘the phubber’, and how interruptions to face-to-face interaction results in feelings of ostracism and social exclusion (Hales et al., 2018; Nuñez, Radtke & Eimler, 2020). The analysis here has highlighted how witnessing text conversations between two or more people with whom one is physically present may result in heightened feelings of distrust, paranoia and social exclusion. In this instance negative feelings stem from individuals’ perception of the nature of the digital activities that others are engaged with when using their phones in the presence of others. Ingroup ostracism may produce a threat to one’s acceptance and make one question their place within the group. The present study is one of the first to empirically highlight how smartphone use in small group settings may negatively impact the identity work of others (Roholt, 2021). Having private conversations via text in a larger group setting was depicted as a norm and the dynamics and resultant effects of this are worthy of future research.

Some limitations of this study should be noted. While demographic details related to the inclusion criteria were gathered, additional demographic information was not included, and these aspects may have an impact on bringing particular elements of experience to the foreground. Future research that captures key aspects of identity will allow reflection on the diversity and context-specific nature of experiences. The small sample may be understood as a limitation of the study, however, to avoid sacrificing depth for breadth, “IPA studies are conducted on small sample sizes” (Smith & Osborn, 2012, p. 55). A limitation of IPA is that it enables perceptions of experiences to be explicated but does not seek to explain them and so generalisations cannot be made. However, it is useful to consider IPA in terms of vertical generalisability and the contribution to building interpretative theory, rather than horizontal generalisability whereby findings are applied across a range of settings. In essence, one should consider the extent to which findings resonate with their own experiences, the extent to which they provide rich insight, develop an understanding and relate to existing theory. The present study has provided rich insight into young people’s lived experiences of using and managing their smartphone and has developed understanding of the desirability of presence. A particular novel contribution is the insight into experiences of ingroup ostracism when phones are used by multiple individuals in group settings. As Roholt (2021) notes, changes in smartphone behaviour and app design can be informed by understanding the ways in which smartphone use may conflict with core aspects relevant to our wellbeing, such as identity work.

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