

# Our Buzzing Phones

"Nothing vast enters the life of mortals  
without a curse" - Sophocles



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When the iPhone was created meaningful systemic changes happened around the world although its creators were naive as its notification design and implementation would have detrimental consequences on society.

Smartphones such as the iPhone **increasingly pervade daily life**, society is ever more interrupted by alerts and notifications. It's companies like Apple that know the little red dots of 'unfinished business' capture the attention of the masses. The question that needs to be asked is, how are we as a society letting these constant buzzing phones rule our lives and invite us down the rabbit hole. The answer to this question lies within Apples notification design and how it manipulates.

Apple's design of unread notification is a **problematic design choice**. Red is an important colour that society already perceives as meaning importance and immediacy, well before Apple technology

was introduced. Apple has used this colour as a tool for not only grabbing attention but as a tool of manipulation "using red as a notification badge makes sense because we are already conditioned to pay attention to red signals as items that require our attention". Furthermore, A New York Times article also analysed the annoyance and almost unethical design of Apple notifications, "Late last year, a red badge burbled to the surface next to millions of iPhone users' Settings apps. It looked as though it might be an update, but it turned out to be a demand: Finish adding your credit card to Apple Pay, or the dot stays put. Apple might as well have said: Give us your credit card number, or we will annoy you until you do". It is the design of these notifications that change from being tool based technology that provides aid to people, that becomes **manipulation technology** where it wants to collect your information or make you engage more with your phone.

Apps designed with notifications harboured by Apple, in particular, social media apps also could be viewed as manipulative. Their

notifications about commenting, liking, sharing ect **take advantage of human nature**. An example of the impact of social media notifications can be seen in a photo tagging tool, Jeff Seibert a former Twitter 'Head of Consumer Product', comments on when getting a notification about being tagged in a photo, we need to go into the app to see it, rather than getting a notification with the image in question. This manipulation directs us to use these apps more and dive into the rabbit hole of endless scrolling. He also explains the irresistibility of this photo tagging tool "of course you're going to look at the photo, we can't decide to ignore its deep-seated human personality that the technology is tapping into". The deep-seated personality that Joe is referring to is society's need for connection and validity and the social media apps harboured by Apple that exploit this human need.

The design of these notifications on the iPhone have been found to have consequences on our attention span,

#### References:

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How Tiny Red Dots Took Over Your Life. Nytimes.com. 2018. October 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/27/magazine/red-dots-badge-phones-notification.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share>.

productivity and psychological well being. This is examined in a study where "Participants reported higher levels of inattention and hyperactivity when alerts were on than when alerts were off. Higher levels of inattention in turn predicted lower productivity and psychological well-being". This study proved the consequences of notifications when they are left at their erratic and frequent rate, although when silenced the symptoms of inattention and hyperactivity lowered. It is also these notifications that are detrimental as they feed into FOMO the addiction-like symptoms individuals experience with the use of smartphones. **Notifications provide positive social stimuli and promote a release of neurotransmitter dopamine** "Smartphones have provided us with a virtually unlimited supply of social stimuli, both positive and negative. Every notification, whether it's a text message, a "like" on Instagram, or a Facebook notification, has the potential to be a positive social stimulus and dopamine influx" this justifies the opinion that notifications can be manipulative.



Kushlev, K., Proulx, J., & Dunn, E. W. May, " Silence Your Phones". 2016.Smartphone Notifications Increase Inattention and Hyperactivity Symptoms. In Proceedings of the 2016 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems (pp. 1011-1020).

Tristan Harris: What Your Notifications Do To Your Brain, And What To Do About It. Thriveglobal.com. October 2020, from <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/what-your-notifications-do-to-your-brain-and-what-to-do-about-it/>.

# Our Reaction to Seeing a Notification

When a notification is received, dopamine is created in the midbrain, releasing in several parts across the brain. This stimulates 'social reward' within individuals and encourages them to repeat their actions, often leading to habit and addiction. This diagram displays the areas in which the dopamine is released.

