Chapter 67

Perpetual Mobile Availability as a Reason for Communication Overload:
Experiences and Coping Strategies of Smartphone Users

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ABSTRACT

Mobile communication media such as smartphones have dramatically increased the social availability of users. The perpetual contact is experienced quite ambivalently, not only as a big advantage of technological development but also as a new reason for increasing communication overload. This chapter details how people evaluate mobile availability in their everyday lives and how they cope with experiences of overload and stress. Using the transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977), data from a diary study and qualitative interviews with German smartphone users are analyzed. The findings emphasize the high level of subjectivity that influences how everyday experiences of smartphone usage and mobile availability are evaluated.

INTRODUCTION

The term *communication overload* was first introduced in the context of an amplification of communication channels at the workplace. Nowadays communication overload has increasingly entered the private sphere (Harper, 2010). A main reason can be seen in the mobilization of Internet-connected communication devices, first and foremost the smartphone. Whereas the "perpetual contact" (Gergen, 2002) in the mobile phone era was limited to a one- or two-channel (calls or/and SMS) communicative experience, smartphones have introduced a new multidimensionality of mobile interaction channels by making all types of computer-mediated communication available without time or space constraints (Turkle, 2008). But this communicative deliberation also causes a new complexity of communication practices that can

result in "technostress" (Weil & Rosen, 1997) and communication overload. Communication overload is defined as a state when communication demands from information and communication technology channels exceed users' communication capacities (Cho et al., 2011). Communication overload can interrupt users' daily tasks (Cho et al., 2011) and increase stress levels as well as the risk for certain diseases (Lee et al., 2016).

As a theoretical background, the "transactional theory of stress and coping" (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977) is used to analyze stress experiences and related coping strategies as a transactional process. Based on a research review, this paper discusses four characteristics of smartphone usage that could be potential precursors of communication overload and stress emotions:

1. "Perpetual contact",
2. Technologically induced availability expectations,
3. Parallelization of communication channels, and
4. "Doubling of space".

Using data from an empirical project, we will analyze the theoretically discussed stress experiences and stress inducers during smartphone usage.

BACKGROUND

Mobile Communication as Stress Inducer

In many public discussions and even scientific studies, digital media such as mobile computers and mobile phones are frequently mentioned as stress inducers in the everyday lives of many people (Barley, Meyerson, & Grodal, 2011; Lee et al., 2014). Especially smartphones with their potential usage as mobile "minicomputers" can lead to technostress (Lee, Jin, & Choi, 2012; Lee et al., 2014; Palfrey & Gasser, 2013). Technostress is defined by Weil and Rosen (1997, p. 5) as stress that is a direct or indirect result of the use of technology. It often is discussed as an emotional consequence of communication overload (Chen, 2015, p. 734). Moreover, most studies about digitally induced communication overload and stress focus on the use of digital information and communication media in the work context (e.g., Barley et al., 2011; Grandhi & Jones, 2010; Jackson, O'Conaill, & Frohlich, 2012; Lee et al., 2014; Wajcman et al., 2008). Hardly any research has been done on stress-inducing mobile communication behavior in the private context. With this paper, the author intends to contribute to closing this research gap.

Chen focused his work on "mobile technostress" and highlighted the new need for permanent multi-tasking as especially stress inducing (2015, p. 735). Even outside the work context, many situations exist where individuals have to handle more than one task simultaneously because of the perpetual contact created by mobile communication media (Sellberg & Susi, 2014). Mobile phone users have to decide which incoming call, message, e-mail, or voice mail should be answered first. Additionally, all forms of mediated communication can reach the individual during face-to-face interactions so that interactions with co-located people and with only virtually present people have to be coordinated instantaneously. This can lead to feelings of tension and irritation (Chen, 2015, p. 735).

The results of this type of research indicate a simple solution for "mobile technostress": reduce the use of mobile communication media. However, a large amount of evidence shows that it is not that easy.

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