

Daniel Miller, Laila Abed Rabho, Patrick Awondo, Maya de Vries, Marília Duque, Pauline Garvey, Laura Haapio-Kirk, Charlotte Hawkins, Alfonso Otaegui, Shireen Walton, and Xinyuan Wang, **The Global Smartphone: Beyond a Youth Technology**, London, UK: UCL, 2021, 297 pp., \$38.68 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Tanja Bosch
University of Cape Town



As ubiquitous as the smartphone is in the present day, there remains a dearth of current research on this tool that has become part of everyday life around the world. **The Global Smartphone: Beyond a Youth Technology** fills this gap with ethnographic accounts from 11 researchers who spent 16 months in 10 diverse field sites from Japan to Uganda to explore aging, smartphone use, and the potential use of phones in healthcare applications. As a result, this book uniquely features 10 authors alongside British anthropologist Daniel Miller, who is well-known for his previous work on technology's social and cultural aspects. One of his previous notable works, *The Cellphone: An Anthropology of Communication* (Horst & Miller, 2020), presents the result of ethnographic research conducted in Jamaica and highlights the role of mobiles in low-income communities. In that book, Miller makes the key argument for the need to address the wider communication ecologies in which smartphones are located and explores these devices within locally situated social practices. This ethnographic work is a welcome addition to a field in which Big Data or quantitative approaches are often privileged. Miller uses the term “holistic contextualization” (p. 21) to refer to their consideration of all aspects of everyday life. This ties into Miller and his collaborators’ “from below” approach in which the smartphone is seen as much more than just a device or extension of the phone, as it serves so many different purposes (music listening, photography, locative apps, etc.). A key approach in this book is that it sees smartphones as devices that are crafted by users who have agency and reconfigure apps to suit their own lives.

The Global Smartphone carries forward this work 17 years later and expands it into a range of different cultural contexts. In the introduction, Miller argues that “the smartphone is arguably becoming the ubiquitous appendage to humanity” (p. 4). Written during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which people were physically isolated to prevent infection, and thus connected much more via their smartphones, this book focuses on understanding “the consequences of smartphones for people around the world,” with the secondary aim “to gain a better understanding of what a smartphone really is” (p. 4).

Chapter 2, “What People Say About Smartphones,” highlights the contradictory claims about smartphones that are often dictated by moral and political debates. Miller explores various factors that have played a key role in negative discourses around smartphones in various cultural contexts. Notably, there is significant discussion on the cases of China and Japan, which contributes significantly to existing literature that has tended to focus on Western contexts.

Chapter 3, "The Smartphone in Context," introduces the terms "screen ecology" and "social ecology." Screen ecology "refers to how smartphones work in tandem with other screens such as tablets, laptops and smart televisions" (p. vii); while "social ecology" refers to how smartphones and related practices often reflect social relations in a society. The concept of screen ecology is important, as people often use their phones alongside other screens, such as televisions or tablets. Similarly, the term "social ecology" is relevant in low-access contexts and refers to contexts where smartphones are shared, sometimes across generations. These approaches highlight a central premise of this book that phones cannot be studied "merely as the relationship between a device and its individual owner" (p. 75).

Chapter 4, "From Apps to Everyday Life," reflects on smartphone apps and uses the term "scalable solutionism" to describe the range of things people use apps for. Miller argues that to properly understand a smartphone and its related user, one would have to go through every single app on the smartphone to find out how it is used. This chapter draws on interview data to explore a wide range of app use and related tasks, including health-related and mobile money apps.

Chapter 5, "Perpetual Opportunism," introduces the phrase to refer to the smartphone's always-being-available status and how this changes people's relationship with the world around them. This chapter explores mobile photography, locative apps, and the use of phones for news and information. The term "perpetual opportunism" is used to refer to the phenomenon where the intrinsic design of smartphones and their portability synergize to enable users to seize and maximize opportunities at any given moment, regardless of their location or the task at hand.

In chapter 6, "Crafting," Miller uses the term to refer "not only to how people adopt and adapt their smartphones" but how they see their everyday lives as craft, as they construct the "content and rhythms of everyday life" (p. 135). "In crafting the smartphone, people also craft their relationship to the wider world in which they live; they are also crafted *by it*" (p. 136; emphasis in original).

Chapter 7, "Ageing and Smartphones," focuses on older people's relationship to smartphones and explores how the decline in offline access creates a digital divide where people either have to learn to use online tech or "become effectively incapacitated" (p. 37); while chapter 8, "The Heart of the Smartphone: LINE, WeChat and WhatsApp," argues that these apps sometimes become so dominant that people see smartphones merely as devices for gaining access to these platforms.

The book concludes with chapter 9, "General and Theoretical Reflections," where Miller expands on the notion of the smartphone as a domestic space, or the "transportal home," with phone use divided into many separate domains, similar to rooms in a physical house.

This book provides a range of interesting vignettes and examples to illustrate the points it makes from a range of contexts. The use of ethnography as a primary methodology has allowed a rich and nuanced portrayal of how smartphones are engaged in different contexts. In addition, the book also considers lesser-researched apps such as WhatsApp, which are widely used in the Global South, addressing an important gap in existing scholarly literature.

The Global Smartphone provides a wide range of reflections on various aspects of smartphones in everyday life, though further research is needed on users who are not perpetually connected. Miller points out that “not being able to afford a smartphone matters, especially as the phone is the primary point of internet access” (p. 59). This book explores several field sites where cost was a barrier to access, including Uganda, Cameroon, Brazil, and even Japan, among others. *The Global Smartphone* offers an insightful and comprehensive exploration of the integration of smartphones into various aspects of everyday life across the world. The book stands out in its global perspective, studying communities in nine diverse field sites and providing a rich tapestry of cultural contexts in which the smartphone operates. Miller and his co-researchers explore the smartphone as more than just a technological device; instead, they treat it as a window into the complexities of modern life. This book effectively challenges the misconception that smartphones are primarily tools for the youth and showcases how they are deeply embedded in the lives of all groups, subsequently transforming communication, work, and social relationships.

This book would be of interest to any students or scholars interested in studying digital culture, technology’s impact on society, and global variations in smartphone use.

Reference

Horst, H., & Miller, D. (2020). *The cell phone: An anthropology of communication*. London, UK: Routledge.