“Show me your phone, and I’ll tell you who you are...” – The divides in digital habitus and social status

INTRODUCTION: THE SMARTPHONE AS THE “DIGITAL DNA”

In just over a decade and a half, the smartphone has become a key organising force of human life and an extension of body and mind. Nowadays, it is no longer just a communication tool, but also a personal assistant, a map, a wallet and a constant companion, blurring the boundaries between work and leisure, private and public space. The rhythm of everyday life has changed: smartphone use has become an unconscious reflex, and an increasing share of reality is coming through our screens.

As a result, the online platforms and applications were people are active with their smartphones, and when and for what purpose, is no longer just a technological issue, but one of the most important new dimensions of social inequalities. This analysis was conducted using software-collected real smartphone usage data *(digital trace data*) and a complementary questionnaire survey aiming to explore how social status is reflected in patterns of phone use among a representative online sample of adults aged 20-60. The pioneering nature of the research lies precisely in the combined analysis of real (i.e. not self-reported) digital behavioural data and traditional social data.

ON DIGITAL INEQUALITIES

Research on digital inequalities has evolved from the initial “first-level” divide (presence/absence of access) in the late 1990s to a much more complex three-level approach.

1. **Level 1 (*access*):** Without any doubt, social status is still a strong factor in determining the quality of the goods and services that people can afford. For example, people living in low-income households often have to rely solely on their smartphones to access the internet, which limits their ability to complete certain tasks (e.g. online courses, writing a CV).

2. **Level 2 (*use and skills*):** As access to the smartphone has become more universal, inequalities have moved into the dimension of quality of use. The main question is who uses the various devices effectively and for what purposes. This approach focuses on digital skills and the usage gap. It is this level that is the main focus of this analysis.

3. **Level 3 (*results/consequences)*:** This latest line of research focuses on the specific results, positive and negative consequences, that result from the use of digital media. Many theories emphasise that existing social divisions are being reproduced and may even deepen in the digital space.

The key concept at the third level is the **Matthew effect** (“the rich get richer”), whereby those who already have more resources (e.g. higher education, better income) are also better able to exploit the advantages of the online space, thus digital benefits reinforce existing social inequalities.

Figure 1
Three levels of digital inequalities

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted between March and May 2024, with 508 adults aged between 20 and 60. Participants in the survey came from NRC's NetPanel system. Data were collected using a mixed methodology:

1. **Software-based data collection:** The Octopus smartphone app was used to record participants' real smartphone usage data for an average of 17 days. This amounted to 10.6 million raw records, enabling precise measurement of screen time, app usage and microtemporal patterns. Octopus only works on Android phones, so the research did not cover iPhone users.

2. **Online survey:** Questions on demographics, social background and attitudes were answered in a 20-minute online questionnaire.

To measure social status, a **five-level socio-occupational classification system** was used, based on the occupation given in the questionnaire. In the analysis, the following five groups were distinguished: senior managers/intellectuals (1) and junior managers/intellectuals (2), intermediate occupations (3), skilled workers (4), and unskilled workers (5).

RESULTS

Differences in smartphone use by social status

Intensity (screen time)

The average gross daily screen time of the study's participants was **2 hours 59 minutes.**

The data showed an inverse correlation between occupational hierarchy and daily screen time intensity. While the daily average for **senior managers and intellectuals** was 2 hours 3 minutes, the average **for unskilled workers** was 2 hours 58 minutes. This difference is in part due to the fact that for lower-status groups, the smartphone is often the **only digital device** for work, communication and entertainment, while higher-status groups use multiple devices (laptops, PCs) in parallel. However, an explanatory model has also shown that when screen time on other devices and age are taken into account, the difference between occupational groups in smartphone use is no longer significant, i.e. **differences in social status are not reflected through the duration of device use.**

Divides in app use

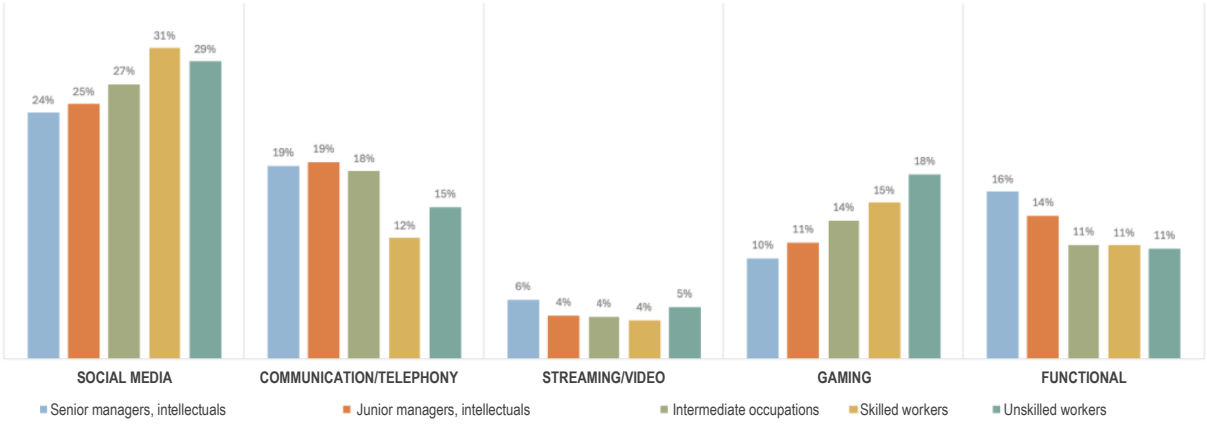
Compared to the average durations, the most pronounced divide appeared **in the purpose** (quality) **of use**. As social status declines, the focus of smartphone use shifts **from functional, productivity-enhancing purposes** (e.g. financial apps, lifestyle, health, etc.) to **entertainment and social media.**

- **Social media:** The rate of use follows a linear trend: lower for higher-status groups (managers/intellectuals) (24-25%) and the highest for manual workers (skilled workers: 31%, unskilled workers: 29%).

- **Gaming:** There is a marked status hierarchy: 10-11% among high-status groups and **15-18% among skilled and unskilled workers.** This suggests a socially differentiated pattern of time spent playing more casual games.

- **Functional applications:** The use of practical apps that support lifestyle (e.g. maps, finance, health, etc.) **is higher in the upper groups (14-16%)** and gradually decreases down the hierarchy (11%).

Figure 2
Individual-level aggregated share of different app times in total screen time by occupational class group



Digital personas: lives and situations behind the phone screen

The research used various clustering techniques to create eight typical user profiles, or "personas", to represent digital behaviour patterns in a comprehensible way. The social composition of the clusters is related to occupational position, i.e. certain groups are clearly under- or over-represented in each cluster.

Some selected examples of personas that illustrate the usage gap:

- **Cluster 1: "Disciplined professional users"** Mostly highly-educated men in managerial positions. For them, the phone is primarily a work tool, and their use is structured and goal-oriented. Functional apps (Gmail, banking apps) are dominant; gaming and excessive phone use are not typical of them.

- **Cluster 2: "Functional, offline-first users"** This group tends to be made up of men over 50 who use their phones mainly for practical purposes. It complements the laptop (the larger screen) rather than replaces it. Communication (calls, messages) dominates in their case, while entertainment and social functions are minimal or almost entirely absent

- **Cluster 3: "Impulsive, entertainment-oriented users"** Younger, typically male users, with extremely high daily screen time (close to 180 minutes or more). Games

make up a disproportionately large share, while Facebook and Viber serve as platforms for social interaction and content consumption. For them, the smartphone is about companionship and relaxation, and usage is primarily entertainment-oriented.

- **Cluster 4: "Life has moved to the phone"** Younger users, mostly female, who spend a lot of time on their phones each day (2.5 hours on average). Usage is dominated by social media (Facebook, YouTube) and browsing, with communication playing a secondary role. For them, the phone is both a social space and a source of entertainment

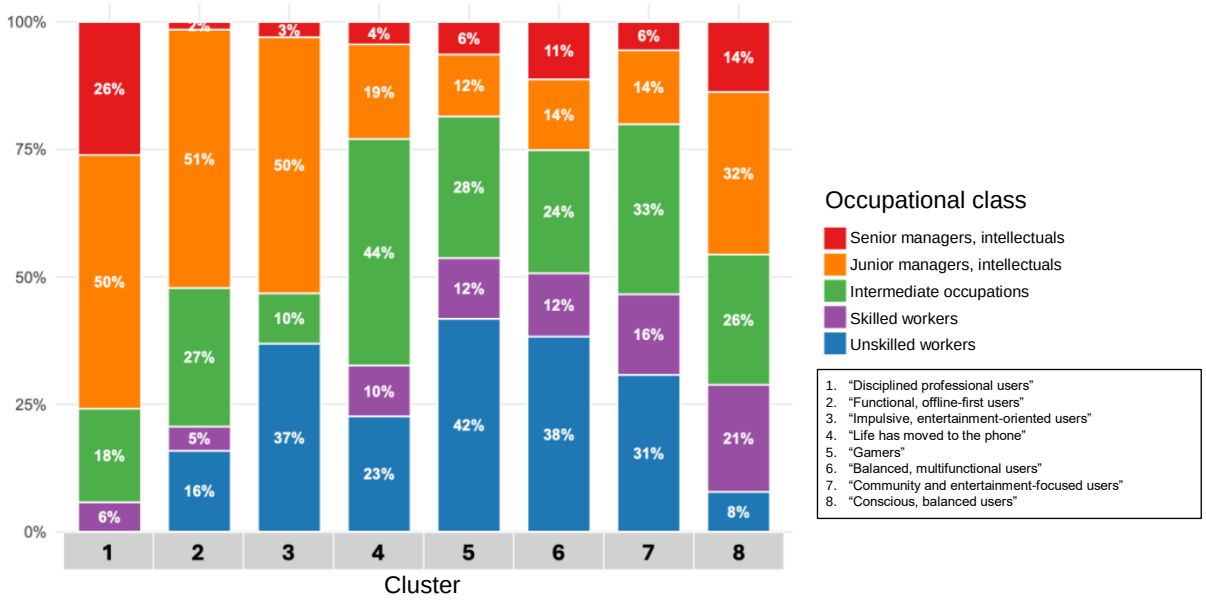
- **Cluster 5: "Gamers"** This group is made up of middle-aged, mixed-sex users with mostly lower levels of education. With more than 200 minutes of screen time a day, games account for nearly half of their screen time, which is by far the highest value. They are the "gamers who relax with mobile games" and play regularly (e.g. Farm Heroes Saga, Homescapes).

- **Cluster 6: "Balanced, multifunctional users"** This is the digital "middle class", made up of middle-aged, mainly urban, working men. Their phone use is moderate and steady (around 160 minutes/day). They work with a wide range of tools, and the phone is a natural, versatile device for everyday life (work, communication, organisation, recreation).

- **Cluster 7: "Community and entertainment-focused users"** This group is younger, with a female predominance (over 60%). Their phone use is intensive and varied (more than 2-3 hours per day), with social media (Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, TikTok) accounting for nearly 40% of their usage. The phone is primarily a means of contact and a way to spend time, and often the only means to connect to the online world.

- **Cluster 8: "Conscious, balanced users"** Middle-aged, urban or small-town users with a secondary education who use the phone regularly but in a relatively targeted and deliberate way (about 2 hours 20 minutes/day). Their digital profile is characterised by a balanced mix of social and functional applications. They do not avoid the digital world, but they are careful about what they let into their lives. For example, they are the ones with above-average use of various "gamified" educational apps (e.g. Duolingo) or "knowledge-expanding" applications (e.g. Triviador).

Figure 3
The presence of occupational class groups in each cluster



WHAT DOES THIS IMPLY?

The main conclusion of the analysis is that the main divide in the digital space dominated by smartphones is clearly **the quality and purpose of use**, rather than mere access. The research has provided further indirect evidence for the theory of digital inequalities and, within this, for the **presence of** the so-called **Matthew effect.**

1. **The duality of the digital habitus:** Users in higher-status occupational groups show a slightly higher proportion of functional, productivity-focused use, which may help them **to further build their "digital capital"**.

2. In contrast, the more intensive mobile use of lower status groups is mainly related to the dominance of entertainment, gaming and social media, which is less easily converted into offline advantages (e.g. better jobs, higher income) from the perspective of third-level digital inequalities (results/consequences). The quality of smartphone use is, therefore, likely to **reinforce** rather than reduce existing social differences.

The results suggest that policy interventions should focus more on encouraging productive phone use, developing digital skills (e.g. DigComp competences) and emphasising critical media and information literacy, especially for groups where mobile is the primary digital device.