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'iTIME' AS A BLESSING OR A CURSE: IMAGINARIES OF SMARTPHONE USE AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL TIME AMONG GENERATION GROUPS IN ESTONIA

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The ontological problems of social time and space and their interconnectedness with social imaginaries and the related concepts have become an important stream in social sciences since the classic works of social constructivism in the 1970s. A new turn in this area was proposed by theorists of the information society interested in fundamental changes in spatial and temporal organization of the world induced by the penetration of digital technologies in all spheres of the global network society (Castells 1996; Lash 2002). Recent theoretical elaborations have focused on problems related to acceleration of social time, time-space compression and (de)synchronization, offering models and critical insights concerning social, psychological and political implications of the speeding up of these processes, reaching beyond the capacity of human control and self-regulation (Adam 2003; Rosa 2005; Scheuerman 2009; Mückenberger 2011).

A rapid advancement and diffusion of mobile media technologies, particularly smartphones, is considered as an evolution and intensification of the speeding-up processes that started to gather momentum in an earlier internet era of desktops. It has been claimed that 'smartphoning creates a kind of "iTime" that challenges the pre-internet boundaries between public and private, day and night, work and leisure, space and time' (Agger 2011: 120). At the same time, Ben Agger (2011) has emphasized that these changes need to be analyzed dialectically – that is, in terms of upsides and downsides, the potential for further change, and inter-generational differences. In particular, he envisions a huge generational divide in social imaginaries of 'iTime': while elders view it as a nightmare of 'limitless accessibility and manic connectivity', kids of today – the 'iPhone generation' in Agger's terminology – experience this time as normal.

Although theoretical literature has paid a lot of attention to the importance of mobile digital media in shaping people's perception of personal and social time, and in molding the patterns and rhythms of their everyday lives, little empirical research beyond media multitasking studies (see Székely 2015, for an overview) has focused on these issues. This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap by focusing on people's imaginaries of digital media technologies, particularly smartphones, and the relationships between those imaginaries and personal perception and use of time. More specifically, the paper

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endeavors to test empirically Agger's (2011) thesis that the social imaginaries of the normal social life in a smartphone era vary generationally.

The paper employs data from the 5th round of the representative population survey 'Me. The World. The Media' (N=1,500), gathered at the end of 2014 in Estonia. The post-socialist transition in Estonia has been described as extremely radical, characterized by highly liberal transformation policies and economic reforms, and rapid technological changes. The speed of the diffusion of new information and communication technologies, however, has affected different social groups to a varying degree. As generations differ, due to dissimilar locations on life span, in their speed of adapting to rapid social changes, age has become one of the most significant markers of social and digital stratification (Kalmus, Talves & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2013). In this context, inter-generational differences in time as resource and commodity, time management, and control over one's time are especially meaningful.

The analysis is based on a set of novel and original indicators, developed by the research team of the project 'Acceleration of Social and Personal Time in the Information Society: Practices and Effects of Mediated Communication' at the Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu.

Firstly, the analysis focuses on a module consisting of 14 positive and negative statements regarding the use of smartphones, measured on a 5-point scale (5 – *totally agree* ... 1 – *totally disagree*). The statements begin with the phrase '*Due to smartphones...*' Examples include: '*... it is possible to use time much more flexibly as I always have access to the internet*'; '*... my life is substantially more versatile as I can engage simultaneously in different activities and communicate with different people*'; '*... boundaries between work and leisure time disappear, it is impossible to disengage oneself from work*'; '*... it is impossible to really focus on anything*'; etc. These questions were asked of people who had a smartphone (n=573). Factor analysis was used to reveal underlying relationship patterns among these statements, presumably referring to imaginaries of smartphone use. The analysis (principal components, Varimax rotation, and the criterion of eigenvalues over 1) provided a well interpretable 3-factor model:

- Factor 1 involves six positive statements (e.g. '*...I have better opportunities to know the score of the events around me and in the world*'), and can be labelled as *Expanding flexibility and diverse opportunities*.
- Factor 2 comprises four critical statements (e.g. '*... boundaries between public and private information disappear*'); thus, we labelled it *Vanishing boundaries and foci*.
- Factor 3 involves four statements about social belonging and communication (e.g. '*... I feel that I belong to a certain group; I never feel myself alone*'), and was named *Changing social identity and communication conventions*.

Subsequently, the levels of internalization of those imaginaries (measured with factor scores) among different age groups were compared. Factor 1, *Expanding flexibility and diverse opportunities*, was most characteristic of the youngest group (15-20 year olds), followed by a very small group (n=8) of 71-79 year-old smartphone users, and 21-30 and 31-40 year olds. A bit surprisingly, the youngest respondents were also most

cognizant of the *vanishing boundaries and foci* in the smartphone era, being followed by the oldest group (aged 71-79) and 21-30 year olds, and then by all age groups in a linear way. *Changing social identity and communication conventions* were most strongly perceived by the oldest smartphone owners, followed by the youngest respondents and 21-30 year olds.

Secondly, the paper scrutinizes the distribution of indicators and derived variables (indices), measuring time perception and time use strategies (e.g. *surplus time*; *perceived lack of time*; *overwork*; *multitasking*; etc.) in age groups. *Surplus time* (when one has nothing to do with one's time) had the highest mean value among the youngest group, followed by 71-79 year olds, while respondents in the age range of 21-50 suffered most from *perceived lack of time* and *overwork*. Strategies to use one's time more efficiently appeared to be correlated with age in a fully linear fashion: the younger the people, the more they reported both *multitasking* and *endeavors to rearrange one's time use*.

Lastly, the paper analyses correlations between the factors of the imaginaries of smartphone use and the indices of time perception and time use. Factor 1, *Expanding flexibility and diverse opportunities*, was positively correlated with *multitasking* and *time spent on hobbies*, and negatively with *general lack of time* as well as *surplus time*. This suggests that people who see smartphone as a means of enhancing their time use flexibility and increasing the range of opportunities and activities, tend to make a more efficient and rich use of their time.

Factor 2, *Vanishing boundaries and foci*, was positively correlated with *multitasking*, *endeavors to rearrange one's time use*, *general lack of time*, and *surplus time*. These relationship patterns imply that smartphone users, who are more critical towards the 'iTime' condition, tend to be still struggling to find more efficient ways of time management.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that opinions about the role and functions of smartphones in molding everyday life form coherent and meaningful social imaginaries, internalized to a different degree by generation groups. Furthermore, the strategies of managing personal time as an unequally distributed resource vary, to a large extent, between age groups, and are, to a degree, related to the social imaginaries of smartphones.

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