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WORKPLACES DIGITAL DISTRACTION : PSYCHOLOGICAL DRIVERS OF EXCESSIVE SCROLLING AT SINO UNRAM INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

Xu Jing ¹ | Mujahidin Hasanul Bisri ²  | Ahmad Lani ³

^{1,3}Faculty of General Studies and Advanced Education, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia; ² Faculty of Social Sciences, University Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia;

*Corresponding author: mujahidin25121994@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigates how employees in a highly flexible workplace perceive and manage smartphone use, and how such use shapes their attentional and emotional experiences at work. Drawing on in-depth interviews and non-participant observations at Sino Unram International Centre, the analysis reveals that smartphone use is experienced ambivalently: employees regard smartphones as essential tools for communication and task completion, but also as persistent sources of distraction. The findings identify several interrelated patterns, including habitual checking, intentional checking triggered by notification avoidance, content-specific immersion (particularly in online shopping), and mixed emotional outcomes ranging from momentary relief to post-scrolling exhaustion and mental clutter. These behaviours are driven by boredom, stress, and entrenched habits, and are reinforced by a permissive organisational culture in which smartphone use is normalised and rarely questioned. In the absence of formal rules or monitoring, the burden of regulating digital engagement shifts to individuals, amplifying differences in self-regulatory capacity: some employees maintain functional boundaries, while others become caught in cycles of excessive scrolling. The study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of workplace smartphone use by showing that digital distraction emerges at the intersection of psychological tendencies and organisational conditions, and it suggests that effective interventions should combine respect for autonomy with light structural supports, such as shared digital etiquette and subtle behavioural nudges.

Keywords: smartphone use; digital distraction; excessive scrolling; self-regulation; organisational culture; workplace attention; flexible work environments

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1 Introduction

In today's digital age, smartphones have become an integral part of daily life, offering convenience and seamless connectivity. However, their excessive and purposeless use during work hours has emerged as a growing concern, leading to workplace digital distraction. Many employees frequently engage in habitual smartphone scrolling, often driven by psychological triggers such as boredom, impulsivity, and stress rather than necessity (Rozgonjuk et al.,

2018). According to a (A National Survey of Full-Time U.S. Employees, 2019), 35% of workers reported spending an excessive amount of time on non-work-related digital content during work hours, with social media being the predominant distraction (74.4%). This phenomenon has significant implications, as 87% of respondents indicated that digital distraction reduces workplace productivity, contributing to missed deadlines, errors, and overall performance decline.

The cognitive and psychological impact of excessive smartphone use at work is particularly concerning. Frequent task-switching between professional duties and non-work digital content increases cognitive load (Monsell, 2003), prolongs task completion times (Biondi et al., 2021), and reduces concentration (Wamsley & Collins, 2024). Research suggests that once distracted, employees may require up to 23 minutes to regain full focus on their primary tasks (Orhan et al., 2021). Moreover, habitual smartphone use reinforces procrastination tendencies (Eze et al., 2018; Xue et al., 2024), as employees seek instant gratification through digital engagement rather than prioritizing work responsibilities. This behavioral pattern not only disrupts workflow but also contributes to workplace disengagement, mental fatigue, and decreased motivation (Cappellozza et al., 2017; Priya & Subramaniam, 2022).

Despite extensive research on digital distraction in workplace settings, limited studies have explored the psychological mechanisms that drive excessive scrolling in flexible work environments, where employees operate with minimal external restrictions on smartphone use. While previous research has examined the effects of smartphone use on productivity (Duke & Montag, 2017; Issahaku et al., 2018; Mezher et al., 2023), fewer studies have investigated how workplace flexibility and the absence of structured smartphone policies shape digital distraction behaviors. This is particularly relevant given that autonomy in the workplace may either enhance productivity (Johannsen & Zak, 2020) or increase digital distractions (Karimikia et al., 2021), depending on individual self-regulation abilities. Additionally, existing research has primarily focused on employees who struggle with digital distraction (Nakayama & Chen, 2022; Orhan et al., 2021), with little attention given to why some individuals maintain productivity despite high smartphone engagement.

For this study, excessive scrolling is defined as frequent and habitual smartphone engagement that interrupts workflow, reduces efficiency, or shifts attention away from work-related tasks for prolonged periods. Initial observations at Sino Unram International Centre suggest that the workplace environment, characterized by high flexibility and minimal external regulations on smartphone use, influences employees' perceptions and experiences of excessive smartphone use. Many employees frequently check their devices every 15–30 minutes, often engaging in non-work-related activities such as social media browsing, video streaming, or online shopping. However, individual differences play a crucial role in shaping how employees perceive and respond to this digital engagement. While some employees feel that smartphone use enhances their work efficiency, others acknowledge its distracting nature and struggle to maintain focus.

Beyond individual perceptions, psychological factors play a critical role in driving excessive scrolling. Some employees engage with their smartphones habitually, often checking their devices impulsively even in the absence of notifications. Others use smartphones as a coping mechanism in response to boredom, stress, or a lack of task engagement. Previous research has shown that self-regulation abilities (Steel et al., 2022), impulse control (Cappellozza et al., 2017), and habitual checking tendencies (Throuvala et al., 2021) significantly influence whether smartphone use becomes a distraction or a productivity tool. Furthermore, employees differ in their awareness of and response to digital distraction. Some actively manage their smartphone use by setting personal boundaries, using productivity tools, or adopting self-imposed restrictions, while others struggle to regulate their screen time, leading to workflow interruptions and reduced efficiency.

This study aims to explore how employees perceive and experience excessive smartphone use in the workplace,

identify the psychological factors contributing to excessive scrolling and its impact on productivity and mental well-being, and examine the strategies employees adopt to manage digital distractions.

2 Research Method

This research employed a qualitative exploratory approach to examine the psychological drivers behind excessive smartphone use among employees in a flexible workplace environment. The study took place at the Sino Unram International Centre, where smartphone use is not formally regulated by any standard operating procedures (SOPs) or monitored by direct supervision. This unregulated environment allows for a wide range of individual behavior, making it an ideal setting to explore how personal tendencies and perceptions influence digital distraction. Eight participants were involved, consisting of seven staff members and one supervisor, selected through purposive sampling to reflect various roles and responsibilities within the organization.

Data collection utilized three primary methods: semi-structured interviews, self-report questionnaires, and non-participant behavioral observations. The interviews explored employee perceptions, emotional and cognitive responses to smartphone use, and self-regulation efforts. Meanwhile, the self-report survey included 25 Likert-scale items divided across five dimensions: habitual checking, smartphone use as a coping mechanism, perceived productivity impact, task avoidance, and digital self-regulation. Observations were conducted over two weeks using a checklist based on established psychological theories. Observers recorded frequency, context, and emotional cues surrounding smartphone use, such as repeated checking without notifications, fidgeting, task avoidance, and difficulty returning to work after digital engagement.

All qualitative data were analyzed thematically using (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six-phase method, supported by Atlas.ti. Deductive codes were informed by the theoretical framework (e.g., Habit Formation, Self-Regulation), while inductive codes emerged directly from the data. Triangulation was achieved through integration of findings from interviews, observations, and self-reports. Ethical considerations included informed consent, anonymization of participants, and voluntary participation. To enhance credibility, member checking and an audit trail of analytic decisions were maintained. A summary of the research design is provided in Table 1, and a visual representation of the research process is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Research Design and Procedures

Component	Description
Research Design	Qualitative Exploratory
Participants	8 (7 staff, 1 manager) selected via purposive sampling
Data Collection Methods	Semi-structured interviews, self-report questionnaires, behavioral observations
Instruments	Interview guide, observational checklist
Analysis Approach	Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), Atlas.ti-assisted coding
Theoretical Framework	Habit Formation, Self-Regulation, Cognitive Load, Boredom Theory
Triangulation	Multi-method triangulation (interviews, observations, self-reported)
Ethical Measures	confidentiality, voluntary participation

3 Result

3.1 Employee Perceptions and Experiences of Smartphone Use

The findings of this study reveal a complex interplay between individual psychological tendencies and contextual workplace dynamics in shaping employees' perceptions and experiences of smartphone use. Across interviews and observational data, employees expressed marked ambivalence toward their digital engagement, viewing

smartphones simultaneously as functional tools, sources of comfort, and contributors to distraction. This complexity mirrors emerging research suggesting that workplace smartphone use cannot be interpreted as purely beneficial or purely disruptive, but rather as a flexible behavior shaped by personal dispositions and environmental cues.

a. Habitual and Intentional Smartphone Checking

A consistent pattern across participants was the highly routinized nature of smartphone checking. Employees frequently checked their phones shortly after arriving at work and continued to do so at intervals of approximately 10–15 minutes, even in the absence of notifications. Observational data corroborated this pattern, documenting repeated checking during cognitively demanding tasks and indicating that smartphone salience persists even when individuals consciously attempt to focus (Deursen et al., 2015; Soror et al., 2015).

Beyond this largely automatic behavior, the interviews also revealed an emerging phenomenon: intentional checking triggered by notification avoidance. Several employees reported deliberately disabling notification sounds or on-screen notification banners to reduce distraction during work. Paradoxically, this strategy often increased the frequency of manual checking. In the absence of alerts, employees described feeling compelled to “look for updates” or “make sure nothing important was missed.” This shift from reactive engagement, in which individuals respond to incoming alerts, to proactive vigilance illustrates how employees may repeatedly initiate checks to compensate for the absence of external cues.

b. Uncertainty Reduction and Availability Pressure

The pattern of proactive checking appears to be closely linked to employees’ need to reduce informational uncertainty. When external prompts were removed, participants reported a subtle sense of ambiguity, encapsulated in the internal question, “What if something is happening and I don’t know?” Such uncertainty seemed to activate a cognitive monitoring loop and increase anticipatory checking. This interpretation is consistent with work on cognitive vigilance and hypersensitivity to potential signals, where the mind remains on high alert even in the absence of external stimuli (Maza et al., 2023). In this context, disabling notifications does not eliminate the attentional pull of smartphones; rather, it relocates the burden of monitoring from the device to the user’s internal cognitive system.

Social and emotional expectations intensified this mechanism. Messages from supervisors, family members, or colleagues were often perceived as important and time-sensitive, creating latent pressure to remain available. The silence of a muted phone could therefore generate anticipatory anxiety, prompting repeated checking to avoid missing communications with emotional or professional implications. This dynamic aligns with research on availability pressure and techno-social expectations, which shows that individuals may feel obligated to remain responsive even in the absence of explicit directives.

c. Smartphones as Productivity and Comfort Tools

Employees perceived smartphones as dual-purpose devices: both productivity tools and comfort tools. Many participants described smartphones as essential extensions of their workflow, enabling rapid access to email, summarization features, and communication with supervisors. This finding mirrors literature suggesting that mobile devices can enhance efficiency when meaningfully integrated into work processes (Issahaku et al., 2018). At the same time, employees reported using smartphones for mood regulation for example, by listening to music, watching short videos, or engaging in light browsing. Such practices align with research indicating that digital media can function as micro-breaks that temporarily restore cognitive resources (Le Roux & Parry, 2022)

d. Content-Specific Distraction and Cognitive Immersion

Content type played a critical role in shaping employees' experiences of distraction. While casual social media browsing was often described as relatively easy to disengage from, activities such as online shopping were perceived as far more immersive, requiring decision-making, evaluation, and exploration. Several participants explained that shopping drew them in more deeply than social media. One employee stated, "When I shop, I have to compare and choose, the exploration feels more engaging," while another noted that shopping often "pulls you in and makes you lose track of time." This deeper cognitive pull is consistent with research on reward-based digital engagement and the stimulating nature of interactive digital environments (Hamilton et al., 2023). As a result, shopping activities made it more difficult for employees to return to their tasks and exacerbated attentional disruption beyond what was typically experienced during casual scrolling.

e. Emotional Consequences and Post-Scrolling Disturbance

Emotionally, participants reported a mix of positive and negative outcomes associated with smartphone use. Some noted that scrolling helped them relax or regain mental energy, describing it as "a quick way to refresh my mind," which is consistent with literature describing digital engagement as a short-term coping mechanism (Elpidorou, 2018). At the same time, several employees reported emotional carryover effects, such as frustration, excitement, or anxiety, after engaging with emotionally charged content. One participant shared, "When the content is upsetting, it stays in my head and makes it harder to focus again," echoing prior findings on affective spillover from digital media (Wamsley & Collins, 2024).

A notable pattern in this study was the presence of post-scrolling emotional disturbance, including exhaustion, mental clutter, and anxiety after prolonged scrolling. Participants described these episodes as "exhausting... overwhelming" or "making my mind feel full and unfocused." Such reactions reflect findings from research on information overload and emotional fatigue associated with smartphone use (Priya & Subramaniam, 2022). Rather than consistently alleviating stress, digital engagement sometimes amplified emotional strain, reducing employees' ability to regain cognitive clarity.

f. Organizational Context and Self-Regulation

These individual experiences were strongly shaped by the organizational environment. Sino Unram International Centre (SUIC) does not implement smartphone-related standard operating procedures (SOPs), monitoring systems, or productivity-linked consequences for device use. This context fosters a permissive culture in which smartphone use is normalized, mirroring prior research indicating that environments with low structural constraints tend to increase discretionary digital behaviors (Karimikia et al., 2020). Employees reported that because smartphone use was common and culturally accepted, distractions were rarely questioned, reinforcing distraction as a collective rather than purely individual phenomenon. As one participant explained, "There are no rules about phone use here, and no one checks what we're doing, that's why it feels acceptable to use my phone anytime." Another employee similarly observed, "Since no one supervises us, it's easy to get carried away with scrolling."

The impact of this permissive context varied depending on employees' self-regulatory capacities. For employees with stronger self-regulatory skills, the lack of smartphone restrictions supported autonomy and did not appear to hinder productivity. These individuals were able to set internal boundaries, selectively disengage from their devices, and redirect their attention back to work with relatively minimal disruption. By contrast, employees who reported difficulties with impulse control or attentional stability were more susceptible to excessive scrolling, often slipping into repetitive checking cycles or prolonged digital engagement in the absence of external structure (Deng et al., 2024). In a workplace such as SUIC, where formal controls over smartphone use are minimal, the burden of managing digital engagement effectively shifts from organizational systems to the individual, amplifying disparities in attention management.

3.2 Psychological Drivers of Excessive Scrolling

Building on these experiential themes, the analysis indicates that excessive smartphone scrolling at work is driven by a combination of boredom, emotional regulation needs, and limitations in impulse control. These mechanisms help explain why the patterns described above, frequent checking, difficulty disengaging, and post-use disturbance, persist even when employees recognise their potentially disruptive effects.

a. Boredom, Underload, and the Search for Stimulation

Several participants reported reaching for their phones when they felt disengaged or uninspired by their current task, particularly during periods of low workload or repetitive administrative duties. Scrolling was often described as a form of “mental escape” or “something to make the time pass.” Such behaviours strongly align with Boredom Theory (Elpidorou, 2018), which posits that individuals seek novel stimulation when their environment lacks sufficient engagement. In this sense, smartphones provide an immediately accessible source of cognitive and affective stimulation that temporarily offsets the experience of monotony but also increases the likelihood of distraction.

b. Stress, Coping, and Maladaptive Relief

Emotional states also played a prominent role in triggering smartphone use. Participants commonly acknowledged turning to their phones when experiencing stress, anxiety, or interpersonal frustration at work. One respondent remarked, “When I’m overwhelmed by tasks or after a tense conversation, I just scroll for a few minutes to calm myself.” This behaviour aligns with Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) wherein digital engagement functions as an avoidant coping strategy aimed at reducing perceived emotional distress. While many employees described experiencing short-term relief, they also noted that prolonged scrolling could lead to decreased motivation, heightened fatigue, or a sense of guilt. This suggests that smartphone-based coping, although subjectively helpful in the moment, may be maladaptive in the longer term, especially when it interrupts task engagement or exacerbates the emotional patterns.

c. Habit, Impulse, and Self-Regulation Gaps

Beyond boredom and stress, impulse control and unconscious behavioural routines emerged as key psychological drivers of excessive scrolling. Many employees described checking their phones as “automatic” or “reflexive,” often performed without clear intention or external triggers. This pattern is consistent with Habit Formation Theory (Gardner et al., 2012), which explains how repeated stimulus–response patterns can become ingrained and difficult to interrupt without deliberate self-monitoring. Reports of phantom notifications, where users sensed vibrations or alerts that never occurred, further support the presence of cognitive hypersensitivity linked to habitual checking (Maza et al., 2023).

Interestingly, some employees demonstrated high levels of self-awareness about these tendencies, referring to their scrolling as a “compulsion” or “distraction I can’t control.” Yet this awareness did not always translate into behaviour change. The gap between insight and action points to limitations in self-regulation capacity (Inzlicht et al., 2021), particularly under stress and within loosely structured work settings. In the absence of external accountability or clear performance benchmarks, employees often reverted to scrolling as a default response to internal cues (emotional discomfort) and external cues (task monotony). Consistent with Cognitive Load Theory (Paas & van Merriënboer, 2020), several participants reported needing 10–20 minutes to refocus after digital use, indicating that frequent task switching between work content and smartphone content imposes a cumulative cognitive cost.

3.3 Regulation Strategies and Digital Self-Management

Within the permissive organizational context described earlier, employees adopted a range of self-regulation

strategies to manage their smartphone use during work hours. However, the effectiveness of these strategies was uneven and strongly contingent on individual self-regulatory capacity and the broader structural features of the workplace.

a. Individual Regulation Strategies and Their Fragility

Several employees reported deliberate efforts to limit smartphone use, including placing the phone face down, activating “Do Not Disturb” mode, keeping the device out of immediate reach, or setting personal rules such as only checking messages during breaks or avoiding entertainment applications until after work. These behaviours reflect individual attempts to preserve focus in the absence of external restrictions and align with principles from Self-Regulation Theory (Baumeister et al., 1998) which emphasises internal goal setting and impulse control.

Yet many participants admitted that these strategies were inconsistently applied and easily overridden. Emotional triggers, task avoidance, and boredom frequently undermined intentions to stay offline. As one respondent explained, “I try to leave my phone in the drawer, but when I get bored or frustrated, I still reach for it.” Such tendencies are consistent with evidence that self-regulatory capacity is especially vulnerable under cognitive strain or negative affect (Solberg Nes et al., 2009; Wagner & Heatherton, 2013). For employees with already limited self-regulation, these conditions made it particularly difficult to sustain digital boundaries over time.

b. Individual Regulation Strategies and Their Fragility

The fragility of self-regulation was reinforced by broader organizational structures. SUIC is characterised by minimal smartphone-related rules and weak monitoring. In addition, participants described a lack of clear job descriptions, workflow hierarchies, and time management expectations. This structural ambiguity blurred the boundaries between work-related and non-work-related activities and weakened the perceived urgency to enforce personal digital limits. Without explicit indicators of task urgency or institutional feedback loops, employees were left to self-define productivity benchmarks and determine what constituted “acceptable” smartphone use.

Prior research shows that environments with low structural clarity tend to generate higher levels of discretionary behaviour, including counterproductive technology use (Kim & Lee, 2021; Mvuyana et al., 2025; Piccoli et al., 2017; Yao et al., 2024). In this study, several participants indicated that they did not perceive their smartphone use as problematic unless it interfered with immediate deadlines or attracted direct criticism from colleagues. This low perceived risk reduced motivation to apply consistent control measures. Digital breaks were often framed as “a natural part of work” or “a way to recharge,” even when they contributed to the patterns of distraction described earlier. Such rationalisations reflect what Pinto (2014) describe as the “normalization of deviance” in digital work environments, where repeated departures from optimal behaviour gradually become accepted as part of organisational culture.

c. Preferences for Support and Behavioural Nudges

Despite this normalization, some employees expressed concern about the long-term consequences of their smartphone habits and openness to change. Rather than advocating strict prohibitions or intensive monitoring, most participants favoured light-touch interventions that would preserve autonomy while fostering collective awareness. Suggestions included informal peer accountability systems, optional productivity applications to track or limit usage, and shared digital etiquette agreements within teams.

These preferences align with recent work suggesting that subtle environmental cues and behavioural nudges can be more effective than rigid policies in shaping sustainable digital habits (Karimikia et al., 2020). Taken together, the findings indicate that while individual self-regulation is an important component of digital self-management, its success is deeply contingent on contextual factors, including structural clarity, cultural norms, and the

availability of supportive, autonomy-preserving interventions.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that employees' smartphone use at work is an ambivalent, context-dependent practice rather than a simple matter of distraction versus productivity. Smartphones simultaneously support task performance, emotional regulation, and everyday communication, while also contributing to attentional disruption through habitual checking, notification avoidance, and highly immersive content such as online shopping. These behaviours are driven by boredom, stress, and entrenched habits, and often result in emotional carryover and cognitive fatigue, indicating that smartphone-based coping can be both functional and maladaptive.

The findings further demonstrate that organisational context plays a critical role in shaping digital behaviour. In a permissive and weakly structured environment, the burden of managing smartphone use shifts from organisational systems to the individual, amplifying differences in self-regulatory capacity. Rather than treating digital distraction solely as a matter of personal discipline, organisations may need to combine respectful autonomy with light structural supports, such as clearer expectations, shared digital etiquette, and gentle behavioural nudges, to help employees maintain focus and well-being in increasingly smartphone-saturated workplaces.

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Ethical Considerations

Not Applicable

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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