



The key issue is not notifications but how they are designed. Tech firms have optimised their platforms for engagement, not well-being, ensuring that apps suck up our attention, says the writer. This problem is not an inevitable by-product of digital life but a design choice, she adds. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Tackling the torment of phone notifications

They interrupt conversations and overload our brains. But there is a way to tame the beast.



Lim Sun Sun

The lunch with my business contact had started out warm and cordial. Laughing at each other's jokes, the conversation flowed briskly as we discovered a common vocabulary, mutual friends and shared experiences. But there was a constant intruder in the form of our table trembling ever so slightly each time his phone vibrated with a notification. We could ignore it for the most part until the vibrations' tempo picked up and I could sense his rising anxiety as he stole discreet glances at the screen. Too polite to check his phone, he continued chatting but was increasingly distracted, whereas I began to experience secondary unease. Even though my phone was not set to vibrate, I started to imagine the notifications it was silently emitting and wondered if any needed my immediate attention.

I fought the urge to retrieve it from my handbag and sneak a quick peek. Eventually his phone was practically rattling with vibrations and I urged him to pick it up. He gratefully excused himself and returned to sheepishly explain that an office emergency had indeed erupted but that he had resolved it, for the time being. I had, in turn, checked my phone in his absence and realised that I, too, had pressing matters to handle. The rest of the lunch was relatively stilted as both our minds were elsewhere, and we never quite recovered our earlier conviviality. Such is the torment of phone notifications in our connected lives. All the way from breaking news alerts and social media updates, to promotional offers, clinic reminders or a family group chat explosion, we are bombarded by a relentless stream of notifications, be they uplifting, distressing or downright mundane.

THE NOTIFICATIONS INDUSTRY

Apart from being a source of disruption, notifications are a veritable industry unto themselves. Marketers treat

mobile notifications as key weapons in their armoury for nudging customers, building loyalty, seeking feedback, collecting data and closing transactions. Little wonder then that we are virtually inundated with messages each time we download an app or sign on to a new online service. But notifications are not just confined to the commercial realm. In my research on digital parenting in China and Singapore, parents decry the ceaseless flood of notifications from homework apps to parent-teacher chat groups to edtech platforms, and how managing them is akin to a full-time job. Yet they fear turning them off lest their children miss out on critical information. Phone interruptions also rear their ugly head in our social lives. In settings like the one I was in, notifications siphon attention away from real-life conversations, undermining our ability to be fully present. The growing

expectation of immediate responses fuels stress, while the dopamine-driven design of notifications fosters compulsive phone-checking. There is even an academic label for what I had experienced – phantom vibration syndrome, the perception that one's mobile phone is vibrating or ringing even when it is not. Clearly my avid phone use has habituated me to expect constant notifications although, in my defence, I have turned off all but the most urgent and necessary of notifications and my phone is never set to vibrate because I know it will be more stress than I can stomach. The mental load imposed by notifications was recently flagged in a Financial Times article asserting that human ability to concentrate has sharply declined in recent years, attributing this dip to our growing dependence on online information where we are pushed content via notifications rather than actively and autonomously browsing. The effects of this notification

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overload are far from trivial. Research by Professor Gloria Mark at the University of California, Irvine found that subjects completing online tasks took an average of 23 minutes to refocus after an interruption, making deep concentration increasingly difficult in a world punctuated by notifications.

SETTING UP OUR DEFENCES

As phone users, we can manage the notifications that we receive. Most phones now allow users to control notification sounds, vibration patterns, as well as whether and how notifications appear on our screens. They also offer features such as "Do Not Disturb" or "Focus" modes to silence notifications during specific periods or activities.

You can also customise how notifications appear for every app and on the lock screen, such as displaying the total number of notifications and with accompanying previews.

However, these customisations need to be more intuitive rather than buried within multiple layers of menu options or denoted by indecipherable icons. Above all, tech companies must work harder at educating us on these features that are meant to help consumers.

Indeed, the key issue is not notifications themselves but how they are designed. Tech companies have optimised their platforms for engagement, not well-being, ensuring that apps suck up as much of our attention as possible. This problem is thus not an inevitable by-product of digital life – it is a design choice.

If the design is in fact the problem, a shift towards "design for well-being" could transform how notifications function. Instead of pulling users in constantly, devices should be built to prioritise focus and mental clarity.

Smartphones should have intelligent notification management that adapts to user behaviour. Instead of forcing users to manually manage notification chaos, tech companies should embed digital well-being into the core of device and app design.

Devices should automatically detect focus time, meetings or sleep hours and limit interruptions accordingly. Notifications should be prioritised, with essential ones delivered immediately while less urgent ones are grouped into scheduled summaries, thus minimising unnecessary interruptions.

The default settings of apps must also be reconsidered. Notifications should be off by default, requiring users to opt in rather than opt out. Instead of jarring pop-ups and persistent badges, apps should rely on subtle visual cues that respect the user's attention.

Digital well-being tools should be built into every smartphone and app, giving users greater control over their screen time.

Customisable focus modes should allow people to easily silence notifications based on their activity, whether they are working, relaxing or spending time with family. Automated reminders should nudge users to take breaks and set time limits on apps that are prone to overuse.

Beyond individual choices, systemic change is needed. Governments and industry leaders must establish ethical guidelines that prioritise user well-being over profit-driven engagement metrics. Just as regulations protect consumers from misleading advertising, there should be safeguards against exploitative notification practices that subvert our ability to focus.

The untrammelled proliferation of notifications is not sustainable. If we do not enact decisive change, the consequences for our mental health will worsen.

The upside is that we are not powerless. Technology may have created this problem, but it can also be reimagined to solve it. Design for well-being is the key to taming the notification beast.

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