

# ANTHROPOLOGY of SMARTPHONES and SMART AGEING



# DISCOVERY COMICS

# DISCOVERIES

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# GLOBAL SMART PHONE



The smartphone is often literally right in front of our nose, so you would think we would know what it is. But do we?

To find out, the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing team spent 16 months living with communities in Japan, China, Cameroon, Uganda, Italy, al-Quds, Ireland, Chile, and Brazil. Our focus was on the use of smartphones by older people, and how experiences of mid-to-later-life are both impacting and being impacted by the uptake of these devices.

We found that what makes the smartphone 'smart' is its transformation by users. People change settings, delete and download apps, consume content, and deploy their devices in a range of highly personalised ways that can also reveal regional and cultural values. In this booklet we present some of our key discoveries, illustrated with comics from each fieldsite.



# WHAT IS ANTHROPOLOGY?



Anthropology is the study of what makes us human. Social anthropologists conduct extended periods of ethnographic fieldwork, often living among the people they study, in order to seek a holistic understanding of their lives and hear a



multitude of voices. Anthropological research aims to understand how societies vary and what they have in common. The comparative approach taken by the ASSA



project, with simultaneous fieldwork conducted in field sites across the world, enabled us to highlight the local nuances of findings as well as spot overarching trends.

## GRAPHIC ETHNOGRAPHY

Drawing has long been part of anthropological research and communication, in the form of maps, field-note sketches, and kinship diagrams. Now anthropologists are increasingly turning to graphic ethnography as a way to tell stories from their research, and indeed as a research method to capture the richness of human life. The comics in this booklet were produced to show how each general discovery found local expression in individual field sites, and to introduce some of the people who populated our research. To see the wide variety of ways that anthropologists are experimenting with graphic ethnography, visit the online *Illustrating Anthropology* exhibition.



[www.illustratinganthropology.com](http://www.illustratinganthropology.com)

Each discovery in this booklet can be explored in more detail on our website. Read our open access book series to go into depth about our findings, watch our Youtube videos to get a sense of our field sites, and follow us on social media to hear the latest news.



[www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/assa](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/assa)



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The comics in this booklet were scripted by Laura Haapio-Kirk and Georgiana Murariu in collaboration with the ASSA team. Comics 1-7 were illustrated by John Cei Douglas, and comics 8-9 were illustrated by Alexander Hahn.

## THE ASSA TEAM



**Al-Quds (East Jerusalem):**

Laila Abed Rabho and  
Maya De Vries

**Brazil:** Marília Duque

**Cameroon:** Patrick Awondo

**Chile:** Alfonso Otaegui

**China:** Xinyuan Wang

**Ireland:** Pauline Garvey and  
Daniel Miller

**Italy:** Shireen Walton

**Japan:** Laura Haapio-Kirk

**Uganda:** Charlotte Hawkins

# TRANSPORTAL HOME

## 01.

To understand smartphones, we found it is better to view them less as a device we use and more as a place within which we now live.



Like a traditional home, the smartphone can divide into zones for being entertained, doing homework or organising a holiday. Unlike a bricks-and-mortar home, the smartphone is mobile, so a person is always at home in their smartphone home. The idea of the smartphone as a *transportal home* may be especially important for young people who can't afford their own home, or for migrants who have plural homes they are equally attached to.

## COMIC

In this comic, based on Shireen Walton's research in Milan, we meet Heba, who is living a busy life in Milan raising her two children. We can see why living seamlessly within her smartphone and her flat is important as a migrant. In her smartphone home, she doesn't have to choose between her family in Milan or Egypt.

Where the heart is 



Milan, Italy

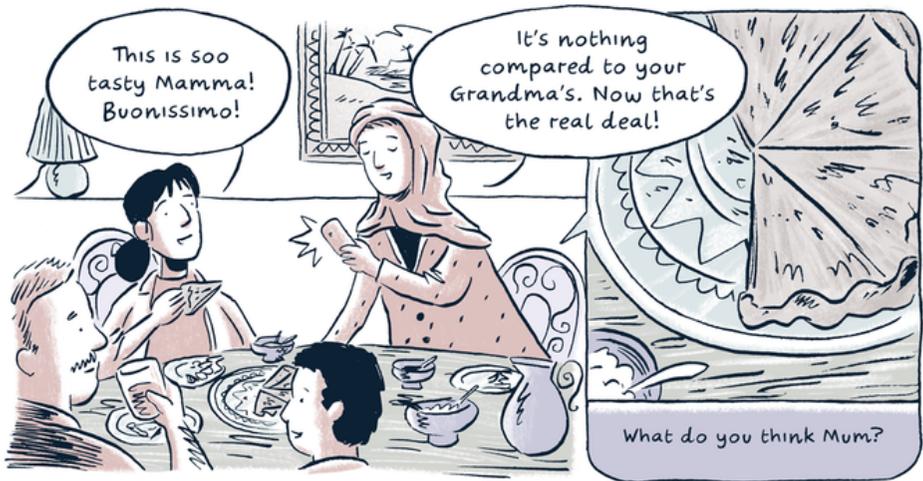


Sure thing Sis!  
Did you get the song I sent you earlier?  
Mo @ 11.39 am

Yeah I'm listening to it now!  
You @ 11.46 am

Remember Mum and Dad dancing to this when we were kids! Haha  
Mo @ 11.52 am





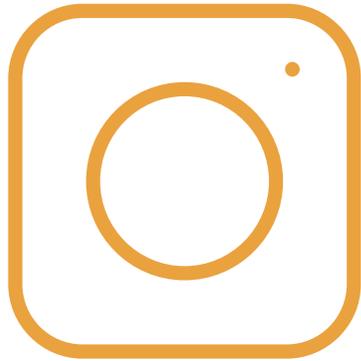
# PERPETUAL OPPORTUNISM

## 02.

With mobile phones, we could see the advantages of perpetual contact. Perpetual opportunism enabled by the smartphone is more profound as a reorientation to the world around us.

The smartphone is there when you see the perfect instagram-friendly sunset or need to send a shopping list to your partner. You can always rely on the smartphone to be entertained or get on with other things.

Perpetual opportunism means we depend less on planning and can feel more confident to respond to life experiences as they unfold, with both positive and negative consequences



## COMIC

In this comic, which is based on Pauline Garvey and Daniel Miller's research in Ireland, we meet Mary. She fills her free time with a variety of activities at a moment's notice, such as checking the news whilst shopping. The smartphone changes her relationship to the world around her and allows her to take advantage of new opportunities while also meaning she never gets a screen break.

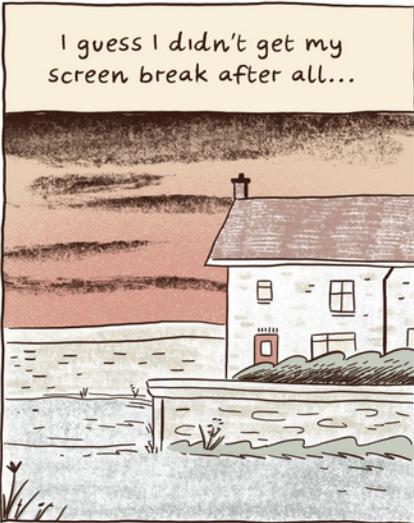




Glad I didn't ignore that message, or else we'd be out of milk!



Time to catch up with a bit of news...



I guess I didn't get my screen break after all...



But where would I be without this thing!

# RISE OF THE VISUAL CONVERSATION



There are an increasing number of conversations that are being had without necessarily needing either voice or text.

Our research found in several fieldsites, including Japan, China and Italy, older adults found visual communication to be a quick and easy way to express care and emotion.

## 03.

Prior to digital devices, people mainly communicated using their voice, or through writing. Through smartphones, the visual can become an integral element of conversation

### COMIC

In this comic, based on research by Laura Haapio-Kirk in Kyoto, Japan, we meet 50 year old Hiro-san, who finds the smartphone convenient, but feels his slower style of communication does not fit with others.

In response, he develops his own way to deal with these pressures by developing a 'tortoise' persona.



Having a smartphone is very convenient...



Especially when I need to message a group of people like my colleagues.



But I find my style of messaging does not fit in.

Young people especially seem to love sending messages that flow too quickly. I guess I'm used to writing letters & emails.



Also now people know when you've read their message...



There is a lot of pressure to respond immediately.

So now I take a long time to reply on purpose...



There's no more expectation...



Now that people know I am a tortoise...

I don't get stressed out and they don't get offended by my slow response!



# SMART FROM BELOW

## 04.

Our research showed that the autonomous learning of 'smart' devices is less important than the ability of users to transform their smartphones through usage.



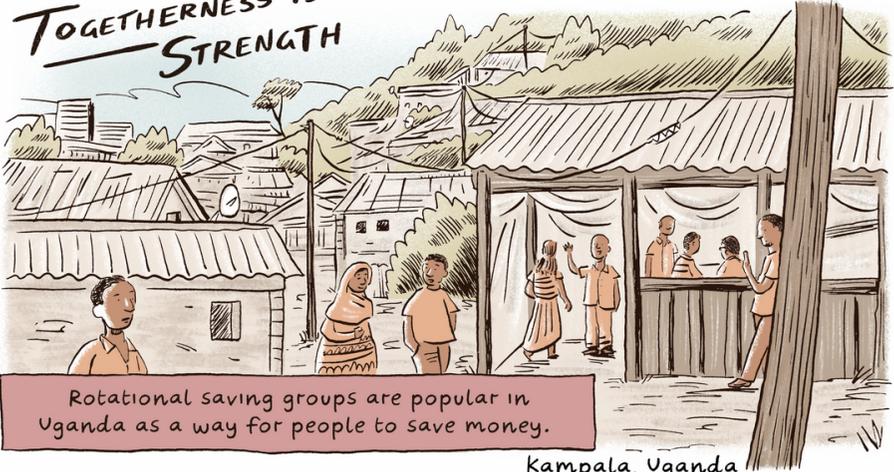
Once we own a smartphone, we ignore some apps and download others, we change settings, and above all, add and consume our own content.

In the area of health, bespoke smartphone apps are being created across the world (so-called 'mHealth'). However, ordinary people are creatively adapting the apps they are comfortable with, such as WhatsApp, for their own health purposes ('informal mHealth').

## COMIC

In this comic, based on Charlotte Hawkin's research in Kampala, Uganda, we see how a rotation savings group organises itself with smartphones. Groups such as these are increasingly communicating via WhatsApp but, not everyone has a smartphone. Here we see how the group facilitates access to smartphones through cooperation, another form of 'smart from below'.

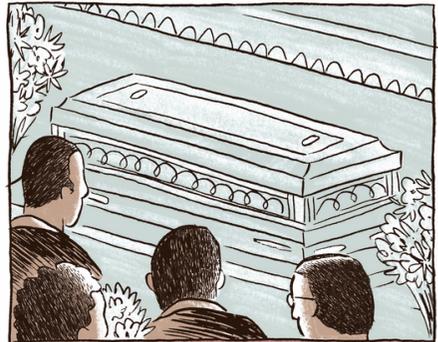
# TOGETHERNESS IS STRENGTH



Rotational saving groups are popular in Uganda as a way for people to save money.

Kampala, Uganda

Each month one member withdraws the total pot of money from the group.



People can count on this money in times of trouble or celebration.

Group meetings are important but not everyone can always come – some members live quite far away.



The savings group should keep in touch more on Whatsapp...



But not everyone has a smartphone!

We can't force everyone to buy one.

Get the simplest smartphone so you can have Whatsapp. This is my request.

If we save together we can make this happen!



So we agree, every two weeks we will pay UGX 30,000\*.

People without smartphones will get the money first.

Savings groups allow members to save frequently, in small amounts. \* £6.50

Two weeks later, Okello has a new smartphone bought with the money from the savings group.



Dad, do you think your phone could help with my maths homework?



I don't know... why don't we have a look together and find out!

# INTER-GENERATIONAL RELATIONS

## 05.

Where once knowledge was mainly a question of experience, now this is changing. Young people may be more skilled using smartphones than older people.

We found that this reversal can create tensions between generations, though sometimes smartphones can facilitate intergenerational support.

Smartphones can add to a generational digital divide, but when older people do become comfortable with their devices they can feel more aligned with youth as a result.



## COMIC

In the comic below, which is based on Alfonso Otaegui's research in Chile, we meet Joaquín and Emilia. Joaquín struggles at first to use a smartphone, and his family are of little help. You can see the place of intergenerational relations for an older person learning to use a smartphone.

# The Next Step



I ask my family for help...





The teacher breaks down all those options into a step by step process.



- you just press this button to share your photo!



# TASKS NOT APPS



When organising a holiday, booking a meal, or keeping track of a to-do-list, we found that people often use a combination of various apps, and typically only use a specific function of an app that suits their needs.

Apps follow a spectrum of scalable solutionism. Some are intended for a single task ('there's an app for that!') while others try to be useful for almost every task we can imagine.

## 06.

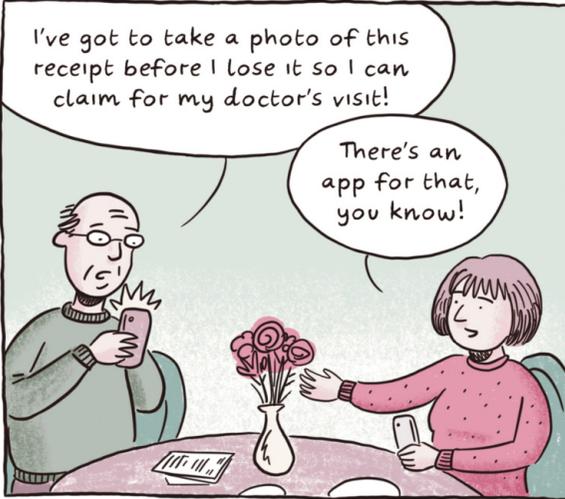
Increasingly, we think of smartphones as an app machine. However, it is better to understand them as orientated towards tasks rather than an aggregate of apps.

### COMIC

In this comic based on Pauline Garvey and Daniel Miller's research in Dublin, Ireland we meet Connor, a retired man in his 60s. He does not use his smartphone in the way developers may have envisaged. A trip to the doctors shows he has his own 'counterintuitive' way of doing things, using his own combinations of different apps and functions.

# Tasks not apps...

Dublin, Ireland



Using a combination of apps, video tutorials, emails, and photos Connor finds his own way to get things done.



# NEITHER ELDERLY NOR YOUNG

## 07.

People are not defined by their chronological age, and often do not see themselves as 'young' or 'old'. Not surprisingly, the way people understand ageing varies.



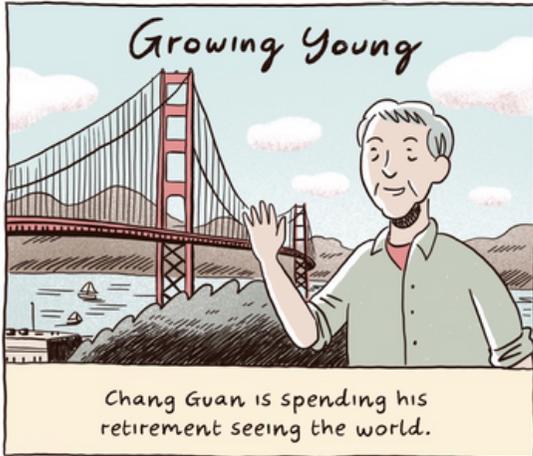
In our fieldsites, people say they expected to become old when they hit 60, 70, 80, or even 90, but are surprised to find that they feel continuity with youth.

There are also differences in retirement. In São Paulo, Brazil, people may be concerned to have continuity with their working identity, whilst in Dublin, Ireland retirement is an opportunity of a new start.

## COMIC

In this comic, which is based on Xinyuan Wang's research in Shanghai, China, we meet Chang Guan, now in his 60s who is reminiscing about his younger self. He is now developing the interests he did not have a chance to pursue during his youth. He feels he missed out on his original youth when he was politically active during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

Shanghai, China



Chang Guan's youth was caught up in the radical political revolutions of the time, when young people had little time for personal interests.



Smartphones offer a different kind of revolution.

As young people we were told the world belonged to us...



But it's only now that I feel truly young!

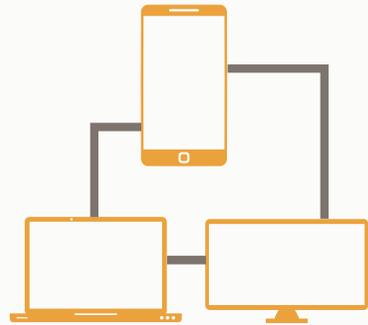


# SOCIAL & SCREEN ECOLOGY

## 08.

Studies of smartphones tend to focus on the relationship between one person and one device. Both of these concepts, however, need to be expanded.

The smartphone is found alongside a wider ecology of screens such as tablets, laptops, and smart TVs. While some people now do their banking on their smartphones, others will only do this on the computer. Others may use a tablet for many of the things most people now use a smartphone for. That is what we call *screen ecology*. Smartphones may also be shared and borrowed. This is what we call *social ecology*.



## COMIC

In this comic, which is based on Patrick Awondo's research in Yaoundé, Cameroon, we follow a retired middle class couple in their 60's throughout their day. They use lots of different screens throughout the day for a range of purposes. When another couple come for dinner, the television and digital devices interact.

# Life BETWEEN SCREENS

Yaoundé  
Cameroon

LOOKING AT HOW PEOPLE USE SMARTPHONES DOESN'T TELL US MUCH UNLESS WE ALSO LOOK AT THEIR USE OF OTHER SCREENS.

TOM, CAN YOU PUT ON THE MORNING NEWS?

TV IS STILL ONE OF THE MOST COMMON SCREENS IN HOMES.

HEAVY RAIN EXPECTED IN YAOUNDÉ!

I HOPE THIS WON'T MEAN WE'LL HAVE TO CANCEL OUR DINNER PARTY TONIGHT, I'LL KEEP AN EYE ON MY WEATHER APP.

LATER THAT EVENING...

LOOK AT HOW BIG OUR GRANDKIDS ARE GETTING NOW!

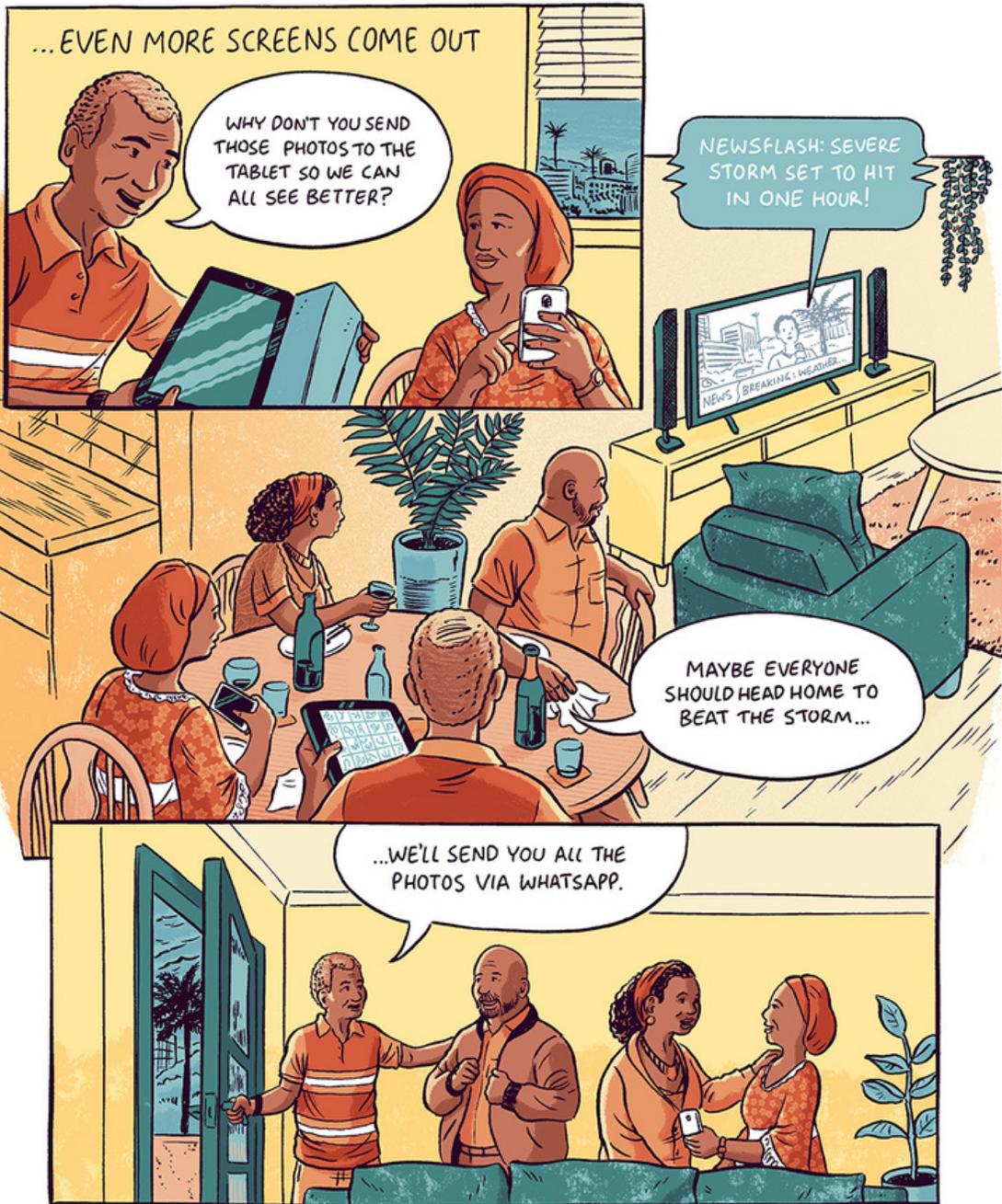
...EVEN MORE SCREENS COME OUT

WHY DON'T YOU SEND THOSE PHOTOS TO THE TABLET SO WE CAN ALL SEE BETTER?

NEWSFLASH: SEVERE STORM SET TO HIT IN ONE HOUR!

MAYBE EVERYONE SHOULD HEAD HOME TO BEAT THE STORM...

...WE'LL SEND YOU ALL THE PHOTOS VIA WHATSAPP.



# RETURN OF THE EXTENDED FAMILY

## 09.

The nuclear family has grown around the world, slowly replacing the extended family. However, the smartphone has allowed for an entirely new kind of family.



With platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, the extended family no longer have to live nearby to keep in touch. Cousins, for example, can now remain in constant conversation.

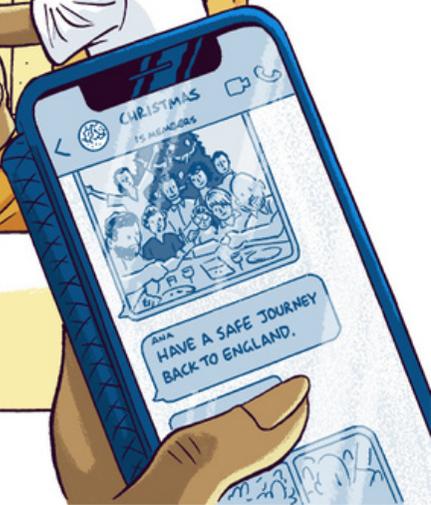
With the more constant communication that takes place online, the extended family has returned to a more informal everyday style of interaction. This is a new kind of extended family that has no exact precedent.

## COMIC

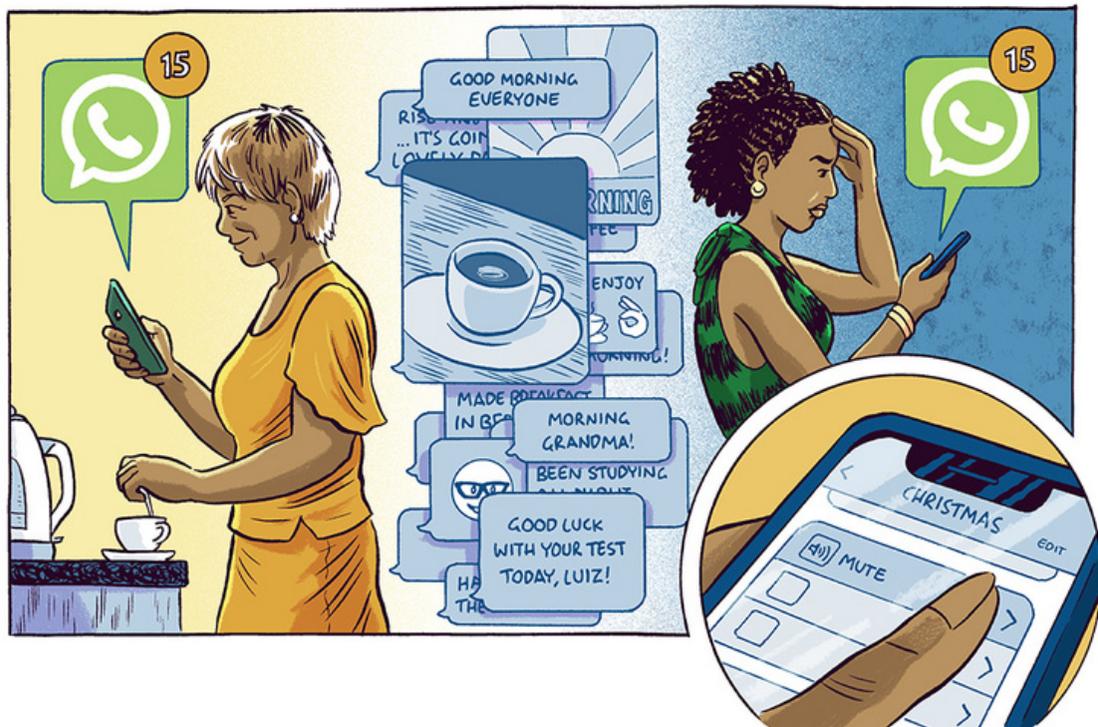
In this, comic which is based on Marília Duque's research, we meet a family coming together for Christmas in São Paulo, Brazil. The 'Christmas Whatsapp group' set up to coordinate all the extended family then becomes the space where they come together on a daily basis, impacting members of the family in different ways.

# EXTENDED family

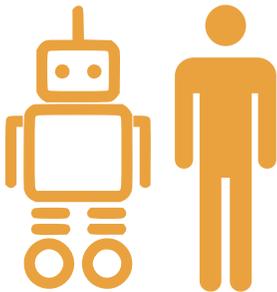
São Paulo  
Brazil



A FEW MONTHS LATER



# BEYOND ANTHROPO MORPHISM



## COMIC

In this, cartoon which is based on Maya de Vries' and Laila Abed Rabho's research in Al Quds (East Jerusalem), we meet Fatima and Aisha. Both women are in their early sixties, and they notice how each others' smartphones reflect their personalities and interests, becoming an extension of themselves.

## 10.

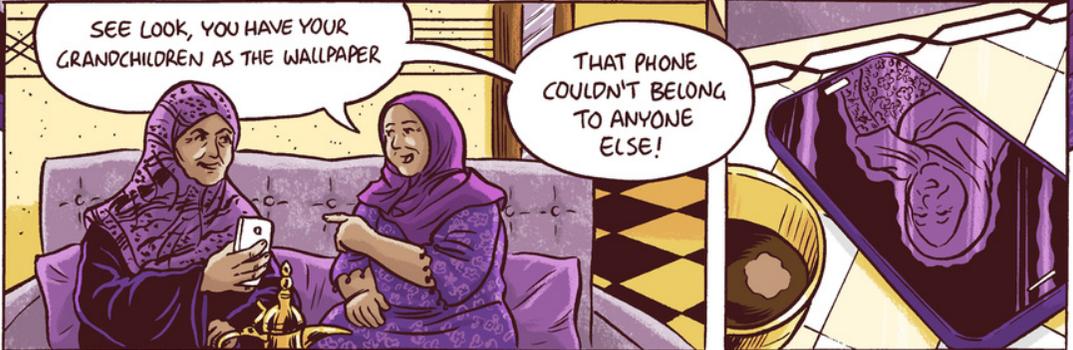
Humanity's fascination with human-like robots may have led us to ignore a more profound and advanced trajectory, exemplified by the smartphone.

The smartphone is usually radically transformed after it has been purchased. Our evidence shows that these changes can be so extensive that they allow the smartphone to express an individual's personality and cultural values

The smartphone does more than reflect us, it also complements and extends us. It extends our geographical reach, our ability to socialise and work, among other activities.

# BEYOND ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Palestine



The Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing project (ASSA) is based at UCL Anthropology and is primarily funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 740472).

Scan to go to our website!



# ANTHROPOLOGY OF SMARTPHONES AND SMART AGEING



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