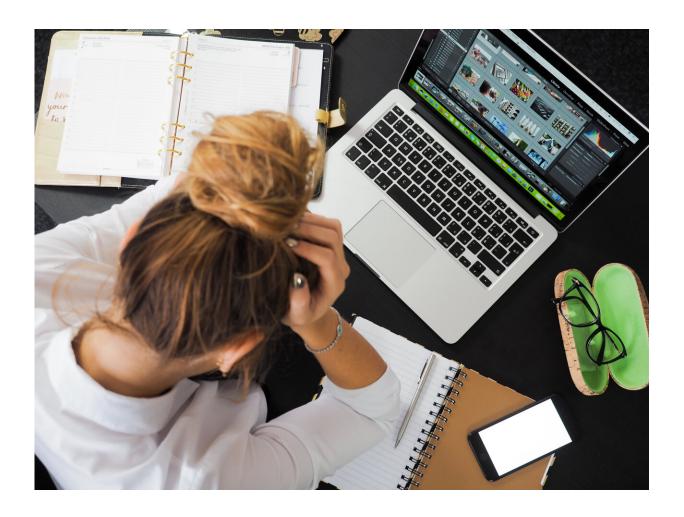# Smartphones could be changing the way we make moral decisions, says study

May 25 2017, by George Wigmore

Credit: energepic.com from Pexels

People using smartphones are more likely to make rational and

unemotional decisions compared to PC users when presented with a moral dilemma on their device, according to a new study from City, University of London.

In contrast, the researchers found that PCs users were found to were more likely to favour action based on intuition and following established rules.

The study, which is published in *Computers in Human Behavior*, is one of the first studies into the impact of the digital age on moral judgments, and suggests that moral judgments depend on the digital context in which a dilemma is presented and could have significant implications for how we interact with computers.

To investigate how moral judgements are affected by smartphones and PCs, the researchers recruited 1,010 people and presented them with a classic moral dilemma known as the 'Trolley Problem'.

A key distinction regarding moral judgments concerns deontological versus utilitarian decisions. While deontological judgments are generally driven by automatic or intuitive responses, prompted by the emotional content of a given dilemma, utilitarian responses are the result of unemotional or rational/controlled reflection, driven by conscious evaluation of the different potential outcomes. As a result, a deontological perspective evaluates an act based on its conformity to a moral norm or perhaps just a rule (such a law) but in contrast a utilitarian perspective evaluates an act depending on its consequences.

In the trolley problem, participants are told that there is a runaway trolley travelling quickly down the railway tracks. Ahead, on the tracks, there are five people tied up and unable to move and the trolley is headed straight for them. The participants are then told that they are standing some distance off in the train yard, next to a lever and that if

you pull this lever, the trolley will switch to a different set of tracks. However, they are also told that there is one person on the side track.

As a result, participants are asked to either do nothing, and the trolley kills the five people on the main track or alternatively pull the lever, diverting the trolley onto the side track where it will kill one person.

In the 'fat man' version of this dilemma, the runaway trolley is again heading toward five innocent victims, but instead you and a fat man are standing on a footbridge overlooking the track. In this dilemma, participants are told that they can spare the lives of the five people if they push the fat man off the bridge onto the tracks below, stopping the trolley.

In both scenarios participants are asked to sacrificing one life to save five other, but the lever trolley dilemma is impersonal while the footbridge dilemma is personal.

In addition to these two scenarios, participants were given a 'balanced' version, which was a modified version the Fat Man scenario by asking participants how many workmen they would need to save to be justified in taking the action.

When presented with these different scenarios, the researchers found that participants in the fat man dilemma were more likely to opt for sacrificing the fat man (utilitarian response) to save five people when using a smartphone (33.5 percent) than when using a PC (22.3 percent).

In the lever condition, it was also found that slightly more participants decided to sacrifice one man by pulling the switch than to do nothing and let five people die (80.9 percent for the Smartphone users; 76.9 percent for the PC users).

In a separate experiment when time variables (either 10s or unlimited) were introduced, results are tended to become more utilitarian. As a result, the study suggests that even under conditions of time pressure, some digital contexts – such as using a smartphone -could trigger utilitarian decision-making.

Dr Albert Barque-Duran, a researcher from the Department of Psychology at City, University of London and lead author of the study, said:

"What we found in our study is that when people used a smartphone to view classic moral problems, they were more likely to make more unemotional, rational decisions when presented with a highly emotional dilemma. This could be due to the increased time pressures often present with smartphones and also the increased psychological distance which can occur when we use such devices compared to PCs.

"Due to the fact that our social lives, work and even shopping takes place online, it is important to think about how the contexts where we typically face ethical decisions and are asked to engage in moral behaviour have changed, and the impact this could have on the hundreds of millions of people who use such devices daily."

Provided by City University London