There is a significant cultural opportunity in the United States for an iMessage-capable “dumb phone”. I think this could have a profound impact on Gen Z in particular. Here’s why:

1. Smartphones are too addicting
    a. Gen Z is super addicted to smartphones
    b. App-restricting productivity apps don’t fix smartphone addiction
2. Existing dumb phones have a problem
    a. Dumb phones fix smartphone addiction, but they are very inconvenient
    b. SMS/MMS sucks
    c. Dumb phone developer experience can suck
    d. For most people, the dumb phone can’t meet all their needs
3. A better solution is possible
    a. What features do we need?
    b. The solution
    c. Why not do all texting through a better dumb phone?
    d. Why do we need iMessage specifically? (Why not RCS or WhatsApp?)
    e. What would it take to make this work? (Not much)
4. My questions for the reader

I’m convinced that somebody who understands the smartphone addiction problem and has experienced the shortcomings of the existing solutions can build an excellent solution. The hardware and software is already ready. All this idea needs to be functional is a little bit of easy setup and development work. We need a proof of concept to demonstrate that this is a livable, best of both worlds solution that strikes a good balance between having useful features, while reducing distractions and giving the user mental clarity.

Part 1: Smart phones (especially iPhones) are too addicting

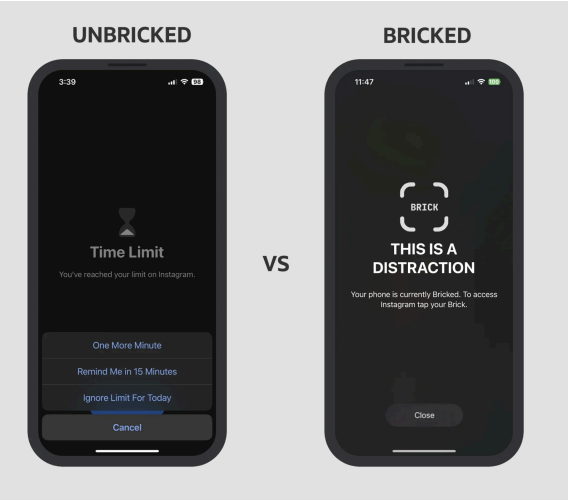
a. Gen Z is super addicted to smartphones

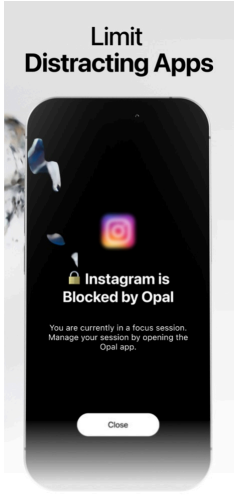
Gen Z is super addicted to smartphones. A large majority of our generation spends several hours per day “doom scrolling” on TikTok and Instagram reels. Nearly everybody recognizes that they have a problem, but doesn’t do anything about it because the existing solutions are either ineffective or too limiting. Deleting apps doesn’t help; I had friends in high school who were deleting and redownloading TikTok on a near-daily basis.

b. App-restricting productivity apps don’t solve the real issue.

There are a few solutions that exist for limiting the addictiveness of the device, which I consider to be mostly ineffective. Personally, I’m a fan of using a grayscale color filter to limit how appealing the screen is, but I often turn it off when I need to look at a picture more clearly and forget to turn it back on. There are also apps like Opal and Brick which enables you to restrict your own ability to access certain apps on your device. I tried Opal a couple years ago and didn’t find it to be very helpful; I still felt tempted to open Instagram while using it, and felt like this temptation was taxing my willpower. Brick (which I haven’t tried) improved upon Opal by

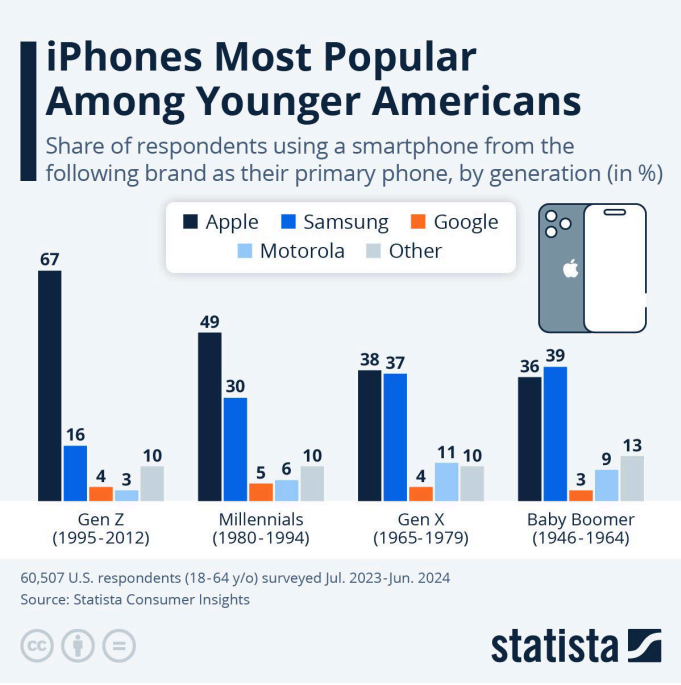
adding a clever feature: it uses a physical “key” to restrict your device, meaning that a Brick user can leave the key behind and force themselves not to use restricted apps.





Brick’s differentiating value proposition is that “with other solutions, the ‘key’ that re-enables distractions is always present. Brick allows you to leave that key behind, turning your phone into a new, distraction-free device until you return.”

However, this doesn’t change the fact that the smartphone itself is engineered to be addictive. This is particularly true of the iPhone; statistics indicate that iPhone users spend 1.3x as much time on their phone as Android users on average. About 67% of Gen Z Americans own an iPhone, and among the teen population, iPhone ownership is at 88%. This is the exact demographic that is struggling so much with screen time and phone usage.



The problem with apps like Brick and Opal is that they try to address the symptom of the screen time problem and not the source of the phone addiction. Instead of just preventing the user from opening Instagram, wouldn't it be better if the user of the device wasn't tempted to open Instagram in the first place? Smartphones, especially the iPhone, have been designed to be addicting, and some people need a better solution than just adding restrictions to their smartphone. Enter the dumb phone.

Part 2: Existing dumb phones have a problem

a. Dumb phones solve the real issue, but they are very inconvenient

There is a community of people who have decided that smartphones are too addictive and choose to live with a "dumb phone". The exact definition of a dumb phone is debatable, but the concept is clear: dumb phones are capable of primitive communication (like texts and calls) that you would expect, but often have a limited app ecosystem, fewer features, and slower access to the internet than modern smartphones. It may sound crazy to some people, but the whole point of using a dumb phone is that the device itself is so limited that it isn't capable of distracting you.

I tried using a dumb phone for 3 months during the spring of 2023. The phone I used was the TCL Flip 2 running KaiOS, a web-based mobile operating system forked from the Mozilla Boot-2-Gecko project). At $40, the Flip 2 is a very cheap (and very dumb) phone you can buy at Walmart in the US. Despite its "dumbness", I absolutely loved some aspects of using it. Here's my review:

The mental clarity I got from using this phone was unbelievable. You don't realize how addicted you are to your smartphone until you try one of these. However, I found that the flip phone was too inconvenient for text messaging and switched back to my iPhone after 3 months.

Pros:

- Calling works great. You can get an unlimited talk and text plan for $10 a month from T-Mobile
- Google Maps works in a pinch (although you need a data plan to use it)
- Internet access is slow but usable

Cons:

- SMS/MMS texting was terrible
- The developer menu was restricted and Android Debug Bridge (ADB) was disabled
- KaiOS has a poor app ecosystem (no Spotify, WhatsApp not supported, etc.)

Aren't these things expected when switching to a dumb phone? Yes and no.

b. Messaging sucks

The flip phone form factor and keyboard were expected parts of the experience. The part that bothered me the most about texting with the flip phone was something I didn't anticipate: I had become extremely accustomed to iMessaging from my Macbook. iMessage is a killer feature that lets you send texts from both your mobile phone and Mac, and crucially, ensures texts sent from either device appear as being sent from the same contact.

After getting the flip phone, I was no longer able to iMessage from my computer and have the text be delivered from my phone number. I ended up making an iCloud email in order to continue using iMessage from my laptop while connected to WiFi, and used the flip phone to communicate via SMS through my phone number while on the go. This was no big deal for my friends with Androids since they could continue to text my phone number via SMS. However, this approach ended up being annoying for my friends with iPhones, who didn't know whether to text my phone number via SMS or my email address via iMessage. First world problem, I know.

Why bother texting from the laptop? Why not fully commit to SMS/MMS? Two reasons: first, SMS is outdated, and group messages with SMS/MMS are absolutely awful. (For reference, MMS is the reason Gen Z iPhone users hate "green bubble" group chats.) Second, and more importantly, having access to the extended interface of a keyboard on your communication device is really nice. Even when I'm at home and have my iPhone with me, I often choose to text from my laptop when sending a long or carefully worded text. Most of the time, I don't need access to the extended interface of the laptop, but when I'm connected to wifi, I get tremendous use out of texting from the laptop.

Having a dumb phone only amplifies this desire, since the interface on the dumb phone is even more limited than the interface of an iPhone. I fully embrace the limited interface of the dumb phone while on the go, but I want to be able to send texts from the laptop *using the same contact profile* as I do with the dumb phone.

An alternative to this approach would be using a dumb phone with a superior interface to a flip phone, and using that as a primary texting device so that texting from a laptop isn't

necessary. Some companies have built dumb phones like the Lightphone and the Wisephone to meet this need. Both of these phones have touchscreen keyboards that function similar to that of an iPhone, but I'm not tempted by these devices; I liked texting from my laptop even when I had an iPhone. The problem isn't the flip phone keypad vs touch screen interface, the problem is that a mobile phone interface is very limited compared to a laptop interface. I believe the combination of texting from a laptop and phone through a common contact profile across devices is a killer feature.

c. The developer experience can suck (if you don't do your research)

The developer experience was a huge disappointment. Trying to use apps within such a terrible ecosystem made me realize how much phone users depend on third-party app developers for a good device experience. If you're a flip phone user, you should absolutely care about the developer ecosystem, even if you don't plan to do any development. The better the developer ecosystem, the more apps developers will make for it, making the device more usable.

The device I bought was completely locked down and prevented me from doing any development. I bought a carrier-specific prepaid phone, and only later realized the implications of this. KaiOS is open source, but carriers do their best to restrict development on these devices through a variety of measures such as removing the developer menu from the device settings and disabling Android Debug Bridge (ADB), a tool for communicating with and modifying android phones from a PC.

Even without these restrictions, the KaiOS software stack is based on this massively out of date Mozilla project. Doing any app development for this ecosystem requires using an old firefox-based browser with a WebIDE, which hasn't been a thing since 2017. I spent a few days trying to root my locked down device, but ultimately decided that I would look for a better ecosystem to develop around.

Even after giving up on the KaiOS flip phone experiment 2 years ago, I've remained very curious about other dumb phones that could address my gripes with SMS. Recently, I did much more research on dumb phones and have a much better understanding of what's out there. For those who are curious about current dumb phone offerings, reddit is a really good place to start: State of the Dumbphone 2025.

The tricky part about buying a dumb phone is that you want the right balance of features to make the phone livable without making it distracting. It's important to realize that there is no perfect dumb phone. Your choices are to customize or compromise. The TCL Flip 2 with KaiOS is a compromise, since the restrictions on the device and poor developer ecosystem prevent you from customizing your device. I'm looking to switch back to a flip phone, but I want to develop a custom message client to meet my needs. Since I need customization, my next flip phone will be an android device.

d. For many people, the dumb phone alone isn't enough

Even if you figure out a fantastic dumb phone setup, I think it's extremely important to acknowledge that there are some days that you **really** want a smartphone. Maybe you're traveling somewhere unfamiliar and need the versatility of a smartphone for your peace of mind. Maybe you're going on a 6 hour drive and don't want to look at google maps on a tiny screen for

the entire trip. Sure, there are ways around using a smartphone in these scenarios, and hardcore dumbphone users figure it out. However, I think there are a huge number of people who would consider using a dumb phone, but don't because it's too inconvenient in a few situations like this. These people may even be committed enough to try a dumb phone, only to realize the limitations and switch back to their smartphone. You could easily imagine scenarios in which people want a smartphone for 1 day a month, and would be better off using a dumbphone the rest of the time, leaving their iPhone powered off. I put myself squarely in that category of people.

Part 3: A better solution is possible (and it shouldn't be that hard)

a. What features do we need?

Here's what I personally want in a dumb phone:

- Flip phone form factor (non-negotiable)
    - I am a big believer in the form factor of a flip phone. The fact that it can snap shut is very important. When you take your smartphone out of your pocket and look at it, it turns on immediately and shows you your notifications. Then you click on something and have been subconsciously guided into using your phone. The flip phone must be consciously opened and used, and doesn't force its way into your brain the same way your smartphone does.
- Open source operating system, developer-friendly ecosystem (non-negotiable)
- A cut-down iMessage client (a limited version of iMessage must be able to run on the device.)
    - This will require support from a manually hosted server, at least for now.
- WhatsApp
    - (non-Americans need this for the same reason Americans need iMessage; keep reading for a complete explanation)
- RCS (and a way to pair this with an RCS client on any desktop OS)
    - As I learned, SMS/MMS is terrible, and I want RCS available for communicating with other android devices
- Google Maps/Waze
- A browser
- A really good speech-to-text service (saves time typing on the flip phone)
- I prefer no touchscreen.
    - I fear that a touchscreen would make the device more addictive. If there was a way to disable the touchscreen, I would be happy

Okay, so this would be a good dumb phone, but how do we solve the problem of people sometimes needing their smartphone? Should they suck it up and accept the dumb phone even when it's inconvenient? Should they swap their SIM card back and forth between their smartphone and dumbphone?

b. The solution

For that reason, I propose an unusual setup: **two phones, two sims, a shared data plan, and shared messaging clients**.

Here's why this is useful:

Tremendous versatility:
Keep your current phone number attached to the smartphone. Host an iMessage server on your Mac, and put an iMessage client on your data enabled dumb phone that communicates with your iMessage server. Daily drive the dumb phone, leave the smartphone turned off until you need it. You can keep your iPhone powered off and put it away. All you want is for your current phone number to remain associated with your Apple ID so that texts from your dumb phone iMessage client appear to have originated from your phone number. No SIM swapping required, no data loss, no bothering your friends.

A common messaging client:
(In the United States, to have a cultural impact among young people, I anticipate that this client needs to be compatible with iMessage, but I'm open to being persuaded otherwise).

Using a flip phone made me realize that iMessaging from multiple devices is a killer feature: one that I didn't even think about, but utterly depended on. I found this to be the case even when my main phone was an iPhone; my dependence on iMessage became even stronger when I started using a flip phone as my main phone.

I learned that I don't want to compromise on text messages. Texting is a necessary feature of any phone, and compared to doom scrolling on instagram, not a particularly distracting one. In my mind, it's acceptable for a mobile phone to have a limited user interface for texting, but I want to be able to complement that by texting from my laptop when I need the extended interface.

Let's consider the downsides:

The obvious downside is the cost of two data plans. However, this isn't as extravagant as it first sounds. You can easily set up a family plan for two devices with shared data. This allows you to communicate from two devices, but use only one person's worth of data. This approach could even save you money if it allows you to use less data while using a dumb phone than you would while using an iPhone.

The second downside is hassle, but consider this: these solutions are ultimately aimed at people trying to escape an addiction to their smartphones. People pay 300-400 dollars for mediocre dumb phones like the Lightphone and the Wisephone. People are paying 100 bucks a year to use opal for blocking apps on a phone they already own, and paying 50 bucks for a Brick. If you're willing to do that, why not spend the same money on a solution that actually works? Cost is not the issue: the value of the time people are wasting vastly exceeds the incremental time and financial cost of a second phone plan.

The third downside is that it requires you to host a server to support your hacked-together iMessage client, which is just an additional hassle.

c. Why not do all texting through a better dumb phone?

Aren't there other dumb phones that are better for texting than a flip phone? Does that eliminate the need to text from a laptop through a common message client?

Yes, but they don't support texting from a laptop. Litephone, for example, has tried making their own device, and have had moderate success. One of my friends tried one for a year, and he's since switched back to his iPhone. He complained about their basic utilities: calculator, messages, phone. It's definitely an interesting idea and is presumably being refined by the company, but still needs some work.
[Building LightOS with React Native | by Hugh Francis | Sanctuary Computer Inc | Medium]

For me, not being able to text from a laptop is a dealbreaker. I appreciate the effort this company put into making this phone capable of being a primary texting device with a wider human-machine interface than most other dumb phones, but that doesn't solve my problem. I don't mind the limited interface of a flip phone while on the go, but when I want an expanded interface, I **really** want to be able to text from my laptop. This means that I need software that this phone's ecosystem doesn't currently have, to my knowledge.

Also, the LightPhone phone is really expensive for what it is. It's ⅔ the price of an iPhone for 1/10 of the features. We've established that iPhones have too many addictive features, but it doesn't make much sense to pay smartphone money for a dumb phone.

d. Why do we need iMessage specifically?

- What about an RCS capable flip phone with text forwarding to a third party desktop messaging client?

This already exists on Windows with Phone Link and Linux with KDE Connect (and maybe even MacOS as well, but I imagine relatively few Mac users would use this tool). This is definitely the best and easiest option from a technical perspective. My only reluctance to switch to this setup is that I'm very locked into the Apple device ecosystem and love using iMessage. Apple uses their own servers to make the iMessage experience as seamless as possible, which is nice; I wonder how reliable the RCS + Phone Link equivalent is. If anybody is currently using this setup (RCS capable flip phone linked to a desktop message client on Windows/Linux/MacOS), please let me know!

- Why not just use WhatsApp? It allows you to text from multiple devices.

This problem is 0% technical and 100% cultural. I love WhatsApp for exactly this reason, but people don't really use it in America, which is a shame. For young Americans, iMessage is pretty much the cultural equivalent of WhatsApp for the rest of the world. It's reliable and easy to use, has a nice UI, and is really well optimized for group chats, as well as sending pictures and

videos. An absolutely crucial feature of both platforms is that you can send messages from multiple different devices, and have them appear as coming from the same contact.

However, it's worth pointing out that iMessage is not an app that you choose to use as an iPhone user. It's part of the Apple Messages app, which is responsible for all texting communication on your iPhone, not just iMessage. When an iPhone user messages with an android device, Apple Messages will have to handle communication over Rich Communication Service (RCS) or Simple Messaging Service (SMS). This adds complexity to any third party messaging client that would interface with Apple Messages, which adds complexity to the fact that any third party solution must effectively be reverse engineered, as iMessage is not an open-source protocol, and is supposed to be restricted to apple devices.

Part of the reason that iMessage and WhatsApp work so well are that they depend on Apple and Meta servers to deliver messages to their destination. Meta provides WhatsApp for free; Apple does the same with iMessage, but only for their customers.

The benefits of this server support are huge. This introduces a challenge if you're trying to use iMessage on a non Apple device: you need to host your own server on an Apple computer if you want to forward your messages from the apple device to the non apple device. However, it is possible, and already exists for android phones.

e. What would it take to make this work?

Good news: there are already devices that could check all of these boxes, or are very close. The cat S22 flip, for example. All of this is already possible except for the iMessage client.
I think the cat flip 22 could check all these boxes and be the solution, but to work in the American market, I think that the iMessage client is a must. Being able to communicate through the same communication portal on both your phone and computer is a killer feature, **especially** if your phone is a flip phone. Sometimes, you want to be able to type out a long text, and you don't want to worry about whether you're sending it through your phone number or your email address

To me, iMessage is a crucial part of the solution, but the currently available methods for setting it up aren't as easy as just installing Whatsapp, for example. The would-be user must run an iMessage server on their old Mac 24 hours a day. This is possible with the 'caffeinate' utility. There are more advanced solutions that don't require a Mac (like running OS-X in a Docker container), but fundamentally, some annoying setup is required. (If this became popular, a better solution would likely emerge, such as perhaps a hypervisor for running dozens of virtual macOS containers, each with a secure message server. If that doesn't already exist, I would be interested in making one.)

Apple could fix this problem themselves by making their own iMessage capable flip-phone, but I suspect the world will end before they do this, for a couple reasons.
First, flip phones are old school and not futuristic like all other apple products.

Second, Apple makes a ton of companies a ton of money by making their device so addictive, ensuring that people put a lot of time and thought into IOS development. No matter what Tim Cook says, I bet Apple likes the fact that they have an entire generation addicted to their product. Let's do something about it and make iMessage a thing for dumb phones.

My questions for the reader:

1. Does anyone else yearn for iMessage on a dumb phone as much as I do? Am I a crazy Apple fanboy for wanting to send imessages from both my Mac and dumb phone?
2. What is the state of RCS for dumb phones? Is the desktop client integration any good? What are the current limitations?
3. Is the Cat flip s22 a good platform to build a cut-down Blue Bubbles client on? Are there better platform alternatives? I like the fact that the cat s22 runs android Go instead of kaiOS, since that's a huge upgrade from an OS perspective. The Cat S22 also already has RCS, since that's supported by android Go. However, I don't love the touch screen. Any suggestions?

If anyone has any other thoughts about this, developers especially, I would love to hear from you.