

Smartphone users develop new concepts of privacy in public spaces: study

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With endless applications, high-speed wireless Internet access, and free messaging services, smart phones have revolutionized the way we communicate. But at what cost? According to researchers at Tel Aviv University, the smart phone is challenging traditional conceptions of privacy, especially in the public sphere.

Dr. Tali Hatuka of TAU's Department of Geography and Dr. Eran Toch of TAU's Department of [Industrial Engineering](#) have teamed to measure the impact of the smart phone phenomenon on privacy, behavioral codes, and the use of public space. Their early results indicate that although spaces such as city squares, parks, or transportation were once seen as public meeting points, smart [phone users](#) are more and more caught up in their technology-based [communications devices](#) than their immediate surroundings.

Smart phone users are 70 percent more likely than regular [cellphone users](#) to believe that their phones afford them a great deal of privacy, says Dr. Toch, who specializes in privacy and information systems. These users are more willing to reveal private issues in public spaces. They are also less concerned about bothering individuals who share those spaces, he says.

Inside a private bubble

Dr. Hatuka says that smart phones create the illusion of "private

bubbles" around their users in public spaces. She also believes that the design of public spaces may need to change in response to this technology, not unlike the ways in which some public areas have been designated as "smoking" and "non-smoking." Dr. Toch also notes that smartphones and [personal computing](#) devices are becoming more "context-aware," adjusting themselves in terms of brightness and volume to the user's location and activity.

To examine how [smart phones](#) have impacted [human interactions](#) in public and private spaces, the researchers designed an in-depth survey. Nearly 150 participants, half smart phone users and half regular phone users, were questioned about how telephone use applied to their homes, public spaces, learning spaces, and transportation spaces.

While regular phone users continued to adhere to established social protocol in terms of phone use — postponing private conversations for private spaces and considering the appropriateness of cell phone use in public spaces — smart phone users adapted different social behaviors for public spaces. They were 50 percent less likely to be bothered by others using their phones in [public spaces](#), and 20 percent less likely than regular phone users to believe that their private phone conversations were irritating to those around them, the researchers found.

Feeling lost without a phone

According to the researchers, smart phone users were also more closely "attached" to their mobile devices. When asked how they felt when they were without their phones, the majority of smart phone owners chose negative descriptors such as "lost," "tense," or "not updated." Regular phone users were far more likely to have positive associations to being without their phones, such as feeling free or quiet.

The next phase of the study will be a more in-depth analysis of how

smart phone users incorporate this technology into their daily lives. It requires users to install an application that the researchers developed called Smart Spaces. The application is designed to track where the participants go over a three-week period and how they use their phones while there. This will give researchers a better idea of how smart phone users interact in both public and private spaces during the course of a typical day.

Dr. Hatuka and Dr. Toch believe that their complete findings can reveal clues about the future of public space and how it will be designed in order to meet the needs of those it serves. "We are entering a new phase of public and private spaces," says Dr. Hatuka, suggesting that physical spaces need to be redesigned as arenas which could enhance personal interaction.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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