

New study shows putting cell phones out of sight can enhance in-person conversations

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Can the mere presence of a mobile device during a face-to-face conversation affect the quality of social interaction? Absolutely, according to a study led by Shalini Misra, assistant professor, Urban Affairs and Planning program in Virginia Tech's National Capital Region.

"The iPhone Effect: The Quality of In-Person Social Interactions in the Presence of Mobile Devices," published in the current issue of the journal, *Environment & Behavior*, examines the relationship between the presence of [mobile devices](#) and the quality of real-life in-person social interactions in third places through a naturalistic field experiment.

For the research, 100 two-person conversations were randomly assigned to discuss either a casual or meaningful topic together. A trained research assistant observed the participants unobtrusively from a distance during the course of a 10-minute conversation, noting whether either participant placed a mobile device on the table or held it in his or her hand.

Research found that even when not in active use or buzzing, beeping, ringing, or flashing, a mobile device represents a wider social network and a portal to an immense compendium of information. In the presence of mobile devices, people have the constant urge to seek out information, check for communication, and direct their thoughts to other people and worlds.

Using hierarchical linear modeling, the study showed that conversations in the absence of mobile communication technologies were rated as significantly superior compared with those in the presence of a mobile device, above and beyond the effects of age, gender, ethnicity, and mood. People who had conversations in the absence of mobile devices reported higher levels of empathetic concern.

Participants who had a close relationship with one another reported lower levels of empathy while conversing in the presence of a mobile device compared with those who were less friendly with each other.

"Both non-verbal and verbal elements of in-person communication are important for a focused and fulfilling conversation," said Misra. "In the presence of a mobile device, there is less eye contact. A person is potentially more likely to miss subtle cues, facial expressions, and changes in the tone of their conversation partner's voice when his or her thoughts are directed to other concerns."

Misra's research team for the project included Lulu Cheng, a regulatory statistician in the Statistical Technology Center at Monsanto, who earned a Ph.D. in statistics from Virginia Tech; Jamie Genevie of Linden, Michigan, a student in the Master of Urban and Regional Planning program at Virginia Tech in the National Capital Region; and Miao Yuan of Blacksburg, Virginia, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Statistics and an associate collaborator at the Laboratory for Interdisciplinary Statistical Analysis at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg.

The full text of "The iPhone Effect: The Quality of In-Person Social Interactions in the Presence of Mobile Devices" can be accessed [here](#).

Provided by Virginia Tech

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