

Phones at the dinner table: Study explores attitudes

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Checking email for work. Posting a photo to Facebook. Texting the kids to come downstairs. Sending a quick snap to a friend. People of all ages might use their smartphones in these ways during shared meals.

A new study from the University of Michigan explores how [people](#) use mobile phones during meals and how they feel about other people doing so. The researchers surveyed 1,163 people between the ages of 8 and 88 in English-speaking countries around the world.

The survey reveals that people's attitudes about whether or not you should be using a [mobile phone](#) at mealtimes depends heavily on what you are doing, and who else is at the table.

Not all phone use is perceived the same, the researchers found. For example, texting and answering a phone call are both considered more appropriate than using [social media](#).

The researchers think this might be because texting and talking on the phone are both brief activities, whereas using social media can take much longer. This was at least true for adults in their study. However, children texting is rated as less appropriate, probably because children are perceived to be largely socializing with their friends, and they do it a lot more than adults.

"These results are interesting because they challenge the idea that using your phone during a shared meal is categorically inappropriate. What we

find is that attitudes are much more nuanced than that," said Carol Moser, a doctoral student at the U-M School of Information and the study's lead author. "A quick text or even phone call with your boss might be okay. Watching someone across the table thumb through their Facebook feed, that's different."

Regardless of activity, the study finds that the older the participant, the more appropriate they perceive using mobile phones at meals to be, but this peaks by the mid-20s. Above that age, perceived appropriateness of use declines with age.

However, both adults and children generally agree that it is more appropriate for adults to use a phone at meals than for children to. In fact, the mere presence of a child at a meal decreases the perceived appropriateness of adults using their phones.

"People have done other activities during meals like reading a newspaper or watching the television for years. But smartphones introduce a new challenge," said co-author Sarita Schoenebeck, assistant professor of information. "You can't tell what someone else is doing on their smartphone, so you have no idea if they're ignoring you in order to reply to an urgent email or to play Candy Crush Saga."

Perhaps not surprisingly, people's own mobile phone use is the strongest predictor of their beliefs about appropriateness. In other words, if you use your phone at [meals](#) a lot, you probably think it's okay to do so.

The researchers suggest that smartphone developers might build more visibility into the devices. For example, a phone might be able to detect that a user is at a meal and ask her if the activity is important to finish now or if she would like to wait until after the meal.

Or a [phone](#) might flash a small light to indicate the nature of use to

people nearby—if an activity is deemed important by the group (e.g., an adult checking an important work email or a child checking a school assignment), people can help one another follow their own rules.

The study, "Technology at the Table: Attitudes about Mobile Phone Use at Mealtimes," will be presented at the Association for Computer Machinery's Human-Factors in Computing Systems conference this month.

Provided by University of Michigan

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