

Combing through someone's phone could lead to end of relationship—or not

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For some people, the thought of their partner, friend or colleague snooping through their phone, reading their texts and emails, is an automatic deal breaker. However, some relationships can survive the snooping, a new study examining the motivations behind phone snooping has found.

Researchers from UBC and the University of Lisbon recruited 102 individuals and asked them to recall a past situation in which they accessed the [phone](#) of someone they know, or someone they know accessed theirs. Participants were asked to describe the events leading up to the incident, how the snooping was conducted and what happened to the relationship afterwards.

Out of 46 participants who provided information about relationship outcomes, 21 said that the relationship eventually ended while 25 said the relationship survived the prying.

"In cases where the relationship ended, it was either because the phone owner felt their trust was betrayed or the relationship was also experiencing difficulties. Another main reason was the relationship was not that strong or important to begin with, as was the case with two work friends where one stole valuable contact information from the other's cellphone," said study author Ivan Beschastnikh, a professor of computer science at UBC.

If the relationship survived, it was because the friendship was mostly solid and the victim considered it important enough to overlook the offence, Beschastnikh said.

"In such cases, the victim explained away the snooping by considering it as a sign that they should reassure their romantic partner about their commitment to the relationship. They ended up excusing the behaviour and, in some cases, continued to give the other person access to their phone," he said.

Participants also mentioned a few different motivations for snooping on their friends or partner's phones. Many cited jealousy and a desire to "control relationships with others." Others wanted to pull a prank, or to use the stolen information for [financial gain](#) or other nefarious purposes.

Participants were all residents of Europe, Canada or the United States, and about 60 per cent were women. They were enlisted using the online research platform Prolific.

The study, while small, is the first to provide detailed information on motives and outcomes around phone snooping from the point of view of those who were directly involved, say the researchers, who previously studied [unauthorized access](#) to Facebook accounts.

"The fact that people snoop is widely known, but we know much less about exactly why they do what they do, and about the eventual impact on their relationships," said Beschastnikh. "This study contributes new insights to that discussion straight from those who have experienced snooping, and hopefully prompts more research down the line."

The findings also highlight the critical role of human factors in digital security, added study co-author Konstantin Beznosov, a professor of electrical and computer engineering who studies the human and social aspects of cybersecurity and privacy.

"It all comes down to who you allow to use your phone, whether you trust them or they trust you, and what the parameters for your [relationship](#) with them are," said Beznosov. "Given that partners, kids, friends and colleagues can easily observe or guess your PIN and other types of passcodes, you can restrict access to your phone with biometrics identification, which is available on most phones and hard to circumvent."

Not too surprisingly, the findings show that the prime time for snooping is when the owner takes a shower or bathroom break. So if you don't trust the people around you, take your phone to the bathroom with you, suggest the researchers.

More information: The study, "Vulnerability & Blame: Making Sense of Unauthorized Access to Smartphones" was presented earlier this month at the ACM CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems conference: www.cs.ubc.ca/~bestchai/papers...martphone-access.pdf

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