

Strangers trust others more when they put down their phones, experiment finds

July 24 2024



Credit: Keira Burton from Pexels

It's practically a ritual: As soon as we sit down on the bus or get in line at the post office, we pull out our phones. Studies show average Americans check their phones almost 100 times a day, spending more than five

hours daily staring at that pocket-sized screen. While scrolling through social media or checking sports scores may seem like a good way to kill time it may come at a social cost, according to a new study by Sandy Campbell, Ph.D. 24.

"When I was younger, growing up in New York I'd see people on trains chatting with each other while they read the newspaper," says Campbell, now a post-doctoral researcher at the University of California Los Angeles. "Now everyone is plugged in and looking down."

In a novel laboratory experiment, Campbell and Uri Gneezy of UC San Diego's Rady School of Management found that being on our phones instead of connecting with other people can affect our trustworthiness.

"Trust is so fundamental to society," Campbell says. "If you look at someone else, you see them and smile, and that might lead to a connection with them."

For their experiment, [published](#) in the *Journal of Economic Psychology*, they brought groups of six students into a laboratory and had them wait together for 20 minutes.

Some groups were allowed to use phones as usual. For others, they confiscated the phones and made them wait without them. They then broke the students up into pairs to play a simple trust game that gave them the chance to earn more money back by sharing up front—if they trusted the partner to split the final pot rather than pocket it, and if their partner actually did send back money.

Those who didn't have phones and who also interacted with other people in the [waiting room](#) tended to share more up front than those who didn't interact. Even more significantly, the partners without phones also gave back more than those with phones—and more than they'd received.

Campbell attributes this generosity to the trust engendered when people connect with one another.

"If you are not looking someone in the eye, you're almost treating them as less than human—it's just money," she says. "But if you'd looked up and smiled and chatted, then you'd developed more of a sense of who this person is. They are no longer a blank slate."

While our phones undoubtedly connect us to loved ones far away, they can also distance us from strangers close at hand, she concludes. People might look at their phones in [social situations](#) for a number of reasons, including boredom, shyness, or a feeling like others might not want to talk to them. Campbell suggests, however, that by putting away our phones around strangers, we might feel more of a sense of trust that could enrich everyone's lives.

Children could learn more [social skills](#) by giving up their phones during the school day or at summer camp. In a business context, managers might foster a sense of [trust](#) by limiting [phone](#) usage at certain times, such as orientations, when new hires could be encouraged to drop their phones on the way into the room and pick them up on their way out.

"Obviously, our phones are immensely valuable, but in some situations, it may be more valuable to chat to the person next to you," she says. "You might be surprised to find they want to chat with you too."

More information: Sandy Campbell et al, Smartphone use decreases trustworthiness of strangers, *Journal of Economic Psychology* (2024).
[DOI: 10.1016/j.joep.2024.102714](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2024.102714)

Citation: Strangers trust others more when they put down their phones, experiment finds (2024, July 24) retrieved 24 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-strangers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.