

Socializing found to boost mood more than screen time

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It turns out people might prefer social interactions over their smartphones, but that doesn't mean they're going to stop scrolling.

A [new study](#) from researchers in the University of Georgia's Franklin College of Arts and Sciences found that when asked to scroll on their phones, sit quietly by themselves or have a [conversation](#) with a stranger, participants typically found talking was the most enjoyable.

"When people are out in the [real world](#), they have these options," said lead author and doctoral student Christina Leckfor. "We were interested in getting a sense of how people compare their options, both in terms of how they expect to feel and then how they actually feel after doing these things."

To delve into these perceptions, researchers broke study participants into four groups. Two groups predicted how they would feel about different actions, and two groups completed the assigned actions. All groups then ranked options from most to least enjoyable. To gauge feelings around these tasks, all four groups used a 0 to 100 scale to rate how likely they were to experience a positive or negative emotion from a [task](#).

"We thought people might underestimate how much they would enjoy talking to a stranger and overestimate how much they would enjoy using their smartphones," Leckfor said. "But that's not what we found. Across our studies, people were actually more accurate in predicting how they would feel than we thought they'd be."

Participants enjoy conversation over idea of smartphones

Between the groups that imagined and those who completed a task, emotional values fell on a similar spectrum. When given three options—use a [smartphone](#), sit alone or talk to a stranger—the conversation held the highest positive emotional value in both groups. Using a smartphone was second, and sitting alone was third.

Adding more options shuffled up results a bit.

After giving specific smartphone tasks (watching videos, scrolling [social media](#) or texting) in addition to talking or sitting quietly, participants said they would enjoy watching videos the most, followed by talking to a stranger, using social media and then texting. Sitting alone once again came last.

Preference given to watching videos, despite emotional boost from conversations

A big difference, Leckfor said, came from the emotions associated with these tasks. While participants said they would prefer using their smartphone in some capacity, they saw a higher mood boost after talking to a stranger. From an average baseline of a 52.2 out of 100, conversations increased positive emotions by about 5 points to 57.68. In comparison, watching videos gave a 2.4-point bump to 54.62, and texting resulted in a drop to 47.56.

"It surprised us that even though participants reported an improved mood after talking to a stranger, they still ranked texting above talking to a [stranger](#)," Leckfor said. "This could mean that people don't always recognize the potential benefits of a conversation, or they're not prioritizing that information. It also shows that just experiencing something as enjoyable isn't always enough to get us to want to do it."

Sitting alone remains least preferred task

Across all measures, sitting alone came in last place, and many gave it the lowest potential for positive emotions and highest potential for negative emotions. This result could indicate that participants would prefer an activity or escape compared to solitude, Leckfor said, but it

could also be a result of the study's forced isolation.

"Each study participant was instructed to spend that time alone," Leckfor said. "They didn't have a choice. Some previous research shows that when people have a choice, and freely choose to spend time in solitude, they enjoy it more than when it's forced upon them."

Outside of a study, it can be difficult to consider and rank what options are available in your free time, Leckfor said, but these results highlight the importance of giving it some thought before just picking up a smartphone.

"In the real world, we're not always consciously making these comparisons, even if you have all of these choices," she said. "But this study taps into the idea that maybe we are better at understanding how we feel about different activities if we take the time to give them conscious thought."

The study is published in *The Journal of Social Psychology*.

More information: Christina M. Leckfor et al, Expectations and experiences of screen time, social interaction, and solitude, *The Journal of Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/00224545.2023.2231617](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2023.2231617)

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