

'Chameleon effect' and smartphone use: Spontaneous mimicry in social situations

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A team of researchers at the University of Pisa has found that the "chameleon effect" applies to people initiating use of their smartphone. In their paper published in *Journal of Ethology*, the group describes studying people reacting to others initiating use of their phone.

Prior research, along with anecdotal evidence, has shown that people are subject to the "chameleon effect" in certain circumstances, in which people mimic the behavior of another. The most well-known example is yawn contagion. In this new effort, the researchers have found that when one person starts using their phone, nearly half of those who witness it will pick up their own phones.

The work involved watching groups of strangers and groups of people who know each other to see what would happen when someone in a group began using their phone. They also sought to control the action in some situations by acting as the person in a group who picked up their phone.

In all, the researchers observed 184 people—96 men and 88 women—in [natural settings](#) such as in

lunchrooms, at a park or attending a dinner party. They would simply wait for someone to pick up their phone and to start conducting phone activities such as checking messages. When it happened, the researchers would count how many people in a given group checked their phones within the following 30 seconds. In other cases, they act as the person who picked up their phone and started using it—this allowed them to vary the action slightly by conducting phone activities without looking at the phone.

The researchers found that overall, half of the people who saw a person pick up their phone and start using did the same within 30 seconds. They noted that in the instances when the researchers began using their [phone](#) without looking at it, fewer people picked up their phones—just 0.5% did so.

More information: Veronica Maglieri et al. Navigating from live to virtual social interactions: looking at but not manipulating smartphones provokes a spontaneous mimicry response in the observers, *Journal of Ethology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s10164-021-00701-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10164-021-00701-6)

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