

Screen Time Vs Face Time

How Technology is Taking over the Table and Our Lives

No phones at the table used to be a standard rule in a lot of households. Dinner was a time to talk about your day, share what was coming up and actually pay attention to the people sitting across from you.

Walking into a dining hall at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, that rule feels almost nonexistent. Friend groups sit together, laughing and talking, but between conversations, their attention drifts to glowing screens. Notifications buzz, TikTok videos play quietly under the table and messages get answered mid-meal.

Social media has made it easier than ever to stay connected, but in spaces meant for face-to-face interaction, its presence raises a bigger question: how is constant digital engagement shaping the way college students build and maintain real-life relationships?

For a lot of students, the answer isn't black and white. Phones aren't just distractions, they're a normal part of everyday life.

"I feel like it's just normal now," said Isabela Santoyo, a freshman at UNC. "We'll be sitting together, but if my phone buzzes, I'll check it without even thinking about it."

That habit is backed up by research. According to the Pew Research Center (2022), the vast majority of young people have access to smartphones, and many report being online almost constantly. Those habits don't stop when students get to college, they carry over.

At the same time, researchers have studied how phones affect in-person interaction. One term that comes up often is "phubbing," which refers to ignoring someone to look at your phone. Studies have found that it can reduce feelings of connection and relationship satisfaction (Roberts & David, 2016).

In a college setting, where friendships are still forming, those small moments can matter more than they seem.

"It's not that we don't care about each other," said Saraahi Shroff, a first-year student. "But sometimes it feels like you're competing with someone's phone for their attention."

Still, not everyone sees phones as negative. For some students, they're just part of how conversations work now.

"I actually think it helps," said Annie Pape, a junior. "If someone shows me something on their phone, it becomes part of the conversation. It's not always a bad thing."

That mix of perspectives reflects a bigger shift. Social media makes it easier to stay connected, share experiences instantly, and meet people you might not otherwise encounter. But it also means people are constantly splitting their attention between what's happening in front of them and what's happening on their screens.

Research published in *Computers in Human Behavior* has found that heavy social media use can be associated with lower well-being, especially when it replaces face-to-face interaction (Kross et al., 2013). Other studies suggest that even small interruptions, like checking out a notification, can make conversations feel less meaningful.

You can see that tension plays out all over campus. In dining halls, study lounges and dorm rooms, students are balancing real-life conversations with whatever is happening on their phones.

Some students say they're starting to notice that trade-off more.

"I've started putting my phone face down when I'm with friends," said London Dernis, a UNC student. "It makes a difference. You're more present, and the conversation feels more real."

At the same time, expectations are changing. For a generation that grew up with smartphones, constantly checking your phone isn't always seen as rude, it's normal. The line between online and offline interaction is a lot less clear than it used to be.

And in some cases, phones actually help create the relationships they later interrupt. A lot of students start connecting before they even get to campus, using social media to find roommates, join group chats, or meet people ahead of time.

"I met some of my closest friends through social media before I even got here," said Caitlyn Murphy, a UNC student. "It made coming to a big school, out of state, a lot less intimidating."

That's part of what makes the issue complicated. Phones can take away from in-person moments, but they also help build and maintain relationships.

According to the *Medical News Today* (2023), social media can strengthen connections, especially over distance, but excessive use can reduce the quality of face-to-face interaction. It often depends on how intentionally it's used.

Back in the dining hall, that balance shows up in small decisions, whether someone checks a notification right away or ignores it, whether a phone stays on the table or gets put away, whether someone looks down or looks up.

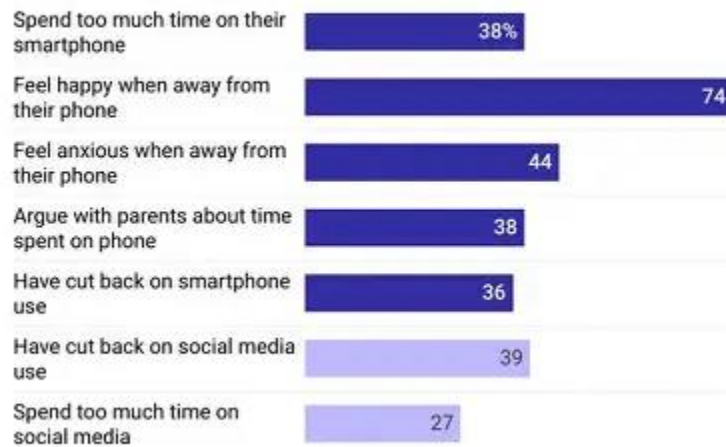
For most students, the goal isn't to get rid of phones, but to be more aware of how they use them.

"I don't think we're ever going back to no phones at the table," Dernis said. "But I do think people are starting to realize when it matters to put them away."

For college students today, connection isn't disappearing; it's evolving. Sometimes, the difference between feeling included and feeling ignored comes down to something as simple as whether someone chooses to look up from their phone.

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Data source: Pew Research Center, 2023

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