Research Article **IJPRR (2021) 4:47**

International Journal of Psychological Research and Reviews
(ISSN:2639-6041)

Social Interaction and Social Media At Airport Departure Gates

Tiffany Field[1, 2*], Shantay Mines[2], Samantha Poling[2], Annie Luu[2]

[1]University of Miami / Miller School of Medicine.
[2]Fielding Graduate University.

ABSTRACT

An observational study was conducted at airline departure gates in several U.S. and European countries. Thirty-second observations were randomly made of 1360 different individuals ranging in age from infants to the elderly, although 79% of the travelers were adults. Most of the individuals were traveling with someone, except for adults who were more often traveling alone (58% vs. 42% time). Of the different types of social interaction and social media observed, cell phone texting/scrolling was significantly more frequently observed (at 53% time) than cell phone talking (13 % time), face-to-face interaction (13% time), on computer (7%) and touching (4%) which was the least frequently observed behavior. Significantly more cell phone texting/scrolling time occurred when adults were traveling alone (58% time). These data suggest that airline travelers are spending significantly more airport departure gate time on social media (specifically cell phone texting/scrolling) than face-to-face interaction or touching. Unfortunately, the observations that were made by professors and students were from too great a distance (10 feet away) in order to be unobtrusive but unable to code the precise type of cell phone texting/scrolling that was occurring.

Keywords: Social Interaction; Social Media

***Correspondence to Author:**
Tiffany Field
[1]University of Miami / Miller School of Medicine. [2]Fielding Graduate University.

How to cite this article:
Tiffany Field, Shantay Mines, Samantha Poling, Annie Luu. Social Interaction and Social Media At Airport Departure Gates. International Journal of Psychological Research and Reviews, 2021; 4:47.

eSciPub LLC, Houston, TX USA.
Website: https://escipub.com/

Waiting time at airport gates is an opportunity for social interactions between partners and within families. Surprisingly, no studies could be found in the literature on social interactions at airport gates. Although air travel has been limited by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, significant airline travel is still occurring in the U.S. according to a New York Times report on Christmas day 2020. Allegedly, more than 1 million people passed through US airports two days before Christmas on December 23, 2020. That was the highest number of travelers since March 2020 which was the beginning of the pandemic lockdown for many states in the U.S. The pre-Christmas travel, according to the New York Times report, was still down by 60% compared with pre-Christmas 2019. Nonetheless, the continuing prevalence of air travel in the U.S. highlights the relevance of observing social interactions in this public setting.

Based on research in other public settings, social interactions would be expected between partners and within families at airport departure gates. Observation research in other public settings like beaches and restaurants suggests significant levels of face–to–face interaction and touching between partners and within families, although cross–cultural differences have emerged. For example, in a study comparing Hawaiians, Japanese and Americans at Hawaiian beaches, Hawaiians were noted to engage with many members of their families, Japanese were observed to spend most of their time interacting with their children, and American couples were relatively more attentive to reading than their children (Martini, 1995).

Touching between couples and within families would also be expected based on earlier observational studies in restaurants and on playgrounds, although again cross-cultural differences have been observed. An example is a study that documented preschoolers in Paris receiving more physical affection from their parents on playgrounds relative to Miami children (Field, 1999). And, adolescents in Paris were more physically affectionate toward each other than Miami adolescents based on observations in McDonald's restaurants (Field, 1999).

Anecdotal observations have suggested that social media is also occurring in public settings like airport departure gates including talking on cell phones, texting/scrolling on cell phones, and working on computers. Social media has become increasingly popular in the U.S. According to a recent Digital 2020 Global Overview Report, 3.8 billion people are social media users, 5.2 billion are mobile phone users, and 4.5 billion are internet users (Kemp, 2020). And, the average internet user spends 6 hours and 43 minutes a day online, suggesting that social media has become an alternative means for social interactions. Not surprisingly, a significant literature has amassed on cell phone and Internet addiction as social media has become more popular (Field 2018, 2020). Given this trend in the U.S., significant amounts of social media might be expected to occur at airport departure gates.

The purpose of the current study was to observe behavior at airport gates including social interaction and social media behavior. These behaviors including face-to-face interaction, touching, talking on cell phones, texting/scrolling on cell phones, and working on computers were observed and coded in many U.S. airports as well as several foreign airports. The amount of social interaction and social media was expected to be approximately equivalent.

Method

Participants

Table 1. Gender by age group (%) distribution and X^2 analysis.

Age group	Male	Female	X^2=3.58, N.S.
Infant	58	42	
child	39	61	
adolescent	48	52	
adult	50	50	
elderly	44	56	

The participants included 1360 travelers at departure gates in several U.S. and foreign airports. Based on the observers' best guesses, the travelers who were observed were distributed 2% infants, 6% children, 7% adolescents, 79% adults, and 4% elderly. As can be seen in table 1, gender was evenly distributed as 48% male, 52% female.

Procedure

A professor and two students conducted the observations of 1360 individuals ranging from infants to the elderly as they were waiting to travel at departure gates in several airports including Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, Beijing, Shanghai, Paris (Orly and de Gaulle), New York City (JFK and LaGuardia), Los Angeles, Houston, Hartford, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Albany, D.C. (Reagan), Charlotte, Newark, and Chicago. The observations were conducted in 2018 and 2019 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The observers were seated in chairs at the departure gates approximately 10 feet away from travelers who were seated in chairs in rows opposite from the observer. Using time sample unit coding sheets, the observers coded the behaviors of each individual for 30 seconds. The behaviors that were coded included guesstimates on age group, gender, and seemingly traveling alone or with other(s). The social behaviors that were coded included face-to-face interaction and touching and the social media behaviors included cell phone/talking, cell phone texting/scrolling and being on a computer. Other behaviors that occurred less frequently were written in the margins of the coding sheet., e.g. eating /drinking, reading, looking around, and napping.

Results

Chi square analyses were conducted to determine the frequency of the different demographic characteristics of the travelers (age group and gender), whether they were traveling alone or with someone and their social interaction and social media behaviors. Significantly more travelers were adults (79%, X^2 =3123.26, p=.000).

As can be seen in table 1, gender was evenly distributed (48% male and 52% female, X^2 =3.58, N.S.) As can be seen in table 2, significantly more travelers who were observed were traveling with others versus traveling alone (M=69% versus 31%, X^2=127.22, p=.000).

Table 2. Alone at the departure gate versus being with others (%) distribution by age group and X^2analysis.

Age group	Alone	With others	X^2=127.22, p=.000
Infant	33	67	
Child	15	86	
Adolescent	17	84	
Adult	58	42	
Elderly	30	70	

Of the different types of social interaction and social media observed, cell phone texting/scrolling was significantly more frequently observed (at 53% time) than cell phone talking (13 % time), face-to-face interaction (13% time), on the computer (7%) and touching (4%) which was the least frequently observed behavior (X^2=778.31, p=.000) (See table 3).

Table 3. Social interaction, touching and social media behaviors (% time) and X^2analysis.

Interaction behavior	% time	X^2=778.31, p=.000
face-to-face	13	
touching	4	
cell phone/talking	13	
cell phone/texting-scrolling	53	
computer	7	

Significantly more cell phone texting/scrolling time occurred when adults were traveling alone versus with others (58% versus 42% time, X^2 =26.34, p=.000). The adults accounted for a significantly greater percent time of the cell phone texting/scrolling behavior (adults=82%, adolescents=9%, children=5%, elderly=2%). Although the type of cell phone texting/scrolling could only be coded 13% of the time because of the 10 foot minimal distance for coding, texting occurred for a greater percent of those observed (68% texting, 24% scrolling and 8% looking/reading the screen).

For behaviors that were coded as other, the following behaviors were noted including: 1) eating/drinking (accounting for 41% of the other behaviors but 7% of total time sample); 2) reading (30% other behavior and 6% time); 3) looking around (16% other behavior and 3%time); and 4) napping (13% other behavior and 1% time).

Table 4. Age distribution for texting behavior (% of texting time) and X^2 analysis.

Age group		
Infant	1.5	X^2=16.90, p=.002
Child	5.3	
Adolescent	8.5	
Adult	82.3	
Elderly	2.4	

Discussion

The greater prevalence of cell phone activity (53 % time) noted in this study is perhaps not surprising given that the average person spends six hours per day on the cell phone (Kemp, 2020). It is not clear, however, why cell phone activity would be predominant at airport departure gates. Folks may be anticipating the 30-minute no-cell-phone period that happens at the beginning of each flight and may be making last-minute connections with distant friends or relatives or working on their phones as long as possible. It's also a way of keeping kids busy, close by, and not running around the airport. The children and adolescents spent moderate amounts of time on their cell phones in this airport departure gate study. The excessive cell phone use at the departure gates may also be a distraction from leaving one place for another, as in some folks having transition anxiety. It could also be distracting one's self from worrying about the flight by using the cell phone. Or, it could just be addictive behavior, as has been seen for cell phone use (Field, 2020), internet use (Field, 2018), Facebook time (Field, 2020), and gaming (Field, 2019). At least the prevalence of cell phone activity in the current study was greater when folks were traveling alone versus traveling with others, so it doesn't appear to have been escapism behavior. No literature could be found on departure gate behavior prior to the advent of cell phones and social media. Anecdotally, seniors have suggested that people talked a lot with each other, "smooched" a lot, and played games with each other.

It would be interesting to have done follow-up observations on the airplanes during those moments when cell phones couldn't be used to see if people then engaged in more face-to-face interaction and touching. The low levels of face-to-face interaction (13% time) and at the same frequency as cell phone talking (13% time) at the departure gates was surprising. Social interactions could have been taking place on the cell phones as well, but that medium is lacking the visual stimulation of face-to-face interaction and the tactile stimulation of touching. That touching occurred at the lowest level (4% time) was also surprising given the anecdotal data that touching was prevalent at departure gates before the era of cell phones and social media.

The press has recently attributed low levels of touching to COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing. And, in a survey monkey study during a COVID-19 lockdown, as many as 68% of the respondents reported being touch deprived, as few as 33% of the participants reported that they touched their partner a lot and only 21% said that

they touched their children a lot (Field et al, 2020). But the departure gate observations of the current study occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that touch deprivation was occurring pre-COVID and apparently was related to the prevalent use of cell phones. COVID-19 may have simply exacerbated touch deprivation. It would be Interesting to conduct observations at departure gates during COVID-19 to determine whether there is even less touching during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic.

The preoccupation with cell phones could be considered analogous to the Americans predominantly reading at beaches, as in the cross-cultural study conducted at Hawaii beaches more than two decades ago (Martini, 1995). Recent videos of crowded COVID-19 beaches show friends gathered closely together laying on beach lounges with cell phones in their hands. While most of the airport departure gate observations took place at American airports, it would be interesting to have more observations at foreign airports to make cross cultural comparisons. Based on the previous studies comparing Paris and American playgrounds (Field, 1999) and McDonalds restaurants in Paris and Miami (Field, 1999), the French, for example, would be expected to engage in more social interaction and touching in airports than Americans.

Future studies might conduct observations on airplanes (as a follow-up to those at the departure gates), as already mentioned, but also at restaurants, pool sides and beaches. A major limitation of the current study was the observers' distance from the travelers, making it impossible to see precisely what type of activity was occurring on the cell phones. In addition, longer observations might have revealed more social interaction and touching behavior. A study that involved recorders that beeped individuals at random times could be conducted to determine the nature and duration of cell phone activity, that is, if participants were willing to honestly report their activity.

Replication studies are needed to further document these surprising findings that cell phone activity was the most prevalent and touching the least frequent behavior at airport departure gates. Of some concern is that the low level of touching within partners and families may contribute to more verbal and physical aggression, as was noted in the studies on preschool children on playgrounds (Field, 1999) and adolescents at restaurants (Field, 1999). Longitudinal studies of individuals may not be possible to determine the negative effects of low levels of social interaction and touching, but larger pictures of the negative effects of folks being isolated and experiencing touch deprivation have been seen in the data from the COVID-19 lockdown (Field et al, 2020). And, the negative effects of social media on depression and anxiety (Kim et al, 2018; Thomee et al, 2018; Visnjic et al, 2018; Yoon, 2019) and even suicide (Jun & Kim, 2017) are being seen in a growing literature, and CDC reports are documenting increasing rates of violence and homicide in the world.

References

[1] Field, T. (1999). Preschoolers in America Are Touched Less and Are More Aggressive Than Preschoolers in France. *Early Child Development and Care*, 151, 11-17.

[2] Field, T. (1999). American Adolescents Touch Each Other Less and Are More Aggressive Toward Their Peers as Compared With French Adolescents. *Adolescence*, 34, 753-758.

[3] Field, T. (2018). Internet Addiction in Adolescents: A Review. *Journal of Addictions and Therapies*, 1, 1-11.

[4] Field, T. (2019). Adolescent Internet Gaming Addiction: A Narrative Review. *Journal of Addiction and Adolescent Behavior,* 2, 1-10.DOI:10: 315 79/JARAB.2019/006.

[5] Field, T. (2020). Cell phone addiction in adolescents: A narrative review. *Journal of Addiction and Adolescent Behavior,* 3 (4), 12-22. DOI 10.3352/OAJAP.2020.03.00566.

[6] Field, T. (2020). Facebooking in adolescents: A narrative review. *Journal of Addiction and Adolescent Behavior, 3 (4),* 1-11 DOI 10.33552/ OAJAP.2020.03.600567.

[7] Field, T., Poling, S., Mines, S., Bendell, D. & Veazey, C. (2020). Touching and touch deprivation during a COVID-19 lockdown. *International Journal of Psychological Research and Reviews,* escipub/ijprr-2020-10-2015.

[8] Jun, H.J. & Kim, M.Y. What accounts for the relationship between internet use and suicidal

ideation of Korean older adults? A mediation analysis. *Journal of Geronatology. Series B. Psychology sciences and Social Sciences,* 2017v;72(5):846-855. Doi: 10.1093/geronb/gbw163.

[9] Kemp, S. (2020). Digital 2020 Global Overview Report

[10] Kim, Y.J., Jang, H.M., Lee, Y., Lee, D. & Kim, D.J. Effects of internet and smartphone addictions on depression and anxiety-based propensity score matching analysis. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health,* 2018 15(5):859. Doi:10.3390/ijerph15050859

[11] Martini, M. (1995). Parenting in Hawaii: Three cultural groups at the beach. *Infant and Child Development*, 4, 113-124.

[12] Thomee, S. Mobile phone use and mental health. A review of the research that takes a psychological perspective on exposure. *International Journal of Research and Public Health,* 2018 15(12):2692. Doi: 10.3390/ijerph15122692.

[13] Visnjic, A., Velickovic, V., Sokolovic, D., Stankovic, M., Mijatovic, K., Stojanovic, M. et al. Relationship between the manner of mobile phone use and depression, anxiety, and stress in university students. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health,* 2018 15(4):697. Doi: 10.3390/ijerph15040697.

[14] Yoon, S., Kleinman, M., Mertz, J. & Brannick, M. Is social network site usage related to depression? A meta-analysis of Facebook-depression relations. Journal of Affective Disorders, 2019; 248:65-72. Doi: 10.1016/j.jad.2019.01.026. Epub 2019 Jan 27.