

# Why We Tell Lies More on a Laptop Than on a Cellphone

New research suggests that we associate laptops with our professional lives, and cellphones with our personal lives

By Emily Holland

June 9, 2023 11:00 am ET



Laptops put us in a more businesslike frame of mind, making us more likely to be deceptive for personal gain, according to the authors of a new study. ILLUSTRATION: ANDRE DA LOBA

How we interact with others may change, depending on the technological device we are using.

So says a new study that found people are more likely to be deceptive for their own gain when performing tasks on a laptop rather than a cellphone. One explanation is that people typically associate laptops with their professional lives while associating cellphones with their personal lives.

“What we ended up tapping into is the association with the device—friends and family for the phone and work and a ‘get ahead at any cost’ mentality with the laptop,” says Terri Kurtzberg, professor of management and global business at Rutgers Business School in New Jersey, who conducted the research with Charles E. Naquin, associate professor of management at DePaul University’s Driehaus College of Business, and Mason Ameri, associate professor of professional practice at Rutgers Business School.

In the first study, 137 graduate students participated in a bargaining exercise where they were asked to use either a laptop or cellphone to email a randomly assigned recipient a one-time offer to split a fictitious pot of money. Those making the offers knew the pot of money was \$125; the recipients of the emails knew only that the pot was somewhere between \$5 and \$200. The people making offers then sent the following email: “The amount I’m offering to you is \$\_\_\_. The total pot size is \$\_\_\_.” If the recipient accepted the offer, both parties got paid.

The study found that the people using laptops to make their offers told their partners that the size of the pot was significantly smaller than those who composed their offers on a cellphone. That is, the laptop users lied more about the size of the pot in the hopes of keeping more of it for themselves.

## Professional vs. personal

The next two experiments aimed to identify the underlying mechanisms driving that behavior. One of the studies hypothesized that users associate cellphones with personal usage and laptops with work. To test that, participants were asked to categorize words as either “professional” or “personal.” Most categorized words such as profit, bottom line and task as professional and words such as social, chat and relationships as personal.

They were then asked to categorize those words by device: laptop or cellphone. A majority categorized the professional words with their laptops and the personal words with their cellphone.

Next, to test their theory that it isn’t the device itself that prompts deceptive behavior but rather the associations we tether to them, the researchers asked 174 graduate students to first think of a personal or professional outcome that turned out better than expected and to then write three words that best described their reaction to said outcome. They were then asked to complete the same bargaining exercise they performed in the first study either via laptop or cellphone.

Those who first thought of a personal outcome were likely to be less deceptive about the size of the money pot than those who first thought of a professional outcome. Furthermore, this priming exercise had more of an effect on the laptop users than cellphone users.

The overarching issue isn’t the device itself, the researchers said in the study, but the associations those devices carry because of the moments we use them.

## Driven to succeed

Of course, associations can and do change, which is why the takeaway from the research shouldn’t be to avoid using laptops to reduce deceptive behavior, Kurtzberg says. Rather, it has to do with the professional mind-set and the “get ahead at any cost” mentality that may come with it, and the subtlety of the signals that can put us in this mind-set.

Kurtzberg says the reason people might be more deceptive in their professional lives could be related to a general cultural understanding that when it comes to “business,” success matters more than anything else, so the ends justify the means.

With technology constantly evolving, Kurtzberg thinks the research begs the answers to other questions such as: Does using a tablet change our mind-set? What about using a keyboard versus a touch screen?

But in the meantime, “I think people need to understand that the idea that we are exactly the same, making the same decisions, regardless of the device in front of us, is incorrect,” she says.

Emily Holland is a writer in Chicago. She can be reached at [reports@wsj.com](mailto:reports@wsj.com).

Appeared in the June 12, 2023, print edition as ‘Why We Tell Lies More on a Laptop Than on a Cellphone’.