

‘Familiar strangers’ help make your day

Study shows people miss others they don’t know

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This Victoria Day, people you don’t even know might be missing you.

So suggests an Intel Research study that found “familiar strangers” — the individuals you regularly see but don’t speak to during your daily routine — contribute to an overall sense of place, comfort and belonging for city dwellers.

These strangers act like human wallpaper for urban environments, casually viewed, but not physically engaged by people who share the same space. Canadians required to work on the holiday may feel a bit lonely in the absence of fellow smokers, commuters or coffee-shop regulars who’d otherwise occupy their weekday haunts.

“The relationship we have with these familiar strangers is indeed a real relationship in which both parties agree to mutually ignore each other, without any implications of hostility,” write Eric Paulos and Elizabeth Goodman, the study’s lead authors.

“A good example is a person one sees on the subway every morning. If that person fails to appear, we notice.”

The study also reports that it’s not uncommon for participants to personalize their “relationships” by secretly giving strangers “names and/or concocting fictitious stories and backgrounds of their personal lives.”

In Edmonton, for example, this tendency has reached fever pitch regarding a man colloquially known as “Dancing Guy.” The air-guitar-loving, head-bobbing stranger has piqued the curiosity of about 1,100 passersby who have become members of an online networking group dedicated to debating the man’s identity, background and impetus to dance on public street corners.

“He’s like the neighbourhood controversy,” says Brendan Murray, a videographer and member of Facebook’s 178th Street Dancing Guy Fanclub, “but it’s so much better to not know (his true identity). If everybody knew who he was, it would totally kill the mystique.”

Intel’s Berkeley, Calif.-based study found 78 per cent of people would recognize at least one face in the crowd at a mutually frequented location during a specific time period. The average person detected three familiar visages in a group of 63.

Certain strangers’ faces were also more likely to be recalled than others, with 33 members of the crowd sample (52 per cent) being consistently recognized by at least one person.

These “socio-metric stars,” a term coined by psychologist Stanley Milgram in an earlier study, generally boasted strong visual cues — a wheelchair or perhaps a memorable hairdo — but also included “seemingly forgettable people” who were recognized strictly because of their constant presence in that location.

New York marketing consultant Peter Shankman has discovered one such socio-metric star in a physically striking stranger he sees during his daily run.

“Every morning in Central Park, I pass this power-walker — African American, six-foot-five, 250 pounds of pure muscle — and he’s always cheering people on: ‘You look great today, you keep it up!’ ” says Shankman, the blogger behind prdifferently.com.

“I don’t know who he is, but the days I don’t see him, I swear I have the crappiest runs.”