



The Social Power of a Smile: Casual Greetings and Everyday Trust in Crowded Urban Spaces

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Abstract

Urban life requires people to share streets, transit systems, markets, parks, and other public settings with large numbers of strangers. Although urban sociology has long examined the management of anonymity, less attention has been given to the smallest positive signals exchanged within it: a nod, smile, greeting, thank-you, or brief acknowledgment. This conceptual integrative review examines how such micro-interactions may contribute to everyday trust. Drawing on Goffman's interaction order and civil inattention, Granovetter's theory of weak ties, social capital theory, symbolic interactionism, and recent research on minimal social interaction, the paper synthesizes evidence from sociology, social psychology, urban studies, and public-space research. The review argues that casual greetings should not be treated as miniature friendships or as direct causes of generalized social trust. Instead, they operate as low-cost relational signals that acknowledge personhood, reduce uncertainty, communicate non-hostility, and create momentary experiences of belonging and safe passage. Repeated across familiar public settings, these signals may accumulate into interpersonal familiarity, perceived predictability, and bridging social capital. The paper also identifies important boundary conditions: cultural norms, gender and safety concerns, status differences, neighborhood design, perceived threat, and digital distraction can all alter whether a greeting is welcomed or avoided. The article proposes a micro-to-macro model in which *greeting* → *recognition* → *affective safety/belonging* → *repeated familiarity* → *everyday trust*. It concludes with a research agenda for observational, survey, experimental, and cross-cultural testing.

Keywords: Casual greetings; stranger interaction; urban trust; public space; civil inattention; social capital; everyday urbanism

INTRODUCTION

Consider a crowded morning street. People move quickly between buses, shops, offices, schools, and sidewalks. Most pass without speaking. A stranger briefly makes eye contact, smiles, and says "good morning." The exchange lasts perhaps two seconds. Nothing material changes: no name is exchanged, no friendship begins, and neither person expects future contact. Yet the encounter can subtly change the meaning of the shared space. The other person is no longer merely an obstacle in a stream of bodies. For a moment, each has been recognized by the other as a person.

This paper begins from the proposition that these apparently trivial moments deserve sociological attention. Urban life depends on the management of relations among people who are frequently unknown to one another. Goffman (1963) described civil inattention as the routine way strangers acknowledge one another while preserving privacy and avoiding unwanted engagement. The practice allows people to occupy the same public environment without demanding intimacy. Contemporary work continues to demonstrate that civil inattention is an important part of the interaction order, including through empirical analyses of gaze and its violations (Horgan, 2020; Pusztai & Kádár, 2023). At the same time, public life is not composed only of indifference. Occasionally, people cross the boundary from neutral acknowledgment into a smile, nod, greeting, brief thank-you, or small act of courtesy.

The distinction matters because a growing body of psychological research indicates that minimal interactions with weak ties and strangers are associated with positive affect, belonging, life satisfaction, and social connection. Sandstrom and Dunn (2014a, 2014b), for example, found that interactions with weak ties were associated with greater happiness and belonging. In a related experiment, brief social interaction with a barista produced more positive affect than highly efficient, impersonal transactions, with belonging providing a plausible mechanism (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014a). Günaydın et al. (2021) extended this line of work by showing, across correlational and experimental studies, that greeting, thanking, or expressing good wishes to strangers could contribute to subjective well-being. More recently, Aşçıgil et al. (2025) found that conversations with strangers and weak ties, as well as simply greeting and thanking weak ties, predicted greater life satisfaction in a nationally representative Turkish sample and a large English-speaking sample. Hermanowicz (2026) has further theorized “evanescent interaction,” arguing that momentary positive exchanges among people with absent or marginal ties can affirm personhood and social integration.

These findings create an important bridge to urban sociology. If minimal encounters affect belonging and well-being, could they also matter for the more specifically sociological problem of everyday trust? Trust is usually examined at larger scales: generalized trust in other people, neighborhood trust, institutional confidence, or social capital. Such measures are important, but they can obscure the interactional processes through which people acquire information about whether others are predictable, respectful, approachable, or potentially threatening. A greeting is not equivalent to generalized trust. Nevertheless, it can function as a small piece of evidence from which people infer something about the social environment.

The argument of this paper is therefore deliberately modest. Casual greetings should be understood neither as a cure for urban alienation nor as a sufficient condition for social trust. Rather, they are proposed as micro-level signals within a broader ecology of urban interaction. When reciprocal and contextually appropriate, greetings can communicate recognition without demanding intimacy, reduce interpersonal uncertainty, and create momentary feelings of safety and belonging. When such encounters recur in shared places, they may contribute to familiarity and weak relational ties. Through repetition and accumulation, these micro-processes can plausibly support elements of bridging social capital and everyday trust.

This argument also modifies a common assumption about dense cities. Density is often associated with anonymity, stress, and social distance. Yet density also creates opportunities for repeated co-presence. Jane Jacobs (1961) famously emphasized the importance of sidewalk life and the “web of public respect and trust” that can emerge from repeated casual contacts. Empirical urban research likewise suggests that walkable, mixed-use environments are associated with greater social capital, neighbor knowledge, and trust (Leyden, 2003), although subsequent research shows that built form interacts with perceptions of safety, incivility, and neighborhood context (Wood et al., 2010, 2012; Mouratidis, 2021). High density therefore does not automatically produce either social fragmentation or cohesion. It creates an interactional field in which both outcomes are possible.

The contemporary urban environment adds another complication. Smartphones, headphones, and digital communication provide powerful “involvement shields” that can help individuals manage public attention, but they may also reduce opportunities for spontaneous face-to-face acknowledgment. Goffman’s original framework was developed before smartphones, yet his insight remains useful: people require mechanisms for controlling attention in public. The question is not whether digital devices are inherently harmful, but whether their increasing use changes the balance between privacy-preserving inattention and low-cost interpersonal recognition (Hossen et al., 2026).

The paper addresses four questions:

1. How can casual greetings among strangers be conceptualized within Goffman’s interaction order?
2. Through what mechanisms might greetings contribute to everyday trust and belonging?
3. Under what social, spatial, and cultural conditions are such interactions more or less likely to occur?
4. What research design could test the proposed micro-to-macro relationship?

The paper makes three contributions. First, it connects Goffman’s civil inattention to contemporary research on minimal social interactions rather than treating inattention and positive engagement as unrelated phenomena. Second, it specifies a mechanism linking micro-interaction to trust without claiming that a greeting directly causes generalized trust. Third, it develops a research agenda for studying everyday urban trust through observable, low-intensity interaction rather than relying exclusively on formal measures of social capital.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nature of Stranger Interactions in Public Space

Urban public space is a distinctive sociological setting because co-presence is unavoidable while intimacy is optional. Goffman’s (1959, 1963, 1967) analysis of behavior in public places remains foundational because it identifies the practical problem that strangers must solve: how to acknowledge one another without converting every encounter into a focused interaction. Schutz (1944) early on examined the social world of the stranger, noting the disorientation of navigating unshared assumptions, while Goffman identified civil inattention as the conventional behavioral solution. A person briefly registers another person’s presence and then withdraws sustained attention. The practice communicates that the other is entitled to occupy the space without becoming the object of scrutiny.

Recent scholarship reinforces the idea that civil inattention is not simply indifference. Horgan (2020) describes it as part of an urban interaction ritual through which strangers maintain a workable public order. Research by Pusztai and Kádár (2023) operationalizes civil inattention through observed gaze behavior and shows that departures from ordinary patterns of public looking can vary sharply according to social appearance. This finding is important for the present argument because it demonstrates that even apparently tiny nonverbal acts are socially structured.

Civil inattention therefore provides the baseline against which greetings become meaningful. A greeting is not simply “more interaction.” It is a controlled departure from neutral anonymity. It selectively converts a stranger from an undifferentiated co-present body into a recognized social person. Hermanowicz (2026) similarly distinguishes ordinary pleasantness from a more consequential “evanescent interaction,” in which a brief, reciprocal exchange produces a spark of mutual recognition. His examples include eye contact, smiles, nods, greetings, and small acts of courtesy.

This distinction helps avoid a conceptual mistake. The absence of greeting should not automatically be interpreted as social failure. Civil inattention protects privacy and can be especially valuable in crowded or potentially unsafe environments. A healthy urban interaction order requires both the right to be left alone and the possibility of low-intensity recognition. The relevant question is therefore not whether people should greet strangers more often, but when a greeting functions as an appropriate and mutually beneficial extension of ordinary civility.

Micro-Interactions, Weak Ties, and Social Trust

Granovetter's (1973) theory of the strength of weak ties provides a second conceptual foundation. Weak ties connect people who are not emotionally close but who can nonetheless transmit information and connect otherwise separate social circles. Although a two-second greeting is weaker than the relationships normally studied as weak ties, repeated greetings can create what Granovetter called a "nodding" relationship: a form of marginal familiarity in which people recognize one another without becoming close.

Sandstrom and Dunn (2014a, 2014b) demonstrated that interactions with weak ties contribute to subjective well-being and belonging. Their work is especially relevant because it shifts attention away from the assumption that only intimate relationships matter psychologically, echoing Baumeister and Leary's (1995) fundamental thesis on the human need to belong. Sandstrom and Dunn's (2014a) research on brief interaction with service providers likewise found that social engagement could improve positive affect and that belonging appeared to be one mechanism.

Günaydin et al. (2021) provide more direct evidence for the relevance of greetings. Their first study involved 856 commuters and found that commuters who reported more minimal positive interactions with shuttle drivers also reported greater subjective well-being. Their second study, involving 265 commuters, experimentally compared greeting, thanking, or expressing good wishes with not speaking to drivers and found greater momentary positive affect among those who interacted. Aşçigil et al. (2025) broadened the evidence: across a nationally representative Turkish sample of 3,266 and a large English-speaking sample of 60,141, greeting and thanking weak ties were associated with greater life satisfaction.

The well-being evidence does not establish an effect on trust, but it identifies a plausible pathway. Positive micro-interactions can create belonging and positive affect. Those states may alter how individuals perceive the social environment, including the extent to which other people seem approachable and non-threatening. Trust may therefore emerge indirectly through repeated experiences of recognition and predictability.

The distinction between trust and belonging is crucial. Trust concerns expectations about another person's or group's future behavior; belonging concerns one's perceived inclusion in a social environment. A greeting may communicate belonging more directly than trust. Hermanowicz (2026) argues that momentary positive exchanges affirm personhood and communicate that one belongs in a shared social world. The present paper therefore proposes that belonging and perceived safety are proximal mechanisms, while everyday trust is a more distal outcome.

Changing Urban Social Life

The contemporary city differs from the settings in which classic theories of public interaction were formulated. Digital devices have become ordinary companions in transit, streets, cafés, and waiting spaces—what Oldenburg (1989) famously conceptualized as vital "third places" necessary for public life. Goffman's concept of an involvement shield remains useful because smartphones can absorb attention

and provide socially legitimate reasons not to engage. Networked technology can also protect privacy and reduce unwanted encounters. The problem is therefore not “technology versus community,” but a changing allocation of attention.

Research on stranger interaction suggests that people often underestimate the benefits of speaking with unfamiliar others. Sandstrom and Dunn (2014b) found positive consequences of brief social interaction, while later work by Kardas et al. (2022) showed that people systematically miscalibrate how awkward and connected conversations with strangers will feel. Li et al. (2025) similarly found that explicit signals of willingness to interact increased the frequency, length, and depth of stranger interactions without forcing interaction on people who preferred solitude (Mohd Pauzi & Shahadat Hossen, 2025).

These findings suggest that urban interaction is partly governed by expectations. People may avoid strangers because they anticipate awkwardness, rejection, or intrusion even when actual encounters are more positive. In this sense, the smallest greeting can be understood as an “availability signal”: it tells the other person that a limited amount of social contact is acceptable. Importantly, recent intervention research emphasizes consent and optionality; facilitating interaction should not mean imposing interaction.

Urban design also shapes opportunities for such encounters. Leyden (2003) found that residents of walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods reported greater social capital, including knowing neighbors, social engagement, and trust. A large Seoul study similarly found positive associations between perceived neighborhood built-environment qualities and social trust and networks (Kang & Kim, 2018). A scoping review of walkability and social capital concludes that compact, mixed neighborhoods and spaces for coexistence can facilitate social interaction (Pozoukidou & Angelidou, 2021). Recent research in high-density housing further suggests that even low-intensity appropriation of common spaces can facilitate neighbor interaction, trust, and belonging (Gao et al., 2025).

The implication is that greetings cannot be separated from spatial opportunity. People cannot exchange casual acknowledgments if urban design keeps them isolated in cars, behind barriers, or in spaces where lingering is discouraged. Conversely, density alone is insufficient. Crowded environments may increase co-presence while simultaneously increasing perceived threat or sensory overload. The relevant urban condition is therefore not simply density but repeated, navigable, relatively safe co-presence.

Cross-Cultural and Contextual Variations

Greeting practices are culturally patterned. What counts as ordinary courtesy in one setting can be interpreted as intrusive, overly familiar, or even unsafe in another. Erbaugh's (2008) analysis of changing Chinese courtesy practices shows that the use of greetings toward strangers is historically and culturally variable. Her account illustrates that “hello” is not a universal social technology with a fixed meaning; its social significance depends on broader norms concerning hierarchy, reciprocity, status, and stranger relations.

Contemporary psychological research also cautions against treating findings from one cultural context as universal. Aşçigil et al. (2025) deliberately addressed this issue by examining minimal social interaction in Turkey, a non-WEIRD context, and comparing it with a large English-speaking sample. The association between minimal interaction and life satisfaction was observed across both samples, but this does not mean that the same behaviors have identical meanings everywhere.

Trust itself varies across societies and is shaped by cultural, institutional, and socioeconomic conditions. Cross-national research shows that generalized trust is associated with multiple contextual factors, including inequality, polarization, institutions, and cultural orientations (Bjørnskov, 2007). Recent cross-cultural evidence also indicates that predictors of generalized trust differ across societies such as Canada, China, Taiwan, and the United States (Kwantes et al., 2025). These findings reinforce the need to conceptualize greetings as context-sensitive signals rather than universal causes of trust.

Gender and perceived safety are especially important. A greeting from a stranger can be experienced as warm recognition by one person and unwanted attention by another. The same behavioral act may have different consequences depending on age, gender, social status, prior experiences, neighborhood reputation, and time of day. A credible theory of casual greetings must therefore include the possibility of non-response and avoidance as rational forms of self-protection.

RESEARCH GAP

The literature reveals three partially disconnected bodies of research. First, Goffmanian sociology explains how strangers maintain order and privacy through civil inattention. Second, social psychology demonstrates that minimal interactions with weak ties and strangers can improve belonging, affect, and life satisfaction. Third, urban studies show that neighborhood design and public-space conditions shape social capital and trust.

What is missing is a clear micro-to-macro account connecting these bodies. Existing studies rarely treat the casual greeting itself as a potential mechanism linking the interaction order to everyday trust. They also tend to measure outcomes such as happiness or belonging rather than perceived interpersonal reliability, safety, or trust in the shared public environment. The present paper addresses this gap by theorizing casual greetings as low-intensity relational signals that can accumulate under conditions of repeated co-presence.

The contribution is not the claim that greetings create generalized trust in a simple causal sequence. Rather, the paper proposes that greetings can contribute to a “trust ecology”: an environment in which people receive repeated cues that others recognize them, respect their personhood, behave predictably, and can share space without hostility.

Theoretical Framework

Goffman’s Interaction Order and Civil Inattention

Goffman’s interaction order provides the primary theoretical framework. The interaction order refers to the patterned organization of conduct that emerges when people are co-present (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967). In public settings, people continually read cues, manage impressions, protect face, and regulate attention. Civil inattention is central because it solves the problem of unavoidable proximity without requiring conversation.

The present paper extends rather than rejects this framework. Casual greetings are conceptualized as selective intensifications of recognition within an interaction order otherwise dominated by civil inattention. They are “small deviations” from anonymity that remain bounded. A greeting does not necessarily invite further engagement; it can acknowledge another person while preserving the option to continue walking.

This bounded quality is important. A greeting can be thought of as a low-cost ritual—resonating with Collins' (2004) interaction ritual chains and McCaffree and Shults' (2022) model of distributive effervescence—with three elements: recognition, reciprocity, and closure. Recognition signals “I see you.” Reciprocity confirms mutual acknowledgment. Closure returns both parties to their previous activities. The ritual is therefore socially efficient: it creates a moment of connection without imposing the obligations of a sustained relationship.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory supplies the meso-level bridge. Coleman (1988) conceptualized social capital through obligations, information channels, and social norms, emphasizing how social structure can facilitate action. Putnam (2000) later distinguished bonding and bridging forms of social capital. Bridging capital is especially relevant here because casual greetings can occur across social categories without requiring a shared identity or strong relationship.

A greeting is not itself a stock of social capital. Instead, it can be treated as an interactional input into conditions from which social capital develops. Repeated recognition can create familiarity; familiarity can increase predictability; predictability can lower uncertainty; and lower uncertainty can make future cooperation or assistance more plausible. This is consistent with the broader urban literature linking repeated casual contacts and walkable environments to social capital (Jacobs, 1961; Leyden, 2003).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism explains why a small gesture can have consequences beyond its duration. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, social reality is continuously produced through meanings attached to gestures and responses. A smile, nod, or greeting is therefore not merely movement or sound. It is a symbolic act interpreted by the recipient (Hossen&Pauzi, 2025).

The meaning of a greeting depends on the interactional frame. A “good morning” from a neighbor-like familiar stranger may communicate continuity; from a service worker it may communicate respectful service; from a complete stranger it may communicate openness; in a threatening context it may be interpreted as unwanted attention. The same observable act can thus produce different outcomes because the meaning is relational and situated.

Contact Theory in Micro Form

Contact theory offers a complementary perspective. Classic contact theory focuses on conditions under which interaction between social groups can reduce prejudice. Recent experimental evidence shows that even brief contact interventions and bilateral discussions can increase trust toward interaction partners, although effects may not generalize to broader group attitudes (Li et al., 2026). This distinction is useful: positive contact may first change perceptions of the encountered individual rather than transforming generalized attitudes.

Casual greetings are an even lower-intensity form of contact. They are unlikely to reduce deep prejudice by themselves, but repeated low-stakes recognition may create opportunities for more substantive contact. The appropriate theoretical claim is therefore cumulative and conditional: greetings may help establish a minimally positive interactional climate in which richer forms of contact become more possible.

An Integrated Micro-to-Macro Model

Table 1: The Micro-to-Macro Structural Model of Casual Greetings and Everyday Urban Trust

MODERATING BOUNDARY FACTORS <i>Gender & Safety Built Environment & Walkability Cultural Norms Digital Shields</i>		
Stage	Process / Phase	Key Indicators & Dynamics
Stage 1	Greeting Signal	Eye contact, smile, nod, verbal greeting
Stage 2	Recognition	Personhood affirmed, non-hostility demonstrated
Stage 3	Proximal Response	Belonging & affective safety, reduced uncertainty
Stage 4	Relational Accumulation	Repeated familiarity, development of marginal/weak ties
Stage 5	Everyday Urban Trust	Predictability in shared public space, bridging social capital & civic safety
Recursive Feedback Loop: <i>Everyday urban trust reinforces the likelihood and safety of future greeting signals (Stage 5 → Stage 1).</i>		

The model is recursive rather than linear. Trust can also make greetings more likely. People who already perceive a neighborhood as safe may be more willing to greet strangers, creating a selection effect. Consequently, empirical studies must distinguish whether greetings produce trust, trust produces greetings, or both are jointly produced by a third factor such as neighborhood safety or social norms.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Search Strategy

This paper adopts a conceptual integrative review rather than an empirical study. The choice is deliberate. No original observational, interview, or survey dataset is available for the present manuscript, and fabricating empirical observations would undermine the paper's validity. The objective is therefore to synthesize established theoretical and empirical findings and derive a testable framework.

To ensure procedural transparency, literature retrieval was conducted across four primary index databases (Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and PsycINFO) for records published between 1963 and 2026. The conceptual review focused on five distinct evidence families, utilizing targeted Boolean search strings outlined in Table 1.

Table 2: Database Search Strategy and Evidence Family Mapping

Evidence Family Focus	Primary Search Keywords & Boolean Strings	Core Theoretical / Empirical Sources
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Evidence Family Focus	Primary Search Keywords & Boolean Strings	Core Theoretical / Empirical Sources
1. Public Interaction & Inattention	("civil inattention" OR "interaction order" OR "evanescent interaction" OR "strangeness") AND ("public space" OR "urban")	Goffman (1959, 1963); Horgan (2020); Pusztai & Kádár (2023); Hermanowicz (2026)
2. Weak Ties & Minimal Contact	("minimal social interaction" OR "weak ties" OR "greeting" OR "nodding relationship") AND ("belonging" OR "well-being")	Granovetter (1973); Sandstrom & Dunn (2014a, 2014b); Günaydın et al. (2021); Aşçıgil et al. (2025)
3. Social Capital & Trust	("social capital" OR "everyday trust" OR "bridging trust" OR "generalized trust") AND ("urban neighborhood")	Coleman (1988); Putnam (2000); Bjørnskov (2007); Kwantes et al. (2025)
4. Urban Design & Built Form	("walkability" OR "built environment" OR "sidewalk life" OR "third places") AND ("social trust" OR "cohesion")	Jacobs (1961); Oldenburg (1989); Leyden (2003); Mouratidis (2021); Gao et al. (2025)
5. Digital Mediation & Signals	("involvement shield" OR "smartphone" OR "stranger conversation" OR "availability signal") AND ("public interaction")	Kardas et al. (2022); Li et al. (2025); Li et al. (2026)

Analytical Procedure

The literature was synthesized thematically rather than statistically. First, concepts were mapped according to level of analysis: micro-interaction, individual psychological response, relational accumulation, neighborhood context, and macro-level trust. Second, evidence was compared for convergent and divergent findings. Third, the mechanisms most consistently supported across disciplines were identified. Finally, the integrated model was evaluated for alternative explanations and boundary conditions.

The review deliberately avoids claiming that it is a fully systematic review or meta-analysis. A publishable systematic review would require a preregistered protocol, explicit database coverage, screening counts, and formal risk-of-bias assessment. The present article is better described as a structured conceptual synthesis.

Ethical Considerations

Because this paper uses published literature and contains no identifiable human-subject data, no new human-participant ethics approval is required. Any future empirical study based on observation or interviews should obtain institutional ethics approval where required, minimize collection of identifiable information, avoid covert recording unless explicitly justified and ethically approved, and pay particular attention to privacy in public spaces.

Research Findings

Casual Greetings Function as Recognition Signals

Across the reviewed literature, the most defensible interpretation of greetings is as signals of recognition rather than direct trust transactions. Goffman's civil inattention shows that public interaction ordinarily involves acknowledgment without engagement. The greeting selectively intensifies this acknowledgment. Hermanowicz (2026) provides the strongest recent conceptual formulation, arguing that momentary positive exchanges can affirm personhood and communicate belonging.

This mechanism is consistent with psychological findings. Sandstrom and Dunn (2014a, 2014b) show that weak-tie interaction is associated with belonging and well-being, while Günaydın et al. (2021) demonstrate that greeting and thanking strangers can improve momentary positive affect. Aşçıgil et al. (2025) further show an association between minimal interaction and life satisfaction across large samples. The convergence suggests that even very brief social signals can be psychologically meaningful.

The Most Plausible Pathway to Trust Is Indirect

The evidence does not justify the claim that a single greeting causes generalized trust. A more plausible pathway is indirect. Greetings communicate recognition and civility; recognition can support belonging and positive affect; repeated recognition can produce familiarity; familiarity can increase perceived predictability; and predictability can make everyday trust more plausible.

This distinction resolves an apparent tension between Goffman and social-capital theory. Civil inattention protects privacy, while greetings create selective moments of connection. Both can coexist. The urban interaction order does not require continuous sociability. It requires predictable rules governing when attention is offered, when it is withheld, and how brief engagements are terminated.

Repetition Is the Critical Urban Mechanism

The trust argument becomes strongest when encounters are repeated. A complete stranger encountered once on a busy street provides little information about future behavior. A person encountered repeatedly at the same bus stop, café, elevator, market, school gate, or neighborhood path is different. Repeated greetings can transform a complete stranger into a familiar stranger and eventually a marginal tie.

This proposition fits Granovetter's (1973) account of weak ties and Jacobs's (1961) analysis of sidewalk life. It also aligns with urban-design evidence showing that walkable, mixed-use environments are associated with more social capital (Leyden, 2003). The crucial mechanism is not simply density but recurring visibility and low-cost interaction.

Public-Space Design Conditions the Effect

The synthesis suggests that greetings flourish where public space supports comfortable co-presence. Walkability, mixed land use, parks, local shops, transit waiting areas, and semi-public gathering spaces create repeated opportunities for recognition. Conversely, environments dominated by high-speed traffic, physical barriers, isolation, or perceived danger may suppress interaction.

The evidence also cautions against simplistic design prescriptions. Wood et al. (2012) found that built-form characteristics do not operate independently of perceived incivilities and neighborhood experiences. Gao et al. (2025) similarly show that high-density environments can support low-intensity

interaction when residents can appropriate and use shared space. Thus, the relevant design principle is not “more density” but “more opportunities for safe, voluntary, repeated co-presence.”

Digital Attention Creates a New Boundary Condition

Smartphones and headphones can reduce the probability that strangers will exchange the visual and auditory cues needed for a greeting. Yet they can also protect people from unwanted interaction. The appropriate interpretation is therefore ambivalent. Digital devices may weaken some forms of spontaneous recognition while strengthening privacy and personal control.

The recent stranger-engagement literature suggests that optionality matters. Li et al. (2025) found that explicit signals of willingness to engage increased stranger interaction without forcing those who preferred solitude to participate. This supports a design principle of “selective openness”: urban environments should make low-intensity interaction easy without making social engagement compulsory.

Cultural and Safety Contexts Moderate the Meaning

Greeting behavior is highly context-dependent. Gender, age, status, cultural norms, time of day, neighborhood reputation, and perceived threat can change the meaning of a greeting. Erbaugh (2008) demonstrates that the social meaning of greeting strangers can change across historical and cultural contexts. Cross-cultural research on generalized trust likewise shows substantial contextual variation (Bjørnskov, 2007; Kwantes et al., 2025).

The implication is that “more greetings” is not a universally valid policy objective. The relevant outcome is appropriate recognition. In some environments, a nod or brief smile may be safer and more culturally appropriate than verbal engagement. In others, a verbal greeting may be the norm. The theory therefore predicts that the trust effect should be strongest when the signal is perceived as voluntary, reciprocal, respectful, and non-threatening.

DISCUSSION

The first research question asked how casual greetings fit within Goffman’s interaction order. The answer is that greetings represent bounded departures from civil inattention. They retain the privacy-preserving structure of public interaction while adding a small amount of recognition.

The second question concerned mechanisms. The strongest mechanism is not direct trust transfer but recognition → belonging/safety → familiarity/predictability → everyday trust. This mechanism is supported by converging findings on weak ties, minimal social interaction, belonging, and urban social capital.

The third question concerned conditions. Greetings are more likely to matter where people repeatedly encounter one another, where public space is navigable and reasonably safe, where social norms permit low-intensity interaction, and where participants can control the depth of engagement. They are less likely to produce positive outcomes where contact is coercive, threatening, stigmatized, or culturally inappropriate.

The fourth question concerned research design. The framework is sufficiently specific to generate observable hypotheses and can therefore be tested through mixed-method urban field research.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

The principal theoretical contribution is to connect three levels of analysis that are often separated. Goffman explains the interactional regulation of strangers; Granovetter and social-capital theorists explain the structural significance of weak connections; social psychology demonstrates the affective consequences of minimal interaction. The proposed model treats casual greetings as a mechanism operating between these levels.

The paper also proposes a useful distinction between “interaction quantity” and “interaction quality.” A crowded city can contain enormous amounts of co-presence but little recognition. Conversely, a lower-volume environment can contain repeated, meaningful micro-signals. The social consequences of urban density therefore depend partly on the interactional quality of co-presence.

Critical Confounders: Reverse Causality, Selection Bias, and Gentrification

To ensure theoretical rigor, two major critical confounders must be explicitly addressed:

Reverse Causality & Trait Selection Bias: Extraversion, low social anxiety, and baseline interpersonal trust strongly select individuals into initiating greetings with strangers. A person who feels safe and trusts their neighborhood is far more likely to offer a casual greeting. Thus, cross-sectional observations risk mistaking pre-existing individual traits for a causal effect of the greeting itself. Empirical studies must control for baseline personality traits and neighborhood safety perceptions.

In-Group Gentrification & Exclusionary Civility: Greetings are not inherently democratic. In rapidly changing or gentrifying neighborhoods, greeting norms can function as exclusionary mechanisms or signals of in-group solidarity among new, affluent residents while alienating long-standing lower-income or minority populations. Micro-civility can reinforce informal social control and boundary-making rather than foster universal civic trust.

Practical Implications

Urban policy should not attempt to manufacture friendliness. Instead, planners and community organizations can create conditions under which voluntary low-intensity interaction is possible. Examples include seating that permits face-to-face orientation, walkable neighborhood streets, small public gathering spaces, community markets, well-designed transit waiting areas, and neighborhood programs that encourage repeated rather than one-off encounters.

At the individual level, the findings suggest that a small greeting can be socially consequential without requiring a major investment of time. However, the ethical principle should be reciprocity and respect for boundaries. A person who does not respond is not necessarily unfriendly; non-response may represent a legitimate exercise of privacy or safety management (Hossen et al., 2026).

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the present paper is conceptual and does not establish causality between greetings and trust. Second, much of the direct evidence on minimal interaction concerns well-being rather than trust. Third, the literature is still disproportionately concentrated in Western or otherwise specific cultural settings, although newer work in Turkey and Japan broadens the evidence base. Fourth, selection effects are likely: people who already feel safe and socially connected may be more willing to greet others. Fifth, gender, status, ethnicity, disability, and prior experiences of harassment may fundamentally alter how a greeting is perceived.

These limitations should be treated as directions for empirical research rather than reasons to dismiss the phenomenon. The proposed model is valuable precisely because it generates falsifiable predictions.

Research Propositions and Future Empirical Agenda

Proposition 1: Reciprocal casual greetings among strangers will be positively associated with momentary perceived social safety and belonging, net of baseline sociability.

Proposition 2: Repeated greeting exchanges in the same public setting will be more strongly associated with interpersonal trust than one-time greetings.

Proposition 3: The relationship between greeting frequency and everyday trust will be mediated by perceived recognition, familiarity, and predictability.

Proposition 4: The positive association between greetings and trust will be stronger in public spaces characterized by repeated co-presence, walkability, and perceived safety.

Proposition 5: Smartphone or headphone use will reduce opportunities for greeting, but the effect will depend on whether device use is interpreted as legitimate privacy management.

Proposition 6: Cultural norms and perceived safety will moderate the association between greeting and trust; the same greeting behavior will not have equivalent meanings across social contexts.

Proposition 7: Greeting effects will be strongest for marginal or familiar strangers and weaker for completely anonymous encounters unless the interaction is unusually positive or repeated.

Proposition 8: The relationship between greetings and generalized trust will be substantially weaker than the relationship between greetings and local, everyday trust.

Recommended Empirical Design

A strong follow-up study should use a mixed-method design in one or more dense cities. Phase 1 could involve structured observation across transit stations, markets, parks, sidewalks, cafés, and neighborhood streets. Observers would code greeting opportunities, greeting initiation, reciprocity, type of signal, duration, public-space characteristics, apparent familiarity, device use, and contextual features such as crowding and time of day.

Phase 2 could use a short intercept or online survey with urban residents. Measures should include frequency of greeting strangers, perceived neighborhood safety, local interpersonal trust, sense of belonging, familiarity with other users of public space, loneliness, and device use. A multilevel model could account for respondents nested within neighborhoods or public-space types.

Phase 3 could use a field experiment with ethical safeguards. Participants could be randomly assigned to a “minimal recognition” instruction—such as making brief eye contact and offering a contextually appropriate greeting—or a neutral condition, while avoiding any requirement to approach unwilling strangers. Immediate outcomes could include perceived belonging, positive affect, and perceived social safety. Longer-term trust should be measured only if repeated exposure is feasible.

Qualitative interviews would complement these data by asking participants what greetings mean to them, when they avoid them, how gender and safety shape their decisions, and whether repeated

greetings transform strangers into familiar faces. This design would directly test the paper's central mechanism rather than relying on generalized trust alone.

CONCLUSION

In crowded cities, social order is built from countless interactions too small to attract formal attention. A glance, nod, smile, greeting, thank-you, or brief acknowledgment may last only seconds, but these acts help determine whether public space feels anonymous, hostile, neutral, or quietly shared.

The central argument of this paper is not that greetings create trust by themselves. Rather, greetings are small relational signals embedded in the interaction order of urban life. They can recognize personhood without demanding intimacy, create momentary belonging without establishing friendship, and provide low-cost evidence that strangers can share space respectfully. When repeated in safe and walkable environments, these signals may accumulate into familiarity and predictability, thereby contributing to everyday forms of trust and bridging social capital.

This perspective reframes urban anonymity. Anonymity is not necessarily the opposite of community. Cities require the ability to remain strangers while still treating one another as persons. The most socially productive urban environment may therefore be neither intensely communal nor completely anonymous, but one in which people can move freely between privacy and recognition.

A borrowed smile cannot solve urban alienation. But thousands of small, voluntary acknowledgments may help make a crowded city feel less like a collection of isolated bodies and more like a shared social world.

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