The Phubbing Phenomenon in Adolescents: Uncovering the Impact of Technology on Social Relationship Quality

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Abstract:

Phubbing is a social behaviour where an individual prioritizes smartphone usage over engaging with those around them. This study seeks to explore the underlying causes, manifestations, and consequences of phubbing behaviour among adolescents and to understand how this behaviour affects the quality of their social relationships. Adopting a qualitative approach through case study methodology, this research focuses on three adolescents who are habitual practitioners of phubbing. The findings of this study reveal that smartphone dependence, fear of missing out (F.O.M.O.), and low self-control are the primary factors influencing this behaviour. The repercussions of phubbing include the weakening of social relationships and an increase in feelings of loneliness and discomfort during social interactions. This research provides valuable insights into how technological advancements impact adolescent social behaviour and underscores the crucial role of educators and parents in promoting healthier social interactions. By identifying the factors contributing to phubbing and its effects on social relationships, this study aids in developing strategies to help adolescents adapt to technology in a more balanced way while maintaining the quality of their interpersonal connections. The study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing phubbing and encourages more meaningful and supportive social interactions in the digital age. This expanded understanding of phubbing's impact highlights the importance of fostering better communication habits and supportive environments for adolescents navigating modern technology. Research shows that phubbing perpetrators have the defence that their behaviour is not the only one, that in this era, almost everyone does the same thing as they do, and their behaviour is inevitable. So, they tend to repeat the same cycle. Thus, phubbing behaviour is a cause-and-effect behaviour that is also influenced by an individual's internal and external factors.

Keywords: Phubbing, Adolescents, Smartphone Dependency, Social Interaction, Social Relationship Quality

1. Introduction
1.1 Background

In the digital age, the rapid advancement of technology has profoundly influenced various aspects of life, including social interaction. One significant phenomenon emerging from this technological progress is "phubbing," a term derived from the combination of "phone" and "snubbing," which refers to the act of ignoring someone in favour of a mobile phone. This behaviour has become increasingly prevalent,

particularly among adolescents, who are among the most active users of smartphones.

Phubbing can significantly impact social relationships, especially during adolescence, a critical period for developing interpersonal skills and forming social bonds. It has been shown that peer behaviours might have a significant social influence on early adolescents, and early adolescents may be more likely to engage in excessive smartphone use when they have high deviant peer affiliation (Yang et al., 2022). Furthermore, Rapee et al. (2022) showed that early adolescents with few friends had higher interpersonal sensitivity, creating distress that might lead them to compensate by gaining acceptance in the virtual world on their smartphone or the internet. The excessive use of smartphones at the expense of face-to-face communication can lead to feelings of neglect and rejection among peers, potentially harming the quality of relationships and contributing to social isolation. As such, phubbing is not merely a trivial or isolated behaviour but a phenomenon that warrants serious attention.

The increasing prevalence of phubbing has sparked concerns among psychologists, educators, and parents, as it may negatively affect adolescents' social development and mental health. However, despite its growing significance, research on phubbing remains limited, particularly in the Indonesian context. There is a need for a deeper understanding of this behaviour, its underlying causes, and its impact on social relationships, especially among adolescents.

In summary, phubbing causes a severe decrease in the quality of relationships with the environment and family (Odaci et al., 2024). Despite growing research on this topic, more is needed to understand phubbing dynamics. Given this context, this study seeks to explore phubbing behaviour among adolescents in Indonesia. It aims to understand the factors contributing to this behaviour, the extent of its impact on social relationships, and the possible implications for adolescents' psychological well-being.

1.2 Problem Statement:

Based on the background above, the following research questions are formulated:

1. What are the factors contributing to phubbing behaviour among adolescents?
2. How does phubbing behaviour impact the quality of adolescents' social relationships?
3. What are the implications of phubbing behaviour for adolescents' psychological well-being?

1.3 Research Objectives:

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the factors contributing to phubbing behaviour among adolescents.
2. To analyze the impact of phubbing behaviour on the quality of adolescents' social relationships.
3. To explore the implications of phubbing behaviour for adolescents' psychological well-being.

1.4 Research Significance:

1.4.1 Theoretical Significance:

This research is expected to contribute to psychology, particularly in understanding phubbing behaviour and its impact on adolescents. The results of this study may also serve as a reference for future research on similar topics.

1.4.2 Practical Significance:

From a practical perspective, the findings of this research could inform interventions and educational programs aimed at mitigating the negative effects of phubbing among adolescents. It could also provide insights for parents, educators, and mental health professionals in supporting adolescents in balancing their use of technology with healthy social interactions.

2. Literature Review:

2.1 Phubbing:

Phubbing, a term derived from "phone snubbing," refers to ignoring or snubbing someone in favour of one's smartphone. This behaviour, which is increasingly prevalent in contemporary society, is

characterized by an individual's excessive focus on their smartphone while disregarding interactions with those around them. The rise of phubbing can be attributed to technological advancements and the widespread adoption of smartphones, which have shifted how people seek entertainment and information. Phubbing is now observed across various age groups, including adolescents and adults, and can create barriers in interpersonal relationships between individuals, groups, and families (Putri et. al., 2024).

The emergence of phubbing is closely linked to individuals' dependence on smartphones, often leading to a lack of engagement with their immediate environment. When repeated frequently, this behaviour can significantly diminish the quality of relationships and social interactions (Raharjo, 2022). Lee (2022) suggests that phubbing arises from the high dependency on smartphones and the internet. Unlike traditional addictions, such as those to substances, smartphone addiction stems from a reliance on digital devices and their functions.

According to Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2016), several factors contribute to phubbing behaviour, including:

1. **SmartphoneAddiction**: Excessive smartphone use and repeated checking can disrupt communication and interpersonal relationships.

2. **Fear of Missing Out (F.O.M.O.)**: The anxiety and discomfort associated with missing out on social media updates drive continuous smartphone use, impacting life satisfaction and mood.

3. **Self-Control**: Individuals with difficulties in impulse control may struggle to manage their smartphone usage, leading to increased incidents of phubbing.

Karadag et al. (2015) further highlight communication disruptions as a significant factor. Frequent smartphone use within social interactions can interfere with effective communication. The impact of phubbing extends to various domains, including family life, where reduced interaction

time due to smartphone use can lead to family estrangement. Additionally, phubbing can erode friendships by diminishing face-to-face interaction, fostering a more individualistic approach to socializing (Alamudi & Syukri, 2019).

Phubbing also disrupts interpersonal communication, which involves face-to-face interactions that provide verbal and nonverbal feedback (Haomasanan & Nofharina, 2018). Individuals engaging in phubbing often experience lower-quality relationships with others. Research by Pinchot et al. (2010) indicates that smartphone use has altered communication norms, with individuals increasingly distracted by their devices even in significant social settings, such as during meals or funerals. This shift illustrates the phenomenon of "bringing the distant closer and pushing the near away."

2.2 Adolescents:

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by significant physical, emotional, and social changes. According to Hurlock (1997), this period is characterized by interactions with the broader adult society. Adolescents are transitional between childhood and adulthood, seeking identity and expanding their social networks beyond the immediate family (Santrock, 2011). Peer interactions become increasingly vital for identity formation and social development

during this time.

The quest for self-identity and adaptation within a larger social context profoundly influences adolescent psychosocial development. Erikson (1968) emphasizes the "Identity vs. Role Confusion" stage, where adolescents experiment with various social roles. In this context, social media and digital technologies have become essential tools for exploring and expressing identity (Arnett, 2021). However, excessive use of social media can have negative consequences, including the emergence of phubbing, which can disrupt social interactions and lead to social isolation (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2023).

Phubbing, as a consequence of excessive technology use, can negatively affect the quality of social relationships among adolescents. Those frequently engaging in phubbing may experience diminished relationships with peers and family members, who are crucial sources of support during this developmental stage (Błachnio et al., 2021). The balance between direct social interactions and digital communication is crucial for healthy adolescent development. Disruptions caused by phubbing can hinder social and emotional growth (Laursen & Collins, 2020).

Understanding how phubbing impacts adolescent development, particularly regarding social interactions, is crucial. Further research is needed to explore this behaviour's long-term effects and develop effective strategies to mitigate its negative impacts. As Hinigharst (cited in Sarwono, 2006) suggests, positive social interactions are vital for adolescent development. Phubbing behaviour can impede these interactions, as adolescents may prefer engaging with their smartphones over meaningful interactions with peers.

3. Methods:

3.1 Research Design:

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study method. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of phubbing behaviour among adolescents, including the forms of such behaviour, its impacts, and the quality of their social relationships. The case study method allows the researcher to explore the phenomenon in detail within a specific context and provides a comprehensive view of the dynamics involved (Yin, 2018). This approach is particularly suitable for examining social phenomena like phubbing, which is rooted in social interaction and individual behaviour in everyday life.

3.2 Research Subjects:

The subjects of this study are adolescents who exhibit phubbing behaviour, with the following criteria:

1. **Adolescents aged 12-21 years**: This age range includes the critical developmental stage where identity formation and social interaction are paramount (Santrock, 2011).

2. **Adolescents tend to engage in phubbing** based on their self-reports and preliminary observations made by the researcher. This tendency is identified through their patterns of interaction with peers and the dominant use of smartphones in social situations.

Based on these criteria, the researcher selected three subjects who exhibit phubbing solid characteristics. These subjects are referred to as RA, AF, and AS. Selection was done through purposive sampling, aiming to choose individuals who best fit the research focus (Patton, 2015). This selection is based on the assessment that these subjects can provide deep insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

3.3 Research Procedure:

The research begins with an initial observation phase to identify subjects meeting the phubbing criteria. Observations are conducted in the subjects' social environments, such as schools and hangout spots, to understand the context in which phubbing occurs. After identifying the subjects, the researcher proceeds with in-depth interviews and data collection.

- **Observation**: The researcher performs participatory observation to monitor the subjects' social interactions within their environments directly. This observation aims to document the frequency and situations in which phubbing occurs.

- **Interviews**: Interviews are conducted using a semi-structured method, allowing the researcher to explore information in depth while allowing subjects to discuss their experiences related to phubbing. This method effectively covers subjects' perspectives in detail (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

- **Documentation**: Data collection includes gathering supporting evidence from observations and interviews, such as screenshots of digital conversations or records of smartphone usage by the subjects.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments and Techniques:

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2014). Additional instruments include observation guides, interview guides, and documentation tools. Data collection is conducted using triangulation techniques, combining observations, interviews, and documentation to ensure the validity of the collected data.

- **Observation**: Conducted directly in the field, focusing on documenting interaction patterns and instances of phubbing.

- **Interviews**: Using semi-structured interview guides to gain an in-depth understanding of subjects' perceptions of phubbing and its effects on their social relationships.

- **Documentation** includes collecting visual evidence and digital data, such as application usage logs or conversation screenshots, supporting findings from observations and interviews.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques:

Data analysis in this study is carried out through three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014).

1. **Data Reduction**: At this stage, data collected from the field are filtered, simplified, and categorized based on relevant research focus. This process helps the researcher concentrate on the most significant data and eliminate irrelevant information.

2. **Data Display**: The reduced data are then presented in narrative text, tables, or diagrams to facilitate the drawing of conclusions. The narrative presentation allows the researcher to systematically and coherently recount research findings, aiding in understanding context and dynamics.

3. **Conclusion Drawing/Verification**: After data presentation, the researcher draws conclusions based on patterns emerging from the analyzed data. Verification is conducted by comparing findings with existing theories and performing data triangulation to ensure the accuracy and validity of the conclusions.

This methodology aims to provide a comprehensive picture of phubbing behaviour among adolescents and its impact on the quality of their social relationships.

4. Results and Discussion:

The phenomenon of phubbing behaviour among teenagers has become the new normal. This is because most triggering events are similar among teenagers. Phubbers (those who engage in phubbing) use smartphones as an escape to avoid discomfort in crowded situations, often referred to as awkward silence, such as in elevators, while travelling on public transportation, or feeling bored when gathering with friends.

As expressed by informant RA, the lack of engaging discussion topics and discomfort with the conversation led to her phubbing behaviour. Despite this, RA feared missing out on information, which compelled her to remain part of the interaction but still engaged in phubbing.

RA stated, "*Especially when I feel uncomfortable, I automatically start using my phone. Even though, yeah, there is really nothing to do on my phone. No chats either. But still, it's like I just want to...*" *(RA.S1.18).* RA explained that her discomfort stemmed from the situation or topic of conversation: *"...for example, not feeling comfortable with the situation or the story but still having to listen, or just feeling bored"* *(RA.S1.21).*

In contrast, AS stated that her reason for using her *phone* while someone was talking was confusion about how to respond, so she only gave minimal responses.

"...I didn't know what to say. So, I would respond briefly, and then, if the person didn't continue talking, I'd go back to focusing on my phone. In situations like that, it feels awkward, you know? Like, I do not know what to say..." *(AS.S3.136)*

Various factors contribute to the occurrence of phubbing, one of which is phone addiction. Teenagers who are addicted to their phones experience excessive smartphone usage and repeatedly check their phones, which leads to communication disruptions, interpersonal relationship issues, and social activity problems. AF expressed that she could not be away from her phone and would feel anxious if she did not check it. *"...I cannot be away from my phone because I have gotten into the habit of checking it every few minutes. If my phone is far away, I feel anxious... I do not know why. There is no clear reason, but maybe it is because I have gotten used to always holding my phone—from the moment I wake up, I am looking for it, and even before I sleep, I need to be on it. So, it is hard. I cannot even eat without watching YouTube or Korean dramas. It is weird when I am not doing anything with my phone, you know?"* (AF.S2.107)

RA also admitted that she could not stay away from her phone, even when doing other activities because she kept thinking about wanting *to check it. "It is hard not to touch it at all... I can focus on my phone, but when it comes to other activities, it is hard to focus because I keep thinking about wanting to use my phone... so that is how it is..."* (RA.S1.31)

Another influencing factor is *the fear of missing out (F.O.M.O.),* which is the anxiety and discomfort of missing out on news or information on social media and other networks. This leads to constant smartphone usage, as the phone plays a key role in fulfilling the needs of satisfaction, life satisfaction, and mood. As AF explained, her phubbing behaviour is often driven by the fear of missing out on the latest updates on social media.

"...Maybe it is because I am afraid of missing out on the discussions. Often, when we hang out, the conversation revolves around what's trending on social media. If I do not know about it, I can't keep up with the conversation... So yeah, I'm active on Twitter, and the flow of information there is really fast, even though sometimes it's not important... But if I miss out, it feels like I don't know what's going on in the world of Twitter. And when I'm with friends, it feels like I'm up to date with everything because of it...I just don't want to be left out." (AF.S2.109-111)

According to AF, she often uses social media to gather information she can use in conversations with her friends. Without realizing it, she fears missing out on the latest information if she does not check her phone regularly. RA also admitted that she is afraid of missing out on the latest updates on social media*: "...like for instance, the latest news on social media, or information about work or college. So, I need my phone all the time."* (RA.S1.61) AS also stated that she finds it difficult to detach from her smartphone because she is worried and afraid of missing out on important chats or information on social media, which causes her to check her phone constantly.

"...I feel anxious, like, what if I miss something if I don't check my phone? It makes me nervous when I don't look at my phone. I'm afraid I'll miss an important chat that needs a reply or some new information that's really important. Ugh... once I missed something important, and it was a disaster..." (AS.S3.134-136)

Poor self-control also contributes to phubbing behaviour, especially among teenagers who prioritize their ego and themselves. Teenagers often struggle to restrain themselves from using smartphones, opting to focus on other activities while neglecting eye contact during communication. AF stated that when she and her peers gather, she increasingly tends to check her phone because she feels like*, "Oh well, there are others who are listening to the person talking..."* she observed that others also engage with their phones in the same manner.

"...Usually, when it's a big group, I check my phone more often because I feel like, 'oh, it's okay, someone else is listening to her (the one telling the story)...' and the others are also on their phones... I guess they're just pretending (pretending to listen), not really paying full attention, haha... Yeah, some are playing games, some are taking selfies, some

are scrolling through Instagram... It's a lot." (AF.S2.101-105)

AF's statement shows that she does not feel guilty about her phubbing behaviour because she believes others also listen to the person telling the story. Simultaneously, her friends likely have the same mindset, unconsciously resulting in collective neglect. AS and her friends engage in similar behaviour, leading *AS to receive comments* that she has changed, becoming someone who no longer pays attention and instead chooses to ignore others around her. AS admitted that she often focuses more on her phone because her friends are doing the same

. *"...Even my friends often say, 'B is not fun to talk to anymore once she starts using her phone.' Well, sometimes my phone is more interesting than my friends, haha. Moreover, honestly, a lot of my friends are like that too (preferring to use their phones rather than listen to someone talking)."* (AS.S3.140)

Some researchers suggest that problematic smartphone use is closely related to several negative consequences, such as anxiety, stress disorders, and disturbances in psychological well-being (Błachnio et al., 2021; Tandon et al., 2022; Umari et al., 2019). Excessive smartphone use and compulsive phone checking are also associated with issues in interpersonal relationships, such as choosing to communicate via smartphones rather than engaging in face-to-face communication, disruptions in romantic relationships, and social isolation (Verma et al., 2019). Additionally, it can lead to a bad mood (Knausenberger et al., 2022) and dissatisfaction with interactions (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018). The excessive use of smartphones while gathering with friends caused RA to experience interpersonal relationship problems, where her friends eventually distanced themselves because they felt neglected.

"...She refused to tell me anything for days. After some time passed and maybe she had forgotten about it, she started talking to me again... After that, I tried to listen more carefully... but even then, if I wasn't paying attention, it could happen again

reflexively... I think I've done that several times. I don't know why, it's just a reflex to grab my phone and not pay attention to the people around me... I think it's created some distance between me and my friends... but maybe that's just in my head." (RA.S1.29-39)

AF experienced something similar when she unintentionally ignored a friend sharing something personal, which upset the friend and avoided meeting her again.

"...She was talking about her difficult situation, but I was stressed out then, too. So, I looked for some distraction on social media and got so focused on it... Like I didn't hear any sounds around me, it was like I wasn't there anymore. Suddenly, my friend knocked on the table and said, 'hello,' and when I looked at her, her face was so angry. Then she said, 'I hate this so much, it's exhausting to talk when you're not listening. If I'd known, I wouldn't have bothered meeting you.' I tried to apologize and make it up to her, but she was in such a bad mood that she just wanted to leave. Afterward, she kind of distanced herself from me, did not want to meet up anymore. She was distraught..." (AF.S2.85).

Phubbing also causes relationships to grow distant, reducing in-person interactions, which are replaced by communication through social media, as experienced by AS. The distance in relationships made AS feel sad because she rarely met her friends face-to-face anymore. "*Now we just connect through chats or Instagram DMs instead of talking in person, so we hardly ever get together anymore. It is kind of sad sometimes"* (AS.S3.142). The negative impacts experienced by the three subjects led to negative or adverse changes in their social interactions and emotional well-being. RA and FA experienced a weakening of friendships, while AS experienced changes in her mood and emotions. The negative impacts felt by the subjects were caused by feelings of rejection, exclusion, and insignificance experienced by their friends due to being ignored by the subjects. According to AF, when she found herself on the receiving end of phubbing, it caused feelings of discomfort, as she felt unheard.

"...Yes, I had experienced it too (phubbing) when I was talking, and my friend was more focused on their phone. It made me feel unheard and suffocated... it made me not want to continue... In the middle of the conversation, I felt down and thought, 'ugh, forget it, let's not continue,' and the person I was talking to didn't even ask, 'Where were we?' They just stayed silent, did not respond at all, so yeah, I just lost interest." (AF.S2.93-95)

The same feeling was also experienced by AS, who felt phubbed by her parents. Since it came from those closest to her, it caused even deeper emotional hurt. AS explained that she wanted to share her situation, but her parents focused more on their phones. This example of behaviour from her parents was later mirrored by AS towards her surroundings.

"...Yeah, it has happened to me… and it happens often, especially with my parents; oh man… it feels heartbreaking to be ignored like that when you want to talk. In the end, I just stopped trying to talk… but then, haha, I realized that it is actually pretty fun. The phone is more fun, you know? Not that I am ignoring people..." (AS.S3.144)

However, even though AF experienced being phubbed herself, it did not deter her from continuing her behaviour. She admitted that she could no longer separate herself from her phone, considering it an unavoidable reality of the present era. *"...What can I do... I cannot stop using my phone; it is just impossible. No matter what, I feel like nowadays it is impossible without a phone..." (AF.S2.115)*. Similarly, AS echoed the same sentiment, not feeling regret for her phubbing behaviour but rather mimicking the very behaviour she experienced. This suggests that phubbers justify their actions by claiming their behaviour is not unique, as almost everyone engages in the same practice in this era. Therefore, they tend to repeat the cycle. Phubbing can be reduced simply by putting the phone in a bag when gathering with friends or family. Good self-control will help implement this new habit.

5. Conclusion:

It can be understood that phubbing behavior is mainly caused by how others treat the subjects. Environmental factors, where others exhibit similar behaviours, also contribute to this behaviour. However, it cannot be denied that internal factors, such as smartphone addiction, F.O.M.O. (fear of missing out), and the inability to engage in conversations with others, also play a role. Thus, phubbing is a cause-and-effect behaviour influenced by an individual's internal and external factors.

6. Recommendations:

One limitation of this study is that it focuses solely on the general phenomenon of phubbing and its impact on social relationships. Future research could delve deeper into massive phubbing across all age groups and its broader effects to obtain more diverse data and provide more decadent literature on the phubbing phenomenon in this digital era. Additionally, another limitation is the need for more subjects in the study, which hindered the exploration of the research problem more comprehensively. Therefore, future research should involve more subjects to realise the objectives better and provide more meaningful insights.

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