

Connected Across Oceans, Disconnected at Arm's Length: A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis of Phubbing and Human Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Smartphones enable instant global connection but often undermine face-to-face relationships through phubbing- the act of ignoring present companions in favor of a mobile device. This paper presents a qualitative meta-synthesis of peer-reviewed studies, analysing lived experiences, relational consequences, and coping strategies associated with phubbing. Six themes emerged. First, digital akasia captures the moral dissonance whereby individuals condemn phubbing yet continue to engage in it. Second, phubbing constitutes an emotional threat, producing feelings of neglect, jealousy, and diminished trust in close relationships. Third, it causes a lower level of conversation and attention, and dialogues become superficial and interrupted by using devices. Fourth, boredom, fear of missing out, habitual checking, and smartphones addiction tendencies are the predictors and drivers. Fifth, the situation and the type of relationship softens the damage: partner phubbing ruins intimacy, parental phubbing ruins child attachment, whereas in workplaces and classrooms it decreases engagement and performance. Finally, people adopt varied coping and repair strategies, such as confrontation, reciprocity, boundary-setting, or acceptance. The synthesis highlights phubbing as a normalized yet resented phenomenon, underscoring the need for cultural sensitivity, digital etiquette, and institutional interventions to mitigate its relational costs.

Keywords: Phubbing, qualitative synthesis, digital akasia, smartphone use, relationships, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

We live in an era where we can speak to someone across an ocean in seconds, yet it has become commonplace to be ignored by the person sitting right next to us, absorbed instead by a glowing screen. This paradox captures the essence of *phubbing*, a portmanteau of “phone” and “snubbing,” which describes the act of diverting attention away from physically present companions in favour of one’s mobile device. The term was first coined in 2012 during a campaign by Australia’s Macquarie Dictionary, and within just a decade, it has entered everyday vocabulary as well as academic discourse (Oxford University Press, 2023). What has started as a trendy cultural phenomenon has quickly become a serious academic subject, as a consequence of the increased realization that phubbing is not solely a frivolous nuisance but a social process with quantifiable psychological and social outcomes.

This is a problem of the ubiquitous smartphones. By 2025, global smartphone penetration had reached over 85%, with many individuals spending upward of four to five hours daily on their devices (Statista, 2025). This constant connectivity affords undeniable benefits like instant communication, access to knowledge, and digital productivity yet it also blurs the boundaries between online and offline presence. In social settings, this blurred boundary often materialises as phubbing: the subtle yet potent displacement of human attention from the immediate interpersonal environment to the digital sphere. Unlike older forms of distraction, such as reading a newspaper at the table, phubbing carries particular symbolic weight because mobile phones are intimate, always-on devices, often linked to social media and private messaging. To the phubbed individual, the act may signal neglect, rejection, or the prioritisation of invisible others over visible companions.

Because of its dual nature—simultaneously banal and emotionally charged—phubbing has attracted interest from multiple academic disciplines. Psychologists examine it through the lenses of attention, attachment, and behavioural addiction, noting its connections to fear of missing out (FoMO), compulsive checking, and impaired self-regulation (Karadağ et al., 2016; Samaha & Hawi, 2016). Communication scholars focus on how phubbing alters conversational dynamics, undermining eye contact, listening cues, and perceived empathy (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013). Sociologists situate the practice within broader debates about digital culture, asking whether phubbing represents a decline of civility or simply a redefinition of social norms in a hyper-connected age. Educators and workplace researchers, meanwhile, highlight the consequences for engagement, learning, and professional collaboration (Beukeboom et al., 2021; Yousaf et al., 2022). This diversity of perspectives underscores phubbing's complexity as both a technological and social phenomenon.

Empirical research provides strong evidence of its disruptive effects. Validated measurement tools such as the Generic Scale of Phubbing (GSP) and the Generic Scale of Being Phubbed (GSBP) (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018) allow for systematic study, while quantitative surveys show alarming prevalence. For instance, large-scale studies reveal that more than 80% of smartphone users admit to checking their devices during face-to-face interactions, and nearly half confess to phubbing friends, partners, or colleagues (Karadağ et al., 2016). Punishments do not just stop at temporary nuisance. Some of these groups have linked partner phubbing to decreased relationship satisfaction, reduced trust, and even depressive symptoms (Roberts and David, 2016; Wang et al., 2017). Mobile devices intrusion has a negative effect on student attendance in the classroom, whereas the intrusion of phubbing in workplaces disrupts team cohesion and perceived professionalism. These findings suggest that phubbing is not a marginalized activity but rather one which exists in the social lives and has actual emotional and relational costs. At the same time, the interpretation of phubbing is more complex due to the differences in context and culture. The use of a phone at a family time in the collectivist society, such as East Asia and the Middle East, could be seen as a multitask or a pragmatic attitude (Cizmeci, 2017; Bitar et al., 2022). On the contrary, in the majority of individualistic western cultures, Phubbing can be much more conveniently perceived as disrespect, rejection or emotional disregard. The meaning is as well a factor of the nature of the relationship, phubbing of a child by a parent may be understood as abandonment and between fellow children as impolite behavior. Such differences suggest that phubbing is not a universally homogeneous activity and its effects are premised on cultural scripts, relational role, and situational expectations. In these undertones, the qualitative research is becoming indispensable in the sense of the phenomenon. Despite quantitative studies indicating prevalence rates and correlations, these studies do not pay attention to the lived experience of being phubbed or being phub. The qualitative research with

interviews, phenomenological research and ethnography gives additional details on the subject of neglect, ambivalence and adjustment (Aagaard, 2019; Al-Saggaf and O'Donnell, 2019). As an example, the expressions commonly applied by the participants include the feeling of being invisible or pushed out during a phubbing state, and this kind of language focuses on the embodied and emotional part of the experience other than plain distraction. It is also possible to observe the element of ambivalence in these descriptions: the majority of them condemn phubbing as a practice that is rude, yet confirm to doing it themselves, and, as the ethical issue at the heart of digital life, moral dissonance, therefore, seems to be the question. This bulk of evidence shows the importance of a qualitative meta-synthesis that can assist in getting divergent findings to converge, identify similar patterns and align theoretical methods. The present paper will be used to provide a comprehensive report of what phubbing is like, how it is transforming relationships and how individuals cope or dismiss phubbing through the synthesis of qualitative and mixed-method studies published after 2013. This would be a practical undertaking besides academic interest. As a result of the continuous integration of digital technologies into every area of life, family dinner, and work meeting, the interpersonal price of phubbing should be understood to develop successful interventions. These may be promotion of digital etiquette, development of education programs to raise awareness or the development of organisational policies that bring about a balance between connectivity and presence. Phubbing is an extremely apparently simple practice with many-sided social consequences and impacts. It is the contradiction of the modern world of communication: never has there been as much connection and disconnection.

2. Objectives

1. To generalise the qualitative evidence on the lived experiences of phubbing and being phubbed through the existing bodies of literature.
2. To identify the emotional, relational, and contextual dynamics that emerge from qualitative work.
3. To summarise predictors and mechanisms (as reported by qualitative and mixed studies) that explain why phubbing occurs.
4. To highlight methodological gaps and propose concrete directions and an interview guide for original qualitative work.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to integrate findings from published research on phubbing, following the procedures of qualitative evidence synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Targeted searches were conducted across ScienceDirect, PubMed/PMC, SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate, covering studies published between 2013 and 2025. Search terms included “phubbing,” “being phubbed,” “qualitative,” “phenomenology,” “interview,” “lived experience,” and related scale names such as the Generic Scale of Phubbing. Backward and forward citation tracking from seminal studies (e.g., Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018; Roberts & David, 2016) was also employed. The inclusion criteria comprised qualitative and mixed-methods studies with a qualitative component, along with select quantitative works used for theoretical grounding, while non-peer-reviewed sources were excluded. Extracted findings were coded and synthesised into themes using Braun and Clarke’s six-phase method to ensure systematic and transparent analysis.

4. Emerging Themes

Theme 1 — Digital akrasia: condemning phubbing while doing it (moral dissonance & normalization)

A consistent finding across qualitative studies is the paradoxical stance individuals adopt toward phubbing: they view it as socially inappropriate or disrespectful, yet they admit to engaging in it themselves. It was conceptualised by Aagaard (2019) as digital akrasia, owing to the philosophical concept of doing something contrary to his better judgment. This idea reflects the internal fight between values and behavior, individuals are aware that phubbing is harmful to presence, yet still, they give in to the notification temptation or the habitual patterns. Al-Saggaf and O'Donnell (2019) also emphasise that this discrepancy is supported by changing norms: even though the participants define the behaviour in question as rude, they also think that it is becoming a normalised aspect of their daily communication. Condemnation and participation, in a way, go together, and it depicts a state of moral dissonance that makes phubbing such a ubiquitous but unappreciated activity. Normalisation process implies that even such critics of the behaviour tend to justify themselves or other people and do what they can to explain phubbing as the result of living in modern society, not as an intentional insult.

Theme 2 — Emotional threat and relational erosion (neglect, jealousy, trust)

It is commonly said what the phubbed experience is not only an inconvenience but an emotional trauma. Qualitative participants use the strong affective language because they say that they felt invisible or they were pushed aside, meaning that phubbing can also be viewed as an act of neglect or exclusion (Al-Saggaf and O'Donnell, 2019). This corresponds with the attachment theory where perceived inattention creates a threat of feeling of belonging and intimacy. These findings are supported by quantitative research: the phubbing of the partner was also discovered to decrease the satisfaction with the relationship and to increase the symptoms of depressions, which are proved in the works by Roberts and David (2016) and Wang et al. (2017). Such researches show that acts that distract attention are dis-prioritization signs that kill trust and cause one to feel insecure. There is also incidence of jealousy as it is sometimes believed that the unknowns of digital focus are the ones that are able to compete intimacy. This may accumulate with time resulting into unhappiness of the relationships in the long run and also lower emotional intimacy. The very phenomenon of Phubbing is not a trifle, but a risk in relationships, and it contaminates the most important elements of trust and bondage.

Theme 3 — Reduced conversation quality and attentional fragmentation

Phubbing also alters the process of communication. Its appearance alone has made the phone decrease the richness and satisfaction of conversations when the phone is not being used (Przybylski and Weinstein, 2013). Participants in qualitative studies describe conversations disrupted by pauses, fragmented attention, and repeated attempts to re-establish context (Aagaard, 2019; Al-Saggaf & O'Donnell, 2019). Instead of seamless dialogue, interactions become marked by shallower exchanges, reduced responsiveness, and a sense of divided presence. This attentional fragmentation conveys disinterest and hampers the flow of intimacy, making conversations less rewarding for both parties. In group settings, phone use can shift dynamics further, drawing some members out of the interaction altogether and leaving others to struggle with maintaining engagement. Such findings underscore that phubbing is not merely a matter of etiquette but one that alters the structure and quality of interpersonal communication.

Theme 4 — Predictors and drivers reported in qualitative accounts

Participants in qualitative studies often emphasise that phubbing is not entirely intentional but driven by psychological and technological triggers. Several interrelated drivers have been identified, including boredom, FoMO (fear of missing out), habitual checking, and the persuasive design of smartphone applications (Karadağ et al., 2016; Samaha & Hawi, 2016; Al-Saggaf & O'Donnell, 2019). Notifications and app features are deliberately engineered to capture and hold attention, leading users into automatic checking cycles that can intrude into face-to-face interactions. Some participants describe phubbing as a habitual reflex, performed almost unconsciously, while others frame it as an instrumental strategy for quick social updates or stress relief. Smartphone and social media addiction tendencies further reinforce the cycle, making it harder for individuals to resist the impulse to check devices even when they recognise the relational cost. These drivers illustrate that phubbing is shaped both by individual dispositions and by the broader design of digital technologies.

Theme 5 — Context and relationship moderates the harm of phubbing

The meaning and impact of phubbing vary depending on context, relationship type, and cultural norms. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2018) show that partner phubbing carries particularly severe consequences, as it undermines intimacy and signals misaligned priorities. In contrast, peer-to-peer phubbing among friends may be brushed off as casual multitasking. Parental phubbing, however, has distinct developmental implications, with children perceiving it as rejection and sometimes mirroring the behaviour in their own peer interactions. Cultural context also shapes interpretation: in some collectivist societies, device use at family gatherings may be tolerated as a practical necessity, while in more individualist cultures, it is interpreted as a sign of disrespect or disengagement (Çizmeçi, 2017; Bitar et al., 2022). In institutional contexts such as classrooms and workplaces, phubbing reduces attention, participation, and performance, with teachers and managers reporting decreased engagement and productivity (Beukeboom et al., 2021; Yousaf et al., 2022). These variations highlight that phubbing is not universally experienced but filtered through relational expectations and cultural scripts.

Theme 6 — Coping, repair, and meaning-making (how people respond)

People do not passively endure phubbing; they develop strategies to cope with or respond to it. Qualitative studies reveal a repertoire of responses, including direct confrontation (e.g., asking the phubber to put the phone away), reciprocal phubbing (mirroring the behaviour to balance the interaction), and boundary-setting agreements such as “no phones at dinner” (Aagaard, 2019). Some individuals, however, choose acceptance or normalisation, interpreting phubbing as a minor annoyance rather than a personal rejection. The techniques underline the conflict between people's desire for connection and the acceptance of digital interaction as a defining element of modern times. Aagaard (2019) emphasizes the difficulty of addressing this, given that many people resent phubbing but are unable to separate themselves from their smartphones altogether. This is not just a personal challenge but also a collective one, as society continues to negotiate new relational norms, placing resilience strategies at the forefront.

5. Discussion

Most of all, the qualitative literature humanises the description of phubbing: The phenomena it describes is not a momentary and punctual action, but rather an omnipresent social phenomenon that cuts across attention, design, habit, and relational expectations. In research it would not merely become a problem of phone use but a methodical disruption of presence, whose definition would be relative, cultural and

interpersonal. This summary indicates that phubbing is an outcome of technology and a type of relationship: the screen-viewing habit provides information regarding priorities, availability and social value, typically without intent. Two important tensions can be used to characterize the findings. First of all, the ethical-attentional tension explains that Aagaard (2019) writes of digital akrasia: people know that phubbing has a deleterious effect on the quality of social life, but are ready to do it because of their addicted nature, a design based on notifications, or the sense of social alienation. This pressure is the paradox of the modern interconnectedness that on the one hand creates the understanding of the harmfulness of the same, and on the other hand causes the desire to connect. It is also a matter of influence of the persuasive technology and attention economies on the interpersonal behaviour whereby it cannot be the person in charge only but also larger digital infrastructures (Al-Saggaf and O'Donnell, 2019). Second, the situation of tension shows that the notion of phubbing does not necessarily bring the same meaning and not identical harm. The use of phones in other casual contexts with friends may be seen as being normal or even expected, but on the other hand, in a more intimate or family-oriented context, it may be seen as an exclusionary or disrespectful habit. In one example, the phenomenon of parental phubbing has been found to impair the parental affection withdrawal in children, and partner phubbing has been found to spoil the trust and romantic feelings within romantic relationships (Roberts and David, 2016; Bitar et al., 2022). This heterogeneity contributes to the significance of the situational sensitivity and cultural competence in addressing the problem. Intermediaries of the concept of what constitutes rude are relational proximity, power relations and culturally prescribed norms of phone usage (Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas, 2018). These are strains put on larger theoretical units. Digital wellbeing models would suggest that technology is not necessarily bad but when it reverses the conventional values of humanity, such as attention, presence, and connection, then it is problematic (Vanden Abeele, 2020). In the same vein, phubbing may be regarded as akin to the hypothetical notion of technoference (McDaniel and Coyne, 2016) and the influence that the digital technologies have on in-person communication and family interactions. Collectively, these sentiments can aid in promoting the idea that phubbing is not a void but a void in how digital media are now transforming the nature and needs of human engagement. The synthesis proposes the potential intervention in three levels that are connected in a pragmatic way. The awareness-building and habit redesign strategies can be applied at the individual level. Although even insignificant behavioural changes, like turning off any unnecessary notifications, putting aside the phone during conversations, or using digital well-being apps can make the urge to look at the phone during conversations smaller. The qualitative data confirms that people are ready to get a transition, yet they lack any sort of assistance that could be elicited to take place, which means that the solutions concerning reflective practices and mindfulness-oriented methods could have a potentially helpful effect to recuperate the attentional control. At the relational level, couples and families as well as peer groups can experience the process of developing shared etiquette or digital contract. This can be proven by the agreement not to use a phone during dinner, to have a technology-free Saturday, or simply saying that one is not listening. These micro-level plans can turn phubbing to the nullification of that person as an individual failure and convince people to agree to limits in a way that will not damage intimacy and respect. On a bigger institutional scale, in the classroom or the work place, it may be necessary to have more policies to protect the quality of discussion and interaction. The schools may consider the possibility of a structured phone time/lock-box system so that students are not distracted and meeting policies can be adopted by the working environment to prevent multitasking with the device. The policies are not directly related to demonising technology, but they are structured towards the purpose of supporting, rather than eroding the collective

learning, collaboration, and productivity purposes (Przybylski and Weinstein, 2013; Beukeboom et al., 2021). On the whole, this synthesis leads to the fact that phubbing cannot be solved only with the assistance of the awareness. It involves a multifaceted solution of seeing the interdependence of the forces of the psychological impulses, the design of technologies, the process of relations, and the rules of the institution. Personal digital literacy, joint relational contracts, and support-based interventions are most likely to reduce the extent of relational erosion and attentional fragmentation of phubbing in the form of policies. The qualitative literature creates the image unity; the image of a humane being: phubbing is not a type of activity but a kind of process in the society when all the attention, design, habit and the expectations of relations collide.

6. Conclusion

This discussion states that phubbing negatively affects intimacy, reduces the quality of conversation, and destroys mental health, despite being becoming routinely normalized in everyday life. It is a symbol of the digital addiction and a moral dilemma of the contemporary communication. The need to combat phubbing is highlighted, and the concept of immediacy is focused on cultural, emotive, and contextual aspects as the means to influence digital manners and more beneficial habits. The qualitative studies in the future, particularly in understudied regions like South Asia, are required to increase the breadth of the knowledge on the problem. The synthesis frames phubbing as a cultural transformation that transcends individual behavior, demanding collective responses. Educational programs that strengthen critical digital awareness, integration of phubbing into public health campaigns, and digital literacy training in schools are all essential for reframing it as a societal concern. For policymakers, awareness of phubbing's impact on communication and community interactions can inform principles that foster healthier digital environments. Finally, longitudinal studies are recommended to understand how early experiences with phubbing behaviors shape long-term relational outcomes. This approach can transit scholarship from simple observation toward the development of actionable strategies that cultivate empathy, attentiveness, and durable human connections in an increasingly digital world.

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