

## ABSTRACT

### Starting a Relationship is Difficult: Phubbing Creates Bad Impressions and Prevents the Creation of Relationships

Paraskevie Stathatos

Director: James A. Roberts, Ph.D.

Phubbing is a portmanteau, or combination, of the words “phone” and “snubbing”. To be phubbed is to be snubbed, or ignored, by someone using their cell phone when in your company. This paper reviews the literature about phubbing and its impact on relationships. Results suggest that phubbing undermines attempts at creating relationships. Phubbing may foster bad impressions and poor conversation quality as perceived by the phubbed individual. The current review of the relevant literature finds that being phubbed leads to perceptions of a lack of empathy, trust, closeness, attentiveness, politeness, and care. The negative outcomes of phubbing undermine the creation of healthy relationships. This paper reviews and synthesizes previous literature written on phubbing and supports claims that phubbing can interfere with the creation of healthy relationships. Given the importance of healthy relationships to human well-being, research into the impact of phubbing on relationship creation is of vital importance.

*Keywords:* phubbing, smartphones, multi-tasking, distraction, social interaction, impression management, relationship quality

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

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Dr. James A. Roberts, Department of Marketing

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

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Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

STARTING A RELATIONSHIP IS DIFFICULT: PHUBBING CREATES BAD  
IMPRESSIONS AND PREVENTS THE CREATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

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Paraskevie Stathatos

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	3
Phubbing and Its Impact on Relationships.....	3
Impressions and Judgments.....	5
Phubbing, Perceptions, and Conversation Quality.....	5
Phubbing Affects Perceived Empathy, Trust, and Closeness.....	6
Phubbing Affects Perceived Attention.....	7
Phubbing Affects Perceived Politeness.....	8
Phubbing Affects Conversation Quality.....	9
Chapter Three: Discussion.....	13
Chapter Four: Conclusion.....	15
References.....	17

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## DEDICATION

To my family, who continues to support me and my endeavors.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Most people in society today have a smartphone that they use daily. Smartphones have become so useful and popular that almost everyone has one, and those that have one use their phones for multiple hours a day. In 2019, 96% of people in the United States owned a cell phone (Pew Research Center, n.d.). According to Statista.com, in 2018, adults in the United States spent 3 hours and 35 mins on their mobile devices on average per day. Even though smartphone and cell phone technology has made people's lives easier and has provided people with a form of entertainment, smartphones have many negative effects on people. Smartphones have become a distraction for almost every person who owns one, and some people are better at dealing with distractions than others. This distraction that stays with a person throughout the entire day can affect how a person lives. Most people who own a smartphone are constantly checking it, and in 2019, people in the United States checked their smartphones 96 times per day on average (Asurion, n.d.). People who are between 18-24 years old check their phones twice as much as the average in America (Asurion, n.d.). This daily distraction can prevent people from paying attention to the task at hand. People are distracted from simple tasks, such as walking across the street, and more complex tasks, such as problem-solving or reading a book. Smartphones can prevent people from giving their full attention to the person they are having a

conversation with, which can even harm relationship satisfaction (Roberts & David, 2016).

The word phubbing is a combination of the words “phone” and “snubbing”. Phubbing is to be snubbed or ignored by someone using their cell phone who is around you or interacting with you (Roberts & David, 2016). The person who is on their phone and who is distracted from the conversation is known as the “phubber”, and the person who is being ignored is the “phubbee”. If someone is not paying attention to the person they are talking to, that could show the person that they do not care about them or the conversation. When this happens during an initial interaction between two people, the person who is being ignored could possibly have a negative feeling about the interaction and they would be less likely to want to see that person again. Phubbing causes bad impressions and poor conversation quality, which cause failed attempts at creating relationships. Bad impressions and poor conversation quality are caused by someone who seems like they are not empathetic, not trustworthy, not understanding, not close, do not care, are not attentive, and are not polite (Aron et al., 1997; Misra et al., 2016; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012; Vanden Abeele et al., 2016, 2019). These qualities or effects can be caused by phubbing. This research claims that phubbing can have negative effects on the creation of relationships.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

The research that has been done on phubbing has shown many negative effects and impacts. Research has shown that phubbing can reduce relationship satisfaction, make someone feel socially excluded, and hurt the quality of a conversation (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018; David & Roberts, 2017; Roberts & David, 2016). Some people find phubbing to be the norm, and phubbing can be contagious (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016). Research has also shown that phubbing can change perceptions of others, and these perceptions are an important part of creating a relationship.

#### *Phubbing and Its Impact on Relationships*

Phubbing has affected many people's lives, and sometimes the person who is phubbing does not realize their effect on others. Phubbing reduces relationship satisfaction, which can lead to depression and can affect well-being (Roberts & David, 2016). It has been shown that people who are phubbed feel socially excluded, which makes them feel like they need more attention, and as a result, they turn to social media to feel included (David & Roberts, 2017). In "The effects of 'phubbing' on social interaction", Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2018) also found that phubbing affects communication quality and lowers relationship satisfaction due to someone feeling like they do not belong.

Phubbing can also affect many kinds of relationships. Roberts and David (2017) found that employee engagement is affected whenever a supervisor or boss phubbs his employee because it reduces trust in the supervisor.

Being addicted to your smartphone can also make phubbing worse. Research has shown that cell phone addiction in young adults is worsened by materialism and impulsiveness (Roberts & Pirog, 2013). People who are addicted to the internet, have constant fears of missing out, and a lack of self-control are more likely to be addicted to their cell phones, which makes them more likely to phubb (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016).

Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2016) also claim that phubbing has become the norm due to observed phubbing behaviors and individual phubbing behavior. They observed people who switched between being phubbers and phubbees, and they claim that this has led to people assuming others also phubb like they do.

Phubbing has become a big part of our daily lives due to the abundance of smart phones and increase in cell phone addiction. In “Measuring phone snubbing behavior: Development and validation of the Generic Scale of Phubbing (GSP) and the Generic Scale of Being Phubbed (GSBP)”, Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2018) created phubbing scales to measure phubbing behavior and how one feels when they are phubbed. They said that they hope the scales will help future research, reduce phubbing, and make social interactions better.

### *Impressions and Judgments*

When meeting someone for the first time, normally, two people create impressions of each other, whether they are good or bad. These impressions are made based on a small amount of information from a person. They can be based on many things such as the way a person looks, a person's behavior, something the person said, or previous information known about that person. Impressions can be created from a small observation of someone's behavior, also known as a thin slice (Ambady et al., 2000; Carney et al., 2007). Thin slices can be observed from someone's appearance or their voice. Judgments and first impressions are strongly influenced by the initial experience of someone's behavior (Ambady et al., 2000).

After creating these impressions, each person can decide how they initially view the other person and if they possibly want to continue to create a relationship with that person. First impressions influence how someone perceives another person (Ambady et al., 2000). An initial interaction creates impressions and judgments. Anything done after that initial impression signals if a person has decided to continue to invest time into the other person.

### *Phubbing, Perceptions, and Conversation Quality*

Since phubbing has proven to affect people in a negative way, phubbing can possibly affect judgments of others. How we perceive people is based on the initial and following interactions with people. If these interactions are tainted

by phubbing, the resulting judgments of the interaction and of people will probably be affected.

### *Phubbing Affects Perceived Empathy, Trust, and Closeness*

Phubbing can cause someone to perceive the person using their smartphone in a certain way, and a lot of these perceptions are negative. Even the mere presence of a smartphone on a table or in sight can change a person's feelings toward someone or their conversation. In studies done by Misra, Cheng, Genevie, and Yuan (2016) and Przybylski and Weinstein (2012), people who had conversations with the presence of a cell phone felt less empathy and understanding from the other person than people who had conversations together without the presence of a cell phone. If one person is paying attention to their smartphone instead of listening to the other person, the person speaking may feel like the person they are talking to is not empathetic and does not care about the conversation. This results in a reduction in relationship quality. People have reported that their relationship quality is lowered when there is a cell phone present (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012).

In a study done by Vanden Abeele et al. (2019), people who were phubbed at least once during a conversation reported lower conversation intimacy. The presence of a cell phone can also prevent people from creating a sense of trust with or closeness between each other, and when two people are discussing a meaningful topic with the presence of a cell phone, these feelings are affected even more (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012). When two people have a meaningful

conversation, they may start to feel more comfortable sharing personal information with each other, which can create a sense of closeness (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, and Bator, 1997). This sense of closeness is something that can help create and sustain a relationship. In the study mentioned above done by Aron et al. (1997), many of the students who participated reported that they continued to have a relationship with the student they were partnered with in the study. These students chose to continue relationships with each other due to many things such as a sense of closeness that they felt with each other initially. Without this sense of closeness, students would not have continued to create a relationship with the other students they were partnered with in the study.

#### *Phubbing Affects Perceived Attention*

Phubbing also makes a person feel like they are not being given their full attention. Paying attention is important when meeting and interacting with another person for the first time (Ambady et al., 2000). Not paying attention to someone can lead to a bad impression. Someone who phubbs someone who they are interacting with for the first time can cause the person to think that they are not interested in interacting with them or they do not care about the interaction. It can also make a person seem distracted or like they have different priorities than talking with the person who is in front of them.

People who use their phone while in the presence of another person show non-verbal behaviors that make them look absent from the conversation. In a

study done by Murtagh (2001), people who used their phone while on a train carriage presented non-verbal behaviors, such as turning their heads or bodies away, that disengaged themselves from the other person who was with them. Having a cell phone present during a conversation with someone can divert someone's attention (Misra et al., 2016). When someone is not completely paying attention to or listening to someone, they can miss verbal and non-verbal responses that are vital to carrying on a good conversation. Those paying attention to their phone can miss hearing changes in tone, seeing changes in facial expressions, and not giving or receiving eye contact (Misra et al., 2016). In a study done by Vanden Abeele et al. (2016), smartphone users were seen as less attentive, and those who participated said that a conversation was lower in quality with someone who was using their phone. The quality of a conversation is affected when someone is on their phone because the person is less involved in the conversation and less attentive.

### *Phubbing Affects Perceived Politeness*

Phubbing makes a person seem like they are not polite. Being attentive while in a conversation with someone is considered polite (Vanden Abeele et al., 2016). Using a smartphone while conversing with someone takes attention away from that person and the conversation, which makes the person using their phone seem impolite. In a normal conversation between two people, the flow continues when each person takes their turn to talk to each other. This turn-taking of two individuals during a conversation was evaluated in a study done by Duncan (1972). The study

recorded verbal and non-verbal signals that the speaker and auditor made throughout the conversation. Some of the signals that were recorded were non-verbal signals made by the speaker that showed the auditor when it was his turn and verbal and non-verbal instances where the auditor interrupted the speaker. The way a person takes turns can affect conversation flow and quality. Interruptions disrupt the flow of conversation and can be seen as rude in certain instances. If someone looks at their phone or uses their phone while in a conversation with someone, that is an interruption to the conversation, and it can make that person seem impolite. If a person is attentive and waits their turn to speak instead of interrupting or if a person agrees with the speaker, those verbal and non-verbal behaviors make that person seem like they are paying attention, which makes them seem more polite. The way that people portray basic parts of a conversation could create subtle effects that affect how impressions are made and future interactions (Duncan, 1972). If a person interrupts the flow of conversation constantly, that could make that person seem impolite, which could create a bad impression. In a study done by Vanden Abeele et al. (2016), participants who used their phone during a conversation were seen to be less attentive and less polite.

### *Phubbing Affects Conversation Quality*

All of these effects and perceptions of phubbing; a lack of empathy, trust, closeness, attention, and politeness; lower the conversation quality between two people. Another factor of phubbing can also reduce the quality of a conversation. When a person is on their smartphone while having an in-person conversation

with someone, they are multitasking. Multitasking is described as switching your attention to and from two or more things (Salvucci & Taatgen, 2008). It involves an attempt to do two things at the same time. According to Salvucci and Taatgen (2008), multitasking can be easy or very difficult depending on the situation. When multitasking, if two or more tasks need the same peripheral resource, such as vision, problems can occur (Salvucci & Taatgen, 2008). Oulasvirta, Tamminen, Roto, & Kuorelahti (2005) describe the Resource Competition Framework (RCF), which explains that social and psychological tasks compete for cognitive resources, which leads to reducing resources for other tasks, which results in interaction to be less fluent. Tasks that pertain to safety and evaluating the environment tend to be more important than other tasks, and these more important tasks compete for cognitive resources with other, normally less important, tasks, such as using a cell phone (Oulasvirta et al., 2005). Multitasking can involve this competition for cognitive resources, especially when someone is using their smartphone. When a person engages in a conversation with another person, it requires a higher cognitive demand, such as long-term memory and thought, than trying to find a bus stop or walking on an escalator (Oulasvirta et al., 2005). This means that it requires more cognitive resources to engage in a conversation, which means that it is harder to multitask while in this situation.

This competition for cognitive resources also results in tasks that are not being directly focused on, or secondary tasks, to slow down (Oulasvirta et al., 2005). In the study done by Oulasvirta et al. (2005), secondary tasks were



compromised due to resource depletion. The article gives the example of their participants having to compromise walking, a secondary task, in order to continue to interact with their smartphone. The authors also state that it is natural to walk at a slower pace to reduce how often one needs to evaluate their environment, and this allows more resources to be available to perform other tasks (Oulasvirta et al., 2005). If a person is multitasking and needs to slow down what they are doing to attend to their smartphone, the person's secondary task will be compromised. Compromising secondary tasks prevents someone from paying attention to that task. Some results of multitasking while having a conversation include mishearing what someone says, asking someone to repeat what they said, or asking someone to start the conversation over (Newman & Smith, 2006). People also normally have a hard time re-entering a conversation after they have been distracted by other tasks. In a study done by Newman and Smith (2006), when someone tried to rejoin a conversation after being distracted by another task, they did not contribute to the discussion as much as they had before being distracted. Newman and Smith (2006) observed that when people tried to reengage in a conversation after finishing a task, they only looked up quickly, nodded for a second, or said one word. All of the above effects of taking part in another task reduce conversation quality because being distracted from a conversation makes that conversation a secondary task.

Another way phubbing reduces conversation quality is by causing the phubbee to become the phubber. In a study done by Vanden Abeele et al. (2019), over half of the people who phubbed someone were also phubbed by the person

they were with, and this was done as a reaction to being phubbed. This implies that when a person uses their phone during a co-present social interaction, it can cause the other person to also use their phone. The same study also showed that some people do not remember how much they have used their phone while in a conversation with someone else. Another finding from the study done by Vanden Abeele et al. (2019) was that people who used their phone more often judged their conversation partners to be more distracted.

Almost anything that takes a person's attention off a conversation can lower the quality of a conversation. Some of the effects of phubbing mentioned earlier such as a perceived lack of empathy and trust, lack of closeness, and lack of politeness also create poor conversation quality. If a person is having a conversation with someone while attending to their phone, the conversation will be compromised, and this leads to lower conversation quality.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Discussion

According to research that has been done, phubbing has had a negative impact on people's lives. Some of this negative impact includes creating bad judgments about others. When two people meet for the first time, an initial impression is created quickly. Impressions can be affected by actions, and phubbing is one of them. Phubbing can create a bad impression because the phubbee thinks that the phubber is not empathetic, not trustworthy, and not close to them. Phubbing can also make the phubbee think that the phubber is not paying attention and is not polite. First impressions are important to creating a relationship because they can be lasting. If the impression that is made during a conversation ends up being a bad impression, the chances of those two people interacting again are low. If the impression is bad enough, one person or both people will not be interested in creating a relationship with each other. Bad impressions prevent the creation of new relationships.

Another factor that affects the creation of new relationships is conversation quality. The potential effects of phubbing and the impressions that are made from being phubbed affect conversation quality. There are certain elements that are needed during a conversation that make people want to continue the conversation and start a relationship with each other. Some of the elements that

are needed to have a good conversation include empathy, understanding, trust, closeness, sharing personal information, intimacy, paying attention, receiving and responding to verbal and non-verbal behaviors, a good flow of conversation, a lack of interruption, and using cognitive resources for the task at hand instead of a distraction. These elements make the conversation better and they make a person seem more willing to be in the conversation. When there is a lack of these elements as a result of phubbing, the quality of the conversation is reduced. Lowered conversation quality makes a person disinterested in the conversation and the person, and this can undermine the desire to create or continue a relationship.

Conversation quality can be reduced due to a lack of interaction from both conversation partners. Phubbing can also cause the phubbee to use their smartphone during the conversation. When two people who are interacting with each other are both using their smartphones, they are not able to continue a conversation with each other or it would be very difficult for them to keep a conversation going. Interacting with someone is vital to creating a relationship, so not being able to interact or converse well, or at all, does not give either person a chance to learn more about each other, become close to each other, divulge personal information, or create trust between each other. All these elements are necessary to creating and sustaining a relationship.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

Creating relationships is important despite the many distractions in modern day society. As technology continues to improve and evolve, more things become available to us that can distract us from communicating with each other. Smartphones have become more prevalent within the past 10-15 years, and they have improved so much that they have become miniature computers that contain even more distractions than a simple cell phone. We are exposed to many resources and there is a lot of information available to us today, so it can be hard to focus on one thing for a long time. This lack of focus can also affect relationships and how much time and effort we are putting into them.

Distractions, such as smartphones, prevent a good relationship from being created. Distractions cause phubbing, which creates bad impressions and lowers conversation quality. The research that has been done has shown that phubbing causes bad impressions to be formed, which causes a failed attempt at creating a relationship.

Phubbing is an important problem that affects many people today. There is more research that needs to be done on the effects of phubbing. Research needs to be done on how often people think phubbing occurs or if phubbing is acceptable, which are two topics that do not have to be related but can be. The realization of how often phubbing occurs and how acceptable phubbing is to people may be affected by age, use of technology, surroundings, and personal

morals. Additional research should also be done on what the phubber thinks when they are phubbing and if they realize how much they are phubbing. Phubbing will continue to become a bigger problem as technology is constantly improving and evolving. Technology will continue to create more ways for us to become distracted. Research needs to be done in order to figure out how technology is affecting us. The effects of phubbing should be brought to more people's attention because the problem will only get worse, and knowledge of how phubbing affects others could help prevent phubbing from happening.

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