Original Research Article

The Impact of Phubbing on Psychological Distress Among Adults

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ABSTRACT

Background: Phubbing refers to snubbing people around in favour of one's phone. As adults increasingly integrate smartphones into their daily lives, the impact of phubbing on their relationships, mental health, and overall quality of life becomes increasingly pertinent. The current research aimed understand the levels of phubbing among young adults and older adults as well as the effect of phubbing on psychological distress among young adults and older adults.
Methodology: A cross-sectional study was conducted. The sample consisted of 200 individuals in the age groups 18-25 years and 40-60 years. Data was collected from all over India. Variables included socio demographic, the Phubbing scale and the K10 Psychological Distress Scale. Statistical methods of independent t-test and two-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD as the post hoc test were used.
Results: No significant difference was found in the levels of phubbing between younger and older adults. The results indicated that the levels of phubbing along with the age differences had a joint effect on the level of psychological distress. The psychological distress because of phubbing was higher in younger adults than older adults.
Conclusion: Phubbing has an impact on psychological distress It is advisable to raise awareness about health phone usage, phubbing and its impact along with developing effective interventions and strategies, thus ultimately promoting improved mental well-being and healthier social connections among adults in our digital age.
Keywords: Phubbing, Phone Snubbing, Psychological Distress, Youth, Adults.

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INTRODUCTION

The advent of smartphones in the early 21st century has transformed how people communicate, access information, and engage with technology. Smartphones have changed how people communicate, access information, and engage with technology. They are now an essential part of our daily lives, offering communication, entertainment, productivity, and information access. With the rise in smartphone usage, phubbing has also increased.

Phubbing is a term coined by the Macquarie Dictionary as part of a language experiment to describe the behaviour of ignoring someone in favour of a mobile phone [1]. Although it may be a new concept to many, it is certainly a part of one's everyday life. Phubbing has been defined as "is the act of snubbing someone in a social setting by looking at your smartphone instead of paying attention" [2].

Instead of paying attention to the people around them and spending time with them, individuals tend to be stuck on their mobile phones while interacting with people around them. Individuals need to find a balance between digital and face-to-face interactions and be present when engaging with others. Addressing phubbing is crucial for healthier relationships and overall well-being in the digital age.

The American Psychological Association defined psychological distress as "a set of painful mental and physical symptoms that are associated with normal fluctuations of mood in most people" [3]. Phubbing can

lead to psychological distress through various mechanisms, such as reduced social connection and bonding, disrupting effective communication, conflicts and tensions in relationships, and cell phone addiction.

A research conducted to understand the predictors and consequences of phubbing among adolescents and youth in India found factors such as mobile addiction, Internet addiction, social media addiction, game addiction, self-control, and fear of missing out as the predictors of phubbing. Phubbing had consequences on social health, relationship health, and self-flourishing, and was significantly related to depression and distress. Upon evaluating the impact of phubbing after 6 months, they also found depression and distress as the most important consequences of phubbing [4]. Another study found that excessive phone usage had a negative impact on romantic relationships and mental health – those who reported greater phubbing reported lesser couple satisfaction along with more symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and lower psychological well-being [5].

A meta-analytic study found that phubbing has affected various relationships - heightening feelings of jealousy between partners, weakening the bond between them, lowering their relationship satisfaction and increasing their rates of depression. Similarly, it affects relations with friends and family. Phubbing was considered impolite, insulting, and a breach of social norms - it harmed people's feelings of empathy, intimacy, interpersonal trust, and the quality of their conversations. Technological addictions, such as smartphone addiction, SMS addiction, social media addiction, boredom, fear of missing out, and a lack of self-control all predicted phubbing activity, according to the evaluation of research. The desire to multitask (doing many things at once) and the satisfaction of an instant need or gratification may explain why individuals use their smartphones during face-to-face conversations [6]. A few studies that have explored the consequences of phubbing on psychological distress and quality of life have found a significant positive relation of phubbing with distress and quality of life [7-8]. Another study found that higher levels of mobile phone addiction and phubbing was linked to higher levels of depressed moods, with phubbing acting as a mediator between mobile phone addiction and depression [9].

Phubbing is indeed an important phenomenon to study among adults due to its potential to impact on individual well-being and societal interactions. As adults integrate smartphones into their daily lives, the impact of phubbing on their relationships, mental health, and overall quality of life becomes more relevant. With the widespread use of smartphones, phubbing has become a common practise that may contribute to increased levels of psychological distress, such as feelings of isolation, anxiety, and a general sense of being unwell. Investigating this relationship is critical for understanding the nuanced ways in which phubbing affects adult mental health, which could lead to valuable insights for targeted interventions. Understanding the psychological toll of phubbing is critical for fostering healthier digital communication habits and enhancing overall psychological well-being among adult populations, as adults increasingly rely on smartphones for work and personal interactions. Research in the field of phubbing behaviour is relatively new. There are not many studies on the consequences of the phubbing phenomenon on Indian youth and older adults in India. As a result, this is still a blind researchable field, which is one of the key reasons for this unique study.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives:

- To compare the levels of phubbing between young adults and older adults, and
- To assess the effect of phubbing on psychological distress among young adults and older adults.

Hypotheses:

- H_1: The levels of phubbing will be higher for younger adults than older adults.
- H_2: Higher levels of phubbing will cause a higher level of psychological distress while lower level of phubbing will cause a lower level of psychological distress.
- H_3: Psychological distress as a result of phubbing will be more among the younger adults than older adults.

Sample: The sample comprised 200 individuals. There were two groups of adults: Young Adults (18-25 years) and Older Adults (40-60 years), with 100 participants from each group. Convenient Sampling was used.

Research Design: A non-experimental cross-sectional research design which is quantitative in nature was used.

Instruments:

Two measures were used in this study:

- **Phubbing Prevalence Questionnaire**: This scale developed by Karadağ et al. in 2015 was used to assess the phubbing behaviour of individuals. It measures the extent to which individuals are distracted from conversation partners, connected with their phones, and escape from social communications. Participants rated themselves from 1 (never) to 5 (always) on a five-point scale (α = .88, M = 2.32, SD = 0.76) [10].
- **K10 scale**: This scale developed by Kessler et al. in 2002 was used to measure the psychological distress in individuals. The K10 scale involves 10 questions about emotional states each with a five-level response scale (where 1 is None of the time and 5 is All of the time). It has a strong scale reliability with Cronbach's α equal to 0.88 [11].

Procedure: A google form with the scales was circulated. The participants were briefly informed about the study on the first page of the form and only after their consent to participate were they directed to further sections of the form which consisted of the scales. They were assured that their responses would be kept confidential. In the end, the participants were debriefed and later thanked for their participation.

Statistical Analysis: After the data was collected, it was analysed using JASP (0.14.1). Descriptive statistics, independent t-test and two-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD as the post hoc test were calculated.

RESULTS

Table 1: Independent Samples T-Test results comparing phubbing levels in young and older adults

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	P
Phubbing	Older Adults	100	28.770	7.226	0.153	198	0.561
	Young Adults	100	28.620	6.595			

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare phubbing levels between younger and older adults. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the phubbing levels of the younger and older adults and summarizes the independent samples t-test results. There was no significant difference in the scores of the younger adults (M=28.620, SD=6.595) and older adults (M=28.770, SD=7.226); t(198)=0.153, p=0.561. These results suggest that age does not influence the level of phubbing, thus rejecting H_1.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Psychological Distress

Phubbing	Age	Mean	SD	N
High	Old	30.180	6.381	50
	Young	33.140	6.078	50
Low	Old	15.180	6.769	50
	Young	23.200	8.415	50

Table 3: Two-way ANOVA results for influence of age and phubbing levels on the level of psychological distress

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Phubbing	7775.045	1	7775.045	160.061	< 0.001
Age	1507.005	1	1507.005	31.024	< 0.001
Phubbing Age	320.045	1	320.045	6.589	0.011
Residuals	9520.780	196	48.575		

A two-way analysis of variance was conducted on the influence of age and phubbing levels on the level of psychological distress. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the psychological distress of younger and older adults with high and low levels of phubbing. Table 3 summarizes the two-way ANOVA results. The main effect for age yielded an F ratio of F (1,196) = 31.025, p<0.001, indicating a statistical difference between younger adults (M=28.17, SD=8.85) and older adults (M=22.68, SD=9.98). The main effect of phubbing levels yielded an F ratio of 160.0613, p<0.001, indicating a significant difference between high phubbing (M=31.66, SD=6.38) and low phubbing levels (M=22.68, SD=9.98). The interaction effect was significant, F (1,196) = 6.5886, p<0.05. The results suggest that levels of phubbing along with the age differences have a joint effect on the level of psychological distress, thus accepting H_2.

Table 4: Post Hoc Comparisons (Tukey HSD) - Phubbing Age

		Mean Difference	SE	T	P_{tukey}
High, Old	Low, Old	15.000	1.394	10.761	< 0.001
	High, Young	-2.960	1.394	-2.124	0.149
	Low, Young	6.980	1.394	5.007	< 0.001
Low, Old	High, Young	-17.960	1.394	-12.885	< 0.001
	Low, Young	-8.020	1.394	-5.754	< 0.001
High, Young	Low, Young	9.940	1.394	7.131	< 0.001

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test were made. Table 4 summarizes the post hoc comparisons results. All groups differed significantly from each other (p<0.001) except high levels of phubbing for older adults and high levels of phubbing for younger adults. The results indicate that overall, the levels of psychological distress are higher for the younger adults phubbing group, thus accepting H_3. However, similar levels of psychological distress were found for the high phubbing older and younger adults.

DISCUSSION

The present study compared the levels of phubbing between young adults and older adults as well as assessed the effect of phubbing on psychological distress among young adults and older adults.

The results indicated that there was no difference in the level of phubbing between the younger and older adults, implying that this behaviour is not exclusive to any age group. One possible explanation is that older adults have increasingly adopted smartphones and other mobile devices and have integrated them into their daily lives to a similar extent as younger adults. As a result, they may engage in phubbing behaviour at a similar rate. Age and phubbing levels had an impact on psychological distress levels. Higher levels of phubbing were related to higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of phubbing were related to lower levels of psychological distress. Phubbing caused higher levels of psychological distress in younger adults as compared to older adults. The psychological distress levels of the young high phubbing group were highest compared to low phubbing young or older adults.

These results imply that indicating that individuals who engage in more frequent or intense phubbing tend to experience greater psychological distress. Older adults and younger adults both engage in phubbing behaviour at similar rates. However, the consequences of phubbing differ between the two age groups. Younger adults who heavily engage in phubbing are more vulnerable to experiencing psychological distress. This may be because younger adults rely more on social interactions for their emotional well-being. High levels of phubbing can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection. On the other hand, older adults may be less affected by phubbing because they have established social networks and routines. They have diversified sources of social support and do not rely as heavily on digital interactions. These findings are consistent with the previous findings [4-9].

Being absorbed in our phones for most of the day has affected and limited our interaction with others. It has had an impact not just on our interpersonal connections, but also on our overall well-being. The idea of smartphones was to minimise distances, bring people closer together, and make communication easier, but it has sadly created more distances than ever before. Although smartphones have made many activities simpler, they are also having a detrimental impact on us, our surroundings, and our well-being.

Predictably, the phubbers might be unaware of the impact of phubbing behaviour on their life - their social, psychological and emotional well-being, relationships, interpersonal communications, quality of life, anxiety, distress and so on. By gaining a deeper understanding of phubbing, researchers and professionals can work towards mitigating its negative effects and fostering healthier and more fulfilling interpersonal connections in the digital age.

It is advisable to start awareness campaigns and intervention programmes relating to the time one should spend on their phone, avoiding excessive usage of phones, phubbing behaviour patterns and how it all affects them. Individuals need to be sensitive to those being phubbed. Those being phubbed feel a sense of exclusion, and unwantedness which stems from their need for attention and belonging and it affects their wellbeing. Raising awareness in this field will lead to better social interactions and quality of life. This would also have a positive impact on the mental health wellbeing of individuals who are involved in the act of phubbing or are being phubbed.

Limitations

The research, however, is subject to a few limitations. The sample size was relatively small. There were more female participants (120) than male participants (80). There is not a lot of research in this area, especially in India and, many people are not aware of the term 'Phubbing'.

Suggestions for Future Research

Qualitative studies should be done on phubbing and psychological distress to know about their relationship along with other consequences. Research should also be done on those being phubbed. Longitudinal studies on phubbing behaviour along with their predictors and consequences are suggested.

CONCLUSION

Whether younger or older adults, phubbing is prevalent in all age groups and does cause psychological distress which is more for younger adults. It is suggested that there should be education and promotion of healthy phone usage to prevent the negative effects of phubbing.

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