

The Effects of Parental Phubbing on Relationship Satisfaction Among Adolescents in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Parental phubbing behaviour has emerged as a growing concern in recent years, yet research in this area remains limited. This study aims to address this gap by examining the relationship between parental phubbing and relationship satisfaction among adolescents. A total of 382 adolescents aged 13 to 14 from secondary schools in Malaysia were selected through simple random sampling. Data were collected using the Generic Scale of Being Phubbed (GSBP) and the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS). Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between parental phubbing and adolescents' relationship satisfaction, indicating that higher levels of parental phubbing are associated with lower relationship satisfaction among adolescents. These findings underscore the potential adverse effects of parental smartphone use during parent-child interactions and highlight the need for greater parental awareness to promote healthier and more satisfying relationships with their children.

Keywords: Parental phubbing, Relationship satisfaction, Family relationship, Adolescents, Parent-child interaction

1. INTRODUCTION

The excessive use of smartphones has led to the emergence of phubbing behaviour, a phenomenon where individuals ignore those physically present by focusing their attention on their mobile devices. Phubbing, particularly within a family setting, is considered a disruptive and negative social behaviour, as it may adversely affect interpersonal relationships and emotional well-being. In the context of parent-child interactions, phubbing has been associated with negative outcomes for children and adolescents, including increased risks of depression (Xiao & Zheng, 2022) and heightened mobile phone dependency (Liu et al., 2019). The present study explores the impact of parental phubbing behaviour on adolescents' relationship satisfaction, highlighting the importance of parental engagement in fostering healthy family relationships.

The term "phubbing", which is a blend of the words "phone" and "snubbing", was coined in 2012 to describe the act of ignoring someone in favour of using mobile device. The concept of phubbing has been widely studied in terms of romantic and peer, while parental phubbing refers to scenarios where parents focus on using their phones instead of their children. Where this situation has emerged as a particular concern due to its potential effect on adolescents' emotional well-being and development. According to Van Edwards (n.d.), the word "phubbing" combines "phone" and "snubbing" to characterize this behaviour, which involves prioritizing phone use over direct human interaction (Capilla Garrido et al., 2021).

Adolescents, being in a crucial stage of emotional and relational development, depend heavily on parental attention, support, and communication. However, frequent parental phone use during interactions with adolescents, it may be perceived as neglect or rejection, which may diminish relationship satisfaction and potentially impacting the adolescent's mental health. The increasing

duration of daily smartphone usage is a contributing factor to the prevalence of phubbing. Given that Malaysians spend an average of 4 hours and 49 minutes daily on using smartphones (Howarth, 2023), which causes growing concern about the effect of digital distractions during family interactions. Moreover, Ang et al. (2019) noted a dramatic rise in smartphone ownership and usage among Malaysians, yet scholarly attention to the phubbing phenomenon remains limited, particularly concerning its implications within family environments.

Of particular concern is parental phubbing, which refers to instances where parents divert their attention away from their children due to mobile phone usage during family interactions. As reported by Hong et al. (2019), parental phubbing frequently occurs in domestic settings and may undermine the quality of the parent-child relationship. The family environment plays a pivotal role in shaping an adolescent's emotional, cognitive, and behavioural development; therefore, parental behaviours, such as phubbing, may significantly influence adolescents' perceptions of parental availability, warmth, and acceptance.

Despite growing smartphone dependency in Malaysia, research regarding parental phubbing and its particular influence on adolescents' relationship satisfaction remains limited. This study seeks to address the gap by investigating the association between parental phubbing and relationship satisfaction among Malaysian adolescents, focusing on secondary school students aged 13 and 14 years old in Malaysia. The study aims to assess how parental smartphone use during interactions may affect adolescents' satisfaction with their parent-child relationship, thereby contributing to the growing body of research on digital technology's impact on family dynamics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies have highlighted various forms of phubbing, including peer phubbing, partner phubbing, and parental phubbing. Thabassum (2020) categorised phubbing into boss phubbing, partner phubbing, and classroom phubbing, indicating that this behaviour can occur across diverse social contexts. In the family domain, parental phubbing specifically refers to situations where parents engage in smartphone use during interactions with their children, thereby ignoring or neglecting them (Xiao & Zheng, 2022). Wu et al. (2022) classified parental phubbing as a form of social neglect, where parental attention is directed towards mobile devices instead of meaningful communication with their children.

The growing integration of smartphones into daily family life is evidenced by the increasing number of smartphone users worldwide (Wang et al., 2019). According to Wang et al. (2019), smartphones have become indispensable to individuals across age groups, fostering dependency and increasing the risk of habitual phubbing behaviours. Parental phubbing raises significant concerns, given that parents play a critical role in shaping children's behavioural, emotional, and psychological development (Liu et al., 2019). Pancani et al. (2020) also emphasized that the negative consequences of phubbing may be more profound in family settings since parents are primary sources of emotional support. Despite the potential impact of this behaviour, limited research has explicitly examined the influence of parental phubbing on adolescents' relationship satisfaction within the family context.

To summarise, phubbing is generally defined as the act of ignoring someone who is physically present by paying high attention to a mobile phone, which often disrupts interpersonal interactions (David & Roberts, 2020). In terms of families, parental phubbing happens when parents use mobile devices during parent-child interactions, which potentially leading to feelings of rejection and emotional distance among adolescents (Xiao & Zheng, 2022). Researchers such as Liu et al. (2019) and Wu et al. (2022) classify this behaviour by parents as a type of social neglect, which may impact adolescents' psychological well-being and relationship satisfaction. Research conducted in recent years shows that parental phubbing is an emerging concerning

issue, specifically can have negative impacts to adolescents who are still depending on their parents.

In discussions of phubbing, the terms phubber (the one who engages in phubbing) and phubbee (the one who is subjected to phubbing) have been introduced (Utami et al., 2021). This behaviour closely resembles social exclusion, where individuals feel rejected or neglected during interactions (Nuñez et al., 2020).

Being the phubbee has been associated with a range of negative outcomes, such as reduced satisfaction with social interactions, diminished feelings of connectedness, and thwarted fundamental human needs (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018b). Koçak (2021) further linked the experience of being phubbed with decreased feelings of belonging, lower mood, and reduced relationship satisfaction. Social Exclusion Theory explains that when individuals are excluded from social exchanges, such as during phubbing incidents, they experience psychological distress, which may manifest as decreased relationship satisfaction, heightened risk of depression, and reduced life satisfaction (Pancani et al., 2020).

A strong parent-child relationship is a cornerstone of adolescents' emotional security, characterized by warmth, care, effective communication, and mutual connection (Raising Children Network, 2023). When this bond weakens—such as through reduced interaction caused by parental phubbing—the quality of the relationship may deteriorate, resulting in diminished relationship satisfaction. This aligns with the notion that phubbing negatively impacts family relationships by undermining the frequency and quality of parent-child interactions. The parent-child relationship is a unique and influential connection that plays a pivotal role in an adolescent's development (Mihalec-Adkins, 2020). Parental behaviours, including digital distractions, directly influence adolescents' emotional well-being and behavioural outcomes. As parental phubbing increases, the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship is likely to decline, leading to lower relationship satisfaction.

Several studies have demonstrated the broader implications of parental phubbing. For example, Hong et al. (2019) found that parental phubbing was correlated with problematic smartphone use among children. Xiao and Zheng (2022) linked parental phubbing to heightened depression levels, while Liu et al. (2020) suggested that relationship satisfaction plays a mediating role between parental phubbing and adolescents' life satisfaction. Despite these findings, many prior studies have not fully explored relationship satisfaction as the primary outcome variable, thereby leaving a gap that the present study seeks to address.

Relationship satisfaction refers to an individual's overall evaluation of the quality of their relationship (Bühler et al., 2021). It is a subjective construct that encompasses feelings, thoughts, and attitudes towards the relationship partner. High relationship satisfaction is typically associated with positive emotions, mutual respect, and the perception that one's relational needs are being met (Bühler et al., 2021). In the context of the parent-adolescent relationship, relationship satisfaction is crucial for ensuring adolescents' access to emotional and psychological resources.

Furthermore, a supportive and involved parent-child relationship predicts adolescents' life satisfaction more strongly than factors such as physical appearance or academic self-concept (Liu et al., 2020). However, parental phubbing threatens this relationship by diminishing perceived parental involvement and support. Consequently, parental phubbing may significantly reduce relationship satisfaction in the parent-adolescent dyad.

Nevertheless, some inconsistencies exist in the literature. For instance, Frackowiak et al. (2022) reported no significant decrease in relationship satisfaction following partner phubbing in their study, suggesting that contextual factors may moderate the impact of phubbing behaviour.

Similarly, David and Roberts (2021) highlighted that the relationship between phubbing and satisfaction could be influenced by individual differences such as attachment anxiety. Despite these discrepancies, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that parental phubbing poses risks to adolescents' relationship satisfaction, with more frequent parental phubbing predicting lower satisfaction levels.

Silver (2019) stated social exclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon expressed in multiple spheres of life, but not just in the context of economy or politics. Exclusion in certain areas is not implying exclusion in others (Silver, 2019). This can be further related to the act of parental phubbing may impact adolescents to different areas like relationship satisfaction in this study. Parental phubbing might impact relationship satisfaction of adolescents towards parents. The concept of social exclusion refers to the process by which individuals or groups are completely or partially excluded from fully participating in the society they are part of (Rawal, 2008). This reflects that parental phubbing is an act that disregards adolescent's involvement in their parents' lives. The effect is not immediate or easily identifiable, it happens gradually over time, slowly excluding adolescents from the parent-child relationship.

With respect to the social exclusion concept mentioned earlier, this study is guided by Social Exclusion Theory, which suggests that being ignored or excluded in social situations can cause emotional distress and reduce perceived belonging (Pancani et al., 2020). Muddiman (2000) stated focusing on social exclusion can reveal the connections between issues and its impacts influence the lives of individuals or families over a period of time. This would be important in this study as social exclusion is measured in terms of relationship satisfaction and the focus is parental phubbing. In terms of parental phubbing, adolescents who are frequently "phubbed" may experience similar emotional responses, such as decreased relationship satisfaction because of perceived rejection.

3. METHODS

This study employed a quantitative research design, and data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to respondents. Informed consent from parents and assent from students were collected prior to participation. The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms, with the survey link shared through platforms such as WhatsApp. Google Forms were distributed via WhatsApp due to its accessibility and widespread use among parents and students, especially during the COVID-19 endemic period, when public awareness of pandemic prevention remained high and in-person data collection was restricted to certain extent. As defined by Roopa and Rani (2012), a questionnaire comprises a set of printed or digital questions completed by respondents to express their opinions. It remains one of the primary instruments for collecting quantitative primary data (Roopa & Rani, 2012). In the present study, this method was used to measure the level of parental phubbing and its effects on family relationships among adolescents.

A cross-sectional design was adopted to assess the influence of parental phubbing on adolescents' family relationships. Cross-sectional studies are observational in nature and involve analyzing data from a population at a specific point in time (Wang & Cheng, 2020). Such designs are particularly effective for obtaining descriptive data and are advantageous because they do not require follow-up measurements (Wang & Cheng, 2020). In this study, parental phubbing served as the independent variable, whereas relationship satisfaction was designated as the dependent variable.

According to Thacker (2019), a population is defined as the complete set of individuals possessing specific characteristics. Shukla similarly described a population as the entire group to which the research findings are intended to apply. In addition to geographic boundaries, characteristics such as demographic, clinical, and temporal factors are essential in defining a study population

(Thacker, 2019). The target population for this study comprised adolescents aged 13 to 14 years enrolled in secondary schools in Malaysia, specifically students from the Remove, Form 1, and Form 2 levels.

Based on data from the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2022), the total number of secondary school students in these levels was 810,245. This included 12,581 Remove students (8,084 males and 4,497 females), 402,058 Form 1 students (202,044 males and 200,014 females), and 395,606 Form 2 students (199,043 males and 196,563 females). This entire group constituted the study's population frame for investigating the effects of parental phubbing on relationship satisfaction among adolescents.

To determine the required sample size, the study referred to the sample size determination table developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). For a population of 810,245, the recommended sample size is 382 respondents, which was the target sample size for this study. A simple random sampling technique was utilized to select respondents. As stated by Showkat and Parveen (2017), simple random sampling ensures that every element in the population has an equal chance of being selected, thus enhancing the external validity of the study. The questionnaire used in this study was adapted and modified from validated scales in previous research: the Generic Scale of Being Phubbed (GSPB) (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018b) and the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) (Maroufizadeh et al., 2018). The questionnaire link, created using Google Forms, was distributed to potential respondents to facilitate data collection.

For data analysis, descriptive statistics were applied to summarize respondent demographics and individual questionnaire items. Inferential statistics were employed to examine the relationship between parental phubbing and adolescents' relationship satisfaction within the family context. Specifically, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between parental phubbing and adolescents' relationship satisfaction.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 382 valid responses were collected for this study, comprising 86 male respondents (22.5%) and 296 female respondents (77.5%) from various secondary schools. In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents were 14 years old ($n = 252$, 66%), while the remaining 130 respondents (34%) were aged 13. Regarding academic level, most participants were from Form 2 ($n = 251$, 65.7%), followed by Form 1 students ($n = 121$, 31.7%), and Remove class students ($n = 10$, 2.6%).

4.1 Inferential Analysis

To examine the relationship between parental phubbing and adolescents' relationship satisfaction, Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was conducted. The following research hypothesis was tested:

Ha1: There is a significant relationship between parental phubbing and relationship satisfaction among adolescents.

As shown in Table 1, the analysis revealed a strong negative correlation between parental phubbing and relationship satisfaction ($r = -0.822$, $p < 0.001$). Since the p-value is less than the significance threshold of 0.05, the alternative hypothesis (H_{a1}) is supported. This indicates that increased parental phubbing is significantly associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction among adolescents.

Table 1 Correlations between parental phubbing and relationship satisfaction

		Parental Phubbing	Relationship Satisfaction
Parental Phubbing	Pearson Correlation	1	-.822**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	382	382
Relationship Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	-.822**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	382	382

The present study revealed a significant negative relationship between parental phubbing and relationship satisfaction among adolescents ($r = -0.822$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates a strong inverse correlation, where higher levels of parental phubbing are associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction among adolescents. In other words, the more frequently parents engage in phubbing behaviours, the less satisfied adolescents feel in their relationship with their parents. Conversely, lower parental phubbing corresponds to higher relationship satisfaction. These findings are consistent with the study by Zhan et al. (2022), which demonstrated a negative association between phubbing and relationship quality in romantic relationships, thus supporting the generalizability of phubbing's detrimental impact across relationship types.

Relationship satisfaction refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their relationship quality. According to Bühler et al. (2021), high relationship satisfaction is characterized by positive emotions and attitudes toward one's relationship partner, often reflecting the fulfillment of emotional needs. In the context of this study, relationship satisfaction aligns with the concept of parental acceptance from the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory (PART). High relationship satisfaction reflects perceived parental warmth and acceptance, while low satisfaction indicates perceived rejection and emotional distance, which adolescents may interpret as feeling unloved.

Phubbing behaviour has been identified as a risk factor that undermines relationship quality (Xie et al., 2019). Specifically, the dynamics of phubbing involve two roles: the "phubber" (the one who phubs) and the "phubbee" (the one being phubbed). Al-Saggaf and O'Donnell (2019) found that phubbees tend to experience diminished trust and reduced satisfaction in their relationships with phubbers. These findings are reflected in the present study, where parental phubbing behaviours were significantly associated with lower relationship satisfaction among adolescents.

Moreover, Utami et al. (2021) emphasized that excessive phubbing not only reduces relationship satisfaction but also increases negative emotions such as jealousy and depression. Zhan et al. (2022) further highlighted that low relationship satisfaction resulting from phubbing can contribute to heightened feelings of loneliness. These outcomes suggest that the effects of parental phubbing extend beyond the parent-child relationship and may adversely influence adolescents' mental health and psychosocial development (Xiao & Zheng, 2022).

The observed negative correlation between parental phubbing and relationship satisfaction indicates that frequent parental phone use during interactions with adolescents may undermine the emotional closeness and quality of the parent-adolescent relationship. This diminished relationship quality may, in turn, jeopardize adolescents' emotional well-being, potentially increasing their vulnerability to mental health issues such as depression. Conversely, reduced parental phubbing and increased parental attention and warmth are likely to foster parental acceptance and improve relationship satisfaction.

The present findings are also in line with David and Roberts (2021), who reported a negative association between partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction, suggesting that phubbing is universally detrimental to interpersonal relationships, regardless of the relationship type. Thus,

this study confirms that parental phubbing negatively affects adolescents' relationship satisfaction, highlighting the importance of mindful parental behaviour during family interactions. Furthermore, Habenicht and Schutte (2023) noted that higher relationship satisfaction is linked to greater life satisfaction, lower negative affect, higher positive affect, and reduced depression. Therefore, enhancing relationship satisfaction through reduced parental phubbing could play a pivotal role in supporting adolescents' emotional health and overall well-being.

5. CONCLUSION

Parental phubbing, defined as excessive mobile phone use during parent-child interactions, has been shown to have a significant negative impact on adolescents' relationship satisfaction. The results of this study demonstrate that higher levels of parental phubbing are associated with lower relationship satisfaction among adolescents, indicating that adolescents perceive parental phubbing as a form of parental rejection. This perceived rejection undermines the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship. These findings underscore the need for greater parental awareness regarding the consequences of their smartphone usage during interactions with their children. Reducing parental phubbing behaviour may foster feelings of acceptance and closeness, thereby enhancing the emotional bonds within the family. This study contributes to the growing body of evidence highlighting the adverse effects of phubbing on interpersonal relationships and emphasizes the importance of mindful parenting in promoting adolescents' relationship satisfaction and overall well-being.

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