
The Phenomenon of Phubbing in Interpersonal Communication Among Teenagers in Cirebon

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ABSTRACT

Phubbing is the act of someone ignoring the people around them because they are too focused in using their cell phones. Among adolescents, phubbing has now become a serious issue in social interactions. This study has the aim to find out about the various forms of phubbing, the triggering factors, the impact on victims, as well as the effectiveness of interpersonal communication regarding phubbing among adolescents in Cirebon. A descriptive qualitative method and purposive sampling were implemented for this study, involving six informants, which comprises three perpetrators and three victims of phubbing. Through in-depth interviews as well as observation, data were collected and then analyzed with the Miles and Huberman model. The findings revealed that there are five forms of phubbing behavior and there are five main factors that trigger it, which are dependency on social media, poor skills of communication, low self-control, Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), along with the influence of social environment. The findings indicate that phubbing leads to ineffective interpersonal communication, as evidenced by disruptions in the five elements of communication: openness, empathy, positive attitude, support, and equality. This study emphasizes the importance of digital literacy in raising adolescents' awareness of the value of full presence in social interactions.

Keywords: effectiveness; interpersonal communication; behavior; phubbing; adolescents

INTRODUCTION

Smartphones, which were originally designed to facilitate communication, now pose new challenges to social interaction. One concerning phenomenon is “phubbing” a portmanteau of “phone” and “snubbing” which refers to the behavior of ignoring those around you in favor of your smartphone. According to research (Kharunnisa & Nursanti, 2024), phubbing reflects an unhealthy dependence on smartphones, which shifts focus from direct social interaction to the digital world. Adolescents are the group most affected by phubbing because adolescence is a critical period for the formation of social identity and the development of communication skills. If they become accustomed to communication disrupted by phubbing, this can have long-term negative effects on their ability to form healthy relationships in the future. Research by (Youarti & Hidayah, 2018) indicates that phubbing has become a defining characteristic among adolescents, suggesting that this behavior has become an integral part of the digital culture of the younger generation.

The phenomenon of phubbing is very common in teenagers' daily activities, such as in the cafeteria, library, café, or when gathering with family. In terms of interpersonal communication, phubbing disrupts the two-way interaction that should be effective. According to (Gandasari D, Muslimah T, Nilamasari, Iskandar, Aminah, Nahuway, 2022), interpersonal communication is the most efficient form of communication because it requires full presence, active attention, and emotional openness from both parties. However, when phubbing occurs, attention shifts to the phone, presence is merely physical without emotional engagement, and

emotional openness is hindered. As a result, the person getting ignored does not feel valued, feels lonely even in others' company, and may even start to see the relationship as meaningless. As reported by (Stephanie, 2019), Indonesia is ranked 11th worldwide with 3,706,811 of its people engaging in phubbing behavior, with the largest group of perpetrators being Generation Z (34.3%). It is also reported by (Syakilah et al., 2025) that at 6.05 hours per day, Indonesia is the country with the highest daily smartphone usage duration in the world. Referring to data from (Social, 2024), internet users in Indonesia spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes per day online, with 3 hours and 11 minutes spent on social media. The high level of internet access in West Java, particularly Cirebon, is an indication that teenagers have high access to the internet and this increases the occurrence of phubbing.

Previous research has established a strong relationship between interpersonal communication and phubbing behavior among adolescents. Studies show that effective interpersonal communication can reduce phubbing, while poor communication increases it. For instance, (Dayanty, 2023) found a strong negative correlation between interpersonal communication and phubbing, indicating that adolescents with low empathy and poor face-to-face interaction skills are more likely to engage in phubbing. Similarly, (Kurnia et al., 2020) highlighted that self-control plays an important role, where adolescents with better impulse control tend to avoid phubbing. In addition, (Aiyuda et al., 2023) revealed that phubbing negatively affects friendship quality, while (Sigalingging et al., 2024) confirmed that phubbing weakens interpersonal communication by reducing attention and focus. Furthermore, (Nurfalah & Lestari, 2020) emphasized that effective communication requires both the ability to convey and receive messages properly, which can be disrupted by phubbing behavior.

Phubbing has become a significant problem in interpersonal communication because it has a direct effect on social interactions. Effective communication, as explained by Devito, has five key elements, which are empathy, openness, a positive attitude, support, as well as equality. These five elements become hard to fulfill with the occurrence of phubbing because the attention of the speaker will be divided between their smartphone and their conversation partner. As a result, misunderstanding and neglect may be felt by the person being ignored, and they may even experience loneliness while being surrounded by friends. A descriptive qualitative method was implemented for this study, with the aim to deeply comprehend the phenomenon of phubbing from the perspectives of both the perpetrator and the victim. This method was selected to explore the feelings, experiences, as well as emotional impacts felt directly by adolescents. This study is expected to give a more comprehensive understanding regarding the forms of phubbing, the driving factors of phubbing, the impact of phubbing on victims, as well as how this behavior affects the effectiveness of interpersonal communication.

Although these studies demonstrate the link between interpersonal communication and phubbing, there is still a research gap regarding its specific impact within adolescent friendships in Cirebon. Previous studies tend to be general across different contexts and locations, whereas this study focuses on a more specific social setting. The novelty of this research lies in the use of a descriptive qualitative approach to explore phubbing behavior in depth, including its emotional impacts and influencing factors from both the perpetrator's and the victim's perspectives. This study is expected to provide contextual insights and increase adolescents' awareness of the importance of maintaining full attention in social interactions to preserve the quality of friendships.

This study aims to identify various types of phubbing behavior commonly observed among adolescent friends, understand the factors that lead adolescents to engage in phubbing, and analyze the impact experienced by those who are victims of phubbing. The effectiveness of interpersonal communication regarding phubbing behavior among teenage friends. By understanding these four aspects, it is hoped that the research findings can contribute to the development of digital literacy programs and raise teenagers' awareness of the importance of being fully present in social interactions to maintain the quality of their friendships and emotional well-being.

METHOD

This research employed a descriptive qualitative method to provide a detailed account of phubbing behavior experienced by individuals in their daily lives, particularly among adolescents. Through this method, research can better comprehend and describe the experiences of adolescents both as perpetrators and victims of phubbing from their own perspectives. A qualitative approach is very suitable for understanding context as well as meaning of what individuals personally experience, therefore this approach allows researchers to dig deeply into the emotions, stories, and experiences of informants through interviews or observations. Phubbing phenomenon involves emotional and psychological elements that are complex, require thorough exploration, and the explanations cannot be by numbers alone.

This study took place in the city of Cirebon, primarily in public places like Tetra Café, Tabo Café, the Bank Indonesia Library, and Dimsum Bos Sunyarangi, and was conducted from November 25, 2025, to December 5, 2025, at locations that teenagers visit frequently. These locations were chosen because they represent environments where the social interaction of teenagers is very active and phubbing behaviour can be observed. Purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique, was used as the sampling technique. In this technique, informants were chosen according to specific criteria that aligns with the objective of the research (Sugiyono, 2013). Six informants took part in this study, consisting of 3 individuals who engage in phubbing and 3 others who are the victims of phubbing. There were two ways to collect primary data, which were semi-structured in-depth interviews and participatory observation. The interviews lasted between 10 to 20 minutes per informant and a guide was used to collect information on emotions, experiences, impacts on friendships, as well as factors that trigger phubbing. Meanwhile, the observation was carried out in campus and at teenagers' gathering spots to directly observe the behavior of phubbing, the context of incidents, the reactions of victims, and the patterns of communication, while the findings were recorded in field notes. For secondary data, information was gathered from journals, scientific articles, books, as well as earlier studies on phubbing behaviour and interpersonal communication.

Source triangulation was implemented for this study. This technique compares and verifies information from numerous parties that are involved in the phubbing phenomenon. There are two stages in the conduct of triangulation. First, comparison was made between data from informants that act as both perpetrators and victims of phubbing to identify differences in perspective regarding how perpetrators see and explain their actions, along with how victims experience the psychological impact and disturbances in interpersonal communication. Second, comparison was made between the results of in-depth interviews with collective views from group discussion forums. From the consistency of findings across numerous sources as

well as data collection methods, this study's results can be deemed reliable and accurately reflect phubbing phenomenon among adolescents in Cirebon.

Data collected from in-depth interviews and observations were analyzed with the use of the interactive or inter-relational analysis method that Miles and Huberman developed. This method consists of three steps, which are data simplification, data presentation, as well as conclusion drawing. Through continuous and interactive analysis process, this study is expected to result in a credible and reliable comprehension of phubbing phenomenon among adolescents in Cirebon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

The aim of this study was to comprehend phubbing behavior in the context of friendships among adolescents, specifically the forms of this behavior, the triggering factors, as well as how it impacts the quality of interpersonal communication. Several important aspects of this phubbing phenomenon were uncovered by this study through in-depth interviews with six adolescents aged 19-21 who had experienced phubbing personally. The findings reveal that phubbing is a complex behavior with various psychological and social aspects, and not just a simple habit of using a smartphone. The informants' experiences that they shared provide a clear understanding of phubbing's impact on adolescent friendships in this digital age. The research findings are organized into four main themes, as follows:

Forms of Phubbing Behavior Among Teenagers

Five common forms of phubbing behavior among teenagers are identified in this study. The first form is ignoring the person one is having a conversation with while putting their focus on their phone. This situation was experienced by Lia (19) when she was sharing a personal problem, however, her friend remained busy with her phone and caused Lia to feel neglected. The second form is still listening to the conversation while using a phone. Nadia (19) admitted that she often replies to messages while still listening to the stories that her friends tell. She also admitted that she tries her best to stay attentive, but her friends feel they are not getting her attention because of the divided focus. The third form is repeatedly checking the phone without any reason. Handika (21) admitted that he often checks his phone even when he does not receive any important notifications. He does it because he worries about missing something if he does not constantly check his phone. The fourth form is not making any eye contact during interactions. Marsya (20) feels that her friend is not fully present in the conversation because their eyes are always on their phone, even when they are answering a question. The fifth form is giving responses without looking away the screen. Ayu (20) stated that she feels like she is talking to a machine when her friend only gives answers that are brief and without even looking at her. All these experiences by informants indicate physical presence but with minimal mental and emotional engagement.

Factors Contributing to Phubbing Behavior Among Teenage Friends

Five main factors that can trigger phubbing behavior among teenagers are identified in this study. First, dependence on social media and the internet is a dominant factor; Alam (19 years old) stated that he feels the need to constantly keep up with the latest updates on social media so as not to miss out on news, just as Handika (21 years old) admitted to frequently checking Instagram or Twitter every few minutes even while interacting face-to-face with his

friends. Second, the presence of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), which is felt by Nadia (19 years old), who experiences high anxiety if she is unaware of the latest news, gossip, or trends on social media, leading her to feel compelled to constantly check her phone even while hanging out with friends. Third, low self-control makes it difficult for young people to prioritize face-to-face communication over the urge to check their smartphones, as expressed by Handika (21 years old), who admits that although he knows it is rude to use his phone while a friend is speaking, he finds it hard to resist due to an overwhelming urge. Fourth, a lack of good communication skills makes some teenagers feel anxious and uncomfortable when interacting face-to-face, so they prefer to use their phones as a way to avoid awkward or boring social situations, as explained by Alam (19 years old), who prefers to play with his phone when the atmosphere feels uncomfortable rather than face an embarrassing silence. Fifth, the influence of the social environment reinforces this behavior because phubbing is considered normal since everyone around them does it, as expressed by Nadia (19 years old), who feels comfortable phubbing because her friends do the same, making this behavior a normal part of social interaction among teenagers.

The Impact of Phubbing on Its Victims

The most noticeable impact is the emergence of negative feelings. Lia (19) feels worthless and that her presence is meaningless, while Ayu (20) feels inferior and thinks she's boring. Victims of phubbing often experience a decline in self-confidence, feel worthless, and feel lonely even when surrounded by people. The quality of friendships also suffers, as experienced by Marsya (20), who realized that their relationship was not as close as before because meaningful conversations had become increasingly rare. Another impact is communication issues and misunderstandings. When the person divides their attention between their smartphone and the person they're talking to, important information can be missed, leading to confusion. Marsya added that the responses that her friends give are often irrelevant to the topic because they were not listening from the beginning. From this, the feeling of loneliness in a crowd can arise. It is ironic because communication technology creates distance in relationships that should be tightly knit. The long-term effect of phubbing is that it can weaken trust and increase the possibility of conflict. Ayu (20 years old) began to doubt whether her friends truly cared, and this caused their friendships to drift apart.

The Effectiveness of Interpersonal Communication in Phubbing Behavior

The results of the study indicate that interpersonal communication is impaired when phubbing occurs in social interactions among teenage friends. This is evident from the disruption of five key aspects of communication identified in Devito's study in Anggraini et al., (2022) namely openness, empathy, a positive attitude, support, and equality. The aspect of openness is hindered because victims of phubbing hesitate to share personal problems with friends who frequently engage in phubbing, as they feel such efforts are futile. The aspect of empathy also does not function optimally because phubbers cannot sense their conversation partner's feelings due to their attention being divided between their phone and the conversation. Furthermore, a positive attitude in communication does not develop because the atmosphere becomes awkward and uncomfortable, very different from interactions with friends who give their full attention. Emotional support is also not provided effectively, as phubbers only offer seemingly random responses without truly paying attention to the problems faced by the victim.

The aspect of equality in communication is also not realized because phubbing creates an imbalance, in which the victim feels that their position is unequal and less important than whatever appears on the perpetrator's phone screen. A communication that is good should be two-way and involves mutual listening as well as respect. However, this balance is disrupted by phubbing and causes one party to feel ignored. The five aspects of interpersonal communication that signify effectiveness are significantly disrupted by phubbing behavior. This is an indication that interpersonal communication becomes ineffective due to phubbing behavior among teenage friends in Cirebon and can damage their friendship quality as well as long-term emotional wellness.

As shown by the findings, phubbing phenomenon has become an issue that is significant in social interactions among teenagers in Cirebon. There are five main forms of this phubbing behavior, which are ignoring the person one is speaking with, using a phone while still listening to the conversation, constantly checking one's phone without a clear reason, not making eye contact, and giving responses while still looking at the screen. The five main factors that contribute to this behavior are social media and internet dependence, fear of missing out (FoMO), self-control that is low, poor skills of communication, as well as the influence of the surrounding environment. The impacts that result from this behavior are negative emotional effects, communication disruptions, feelings of loneliness when surrounded by others, a decline in friendship quality, and a weakening in trust as well as conflict emergence. Research findings indicate that phubbing renders interpersonal communication ineffective, as evidenced by its disruption of five key aspects: openness, empathy, positive attitude, support, and equality.

The five identified forms of phubbing can be understood through the concept of interpersonal communication according to Rakhmat, (2007) which emphasizes that effective communication requires full presence, both physically and mentally. These various forms of phubbing reflect a failure to apply the basic principles of interpersonal communication, where a person is physically present but not mentally or emotionally engaged. In the context of media system dependency theory, adolescents are heavily reliant on smartphones to meet their needs for information, entertainment, and the formation of social identity Kim, (2020). This dependence creates the misconception that online interaction is more important than face-to-face communication, which ultimately leads to a decline in the quality of interpersonal communication. This is consistent with the findings (Putri et al., 2023) which indicates that Generation Z uses Instagram intensively to shape their self-identity, where their presence on social media has become extremely important even more so than face-to-face interactions. This phenomenon creates a high level of dependence on social media as a means of building and maintaining one's self-image, which in turn contributes to phubbing behavior when teenagers prioritize their digital presence over direct social interaction.

The factors that trigger phubbing include dependence on social media and the fear of missing out (FOMO), which reflects teenagers' need for the latest information and their concern about losing social connections. The results of this study are consistent with the findings Dayanty, (2023) which found a strong negative correlation between interpersonal communication and phubbing behavior, such that poor face-to-face communication skills increase the tendency to engage in phubbing. According to Rakhmat, (2007) explains that self-control refers to a person's ability to regulate their behavior and delay gratification. An inability to exercise self-control makes it difficult for adolescents to resist the urge to check their

smartphones, even while engaging in face-to-face interactions. This is supported by a study (Kurnia et al., 2020) that found a negative correlation between self-control and phubbing behavior among adolescents in Jakarta. Limited skills in communication leads to smartphone usage to escape social anxiety, while a social culture that considers phubbing normal justifies this behavior.

Phubbing's impact on victims can be seen from the perspective of interpersonal communication. As revealed by Rakhmat, (2007), basic human psychological needs, such as attention, recognition, and validation, are fulfilled by effective communication. With the occurrence of phubbing, these needs are not met, which causes the victim to feel ignored and not valued. Negative emotional effects arise as the victim sees phubbing as a form of rejection. The feeling of loneliness despite being together indicates the irony that emotional distance can be created by communication technology. These findings are backed by Aiyuda et al., (2023), in which it is found that there is a significant negative relationship between phubbing and friendship quality among teenagers in Pekanbaru. Phubbing weakens trust, closeness, as well as emotional support that is built through communication.

The five characteristics of effective communication, which according to Anggraini et al., (2022) and Rakhmat, (2007) are empathy, openness, support, a positive attitude, and equality can explain the ineffectiveness of interpersonal communication that is caused by phubbing. Studies show that openness can be hindered if victims do not feel comfortable enough sharing the personal problems that they have with the phubber, whom they believe will not give appropriate responses. Empathy can be absent if the attention of the phubber is divided between their phone and the conversation as it can prevent them from sensing other people's feelings. A positive attitude may become negative if the atmosphere becomes awkward and uncomfortable. Emotional support cannot be received because phubbers tend to give trivial responses as they do not fully pay attention to the victims' problems that they share. Equality can also be disrupted because an imbalance is created from phubbing. Phubbing can make the victim feel their position is unequal and less important than the digital content on the phubber's phone. These findings support the results of research conducted by Sigalingging et al., (2024) which states that phubbing has a significant impact on interpersonal communication, leading to a decline in communication quality characterized by an inability to concentrate and give full attention.

Dependence on social media creates misplaced priorities, with more emphasis placed on digital connections than on the depth of interpersonal interactions (Kim, 2020). This creates a vicious cycle, in which poor communication resulting from phubbing further damages relationships, which in turn leads to more phubbing to avoid unsatisfying interactions. This phenomenon indicates that interpersonal communication becomes less effective in the context of phubbing behavior among adolescents in Cirebon, which has the potential to harm the quality of their relationships and their future emotional well-being. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of digital literacy and awareness of the negative impacts of phubbing on interpersonal communication, as also suggested by Nurfalah & Lestari, (2020) In their study on the effectiveness of family communication in Cirebon, they state that effective communication requires an effective process of sending and receiving messages, both of which are disrupted by phubbing behavior.

Six teenagers aged 19 to 21 who live in Cirebon were involved in this study as the primary sources of information, consisting of Lia (19), Nadia (19), Alam (19), Ayu, (20), Marsya (20), and Handika (21). These informants were selected because they had experience with phubbing behavior, either as the perpetrator or the victim within their daily friendships. Each participant shared their personal experiences in individual interviews regarding how phubbing affects their friendships as well as their communication quality. Different perspectives of these six informants give a broad and comprehensive picture of the phubbing phenomenon among teenagers, strengthening the validity of this study's findings.

Through this study, a deeper understanding is gained on how phubbing is a behavior that significantly weakens the quality of social relationships among teenagers. When a person feels ignored because their friend chooses to focus on their phone, it can lead to a sense of discomfort, a decline in self-confidence, feelings of loneliness, and even cause friendships to grow distant. In social interactions, mental and emotional presence are just as important as physical presence for meaningful communication. Quality conversation is not measured by how long two or more people sit together, but by the attention they pay to each other during that time.

This study's results support and complement the theory of interpersonal communication, where the importance of five key elements of effective communication is emphasized, which are empathy, openness, attitude, support, and a positive attitude. From the findings, a conclusion can be drawn that phubbing directly hinders these five aspects. This supports the need to update our comprehension of interpersonal communication theory in this digital age. In practical terms, these results inform teachers, youth counselors, as well as parents that now is the time to begin teaching teenagers about digital literacy as well as the importance of respecting communication ethics. Creating healthy communication habits, like active listening exercises and face-to-face discussions without interruptions from digital device, can improve the emotional well-being of teenagers.

CONCLUSION

This study identifies five common forms of phubbing among adolescents in Cirebon—ignoring conversation partners, using phones while listening, repeatedly checking phones without clear reasons, avoiding eye contact, and responding without looking away from screens—revealing how deeply this behavior affects both physical and psychological aspects of social interaction. It finds that phubbing is driven by interconnected factors such as dependence on social media and the internet, fear of missing out (FOMO), low self-regulation, and weak communication skills, which together sustain the behavior despite awareness of its harmful effects. The consequences are substantial, including reduced self-confidence, feelings of worthlessness, weakened friendship quality, communication breakdowns, misunderstandings, loneliness even in social settings, and declining trust that can lead to conflict. Phubbing also disrupts key elements of effective interpersonal communication—openness, empathy, positivity, support, and equality—creating a negative cycle that harms both relationships and emotional well-being over time. Therefore, the study underscores the importance of digital literacy and psychoeducational interventions to promote mindful presence and self-control in social interactions; future research could explore the effectiveness

of specific intervention programs or compare phubbing behaviors across different cultural or socioeconomic adolescent groups to better tailor prevention strategies.

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