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Adult Phubbing in the Digital Era: A Conceptual Integration of Fear of Missing Out, Loneliness, Relationship Satisfaction, Self-Esteem, and Resilience

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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Abstract

The rapid diffusion of smartphones has profoundly reshaped interpersonal communication across the lifespan. Among the most pervasive yet under-theorised digital behaviours is phubbing - the act of ignoring physically present individuals in favour of mobile phone engagement. While phubbing has been extensively examined among adolescents and emerging adults, its conceptualisation and psychological implications in adulthood remain inadequately explored. Adult life is marked by enduring relational roles, emotional responsibilities, and social expectations, rendering attentional presence a critical component of psychological and relational well-being. Drawing upon psychological, sociological, and communication theories, the present article offers a comprehensive

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conceptual analysis of adult phubbing and its interrelationships with Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), loneliness, relationship satisfaction, self-esteem, and resilience. By synthesising existing empirical literature and extending adolescent-based frameworks into adult psychosocial contexts, the article proposes an integrative conceptual model that positions phubbing as both an antecedent and outcome of relational and emotional vulnerabilities in adulthood. The article contributes to theory development by reframing phubbing as a multidimensional psychosocial phenomenon and outlines directions for future empirical research and intervention strategies aimed at fostering digital well-being and relational health among adults.

Keywords: Adult phubbing; fear of missing out; loneliness; relationship satisfaction; self-esteem; resilience; digital well-being.

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has transformed the texture of everyday social life. Smartphones, once designed primarily for communication, have evolved into multifunctional devices that mediate work, leisure, social interaction, and emotional regulation. For adults, smartphones occupy a central position in managing professional responsibilities, maintaining social ties, and accessing information in real time. However, the omnipresence of these devices has also generated behavioural patterns that subtly yet persistently disrupt face-to-face interaction. One such behaviour is phubbing—a portmanteau of “phone” and “snubbing”—which refers to the act of ignoring physically present individuals in favour of smartphone use.

Phubbing has become normalized in contemporary social contexts, often perceived as an unavoidable by-product of technological advancement. In many settings, divided attention is no longer viewed as socially inappropriate but as an expected mode of interaction. Despite this normalisation, growing evidence suggests that phubbing carries significant psychological and relational consequences. The experience of being ignored during interpersonal encounters can undermine feelings of belongingness, relational security, and self-worth, while habitual engagement in phubbing may reflect deeper emotional needs and anxieties.

The majority of existing research on phubbing has focused on adolescents and university students, situating the behaviour within developmental frameworks such as identity formation, peer influence, and social comparison. While this body of research has yielded important insights, it risks marginalising the unique psychosocial realities of adulthood. Adults occupy relatively stable relational roles—as spouses, partners, parents, colleagues, and

community members—where attentional presence is closely tied to emotional responsibility, mutual respect, and relational commitment. Disruptions in attentional engagement within these roles can have cumulative and long-term consequences for psychological well-being and relationship stability.

Despite the increasing prevalence of adult phubbing, theoretical integration in this area remains limited. Many studies examine isolated variables without embedding them within a coherent conceptual framework. Moreover, constructs such as resilience, which may buffer the negative effects of digital disruption, remain underexplored. The present article seeks to address these gaps by offering a comprehensive conceptual analysis of adult phubbing, integrating five key psychological constructs: Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), loneliness, relationship satisfaction, self-esteem, and resilience.

Rather than presenting new empirical data, this article adopts a theory-building approach, synthesizing existing literature and extending adolescent-based models into adult contexts. In doing so, it aims to establish a robust conceptual foundation for future empirical research and practical intervention.

1.1 Rationale and Significance of a Conceptual Approach

Conceptual articles occupy a critical position in psychological scholarship, particularly in areas characterized by rapid social change and fragmented empirical findings. By organizing existing knowledge, identifying theoretical gaps, and proposing integrative frameworks, conceptual work guides future research and deepens theoretical understanding.

The decision to adopt a conceptual approach in the present article is grounded in several

considerations. First, adult phubbing remains under-theorised despite its widespread occurrence. While empirical studies have documented associations between phubbing and various psychological outcomes, there is a lack of comprehensive frameworks that explain why and how these relationships emerge in adulthood. Second, adulthood is often treated as a homogeneous extension of youth, overlooking the unique emotional, relational, and role-based demands that characterise adult life. Third, there is a pressing need to integrate multiple psychological constructs-such as FOMO, loneliness, self-esteem, and resilience-into a unified explanatory model.

By focusing on conceptual integration rather than statistical analysis, this article aligns with the standards of reputed national and international journals that recognize the scholarly value of theory development. The conceptual framework proposed here is intended to inform hypothesis generation, research design, and intervention development in future studies on adult digital behaviour.

Conceptualizing Adult Phubbing: Phubbing in adulthood can be conceptualised as a pattern of attentional displacement in which individuals prioritize smartphone-mediated engagement over immediate interpersonal interaction. Unlike adolescents, whose phubbing behaviour is often shaped by peer norms and developmental experimentation, adult phubbing is embedded within complex psychosocial contexts involving responsibility, emotional labour, and relational expectations.

Adult phubbing manifests across multiple relational domains:

Phubbing in Intimate Relationships: In romantic and marital relationships, attentional presence serves as a foundation for emotional intimacy and trust. Phubbing in these contexts is often perceived not merely as a distraction but as emotional withdrawal or relational neglect. Repeated episodes of divided attention can erode perceived partner responsiveness and contribute to relational dissatisfaction.

Phubbing in Family Interactions: Within family systems, particularly parent-child and intergenerational relationships, phubbing may disrupt emotional availability and modelling of healthy communication. Adults who habitually engage in phubbing may unintentionally signal

diminished relational priority, affecting family cohesion.

Phubbing in Social and Professional Contexts: In social gatherings and workplace settings, phubbing alters norms of respect, attentiveness, and engagement. While occasionally tolerated, persistent phubbing can undermine social cohesion, professional credibility, and interpersonal trust.

Across these domains, adult phubbing reflects a reconfiguration of attentional priorities that has far-reaching psychological and relational implications (Al-Saggaf et al., 2019).

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Phubbing: Conceptualization and Measurement

Phubbing, a portmanteau of phone and snubbing, is increasingly recognised as a significant interpersonal and social phenomenon. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2016) define it as the act of ignoring physically present individuals in favour of smartphone use. The literature indicates that phubbing not only reduces the quality of interaction but also carries implicit social cues signalling neglect or disinterest (Vanden et al., 2016). From a psychological perspective, phubbing embodies both attentional distraction and social signalling, affecting impressions and relational dynamics (Roberts & David, 2016).

Phubbing is multi-dimensional. Researchers have developed instruments like the Generic Scale of Phubbing (GSP) and the Generic Scale of Being Phubbed (GSBP) (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018). The GSP measures individual phubbing behaviour, while GSBP assesses perceptions of being phubbed by others. Dimensions such as screen obsession, communication disturbance, and relationship neglect capture both behavioural and subjective experiences of phubbing. Recent meta-analytic studies show that phubbing prevalence ranges from 40-70% among young adults, highlighting its ubiquitous nature in contemporary society (Arenz & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2023; Ansari et al., 2024). Sobhan & Lokesh (2022) found a positive correlation between phubbing and impulsivity in young adults (18–25 years), indicating that higher levels of phone-ignoring behaviour during social interactions are associated with greater impulsiveness. This

highlights phubbing's link with problematic mobile phone use.

Predictors of phubbing include personality traits, social media addiction, and compulsive technology use. For instance, Karadag et al. (2015) identified neuroticism and low conscientiousness as strong predictors of phubbing. Sociodemographic variables such as gender, age, and relationship status also modulate phubbing behaviour (Escalera-Chavez et al., 2020; Jain & Tyagi, 2024). The literature demonstrates that phubbing is not merely a behavioural habit but reflects deeper psychological and social processes influenced by technological and relational contexts.

2.2 Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and Its Relationship with Phubbing

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) is defined as a pervasive apprehension that others are having rewarding experiences from which one is absent (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013). This construct has been extensively linked to digital media use and phubbing. FOMO increases compulsive smartphone checking and social media engagement, which directly fosters phubbing behaviour (Franchina et al., 2018; Balta et al., 2020). Individuals with higher FOMO experience more distractions and reduced attention in face-to-face interactions, thereby escalating relational disruptions.

Adolescents and young adults appear particularly vulnerable to FOMO-induced phubbing. Stead and Bibby (2017) found that individuals with high neuroticism and FOMO were more likely to engage in phubbing behaviours. Fang et al. (2020) revealed that perceived social support through digital platforms could paradoxically increase FOMO, which, in turn, elevated phubbing frequency. Paul et al. (2024) further confirmed that FOMO predicts phubbing independent of age or relationship status, suggesting that this cognitive-emotional mechanism operates across demographic boundaries.

2.3 Loneliness: Mediating and Outcome Variables

Loneliness, conceptualized as a subjective feeling of social isolation (Victor & Yang, 2012), is both an outcome and a mediator in phubbing research. Theoretical frameworks such as the

Social Compensation Hypothesis propose that individuals use digital devices to compensate for real-life social deficits, often exacerbating relational isolation Weidman et al. (2012). Phubbing disrupts interpersonal cues such as eye contact, gestures, and conversational reciprocity, leading to emotional disconnection (Wirth et al., 2010). Błachnio and Przepiorka (2018) observed significant positive correlations between being phubbed and loneliness, suggesting that both active and passive digital disengagement contributes to perceived social disconnection.

The research of Zhan et al. (2022) highlighted that repeated phubbing episodes within close relationships can perpetuate loneliness, emphasizing the cyclical nature of this phenomenon. Gender differences emerge, with females reporting higher emotional distress linked to phubbing compared to males (Escalera-Chavez et al., 2020), reflecting socio-cultural and relational expectations.

2.4 Relationship Satisfaction and Partner Phubbing

Phubbing negatively influences romantic and interpersonal relationship satisfaction. Roberts and David (2016) showed that partner phubbing is associated with decreased relational intimacy, communication quality, and trust. McDaniel and Coyne (2014) observed that technofence, or the interference of technology in dyadic interactions, is significantly linked to conflict escalation and reduced satisfaction.

Attachment theory provides a robust framework to understand this dynamic. Individuals with insecure attachment styles are more sensitive to partner phubbing, interpreting it as relational rejection (Bowlby, 1969). Conversely, empathic partners demonstrate resilience against the negative impacts of phubbing (Zhan et al., 2022). Recent studies further indicate that phubbing not only diminishes satisfaction but also predicts relational instability, increased conflict, and decreased commitment (Jain & Tyagi, 2024; Utami et al., 2021). Sun & Yoon (2023) explored friend phubbing (ignoring friends for smartphone use), showing that smartphone dependence, social norms, technology overload, and notifications increase phubbing, while self-control reduces it. Phubbing was linked to lower friendship commitment and satisfaction and acted as a mediator between predictors and social outcomes.

2.5 Self-Esteem and Digital Interaction

Self-esteem, representing an individual's evaluation of self-worth, is significantly affected by phubbing behaviours. Błachnio and Przepiorka (2018) found that individuals who frequently phub or experience phubbing report lower self-esteem and higher social media intrusion. Ivanova et al. (2020) observed that lower self-esteem predicts higher engagement in phubbing, creating a feedback loop where diminished self-worth leads to increased reliance on digital devices for validation.

Theoretical perspectives such as Symbolic Interactionism suggest that social interactions shape self-concept (Mead, 1934; McMullin & Cairney, 2004). When phubbing interrupts face-to-face interactions, it conveys subtle social rejection, potentially eroding self-esteem over time (Chmielik & Błachnio, 2021). Gendered patterns of smartphone use further mediate this relationship, with females often perceiving higher relational neglect and consequent self-esteem reductions (Kling et al., 1999).

2.6 Resilience: Protective Factor

Resilience, defined as the ability to adapt positively to stress and adversity, serves as a protective factor against the negative psychological consequences of phubbing. Ari and Çarkıt (2020) note that resilient individuals display stronger emotional regulation, mitigating the adverse impact of digital distractions. Mindfulness, closely related to resilience, has been shown to improve attentional control, reducing susceptibility to phubbing-induced relational stress (Chin et al., 2021). Coşkun et al. (2024) examined ostracism as a risk factor for smartphone addiction among young adults. Findings showed that ostracism increased addiction risk, resilience acted as a protective mediator, and nomophobia weakened this buffering effect, highlighting complex psychosocial pathways in problematic smartphone use.

Emerging research suggests that resilience moderates the relationship between phubbing and outcomes such as loneliness and reduced self-esteem (Coskun, Griffiths, & Erzen, 2019). Resilient individuals interpret phubbing events as situational rather than personal rejection, thereby preserving emotional well-being. Although literature directly linking resilience to phubbing is limited, theoretical frameworks indicate its

relevance as a buffer in digital-age social stressors.

2.7 Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Phubbing Research

Several psychological theories have been employed to explain the mechanisms of phubbing and its outcomes:

1. **Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976):** Explains how the absence of real-time attention in interactions (due to smartphone use) reduces perceived social presence, impacting relational satisfaction.
2. **Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969):** Highlights the moderating role of attachment style in interpreting phubbing as relational rejection.
3. **Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, 1934; Chmielik & Błachnio, 2021):** Suggests that self-esteem and relational evaluations are co-constructed through observed social behaviours, including phubbing.
4. **Social Compensation Hypothesis (McKenna & Bargh, 2000):** Explains how individuals compensate for offline relational deficits via digital engagement, which may exacerbate loneliness and phubbing.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives provides a multidimensional understanding of phubbing, linking cognitive, emotional, and social domains.

2.8 Research Gap

Despite the growing body of research on phubbing, existing literature remains disproportionately focused on adolescents and young adults, with limited attention to phubbing as a phenomenon embedded within adult psychosocial contexts. Most empirical studies examine phubbing either as an outcome of problematic smartphone use or as an interpersonal irritant, without sufficiently situating it within the complex relational, emotional, and role-based responsibilities that characterize adulthood. Consequently, the psychological mechanisms through which adult phubbing influences well-being and relationship quality remain under-theorized.

Furthermore, prior studies tend to investigate phubbing in isolation or in relation to a narrow set of correlates, such as smartphone addiction or relationship satisfaction, thereby overlooking the interconnected roles of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), loneliness, self-esteem, and resilience within a unified explanatory framework. The absence of integrative models limits theoretical advancement and constrains the development of holistic interventions targeting adult relational functioning in digitally saturated environments.

Notably, resilience—a key psychological resource in adulthood—has received minimal attention in phubbing research, despite its potential to buffer the adverse effects of digital distraction on emotional and relational outcomes. Additionally, most studies adopt cross-sectional and individual-centric approaches, neglecting the dyadic and contextual dimensions of adult relationships where attentional presence carries moral, emotional, and social significance.

In light of these gaps, there is a critical need for a comprehensive conceptual framework that explicates adult phubbing as a psychologically meaningful behaviour shaped by digital anxiety and motivational deficits, and that systematically links phubbing to loneliness, relationship satisfaction, self-esteem, and resilience. Addressing this gap, the present conceptual article integrates established psychological theories to propose an inclusive model of adult phubbing, thereby extending existing knowledge and offering a foundation for future empirical and intervention-based research.

2.8.1 Summary of Literature and Research Gaps

The literature reveals several critical insights:

- Phubbing is prevalent across age groups but more extensively studied in adolescents and young adults.
- Psychological constructs like FOMO, self-esteem, and loneliness are closely interlinked with phubbing.
- Relationship satisfaction is significantly compromised by both partner phubbing and individual phubbing.
- Resilience and mindfulness emerge as potential protective factors but remain under-researched in digital contexts.

- Existing studies often lack integrated models combining individual, relational, and psychological variables.

2.9 Distinctiveness of Adult Phubbing

While phubbing has been widely examined among adolescents and emerging adults, its manifestation in adulthood represents a qualitatively distinct psychological and relational phenomenon. Adolescence and early adulthood are developmental stages characterized by identity exploration, peer validation, and experimental social engagement. In contrast, adulthood is marked by relative identity consolidation, stable relational commitments, occupational responsibilities, and heightened expectations of emotional availability. Within this context, phubbing assumes deeper relational and moral significance.

Adult phubbing occurs primarily within enduring interpersonal relationships—such as marriages, long-term partnerships, friendships, and workplace interactions—where attentional presence functions as a symbol of respect, care, and relational investment. Unlike adolescents, adults are socially expected to regulate their digital engagement in ways that preserve relational quality and emotional reciprocity. Consequently, phubbing in adulthood may be perceived not merely as distraction, but as emotional withdrawal, relational neglect, or symbolic devaluation of the interaction partner.

Moreover, adult phubbing is often driven less by novelty-seeking and more by chronic digital anxiety, particularly Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) associated with professional demands, social obligations, and persistent connectivity norms. The psychological cost of such behaviour is therefore amplified, as repeated attentional disengagement undermines relational security, contributes to perceived loneliness even within close relationships, and erodes self-worth through diminished social validation.

Importantly, adulthood also involves greater reliance on psychological resources such as resilience to manage stressors arising from role conflict, digital overload, and relational strain. This positions resilience as a critical moderator in understanding why some adults experience significant psychological distress due to phubbing, while others demonstrate adaptive coping and relational repair. Thus, adult phubbing cannot be adequately understood

through developmental models designed for younger populations, necessitating a distinct conceptual lens that accounts for adult relational ethics, emotional responsibility, and psychological regulation.

By foregrounding these distinctions, the present article advances the argument that adult phubbing constitutes a unique behavioural construct with specific antecedents, processes, and consequences, warranting independent theoretical and empirical attention.

2.10 Conceptual Distinction between Adolescent and Adult Phubbing

Although phubbing has been predominantly examined within adolescent and emerging adult populations, its manifestation in adulthood occurs within a qualitatively different developmental and relational context. To clarify these differences, Table 1 presents a conceptual distinction between adolescent and adult phubbing across key developmental, motivational, and regulatory dimensions. This comparison situates adult phubbing as a distinct phenomenon rather than a

mere developmental continuation of adolescent digital distraction.

As illustrated in Table 1, adolescent phubbing is largely embedded in processes of identity exploration, peer approval, and novelty seeking, where external regulatory structures such as parental and institutional control play a significant role. In contrast, adult phubbing unfolds within a context of identity consolidation and enduring relational commitments, where attentional presence carries ethical and emotional significance. The shift from externally regulated experimentation to self-regulated relational responsibility underscores the heightened psychological and moral implications of phubbing in adulthood. Consequently, adult phubbing is more likely to be driven by digital anxiety and Fear of Missing Out, and its consequences extend beyond momentary social disengagement to affect relational satisfaction, self-esteem, and emotional well-being.

Fig. 1 illustrates the psychological process through which FOMO-driven attentional withdrawal translates into relational neglect and subsequent emotional and relational outcomes in adulthood.

Table 1. Conceptual distinction between adolescent and adult phubbing

Dimension	Adolescent Phubbing	Adult Phubbing
Developmental orientation	Identity exploration	Identity consolidation
Primary social motivation	Peer approval	Relational responsibility
Underlying psychological driver	Novelty seeking	Digital anxiety (Fear of Missing Out)
Nature of relationships	Short-term and fluid relationships	Enduring and committed relationships
Regulatory mechanisms	External regulation (parents, teachers, peers)	Self-regulation expectations
Developmental function	Experimentation and boundary testing	Ethical and emotional accountability

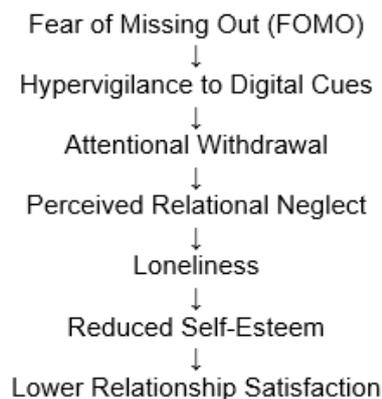


Fig.1. Psychological mechanism underlying adult phubbing

3. Theoretical Foundations of Adult Phubbing

Adult phubbing is a complex behavioural phenomenon that intersects cognitive, emotional, and social domains. Understanding it requires integrating multiple theoretical lenses to capture its antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that human behaviour is driven by the need to satisfy three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). FOMO, a primary antecedent of phubbing, can be conceptualized within this framework as the manifestation of unmet relatedness needs. Adults who feel socially excluded or perceive themselves as missing rewarding experiences may compulsively check their phones, resulting in phubbing. The digital environment amplifies the visibility of others' activities, fostering FOMO, which serves as a motivational force driving attentional withdrawal from present interactions. Studies by Alt (2015) and Franchina et al. (2018) provide empirical support, highlighting the role of unmet social needs in triggering phubbing behaviour.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) provides another critical lens. Adult phubbing often occurs in close relational contexts-romantic relationships, friendships, and family interactions-where attentional withdrawal can be interpreted as rejection. Individuals with insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious or avoidant attachment, may experience heightened distress when their partners or peers phub them. This attentional neglect signals relational insecurity and can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction. Empirical studies by Roberts and David (2016) and Zhan et al. (2022) demonstrate that partner phubbing diminishes relational trust and intimacy, particularly among individuals with high attachment anxiety.

Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) frames phubbing in terms of cost-benefit analysis within interpersonal relationships. Phubbing represents a reduction in relational rewards-the attention, responsiveness, and emotional validation exchanged during interactions. When one partner's attention is diverted to a digital device, the relational "currency" of responsiveness declines, leading to perceptions of imbalance and dissatisfaction. This perspective is particularly useful in understanding why

phubbing predicts relationship deterioration: it alters the expected reciprocity in social exchanges (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014; Utami et al., 2021).

Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, 1934) emphasizes the role of social feedback in shaping self-concept and self-esteem. Adult phubbing can convey subtle messages of neglect or disinterest, which are internalized by the recipient. This process can erode self-esteem over time, particularly when phubbing is recurrent and occurs in emotionally significant relationships. Chmielik and Błachnio (2021) highlight that adults who experience frequent phubbing perceive themselves as less valued, which negatively affects psychological well-being.

Together, these theories provide a multidimensional lens for adult phubbing: SDT explains the motivational antecedents, Attachment Theory elucidates relational vulnerabilities, Social Exchange Theory frames the cost-benefit relational consequences, and Symbolic Interactionism accounts for intrapersonal psychological outcomes. Integrating these frameworks allows a more nuanced understanding of why phubbing occurs, how it impacts relational and psychological health, and what moderating factors might mitigate its negative effects.

3.1 An Integrated Conceptual Model of Adult Phubbing

Drawing upon the reviewed literature and theoretical perspectives, this article proposes an integrated conceptual model of adult phubbing. The model positions FOMO as a central antecedent that drives phubbing behaviour. Adults experiencing high levels of FOMO are more likely to engage in phubbing, diverting attention from in-person interactions toward digital activities.

Phubbing, in this framework, functions as a mediator between digital anxiety and relational outcomes. Digital anxiety arises from concerns about missing information, social validation, or updates in social networks (Alt, 2015; Fang et al., 2020). Phubbing translates this anxiety into observable behaviour that affects others in relational contexts. As a result, individuals who experience phubbing, either as perpetrators or recipients, face negative outcomes such as:

1. **Increased loneliness:** by reducing meaningful social interactions and diminishing perceived social presence (Błachnio & Przepiorka, 2018; Victor & Yang, 2012).
2. **Reduced relationship satisfaction:** as attentional withdrawal signals neglect, reducing perceived emotional support and reciprocity (Roberts & David, 2016; Zhan et al., 2022).
3. **Lowered self-esteem:** through internalization of social cues indicating diminished personal value or relational importance (Chmielik & Błachnio, 2021).

Resilience is integrated as a moderating factor in this model. Resilient individuals possess greater emotional regulation and adaptive coping strategies, allowing them to buffer the negative impact of phubbing. For example, a resilient adult may interpret partner phubbing as situational rather than as a reflection of personal worth, thereby maintaining relationship satisfaction and self-esteem (Ari & Çarkıt, 2020; Coskun et al., 2019). Conversely, individuals with lower resilience may experience amplified negative outcomes.

This model provides a holistic understanding by linking motivational, relational, and psychological dimensions. It emphasizes that adult phubbing is not merely an isolated behavioural problem but a phenomenon

embedded in broader social, cognitive, and emotional processes. The integrated framework also offers clear propositions for empirical testing, intervention development, and theoretical advancement.

Fig. 2 presents the proposed integrated conceptual model of adult phubbing. The model conceptualizes Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) as a primary antecedent that generates digital anxiety, which in turn predicts adult phubbing behaviour. Phubbing is positioned as a mediating mechanism linking digital anxiety to key psychological and relational outcomes, including loneliness, relationship satisfaction, and self-esteem. Resilience is incorporated as a moderating factor that influences the strength of the relationships between adult phubbing and its psychological consequences.

3.2 Conceptual Propositions

Building on the conceptual model, five propositions are advanced:

Proposition 1: “Fear of Missing Out positively predicts adult phubbing behaviour.”

Adults experiencing high FOMO are compelled to monitor digital content and social updates, often at the expense of present interpersonal engagement (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013; Franchina et al., 2018). This behaviour is reinforced through reward-based mechanisms, including social validation and informational gain.

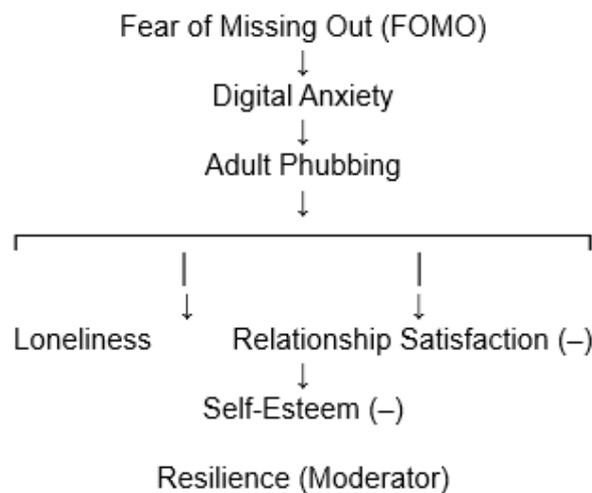


Fig. 2. The impact of adult phubbing on loneliness, relationship satisfaction, and self-esteem

Proposition 2: “Adult phubbing is positively associated with loneliness.”

Both empirical and theoretical evidence supports that phubbing reduces the quality and frequency of meaningful interactions, leading to perceived social isolation (Błachnio & Przepiorka, 2018). This effect is particularly salient in emotionally significant relationships where attentional neglect signals relational absence.

Proposition 3: “Adult phubbing negatively affects relationship satisfaction.”

Phubbing violates social norms of attentional reciprocity, diminishing perceived relational rewards and trust (Roberts & David, 2016; McDaniel & Coyne, 2014). Repeated exposure to phubbing can result in chronic dissatisfaction, conflict escalation, and relational instability.

Proposition 4: “Adult phubbing is associated with lower self-esteem.”

Through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, phubbing communicates neglect and devaluation. Adults internalize these cues, which can erode self-worth, particularly among individuals with pre-existing vulnerabilities (Chmielik & Błachnio, 2021).

Proposition 5: “Resilience moderates the relationship between adult phubbing and psychological outcomes.”

Individuals with high resilience are less susceptible to the adverse effects of phubbing on loneliness, relationship satisfaction, and self-esteem, highlighting its role as a protective psychological resource (Ari & Çarkıt, 2020; Coskun et al., 2019).

4. Implications for Research and Practice

The proposed framework offers several significant implications for both research and practical interventions.

Research Implications:

- 1. Empirical Validation:** The conceptual propositions can guide future quantitative and qualitative studies. Researchers may employ longitudinal designs to test causal pathways, particularly the mediating role of phubbing between FOMO and relational outcomes.
- 2. Dyadic Studies:** Examining phubbing within couples, friendships, or family systems can elucidate the interactive effects of attentional withdrawal on relational satisfaction and well-being.

3. Interdisciplinary Integration: Combining psychological, sociological, and communication perspectives can provide a more comprehensive understanding of phubbing in adult populations.

4. Moderating Variables: Future research may explore additional moderating factors, such as mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and cultural norms, which may influence the phubbing-outcome relationship.

Practical Implications:

1. Digital Mindfulness Training: Programs designed to enhance awareness of smartphone use and its relational consequences can reduce phubbing behaviours.

2. Relational Communication Interventions: Couples, family, and workplace training can emphasize attentional presence, non-verbal communication, and responsive listening.

3. Resilience Enhancement: Psychological interventions that strengthen coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, and resilience may buffer against the negative impact of phubbing.

4. Organizational and Policy Applications: Organizations can promote healthy digital use through norms, policies, and work-life balance initiatives to mitigate phubbing-related relational disruption.

By integrating theory, literature, and practice, this framework provides a roadmap for addressing adult phubbing in diverse contexts, from personal relationships to professional settings.

5. Conclusion

Adult phubbing represents a subtle yet pervasive challenge in the contemporary digital landscape. Rooted in FOMO and reinforced by individual psychological vulnerabilities, phubbing undermines attentional presence, relational satisfaction, and self-perceptions. The integration of Self-Determination Theory, Attachment Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism provides a multidimensional

understanding of phubbing's antecedents, processes, and outcomes.

The proposed conceptual model positions FOMO as a primary driver of adult phubbing, which mediates the relationship between digital anxiety and negative relational outcomes. Loneliness, diminished relationship satisfaction, and reduced self-esteem are primary consequences, while resilience operates as a protective moderator. This framework not only synthesizes existing empirical evidence but also identifies clear pathways for future research and intervention development.

Addressing adult phubbing requires not a rejection of technology but a conscious commitment to attentional presence, mindful digital engagement, and relational responsibility. By adopting strategies that enhance resilience, relational awareness, and emotional regulation, adults can navigate the challenges of the digital age without compromising interpersonal and psychological well-being. Ultimately, understanding and mitigating phubbing represents a critical step toward fostering healthier digital lives and more meaningful social connections in adulthood.

Disclaimer (Artificial Intelligence)

The author hereby declare that artificial intelligence (AI) technology was used during the editing of this manuscript. The use of AI was strictly limited to strengthening sentence structure, improving flow, and refining academic language in the *Introduction* section. The author retains full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, interpretation, and integrity of the scholarly content presented in this manuscript.

Details of AI Usage:

- Name of AI tool:** ChatGPT
Version/Model: GPT-5.2
Source: OpenAI (<https://openai.com>)

Purpose and nature of prompts used: Prompts focused on improving sentence structure, clarity, coherence, and academic tone in the Introduction section without generating new data, results, or interpretations.

Competing Interests

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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