

Phubbing and Its Impact on the Quality of Interpersonal Communication: A Literature Review

Nur Nilam Sari*, Toharim Suryarini, Siti Rohana, Sulistio, Ali Murtadho

Master's Program in Islamic Communication and Broadcasting, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, UIN Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600867>

Received: 13 June 2026; Accepted: 18 June 2026; Published: 08 July 2026

ABSTRACT

Phubbing, the behavior of ignoring one's conversation partner during face-to-face social interactions in favor of using a smartphone has become a pervasive psychosocial phenomenon in the digital age, with significant implications for the quality of interpersonal communication. This study presents a systematic literature review, guided by PRISMA reporting principles, of 16 peer-reviewed scientific articles published between 2020 and 2025, sourced from Google Scholar, DOAJ, and Semantic Scholar. Three main themes were identified: (1) the impact of phubbing on communication quality and relational satisfaction, (2) the psychological mechanisms underlying the impact of phubbing, including threats to basic needs, erosion of empathy, and attachment anxiety, and (3) contextual and individual factors that moderate phubbing behavior. The findings consistently show that phubbing threatens basic psychological needs, erodes empathy and interpersonal competence, and reduces relational satisfaction across various social contexts, although the strength and consistency of these effects vary by relationship type and cultural context. The implications of these findings are highly relevant for Indonesia as one of the countries with the highest smartphone usage rates in the world. This review provides a structured synthesis of the latest evidence, proposes an integrative conceptual framework linking phubbing to its psychological mechanisms and outcomes, and highlights the urgency of context-based empirical research in Indonesia.

Keywords: phubbing, interpersonal communication, communication quality, psychological well-being, digital media

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of smartphone technology over the past decade has fundamentally transformed patterns of human social interaction. Mobile devices are no longer merely tools for long-distance communication; rather, they have become an extension of an individual's identity and social presence. In this digital age, it is not uncommon for people to keep their smartphones in hand even when face-to-face with others, a phenomenon reflecting a fundamental shift in the ethics and practices of interpersonal communication. The phenomenon of phubbing does not emerge in a vacuum; it is a product of a digital ecosystem that systematically commodifies human attention. Social media platforms, instant messaging apps, and constant notifications create an environment that actively competes with the presence of the conversation partner in face-to-face interactions. Under such conditions, the act of shifting attention to a smartphone screen is not merely a conscious choice but a response conditioned by the persuasive architecture of the technology itself (Twenge & Campbell, 2019).

Empirically, numerous international studies have confirmed that phubbing the act of ignoring a physically present conversation partner to use a smartphone has a tangible impact on communication quality and relational well-being. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2016) were the first to systematically define phubbing and develop

the Generic Scale of Phubbing, launching a research agenda that is now rapidly expanding across psychology, communication studies, and family studies (Capilla Garrido et al., 2021). Subsequent studies consistently show that phubbing is associated with reduced relationship satisfaction, increased interpersonal conflict, decreased empathy, and disrupted social connectedness (Roberts & David, 2020; Sun & Samp, 2022; Uncu et al., 2024).

Although the international literature on phubbing is growing rapidly, there remains a significant gap. Most existing studies have been conducted in Western and East Asian cultural contexts, so the generalizability of these findings to the Indonesian context with its collectivist cultural characteristics, distinctive communication norms, and extremely high smartphone penetration rate remains limited. Furthermore, research that specifically integrates a communication psychology perspective to analyze the impact of phubbing on the quality of interpersonal communication in Indonesia remains scarce. Indonesia records an average of over six hours of mobile device usage per day, making it one of the countries with the highest smartphone dependency globally (We Are Social, 2023). This reality creates a social context highly conducive to the emergence of phubbing patterns as a norm of daily interaction, particularly among Generation Z and college students. Meanwhile, the Indonesian context adds a distinct dimension that cannot be ignored. A collectivist culture that prioritizes social harmony and a sense of reserve in interpersonal communication creates a paradox: on one hand, social norms demand full engagement in face-to-face interactions; on the other hand, the pressure to always be responsive to digital messages actually encourages phubbing behavior. The tension between these two social demands has not been extensively studied empirically, even though it has the potential to produce psychological impact patterns that differ from findings based on Western individualistic cultures. Closing this gap is one of the central motivations of the present review.

Most existing literature reviews also cover too broad a time span, thus failing to reflect recent post-pandemic research developments, during which smartphone use and the normalization of phubbing have accelerated significantly. Given this gap, this study aims to synthesize the latest literature (2020–2025) on phubbing and its impact on the quality of interpersonal communication, with the specific objectives of: (1) identifying the primary psychological mechanisms mediating the effects of phubbing; (2) to map the contextual and individual factors that moderate phubbing behavior; and (3) to formulate implications of the findings for the development of context-based research in Indonesia. Research based on systematic reviews and meta-analyses is becoming an increasingly relevant approach in this context, given the proliferation of empirical studies on phubbing that employ diverse measurement instruments, research designs, and sample populations. A critical synthesis of the current literature allows for the identification of findings that are consistent across contexts while revealing inconsistencies that indicate undetected moderators. Without such consolidation efforts, the rapid growth of the literature risks obscuring conceptual understanding rather than clarifying it.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines for the search, screening, and selection stages (Page et al., 2021). This approach was chosen because it allows for a transparent, replicable, and comprehensive synthesis of evidence, thereby minimizing selection bias and providing a structured foundation for drawing conclusions (Snyder, 2019). In this study, phubbing is operationally defined as the behavior of ignoring an individual physically present in a face-to-face interaction by diverting attention to smartphone use, including reading, typing, browsing, or simply staring at the device's screen (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016). Interpersonal communication quality refers to an individual's perception of the depth, satisfaction, emotional connection, and effectiveness of message exchange in dyadic or small-group interactions (Sun & Samp, 2022).

The literature search was conducted systematically using three electronic databases: Google Scholar, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), and Semantic Scholar. The initial search was conducted in May 2025 with a publication year range of 2020–2024 to ensure the relevance and recency of the findings, given the acceleration of phubbing research following the pandemic. To address the continued rapid growth of this literature and improve the comprehensiveness of the synthesis, a supplementary search using the identical keyword strategy

and databases was conducted in June 2026 to capture studies published in 2025, extending the overall coverage period to 2020–2025. The keyword combinations used are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Keyword Combination Strategy for Literature Search

Primary Keywords	Combined With	Database
"phubbing"	"interpersonal communication" / "communication quality"	Google Scholar, DOAJ
"smartphone snubbing"	"relationship satisfaction" / "relational well-being"	Google Scholar
"partner phubbing"	"empathy" / "interpersonal competence"	Semantic Scholar, DOAJ
"phone snubbing"	"psychological well-being" / "social interaction"	Google Scholar
"technoference"	"face-to-face communication" / "attachment"	Semantic Scholar

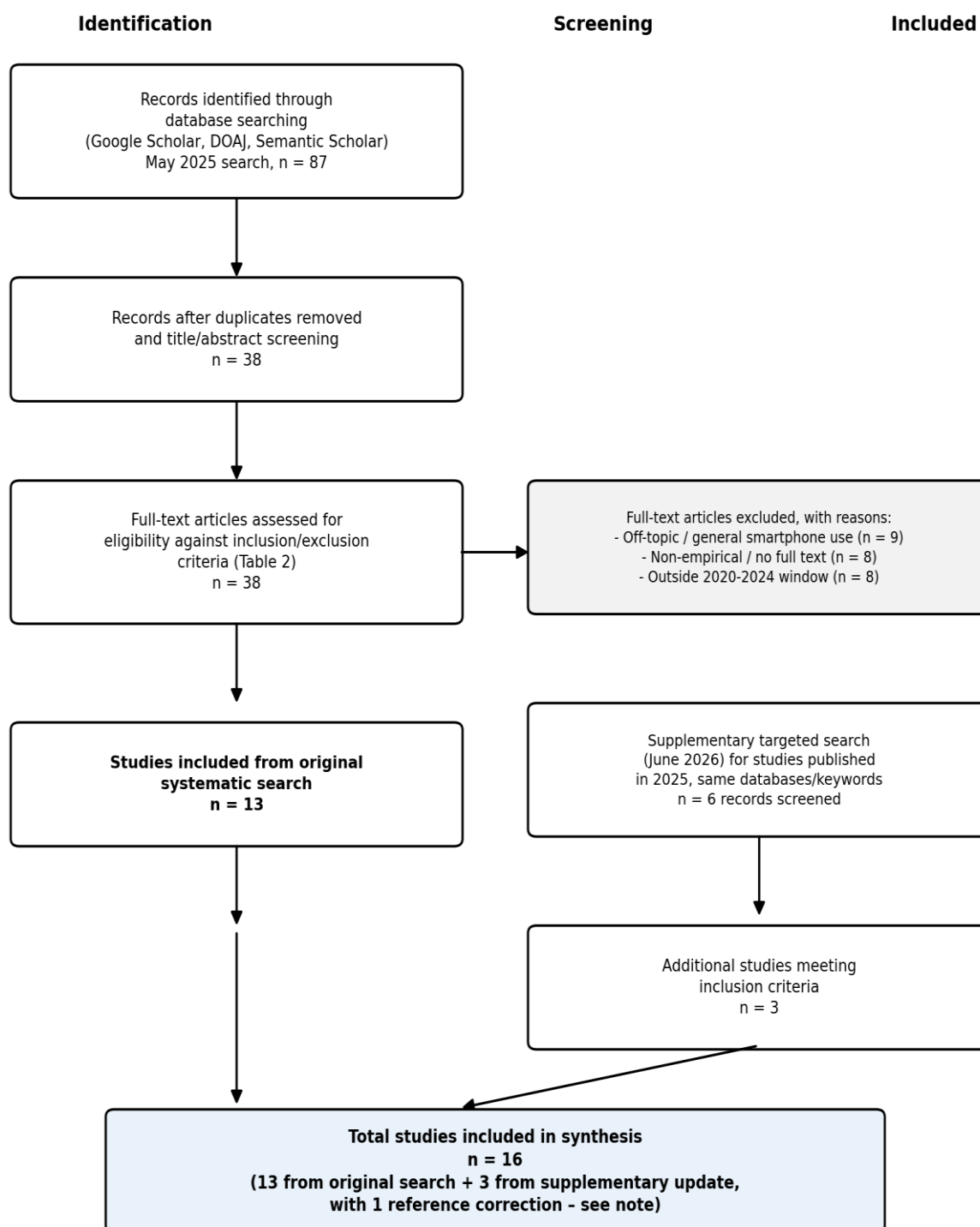
Articles were selected based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria set forth in Table 2.

Table 2. Study Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English and Indonesian	Other languages
Publication year	2020–2025	Before 2020 or after 2025
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Theses, books, conference proceedings, blogs
Topics	Phubbing and its impact on communication or interpersonal relationships	General smartphone use without phubbing
Accessibility	The full text is available online	Available only as an abstract

The selection process was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, a database search yielded 87 potential articles. In the second stage, screening of titles and abstracts to assess relevance and eliminate duplicates resulted in 38 articles suitable for full-text review. In the third stage, a full-text review based on inclusion and exclusion criteria yielded 13 final articles used in the synthesis from the original search. Screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts against the criteria in Table 2 was carried out by the lead author and cross-checked against the eligibility criteria by the co-authors, with disagreements resolved through discussion. Data extracted from each article included authors and year, study design, population, main variables, key findings, and the theoretical framework used; these were then analyzed thematically to identify cross-study patterns. As described above, a supplementary targeted search conducted in June 2026 using the same databases and keyword strategy identified 3 additional peer-reviewed articles published in 2025 that met the same inclusion criteria, while a duplicate record carrying an incorrect author attribution for an already-included 2021 article was identified and corrected during this update. The final synthesis therefore comprises 16 articles. The complete selection process is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the study identification, screening, and inclusion process.



Quality Appraisal

Because this review synthesizes findings primarily from published abstracts, results sections, and secondary reporting rather than full re-coding of each primary dataset, study quality was appraised using four transparent and reportable criteria: (1) publication in a peer-reviewed, indexed journal, which was already an inclusion criterion (Table 2); (2) the use of a validated or clearly described instrument to measure phubbing or a closely related construct, such as the Generic Scale of Phubbing (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016) or the Partner Phubbing Scale; (3) explicit theoretical grounding, such as need-threat theory, attachment theory, or media dependency theory; and (4) clear reporting of study design and sample characteristics. Table 3 summarizes these characteristics across the 16 reviewed studies. This appraisal is intentionally lightweight given the scope of a

literature review rather than a full systematic review with meta-analysis, and it does not substitute for a formal risk-of-bias instrument such as the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool, which would require access to complete primary datasets. Entries marked “not specified in review” indicate that the detail was not reported in the sources available to the authors at the time of review, not that the original study necessarily lacks it; a fuller risk-of-bias assessment using complete primary texts is recommended as a direction for future, more exhaustive systematic reviews of this literature.

Table 3. Summary of Study Characteristics and Quality-Relevant Criteria

Study	Design	Instrument / Measure	Theoretical Framework	Peer-Reviewed / Indexed
Al-Saggaf & O'Donnell (2020)	Quantitative (correlational survey)	Not specified in review	Social norms theory	Yes
Arenz & Schnauber-Stockmann (2024)	Systematic meta-analytic review	N/A (synthesizes multiple instruments)	Predictor-outcome meta-analytic model	Yes
Astuti (2021)	Quantitative (survey/regression)	Not specified in review	Not specified in review	Yes
Capilla Garrido et al. (2021)	Descriptive/bibliometric review	N/A	N/A	Yes
David & Roberts (2021)	Quantitative survey	Partner Phubbing Scale	Mediation model (relational dissatisfaction)	Yes
Han et al. (2025)	Quantitative survey (N = 837)	Partner Phubbing Scale	Attachment theory	Yes
Knausenberger et al. (2022)	Experimental (2 studies)	Experimental ostracism paradigm	Need-threat theory (Williams)	Yes
McDaniel & Coyne (2016)	Quantitative survey	Technoference scale	Family systems / coparenting	Yes
Ni et al. (2025)	Meta-analysis (52 studies, N = 19,698)	N/A (aggregated)	Antecedent-consequence model	Yes
Rahmah & Sanyata (2024)	Qualitative	N/A (interview-based)	Coping-strategy framework	Yes
Roberts & David (2020)	Quantitative survey	Partner Phubbing Scale	Personality/attachment-controlled model	Yes
Sitorus & Irwansyah (2023)	Quantitative survey	Not specified in review	Media dependency theory	Yes
Stevic et al. (2025)	Experimental (2x2 between-subjects)	Observer-rating paradigm	Need-threat model	Yes
Sun & Samp (2022)	Quantitative survey	Generic/Partner Phubbing measures	Communicative competence framework	Yes
Uncu et al. (2024)	Quantitative correlational	Not specified in review	Empathy framework	Yes
Zhan et al. (2022)	Quantitative survey	Not specified in review	Loneliness-mediation / attachment	Yes

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on a systematic review of 16 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025, three main themes were identified: (1) the direct effects of phubbing on communication quality and relational satisfaction; (2) the psychological mechanisms underlying the effects of phubbing; and (3) contextual and individual factors that moderate phubbing behavior.

The Direct Impact of Phubbing on Communication Quality and Relational Satisfaction

All of the studies reviewed provide strong and consistent evidence that phubbing has a negative impact on perceptions of interpersonal communication quality. In the context of romantic relationships, Roberts and David (2020) confirmed that partner phubbing is significantly associated with reduced relationship satisfaction, even after controlling for personality and attachment style variables. These findings indicate that the impact of phubbing is not merely an artifact of individual characteristics, but rather a direct effect of communicative behavior that disregards the partner's physical presence.

David and Roberts (2021) further expanded on this understanding by finding that individuals who are frequently phubbed by their partners tend to report higher levels of depressive symptoms, with relational dissatisfaction serving as a key mediator in this relationship. This suggests that the impact of phubbing extends beyond the realm of communication alone, affecting an individual's overall psychological well-being. The study also found that these depressive effects are stronger in individuals who view relationship quality as a crucial component of their self-identity.

Taken together, Roberts and David (2020) and David and Roberts (2021) constitute a programmatic two-study series from the same research group that progressively builds a causal-ish narrative: phubbing undermines satisfaction, and reduced satisfaction then predicts depressive symptoms. While this cumulative logic is compelling, it is important to note that both studies rely on self-report data from the same cultural context (the United States), use overlapping theoretical assumptions, and were produced by a group with a consistent prior position on phubbing's harms. Independent replications particularly from non-Western and non-student samples are needed before treating this two-study arc as an established causal chain rather than a coherent but as-yet unconfirmed hypothesis.

In the context of friendships, Sun and Samp (2022) report that peer phubbing is associated with a reduced sense of closeness, decreased conversation satisfaction, and more negative perceptions of the phubber's communicative competence. Interestingly, this study found that the negative impact of phubbing on friendships is felt more acutely when it occurs in contextually meaningful conversations such as in-depth discussions or planned meetings compared to casual conversations.

This conversation-seriousness moderation effect, however, is not consistently replicated in more recent work. Using a controlled observational design, Stevic et al. (2025) found that observing phubbing during serious versus casual conversations produced no significant difference in perceived appropriateness, although female observers consistently rated conversation quality lower than male observers when witnessing phubbing, regardless of topic seriousness. This divergence suggests that the conversational-depth moderator identified by Sun and Samp (2022) may not generalize across measurement approaches (self-report by participants versus third-party observation) or across samples, and that gender may be a more robust moderator of phubbing's perceived severity than conversational context. Rather than treating these as a simple confirmation of one another, this inconsistency points to an unresolved methodological question for future research: whether the impact of phubbing depends more on who is judging the interaction (participant or observer) than on what the interaction is about.

Al-Saggaf and O'Donnell (2020) expand on these findings by showing that individuals who frequently experience phubbing report weaker social norms supporting honest and attentive communication. This indicates a more systemic long-term effect: phubbing not only undermines the quality of individual conversations but can gradually erode shared expectations regarding communication standards within broader social networks. In the Indonesian context, Rahmah and Sanyata (2024) as well as Astuti (2021) also confirm a similar pattern, where

phubbing in academic and friendship settings triggers significant frustration, disappointment, and a sense of social alienation.

A cross-cultural comparison within this theme, however, reveals more nuance than straightforward convergence. Al-Saggaf and O'Donnell's (2020) finding that phubbing erodes shared social norms around communication was obtained in a Western context (Australia), where individuals are more likely to verbalize dissatisfaction with communicative behavior directly. By contrast, Rahmah and Sanyata (2024) and Astuti (2021) show that Indonesian respondents respond to phubbing primarily through withdrawal or indirect expression rather than direct confrontation a pattern consistent with face-saving norms in collectivist cultures. This means that while the direction of phubbing's impact (negative) is consistent across cultural settings, the form that impact takes and the social-psychological processes through which it operates differ in ways that matter for how intervention strategies should be designed. An anti-phubbing intervention premised on direct communication and norm negotiation appropriate in a Western context may be poorly calibrated for Indonesian students who express displeasure indirectly and prioritize relational harmony over confrontational honesty.

Psychological Mechanisms Underlying the Impact of Phubbing

Threats to Basic Psychological Needs

Based on the need-threat theory developed by Williams, a number of recent studies indicate that the experience of being phubbed directly threatens four basic human psychological needs: a sense of belonging, self-esteem, a meaningful existence, and self-control (Knausenberger et al., 2022). This theory posits that any form of social neglect, including implicit forms such as phubbing, is processed by the brain in the same way it responds to a threat to social existence.

Knausenberger et al. (2022) confirm across two experimental studies that responses to phubbing consistently involve the activation of psychological distress analogous to responses to social ostracism, alongside reduced trust toward the phubbing party. This means that even though the phubber may not intend to cause harm, the person being phubbed experiences an emotional response similar to feeling excluded from a social group. This explains why phubbing, even in small doses, can have a disproportionate psychological impact compared to its seemingly trivial nature.

Threats to these basic needs directly hinder two crucial processes in quality interpersonal communication: emotional openness and reciprocity. When a person feels unvalued or ignored, their natural response is to withdraw from deeper communication, lower their level of self-disclosure, and reduce their emotional investment in the interaction. This creates a cycle that progressively weakens the quality of communication, particularly in long-term relationships where phubbing occurs repeatedly.

It is methodologically significant that Knausenberger et al. (2022) is the only study among the 16 reviewed that tests the need-threat mechanism experimentally, using random assignment and controlled conditions, rather than inferring it retrospectively from self-reported survey correlations. This distinction matters because survey evidence of the form 'phubbed individuals report feeling neglected' cannot rule out the possibility that individuals who already feel neglected are simply more likely to notice and remember instances of phubbing. Knausenberger et al.'s experimental paradigm where participants are randomly assigned to conditions with or without a phubbing confederate provides stronger evidence that phubbing causally triggers need-threat responses rather than merely correlating with pre-existing feelings of exclusion. The relative scarcity of experimental evidence in this literature is itself a finding: the need-threat pathway is plausible and theoretically grounded, but its causal status rests on a narrow empirical base that urgently needs replication across diverse relationship types and cultural contexts.

Erosion of Empathy and Interpersonal Competence

Empathy is the foundation of interpersonal communication competence the ability to accurately and responsively perceive, understand, and respond to the emotional state of the person with whom one is speaking. Uncu et al. (2024) found a significant negative correlation between the level of phubbing and the tendency toward empathy

among college students. This finding is important because it indicates that phubbing is not merely a symptom of low empathy but also an active agent that erodes one's capacity for empathy over time.

This mechanism of empathy erosion can be understood through the logic of cue deprivation. Face-to-face communication is rich in nonverbal information facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, and gestures which serve as the primary fuel for the empathy process. When someone consistently shifts their attention to a smartphone screen, they lose exposure to these nonverbal cues. Over time, the ability to read, interpret, and respond to others' emotional cues degrades due to a lack of practice and exposure.

Sun and Samp (2022) reinforce these findings by reporting a negative relationship between phubbing and perceived communicative competence, particularly in terms of the ability to effectively initiate, maintain, and repair social relationships. Individuals who habitually engage in phubbing tend to be less skilled at managing conversational transitions, responding appropriately to emotional cues, and demonstrating full psychological presence a key indicator of the quality of interpersonal communication.

A critical limitation of both Uncu et al. (2024) and Sun and Samp (2022) on this point deserves explicit acknowledgment: both studies employ cross-sectional survey designs, which means the direction of causality between phubbing and communicative competence cannot be determined from the data. The cue-deprivation account described above that habitual phubbing degrades empathic capacity over time through a lack of nonverbal practice is theoretically plausible and developmentally grounded, but it is a longitudinal claim supported only by cross-sectional correlations. An equally plausible alternative interpretation is that individuals with already-lower communicative competence are more prone to phubbing in the first place, either because they are less adept at reading social signals that phubbing is unwelcome, or because they have fewer social incentives to sustain attentive engagement. Longitudinal and experimental designs are needed to adjudicate between these interpretations, and the extent to which phubbing causally erodes empathy rather than expressing pre-existing deficits remains an open empirical question that this review cannot resolve.

The long-term implication is that if phubbing actively erodes empathy and interpersonal skills, then the normalization of phubbing among Generation Z who are currently in a critical phase of social identity formation and the development of relational skills could have serious developmental consequences. This makes phubbing not merely an issue of digital etiquette, but a matter of building the social and communicative capacities of future generations.

Attachment Anxiety as a Factor That Amplifies the Impact

Attachment theory provides an important explanatory lens for why the effects of phubbing are not uniform among individuals. In this theory, the attachment style formed in early life shapes an individual's relational patterns in interpreting and responding to signals in interpersonal relationships.

Zhan et al. (2022) demonstrate that loneliness mediates the relationship between phubbing and decreased relational satisfaction. Individuals who already experience chronic loneliness tend to be more sensitive to signals of neglect, so a single episode of phubbing can be interpreted as confirmation of their deepest fears regarding relational unworthiness. In this context, empathy functions as a protective buffer: individuals with high empathy, whether as recipients or perpetrators in a relationship, tend to be able to manage the negative effects of phubbing more adaptively.

David and Roberts (2021) also confirmed that anxious attachment significantly moderates the relationship between experiences of phubbing and depressive symptoms the same dataset discussed above under direct relational impact, here re-examined through an attachment lens rather than a relational-mediation lens, which strengthens confidence that the finding is not an artifact of a single analytic choice. This means that individuals with an anxious attachment style not only experience the effects of phubbing more intensely, but also recover more slowly from such episodes of neglect due to their less adaptive emotion regulation mechanisms. These findings have important implications for counseling practice: addressing the psychological impact of phubbing must consider the client's attachment style as a crucial contextual variable.

These attachment-based findings receive convergent support from two more recent, larger-scale studies. Han et al. (2025), in a survey of 837 young adults, found that attachment anxiety mediates the relationship between partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction, and that this pathway is buffered when couples employ constructive conflict coping styles such as voicing concerns directly rather than withdrawing pointing to a practical, teachable moderator rather than only a fixed individual trait. At a broader level, Ni et al.'s (2025) meta-analysis of 52 studies (58 samples, $N = 19,698$) confirms that attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are among the most consistent correlates of partner phubbing across the literature, alongside media addiction as the strongest predictor. Taken together with the need-threat and empathy-erosion mechanisms discussed above, this convergence across independent samples and methods strengthens confidence that attachment-related vulnerability is a genuine amplifying mechanism rather than an artifact of any single study's sample or measures. At the same time, it is worth noting that the three mechanisms reviewed in this section need-threat, empathy erosion, and attachment anxiety have rarely been tested against one another within a single study; each has typically been examined in isolation using different samples and instruments. It therefore remains unclear from the existing literature whether these mechanisms operate in parallel, sequentially, or redundantly, which is a conceptual gap the framework proposed later in this review (Figure 2) attempts to make explicit rather than resolve.

Contextual and Individual Factors Moderating Phubbing Behavior

Individual factors such as smartphone addiction, fear of missing out (FoMO), and poor self-control have consistently been identified as the primary precursors to phubbing behavior. Sun and Samp (2022) found that smartphone addiction is the strongest predictor of phubbing frequency, even after controlling for demographic variables. Individuals who are dependent on their smartphones experience a compulsive urge to check their devices that is difficult to resist, even in social situations that normatively demand full attention. This pattern is corroborated at a larger scale by Arenz and Schnauber-Stockmann's (2024) systematic meta-analytic review, which confirms smartphone addiction and FoMO as the most consistent predictors of phubbing across dozens of primary studies, while also noting that predictors such as self-esteem and loneliness show weaker and less consistent effects an inconsistency that the present review's synthesis also encounters and discusses further below.

Sitorus and Irwansyah (2023) highlight the role of digital media dependence in perpetuating phubbing among Indonesian youth. They note that the need to be constantly connected digitally has become part of Generation Z's social identity; therefore, efforts to curb phubbing are not sufficient if they merely involve enforcing rules on device use, but rather require a reconfiguration of social norms regarding the meaning of presence and attention in face-to-face interactions.

Cultural context also plays a significant moderating role. In collectivist societies like Indonesia, where interpersonal harmony, respect, and sensitivity to others' feelings hold high social value, phubbing has the potential to disrupt communication patterns more significantly than in individualistic contexts. Building on the frustration and alienation findings reported earlier, Rahmah and Sanyata (2024) identified that Indonesian students develop various coping strategies against phubbing, ranging from direct confrontation and indirect expression of feelings to social withdrawal, reflecting an active negotiation between collectivist cultural norms and the increasingly individualistic reality of digital communication.

McDaniel and Coyne (2016) added an important dimension by finding that technofence technological interference in intimate relationships has increased post-pandemic as the use of devices in various life contexts has become the new normal. This finding is relevant for understanding how the boundary between "reasonable" technology use and phubbing is becoming increasingly blurred in social perception, which in turn complicates normative efforts to redefine the ethics of digital communication.

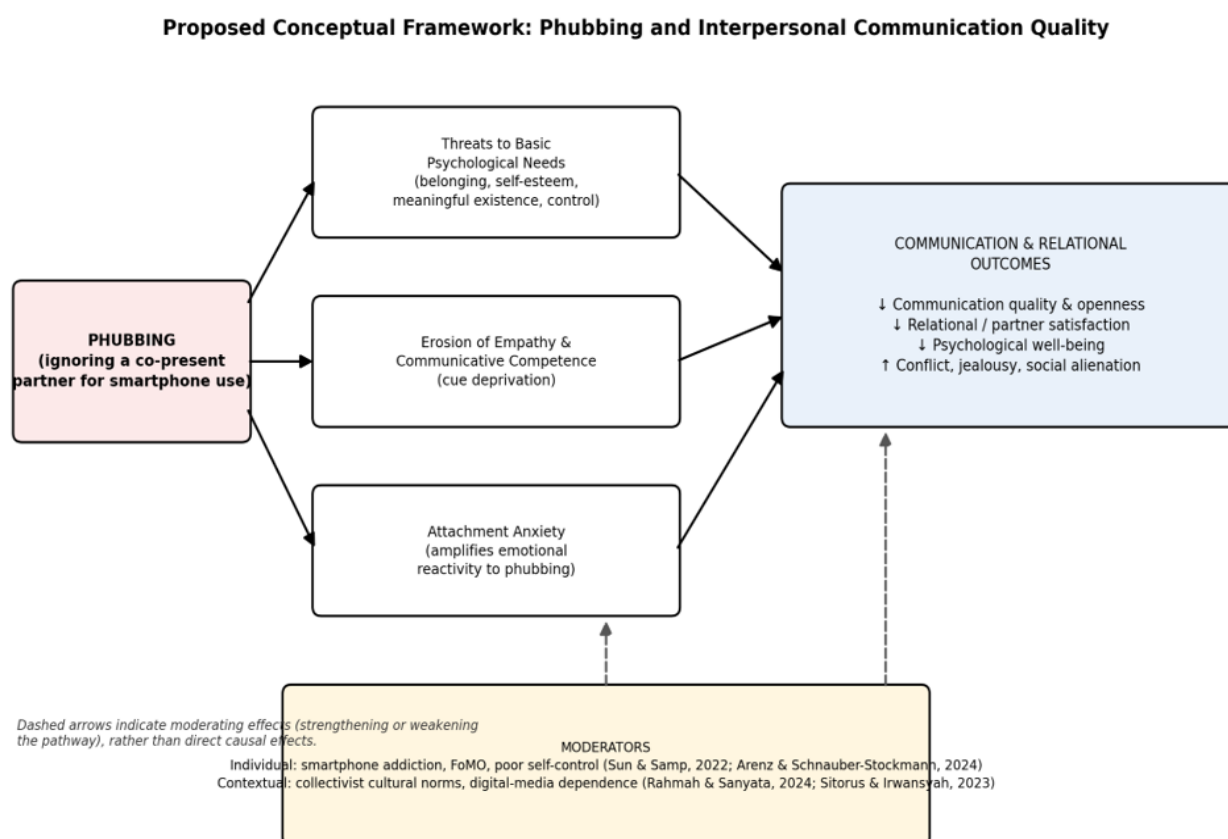
Two methodological observations about the evidence base underlying this section are worth making explicit before turning to the integrative framework. First, the apparent inconsistency flagged earlier between Arenz and Schnauber-Stockmann's (2024) meta-analytic finding that loneliness is a comparatively weak and inconsistent predictor of phubbing frequency, and Zhan et al.'s (2022) finding that loneliness significantly mediates the relationship between phubbing and relational satisfaction, is best understood as a conceptual rather than a strictly

empirical contradiction: the former treats loneliness as an antecedent of phubbing behavior, while the latter treats it as a mechanism that shapes how the effects of phubbing are experienced. The reviewed literature does not consistently distinguish between these two roles, and conflating predictors-of-phubbing with moderators-of-its-impact is itself a source of apparent inconsistency that future studies should address through clearer construct definitions. Second, Sun and Samp's (2022) single study recurs across all three themes of this review—as evidence for direct relational impact, for empathy and communicative-competence erosion, and for smartphone addiction as a predictor of phubbing frequency. This breadth reflects the genuine richness of its multi-variable design, but it also means that a non-trivial share of this review's synthesis rests on findings from one sample rather than on independent replication, which is a limitation of the current evidence base rather than of this review's synthesis method; future systematic reviews with a larger pool of studies per theme would be better positioned to assess whether these patterns replicate beyond a single dataset.

Toward an Integrative Conceptual Framework

The three themes synthesized above direct relational impact, psychological mechanisms, and moderating factors are typically reported as separate findings across the 16 reviewed studies, each using its own sample, instruments, and theoretical lens. None of the reviewed studies tests all three components within a single model. To make the implicit relationships among them explicit, and to respond to the need for a stronger theoretical synthesis rather than a purely descriptive one, Figure 2 proposes an integrative conceptual framework that organizes the reviewed evidence into a single explanatory pathway: phubbing gives rise to three psychological mechanisms (threats to basic needs, erosion of empathy, and attachment anxiety), which jointly shape communication and relational outcomes; this pathway is, in turn, strengthened or weakened by individual moderators (smartphone addiction, FoMO, self-control) and contextual moderators (collectivist cultural norms, digital-media dependence). This framework is offered as a synthesis and a set of testable propositions derived from the reviewed literature, not as a model that has itself been empirically validated as a whole; doing so would require a single study capable of measuring all framework components simultaneously, which represents an important direction for future context-based research in Indonesia.

Figure 2. Proposed integrative conceptual framework linking phubbing, its psychological mechanisms, moderating factors, and communication/relational outcomes.



CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review yielded three main conclusions. First, phubbing consistently and significantly reduces the quality of interpersonal communication, relational satisfaction, and psychological well-being across various social contexts including romantic relationships, friendships, academic settings, and family life—with effects mediated by three identifiable psychological mechanisms: threats to basic psychological needs, the erosion of empathy and communicative competence, and attachment anxiety that amplifies individual vulnerability. Second, this synthesis reveals that the evidence base is more methodologically heterogeneous and interpretively contested than prior narrative reviews have suggested. Specifically, four inconsistencies emerged that warrant explicit attention: (a) the conversational-seriousness moderator identified by Sun and Samp (2022) was not replicated in Stevic et al.'s (2025) experimental observer study, pointing to a likely measurement-method artifact; (b) loneliness functions as a weak predictor of phubbing behavior in Arenz and Schnauber-Stockmann's (2024) meta-analysis but as a meaningful mediator of its effects in Zhan et al. (2022), suggesting the literature conflates two conceptually distinct roles; (c) the causal direction of the phubbing-empathy relationship cannot be determined from the available cross-sectional evidence, despite the plausibility of the cue-deprivation account; and (d) conclusions about phubbing's cultural generalizability are constrained by the near-total dominance of Western and East Asian samples in the experimental and quantitative literature. Third, phubbing behavior is robustly predicted by individual factors principally smartphone addiction and FoMO and moderated by contextual factors including collectivist cultural norms and digital-media dependence, with coping responses in Indonesia taking characteristically indirect forms that differ from Western-derived intervention assumptions.

Several limitations of the present review should be acknowledged. The synthesis relies on a relatively small final corpus of 16 studies and did not include grey literature, conference proceedings, or non-English or non-Indonesian publications, which may have excluded relevant work. Quality appraisal was conducted using four transparent but lightweight criteria rather than a formal risk-of-bias instrument, because the authors did not have access to the complete primary datasets of all included studies; a more rigorous quality appraisal would require full-text access and is recommended for future, more exhaustive systematic reviews. The included studies are predominantly quantitative and survey-based, with only two experimental studies (Knausenberger et al., 2022; Stevic et al., 2025), which limits causal inference across most of the synthesized evidence. Furthermore, the supplementary search conducted in 2026 extended the corpus in a targeted manner rather than through a full repeat of the original systematic procedure, which means some 2025 publications may have been missed. These limitations do not negate the review's contributions its structured synthesis, the identification of four specific cross-study inconsistencies, and its proposed conceptual framework but they do circumscribe the certainty with which its conclusions should be held.

The practical implications of these findings are multiple. For educational institutions, integrating communicative digital literacy into higher education curricula not merely as a technical skill but as a relational one, addressing the ethics and social costs of divided attention is a concrete and actionable recommendation. For counseling practitioners, the moderating role of attachment anxiety and the buffering role of constructive conflict coping (Han et al., 2025) suggest that phubbing-related relational distress is not simply about smartphone overuse but about underlying attachment needs that require targeted therapeutic attention. For policymakers and institutional designers in Indonesia, the collectivist-individualist tension identified across the reviewed studies implies that device-use policies and social norms around presence and attention need to be negotiated within, rather than simply imported from, local cultural frameworks. For future research, four specific priorities are indicated by the inconsistencies this review has identified: (1) longitudinal and experimental studies that can clarify the causal direction of the phubbing-empathy relationship; (2) multi-group comparative studies explicitly designed to test whether Western-derived moderators such as conversational seriousness replicate in collectivist samples; (3) single studies that measure all three proposed psychological mechanisms simultaneously to determine whether they operate in parallel, in sequence, or redundantly; and (4) Indonesia-based empirical studies using qualitative or mixed-methods approaches capable of capturing the culturally specific phenomenology of being phubbed and the socially embedded meanings attached to smartphone use in face-to-face contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank our faculty members from the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication at UIN

Walisongo Semarang for their academic support in the completion of this research.

REFERENCES

1. Al-Saggaf, Y., & O'Donnell, S. B. (2020). Phubbing, social norms and relationship satisfaction. *Heliyon*, 6(12), e05653. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e05653>
2. Arenz, A., & Schnauber-Stockmann, A. (2024). Who "phubs"? A systematic meta-analytic review of phubbing predictors. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 12(1), 3–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20501579231215678>
3. Astuti, W. (2021). Pengaruh Phubbing Terhadap Kualitas Komunikasi Interpersonal Generasi Z Di Kota Yogyakarta. Universitas Atma Jaya Yogyakarta. <https://repository.uajy.ac.id/id/eprint/26307/>.
4. Capilla Garrido, E., Issa, T., Gutiérrez Esteban, P., & Cubo Delgado, S. (2021). A descriptive literature review of phubbing behaviors. *Heliyon*, 7(5), e07037. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07037>
5. Chotpitayasunondh, V., & Douglas, K. M. (2016). How phubbing becomes the norm: The antecedents and consequences of snubbing via smartphone. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 63, 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.018>
6. David, M. E., & Roberts, J. A. (2021). Investigating the impact of partner phubbing on romantic jealousy and relationship satisfaction: The moderating role of attachment anxiety. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 38(5), 1436–1455. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407521996454>
7. Han, Y., Li, X., Song, W., & He, Y. (2025). Young adult partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction: The mediating role of attachment anxiety and the moderating role of constructive conflict coping style. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1490363. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1490363>
8. Knausenberger, J., Giesen-Leuchter, A., & Echterhoff, G. (2022). Feeling ostracized by others' smartphone use: The effect of phubbing on fundamental needs, mood, and trust. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 883901. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.883901>
9. McDaniel, B. T., & Coyne, S. M. (2016). Technology interference in the parenting of young children: Implications for mothers' perceptions of coparenting. *The Social Science Journal*, 53(4), 435–443. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2016.04.010>
10. Ni, N., Ahrari, S., Zaremohzzabieh, Z., Zarean, M., & Roslan, S. (2025). A meta-analytic study of partner phubbing and its antecedents and consequences. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1561159. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1561159>
11. Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., et al. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
12. Rahmah, M., & Sanyata, S. (2024). Phubbing and its impact on student communication and relationships: A qualitative study on coping strategies and social implications. *Al-Ishlah: Journal of Education*, 16(4), 4876–4889. <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v16i4.5801>
13. Roberts, J. A., & David, M. E. (2020). Phubbed again: The impact of partner phubbing on romantic relationship satisfaction. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 112, 106475. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106475>
14. Sitorus, L., & Irwansyah, I. (2023). Fenomena Phubbing: Peran Teknologi Komunikasi Dalam Perubahan Interaksi Sosial, 10(2), 133–146. <https://doi.org/10.47233/jkomdis.v4i1.1580>
15. Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
16. Stevic, A., Liftinger, H., & Matthes, J. (2025). Observing phubbing behaviors during casual and serious conversations: Consequences for conversation quality, connectedness, and appropriateness. *BMC Psychology*, 13, Article 170. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-02426-4>
17. Sun, J., & Samp, J. A. (2022). Phubbing is happening to you: Examining predictors and effects of phubbing behavior in friendships. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 41(12), 2691–2704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2021.1943711>
18. Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2019). Media use is linked to lower psychological well-being: Evidence from three datasets. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 90(3), 311–331. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-019-09630-7>

19. Uncu, F., Gunes, D., Kilinc, N. O., & Gunes, M. E. (2024). A study evaluating the relationship between phubbing levels and empathic attitudes of college students. *Health Sciences Quarterly*, 4(1), 53–60. <https://doi.org/10.26900/hsq.2180>
20. We Are Social. (2023). *Digital 2023: Indonesia*. Hootsuite & We Are Social. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-indonesia>
21. Zhan, S., Shrestha, S., & Zhong, N. (2022). Romantic relationship satisfaction and phubbing: The role of loneliness and empathy. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.967339>