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## Phubbing Behaviour: An Analysis of Triggers and the Impact on Social Interaction in the Digital Age

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### Abstract

This study examines phubbing as a social phenomenon through the framework of politeness theory, focusing on how it triggers Face Threatening Acts (FTA) and the factors shaping individuals' responses. Previous research has primarily explored the psychological and relational impacts of phubbing, limited attention has been given at how individuals negotiate face in naturally occurring interactions. To fill this gap, this study uses a qualitative method with semi structured interviews with 25 people aged 15-30 who have been phubbed. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify types of FTA and contributing factors. This study aims to explore the types of face threats caused by phubbing and the factors influencing individuals' responses to such behavior. The findings show that phubbing can threats positive and negative face. Positive face threats involve feelings of being ignored and unappreciated, leading to indirect responses, while negative face threats involve irritation and disrupted autonomy, prompting more direct reactions. Additionally, the study identifies several key factors influencing responses, including relational closeness, interlocutor personality, prior consent, and conversational context. This study highlights phubbing as a face threat that provokes diverse response patterns influenced by interpersonal and situational variables. These results enhance comprehension of how individuals perceive and react to phubbing in routine communication.

[Studi ini meneliti phubbing sebagai fenomena sosial melalui kerangka teori kesopanan, dengan fokus pada bagaimana hal tersebut memicu Tindakan Mengancam Wajah (FTA) dan faktor-faktor yang membentuk respons individu. Penelitian sebelumnya telah mengeksplorasi dampak psikologis dan relasional dari phubbing, namun penelitian terbatas pada bagaimana individu menegosiasikan wajah dalam interaksi yang terjadi secara alami. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan 25 orang berusia 15-30 tahun yang telah mengalami phubbing. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi jenis-jenis FTA dan faktor-faktor yang berkontribusi. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi jenis-jenis ancaman wajah yang disebabkan oleh phubbing dan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi respons individu terhadap perilaku tersebut. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa phubbing dapat mengancam wajah positif dan negatif. Ancaman wajah positif melibatkan perasaan diabaikan dan tidak dihargai, yang mengarah pada respons tidak langsung, sementara ancaman wajah negatif melibatkan iritasi dan gangguan otonomi, yang mendorong reaksi yang lebih langsung. Selain itu, studi ini mengidentifikasi beberapa faktor kunci yang mempengaruhi respons, termasuk kedekatan relasional, kepribadian lawan bicara, persetujuan sebelumnya, dan konteks percakapan. Studi ini menyoroti phubbing sebagai ancaman wajah yang memicu pola respons yang beragam yang dipengaruhi oleh variabel interpersonal dan situasional. Hasil ini meningkatkan pemahaman tentang bagaimana individu memandang dan bereaksi terhadap phubbing dalam komunikasi sehari-hari]. © The Authors.

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## 1. Introduction

The expansion of smartphones has reshaped interpersonal communication, introducing new interactional norms as well as new forms of disruption. One phenomenon is phubbing. Phubbing is a combination of phone and snubbing, which means the behavior of ignoring someone in face-to-face interactions and focusing more on their smartphone [1]. According to a number of studies [2], phubbing has become a global epidemic that affects people of all ages and situations due to the widespread usage of cellphones and their intense daily use. Phubbing has become increasingly common because smartphones are never out of people's hands [3]. Smartphones make it easy for people to connect with others who are far away. This encourages many people to continue interacting through smartphones. Teenagers and adults often justify this behavior by claiming that everyone does it, thus reinforcing the cycle [4].

FoMO (fear of missing out) and phubbing (ignoring people to focus on a phone) are tightly linked across many studies in teens, university students, and workers. Research looks at how FoMO drives phubbing, how phubbing feeds back into FoMO, and what psychological and social outcomes are involved [5]. Multiple surveys in adolescents, undergraduates, and adults confirm that higher FoMO predicts more phubbing [6]. In cross national work, FoMO was the strongest predictor of phubbing compared with other online behaviors like media multitasking and cybergossip [7].

Since its introduction in the 2010s, it has been widely investigated as a social and relational issue [8]. Empirical studies have demonstrated that phubbing negatively affects relationship satisfaction [9], interaction quality [10], and perceived attentiveness [11]. A meta-analysis by [12] shows that predictors of phubbing include excessive social media use, smartphone addiction, poor romantic relationships, fear of missing out, nomophobia (fear of losing a cell phone), boredom, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. This study also summarizes the impacts of phubbing behavior, which include social media addiction, smartphone addiction, poor job performance, poor romantic relationships, poor life satisfaction, psychological distress, and depression [13]. Teenagers and adults rationalize phubbing behavior since everyone does it. However, [14] characterize smartphone use during social interactions as disrespectful, unpleasant, rude, and socially unacceptable. This indicates that even though phubbing is seen as rude [15], it is still done. While these findings provide valuable insights into the effect of phubbing, they mainly focus on psychological and relational outcomes, offering a limited explanation of how individuals respond at the level of discourse and interaction.

Based on expectation violation theory [16] phubbing has been linked to how disrupted attention and unsatisfied interactional expectations lead to negative evaluation and relational. In romantic relationship it proved that phubbing can decrease the level of satisfaction in relationship quality [17]. It is important to position phubbing within Politeness Theory (PT) to understand it as an interactional phenomenon. Based on the PT, communication is conceptualized as the management of 'face' or an individual's public self-image. Further, [18] defines face as the public image that individuals wish to maintain during social interactions. According to [19] phubbing can be interpreted as a face-threatening act (FTA), as it potentially undermines both positive face (the desire for approval and inclusion) and negative face (the desire for autonomy and respect [20]). Following this, he suggests a politeness strategy is required to mitigate the impact of the face-threatening caused by mobile phone use during interaction. However, empirical findings also indicate that individuals do not always respond with face-saving strategies; instead, they may respond with various other strategies [21].

Moreover, the existing research has not sufficiently examined phubbing as a trigger for face-threatening responses in naturally occurring interactions. In particular, there is a lack of systematic investigation into (1) the types of face-threatening acts produced in response to phubbing, and (2) the factors that shape these responses. Previous studies have mainly focused on contextual variables influencing the positive or negative face responses during the interactions [8]. As a result, how individuals negotiate face in phubbing situations remains underexplored. Along with its theoretical contribution, this study is also important for bigger global issues about how people interact with each other in the digital age. The growing prevalence of phubbing and its effects on interpersonal communication underscore the necessity of sustaining respectful and attentive social interactions, which are intrinsically linked to SDG 3, particularly in fostering individuals' psychological and social well-being. This study also contributes to SDG 4 by helping people understand how to be polite and maintain their face in digital situations. Addressing these gaps, the present study aims to investigate the following research questions: (1) What are types of face-threatening acts in response to phubbing?; (2) What are the possible factors contributing to the responses?

## 2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive qualitative approach to explore how individuals perceive and respond to phubbing as a face-threatening act, as well as the factors influencing these responses. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth understanding of participants' real-life experiences with phubbing in everyday interactions. The research procedure involved selecting eligible participants, conducting interviews, transcribing the interview data, and analyzing the findings. The participants consisted of 25 individuals aged between 15–30 years old who had consciously experienced being a “phubee.” They were selected through purposive sampling based on the primary criterion of having experienced phubbing in social interactions.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using a list of guiding questions prepared by the researcher. During the interview sessions, impromptu questions were also asked when necessary to clarify participants' answers or explore certain experiences in greater depth. This method allowed the researcher to examine participants' experiences flexibly while still maintaining consistent interview guidelines [22]. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis proposed by [23]. The analysis process involved coding the data, categorizing participants' responses, and identifying major themes related to positive face threats, negative face threats, and the factors shaping participants' responses to phubbing. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, credibility and confirmability were maintained by ensuring consistency between the data and its interpretation. Ethical considerations were also applied by obtaining informed consent, protecting participants' anonymity, and using the data solely for academic purposes.

## 3. Results

This section is intended to present the findings of the analysis of data. The presentation follows the order of the research questions and made to be integrated with the discussion.

### 3.1. RQ 1. What are types of face-threatening acts in response to phubbing?

The findings of this study prove that phubbing is indeed a face-threatening act in interpersonal communication. Participants' varied reactions to phubbing show how this practice threatens both positive and negative faces.

#### 3.1.1. Threats to positive face

The desire to be liked, accepted, valued, and affirmed by the interlocutor is known as positive face. This implies that throughout conversations, people want to be acknowledged or validated by others. The findings of this study reveal that phubbing is widely accepted as a threat to positive face. Participants' responses when facing a interlocutor who engages in phubbing include feeling unappreciated, ignored, disappointed, uncomfortable, sad, and even questioning their own existence. This reaction illustrates how phubbing threatens positive face, which prevents someone from getting affirmation from their discussion partner. Fourteen of the twenty-five participants' responses were classified as a threat to positive face.

“nggak seneng, aku nggak nyaman karena merasa nggak dihargai”  
 ‘I'm not happy, I'm not comfortable because I feel unappreciated’  
 (Respondent 11)

Phubbing can threaten an individual's positive face by making them feel ignored and unappreciated during social interaction. Positive face refers to a person's desire to be valued, accepted, and acknowledged by others. When an interlocutor pays more attention to their smartphone than to the ongoing conversation, the other person may perceive this behavior as a sign of disinterest or disrespect. Respondent 11 expressed feeling uncomfortable and unappreciated when their conversation partner engaged in phubbing during an interaction. The respondent also clearly stated their dislike toward phubbing behavior because it reduced the sense of mutual engagement in the conversation. This reaction indicates that the respondent expected recognition and attention from the interlocutor, but those expectations were disrupted by the smartphone use. Therefore, the experience of Respondent 11 demonstrates that phubbing functions as a face-threatening act that threatens positive face by undermining an individual's sense of value and social acknowledgment.

“seakan-akan aku nggak dianggap, seperti ceritaku nggak penting”  
 ‘It’s as if I’m not being considered, like my story isn’t important’  
 (Respondent 17)

A similar response was also given by respondent 17, who felt disregarded and that their story was considered unimportant. The feelings experienced by respondent 17 when facing phubbing behavior are also categorized as a threat to positive face. Because the perception that their story is unimportant means they feel belittled. Being belittled and ignored clearly threatens the positive face that the respondent presents.

“ada perasaan sedih karena dia aja yang mau didengerin, tapi ceritaku tidak didengarkan”  
 ‘I feel sad because he’s the one who wants to be heard, but my story isn’t being heard’  
 (Respondent 3)

Respondent 3 was disappointed because she believed that their interaction was not mutual when the interlocutor was phubbing. Her friend was phubbing, and she felt that her story was not being heard. Reciprocity is a communication ethic in a conversation, however this was broken, making the respondent feel ignored.

Some of the participants’ responses show how they feel unappreciated and their presence lacks appreciation and validation from interlocutor. This is inconsistent with the idea of positive face, which a person has the desire to be liked, appreciated and validated from others [20]. This means that phubbing behavior is a threat to the positive face presented by the individual, This strengthens the claim in previous research by [19] which states that phubbing is a threat to a positive face. This response is followed by actions taken by participants in dealing with phubbing. Remaining silent and waiting, humorously reprimanding, attempting to recapture attention, and moving on to another issue as if nothing had happened are some of the actions taken.

“aku tetap harus mengambil perhatian dia ke aku ketika aku bercerita, biasanya aku mencari cara supaya mereka pay attention lagi”  
 ‘I still have to get their attention when I’m talking. I usually find a way to get them to pay attention again’  
 (Respondent 8)

The answer to the question of what to do when your friend is phubbing is given above. Respondent’s 8 response was conveyed that the participant was attempting to get their conversation partner’s attention again so that they could carry on. According to this data, the participants’ attempts to regain attention are a selected strategy to guarantee that the interlocutor is aware of their presence, enabling them to keep a happy face in front of the interlocutor. According to the politeness theory’s “positive face” notion [20], people desire to feel taken into consideration.

“aku menegur tapi sambil bercanda biar tidak tersinggung dan awkward”  
 ‘I reprimand them, but I joke around so they don’t get offended and awkward’  
 (Respondent 10)

Respondent 10’s reaction is likewise comparable; in order to avoid offending, he preserves the interlocutor’s mood and emotions. One technique to deliver the message without hurting the other person’s feelings is to incorporate humorous reprimands. This effort is made so that the respondent can maintain a positive face that was previously threatened by phubbing behavior.

Overall, the actions taken by the participants seem to prioritize the conversation partner over themselves. This effort is made so that the interlocutor can re-engage in the conversation without feeling sorry. In order to avoid offending interlocutor and making the situation uncomfortable, several participants who decided to address the subject also attempted to include humor. Some of the reasons are include seeking to understand the other person, worrying that boundaries would be established with them, and being fearful of hurting their feelings.

### 3.1.2. Threats to negative face

Phubbing was not seen by more than half of the participants as an act that threatens negative face. Responses from eleven participants were classified as behaviors that threatens negative face.

Phubbing threatens negative face by causing discomfort for individuals to freely participate in conversations. The concept of negative face is the individual's desire to be independent, not restricted or forced, to have freedom of action, and to be free from coercion [20]. Feelings of frustration when discussions are interrupted, aggravation from having to repeat oneself, and questioning why the interlocutor is not listening are among the emotions that participants classified as behaviors threatening negative face.

“agak jengkel, karena tiba-tiba percakapan terputus”  
 ‘I feel a bit irritated because the conversation suddenly cuts off’  
 (Respondent 16)

Respondent 16's displeasure stemmed from a conversation that was cut off by phubbing. The interlocutor's phubbing disrupted the current talk, which irritated him. This conversation's interruption created a communication barrier, demonstrating how phubbing endangers the negative face that craves independence. The act of phubbing is viewed as impeding their autonomy to talk.

“bikin males melanjutkan obrolan”  
 ‘I don't want to continue the conversation’  
 (Respondent 25)

Respondent 25 stated that they were reluctant to carry on the discussion. This occurred when the discussion partner stopped talking because they were phubbing. The interlocutor's poor reaction is the reason for the reluctance to carry on the conversation. As a result, the reply acknowledges that carrying on the discussion would be pointless. This reaction proves once more that phubbing is an activity that threatens negative face by causing the the respondent to reconsider their mind about communicating.

Participants expressed their displeasure with phubbing conduct in a variety of ways, which made them unwilling to carry on the discussion. Some of them even ended the conversation without resuming it later. This reluctance is triggered by their annoyance at the conversation partner who engages in phubbing. Phubbing threatens their need for freedom in sharing stories during conversations. Direct reprimands, speaking louder, and repeating remarks are some of the acts that accompany this response.

“naikin volume suara biar focus lagi ke aku”  
 ‘I turn up the volume so the focus will be on me again’  
 (Respondent 6)

This effort is made when the conversation partner engages in phubbing, and their focus completely shifts to their phone. Respondent 6 raised their voice to redirect the interlocutor's attention back to them. This effort is made so that the respondent's intention is conveyed directly, so that the interlocutor realizes the neglect they have committed. So that by raising the volume of her voice, she can continue the conversation.

“langsung tegur “kok main hp terus?”; “hpnya bisa ditaruh dulu?”  
 ‘Immediately reprimanded "Why are you playing on your cellphone all the time?"; "Can you put your cellphone down first?’  
 (Respondent 22)

Similar response by respondent 22, who chose to address it directly when he felt uncomfortable with the phubbing behavior of his conversation partner. He asked why he was playing with his phone and then made a direct request for him to put it down. This is done so that the phubber realizes the ignored respondent. When faced with phubbing, the response from respondent 22 illustrates that he maintains a negative demeanor, meaning he wants to preserve his freedom to speak.

Many participants choose to address the issue directly with the aim of making the other person aware that they are phubbing and allowing the participant to resume the conversation. In order to make the other person understand that they want to be heard and that their message should be understood, participants choose to provide direct reprimands. The reason participants directly reprimand is so that the conversation continues and does not come to a halt. Participants therefore search for way to carry on the conversation when it ends. The idea of negative face is consistent with the participants' desire to

be free to tell their stories. Therefore, phubbing puts participants' negative faces at risk when they feel unable to carry on the conversation. Negative face threat is described by politeness theory as behaviors that restrict and endanger personal freedom [20]. The interlocutor's gesture of not listening inhibits participants from continuing the conversation, even while phubbing behavior does not explicitly forbid speaking.

### **3.2 RQ 2. What are the possible factors contributing to the responses?**

The participants gave a variety of explanations for their reactions to phubbing activity. These explanations make it clear what influences such reaction.

#### **3.2.1 The Closeness of the Relationship**

Participants' responses to phubbing depend on the closeness of the relationship with to the interlocutor. Closeness is an influential element for two reasons, first, participants' close friends are not hesitant to reprimand them, and second, they are courageous enough to do so. These two items generate distinct reactions. Some participants believe that since close friends can understand one another, they don't need to hold back. There were also several participants believed that intimate connections should be safeguarded, and they were afraid that their friends would take offense if they received frank criticism. Some participants also mentioned that they could respond very differently to phubbing if it was done to someone they were not very close to or someone of a different gender.

#### **3.2.2 Personality of the Interlocutor**

Participants conveyed that their responses also consider who is the interlocutor. When confronted with phubbing, the conversation partner's actions are determined by their personality and character. Because of these various reactions and behaviors, personality is one of the elements that affect how people handle phubbing.

#### **3.2.3 Consent/Permission**

According to some participants, if the conversation partner gave their consent, they could react to phubbing in a different way. Participants may be more understanding if the interlocutor warns them before opening their smartphone. Some participants admitted that they actually realized the reason the conversation partner engaged in phubbing was due to work demands, so many of them understood and accepted this. However, they mentioned it would be better if there was a notice beforehand so that both parties could understand each other and avoid provoking negative emotions.

#### **3.2.4 Context of the Conversation**

The participants' reactions are also influenced by the topics of discussion. Some people complained that they felt irrelevant, disappointed, irritated, and even reluctant to carry on the conversation when it had to be interrupted since the subject matter was serious. According to some participants, phubbing during informal chats in small groups did not bother them too much. Participants understood whether their discussion partner chose to phubbing because they were less interested in the subject in casual conversational settings.

## **4. Discussion**

The findings in this study indicate that phubbing threatens both positive face and negative face. Phubbing threatens positive face because individuals feel unappreciated, ignored, and disappointed when their conversation partner focuses more on their smartphone. Phubbing also threatens the negative face because it limits individuals' freedom of expression. Many participants expressed that they were reluctant to continue the conversation when a smartphone interrupted it. This makes individuals uncomfortable continuing their conversation. Because phubbing has been proven to threaten both positive and negative face, phubbing is concluded to be an impolite act. Based on the politeness theory by [20] actions that threaten someone's face are called face-threatening acts or FTAs.

In line with previous research stating that mobile phones are a distraction in face-to-face interactions [24] this study reinforces that phubbing can disrupt conversations due to interruptions and feelings of neglect. Phubbing, which shifts a person's focus to their smartphone instead of the conversation partner, certainly disrupts the interaction process. Phubbing also breaks communication ethics, where an interaction should involve reciprocity. However, when someone focuses more on their

smartphone than on the conversation partner, the interaction will be interrupted, and the conversation can become one-sided without any response.

The findings of this study also reveal that phubbing, which threatens both positive and negative face, is influenced by several factors, including proximity, personality, consent, and context of interaction. These factors cause differences in how individuals react to phubbing behavior. The different reactions of each participant are influenced by these factors. Being influenced by the same factor does not make individuals react similarly. The findings of this study also expand on previous research, as many participants in this study were found to be able to understand phubbing behavior if the reason was work-related, even tho they still considered phubbing to be an impolite act.

The findings in this study indicate that not 100% of the participants believe that phubbing is an impolite action. This proves that phubbing is becoming more normalized over time. While some studies consider phubbing to be inappropriate and impolite [8]; [25], this study demonstrates that phubbing is no longer considered completely impolite. The level of face threat is influenced by context, relationship, and perception. With the development of technology that makes it easy for individuals to access everything thru smartphones, it has made it difficult for humans to be separated from their smartphones. Thus, even tho phubbing is an act that threatens face, it cannot be considered an impolite action.

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that phubbing is not merely a behavioral disruption but also a significant social phenomenon that generates face-threatening acts in interpersonal communication. Using Politeness Theory, the findings reveal that phubbing threatens both positive and negative face. Threats to positive face arise when individuals feel ignored, unappreciated, or emotionally excluded during interactions, whereas threats to negative face emerge when smartphone use interrupts conversations, creates annoyance, or limits conversational autonomy. The study further shows that participants employ different response strategies depending on the type of face threatened. Positive face threats tend to produce indirect responses, such as silence, humor, or attempts to regain attention, reflecting participants' desire to maintain social harmony. In contrast, negative face threats more frequently lead to direct and assertive reactions, including reprimanding the interlocutor or disengaging from the interaction, indicating a stronger emphasis on protecting personal autonomy in communication.

The findings also indicate that responses to phubbing are shaped by several contextual and interpersonal factors, including relational closeness, interlocutor personality, prior consent, and the nature of the conversation. These factors suggest that reactions to phubbing are not fixed but are dynamically negotiated within particular social situations. One of the strengths of this study lies in its focus on the interactional dimension of phubbing through the lens of politeness theory, which provides a deeper understanding of how individuals negotiate face in everyday communication. In addition, the qualitative approach allows for richer insights into participants' lived experiences and response patterns. However, this study also has several limitations. The findings are based on a relatively small number of participants within a limited age range, which may restrict the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the data rely on participants' self-reported experiences rather than naturally occurring interactions, which may not fully capture spontaneous communicative behavior.

Overall, this research highlights phubbing as a face-threatening behavior that affects both positive and negative face and demonstrates that individuals' responses are influenced by various situational and interpersonal factors. These findings emphasize the importance of maintaining attentiveness and politeness in face-to-face communication in an increasingly digital society. This study also contributes to broader discussions on digital communication awareness and interpersonal well-being by illustrating how technological distractions influence social interaction and communication practices in everyday life.

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### Informed Consent

The authors confirm that informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in this study. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and their rights throughout the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants had the right to decline answering any questions they found uncomfortable and to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. In the event of withdrawal, all associated data, including interview recordings, were deleted and excluded from the study unless explicit permission was granted otherwise.

### Ethical Approval

This research complied with all relevant national regulations and institutional policies of Brawijaya University and was conducted in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were strictly protected through the use of coded identities, and all data were securely stored on password-protected devices with access limited to the researchers. All responses were treated confidentially, and only non-identifiable findings are reported in this study.

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