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ARTICLE / ARTÍCULO

Phubbing as a Social Norm: Effects on Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and Perceived Exclusion

El phubbing como norma social: Efectos en el 'miedo a perderse algo' (FoMO) y la exclusión percibida

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Abstract: Technology and social media have transformed the way we communicate, interact, and stay informed. *Phubbing* is a term that comes from two words «phone» and «snubbing» and represents the act of ignoring a person in a real life setting by paying attention to their cell phone. This behavior may be normalized or cause social difficulties in certain situations. The aim of this study was to analyze the levels of normative behavior and their relations with FoMO, feelings of social exclusion and the phubbing perceived scale. A cross-sectional study was conducted, and the participants were 1506 people in Argentina (50.79% identified as women and 49.21% as men), with an age range between 18 and 65 years old who completed an online survey. The results confirmed that phubbing is perceived as normative behavior in most of the participants, representing a predictor of phubbing in their social interactions. Relations were also found between the perceived normative phubbing and levels of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and feelings of social exclusion. Implications of the variables studied are discussed as possible predictors of phubbing and are to be considered in its approach. The study examines phubbing as a normative behavior in Argentina. No previous studies have been carried out in our country that consider Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), Feelings of Social Exclusion and Perceived Phubbing as predictor variables.

Keywords: Phubbing, Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), Social Isolation, Behavior Standards, Smartphone.

Resumen: La tecnología y las redes sociales han transformado nuestra forma de comunicarnos, interactuar y mantenernos informados. *Phubbing*, en español «Ningufoneo», es un término que proviene de dos palabras «phone» (teléfono) y «snubbing» (desairar) y representa el acto de ignorar a una persona en un entorno de la vida real prestando más atención a su teléfono móvil. Este comportamiento puede estar normalizado o causar dificultades sociales en determinadas situaciones. El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar los niveles de comportamiento normativo y sus relaciones con el FoMO, los sentimientos de exclusión social y la escala de phubbing percibido. Se realizó un estudio transversal, y los participantes fueron 1506 personas en Argentina (50,79% identificadas como mujeres y 49,21% como hombres), con un rango de edad entre 18 y 65 años que completaron una encuesta online. Los resultados confirmaron que el phubbing es percibido como un comportamiento normativo en la mayoría de los participantes, representando un predictor del phubbing en sus interacciones sociales. También se encontraron relaciones entre el phubbing normativo percibido y los niveles de FoMO y sentimientos de exclusión social. Se discuten las implicaciones de las variables estudiadas como posibles predictores del phubbing y que deben tenerse en cuenta en su abordaje. El estudio examina el phubbing como conducta normativa en Argentina. No se han realizado estudios previos que consideren el Miedo a Perderse Algo, los Sentimientos de Exclusión Social y el Phubbing Percibido como variables predictoras.

Palabras clave: Ningufoneo, Miedo a perderse algo (FoMO), Aislamiento social, Normas sociales, Teléfono móvil (celular).

1. Introduction

The vast proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICT) has changed the way people relate to each other, as well as social and communication patterns (Tandon et al., 2022). The negative effects of this change have been studied as the downside of digitization (Turel et al., 2019), among which we find phenomena associated with the downside of social media, such as the fear of missing out (FoMO; Budnick et al., 2020; Tandon et al., 2021) and with the excessive use of smartphones, such as phubbing, among other dysfunctional uses (Al-Saggaf & Macculloch, 2019; Roberts & David, 2020).

The word «phubbing» first appeared in 2007 when a Macquarie dictionary update included the combination of the words «phone» and «snubbing», a problem that is considered to be at the heart of many behavioral addictions. (Aljasir, 2022). Phubbing is described as the act of snubbing others in social interactions by choosing to pay more attention to a cell phone instead of paying attention to them (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018). There are authors who consider that phubbing is not always intentional behavior even though it may upset others (Ranie & Zickuhr, 2015).

Nowadays, there are an increasing number of daily activities that people do from their phones. Mobile devices and social media comprise a number of utilities that make it increasingly difficult for our attention to be diverted from staring at the screen even at night (Boniel-Nissim et al., 2023). Thus, there seems to be a socially common pattern of behavior where people are constantly online in the anticipation of receiving and responding to messages and e-mails, and they are ready to engage in a conversation with another person at any given time, which generates stress and overwhelm, among other symptoms (Derks et al., 2021; Yousaf et al., 2019; 2022).

1.1. Phubbing, Perceived Social Norms, FoMO, and Feelings of Social Exclusion

The use of technology involves new forms of interaction, and phubbing, although perceived as a generalized behavior, is not socially acceptable in all environments (Leuppert & Geber, 2020). Moreover, phubbing has changed the dynamics of interpersonal communication, especially in the last decade (Kadylak, 2019), generating in most human dynamics conflicts that may include relationship, work, and intergenerational problems, among others (Vanden Abeele, 2018; Rendón Vélez, 2022).

Phubbing and its perception in various everyday situations play a fundamental role in an individual's sense of well-being (David & Roberts, 2020). For example, being phubbed leads to feelings of social exclusion, a greater need for attention, and more intensive use of digital media. According to David and Roberts (2017), given the importance of feeling connected to our peers, the feelings of exclusion triggered by being phubbed increase the need to reclaim inclusion, which leads to a discomfort that makes it difficult to control our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. From this perspective, to regain the sense of inclusion threatened by a lack of face-to-face interaction, people may turn to their smartphones and social media to engage with others and relieve the pain associated with being phubbed.

In this regard, one of the vulnerabilities that may cause a person to constantly pay attention to their phone could be the fear of being left out (FoMO: Fear of Missing Out; Blanca & Bendayan, 2018). This term refers to the distress generated by the feeling that others may be experiencing particularly rewarding experiences in which the individual is not participating (Przybylski et al., 2013). The FoMO construct consists of two dimensions (Li et al., 2023), the first is the Fear of Missing Novel Information (FoM-NI), which refers to the ongoing search for new information in social media. On the other hand, the Fear of Missing Social Opportunities (FoM-SO) is linked to the feeling of missing out on social interactions that others may be having (Duraó et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020). According to Tandon et al. (2022) FoMO leads to phubbing, as people try to mitigate the anxiety that may arise from missing up-to-date information about their virtual friends.

Phubbing victims often feel rejected and undervalued (Vanden-Abeeel & Postma-Nilsenova, 2018) and perceive this behavior as aggressive and disrespectful, which generates feelings of social exclusion (Aagaard, 2020). Paying constant attention to their cell phone makes it difficult to talk to and interact with the people around them. Thus, these behaviors (phubbing and FoMO) are closely linked to feelings of social exclusion and loneliness (Ivanova et al., 2020). The feeling of social exclusion affects the ability to regulate our emotions, thoughts, behaviors and even our perception of the passing of time (Télez Rojas & Rivera Fong, 2020). For its part, as well, the feeling of social connection implies that the person perceives closeness in their social ties and a sense of belonging that results in emotional and physical well-being (Koebner et al., 2018). The latter differentiates from social disconnection that causes socioemotional distance from one's surroundings (Pancani et al., 2021).

1.2. Phubbing Assumed as Normative and its Implications

Based on the extent of phubbing and the different variables involved, it is essential to study this issue, focusing on the phubbees and the impact this behavior has on their perception and coexistence with their social environments. Currently, in any modern society, the vast majority of people are exposed to more or less close social interactions and exchanges, in which they suffer or will suffer phubbing (Haigh, 2015). Thus, phubbing is no longer just an isolated behavior or associated with specific situations or contexts; on the contrary, it has become normal or acceptable. It is therefore a challenge to study and analyze the relationship between the suffering of phubbing, to what level this may lead to a better acceptance of phubbing by assuming it as a normal practice, and the possibility that this may lead to phubbing towards other people in the same group. This could be linked to the notion of reciprocity, which in the field of social psychology plays a key role in the study of social interactions (Falk and Fischbacher, 2006). Such reciprocity would make those who are frequently phubbed in their social environments and assume such behavior as normative, more likely to return this behavior even if it has negative consequences for others (Keysar et al., 2008).

Therefore, disregarding or ignoring others in one's social environment through the use of a phone can make said behaviors become normative (and even acceptable) and therefore reciprocal, albeit unintentionally (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016). It is important to note that it does not always take years or decades for a social norm to become established, but on the contrary, it can be established in societies quickly and abruptly (Sunstein, 1996), easily turning into observable behaviors (Miller & Prentice, 1996) as in this case. Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyze the levels of

phubbing perceived as normative behavior, their relationships with FoMO and with feelings of social exclusion and between the five indicators of perceived phubbing as normative and the perceived phubbing scale in their social settings.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A cross-sectional study was conducted with an intentional sample based on the geographical areas of Argentina. A total of 1506 people participated in the study (with a sampling error of 2.5% and a confidence level of 95%), 50.79% (n = 765) of the participants identified as woman, and 49.21% (n = 741) as men. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 65 years (M = 43.21; SD = 11.71). 4.9% of the sample had only completed their primary education, 31.8% had completed their secondary school, 31.4% had finished their tertiary education, and 31.9% had finished their university studies.

2.2. Measures

A variety of evaluation tools, including a battery of self-report measures, were used:

- Perceived Social Norms of Phubbing: Participants completed the «*Perceived Social Norms of Phubbing Scale*» (PSNP; Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016), which consisted of two items measuring injunctive norms—the inference of others' approval toward phubbing—and three items measuring descriptive norms based on their observations of others' behavior.
- Phubbing Scale. We used the scale developed by David and Roberts (2017), which is comprised of nine items that measure how often people use their smartphones while spending time with their contacts (i.e., friends, neighbors, family, etc.) (e.g., "People who I spend time with often glance at their cellphone when talking to me", "When their cellphone rings or beeps, they pull it out even if we are in the middle of a conversation", "When I spend time with people, they keep their cellphone where they can see it"). The response format ranges from 1 = Never to 5 = All the time.
- FoMO Scale. We used the adaptation and validation of the scale's original version (Przybylski et al., 2013), which consists of 10 items that determine dimension 1, FoM NI (for example, "I fear my friends have more rewarding experiences than me"), and dimension 2, FoM SO (for instance, "It bothers me when I miss an opportunity to meet up with friends"). The response format was Likert-type, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree".
- Feelings of Social Exclusion Scale. The scale originally developed by Williams, Cheung, and Choi (2000) and reformulated by David and Roberts (2017), is made up of six items that explore feelings of social exclusion (e.g., "To what extent when spending time with other people, do you experience feelings of being ignored?", "To what extent when spending time with other people, do you experience feelings of being excluded?", "To what extent when spending

time with other people, do you experience feelings of being rejected?"). The response format is five anchors, ranging from 1 = Not at all to 5 = Very much.

- Socio-demographic Data Questionnaire: Information about gender, age, and highest level of education was collected from the participants.

2.3. Procedure and data analysis

Based on the quotas established for the sample distribution, those who satisfied the requirements for age (over 18) and geographic location were asked to participate via social media answering a geolocalized online questionnaire. We work with an intentional, non representative sample. The study's aim, the organization in charge of it, and a contact email address were communicated to the participants, requesting their informed consent to take part in the study. Additionally, they were made aware that the information gathered for this study would be protected in line with Argentine National Law 25,326 on the protection of personal data and would only be used for academic and scientific purposes. The SPSS for Windows version 19.0 (George & Mallery, 2010) was used for the statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis) were examined for each Phubbing indicators. Also correlations, t-test, and a multiple regression were calculate.

3. Results

The descriptive statistics of the Perceived Social Norms of Phubbing were analyzed in the Argentine context (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of phubbing indicators.

	M	SD	S	K	Responses (%)				
					1	2	3	4	5
1. Do these types of situations happen?	4.41	1.12	-.94	1.12	3.8	15.7	25.3	42.3	12.9
2. Do you think people are aware that they use the phone at all times (dining, drinking, conversations, etc.)?	3.40	1.58	-.21	-.90	23.1	24.7	27.8	14.7	9.7
3. Would you say that the people you spend time with are constantly interacting with their cell phone?	4.43	1.17	-.94	.83	4.1	17.6	20.1	43.2	15.1
4. Do you think you spend a lot of time on your cell phone when you are with other people?	2.94	1.55	.01	-1.17	33.2	26.7	23.7	12.5	3.8
5. Are you affected / bothered / annoyed / offended by other people using cell phones while you are having a conversation?	4.06	1.59	-.36	-.73	11.5	26.7	22.7	11.1	28.1

Note: adequate values of Skewness (S) and Kurtosis (K): $-1.4 < X < 1.4$.
 1: Not at all; 2: A little bit; 3: Sometimes; 4: Frequently; 5: Very much

First, no differences were found based on the participants' gender or age. According to Table 1, there is a perception of excessive cell phone use during interactions in social contexts, although there is no awareness of this fact among those who do so. Additionally, this form of social interaction, in which phubbing exists, is in

most cases a source of discomfort. However, as many as 66.8% of cases reported using their phones longer than desired while engaged in social interactions.

Relations in the five indicators of phubbing, FoMO dimensions, and feelings of social exclusion were analyzed next (Table 2).

Table 2. Relationships among the five indicators of perceived phubbing, FoMO dimensions, and feelings of social exclusion.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Do these types of situations happen?	-	.070**	.591**	.408**	.045	.167**	.114**	.136**
2. Do you think people are aware that they use the phone at all times (dining, drinking, conversations, etc.)?		-	.110**	.103**	.010	.115**	.034	.054
3. Would you say that the people you spend time with are constantly interacting with their cell phone?			-	.365**	.100**	.150**	.079**	.167**
4. Do you think you spend a lot of time on your cell phone when you are with other people?				-	-.213*	.210**	.151**	.113**
5. Are you affected / bothered / annoyed / offended by other people using cell phones while you are having a conversation?					-	.102**	.081**	.130**
6. FoMO - NI						-	.452**	.425**
7. FoMO - SO							-	.161**
8. Feelings of social exclusion								-

*. p < .05; **. p < .001.

Table 2 shows significant relationships between the various items that evaluate normative phubbing in the participants' social environment and FoMO and feelings of social exclusion. In relation to FoMO, the FoMO-NI subdimension was the most significantly related to all indicators. As for feelings of social exclusion, these were also moderately positively related to all items of perceived phubbing as normative, with the exception of Item 2 (Do you think people are aware that they use the phone at all times (dining, drinking, conversations, etc.)?). The strongest relation ($r = .42$; $p < .001$) was found between FoMO-NI and feelings of social exclusion.

Next, in Table 3, a multiple regression was calculated between the five indicators of phubbing as normative and the perceived phubbing scale in their social settings.

The results show that, with the exception of Item 2 of the scale of phubbing perceived as normative, the rest of the indicators significantly predict the phubbing suffered by the person in their environment. Thus, a significant association is shown between Item 1 ($\beta = .017$; $p < .001$), Item 3 ($\beta = .017$; $p < .001$), Item 4 ($\beta = .011$; $p < .05$), and Item 5 ($\beta = .010$; $p < .001$).

Table 3. Linear multiple regression model between phubbing as normative and the perceived phubbing scale.

Predictors	β	R2
1. Do these types of situations happen?	.374***	
2. Do you think people are aware that they use the phone at all times (dining, drinking, conversations, etc.)?	-.021	
3. Would you say that the people you spend time with are constantly interacting with their cell phone?	.375***	.496***
4. Do you think you spend a lot of time on your cell phone when you are with other people?	.058*	
5. Are you affected / bothered / annoyed / offended by other people using cell phones while you are having a conversation?	.104***	

*. $p < .05$; **. $p < .001$.

4. Conclusion

Considering that phubbing no longer represents a mere isolated event, but has become an increasingly accepted and sometimes normative behavior (Haigh, 2015), the main objective of the present study was to analyze the levels of phubbing in the Argentine context, as well as the relationships with other variables that literature suggests as related (Cheung & Choi, 2000; Przybylski et al., 2013).

The results of the present study indicate that participants frequently recognize instances of phubbing in their social interactions. Even though this generates certain levels of discomfort, it is not usually attributed to those who perform it. Similarly, more than half of the participants acknowledge that they spend a lot of time on their cell phones when they are with other people. In line with what has been proposed by different authors (Haigh, 2015; Miller & Prentice, 1996; Sunstein, 1996), these findings would reinforce the hypothesis of phubbing as a normative and acceptable behavior, quickly translated into an observable behavior in the Argentine context, as well. Also, these findings are consistent with results from previous studies in other contexts (Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas, 2016) and with other theoretical models that have been depicted (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006). Thus, we may conclude that the perception of phubbing as a normative behavior in social situations of which an individual is a part may lead them to engage in phubbing as a reciprocal behavior (Keysar et al., 2008), regardless of the suffering it might cause others.

Second, the results indicated that phubbing perceived as normative is significantly and positively related to other variables contrary to individuals' psychosocial well-being such as FoMO (Przybylski et al., 2013). As already mentioned, one of the things that may trigger phubbing is the fear of being left out (FoMO; Blanca & Bendayan, 2018) and an increase in distress levels caused by the feeling that others may be experiencing enjoyable and rewarding experiences in which the individual is

not participating (Przybylski et al., 2013). Additionally, all phubbing indicators were positively and more strongly related to the Fear of Missing Novel Information (FoM-NI) dimension than to the Fear of Missing Social Opportunities (FoM-SO) dimension. In line with Li et al. (2023), the results of this study seem to indicate that individuals pay more attention to their phones to access any new information that might come up on social media, rather than for fear of missing out on the desired social interactions that others may be having.

Third, as suggested in the theoretical model of David and Roberts (2017, 2020), the significant relationships found between phubbing indicators, feelings of social exclusion, and Fear of Missing Novel Information (FoM-NI) would support the hypothesis of the former as an important element in the emergence of the latter and a consequent fear of being left out linked to the abusive use of social media (Roberts & David, 2019).

Finally, we further analyzed the association between phubbing perceived as normative and phubbing suffered directly in the participants' social surroundings. From this perspective, and in line with previous studies (Li et al., 2023; Leuppert & Geber, 2020) a significant association was found that allows us to predict the degree of phubbing that a subject suffers directly in their daily life based on the degree of normativity that they perceive in their social environments regarding the use of cell phones during interactions. The results suggest that phubbing may now be becoming increasingly universal, and this is becoming more and more normalized in today's society. This fact may create expectations and a stronger tendency towards phubbing, even in interactions in close or intimate social settings.

To conclude, the present study has provided evidence of significant relationships between phubbing, FoMO, and feelings of social exclusion in the Argentine culture. This finding is considered an advance not only in the theoretical understanding of the factors linked to the downside of social media in general, but also in the understanding of this problem in an underdeveloped country where access to technology and the Internet is increasingly unequal.

Despite the mentioned contributions, the present study has coexisted with a series of limitations that it is hoped can be further explored in future research on the subject. First, a more extensive consideration of the participants' sociodemographic characteristics that may affect access to technology and Internet would allow for greater control over the relationships between phubbing, FoMO, and feelings of social exclusion. In that sense, future work should include more sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, as well as the conditions of effective access to technology and the Internet, since these could operate as possible moderators of the relationships between the variables. Secondly, the use of self-administered questionnaires constitutes a potential response bias that may obstruct the analysis of causal relationships between the variables under study. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies may advance on the adoption of mixed methods or experimental methodologies to carry out this type of work. Lastly, a challenge for the future is the development of other positive and healthy social norms aimed at reducing the perceived social norms of negative behaviors such as phubbing. Given the direct influence of the social context and the norms assumed in relation to phubbing, it is important to address the problem in a social and not only individual sense, thus

avoiding the idea that it is only individual behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes that lead to an unhealthy use of digital media.

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