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Perceived Social Norms of Phubbing Among High School Students

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Abstrak

Phubbing, yaitu tindakan mengabaikan orang lain dalam percakapan pribadi demi menggunakan smartphone yang sudah digunakan, telah menjadi bentuk perilaku digital yang semakin meningkat di kalangan remaja. Selain penggunaan smartphone secara individu, phubbing dapat dipengaruhi oleh norma sosial yang dipersepsikan, terutama dalam hal persepsi remaja terhadap prevalensi dan penerimaan sosial perilaku tersebut di antara teman sebaya mereka. Tujuan studi ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi norma sosial yang dirasakan dari phubbing pada siswa sekolah menengah. Desain yang digunakan adalah survei kuantitatif deskriptif dan responden terdiri dari 324 siswa sekolah menengah. Skala norma sosial yang dipersepsikan dengan empat item mengukur persepsi siswa tentang prevalensi sosial dan penerimaan phubbing, dan digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data. Statistik deskriptif (rata-rata, deviasi standar, skor minimum dan maksimum, serta distribusi variabel kategori) digunakan untuk menganalisis data. Skor rata-rata norma sosial yang dirasakan dari phubbing adalah 10,09 (SD=1,99) dengan skor berkisar antara 4 hingga 16. Berdasarkan rentang skor teoretis, terdapat 55 siswa (17,0%) dalam kategori norma sosial rendah yang dirasakan untuk phubbing, 243 siswa (75,0%) dalam kategori sedang, dan 26 siswa (8,0%) dalam kategori tinggi. Prevalensi tinggi kategori sedang menunjukkan bahwa phubbing dianggap sebagai perilaku sosial yang relatif umum dalam lingkungan interpersonal siswa, tetapi bukan perilaku yang sangat normatif dalam arti universal. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa fenomena phubbing pada remaja harus dipahami tidak hanya sebagai perilaku yang terkait dengan smartphone individu tetapi juga sebagai fenomena yang tertanam secara sosial. Pemahaman tentang persepsi norma sosial remaja dapat menjadi dasar penting untuk mengembangkan intervensi pencegahan dan konseling yang menantang persepsi normatif yang maladaptif dan mengurangi perilaku phubbing di kalangan siswa sekolah menengah.

Kata kunci: Norma Teman Sebaya; Perilaku Digital; Remaja

Abstract

Phubbing, the act of snubbing others in personal conversations in favour of used one's smartphone, has become an increasing form of digital behaviour among adolescents. Beyond individual use of smartphones, phubbing may be impacted by the perceived social norms, especially in terms of adolescents' perceptions of the prevalence and social acceptability of such behaviour among their peers. The purpose of the present study was to explore the perceived social norms of phubbing in high school students. The design used was descriptive quantitative survey and the respondents were 324 high school students. A four-item perceived social norms scale measured students' perception of social prevalence and acceptability of phubbing, and was used to collect data. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores, and distribution of categorical variables) were used to analyse the data. The mean score of perceived social norms of phubbing was 10.09 (SD=1.99) with the scores ranging from 4 to 16. Based on

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the theoretical range of score, there were 55 students (17.0%) in low perceived social norms of phubbing category, 243 students (75.0%) in moderate category and 26 students (8.0%) in high category. The high prevalence of the moderate category suggests that phubbing is considered a relatively common social behaviour in the interpersonal environment of students, but not a highly normative behaviour in a universal sense. These findings suggest that the phubbing phenomenon in adolescents should be understood not only as a behaviour related to individual smartphones but also as a socially embedded phenomenon. An understanding of the social norm perceptions of adolescents may be an important basis for developing preventive and counselling interventions that challenge maladaptive normative perceptions and reduce phubbing behaviour among high school students.

Keywords: *Adolescents; Digital Behaviour; Peer Norms*

INTRODUCTION

The smartphone has become one of the most pervasive artefacts of adolescent daily life. Beyond its function as a communication device, the smartphone now mediates learning, entertainment, self-presentation, and peer relationships, so much so that many adolescents report feeling unable to disengage from it even in the middle of face-to-face social situations. One of the behavioural manifestations of this constant connectivity is phubbing, a portmanteau of "phone" and "snubbing" that describes the act of ignoring a conversation partner in order to attend to a smartphone (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016; Karadağ et al., 2015). Phubbing captures a paradox of the digital age: the very device that promises to connect people to a wider social world can simultaneously disconnect them from the people who are physically present.

Empirical evidence indicates that phubbing is widespread among adolescents and young adults across cultural contexts, with prevalence estimates in recent school- and university-based studies in Europe frequently exceeding two in five students (Barbed-Castrejón et al., 2024). Observational research further shows that phubbing occurs in the majority of everyday dyadic conversations and is associated with reduced perceived intimacy and heightened distraction for both interlocutors (Vanden Abeele et al., 2019). The consequences of phubbing extend well beyond momentary awkwardness. In romantic relationships, being phubbed by a partner is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and greater depressive symptoms (Roberts & David, 2016; Wang et al., 2017), a pattern researchers have described as "technoference", the everyday intrusion of devices into relational life (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). Within families, parental phubbing has been linked to adolescents' smartphone addiction, sleep problems, and internalising symptoms (Tang et al., 2024; Tong et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2022), while adolescents' own phubbing behaviour has been shown to predict lower peer relationship quality and elevated depressive symptoms through frustrated psychological needs (Yue et al., 2024).

Much of this literature has approached phubbing as an individual-level phenomenon, driven primarily by personal dispositions and problematic technology use. Smartphone addiction has consistently emerged as one of the strongest predictors of phubbing (Karadağ et al., 2015; Kwon et al., 2013), together with related constructs such as fear of missing out (Przybylski et al., 2013), boredom proneness (Meng & Xuan, 2023), and personality traits such as low self-control (Abi Doumit et al., 2023). A recent meta-analytic synthesis of 79 studies confirmed that problematic phone and internet use patterns are the most robust correlates of phubbing across populations (Arenz & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2024). While this body of work has substantially advanced the understanding of who phubs and why, it has tended to locate the causes of phubbing inside the individual, leaving comparatively little room for the possibility that phubbing is also learned, reinforced, and normalised through the social environment in which adolescents are embedded.

Social norms theory offers a complementary lens for understanding behaviours such as phubbing. Norms are commonly divided into descriptive norms, which reflect beliefs about what others actually do, and injunctive norms, which reflect beliefs about what others approve or disapprove of (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Perceived norms, that is, an individual's subjective estimate of these descriptive and injunctive standards, frequently diverge from actual norms, a discrepancy known as pluralistic ignorance (Prentice & Miller, 1993). The

social norms approach, first articulated in studies of collegiate alcohol misuse, demonstrated that individuals routinely overestimate how common and how acceptable risk behaviours are among their peers, and that this misperception itself becomes a driver of the behaviour, independent of the true prevalence of the behaviour (Berkowitz, 2005; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). Subsequent research has extended this logic to a wide range of adolescent behaviours, showing that perceived peer norms shape decisions about substance use, aggression, and eating behaviour, often more strongly than the corresponding actual norms (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005).

Phubbing research has begun to incorporate this normative perspective. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2016) found that the frequency with which adolescents phub others, and the frequency with which they themselves are phubbed, predicts the extent to which they perceive phubbing to be a socially normative behaviour, suggesting a reinforcing cycle in which repeated exposure to the behaviour recalibrates what is seen as ordinary. Consistent with this, the widely used Generic Scale of Being Phubbed explicitly contains a perceived-norms subdimension alongside dimensions capturing the felt experience of being ignored and the interpersonal conflict this creates (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018). Peer-context studies reinforce the same pattern: adolescents whose peer group phubs frequently are themselves more likely to phub and to develop related problematic technology use (Chu et al., 2021), and in the Indonesian setting, self-control has been shown to interact with the social environment of the classroom to shape students' phubbing tendencies (Kartikasari et al., 2023). Taken together, these findings imply that when phubbing is common within a peer group, it can come to be perceived as an accepted, even expected, way of managing social interaction, which in turn lowers the psychological cost of engaging in it.

Despite this growing theoretical rationale, direct empirical description of adolescents' perceived social norms of phubbing, as distinct from their own phubbing behaviour or its individual antecedents, remains scarce, particularly within the Indonesian high school context where most existing local studies have focused on self-control, smartphone addiction, or family-based predictors of phubbing (Ramadhani et al., 2024; Rizqika et al., 2023; Sari & Purnomo, 2024). A clear descriptive account of how prevalent and how acceptable high school students believe phubbing to be among their peers is a necessary first step before normative-feedback interventions, of the kind long used in substance-use prevention, can be meaningfully designed and tested for this behaviour. The present study therefore aimed to describe the perceived social norms of phubbing among high school students, examining both the overall distribution of scores and the proportion of students falling into low, moderate, and high normative-perception categories, in order to provide an empirical foundation for school-based counselling interventions targeting the social, rather than purely individual, dimensions of adolescent phubbing.

METHOD

Research Design. This study used a descriptive quantitative survey design. The design was chosen because the primary aim was to describe the distribution and categorical tendency of high school students' perceived social norms of phubbing, rather than to test causal or correlational hypotheses between variables.

Population and Sample. The population of this study consisted of high school students. A total of 324 students participated as respondents, selected through a random sampling technique from among students who were actively enrolled and present at school during the data collection period. Participation was voluntary; students were informed of the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses before providing their consent to participate.

Instrument. Data were collected using a Perceived Social Norms of Phubbing Scale consisting of four items. The instrument was developed with reference to the conceptualisation of phubbing as a socially normative behaviour advanced by Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2016, 2018), and was designed to capture two complementary facets of perceived norms: the perceived descriptive norm (students' estimation of how commonly phubbing is practised among their peers) and the perceived injunctive norm (students' estimation of how acceptable or

tolerable phubbing is considered within their peer environment). Each item was rated on a four-point Likert-type scale, yielding a theoretical score range of 4 to 16, with higher scores indicating a stronger perception that phubbing is a prevalent and socially accepted behaviour. Prior to use, the instrument was reviewed for content validity and its reliability was examined using internal consistency procedures appropriate for a short Likert-type scale.

Data Collection Procedure. The scale was administered directly to students in a paper-and-pencil format under the supervision of the research team and, where applicable, the school counsellor. Students completed the instrument individually during a single session, and completed instruments were checked for completeness before being included in the final data set.

Data Analysis. Data were analysed using descriptive statistical procedures, including the mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum scores of the perceived social norms of phubbing variable. In addition, respondents' scores were classified into three categories, low, moderate, and high, based on the theoretical range and standard deviation of the scale, following the norm-referenced categorisation procedure commonly used in Indonesian guidance and counselling research. The frequency and percentage of students in each category were then calculated to describe the overall tendency of perceived social norms of phubbing within the sample.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Descriptive analysis of the 324 respondents showed that the perceived social norms of phubbing scale produced scores ranging from a minimum of 4 to a maximum of 16, corresponding to the full theoretical range of the instrument. The mean score obtained was 10.09 (SD = 1.99), indicating that, on average, students' perception of the prevalence and acceptability of phubbing among their peers fell around the midpoint of the possible score range, with a moderate degree of variability among respondents.

Table 1 presents the distribution of students across the three normative-perception categories. Of the 324 students surveyed, 55 students (17.0%) were categorised as having a low perceived social norm of phubbing, indicating that they perceived phubbing to be relatively uncommon and/or relatively unacceptable within their peer environment. The largest group, comprising 243 students (75.0%), fell into the moderate category, suggesting that the majority of students perceived phubbing as a fairly common occurrence among peers without regarding it as a fully endorsed or universally expected behaviour. Meanwhile, 26 students (8.0%) were categorised as having a high perceived social norm of phubbing, reflecting a belief that phubbing is both highly prevalent and broadly acceptable within their social surroundings.

Table 1. Distribution of Students' Perceived Social Norms of Phubbing

Category	Score Range	f	%
Low	4 – 8	55	17.0
Moderate	9 – 12	243	75.0
High	13 – 16	26	8.0
Total	-	324	100.0

Overall, the combined moderate and high categories accounted for 83.0% of the sample, indicating that the great majority of high school students in this study perceived phubbing to be, at minimum, a familiar and reasonably tolerated feature of their peer environment. At the same time, the concentration of scores in the moderate rather than the high category suggests that phubbing is not perceived as an unconditionally endorsed norm; rather, most students appear to hold an intermediate perception in which phubbing is recognised as occurring with some regularity but is not viewed as fully sanctioned or expected behaviour.

Discussion

The present findings show that the majority of high school students (75.0%) perceived the social norm of phubbing to be at a moderate level, while smaller proportions perceived it as low (17.0%) or high (8.0%). This distribution offers an important empirical anchor for understanding how the phubbing phenomenon is socially situated within the adolescent peer environment, and it invites interpretation through the lens of social norms theory rather than through individual-difference explanations alone.

The dominance of the moderate category is theoretically meaningful. Within the descriptive/injunctive norms framework (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005), a moderate perception suggests that most students recognise phubbing as something that does happen with some regularity among their peers, a moderately strong perceived descriptive norm, without necessarily believing that it is broadly condoned or expected, a comparatively weaker perceived injunctive norm. In other words, phubbing appears to occupy a normatively ambiguous middle ground in adolescent peer culture: common enough to be unremarkable, yet not so widely approved that it has become an unquestioned standard of interaction. This pattern is consistent with the concept of pluralistic ignorance described by Prentice and Miller (1993), in which individuals hold private reservations about a behaviour while overestimating, underestimating, or remaining uncertain about the extent to which their peers share those reservations. If a meaningful share of students privately view phubbing as somewhat inappropriate but perceive it as commonplace, this ambiguity itself may sustain the behaviour, because no strong corrective social signal emerges to discourage it, even though few students may regard it as fully legitimate.

These results also resonate with the reinforcing-cycle mechanism proposed by Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2016), who found that adolescents who phub more frequently, and who are phubbed more frequently, come to perceive phubbing as more normative. Given that phubbing has been shown to occur in the majority of observed face-to-face conversations among young people (Vanden Abeele et al., 2019), it is plausible that the high combined moderate-to-high proportion found in the present study (83.0%) reflects cumulative, repeated exposure to co-present phone use within students' everyday social environment, rather than a deliberate or reflective judgement about the acceptability of the behaviour. Repeated exposure, in this sense, functions as an implicit normalising mechanism: the more often a behaviour is observed, the more ordinary it comes to appear, regardless of whether it is genuinely endorsed.

The relatively small but non-trivial high-perceived-norm group (8.0%) deserves particular attention, because perceiving a behaviour as both prevalent and acceptable removes an important social barrier against engaging in it. This concern is reinforced by findings that adolescents embedded in peer groups with frequent phubbing are themselves more prone to phub and to related patterns of problematic device use (Chu et al., 2021), and by evidence from the broader predictor literature that problematic phone and internet use remain the strongest correlates of phubbing behaviour (Arenz & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2024). Students in the high-perceived-norm category may therefore represent a subgroup at elevated risk not only of phubbing others but of the downstream relational and psychological costs associated with it, including reduced relationship satisfaction (Roberts & David, 2016; Wang et al., 2017) and, for adolescents specifically, heightened depressive symptoms mediated through poorer peer relationship quality and frustrated psychological needs (Yue et al., 2024).

Conversely, the low-perceived-norm group (17.0%) may function as a naturally occurring "positive deviance" subgroup, that is, students whose environment or interpretation of that environment leads them to see phubbing as comparatively uncommon or unacceptable. Such students could be valuable reference points for peer-modelling components of an intervention, illustrating that alternative, more attentive patterns of face-to-face interaction are both possible and already present within the school community, rather than presenting norm change as an entirely external or aspirational goal.

It is also important to situate these adolescent-level findings within the wider ecological context in which they are perceived. Parental phubbing has itself been linked to increased adolescent smartphone addiction, depression, and even adolescent phubbing behaviour through cross-lagged, longitudinal pathways (Tang et al., 2024; Tong et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2022), suggesting that the normalisation of phubbing may begin within the family before being

reinforced within the peer group. From a social-ecological standpoint, adolescents' perceptions of what is normal or acceptable smartphone-related behaviour are therefore likely shaped by an accumulation of modelling experiences across both family and peer contexts, which may help explain why moderate, rather than low, perceived norms predominate even though few students may regard the behaviour as fully justified.

These findings carry direct implications for school-based counselling practice. The social norms approach that originated in substance-use prevention research has demonstrated that correcting misperceived descriptive and injunctive norms, rather than targeting individual attitudes or knowledge deficits alone, can produce meaningful behaviour change, precisely because it addresses the social scaffolding that sustains the behaviour rather than the behaviour in isolation (Berkowitz, 2005; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). Applied to phubbing, school counsellors could design normative-feedback interventions that make explicit to students the actual, rather than assumed, prevalence and level of peer disapproval of phubbing within their school, alongside psychoeducational sessions addressing the relational costs of phubbing documented in the broader literature (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Roberts & David, 2016). Given the evidence that self-control (Kartikasari et al., 2023) and cognitive-behavioural, self-management techniques have shown promise in reducing student phubbing and smartphone addiction, combining individually oriented counselling techniques with a norm-correction component may offer a more comprehensive intervention strategy than either approach alone.

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the descriptive, cross-sectional design precludes any causal or even correlational inference about the relationship between perceived social norms and students' actual phubbing behaviour, well-being, or peer relationships; the study describes normative perception in isolation rather than testing it as a predictor or outcome. Second, the four-item perceived social norms scale, while efficient for large-scale descriptive survey purposes, does not disaggregate the descriptive and injunctive components of the norm, which theoretically may operate through different psychological mechanisms and could respond differently to intervention. Third, data were collected through self-report, which is susceptible to social desirability bias and to the same misperception biases the construct itself is intended to measure. Finally, the sample was drawn from a limited set of high schools using non-probability elements of convenience in scheduling, which constrains the generalisability of the findings to the broader adolescent population.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal or experimental designs capable of testing whether correcting misperceived norms produces measurable reductions in phubbing behaviour over time, in the tradition of social-norms marketing interventions used in other risk-behaviour domains. Future studies would also benefit from separately measuring descriptive and injunctive norm components, examining perceived norms alongside actual behavioural and psychosocial outcome measures such as peer relationship quality, loneliness, and academic engagement, and extending this line of inquiry across diverse cultural and school settings to determine whether the moderate-normative pattern observed here generalises beyond the present sample.

CONCLUSION

This study described the perceived social norms of phubbing among 324 high school students, finding a mean score of 10.09 (SD = 1.99) and a predominance of students (75.0%) in the moderate normative-perception category, alongside smaller groups perceiving the norm as low (17.0%) or high (8.0%). These results indicate that phubbing is widely regarded by adolescents as a familiar, if not fully endorsed, feature of peer interaction, supporting the view that phubbing should be understood as a socially embedded phenomenon shaped by perceived descriptive and injunctive peer standards, and not merely as an outcome of individual smartphone dependency. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating a social-norms perspective into guidance and counselling practice, whereby interventions address not only individual self-control

or smartphone-use patterns but also the peer-level perceptions that normalise phubbing, in order to more effectively prevent and reduce this behaviour among high school students.

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