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THE SMARTPHONE BETWEEN US: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF PARTNER PHUBBING ON RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION AND TRUST

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to elucidate the effects of partner phubbingon trust and relationship satisfaction. The sample consisted of 100 spouses (50 husbands and 50 wives) chosen from Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. The participants were administered on Partner Phubbing Scale, Relationship Assessment Scale and Trust Scale. Participants falling below Mean−1SD and above Mean+1SD on partner phubbing were respectively categorized as low and high scorer participants were screened out. Results revealed a non-significant effect of gender on both trust andrelationship satisfaction. However,a significant effect of levels of partner phubbing was observed on trust andrelationship satisfaction, indicating that individuals with high level of partner phubbing reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction and trust compared to those with low level of partner phubbing. Mean comparisons supported that low scorer as compared to high scorer associated with better relationship outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's digitally connected world, smartphones have become an integral part of daily life profoundly influencing the way individuals interact and communicate with one another. Though these devices offer convenience and connectivity, they also give rise to a phenomenon known as phubbing defined as, "any interruption of your conversation with someone when he or she attends to their cell phone or when you are in close proximity to another but they use their cell phone instead of communicating with you" (Roberts and David, 2016). Phubbing can occur in various contexts, from casual social gatherings to professional meetings, and it often leads to feelings of neglect, frustration, and social disconnection among those being ignored. When phubbing occurs within romantic relationships, it takes a more specific form called 'Partner Phubbing'. This behavior involves one partner prioritizing their smartphone over meaningful interaction with their significant other, which can significantly affect the quality and emotional depth of the relationship. In marital contexts, where attentiveness and emotional availability are highly valued repeated experiences of partner phubbing may muddle the relationship and lead to reduced relationship satisfaction and trust over time. A qualitativestudy conducted by Broning and Wartberg (2022) found that all respondents' partners had neglected their partners when they were communicating directly by operating the telephone. Attachment theory suggest early life relationships shape adult attachment styles, which in turn affect how individuals engage in and respond to Phubbing(Broning andWartberg, 2022). The cognitive approach emphasizes the role of maladaptive cognitions in shaping emotional and behavioral responses to Phubbing. Phubbing threatens the sense of emotional security and trust within a relationship, particularly among individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment styles (Wang *et al*., 2024).

Humans are inherently social and relational in nature, and interpersonal relationships play a fundamental role in shaping an individual's emotional, psychological, and social development. Romantic relationships are considered one of the most significant, as they provide emotional intimacy, companionship, social support, and a sense of belonging. One of the most important constructs used to evaluate the quality of romantic relationships is **relationship satisfaction**, which refers to the extent to which individuals feel happy, content, and fulfilled in their relationship with their partner.It reflects emotional fulfillment, communication quality, and perceived support from a spouse. Relationship satisfaction, defined as one's overall feelings and attitude towards their romantic relationship (Fincham& Rogge, 2010; Kamp Dush *et al*.,

2008), has been associated consistently with better physical and mental health (Adamczyk *et al*., 2001; Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017; Wilson & Novak, 2022). Jain and Tyagi (2024) examined predictors of phubbing behavior among married individuals and reported that relationship satisfaction, commitment, and personality traits such as neuroticism significantly predicted phubbing behavior, suggesting that both relational and individual factors influence technology-related interpersonal neglect. Romantic relationships play a crucial role in many aspects of an individual's life and are associated with long- term health outcomes, including morbidity and mortality (Lev-Ari *et al*., 2021; Whisman *et al*., 2018).According to Social Exchange Theory, relationship satisfaction depends on a cost–benefit analysis. When rewards (love, support, and companionship) are greater than conflicts and sacrifices, people feel satisfied, on the other when costs exceed rewards, dissatisfaction may occur. Similarly, Equity theory states that relationship satisfaction depends on fairness and balance.Yam (2023) suggested that phubbing may indirectly lower people's life satisfaction through its adverse effects on relationship satisfaction and relationship quality.

In addition to relationship satisfaction, trust plays a crucial role in determining the quality and stability of romantic relationships**.** Trust is a subjective belief in another person's ability to be there, the idea of relying on someone when the need to be. Rotter (1980) defined trust as a"generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word, promise, or statement of another individual can be relied on".Trust plays a pivotal role in maintaining functional and fulfilling relationships, deepening intimacy, and providing continuity (Larzelere and Huston, 1980; Kemer *et al*.2016). Lack of trust can lead to negative reactions, lying, low relationship quality, perception and attachment anxiety, negatively impacting relationships (Simpson, 2007; Campbell *et al*.,2010; Towner *et al*.,2015). On the other hand, trust enables partners to navigate conflicts effectively, as they believe that their partner's intentions are positive and that disagreements can be resolved constructively. Trust is the mutual confidence which indicates that no individual will make use of another individual's weakness (Sabel, 1993).In the context of modern relationships, the trust is being influenced by technological advancements and digital communication. In recent years, researchers have increasingly focused on the impact of technology on trust and relationship quality. However, empirical research on partner phubbing and its consequence on trust are still limited, particularly in non-western cultural contexts. Cultural norms, values, and expectations regarding relationships and technology use may influence how individuals perceive and respond to phubbing behavior. Therefore, there is a need for further research to explore the relationship between partner phubbing, and other diverse cultural settings.

Research indicates that when individuals feel ignored due to their partner's phone use, trust, emotional connection, and overall relationship satisfaction decrease. It has been observed that individuals who experience frequent phubbing report reduced trust, emotional security, and satisfaction within their relationships. As a result, the quality of interaction decreases, and partners may feel undervalued or unimportant. It was also determined that phubbing undermines fundamental relational processes such as attention, empathy, and emotional presence—core components necessary for building trust and satisfaction. Despite these findings, research still lacks deeper examination of how partner phubbingjointly impacts both trust and relationship satisfaction as interconnected variables. Therefore, The present study aims to (i) elucidate the effect of 'spouses' (husbands and wives), and 'levels' (low and high) partner phubbing on relationship satisfactionand trust separately in married couples.

Hypotheses

- There would be significant effects of spouses (husbands and wives) on the relationship satisfaction
- High as compared to low scorers on partner phubbing would manifest lower indices on the measure of relationship satisfaction and trust
- The interaction effects of spouses and levels of partner-phubbing (2 spouses X 2 levels of partner-phubbing) on behavioral measures (relationship satisfaction and trust) are exploratory in nature. It is expected that two factor interaction effects would be in conformity to the main effects of the independent variables on the measures the dependent variable.

Design of research: To achieve the objective, low scorer (Mean – 1SD) and high scorer (Mean + 1SD) participants on partner- phubbing were screened out, and there corresponding scores on the measures of relationship outcomes – (relationship satisfaction and trust) were analyzed by employing 2X2 factorial designs (2 spouses x 2 levels of partner phubbing) on behavioral measures (relationship satisfaction and trust).

Sample: The proposed study was conducted on a sample of 50 married couples (husbands = 50 and wives = 50) from Gorakhpur city in Uttar Pradesh. The participants were selected using the snowball sampling technique. Several extraneous variables, such as socio-economic status, marital age, family background, and duration of the relationship, were recorded. These variables were considered with the objective of equating the sample in order to obtain a representative group for conducting the study effectively.

Behavioral Measures: The study under report has employed the behavioral measures of (i) PartnerPhubbing Scale (PPS; Robert and David, 2016). (ii) Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick,1988). (iii) Trust Scale (Rempel and Holmes, 1986).

Partner Phubbing Scale (PPS; Roberts and David, 2016): The Partner Phubbing Scale compromises 9 items that assess the extent to which individuals experience partner phubbing in their relationships. The scale has established robust psychometric properties, including high internal consistency, with a cronbach's alpha of 0.83, including the reliable measurement.

Trust Scale (Rempel and Holmes, 1986): The Scale measure trust within close interpersonal relationship, comprise 18-items. The scale is divided into 3 subscales such as predictability (how consistent and reliable a partner's behavior is), dependability (confidence in the partner's honesty and integrity), and faith (believe that the partner will remain caring and responsive even in uncertain situations). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert type scale which range from 1(strongly disagree) to 7(strongly agree) for items 1,2,4,7,9,10,11,14,18 and 7(strongly disagree) to 1 (strongly agree) for items

3,5,6,8,12,13,15,16,17. High scores reflect better trust in relationship. The overall Cronbach's alpha was calculated to be .81, along with subscales reliabilities of .80 for faith, .72 for dependability, and .70 for predictability

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988): The Relationship Assessment Scale was designed to measure individuals' satisfaction with their romantic relationships. The scale consists of 7 statements that evaluates various aspects the relationship, such as love, commitment, communication, and overall satisfaction. Responses are rated on five-point Likert scale (from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). RAS shows moderate to high correlations with measures of marital satisfaction, good test- retest reliability and consistent measurement properties across samples of ethnically diverse and age diverse couples.

Procedure: First of all, good rapport was established with the respondent, kept relaxed and pleasant in order to elicit the most frank or candid answers possible, advised not to dwell for any length of time on any given item, to give his overall reaction, were informed that there is no right or wrong answer to any item, and encouraged to respond rapidly and the way they really feel. The three behavioral measures were administered on the respondents in a random manner so as to overcome the problems of carry over, if any, of the response set(s) of the succeeding test on the preceding test and to find anonymous response of the respondent.

RESULTS

The obtained mean ± 1SD values for the measures of partner phubbing over the levels of analysis, 2 "Spouses" (husbands and wives) X 2 "Levels (low and high) of Partner Phubbing" are shown in Table -1.

Table 1. Mean ± SD values of measures of relationship satisfaction and trustover the levels of 2 spouses (husbands and wives) and 2 levels (low and high) of Partner Phubbing

Spouses	Husbands		Wives	
	High (20)	Low (22)	High (19)	Low(25)
Relationship Satisfaction	27.05 ±4.86	31.18 ± 2.98	28.00 ± 3.69	30.44 ± 3.20
Predictability (Trust)	28.10 ± 4.50	30.27 ± 4.76	29.57 ± 6.14	29.52 ± 5.70
Dependability (Trust)	30.90 ± 6.56	32.89 ± 4.05	29.75 ± 4.32	32.73 ± 6.15
Faith (Trust)	30.75 ± 5.74	33.36 ± 4.81	30.89 ± 4.77	33.68 ± 5.64

** indicates statistical significance at $p < 0.01$

The 2 X 2 ANOVA (analysis of variance) was performed on the scores of the measures of Relationship Satisfaction and results revealed non-significant main effect of "Spouses" on relationship satisfaction ($F (1/86) = 0.017$, $p > 0.05$), and interaction effect of "Spouses x Levels of Partner Phubbing'' on relationship satisfaction ($F (1/86) = 1.106$, $p > 0.05$). Whereas significant main effect of "Levels of Partner Phubbing'' on relationship satisfaction ($F (1/86) = 16.69$, $p < 0.05$). Mean comparisons revealed that low scorer (Mean = 30.011, SD = 0.542) as compared to high scorer (Mean = 27.52, SD = 0.594) manifested significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction. However, husbands and wives did not differ significantly from each on any other with respect to relationship satisfaction. Results shown non-significant main effect of "spouse" on dependability ($F (1/65) = 0.164$, $p > 0.05$), predictability ($F (1/65) = 1.956$, $p > 0.05$) and faith ($F (1/65) = .042$, $p > 0.05$), and interaction effect of 'Gender X Levels of Partner Phubbing" on dependability ($F (1/65) = .935$, $p > 0.05$), predictability ($F (1/65) = .070$, $p > 0.05$) and faith ($F (1/65) = .006$, $p > 0.05$). Moreover, non-significant main effect of "Levels of Partner Phubbing" on dependability ($F (1/65) = .839$, $p > 0.05$), predictability ($F (1/65) = .4.604$, $p > 0.01$), whereas significant main effect of "Levels of Partner Phubbing" on Faith ($F (1/65) = .5.698$, $p < 0.05$) was also revealed.Mean comparisons demonstrated that low scorer (Mean = 33.522, SD = 0.782) as compared to high scorer (Mean = 30.822, SD = 0.835) manifested significantly higher levels of trust (faith), however, husbands and wives did not differ significantly from each on any other with respect to dependability, predictability and faith.

DISSCUSSION

The present study aims to explore the direct impact of partner phubbing on trust and relationship satisfaction, addressing this gap and contributing to a clearer understanding of how digital distractions affect modern romantic relationships. The findings of the study revealed that husbands and wives did not differ significantly in their level of relationship satisfaction, which is contrary to the some previous studies (Sharafat *et al*., 2025; Çizmeci, 2017; Wang *et al*., 2025).Sharafat *et al*. (2025) reported that women experienced higher levels of phubbing as well as lower relationship satisfaction. Likewise, Çizmeci (2017) found that women were exposed to phubbing more frequently than men. One possible explanation for this finding is that differences in culture.The present study also reveledsignificant effect of levels of Partner Phubbing on relationship satisfaction and trust. This finding is strongly supported by the study of Roberts and David (2016), who reported that partner phubbing was positively related to relationship conflict and negatively related to relationship satisfaction among romantic partners. Similarly, David and Roberts (2021) found that partner phubbing increased romantic jealousy and reduced relationship satisfaction, particularly among individuals with high attachment anxiety.Denes *et al*. (2025) reported that partner phubbing leads to affection deprivation, which in turn lowers relationship satisfaction. These findings suggest that emotional neglect caused by phubbing plays a key role in reducing marital happiness.Spouse who experienced high levels of partner phubbing reported lower relationship satisfaction, and over time, this may reduce intimacy, affection, companionship, and satisfaction within the relationship. Among the dimensions of trust, only the faith dimension showed a significant effect of levels of partner phubbing, and suggest that faith, being a more emotional and sensitive component of trust and may be more vulnerable to feelings of neglect and emotional disconnection caused by excessive smartphone use during interpersonal interaction. Doğru, Öge, Satıcı, and Deniz (2025), revealed that trustand romantic relationship quality acted as serial mediators between partner phubbingand relationship satisfaction.

They suggested that when partner phubbing reduces faith, overall relationship satisfaction also declines. Further support is provided by Han, Li, Song, and He (2025), who found that partner phubbing reduced relationship satisfaction through attachment anxiety. Their study suggested that when individuals feel ignored by their partner's smartphone use, they may experience insecurity and emotional anxiety, which lowers satisfaction. Yam (2023) found that partner phubbing was negatively associated with life satisfaction through lower relationship satisfaction and poorer romantic relationship quality.VandenAbeele *et al*. (2019) found that smartphone distraction during conversations reduces perceived relationship quality and partner responsiveness, which directly contributes to lower satisfaction. These studies collectively strengthen the present finding that higher levels of partner phubbing significantly reduce relationship satisfaction and create more vulnerable conditions about faith among partners.

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