



## Full length article

## My life has become a major distraction from my cell phone: Partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction among romantic partners



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## ABSTRACT

Partner phubbing (Pphubbing) can be best understood as the extent to which an individual uses or is distracted by his/her cell phone while in the company of his/her relationship partner. The present study is the first to investigate the oft-occurring behavior of Pphubbing and its impact on relationship satisfaction and personal well-being. In Study 1, a nine-item scale was developed to measure Pphubbing. The scale was found to be highly reliable and valid. Study 2 assessed the study's proposed relationships among a sample of 145 adults. Results suggest that Pphubbing's impact on relationship satisfaction is mediated by conflict over cell phone use. One's attachment style was found to moderate the Pphubbing – cell phone conflict relationship. Those with anxious attachment styles reported higher levels of cell phone conflict than those with less anxious attachment styles. Importantly, Pphubbing was found to indirectly impact depression through relationship satisfaction and ultimately life satisfaction. Given the ever-increasing use of cell phones to communicate between romantic partners, the present research offers insight into the process by which such use may impact relationship satisfaction and personal well-being. Directions for future research are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Portmanteau (n) – a word whose form and meaning are derived from a blending together of two or more distinct words.

Phubbing is a portmanteau of the words “phone” and “snubbing”. To be phubbed is to be snubbed by someone using their cell phone when in your company. The “phubb” could be an 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. Partner phubbing (Pphubbing) is when the above takes place when in the company of your spouse or significant other. The ubiquitous nature of cell phones makes phubbing in general, or more specifically, Pphubbing a near inevitable occurrence. In fact, seventy percent of a sample of 143 females involved in romantic relationships reported that cell phones “sometimes”, “often”, “very often,” or “all the time” interfered in their interactions with their partners (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014). Other studies have found Pphubbing to

be a common occurrence among romantic partners as well (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011; Lenhart & Duggan, 2014).

The present research investigates whether Pphubbing impacts relationship satisfaction and individual well-being. The potentially mediating impact of cell phone conflict (Coyne et al. 2011) and moderating effect of attachment style (Bowlby, 1969) are also investigated to better understand the process by which Pphubbing impacts relationship satisfaction amongst romantic partners.

## 1.1. Study contributions

The present study makes several important contributions to the current literature. First, we have built and validated a measure of Pphubbing. Valid and reliable scales are needed to advance our understanding of how technology impacts relationships. As a behavior that occurs regularly, Pphubbing should be at the forefront of any efforts to understand how cell phone use impacts romantic relationships. A second contribution is that the present study investigates how Pphubbing affects romantic relationships—an area of research that has received scant attention (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014). A third contribution is that the present study focuses on the impact of cell phone use on relationship satisfaction. To date, previous research has combined many

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different types of technology (television, computers, cell phones, iPads, and tablets) when investigating the impact of technology use on relationships obfuscating the unique role that any specific technology might play (Padilla-Walker, Coyne, & Fraser, 2012). A fourth contribution includes the potential mediating rule of cell phone conflict in the Pphubbing – relationship satisfaction link. Previous research suggests that it is not the time spent with technologies that impacts relationship satisfaction, but the conflict created by the technology use (Coyne et al., 2012). The present study also examines the potential moderating effect of attachment style on the Pphubbing–cell phone conflict relationship. A final contribution is that the present study investigates the impact of Pphubbing on personal well-being. Previous research suggests that cell phone use and texting can increase reported stress (Beranuy, Oberst, Carbonell, & Chamarro, 2009; Lepp, Barkley, & Karpinski, 2014) and unhealthy attachment to one's cell phone can increase symptoms of depression (Gentile, Coyne, & Bricolo, 2012; Harwood, Dooley, Scott, & Joiner, 2014). A sequential moderated-mediation model (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) is used to examine the hypothesized impact of Pphubbing on life satisfaction and depression.

## 2. Conceptual development and research hypotheses

### 2.1. Pphubbing and relationship satisfaction

Relationship and/or marital satisfaction may be best understood as, “the degree to which spouses perceive that their partners meet their needs and desires” (Peleg, 2008, p. 388). A stable and healthy relationship is seen by many as the cornerstone of happy individuals and well-adjusted families (Coyne et al., 2011). Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach (2000) identified interpersonal interactions between partners as one of several important predictors of relationship satisfaction (Ahlmstrom, Lundberg, Zabriske, Eggett, & Lindsay, 2012).

Given the increased use of cell phones to communicate with others (Coyne et al., 2011; Hertlein, 2012; Luo & Tuney, 2015; Lenhart & Duggan, 2014); it is of critical importance that increased research attention be focused on the impact technology use has on relationship satisfaction. With the ever-increasing presence and use of cell phones, the boundaries that separate other interests and partner relationships have become increasingly “blurred” (Chesley, 2005; Leggett & Rossouw, 2014).

For a relationship to be mutually satisfying, each partner must be present for the other (Siegel, 2010). It is not enough to be merely in each other's presence, but there must be a connection between partners. Leggett and Rossouw (2014) define presence as “... a process whereby we remain open and focused on the other without external or internal distraction” (p. 49). Romantic partners feel connected when they are present for each other.

It is clear from the above that distractions caused by Pphubbing could undermine relationship satisfaction. The basic human needs for control and attachment are at risk when an individual senses that his or her partner is not present. In her book, *Alone Together* (2011), Turkle argues that media use is separating people from one another. In essence, partners may be physically together, but not fully present for each other.

The displacement hypothesis (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Fraser, Fellows, & Day, 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) can be used to explain the deleterious effects of Pphubbing on relationship satisfaction. This theory suggests that time spent on media, such as cell phones, may displace (or reduce) meaningful interactions with one's spouse. For example, not being fully present during conversations or shared time together because of cell phone-related distractions could lead to lower levels of satisfaction with one's romantic partner. In a study of video game playing and

relationships, Coyne et al. (2012) claim that conflict over video game use may not be because of the game playing itself but because it usurps time available for activities that the partner may enjoy more.

In a large dyadic sample of couples ( $n = 349$ ) where either one or both played Massively Multiplayers Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG), playing such games was found to be negatively associated with marital satisfaction (Ahlmstrom et al., 2012). Between 70 and 75 percent of independent-gamer couples (where only one spouse played MMORPGs) stated that gaming had negatively impacted their marriages. The authors conclude that, “displacing time spent with a significant other may indeed be a source of quarreling and marital conflict” (p. 16).

Even the mere presence of cell phones has been found to undermine perceived closeness, connection, and conversation quality. For example, Przybylski and Weinstein (2012) conducted two experiments in which they manipulated the presence of cell phones while a pair of subjects had either casual or meaningful conversations. In the cell phone present condition, a “non-descript” cell phone was placed on the top of a book on a nearby desk outside of the direct visual field of the subject. In the first experiment, subjects were asked to spend 10 min discussing an interesting event during the past month. After this discussion, subjects completed measures of relationship quality and emotional sensitivity. Subjects in the experimental condition reported lower relationship quality and less closeness with their partners after their discussion. A second experiment manipulated the content of the discussion (casual or meaningful) with the same manipulation of the cell phone as present or absent. Again, the presence of a mobile phone predicted lower relationship quality. An interaction between the presence of a cell phone and conversation type was also uncovered. Relationship quality and partner trust were only undermined when the conversation was meaningful. Perceived empathy was reduced when a cell phone was present independent of conversation type. Thus, it is clear that the presence of cell phones can interfere with perceived relationship quality among couples (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012).

Based upon the theory and empirical results discussed above, sufficient evidence suggests that a partner's use of a cell phone while in the company of his or her romantic partner may have a negative effect on relationship satisfaction. Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

**H1.** As Pphubbing increases, reported levels of relationship satisfaction will decrease.

### 2.2. The mediating impact of cell phone conflict

We posit that arguments over cell phone use (cell phone conflict) will mediate the impact of Pphubbing on relationship satisfaction. It is reasonable to assume that interruptions and distraction caused by Pphubbing will create conflict in romantic relationships (Servies, 2012). In a study of the impact of technology interference on relationship well-being, McDaniel and Coyne (2014) found that technology interference (Computers, TV, iPads, cell phones, etc.) caused conflict over technology use within romantic relationships. This conflict was then found to negatively impact relationship satisfaction among the sample of female respondents.

The authors reason that when one partner allows technology to interfere in time spent with their partner, it sends an implicit message of that partner's priorities (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014). Responding to a text message or checking social media during a conversation with a romantic partner, or instead of interacting with them at all, sends a message that interacting with one's romantic

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