

Digital Exclusion and the Experience of Being Phubbed

Yeslam Al-Saggaf

School of Computing, Mathematics, and Engineering

Charles Sturt University

Wagga Wagga NSW Australia

yalsaggaf@csu.edu.au

Abstract

The study sought to investigate the reaction to being phubbed by conversational partners. Data for this study were collected using focused silent observation of individuals being phubbed in public settings, such as outside cafes. The focused silent observation was carried out using an observational checklist, which was implemented using Qualtrics. 105 observations were recorded using the Qualtrics observational checklist. The findings of this study revealed that the majority of phubbing incidents occurred when there were between 11 and 20 people present. The vast majority of these incidents involved dyads. The study findings also revealed that young people aged 18–24 and 25–34 were phubbed more than other age groups, and the vast majority of phubbees were female. Of the 105 observations recorded, the majority of phubbing incidents were actively initiated by the phubber—that is, they were not in response to a phone notification. The analysis of data also showed that the majority of phubbers were observed scrolling through their social media feeds, with fewer instances involving texting or phone calls. Most of those who experienced being phubbed did not display any visible reaction other than feeling socially excluded, and only a small portion showed a noticeable negative response. Reactions of those phubbed varied: some individuals continued engaging with the phubber as if the phone was not in use, while others appeared visibly unhappy or awkwardly occupying themselves by looking at their surroundings to appear busy. A number of those phubbed reacted by also using their phones ('revenged phubbed'). Overall, the findings of the study revealed that phubbing has a more disruptive impact on dyadic interactions than on interactions in group settings. Phubbing has been found to be associated with intensifying feelings of social exclusion. The findings of this study support this association.

Keywords

Digital exclusion, phubbing, being phubbed, qualitative, focused observation, dyads, phubber, phubbee, smartphones

1 Introduction

Smartphones have become nearly inseparable companions in everyday life, yet their constant presence often interferes with the

quality of face-to-face communication, raising important questions about how technology reshapes our social interactions. It is now exceedingly common for people meeting in person to ignore each other with their smartphones. This social behaviour is referred to in the literature as phubbing [4]. Phubbing can make the person being ignored with a smartphone feel digitally excluded [4]. The digital exclusion arises not because the person being ignored does not have a smartphone, but because the person who ignored them prioritised the smartphone over face-to-face interaction. The research on phubbing is growing at a rate comparable to the rate at which this phenomenon is increasing in prevalence [7]. The literature on parental phubbing has expanded rapidly in recent years, with a number of studies recently looking at this issue, including [16, 19, 29, 32, 33]. That said, the recent literature shows that researchers remain curious about the predictors of this behaviour and the effects of being phubbed on the phubbed individual. A number of recently published studies focused on the association between phubbing and the individual factors that predict it, such as fear of missing out [23, 28], addiction to the smartphone [29], addiction to social media [30], self-esteem [12], loneliness [8], and personality types [26]. Arenz and Schnauber-Stockmann [7] took a holistic view to what predicts phubbing behaviour. Their meta-analysis has revealed that while there are 10 higher-level predictor categories of phubbing behavior, namely [1] sociodemographics, [2] personality, [3] technology-related norms and experiences, [4] technical equipment, [5] smartphone and [6] Internet use, [7] problematic use, [8] well-being, [9] psychopathology, and [10] resilience, problematic smartphone use, smartphone addiction, internet addiction, and SNS addiction are the strongest predictors of phubbing. With respect to phubbing effects, the latest research shows that there is a positive correlation between phubbing and severe depression and that young women under 25 years old show higher levels of 'somatic symptoms' than men in the same age group [13] suggesting that phubbing can affect not only psychological well-being, but it can also affect physical well-being. One line of research on phubbing that continues to be neglected is understanding the experience of being phubbed, especially using qualitative research methods. Qualitative research methods can offer rich descriptions of the observed or lived experience of those being phubbed [4]. In his book, 'The Psychology of Phubbing', Al-Saggaf [4] has specifically called for research that investigates the experience of being phubbed using qualitative research methods. This study answers this call. The aim of this study is to investigate the reaction to being phubbed. This study will investigate this reaction using silent observation.

2 Related Work

*Article Title Footnote needs to be captured as Title Note

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The experience of being phone snubbed (known in the literature as ‘phubbed’ in favour of a smartphone) is becoming increasingly common in today’s society [4]. The experience of being phubbed is associated with numerous negative consequences. According to Roberts and David [25], being phubbed can lead to feelings of social exclusion, lower relationship satisfaction, and increased smartphone dependency. Furthermore, their study found that the more frequently an individual reported being phubbed by their partner, the more likely they were to report symptoms of depression and anxiety. The experience of being phubbed can also have a negative effect on individual well-being and relationship quality [18], highlighting the need for individuals to be mindful of their phone use in social situations and to prioritise meaningful in-person interactions. Privileging online interaction over co-present interaction can make the person being phubbed to feel left out [4]. The person being phubbed can use their smartphone too to go online. But that is not what they want. What they want is probably to have a face-to-face conversation. The digital exclusion caused by phubbing is introducing a divide between those who favour the use of smartphones and those who prefer in-person social interaction.

Researchers used a variety of methods to investigate the experience of being phubbed. These methods include naturalistic observation [24], video recordings [11], and self-report surveys [3], which all have contributed to improving the understanding of the experience of being phubbed in social situations. However, qualitative research methods remain underrepresented as a method for studying this topic. One of the few studies that used a qualitative method was Radesky et al. [24] study. Radesky et al. [24] used naturalistic observation to examine the impact of smartphone use on face-to-face conversations. They found that individuals’ use of phones during conversations led to a decrease in conversation quality and engagement between individuals. Radesky’s et al. [24] study suggests that the use of smartphones during social interactions can negatively impact the quality of communication, highlighting the importance of limiting phone use during face-to-face conversations.

Another study that used observation as a method of data collection is Courtright and Caplan [11] study. This study used video recordings to observe how smartphones’ use affects the dynamics of social interactions. They found that smartphone use can interrupt the flow of conversation, lead to a lack of eye contact, and diminish the quality of communication between individuals [2].

While research on the experience of being phubbed has shed light on several associated aspects, especially its negative consequences, there are still some gaps in our understanding of this phenomenon. For example, numerous studies have focused on the effects of phubbing in romantic relationships, with less attention given to the impact of phubbing in other types of relationships, such as friendships or family relationships [4]. Additionally, most studies have relied on self-report measures, which may not always accurately capture the subjective experience of being phubbed [4]. Addressing these gaps in future research could provide a more nuanced understanding of how phubbing affects those at the receiving end (the phubbees) [4].

Several factors have been identified in the research that can trigger phubbing behaviour. One of the most significant factors is the individual’s level of attachment to their smartphones, which can lead to an excessive focus on the device and a corresponding

decrease in attention to interpersonal communication [9]. Another factor is the social norms around smartphones’ use in a particular context, which can influence the perceived acceptability of phubbing behaviour [17]. The individual’s level of self-control, stress levels, and the availability and importance of the communication being received on the smartphone can also trigger phubbing [15]. Another significant factor is the fear of missing out (FOMO) on what friends are up to [27].

What is not clear from the literature is how the person being phubbed reacts to the experience. Individuals who are phubbed may experience a range of emotions, such as annoyance, frustration, and disappointment [21]. They may also feel disrespected or that they are unimportant [21], which can harm the relationship between the phubber and the person being phubbed [10]. Phubbing can also make the individual being phubbed feel socially excluded [22]. In response to being phubbed, individuals may attempt to draw the phubber’s attention back to the interaction or may simply disengage from the interaction [31]. Some individuals may also engage in retaliatory phubbing, using their own mobile device to ignore or distract the phubber [31]. Overall, research suggests that being phubbed can elicit negative emotional responses from individuals and may have implications for the quality of interpersonal communication and relationships. This study will investigate the reaction to being phubbed. The aim of this study is to investigate this reaction using silent observation.

3 Methodology

Silent observation is a method that involves observing social interactions without intervening or interacting with the individuals being studied [14]. This method has several advantages when it comes to studying the experience of being phubbed. One advantage is that it allows for naturalistic observation, which means that individuals are observed in their everyday environment without the influence of an observer’s presence or interference [14]. Additionally, silent observation can provide a non-intrusive way to study the phenomenon of phubbing, without the need for participants to provide self-reports or be interrupted during their social interactions [2]. This can increase the validity and reliability of the study’s findings by reducing the risk of participant reactivity or demand characteristics [20]. Overall, the use of silent observation as a method for studying the experience of being phubbed can provide a unique and valuable perspective on the reaction to being phubbed by conversational partners.

While silent observation has some advantages as a method for studying the experience of being phubbed, it also has several limitations. One limitation is that it can be difficult to obtain a representative sample of participants, as individuals who are aware that they are being observed may behave differently than they would in their natural environment [6]. Additionally, silent observation may not capture the subjective experiences of individuals being phubbed, as it relies solely on the observation of behaviour and does not provide insight into individuals’ internal experiences or emotions [6]. Moreover, silent observation may not be feasible or ethical in all situations, as it requires access to private spaces and the ability to observe individuals without their knowledge or consent [6]. Finally, silent observation can be time-consuming and resource-

intensive, requiring trained observers to record and analyse data over an extended period [1]. Despite these limitations, silent observation can still provide valuable insights into the experience of being phubbed, especially when used in conjunction with other research methods.

Data for this study were collected using focused silent observation of individuals being phubbed in public settings, such as outside cafes, by their conversational partners. Data collection for this study was carried out in line with the ethics approval (Protocol number H23549) from the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Data collection began on 25 May 2023 and stopped on 19 April 2025. The focused silent observation was carried out using an observational checklist of a pre-prepared set of structured questions that guided what to observe. The silent observation focused only on answering the observational checklist structured questions. Irrelevant behaviours that do not link to the guiding questions were ignored. The observational checklist was implemented using Qualtrics. The observational checklist consisted of three groups of observational questions. The first group of questions focused on capturing information about the setting where the phubbing incident occurred. The second group of observational questions focused on the phubber's act. The third group of observational questions focused on the reaction of the person being phubbed. Each question in the observational checklist was accompanied by a set of pre-determined relevant response options, which were used to prepopulate the observational checklist. The observational checklist also contained a textbox for textually recording qualitative observations of the incidents of phubbing.

The process of observation outside cafes took place as follows. The researcher in this project would enter a café and order a coffee. The researcher would then sit at a table outside the café and take out his phone. If, while sipping his coffee and scrolling through his phone, he observed an individual, or a group of individuals, in front of him being phubbed by another person or more, he would record the incident by filling out the observational checklist. A total of 105 observations were recorded in public places (outside cafes). After finishing his coffee, the researcher would simply leave the café.

4 Findings

The study sought to investigate the reaction to being phubbed by conversational partners in public settings (outside cafes). 105 observations were recorded using the Qualtrics observational checklist. As mentioned above, the observational checklist consisted of three groups of observational questions.

The first group of questions focused on capturing information about the setting where the phubbing incident occurred. The first question in this group asked about the number of people present in the public place at the exact moment the phubbing took place. In 55.2% (N=58) of the incidents, there were between 11 and 20 people present, but in 21.9% (N=23), there were more than 30+ people outside the café where phubbing occurred. In 15.2% (N=16) and 7.6% (N=8) of the phubbing incidents, there were between zero and 10 and between 21 and 30, respectively (see Figure 1 below). It appears the majority of phubbing incidents occurred when there were between 11 and 20 people present outside a café. It is not clear why this size of people in a public

place was associated with the majority of phubbing cases, but it is possible that a mid-sized group offers a sense of safe invisibility or optimal anonymity in that if someone engaged in phubbing a conversational partner, the phubber may think other people present may not notice because the attention is not focused on them. In a small group setting, phubbing is more obvious and socially awkward. On the other hand, in a large group setting, the space itself feels less intimate and more demanding of attention.

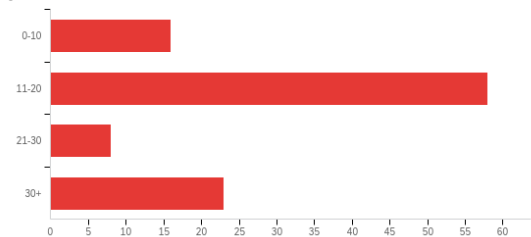


Figure 1: The number of people present in the public place

A key question in this group of questions asked about the number of people involved in the phubbing incident. The pre-determined responses for this question ranged from two individuals (a dyad) sitting together, to a group of three people, and a group of four people. The vast majority of phubbing incidents, 76.2% (N=80), involved dyads, with only 21% (N=22) of the incidents involving three people (see Figure 2 below). This may suggest that phubbing socially excludes those closest, as Al-Saggaf [5] has previously found.

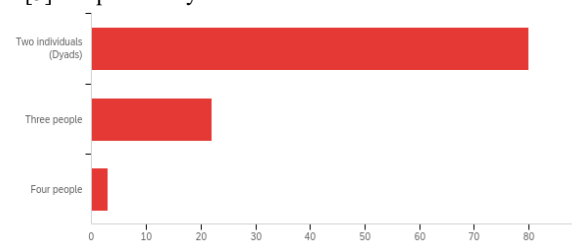


Figure 2: The number of people involved in the phubbing incident

The question relating to the presenting age of the individual being phubbed revealed that young people aged 18-24 and 25-34 were phubbed more than other age groups 24.8% (N=26) and 25.7% (N=27) respectively. While people aged 35-44 were phubbed 20% (N=21) of the time, people aged 45-54 were phubbed less frequently 15.2% (N=16), compared to their younger counterparts (see Figure 3 below). This finding suggests that romantic partners and close friends, who 'go out' for coffee together, phub each other the most.

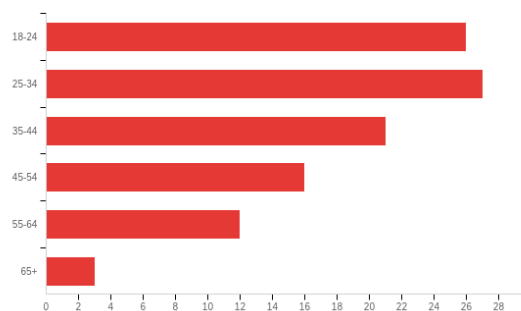


Figure 3: The presenting age of the individual being phubbed

The observational checklist also captured the presenting gender of the individual being phubbed. The vast majority of phubbees 63.8% (N=67), were females, with the remaining 36% (N=38) being male (see Figure 4 below). This suggests females are subject to being phubbed more than their male counterparts.

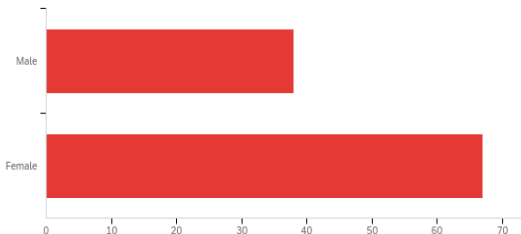


Figure 4: The presenting age of the individual being phubbed

The second group of observational questions focused on the phubber's act. Phubbing incidents were initiated in two forms: active or passive. Phubbing was initiated either by the phubber, i.e. not in response to a form of notification that the phubber had received (active form), or by the phubber in response to a form of notification that the phone had sent (passive form). Of the 105 observations recorded, 78.1% (N=82) were actively initiated by the phubber, that is, not in response to a phone notification, and only 12.4% (N=13) were triggered by a phone notification, 9.5% (N=10), were classified as 'Unsure' (see Figure 5 below). This finding suggests that in the case of those observed, phubbing was largely an active act that took place unprovoked.

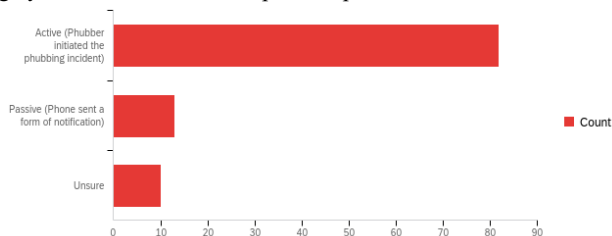


Figure 5: How phubbing was initiated

The observational checklist captured the duration of phubbing using three options: Momentarily (<15 seconds), Quick (>15 seconds and <45 seconds), and Long (> a minute). 71.4% (N=75) of the observed incidents of phubbing lasted more than a minute. That is, the phubbing of those observed suddenly

pulling their phones and starting to use them during their face-to-face conversations with others, was not momentarily, to attend to an urgent matter; rather it was long. Only 6.7% (N=7) and 21.9% (N=23) of the phubbing was Momentarily and Quick, respectively (see Figure 6 below). This suggests in the case of those observed, the phubbing was persistent. That phubbing lasted more than a minute suggests that the phubber disengaged from their face-to-face conversation, leaving their conversational partner on their own. Phubbing is strongly linked with social exclusion [22, 25]. While the phubber is digitally included, the person being phubbed is socially excluded.

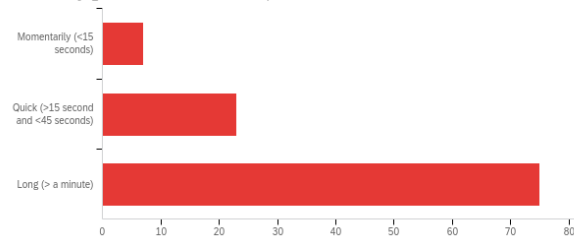


Figure 6: Duration of phubbing

The observational checklist included the possibility to record the phubber's act immediately 'prior' to suddenly pulling their smartphone and starting to use it. The options to choose from to capture this act included seeking permission from the phubbed person, seeing a phone alert (like the phone is lit, vibrates, or produces a sound, or ring), and whether or not the phubber had said something before phubbing their conversationalist. None of these options, however, was deemed relevant to the observed incidents. For this reason, 79% (N=83) of the observed incidents were recorded under 'Other'. Given that the act took place in a split second, it was difficult to record explanatory notes regarding the nature of this act prior to engaging in phubbing others. The observational checklist also included the possibility to record the phubber's act immediately 'after' suddenly pulling their smartphone and starting to use it. The options to choose from to capture this act included beginning to scroll through their social media feeds, starting texting, starting to talk on the phone, getting closer to the co-present person and showing them their phone. The frequency analysis revealed that 31.4% (N=33) of the phubbers were observed scrolling through their social media feeds immediately 'after' pulling their smartphone, 14.3% (N=15) were observed texting, and 12.4% (N=13) were observed talking on the phone. Of the 105 observations recorded, 33.3% (N=35) were categorised 'Other' than above, either because the observed act did not match any of the options for this category or because of the difficulty of observing such a fleeting act.

The third group of observational questions focused on the reaction of the person being phubbed. The first category aimed at capturing the individual being phubbed (phubbee) immediate reaction when another person they were with face-to-face suddenly pulled their phone and started using it. 58.1% (N=61) did not show any observable reaction and therefore their response was classified as Neutral. On the other hand, 33.3% (N=35) showed a noticeable negative reaction and only 8.6% (N=9) showed a visible positive reaction (see Figure 7 below). That the majority's response to being phubbed was neutral suggests that phubbing is becoming a normalised behaviour.

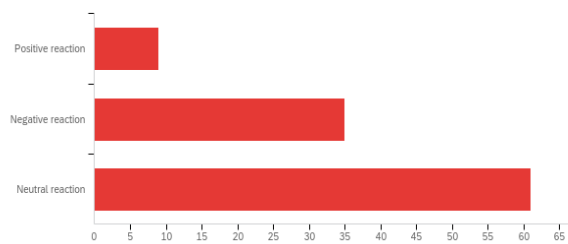


Figure 7: Reaction to being phubbed

The second category in this group aimed at capturing the phubbee's immediate response to being phubbed. Only one phubbee was observed asking the phubber to stop the phubbing, and two became confrontational with their phubber and while 17% (N=18) reacted to being phubbed by using their phone too, the vast majority, 80% (N=84) did not show any visible reaction, other than being observed feeling socially excluded. This social exclusion introduced by phubbing is creating a divide between people who prefer to be digitally included and those who prefer to be included in the co-present interaction.

Qualitative observations of the incidents of phubbing were also recorded textually via the observational checklist. The qualitative observations offered a more nuanced understanding of how individuals react to being phubbed. The recorded reflections captured a composite scene in which multiple interactions occurred simultaneously within a shared public space. In several instances, children—including those in prams—appeared to be overlooked by their caregivers, who were focused on their phones. One mother, for example, was observed crossing a street diagonally while carrying a baby in her left arm and scrolling through her phone with her right hand as the traffic light turned green. Similarly, some elderly individuals were observed being ignored by their adult children, who were engrossed in their devices. Among those observed being phubbed, reactions varied. Some continued engaging with the phubber as if the phone use was not occurring, while others appeared visibly uncomfortable, awkwardly occupying themselves by looking around or attempting to appear busy. But these were all observed feeling socially excluded. It appears that while phubbing has made the phubber digitally included, it has excluded the person being phubbed from the face-to-face interaction. In this sense, phubbing can be considered as a manifestation of a divide where one's need to be digitally included is making another socially excluded. A number of individuals responded by also using their phones, a form of reciprocal behaviour sometimes referred to as "revenge phubbing." In several cases, phubbers invited those they were previously ignoring to view something on their phone screens. This gesture often prompted a positive response and appeared to enliven the conversation. A small proportion of individuals showed visible signs of dissatisfaction when their conversational partners became distracted by their phones. The data also suggest that phubbing has a more disruptive impact on dyadic interactions than on group settings. In group conversations, if one person disengaged by using their phone, the remaining individuals could often continue interacting face-to-face. In contrast, in one-on-one conversations, the phubbed individual was left to either mimic phone use or seek distraction elsewhere to manage the social discomfort. Overall, while the use of the

phone during a face-to-face conversation did make the person being phubbed feel socially excluded, most participants calmly managed the discomfort associated with the experience of being phubbed, suggesting that such phone use is not widely perceived as a transgression against social norms of interaction.

5 Conclusion

The study sought to investigate the reaction to being phubbed by conversational partners. In line with the ethics approval from HREC for this study, data for this study was collected using focused silent observation of individuals being phubbed in public settings, such as outside cafes. The focused silent observation was carried out using an observational checklist, which was implemented using Qualtrics. 105 observations were recorded using the Qualtrics observational checklist.

It appears the majority of phubbing incidents occurred when there were between 11 and 20 people present in a public place. The vast majority of these incidents involved dyads. Observations revealed that young people aged 18–24 and 25–34 were phubbed more than other age groups, and the vast majority of phubbees were female. Of the 105 observations recorded, the majority of phubbing incidents were actively initiated by the phubber—that is, they were not in response to a phone notification. In most cases, phubbing was not prompted by a phone alert such as a lit screen, vibration, sound, or ringtone. The data analysis showed that the majority of phubbers were observed scrolling through their social media feeds, with fewer instances involving texting or phone calls. Most of those being phubbed did not display any observable reaction (other than feeling socially isolated), and only a small portion showed a noticeable negative response. Reactions to being phubbed varied: some individuals continued engaging with the phubber as if the phone use was not occurring, while others appeared visibly uncomfortable, awkwardly occupying themselves by looking at their surroundings to appear busy. A number of individuals reacted to being phubbed by also using their phones—a form of reciprocal behaviour sometimes referred to as "revenge phubbing." The observations also revealed that phubbing has a more disruptive impact on dyadic interactions than on interactions in group settings.

While much of the existing scholarship views phubbing as a social behaviour that impacts the person being phubbed, given that phubbing socially isolates the phubbee, it can also be conceptualised as a divide between those who crave digital connection all the time and those who value face-to-face interaction. This divide is not caused by a lack of access to a smartphone, internet connectivity or digital literacy. It is caused by the phubber's need to be digitally included, even if it is at the expense of excluding a co-present conversational partner. In this sense, the smartphone, which connects, also disconnects. Further research is needed to properly investigate how phubbing can be framed as a divide.

Two limitations of this study need to be outlined. First, the set of relevant response options that accompanied the observational checklist questions was not comprehensive enough to capture the subtleties associated with the phubbing experience. On the other hand, if the set of response options was exhaustive, the observational checklist would have taken longer to fill. Given that the phubbing incidents happened fast, the recording of

observations needed to be done quickly to avoid undermining the accuracy of the data. Second, because what was to be observed occurred quickly and, as already established, the recording of observations needed to be done fast, it was not possible to offer detailed qualitative observations in the available textbox. This limited the depth of the textual qualitative observations. Recording the phubbing incidents by video and then entering the textual qualitative observations would have resulted in rich data enough to offer a 'thick' description of the reaction to being phubbed. But doing so would have violated the privacy of those observed. It is recommended that the observational checklist be used in conjunction with another qualitative research method, such as semi-structured interviews. Combining these two techniques can allow researchers to capitalise on the strengths of each while minimising their individual weaknesses. That being said, this study should be considered significant as it is the first that adopts an observational checklist to explore the range of reactions to be phubbed in public places.

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