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Research Paper

Scrolling Past You: Fear of Missing Out, Self-Esteem, Neuroticism, and Phubbing Behavior among Indian Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the relationship between Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), self-esteem, neuroticism, and phubbing behavior in Indian young adults. A sample of 215 young adults (M_{axa} = 21.65 years; 47.9% male, 52.1% female) drawn through convenience sampling completed an online survey comprising the Generic Scale of Phubbing (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018), the FoMO Scale (Przybylski et al., 2013), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and the NEO-FFI-3 Neuroticism subscale (McCrae et al., 2005). Pearson correlations and stepwise multiple regression were computed using IBM SPSS 26. Results revealed a significant positive correlation between FoMO and phubbing ($r = .55$, $p < .001$) and between neuroticism and phubbing ($r = .22$, $p < .001$). Self-esteem was not significantly associated with phubbing ($r = -.09$, $p > .05$). In the final regression model, FoMO was the sole significant predictor of phubbing, accounting for 30.1% of variance ($R^2 = .30$), $F(1, 213) = 91.73$, $p < .001$. Findings are discussed in relation to self-determination theory, uses and gratifications theory, and the implications for digital well-being interventions targeting Indian youth.

Keywords: *Phubbing, Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), Self-Esteem, Neuroticism, Indian Young Adults, Smartphone Use*

Every time someone checks their phone mid-conversation, a small social cost is paid. This behavior is termed phubbing, a blend of phone and snubbing (Karadağ et al., 2015), has grown common enough to become a research concern (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016; Roberts & David, 2017). Studies show it damages trust, well-being, and relationship quality (David & Roberts, 2017; Misra et al., 2016; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013), and can reduce life satisfaction and increase depression by undermining relationship satisfaction (Roberts & David, 2017). Research has identified several predictors of phubbing, including neuroticism, FoMO, loneliness, anxiety, poor self-control, and various forms of technology addiction (Al-Saggaf & O'Donnell, 2019).

Despite the growing body of literature, comparatively little is known about the complex interplay among neuroticism, self-esteem, and phubbing. Moreover, even though phubbing

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has been theorized to emerge from FoMO, there is a paucity of empirical studies demonstrating this relationship, particularly in the Indian context. The present study therefore investigates the relationships between FoMO, self-esteem, neuroticism, and phubbing behavior in Indian young adults.

FoMO and Phubbing

Fear of missing out is defined as "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Przybylski et al., 2013). This desire to remain permanently connected, in order to know what others are experiencing in one's absence can explain individuals' constant smartphone use (Vorderer et al., 2016). Individuals experiencing higher levels of FoMO also tend to report higher trait anxiety, neuroticism, irritability, inadequacy, and low self-esteem (Abel et al., 2016). FoMO is negatively associated with general mood and overall life satisfaction, and arises partly from deficits in psychological need satisfaction (Przybylski et al., 2013). This, in turn, can trigger self-regulative behavior such that individuals engage more in sharing information on social media (Buglass et al., 2017; Przybylski et al., 2013). Studies have found that FoMO is associated with higher problematic smartphone and social media use (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016; Elhai et al., 2020), which are also predictors of phubbing (Karadağ et al., 2015).

Smartphones are now the primary gateway to social media, making constant connectivity the norm. Individuals high in FoMO may find this connection hard to switch off, even during face-to-face interactions, making phubbing a likely outcome (Kuss et al., 2018).

Self-Esteem and Phubbing

According to Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem reflects one's overall positive or negative evaluation of oneself. Social media exposure has been linked to lower self-esteem, particularly when upward social comparisons are activated (Vogel et al., 2014). Among individuals who feel more social isolation or hold low self-appraisals, social media may elicit more upward comparisons and perceptions that others' lives are more exciting. Low self-esteem has been found to be linked to higher FoMO (Barry & Wong, 2020; Buglass et al., 2017), and Uram and Kalski (2020) found that low life satisfaction predicts higher loneliness and lower self-esteem, which in turn increases FoMO and stronger Facebook addiction.

Low self-esteem has also been linked to excessive phone use (Billieux, 2012), which in turn predicts phubbing (Karadağ et al., 2015).

Neuroticism and Phubbing

Neuroticism is defined as "a tendency to experience negative emotional states, accompanied by heightened anxiety or depression, anger and guilt, as well as an increased tendency for somatization of psychological problems" (Gonda et al., 2009). Neurotic individuals display an overall anxious predisposition and a tendency to worry (Mehroof & Griffiths, 2010). Research indicates that neuroticism predicts both social media and Internet addiction (Blackwell et al., 2017). Moreover, FoMO and problematic social media use may sequentially mediate the relationship between emotional support from social media and young adults' phubbing behavior, making neuroticism an important variable to examine.

Balta et al. (2020) found that neuroticism may indirectly contribute to phubbing via state FoMO and problematic Instagram use. T'ng et al. (2018), studying personality predictors of phubbing, found that neuroticism positively predicted phubbing and emphasized the need for cross-cultural replication. Because neurotic individuals tend toward social isolation (Schermer & Martin, 2019) and may seek to compensate through Internet and smartphone use, a positive relationship between neuroticism and phubbing can be expected.

METHOD

Hypotheses

- **Hypothesis 1:** There will be a significant positive relationship between FoMO and phubbing.
- **Hypothesis 2:** There will be a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and phubbing.
- **Hypothesis 3:** There will be a significant positive relationship between neuroticism and phubbing.

Participants

Participants were 215 young adults from India (M_{axa} = 21.65 years; 47.9% male, 52.1% female) recruited via convenience sampling. Participants were in the age range of 18–25 years. Inclusion required possession of a smartphone with internet access. All participants provided informed consent and completed the survey voluntarily and anonymously. Data were collected via an online questionnaire distributed through email and social networking sites.

Measures

- **Generic Scale of Phubbing (GSP)**: Phubbing was measured using the GSP (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018), a 15-item scale rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 7 = Always). The GSP comprises four subscales: Nomophobia, Interpersonal Conflict, Self-Isolation, and Problem Acknowledgement. Internal reliability coefficients ranged from α = .85 to .92 (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018).
- **Fear Of Missing Out Scale (FoMO Scale)**: FoMO was assessed using the 10-item FoMO Scale (Przybylski et al., 2013), rated on a five-point scale (1 = Not at all true of me, 5 = Extremely true of me). Przybylski et al. (2013) reported coefficient alphas of .87–.90. Total scores correlate negatively with need satisfaction, positive mood, and life satisfaction, and positively with social media engagement.
- **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)**: Self-esteem was measured with the 10-item RSES (Rosenberg, 1965), rated on a four-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 4 = Strongly agree). Items 3, 5, 8, 9, and 10 were reverse scored. Internal consistency in the present sample was α = .83.
- **NEO Five-Factor Inventory–3 (NEO-FFI-3)**: Neuroticism was measured using the 12-item Neuroticism subscale of the NEO-FFI-3 (McCrae et al., 2005), rated on a five-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). Items 1, 4, 7, and 10 were reverse scored. McCrae and Costa (2007) reported internal consistency of α = .86 for the Neuroticism subscale.

Procedure

Rapport was established with potential participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed that the study sought to explore psychological factors related to smartphone use in social settings and that completion would take approximately 10–15 minutes. After obtaining informed consent, the online questionnaire was distributed via email and social networking platforms. Participants were assured of anonymity and that data would be used solely for research purposes. Debriefing about the true nature of the study variables was conducted after data collection.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed for all variables. Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated to examine bivariate relationships. Stepwise multiple regression was used to identify significant predictors of phubbing, with FoMO, self-esteem, and neuroticism entered as predictors and phubbing as the criterion variable. Regression assumptions like normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, and independence of errors were examined using histograms, P–P plots, standardized residual scatterplots, and the Durbin–Watson statistic.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for all study variables. The mean phubbing score was 41.90 (SD = 17.28). The mean FoMO score was 2.47 (SD = 0.79), the mean self-esteem score was 18.60 (SD = 5.03), and the mean neuroticism score was 25.12 (SD = 7.13).

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations for All Study Variables (N = 215)

Variable	M	SD
Phubbing	41.90	17.28
Fear of Missing Out	2.47	0.79
Self-Esteem	18.60	5.03
Neuroticism	25.12	7.13

Correlational Analysis

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlations among all study variables. FoMO was significantly and positively correlated with phubbing, $r(213) = .55$, $p < .001$, supporting Hypothesis 1. Self-esteem was not significantly correlated with phubbing, $r(213) = -.09$, $p > .05$; Hypothesis 2 was therefore not supported. Neuroticism was significantly and positively correlated with phubbing, $r(213) = .22$, $p < .001$, supporting Hypothesis 3.

Table 2 Pearson Correlations among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Phubbing	---			
2. Fear of Missing Out	.55**	---		
3. Self-Esteem	-.09	-.26**	---	
4. Neuroticism	.22**	.43**	-.54**	---

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Among predictor intercorrelations, FoMO was significantly and negatively correlated with self-esteem, $r(213) = -.26$, $p < .001$, and significantly and positively correlated with neuroticism, $r(213) = .43$, $p < .001$. Self-esteem and neuroticism were significantly and negatively correlated, $r(213) = -.54$, $p < .001$.

Regression Analysis

Stepwise multiple regression was conducted with FoMO and neuroticism (both significantly correlated with phubbing) entered as predictors. Self-esteem was excluded as it was not significantly correlated with the outcome. In the final model, only FoMO emerged as a significant predictor. Table 3 presents the regression coefficients.

Table 3 Stepwise Regression Predicting Phubbing from FoMO

Predictor	B	SE B	β	p
Constant	12.33	3.24	---	
Fear of Missing Out	11.99	1.25	.55**	<.001

Note. $R^2 = .30$. $F(1, 213) = 91.73$, $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$.

The overall model was significant, $F(1, 213) = 91.73$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .30$, indicating that FoMO accounted for 30.1% of the variance in phubbing. The unstandardized coefficient indicated that a one-unit increase in FoMO was associated with an 11.99-unit increase in phubbing, $B = 11.99$, $SE = 1.25$, $\beta = .55$, $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined relationships between FoMO, self-esteem, neuroticism, and phubbing in 215 Indian young adults. Results supported two of three hypotheses: FoMO and neuroticism were each significantly and positively associated with phubbing, while self-esteem was not significantly related to phubbing.

FoMO and Phubbing

FoMO was significantly positively correlated with phubbing ($r = .55$, $p < .001$) and was the sole significant predictor in the regression model, accounting for 30.1% of variance in phubbing. This is consistent with prior research documenting positive associations between FoMO and phubbing (Balta et al., 2020; Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018). Studies have found that FoMO predicts higher problematic smartphone and social media use (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016; Elhai et al., 2020), both of which are known antecedents of phubbing (Karadağ et al., 2015).

Fang et al. (2020) found that FoMO mediated the relationship between social media emotional support and college students' phubbing. Drawing on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), students who receive low offline emotional support may compensate on social media, heightening FoMO and, in turn, driving phubbing to avoid losing online connection. These findings are consistent with the uses and gratifications framework (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000): individuals high in FoMO may use smartphones to relieve negative affect in an immediate, habitual manner, even during face-to-face interactions (Elhai & Contractor, 2018).

Self-Esteem and Phubbing

Contrary to Hypothesis 2, self-esteem was not significantly related to phubbing ($r = -.09$, $p > .05$). This is notable given that self-esteem was significantly and negatively correlated

with FoMO (r = −.26), and FoMO was the strongest predictor of phubbing. The indirect pathway from self-esteem to phubbing (via FoMO) may be more meaningful than a direct association, suggesting that the mediating role of FoMO should be tested in future research.

These null findings are consistent with other studies reporting no significant relationship between self-esteem and Internet use (Benvenuti et al., 2020). Tartaglia (2016) found that whereas high self-esteem predicted socially motivated Facebook use, and low self-esteem predicted simulation of an idealized online self, self-esteem was unrelated to using Facebook to seek new acquaintances—a modality that may be more prevalent in the present sample.

Neuroticism and Phubbing

Neuroticism was significantly positively correlated with phubbing ($r = .22$, $p < .001$), consistent with prior research (Balta et al., 2020; T'ng et al., 2018). Guazzini et al. (2019) similarly reported that trait and social anxiety predicted phubbing. Several mechanisms may account for this link. First, neurotic individuals' general negativity and interpersonal difficulties (McCrae & John, 1992) may heighten problematic social relationships offline and drive compensatory online engagement (Caplan, 2007). Second, neurotic individuals' proneness to depression (Liang, 2018) and loneliness (Stokes, 1985) aligns with research linking phubbing to depression (Wang et al., 2017) and loneliness (David & Roberts, 2017). Third, the low self-esteem characteristic of neurotic individuals (Marshall et al., 2015) may drive smartphone use to pursue social validation online (Ergun et al., 2020).

Despite the significant bivariate correlation, neuroticism did not emerge as a significant predictor in the regression model when FoMO was also included. This suggests that FoMO may subsume or mediate the predictive effect of neuroticism on phubbing, a hypothesis warranting empirical examination.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. The cross-sectional, convenience sample precludes causal inference; longitudinal and experimental designs are needed to establish directionality. Self-report measures are susceptible to social desirability and recall biases; future research could supplement surveys with observational or peer-report methods. The study examined only neuroticism among the Big Five; examining all personality dimensions would provide a more complete picture. Finally, the mediating role of FoMO in the self-esteem–phubbing relationship, and moderated mediation models incorporating life satisfaction and perceived social support, are promising avenues for future research in the Indian context.

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence for the role of FoMO and neuroticism in phubbing among Indian young adults. FoMO was the strongest and only significant predictor of phubbing in the regression model, accounting for nearly one-third of its variance. Self-esteem was not directly related to phubbing, suggesting that its influence may operate indirectly through FoMO. These findings underscore the importance of targeting FoMO in digital well-being interventions. Practitioners working with college-age youth should educate individuals about the triggers of phubbing, particularly chronic online anxiety, and promote strategies such as notification management and mindful device use to protect the quality of face-to-face social relationships.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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