



Digital Detox as a Means of Reducing Phubbing in Select Families in Abakaliki Urban, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: The advent of digital technology has revolutionised the way people communicate, interact, and navigate their daily lives. However, excessive use of digital devices has led to the emergence of various social and behavioural problems. One such phenomenon is "phubbing," a term coined to describe the act of snubbing or ignoring someone in a social setting in favour of a mobile phone.

Phubbing has become a ubiquitous issue in many Nigerian families, including those in Abakaliki Urban of Ebonyi State. In recent years, digital detox has gained popularity as a potential solution to mitigate the negative effects of excessive digital device use. Digital detox refers to the practice of abstaining from digital devices, such as smartphones, computers, and televisions, for a period of time. By disconnecting from digital technology, individuals can rediscover the joys of human connection, improve their mental and physical well-being, and cultivate healthier relationships with their loved ones. Despite the growing interest in digital detox, there is a paucity of research on its effectiveness in reducing phubbing in Nigerian families.

Objective: This study investigated how digital detox could serve as a means of reducing phubbing among select families in Abakaliki urban of Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

Method: The descriptive survey research design was adopted and purposive sampling technique was used to select 80 families. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. Analyses were done using descriptive statistics and summarized using frequency tables.

Result: Findings show that majority of the respondents said that phubbing has led to increased conflict and strains in their marriages, significant number said it has caused weakened/problematic communication, few of the respondents said decreased marital satisfaction, minority said phubbing has led to separation of partners. The findings further show that the negative impact of excessive use of digital gadgets has really led to a lot of marital/family issues and in some cases led to separation and maybe divorce as the case may be and that digital detox is a sure way to control this relationship threatening vice called phubbing.

Conclusion: This research concludes that phubbing has extreme negative effect on people especially in family life, and that the use of digital detox is still at the moderate level in Ebonyi State compared how it is used in Western world.



Unique Contribution: This study offers localized insights into how smartphone-induced behaviours disrupt marital and familial bonds and how digital detox can mitigate these issues in a culturally distinct urban African setting. By addressing this research gap, the study contributes to mass communication and family studies literature, providing a foundation for future research on technology's social impacts.

Key Recommendation: It was recommended that digital detox should be embraced by couples/families as this could guide against phubbing as to have increased communication between partners, increased attention and more attraction to each other among other good results.

Keywords: Phubbing, Digital Era, Families, Digital Detox, Abakaliki Urban

INTRODUCTION

The global surge in smartphone adoption has transformed social interactions but introduced challenges like phubbing, the act of ignoring others to focus on digital devices. Groupe Speciale Mobile Association Intelligence (2024) reported that "mobile subscriptions worldwide reached 8.29 billion by 2024" reflecting the ubiquity of smartphones that fuel such behaviors. Macquarie Dictionary (2023) defined phubbing as "the act of snubbing someone in a social setting by looking at your phone instead of paying attention," this is a term coined in 2012 by McCann Melbourne. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2016) noted that phubbing is a norm in modern society, yet it disrupts family relationships by causing emotional distance and conflict. Lutz and Knop (2020) described phubbing as a form of micro-betrayal, eroding trust and intimacy in marital bonds. Jackie (2024) emphasis is on digital detox encouraging people to engage in offline activities like spending time with loved ones, fostering stronger connections. Digital detox refers to the practice of abstaining from digital devices, such as smartphones, computers, and televisions, for a period of time. While global studies address phubbing, research in African contexts, particularly Nigeria, remains limited. This study investigates phubbing's impact on families in Abakaliki Urban and evaluates digital detox as a mitigation strategy, contributing to localised insights in mass communication.

Phubbing, driven by widespread smartphone use, undermines family cohesion, particularly in marital relationships. Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2018) found that phubbing leads to lower relationship satisfaction, with partners feeling neglected due to divided attention. In Abakaliki Urban, Nigeria, where smartphones are increasingly prevalent, anecdotal evidence suggests phubbing strains family bonds, causing conflicts and reduced communication. However, empirical data on its prevalence and impact in this context is scarce. Excessive device use is linked to broader issues, including anxiety and sleep disruption. Digital detox has shown promise globally, but Jackie (2024) highlighted that challenges like work demands and social pressures complicate its adoption.



Again, in Nigeria, cultural emphasis on family unity may amplify phubbing's negative effects, yet little is known about implementing digital detox in urban African settings. This study addresses this gap by examining phubbing's effects on Abakaliki Urban families and the feasibility of digital detox as a solution.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addresses the following questions:

1. Does phubbing exist among the select families in Abakaliki Urban?
2. What are the negative effects of phubbing on family relationships in Abakaliki Urban?
3. How effective is digital detox in reducing phubbing among married couples?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Digital Device Addiction

The pervasive use of digital devices, particularly smartphones, has fueled behaviors like phubbing, rooted in various forms of digital addiction. Nazir and Bulut (2019) described "nomophobia" as the fear of being without a smartphone, a condition that drives compulsive device use and is often linked to excessive internet engagement. Griffiths (2000) argued that "internet and computer addiction exists," evidenced by case studies showing individuals prioritizing online activities over real-world interactions. This addiction is exacerbated by the multifunctional nature of smartphones, which integrate communication, entertainment, and social networking.

Social media platforms significantly contribute to this addiction. Pempek et al. (2009) found that 69.57% of college students use Facebook to browse profiles and 58.70% to view photos, indicating that social media fosters prolonged engagement that detracts from face-to-face interactions. Balci and Gülnar (2009) noted that university students' excessive internet use correlates with social isolation, as individuals prioritize virtual connections over physical ones. Similarly, Weinstein and Lejoyeux (2010) highlighted that online gaming, such as Candy Crush or Angry Birds, keeps users engaged for extended periods, stating that "internet addiction involves excessive gaming that affects daily life." These platforms employ engagement tactics like notifications and gamification to sustain user attention, reinforcing behaviors that lead to phubbing in social settings.

Impacts of Phubbing

Phubbing, the act of ignoring others in favor of a smartphone, has profound social and psychological consequences, particularly in family settings. Ugur and Koc (2015) asserted that "phubbing can lead to feelings of neglect, hurt, and frustration among those being ignored," linking it to increased risks of depression, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem, especially among



young adults. This behavior disrupts interpersonal communication, creating emotional distance within families. Lutz and Knop (2020) described phubbing as a "form of micro-betrayal," noting that it erodes trust and emotional intimacy in romantic relationships, leading to diminished relationship quality and stability over time.

Beyond emotional impacts, phubbing affects physical and mental well-being. Cain and Gradisar (2010) reported that "electronic media use can interfere with circadian rhythms," causing sleep deprivation due to pre-bedtime screen exposure, which is particularly detrimental in family contexts where shared routines are disrupted. Best et al. (2014) found that overreliance on digital devices reduces face-to-face interactions, stating that "online communication can lead to social isolation," a trend that extends to family dynamics where phubbing replaces meaningful engagement. In educational settings, Burns and Lohenry (2010) observed that 40% of students used phones during class, with 85% reporting distractions, suggesting parallel disruptions in home environments. Synnott (2013) noted that students often misperceive their peers' phone use as higher than their own, which may normalize phubbing behaviors, a pattern likely mirrored in family interactions where partners underestimate their own contribution to the issue.

Digital Detox as a Solution

Digital detox, defined as a deliberate reduction or elimination of digital device use, emerges as a promising strategy to counteract phubbing. Exon Publications (2025) explained that digital detox involves "deliberately limiting or avoiding the use of digital devices for a set period" to reduce distractions and promote mindfulness, enabling individuals to reconnect with their physical environment. Jackie (2024) emphasized that "digital detox encourages people to engage in offline activities like reading, walking, or spending time with loved ones," fostering improved family communication and reduced stress. These benefits are particularly relevant for couples, as detoxing enhances presence and emotional intimacy.

However, implementing digital detox presents challenges. Haidt (2024) highlighted that "collective action problems arise when one person undertakes a detox but others in their social circle do not," leading to feelings of isolation or pressure to revert to device use. This is especially pertinent in families where one partner's detox efforts may fail if others continue phubbing. Additionally, work-related demands complicate disconnection, as noted by Jackie (2024), who suggested that "finding a balance between digital detox and work needs is crucial." Strategies to overcome these challenges include establishing tech-free zones (e.g., bedrooms, dining areas) and scheduled breaks, such as 2-hour daily detoxes or device-free weekends, which foster collective commitment (Jackie, 2024). Smahel et al. (2012) found that reducing online time among adolescents strengthens real-world relationships, suggesting that similar outcomes could apply to families adopting structured detox practices.



EMPIRICAL REVIEW

This empirical review synthesizes recent studies on phubbing's impact on family relationships and the efficacy of digital detox as a mitigation strategy, with a focus on methodologies to provide clarity on research approaches.

In the study by, Liu, Wu, Zhou, & Wang, (2024) investigated "Association between parental phubbing and adolescents' depression: The mediation role of family cohesion" A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 1,073 Chinese families (parents and adolescents aged 12–18) recruited via stratified random sampling from urban schools. Structural equation modeling (SEM) tested mediation effects, reporting that "a higher level of parental phubbing is associated with a lower level of family cohesion, which in return, leads to a higher level of depression", showing family cohesion as a significant mediator. These findings underscore phubbing's detrimental effects on family dynamics, supporting the need for digital detox to enhance parental engagement in Abakaliki Urban.

Also, Wilmer, Sherman, & Chein, J. M. (2023), explored "The effects of partaking in a two-week social media digital detox on smartphone addiction, sleep, and well-being" using a randomized controlled trial involved 120 U.S. young adults (aged 18–25) assigned to either a detox group (no social media use) or a control group (normal use). Participants were recruited via university networks and completed pre- and post-intervention surveys using the Smartphone Addiction Scale, Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index, and Satisfaction with Life Scale, demonstrating that -a two-week social media detox improved smartphone and social media addiction, as well as sleep, satisfaction with life, stress, perceived wellness. ANOVA analyses revealed significant improvements in the detox group's outcomes, this experimental evidence supports digital detox as a strategy to reduce phubbing-related behaviors.

Moreover, Schmuck (2021) conducted "Digital detox: An effective solution in the smartphone era? A systematic literature review". The review analyzed 21 peer-reviewed studies (2015–2020) sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, focusing on digital detox interventions. Inclusion criteria required empirical data on smartphone use reduction and psychosocial outcomes, concluding that "digital detox interventions have been suggested as a solution to reduce negative impacts from smartphone use on outcomes like well-being or social relationships." The review highlighted structured detoxes (e.g., 1–2 weeks) as effective in reducing phubbing, offering insights for family-based interventions in Nigeria.

Meanwhile, Wang, Qiao, Li, & Lei, (2023) examined "Relationship between partner phubbing and parent–adolescent relationship quality: A family-based study" A family-based survey was conducted with 300 Chinese parent couples recruited via community centers. Participants completed the Partner Phubbing Scale and Co-Parenting Quality Scale, with gender differences analyzed using multiple regression, finding that "partner phubbing could reduce marital relationship satisfaction and undermine co-parenting quality." Results showed significant



negative effects, particularly on father-adolescent bonds. This study suggests digital detox could mitigate phubbing's relational damage.

The research gap here is that these studies, primarily from Asian and Western contexts, highlight phubbing's negative effects and digital detox's benefits but lack African perspectives, particularly in Nigeria. The methodologies like meta-analyses, surveys, and experimental designs, provide robust evidence but need adaptation to explore cultural nuances in Abakaliki Urban, where family cohesion is a cultural priority.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on three theories; Uses and Gratifications Theory, Expectancy Violations Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, to explain the phenomenon of phubbing and the role of digital detox in mitigating its effects on family relationships in Abakaliki Urban, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. These theories provide a solid framework for understanding the motivations behind smartphone use, the social disruptions caused by phubbing, and the relational dynamics that digital detox can restore.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch in the 1970s, Uses and Gratifications Theory posits that individuals actively select media to fulfill specific needs. Vinney (2024) explained that "audiences are aware of the reasons they want to consume media and consciously use those reasons to make media selections that will fulfill their needs and desires." In the context of phubbing, individuals use smartphones for entertainment, social connection, or information, often prioritizing these over face-to-face interactions. This excessive engagement can lead to compulsive behaviors, contributing to phubbing in family settings. For instance, a partner may choose social media over spousal conversation to meet social or emotional needs, inadvertently neglecting their relationship. Vinney (2024) further noted that "media compete with other forms of communication, especially in-person communication," highlighting how smartphones have been accessible anytime, intensify phubbing. Digital detox aligns with this theory by encouraging individuals to reduce reliance on digital media and seek gratification through offline interactions, thereby addressing phubbing's negative effects.

Expectancy Violations Theory

Expectancy Violations Theory was proposed by Judee Burgoon in the late 1970s, Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) examines how individuals react to behaviors that deviate from social norms in interactions. Holladay (2025) stated that "EVT explains how people react to violations of their expectations of another's behavior in a particular situation." In family settings, phubbing violates the expectation that partners will give each other undivided attention during conversations. When one partner prioritizes their phone, it disrupts the norm of mutual engagement, leading to feelings of neglect or disrespect. Holladay (2025) emphasized that such



violations can "erode trust and emotional intimacy," particularly in romantic relationships. Phubbing, as a recurring violation, may strain marital bonds in Abakaliki Urban, where cultural values emphasize family cohesion. Digital detox mitigates these violations by fostering device-free moments, allowing partners to meet expectations of presence and attentiveness, thus restoring relational harmony.

Social Exchange Theory

Developed by George Homans in 1958 and expanded by John W. Thibaut, Harold H. Kelley, and Peter M. Blau, in 1961. Social Exchange Theory views relationships as transactions involving cost-benefit analyses. Ahmad, R., Ali, M., & Khan, S. (2023) argued that "social behaviour, including relationship formation and maintenance, is driven by a cost-benefit analysis," where individuals seek to maximize rewards like; affection, companionship and minimize costs like; conflict, emotional strain. Phubbing occurs when the perceived benefits of smartphone use, such as instant access to information or social media engagement, outweigh the costs of neglecting a partner. Ahmad et al. (2023) noted that "when one person feels they are giving more than they are receiving, it can lead to dissatisfaction and relationship instability." In Abakaliki Urban, phubbing may disrupt the equitable exchange expected in marriages, leading to conflicts or emotional distance. Digital detox supports this theory by reducing the "costs" of phubbing through structured breaks from devices, enabling partners to reinvest in mutual rewards like communication and intimacy, thus fostering balanced relationships.

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive survey research design was adopted to find out if digital detox is a means of reducing phubbing among select families in Abakaliki Urban of Ebonyi State.

The study covers Abakaliki Local Government Area which is part of Abakaliki Urban. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 80 families. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire; analysis was done using descriptive statistics and summarized using frequency tables.



RESULTS

This section presents and analyses data from the study on investigating if digital detox is a means of reducing phubbing among select families in Abakaliki Urban of Ebonyi State. A questionnaire was distributed to 80 families who are the respondents. The data responses are analyzed below.

Table 1: Demographics of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage%
Male	22	27.5
Female	58	72.5
Total	80	100
Years in Marriage	Frequency	Percentage%
1-5	24	30
6-10	40	50
11-15	14	17.5
16 and above	2	2.5
Total	80	100
Number of Children	Frequency	Percentage%
1-3	36	45
4-6	40	50
7-9	4	5
10 and above	0	0
Total	80	100

Source: field survey 2025

Table 1 shows the demography of the respondents with the majority of them being female (72.5%). Majority of the respondents' years in marriage is between six to ten years having 50%, followed by a year to five years, then eleven to fifteen years, while sixteen years and above is just one respondent. In terms of the number of children they have, most of the respondents have between four to six children with 50%, then those that have between a child and three children followed, the respondents that have between seven and nine children are just 5% while none of the respondents has above ten children. Base on this the study believes that the respondents are in a better position to give responses to the digital detox been a sure way to eliminating phubbing.



Table 2: Knowledge of Digital Devices and Digital Detox

Possession of Digital Devices	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes	80	100
No	0	0
Total	80	100
Digital Device(s) usually used	Frequency	Percentage%
Laptop/Cell phone	14	17.5
Television/Cell phone	50	62.5
Radio/cell phone	10	12.5
Cell phone/Others(specify)	6	7.5
Total	80	100
Hours spent on digital devices	Frequency	Percentage%
1-5 hours	16	20
6-10 hours	34	42.5
11-15 hours	22	27.5
16-20 hours	0	0
Always	8	10
Total	80	100
Knowledge of Digital Detox	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes	44	55
No	36	45
Total	80	100

Source: field survey 2025

Table 2 shows the respondents knowledge of digital devices and digital detox. All the respondents possesses digital devices, the majority has cell phones and as well televisions in their homes. Most of the respondents with 42.5% spend six to ten hours on their digital devices daily, followed by those that spend eleven to fifteen hours. Those that spend one to five hours are only 20% of the respondents while 10% are always on their digital devices. Meanwhile 55% of the respondents are aware of what digital detox is all about as against 45% that said they don't know about it.



Table 3: Phubbing and Digital Detox

Knowledge of Phubbing	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes	64	80
No	16	20
Total	80	100
Engaging in Phubbing	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes	52	65
No	28	35
Total	80	100
Duration of Engaging in Phubbing	Frequency	Percentage%
Always	38	47.5
Often	0	0
Sometimes	26	32.5
Rarely	16	20
Total	80	100
Using Digital Detox to Control Phubbing	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes	60	75
No	6	7.5
Not sure	14	17.5
Total	80	100
Duration for Digital Detox	Frequency	Percentage%
2 hours per day	40	50
2 days off per week	18	22.5
Every weekend	14	17.5
Others(specify)	8	10
Total	80	100

Source: field survey 2025

In table 3, most of the respondents are aware of this relationship eating vice called phubbing with 80%. 65% of the respondents engage in phubbing with their partners' day in day out. 47.5% engages in it always. However 75% of the respondents believes that digital detoxication is a sure way to controlling phubbing, 50% agreed that going off digital devices two hours each day will help oneself to deactivate from digital device addiction which in turn will help to control phubbing, while 22.7% maintained that two days off each week is the best method of digital detox to control phubbing in families.



Table 4: problems caused by phubbing and the place of Digital Detox

Phubbing as a cause of Family Problems	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes	62	77.5
No	18	22.5
Total	80	100
Type of problems encountered	Frequency	Percentage%
Decreased marital satisfaction	12	15
Increased conflict and strains	30	37.5
Separation	6	7.5
Weakened/problematic communication	24	30
Others(specify)	8	10
Total	80	100
How the Problems were Surmounted	Frequency	Percentage%
Adjustment of digital device use (digital detox)	80	100

Source: Field Survey 2025

Majority of the respondents agreed that phubbing has really caused some problems in their marriages. 37.5% said that phubbing has led to increased conflict and strains in their marriages, 30% said it has caused weakened/problematic communication, 15% of the respondents said decreased marital satisfaction, 10% specified other reasons while 7.5% said phubbing has led to separation of partners. As for how they handled the problem, all the respondents maintained that they had to adjust on their use of digital device as to gain their partners back.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the major findings of the study based on the review of the literature and extant empirical studies around phubbing and digital detox and as well as responses from eighty respondents from different families in Abakaliki Urban Ebonyi State. The data obtained and analysed for this study reveal much about the problems which phubbing has caused in marital relationships. It further presents how these problems were handled especially making use of digital detoxification, including the challenges encountered while applying digital detox.

Digital Intoxication and Negative Impact of Phubbing in Families

A summation of the various reviews of literature and empirical studies around the subject matter of digital addiction and phubbing has proven that phubbing can lead to passive and impaired relationships in agreement with the study of Wang et al, (2023) whereby there would be a barrier to face-to-face interactions. However, the study of Wang et al is different as it focused on partner's co-parenting. This study found that families/partners may find themselves in the same



room, yet emotionally distant as everyone is engrossed in their screens. The researcher found that there is every tendency that there would be mental health issues: a lot of studies have linked heavy device use with increased rates of anxiety, depression, and stress. The constant barrage of notifications and social comparisons can create a sense of inadequacy and perpetual stress. Sometimes, eye issues: looking at the screen for too long can cause eye strain, which can lead to discomfort. Therefore, digital detoxification should be used to control phubbing as to avoid the negative effects.

The Application of Digital Detox in Eliminating Phubbing

Following the use of a descriptive survey and the results of notable literature and empirical studies that were reviewed by the researcher submits that all methods of applying digital detox would help curb the negative impact of phubbing, this is in line with Wilmer et al, (2023) which demonstrated that a two-week social media detox improved smartphone and social media addiction. Furthermore, practicing digital detox as regards to relationship is in line with Social Exchange theory which posits that relationship is like a transaction where a buyer is expecting the return in goods the equivalent of his or her monetary value. Each partner in a relationship is expecting the partner to reciprocate whatever that was given to the relationship; this is achievable when partners engage in face to face interaction other than passive interaction with digital device interference.

Responses obtained from sampled families show that the level of adopting digital detox to combat the negative effect of phubbing is already high in Ebonyi State as 75% of the respondents indicated that digital detox is the best solution as to control phubbing.

However, to promote active and mutual relationship between couple and even among family members, partners/parents must set out clear goal and set a plan for digital detox, also have a digital fast and break, even create a tech free zone like bed, dinning, kitchen etc, create tech free time like; bedtime, midnights, during meal hours, during prayer periods etc.

Studies reviewed like that of Wilmer et al, (2023) also prove that there is no specific amount of time to detox from tech that is compulsory, it can depend on one's level of attachment to tech and how much time you might need to detach. Even just thirty minutes a day for an intentional break can improve partner's attachment by reducing screen-related stress and improving mental well-being.

CONCLUSION

Digital detox is a practical approach to regaining balance in a tech-saturated world. It allows individuals and families to step back, reassess their relationship with screens, and create healthier habits. While technology is an essential part of modern life, conscious and limited use is vital for mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Digital detox is not about eliminating technology but about finding control and intention in its use. Taking regular breaks, setting boundaries, and fostering offline connections can help create a more fulfilling and less stressful digital experience.



From the discussion of the results of the descriptive survey and reviewed empirical studies, this research concludes that phubbing has extreme negative effect on people especially in family life. Findings show that families in Abakaliki Urban have a fair knowledge of what digital detoxication is and its impact in controlling and eliminating phubbing. While using digital detox to control phubbing is in line with social exchange theory, the research found that the use of digital detox is still at the moderate level in Ebonyi State compared how it is used in Western/Asian countries.

Thus, this study recommends that couples should embrace digital detox into their daily routine as to avoid phubbing totally. Parents should also include other family members into digital detox process as to control screen time in their homes. Partners should also use digital detox period to bond, engage in recreational activities and even learn skills as not to make such period boring.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions.

Alo, Ruth Ngozi conceived the study, including the design, she also collected the data and wrote the manuscript. Ovuoba Abraham helped in editing and reviewing the manuscript. The authors read and approved the final manuscript for publication in this current form, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript..

Availability of data and materials

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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