



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Phubbing as a social-cognitive failure: Affective theory of mind as a candidate mechanism

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Dear Editor,

Aksoy Avunduk et al. (1) provide a timely and methodologically careful examination of phubbing behavior in adolescents, demonstrating that social media addiction predicts phubbing both directly and through the sequential mediation of social anxiety and emotion regulation difficulties. Their serial mediation model advances our understanding of how digital behavioral patterns are embedded within broader profiles of emotional vulnerability during adolescence. We propose a complementary theoretical perspective that identifies a social-cognitive mechanism absent from the current model and that may account for some of the variance in phubbing behavior not explained by the pathways examined.

Phubbing, the act of ignoring a co-present social partner in favor of one's smartphone, is not merely a habitual behavior or a passive byproduct of social media addiction. At its core, phubbing implicates a sequence of social-cognitive operations that should be kept conceptually distinct: first, inferring that the co-present partner experiences being ignored and that their emotional state has changed as a result; and second, adjusting one's own behavior in light of that inference. Only the first of these belongs to affective theory of mind (ToM) proper, and it is this inferential process that we propose as a mechanism missing from the current model.

Terminological precision is essential to this argument, and we therefore use the following conceptual hierarchy throughout this Letter. Mentalization is the overarching capacity to understand one's own and others' behavior in terms of intentional mental states, such as beliefs, wishes, goals, and feelings, and is considered to be organized along several dimensions, including the cognitive-affective distinction (2). ToM denotes the component of this capacity directed toward representing other people's mental states and is conventionally divided into a cognitive component, involving the inference of others' beliefs, intentions, and goals, and an affective component, involving the inference of others' emotional states (3).

Accordingly, affective ToM is defined here narrowly as the inference and representation of another person's emotional mental state during interaction, without implying any broader construct. The regulation of one's subsequent behavior in response to such an inference, including accommodation to the social expectations prevailing in a given context, is a downstream social-regulatory process that is conceptually and empirically separable from the inferential capacity itself and is not part of the definition adopted here. Affective ToM is likewise distinct from empathy, which involves affective sharing of another person's emotional state rather than its representation.

Both cognitive and affective ToM continue to develop during adolescence, with a discernible

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developmental shift in middle adolescence and distinct neuropsychological correlates for each component (4), making the adolescent sample examined by Aksoy Avunduk et al. (1) particularly informative in this context. The mechanism we propose is therefore specific and testable: adolescents who engage in phubbing more frequently may be less accurate or less flexible in inferring the emotional states that their behavior elicits in co-present partners, independently of whether they subsequently adjust their behavior in light of those inferences.

Empirical work has begun to link social-cognitive capacity to digital social behavior in adolescents and young adults. Reduced empathic and mentalizing capacities have been associated with problematic smartphone use and phubbing, with lower empathy predicting greater phubbing in dyadic relationships (5). However, this evidence base has primarily examined empathy and broader mentalizing capacity rather than affective ToM in the narrow sense adopted here, and these constructs should not be treated as equivalent. Our proposal should therefore be regarded as a hypothesis about affective ToM that is rendered plausible by the available evidence rather than one that has already been established. The absence of a performance-based measure of affective ToM in the present study leaves this question open.

Qualitative evidence lends further support to a social-cognitive interpretation of phubbing. A recent scoping review of qualitative and mixed-methods studies synthesizes accounts in which co-present smartphone use disrupted face-to-face communication and attention to the immediate social environment. Difficulty maintaining eye contact and following the thread of a conversation emerged as characteristic features, while social norms and contextual factors substantially influenced whether a given instance of smartphone use was perceived as phubbing (6).

Both observations bear directly on the present argument. Disruption of eye contact and conversational tracking reduces access to the perceptual information, including facial expression, gaze, and prosody, that contributes to affective ToM in live interaction. The context dependence of phubbing further indicates that the phenomenon cannot be adequately captured simply as a fixed quantity of screen time. Recognizing that smartphone use is inappropriate in a particular context or distressing to a particular partner may itself require inference about that person's mental state. Taken together, these

observations support moving beyond a primarily addictive or habitual account of phubbing toward understanding it as an interpersonal phenomenon with a social-cognitive substrate.

The study's findings are also consistent with this hypothesis. Social anxiety, one of the mediators identified in the study, is associated with distortions in the interpretation of social evaluation: socially anxious individuals may be hypervigilant to cues of negative appraisal and may attribute hostile or critical intent to ambiguous social signals (7). This reflects a distortion of affective ToM rather than its simple absence, characterized by biased rather than deficient inference about others' emotional states.

Whether phubbing among socially anxious adolescents reflects active avoidance of situations that place substantial demands on affective ToM, such as face-to-face interactions requiring continuous inference about a partner's emotional state, or a failure to accurately represent the interpersonal consequences of smartphone-directed disengagement remains unclear. The current design cannot distinguish between these possibilities, but they have potentially different implications for intervention. Importantly, these two mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, and each provides an independent rationale for considering social-cognitive processes, albeit through different therapeutic targets.

To the extent that phubbing is associated with biased inference about others' emotional states, interventions might target these interpretive biases. To the extent that it reflects avoidance of social-cognitive demands, interventions might instead focus on strengthening social-cognitive skills and tolerance for real-time interpersonal interaction. Viewed as complementary rather than competing pathways, these possibilities suggest that emotion regulation training alone may not address all relevant mechanisms and that social-cognitive interventions targeting the recognition and interpretation of others' emotional states during interaction may provide an additional therapeutic target (8).

A second consideration concerns the bidirectional relationship between phubbing and affective ToM. Aksoy Avunduk et al. (1) acknowledge the cross-sectional nature of their design and appropriately refrain from making causal claims; we therefore raise this issue not as an oversight but as a promising direction for future research. Research on screen-based social interaction suggests that chronic reliance

on text- and image-mediated communication rather than face-to-face interaction may affect the development and maintenance of social-cognitive capacities that depend on the real-time processing of facial expressions, prosody, and bodily cues (9). If so, phubbing may not only reflect pre-existing social-cognitive vulnerabilities but could also contribute to their maintenance across adolescence, a developmental period during which affective ToM continues to mature (4).

Longitudinal studies would be well suited to test whether phubbing frequency at one time point predicts subsequent affective ToM performance after accounting for social anxiety and emotion regulation difficulties. Such studies should combine self-report measures of digital behavior with validated performance-based measures of affective ToM. The Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET), which requires participants to infer complex emotional and mental states from photographs of the eye region, is a widely used and readily implementable measure relevant to the affective ToM construct discussed here (10).

Aksoy Avunduk et al. (1) have produced a valuable and practically relevant study. The social-cognitive perspective outlined here suggests that affective ToM, which was not assessed in the current study, may represent an additional mechanism underlying the relationships among social anxiety, emotion regulation difficulties, and phubbing, as well as a potential target for intervention in adolescents who engage in problematic phubbing. Incorporating a brief, validated, performance-based measure of affective ToM, such as the RMET, into future studies of phubbing and digital behavior would substantially strengthen the mechanistic understanding of this growing clinical problem.

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