

TECHNOLOGY CAUSING DISCONNECT IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS



Photo illustration by Lathan Goumas - lgoumas@shawmedia.com

Phubbing is the act of ignoring those whom you are socializing with to interact with people via a smartphone. It is a issue that has grown rapidly with the penetration of digital technologies into people's lives.

'STOP phubbing'

Movement asks smartphone users to re-evaluate habits

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Imelda Sprenger has been a server for 12 years, but it's only in the past few that she's started circling her tables waiting for customers to ready their orders.

It's not always the engaged conversations of reunited friends that keeps diners from the menu – that, Sprenger welcomes. Instead, it's the world-blocking tunnel vision brought by smartphones that too often puts a pause on pizza.

"It's very common," said Sprenger, a server at Nick's Pizza and Pub in Crystal Lake. "What I normally do is give them the, 'I'll be right back.'"

Sprenger, a mother of two who herself limits TV time at home to emphasize family, isn't alone in her frustrations toward the disconnect brought on by the use of smartphones in social situations.

The phenomenon recently sparked a movement in Australia that has gained some steam across the world.

The act has been termed "phubbing" – phone snubbing – and the minds behind stopphubbing.com, while seemingly intent on curbing the act, remain willing to poke sarcastic fun at the uber-serious mission the website URL implies.

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Voice your opinion

How much time do you spend staring at your smartphone in a given day? Vote online at NWHerald.com.

Server says 'I've seen it get way worse'

• PHUBBING

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Phubbing – which extends beyond texting and encompasses any sort of activity on a smartphone, be it reading a Twitter timeline or posting a Facebook status – seems more ingrained in phones-with-app owners every day. Stats on the phenomenon don't exist, so the creator of stopphubbing.com, 23-year-old Alex Haigh, made up his own.

"87 percent of teens would rather communicate via text than face-to-face," the website reads.

Also: "If phubbing were a plague, it would decimate 6 Chinas."

And: "92 percent of repeat phubbers go on to become politicians."

Chelsea Metz, 23, and Cassy Elia, 24, of Johnsbury, aren't necessarily immune to phubbing – a term they hadn't heard of – but they're also conscious of the potential social implications.

And besides that, it can be just plain rude, they say.

"I'll get mad at her if I'm trying to have an in-depth conversation," said Metz, sitting across from Elia at a table filled with study materials in McHenry County College's student union.

The two admit to feeling a certain pull toward a buzzing phone, but both agree the situation ultimately dictates whether pulling out your cell around others is appropriate.

It's always a no-no on a date, and neither would recommend unleashing the iPhone during a personal conversation, but similarly, neither is offended if the other checks social media when conversation lags.

But the problem, they say, seems to be getting worse as kids get smartphones at younger and younger ages.

Like those behind the Stop Phubbing movement, Elia and Metz worry that groups of people buried in their cellphones don't ever fully interact with their surroundings.

"Maybe that [younger] generation can do both things," Elia said. "But our generation isn't programmed like that."

According to a study by Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein of the University of Essex, individuals might not even have to go so far as to engage with their phone for it to affect conversation.

During the study, groups of two strangers had discussions in private booths that held either a nearby cellphone or notebook. Which of the two items the booth contained

turned out to be a determining factor in how well the two connected, based on surveys they answered afterward.

Those who talked near the cellphone reported lower relationship quality.

For Josh Kaiser of Crystal Lake, his willingness to phub depends on his company. If the 19-year-old is with his family and his girlfriend, his phone isn't generally on his mind, mainly because he's in the presence of those he'd usually be texting.

That's not to say he wouldn't or hasn't checked his phone in other social situations.

But would it bug him if someone who engaged him in conversation soon checked out of the real world and into cellphone land?

"Since you're the one starting the conversation, getting information from me, yeah, that would bug me," he said.

Sprenger says the majority of her phubbers are in their 20s and 30s, but the offenders stretch to middle-aged parents and younger kids.

And unfortunately, she said, the trend is going in the wrong direction.

"I've seen it get way worse," Sprenger said of her 12 years serving. "And it's such a great place to bring your family."