Book Review

Yeslam Al-Saggaf (2022) *The Psychology of Phubbing*. Springer Singapore

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The impact and influence of human interaction with and through digital communication technology on social norms is an increasingly important area of research. One such aspect of this research area is the phenomenon of phubbing. Phubbing, as defined by Al-Saggaf, is the momentary shift between participation in face-to-face conversations and interaction with a smartphone, inevitably moving between the real and digital worlds. To find solutions to issues that emerge due to new realities and social norms brought about by this shift between real and digital worlds, Al-Saggaf argues that society will need to interpret and understand how these changes have come about and their impacts.

Yeslam Al-Saggaf, a leading expert on the impacts of digital communication technology on society, takes us through the various relationships where phubbing occurs. Beyond providing a valuable and insightful window into the connections and networks between phubbing and society, Al-Saggaf presents key themes and core concepts that readers must understand to make independent and non-biased interpretations of the phubbing phenomenon. In doing so, he successfully draws a connection between phubbing and social theory. Al-Saggaf accomplishes this by looking at the phenomenon of phubbing through the lens of two key theories: technological determinism and mediation theory. Al-Saggaf's contribution to scholarly and social conversations is the analysis of phubbing using theoretical lenses that have not yet been considered by the existing literature.

Al-Saggaf's theorising provides researchers in this area an opportunity to move beyond data-driven research towards more interpretation that provides a tool for handling the impacts of phubbing on society: '… summarising the findings of published research on phubbing and presenting these summaries in one place allow readers the opportunity to understand the phubbing phenomenon better. The aim is to raise awareness of the serious consequences of phubbing behaviour'.[1]

This book comprises eight chapters. Of the eight chapters, five chapters explicitly explore the effects of phubbing on the doer and the receiver, moving from family relationships to friendships and from human interactions to interactions with other living things, such as pets. Presenting both sides of the phenomenon, doer and receiver, adds to the scholarly field where most of the research has focused on the impacts of phubbing on the doer. By providing a 180-degree position, the reader can weigh up the consequences of phubbing in their own community, considering its impact on global contexts thereafter.

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[1] Al-Saggaf, Psychology of Phubbing, 2.

In the final three chapters, Al-Saggaf provides a space for an in-depth analysis of psychological triggers and a discussion of theoretical frameworks that are currently silent in the literature. Chapters six through eight see Al-Saggaf asking the readers and researchers to consider two key theories: technological determinism and Verbeek's mediation theory,[2] which could help interpret the data-driven literature.

Technological determinism views technology as being neutral, and the how, what and why of using technology is solely at the discretion of the doer.[3] Al-Saggaf provides examples based on this view, such as the gun debate globally and the COVID-19 QR code usage in Australia. However, Al-Saggaf then provides an alternative lens to this phenomenon. He argues that, on the surface, technological determinism could be attributed to society's changing norms, but for the phenomenon of phubbing, the theory of mediation may be better positioned to help analyse the impacts of phubbing.

Mediation, a theory introduced by Verbeek,[4] does not see technology as being neutral but rather as one that facilitates our actions and, therefore, influences how we perceive the world. As opposed to technological determinism, mediation proposes that humans' behaviour and, thus, their choices are informed by their own perception of the world around them, whether real or digital. Therefore, their use of the smartphone impacts relationships and the way they participate in society.

With the rise of cyberbullying and self-image and mental health issues resulting from interacting with the digital world, this book comes at an opportune time. Al-Saggaf does not offer definitive answers; rather, his book identifies where researchers have focused their energies and where important research needs to occur so that the impacts of phubbing can be understood at all levels of society and communities. While the current literature on phubbing's impact has been observed in various levels of society, Al-Saggaf points out that its impact on migrants, individuals with disabilities and minority groups is either under-researched or even silent.

The structure of each chapter makes the discussion around phubbing relevant to the academic reader and accessible to a general reader who walks in the shoes of both the doer and receiver. Each chapter is structured in a way that helps with readability. An ethnographic account is presented to illustrate the type of relationship the chapter will cover. The literature around this theme is then expounded. Finally, each chapter ends with an analysis of the findings in the literature against the psychological theories behind triggers and behaviours of phubbing.

While some recognisable stories and themes may be mentioned, the introduction of mediation theory and how phubbing has impacted social norms is an interesting read. Al-Saggaf metaphorically puts his finger on the concepts and ideas, defining them for consumption and reflection. He does this successfully and in a clear, non-biased voice. This book is essential for those who work in the wellbeing and mental health industries, as well as those who research the impact of digital communication technologies on society. Al-Saggaf is a pioneer in the phubbing research arena, having instigated the initial studies of phubbing in the late 1990s. Since then, Al-Saggaf has continued to research new and emerging trends in this area, which has culminated in this book.

Bibliography

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[2] Verbeek, "Cover Story."
[3] Dafoe, "On Technological Determinism."
[4] Verbeek, "Cover Story."