

Supervisor Phubbing, Employee Trust and Withdrawal Behavior – A Mediation Mechanism

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Abstract

The core aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between supervisor phubbing on employee withdrawal behavior via their trust in supervisor. The data were collected from nurses from public and private sector hospitals, because often doctors and head nurses indulge in phubbing. Using convenience sampling technique, all in all 235 useful responses were received and used for analysis purpose. The findings revealed that phubbing leads to reduction in trust in supervisor which ultimately leads to increased withdrawal behavior. Trust proves to be a partial mediator between supervisor phubbing and withdrawal behavior. Based on these results future directions are also provided.

Key words: Nurses, supervisor phubbing, trust in supervisor, withdrawal behavior.

Introduction

It is hard to claim that cellphones are not pervasive. The growing popularity and use of cellphones have increased its effects of human lives including workplace. Every fifth employer reports that the productive hours of an employee are only five, while use of cellphones is the major cause of that. It is also reported that 55% of the employers consider cellphone a curse for workplace. In addition to that, 28% of the businesses consider smartphone a detrimental force between employee-supervisor interaction (Farber, 2016).

Given the pervasiveness of smartphones at work, numerous researchers have started focusing on the outcomes associated with its use (Yueh et al., 2015). The use of smartphones in interaction is termed as phubbing, which is defined as one is obsessed with his or cellphone rather than chatting with you (Roberts & David, 2016), and it is observed to influence the workplace relationships and outcomes. phubbing has been investigated from two major perspectives, i.e. phubbing by peers and by supervisors, while the supervisor phubbing (SP) is considered more detrimental. For instance, it leads to increase in perceptions of workplace incivility and exhaustion (Tandon et al., 2022). It also reduces the meaningfulness of work for employees (Khan et al., 2022), reduce job engagement and increases turnover intentions (Yousaf et al., 2022), and trust in supervisor (Koc & Caliskan, 2023). But an important consideration that deems important for workplace is how SP can influence employees' willingness to work (Koc & Caliskan, 2023; Yousaf et al., 2022). Considering this gap, the current study aims to find the impact of SP on employees' withdrawal behavior (which is defined as employee involvement in work in such a way which depicts that employee is not willing to take up the job and avoids performing it) (Sliter et al., 2012). But the same has not been probed in the past literature.

Therefore, this study provides a fresh insight into literature by considering the role of SP at workplace and considering its link with the employees' withdrawal behavior. While investigating the mechanism another important consideration is how and why the SP may lead to withdrawal behavior. In order to highlight the mechanism this study entails investigation of trust in supervisor as mediation mechanism. The role of trust seems logical, as the recent studies have highlighted that SP creates negative feelings in employees and the continuous phubbing behavior by a supervisor is translated as the reduced consideration towards employee which reduces their level of trust in supervisor (Kon & Caliskan, 2023; Roberts & David, 2020). Furthermore, it has been observed that trust in supervisor reduces employees' attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g. Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Neinaber, 2015). Thus, this study proposes that trust can work as potential mediator in the said relationship (see figure 1).

Overall the study proposes that SP is directly related with the employees reduced level of trust in supervisor which reduces their attachment, feelings and responses towards the workplace. It is important to notice that though Phubbing can be treated as a form of incivility, yet it is distinctive from many. The foremost difference is the intentional part of act, as phubbing may not be an intentional act when compared with the other incivil acts at work (Jenkins, et al., 2012).

The current study contributes to the body of knowledge in many ways. First, the study current study entails investigation of relationship between SP and employee withdrawal behavior which has largely been and unattended workplace outcome (Gonzales & Wu, 2016). It also increases body of knowledge on use of technology at workplace, its type of use and its possible impacts on surroundings. The study proposes that SP can bring negative workplace outcomes, as the employees consider it a negative workplace act. The study also contributes, by considering the mechanism of trust. The study also adds value by building the relationship using Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) as the underlying mechanism. The following section covers the hypothesis building and is followed by the research methodology.

Hypotheses development

Supervisor phubbing and employee trust in supervisor

Supervisor phubbing (SP) can be defined as *employee's perception that his or her supervisor is distracted by their smartphone while conversing or in close proximity in the office* (Roberts & David, 2017). Humans always like to have unattended attention whether its social or work life. At workplace, employees expect a form of positive behavior from their supervisor (Burgoon and Le Poire, 1993), while phubbing breaks those expectations. While interacting with others, the non-verbal cues influence the quality of communication as often partners maintain eye contact and react through non-verbal acts (Vanden Abeele, 2019). These non-verbal cues are reduced when anyone of the parties indulge in phubbing behavior, which leads to reduction in value of phubber influencing the overall trust (Krishnan et al., 2014; Vignovic & Thompson, 2010).

Numerous studies have found and explained the way phubbing can influence the relationship between interacting parties. For instance, Abeele et al., (2016) found that the social interaction and level of trust between parties reduces when the teacher phubs in presence of students. The victims of phubbing often consider themselves disregarded and less courteous. It is also observed that use of smartphones reduces conversation quality, connection, proximity and relationship quality (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013). Nakamura (2015) highlights that gazing at phone reduces the

emotional connection between interacting parties. The same is attributed to the reduced eye contact and sensation among parties (Shellenbarger, 2013). People who face phubbing tend to consider phubber as rude and socially low considerate (Abeele et al., 2016). Cameron and Webster (2011) also highlighted that the people who are phubbed consider phubbing as disrespectful act and something that reduces emotional bond.

The same can be assumed using social exchange theory (SET, Blaur, 1964) which proposes that an exchange bond exists between parties that interact with each other. SET proposes that when one party offers something favorable to another party the recipient becomes indebted to those favors. Contrarily to that, when one party offers somethings negative the recipient intends to reciprocate it negatively (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). In such cases, when the supervisor indulges in phubbing behavior the employees tend to translate it as a negative workplace act and try to reciprocate it negatively. In such cases, employees would have less faith in their supervisor due to feelings of negligence (Cameron & Webster, 2011). The basic premise of the study is that high level of exchange fosters mutually beneficial relationships based on trust (Blau, 1964).

Using the given empirical findings and theoretical lens, it is expected that when a supervisor is distracted by phone he/she is regarded as someone who does not care for social relations and the employees seem to be less likely to develop trust in such a supervisor. It has been reported that in order to create a connection and bond each interacting party should be present physically, psychologically and mentally in a communication channel (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014; Roberts & David, 2016). On the other hand, mental absence tends to create negative feelings in the mind of the employees which may reduce their level of trust in their supervisor. Thus, the following assertion is being made:

H₁: Supervisor phubbing is negatively related to employee trust in them.

Trust in supervisor & employee withdrawal behavior

Past literature has widely theorized and empirically tested the outcomes of negative supervisory behaviors (e.g. Nauman et al., 2021), as it may reduce employee morale and performance. This could be attributed to the fact that when leaders are not trusted by the followers they are considered the one who may be working only for their personal goals instead of being considerate towards employees. In presence of low level of trust in supervisor employees tend to feel reduced level of meaningfulness of work (Naseer et al., 2016), and they may withdraw their physical, emotional and cognitive energies devoted for the company (Grandey and Gabriel, 2015; Nauman et al., 2021). Even in some cases, due to lack of trust in supervisor, employees tend to indulge in negative workplace behaviors and avoid positive actions (Shoss et al., 2016), like withdrawal (both physical and psychological).

Withdrawal behaviors are employee disengagement acts from work and organizational goals, which may be physical or psychological in nature. Withdrawal may be displayed in many forms, where coming late, missing meetings, showing lower level of commitment, quitting job, and showing intentions to leave the job etc (Hanisch and Hulin, 1990). The current study focuses on the physical withdrawal behavior which covered aspects like taking breaks, taking along the office material, taking long breaks and falling sleep at work (Lehman & Simpson, 1992). These behaviors are attributed to both internal and external reasons, while the external factors like organizational environment and supervisor behavior are considered the most important. It may include factors like coworker behavior (Eder & Eisenberger, 2008), personality differences (Liao et al., 2008), abusive supervision (Chi & Liang, 2013). This study proposes that the supervisor behavior may have effects on increased withdrawal behaviors (Chi & Liang, 2013). We propose that when there is lack of trust in leader (due to his/her behavior towards followers), there are chances that the employees may reciprocate negatively towards the supervisor. The same seems logical when we consider the premise of SET (Blau, 1964), which proposes that employee reciprocate their supervisors for their negative or positive behaviors and when they have low trust in their supervisor they tend to withdraw from work activities. Based on the given discussion following relationship is assumed:

H₂: Trust in supervisor is negatively related to employees' physical withdrawal behavior

Mediating role of trust in supervisor

The aforementioned discussion highlights that SP influences the non-verbal cues and influence the interaction between parties (Vanden Abeele, 2019), and phubbing reduces such cues (Krishnan et al., 2014; Vignovic & Thompson, 2010). Those who are phubbed are considered disregarded and less courteous (Abeele et al., 2016), it reduces conversation quality, connection, proximity and relationship quality (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013). Phubbing reduces the emotional connection between interacting parties (Nakamura, 2015), due to reduced sensation among interacting parties (Shellenbarger et al., 2016). It has also been observed that phubbing creates feelings of disrespect and reduces emotional bonds (Cameron & Webster, 2011), which leads to reduction in trust in between supervisor and employees. The reduced level of stress influences the meaningfulness of work for employees (Naseer et al., 2016), and in such a situation employee tend to withdrawal from work (Grandey and Gabriel, 2015; Nauman et al., 2021). Even in some cases, due to lack of trust in supervisor, employees tend to indulge in negative workplace behaviors and avoid positive actions (Shoss et al., 2016), like withdrawal (both physical and psychological). Based on the

given discussion it is to believe that supervisor phubbing reduces trust in supervisor which further influences employee withdrawal behavior. therefore, the following mediation hypotheses is asserted:

H₃: The relationship between supervisor phubbing and employee physical withdrawal is mediated by employee trust in supervisor.

Research Methodology

The data for the current study is collected from nurses working in public and private sector hospitals of Lahore, Pakistan. All in all, 300 questionnaires were distributed to nursing staff working over there while only 235 useful responses were received back and used for analysis purpose. The convenience sampling was used to distribute the questionnaire. Most of the respondents were female (i.e. 87%), with nursing degree (78%), with average experience of 3.5 years.

The measures used for the study were accepted from the existing studies. The supervisor phubbing was operationalized using the scale of Robert and David (2016) which contains nine items in total with example items like “my supervisor uses cell phone when we are in meeting”. The measure was found reliable by previous studies (e.g. Roberts & David, 2020). The trust in supervisor was assessed using the four items scale of Nicholson et al., (2001), which covered items like “I trust my supervisor completely”. The scale of withdrawal was borrowed from the work of Vander et al., (2014), which covered items like “I often think of remaining absent from my work”. These scales were also found reliable (e.g. Nauman et al., 2021).

Findings of the study

Data for the current study was assessed for preparation and suitability for hypotheses testing. It included tests like reliability tests, descriptive statistics, and correlation analysis. The results of descriptive statistics, reliability and correlation are collectively presented in table 1. It is evident that all the scales were reliable because the computed values for Cronbach alpha were above the threshold of 0.70 (see diagonal lines in table 1). The descriptive statistics show the mean scores and standard deviation. The higher and closer the mean score to the score of five the more the value of mean is assumed (because the measures were operationalized at five points scales). The correlation table highlights that supervisor phubbing is negatively related with the trust in supervisor ($r=-0.19$, $p<.05$), while positively related with the withdrawal behavior ($r=0.21$, $p<0.001$). Similarly, trust in supervisor is negatively related with the withdrawal behaviors ($r=-0.23$, $p<0.05$). These results helped us move further with hypotheses testing.

Table 1
Reliability, Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

	SP	TS	WB	Mean (SD)
Supervisor phubbing	(0.81)			3.95 (0.432)
Trust in supervisor	-0.19*	(0.86)		3.76 (0.487)
Withdrawal behavior	0.21**	-0.23*	(0.77)	4.01 (0.512)

*p<0.05, **p<0.001

Table 2 contains the results of hypotheses testing, where it is evident that supervisor phubbing positively influences the withdrawal behavior of employees ($\beta = .16, p<.05$), and negatively influences the trust in supervisor ($\beta = -.18, p<.001$). Therefore, both H1 and H2 are supported. The mediation analysis also reveals that the indirect relationship vis trust in supervisor is significant but negative, which means that reduction in level of trust increases the impact of supervisor phubbing on withdrawal behavior ($\beta = -.46, p<.05$). Therefore, H3 is also supported.

Table 2
Results of Hypotheses Testing

Relationships	B	SE	t-value	Bootstraps @ 95%		P
				LLCI	ULCI	
SP → WB	0.16	0.045	7.54	0.328	0.541	0.031
SP → TS	-0.18	0.075	4.03	0.510	0.624	0.001
TS → WB	-0.31	0.055	3.98	0.364	0.651	0.002
Indirect effects						
SP → TS → WB	-0.46	0.038	3.21	0.401	0.614	0.010

Discussion

The current study aimed at findings the impact of supervisor excessive cell phone use during communication and interaction with other at workplace on the employee's withdrawal behavior through the mechanism of trust in supervisor. The same was hypothesized using the social exchange theory, which proposes that social interaction among parties create exchange between them which improves and strengthens when the parties exchange favor. On the other hand, when one party offers something negative the recipient tries to reciprocate in the same direction. Using both theoretical lens and past literature three hypotheses were formulated and all were supported by the empirical results carried out on nursing staff in Pakistan. The findings revealed that when the leader is involved in phubbing at work (use of mobile phone during communication), the employees tend to translate it a negative act, they feel ignored, ostracized and social isolated by the supervisor. These workplace facets influence their involvement in the work and they tend to withdraw by remaining absent from work, taking leaves, remaining absent, and missing major job tasks. The results are in-line with the theoretical premise of SET and empirical studies (e.g. McDaniel & Coyne, 2014; Roberts & David, 2016).

Similarly, the study also proposed and empirically evaluated the mediating role of trust in supervisor in the relationship of supervisor phubbing and employee withdrawal behavior. The results highlight that the mediation mechanism is proved and a partial mediation mechanism is supported (H3 supported). These results highlight that when the supervisor indulges in phubbing it reduces the level of trust in supervisor because employees feel socially isolated, ostracized and ignored by their leader. They may translate it a wellfoul act and therefore consider a weakening bond with the leader. In this case they feel reduced level of trust in the leader and tend to reciprocate such a perceived level of relationship. In response, they may make a choice of reducing their work efforts, and remain away from work (withdrawal behavior). The same has been theoretically assumed and empirically supported. These results are therefore inline with the previous studies supporting presence of such or related relationships (e.g. Chi & Liang, 2013; McDaniel & Coyne, 2014; Naseer et al., 2016; Roberts & David, 2016; Shoss et al., 2016).

Implications of the study

The findings have some meaningful implications for the theory and practical purposes. From theoretical perspective, it offers investigation of relationship of supervisor phubbing and its possible outcomes in form of employees' behaviors. Past studies have investigated phubbing for its outcomes, but the withdrawal behavior has gained least attention. In addition to that this study also offers an explanatory mechanism between phubbing and withdrawal behavior relationship via the trust in supervisor. Past studies have highlight trust as an outcome of the supervisor phubbing (e.g. Roberts & David, 2020), but its explanatory role between supervisor phubbing and employee withdrawal behavior has not been proposed or empirically tested. This study is based on the social exchange perspective, which helps in assuming the said relationships and it also helps in identifying the ways through which trust can be considered as a mediator between supervisor phubbing and employee withdrawal behavior.

From managerial and practical perspectives, the current study highlights some meaningful messages. The foremost is the focus on the supervisor work attitudes and behaviors. The supervisor phubbing, a common phenomenon, has very damaging outcomes for organization. therefore, supervisors should be trained for their choices of acts. The management should develop a workplace culture, environment and policies that discourage phubbing like behaviors because employees feel isolated, ostracized and socially excluded because of such supervisor behaviors. This study highlights that due to such feeling employees withdraw from their roles, but there could be more deterring outcomes than this one. The study highlights that phubbing behavior of supervisors reduces employees' level of trust in their supervisor which is the basic

bonding force with the employees. The reduced level of trust is expected to bring more damaging outcomes for the organizations, because supervisors are the bridge between employees and organization and the reduced level of trust may influence this relationship and employees may even feel reduce connection and association with the organization and may lead to higher level of intentions to leave the company.

Limitations and future directions

Even though the research is outcome of carefully executed acts, it is prone to some limitations where the foremost is the adoption of study design which is cross sectional in nature. This design has some limitations associated with it e.g. its inability to test causality. So, it is recommended that future researchers should go with time series or longitudinal studies to see the impact of phubbing on employees. Experimental studies could also be one of the best approaches to see the impact of phubbing on employee attitudes and behaviors. This study is an outcome of small sample size from hospitals. The future researchers should increase the sample size and multi sample studies should be carried out to see the impact of phubbing and various employee outcomes. In this study, SET has been used as underpinning theoretical lens but other theories can also be used to predict this relationship, for instance, conservation of resources theory which talks about the resources and their conservation processes. Similarly, self-determination theory which talks about intrinsic motivation of individuals can also be an explanatory mechanism. Here trust is considered as an explanatory mechanism which can be replaced with some other attitudinal and behavioral factors (e.g. psychological capital, organizational identification). The outcomes may also be replaced with the withdrawal behavior (e.g. megaphoning, scouting, and citizenship behavior). There could be boundary conditions that can reduce the influence of phubbing on employee attitudes and behavior (e.g. reward system, justice at work, social support), as some other factors may reduce the negative supervisory influence.

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