



Online Connection Versus Relational Disconnection: An Exploration of the Impact of Internet Addiction on Couple Burnout in Pakistan

Samman Shafi¹, Ruqia Safdar Bajwa^{2*}

Abstract

With the rapid proliferation of digital technologies, the concept of Internet addiction has emerged as significant attention, particularly in how it affects interpersonal relationships. Excessive internet usage can result in phubbing behavior and couple burnout. To investigate the connection between internet addiction, partner phubbing, and couple burnout, a correlational research design was utilized. An overall sum of 437 respondents from 18 to 40 years of age were selected for the study using a non-probability purposive sampling method from a culturally distinct region of Pakistan. Data was collected using self-administered measurement tools to measure the specified variables, including the Internet Addiction Test, Partner Phubbing Scale, and Couple Burnout Measure. The findings indicate A substantial association between internet addiction, partner phubbing, and couple burnout. Respondents with elevated internet addiction also exhibited elevated partner phubbing and couple burnout. Partner Phubbing acts as a partial mediator between Internet addiction and couple burnout. By exploring interconnections between these variables, the study aims to offer an exhaustive understanding of couples' difficulties in the digitalization age. The findings aim to inform interventions to help mitigate the undesirable outcomes of Internet addiction and phubbing on marital relationships, particularly in regions where traditional values and digital influences intersect.

Keywords: Internet Addiction, Partner Phubbing, Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Reduced Personal Accomplishment

1. Introduction

The pervasive influence of the internet and digital technologies has fundamentally altered human interactions, particularly within intimate relationships. Internet addiction is Distinguished by excessive and compulsive internet usage that disrupts daily life and has become a growing concern worldwide (Young, 1998). This is especially problematic in marriages, where overuse can result in ignoring a partner. One consequence of the issue of "phubbing," a blend or combination of "phone" and "snubbing" words, is an apparent rejection by one spouse for his/her iPhone over their partner (Roberts & David, 2016). Indeed, the adverse effects have shown that phubbing is associated with relationship dissatisfaction and conflict due to reducing the quality of face-to-face interactions between partners (Chotpitayasonondh & Douglas, 2018).

For individuals addicted to the internet, the compulsion to stay online overwhelms their lives, resulting in a perceived loss of control over their online activities (Rachubinska, 2021). It negatively impacts individuals and their loved ones, especially their close companionships (Prasanna Chebbi, 2000; Hawi & Samaha, 2017). Internet addiction can put a Burden on Spousal Connections, decreasing One-on-one meetings between partners and lessening the significance of Marital partners in their everyday existence (Irani & Rezaei, 2018). Contemporary research has examined how excessive Internet use creates spousal problems and household relationships. (Hertlein & Twist, 2019; Zhanga, 2017; Kabasakal, 2015; Muller 2013). Investigators (Hertlein & Twist, 2019) found that higher internet use can change matrimonial connections and create challenges in Relational dynamics and spousal contentment. Research Carried out in Britain found that using Facebook was a factor in about 33% of divorce cases, Facilitating Partnership dissatisfaction Via Resentment and monitoring Practices (Elphinston, 2011). Conjugal discontent has rapidly and significantly changed due to Encouraging and discouraging communication behaviors within the marriage (Rehman, 2007). In Pakistan, conjugal discontent is affected by various Determinants, such as Financial conditions, cultural norms, Academic inequalities, and others (Fahad & Khan, 2020). Previous studies have identified social media platforms as a significant factor in escalating conjugal dissatisfaction and the Dissolution of marriage (Hashemi, 2017; Irani & Rezaei).

Phubbing has become increasingly common in various social contexts, including interactions with friends, family, and colleagues (Roberts & David, 2016). To be phubbed means to be overlooked or marginalized by someone preoccupied with their smartphone, leading to a breakdown in meaningful communication (Chotpitayasonondh & Douglas, 2016). Phubbing disrupts social interactions by prioritizing digital engagement over one-on-one connection, creating societal exclusion and dissatisfaction Among individual connections (Vanden Abeele et al., 2019). In romantic relationships, partner phubbing (P-phubbing) refers explicitly to paying more attention to a cell phone or other mobile gadget than to one's partner during the shared time (Roberts & David, 2016). This behavior Is related to decreased companionship satisfaction and increased feelings of jealousy and conflict (Wang et al., 2017). With the pervasive integration of mobile technology into daily life, both general and partner phubbing have become widespread and nearly unavoidable challenges in maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Many investigators have emphasized the negative impact of P-phubbing on the quality and depth of discussions and the couples' general satisfaction with their dynamic. (Abeele et al., 2016, 2019, 2020). When a person is on a smartphone or any other mobile gadget during face-to-face conversations, he might be physically there but mentally

¹ Department of Applied Psychology, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan

^{2*} Department of Applied Psychology, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan, ruqiasafdar@bzu.edu.pk

disengaged, a phenomenon often referred to as "absent present" (Gergen, 2002). This divided attention can lead to a reduction in the effectiveness of communication, reducing overall satisfaction within the companionship (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014). Even though several investigations have analyzed the broader concept of phubbing (Vanden Abeele, 2020), a specific research gap persists in examining smartphone disregard for personal connections. This void in the research emphasizes the need to advance the study of the impacts of phubbing on intimate connections, particularly in the context of romantic companionships. Nonetheless, Current survey-based studies consistently show that P-Phubbing is associated with reduced satisfaction with relations (Abeele, 2020; David & Roberts, 2021; Hales et al., 2018; Roberts, 2016; Krasnova et al., 2016; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; McDaniel & Drouin, 2019; McDaniel et al., 2021). Despite some research reporting divergences, Including a minor positive correlation between P-Phubbing and relationship contentment or gender-related influences (Cizmeci, 2017; Servies, 2012).

Burnout is marked by physical, emotional, and mental fatigue (Pines, 1996), Detachment, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Pines & Nunes, 2003; Maslach, 1993, 2003). It frequently impacts individuals who are highly ambitious and devoted (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980). Burnout signifies a tipping point where individuals, in various ways, indicate they can no longer tolerate their present circumstances. Although studies on burnout have remained substantial since the mid-1970s, most studies have concentrated on occupational burnout in the social services sector (Pines, 1996). Burnout outside occupational settings has been minimally explored, particularly in marital relationships. Similar to career burnout, couple burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion affecting individuals who had anticipated that their romantic relationship would give meaning to their lives or experiences. According to Pines (1996), couple burnout, a state of Affective weariness, detachment, and diminished sense of achievement within a romantic relationship, has emerged as a critical outcome of digital disruptions. He further states that it happens when individuals become aware that Even with their efforts, their relationships cannot provide the expected sense of purpose and contentment. In extreme instances, couple burnout indicates a tipping point in the partnership.

Relationships Concerning addiction to the Internet and phubbing with couple burnout is an understudied domain that has significant potential within the South Asian region, particularly in the context of South Punjab, Pakistan, where cultural values emphasize strong family ties and marital harmony, the intrusion of digital behaviors like internet addiction and phubbing into relationships presents a unique challenge. Many studies have documented that internet addiction can result in social withdrawal and neglect of interpersonal relationships, causing hurt and emotional exhaustion and leading to relationship dissatisfaction (Kuss et al., 2014). One action contributing to the impact is "phubbing," — which stands for partner phone snubbing (Roberts & David, 2016).

The present research intends to ameliorate this literature deficiency and examine the interplay of Internet addiction, partner phubbing behaviors, and couple burnout in different cultural contexts in developing country Pakistan. This study aims to understand how digital behaviors overlap with marital expectations and whether they affect emotional well-being in couples, a population seldom studied in this culturally specific region. These results will have both research and therapeutic implications for those attempting to help couples navigate the problems associated with digital technology in intimate relationships, particularly among regions where cultural values highly influence marital dynamics.

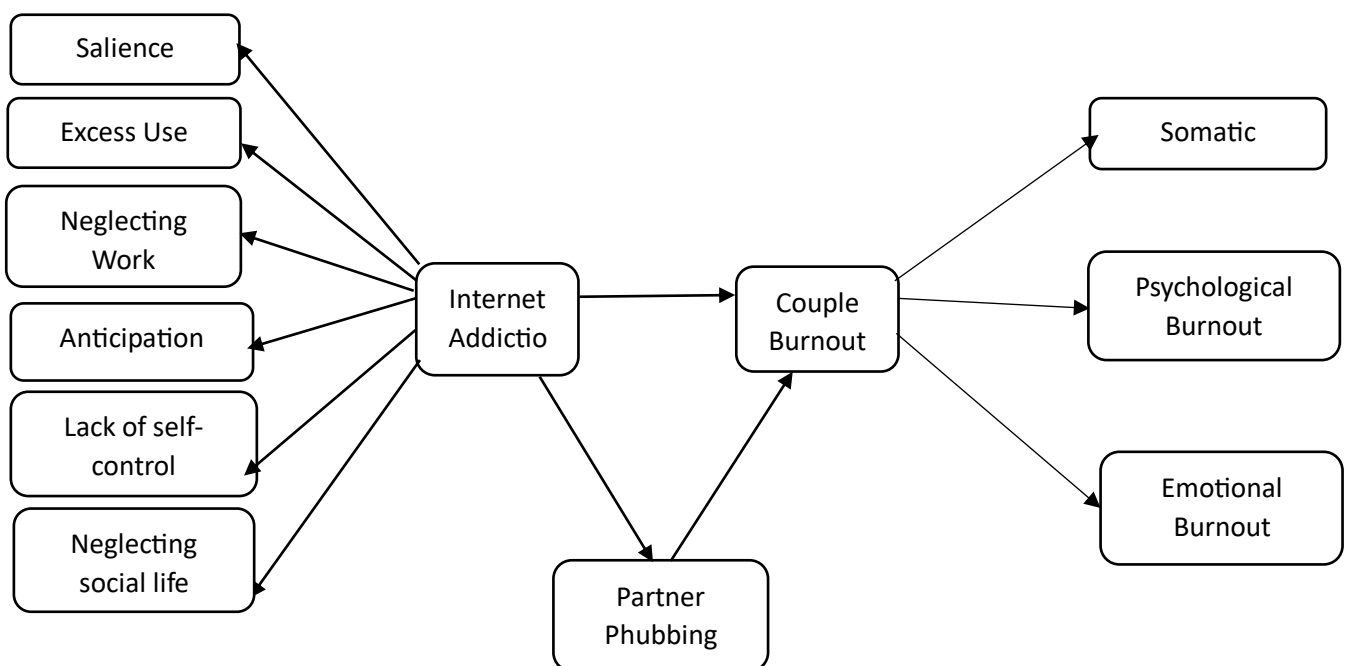


Figure 1: Conceptual model Showing the relationship concerning Internet addiction, partner phubbing, and Couple Burnout.

2. Method

This research investigated internet addiction, partner phubbing, and couple burnout through the application of a quantitative methodology. Data collection involved surveys, and standardized questionnaires were employed to measure each variable. The participants in this study were individuals who had been married for a minimum of a year and had agreed to participate. They were over 18 years of age and residing in South Punjab, Pakistan. 'ten times rule' was used to determine the number of chosen group and respondents, requiring the sample size to be at least ten times greater than the number of items used in the scale. (Hair 2011). Questionnaires were distributed among 530 people, but acceptable or legitimate responses were 437, meeting the criteria for inclusion in the research and furnishing dependable information suitable for analysis. Hence, the sample for the study (n=437) was deemed sufficient to evaluate the proposed model. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to collect the data. After grasping the research objectives and providing voluntary consent, survey takers Submitted the survey anonymously. The survey was conducted over three months. The researcher followed all ethical standards and consent procedures to protect participants' rights and welfare.

2.1. Instruments

The Internet Addiction Test (IAT): The Internet Addiction Test, consisting of 20 items, was utilized For analysis of addiction to the Internet (Young, 1998) Utilizing a Likert- format of five points (1=Rarely, 5=Always), with points spanning from 20 to 100. A score between 20 and 49 indicates no evidence of Internet Addiction (IA), a score between 50 and 79 signifies a mild degree of Internet Addiction, and a score ranging from 80 to 100 indicates a severe degree of Internet Addiction. The IAT can be administered to individuals who use the internet, commencing from adolescence and beyond, to evaluate the presence of Internet Addiction. The IAT is considered a straightforward Evaluative Measurement that can be smoothly executed, including through online distribution and is relatively easy to understand, assuming the Subject Has foundational literacy skills. In the current research, Cronbach's alpha exhibited exceptional reliability. (0.924).

Partner Phubbing Scale(PPS): To assess partner-phubbing perceptions, a 9-item Partner Phubbing Scale(PPS) was used (Roberts & David, 2016). Respondents rated all the items on a five-point scale, with response options ranging from "Never = 1" to "Always = 5." Points for each of the nine measures were determined by computing the mean, and high points indicated more pronounced levels of perceived P-phubbing. In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient produced an alpha score of .855.

Couple Burnout Measure: Pines (1996) developed the Couple Burnout measure. It measures the extent of burnout encountered by people in intimate partnerships, covering individuals in different relationship stages, such as dating, being engaged, married, or in a civil union. The CBM comprises 21 phrases that assess how frequently respondents experience symptoms or signs related to burnout in their marital connections. These manifestations are organized into three segments: physical burnout [PB] (e.g., "being physically exhausted," "feeling weak"), emotional burnout [EB] (e.g., "feeling burned out," "feeling worthless"), and mental burnout [MB] (e.g., "feeling rejected," "feeling trapped"). Participants rate the items using a Likert format from 1 to 5, where one indicates they have rarely experienced the situation and five indicates they have frequently experienced it. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient exhibited high reliability in this study (0.909).

3. Results

The software SPSS 26.0 was employed for descriptive data reporting, and the Process Macro (Hayes, 2017) in the 26 version of SPSS carried out the mediation analysis.

Table 1: Summary Statistics Outlining the Demographic Features of the Sample (n=437)

	Mean	SD	N	Percent
Gender	.55	.498	437	100
Male			195	44.6
Female			242	55.4
Age groups	.89	.893	437	100
18 to 30 Years			344	78.7
31 to 40 Years			93	21.3
Educational attainment	2.24	.817	437	100
Undergraduate and below			82	18.7
Graduate			158	36.2
More than graduation			197	45.1
Length of relationship/marriage	1.52	1.224	437	100
Less than year			132	30.2
1to2 Years			87	19.9
3to4 Years			78	17.8
Five years or greater			140	32.0

Table 1 displays Summary statistics outlining the Demographic features of the sample. The average length of relationship/marriage is 1.52 years, with a standard deviation of 1.224 years. Results regarding the Characteristics of the studied population indicate that the average age difference with partner/spouse is 0.46, with a standard deviation of 0.692.

Table 2: The Correlation between Internet Addiction, Partner Phubbing, and Couple Burnout

	1	2	3
1. IA	1		
2. PP	.315**	1	
3. CB	.373**	.498**	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$; IA=Internet Addiction; PP=Partner Phubbing; CB= Couple Burnout

Table 2 explains the correlation coefficient among this study's psychological assessments. The coefficient of correlation between Internet Addiction (IA) and Partner Phubbing (PP) is .315**, indicating that there exists a positive correlation. The coefficient of correlation between Internet Addiction and Couple Burnout is .373**, which signifies a positive correlation. The correlation coefficient between Partner Phubbing and Couple Burnout is .498**, denoting a positive correlation.

Table 3: Regression Analysis Illustrating the Effect of Internet Addiction and Partner Phubbing on Couple Burnout

Model		B	Standard Error	Beta	t	p
1	(Constant)	14.399	2.029		7.097	.00
	Internet Addiction	.207	.054	.239	3.812	.00
	Partner Phubbing	.793	.118	.423	6.735	.00

Note: $R^2 = .30$, Adjusted $R^2 = .293$, $F(42.215)$, $p < 0.05$

The regression analysis findings are detailed in Table 3, showing the impact of IA and PP on CB. The significance value indicates that IA and PP substantially impact CB. The regression model demonstrates that both Internet Addiction and Partner Phubbing are statistically significant predictors of couple burnout. The positive coefficients for both predictors imply that greater levels of Internet Addiction and Partner Phubbing are related to higher levels of Couple Burnout. The Beta values offer standardized indicators of the strength and direction of these relationships. The low p-values (.00) for all coefficients indicate that these effects are statistically meaningful.

Table 4: Partner Phubbing as Mediator between Internet Addiction and Couple Burnout (n=437)

Models	R ²	F	B	95%CI		p
				LL	UL	
Model without mediator						
Total effect_ IAS-CB			.32	.21	.43	.000***
	.13	31.92				
Model with mediator						
IAS-PP(Med) (a)			.14	.08	.20	.000***
	.09	21.78				
PP-CB (b)			.79	.56	1.02	.000***
	.30	42.21				
Direct effect_ IAS-CB			.21	.099	.314	.0002**
Indirect effect_ IAS-PP-CB			.1151	.04	.0576	.1814

Note: IAS = Internet Addiction Scale; PP = Partner Phubbing Scale; CB = Couple Burnout Measurement; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Table 4 outlines that Internet Addiction can predict Couple Burnout within couples, and this connection is partially influenced by partner phubbing. The total effect of Internet Addiction on Couple Burnout (IAS-CB) is significant (p-value: 0.00), explaining 32% of the variance in Couple Burnout. Including the mediator (Partner Phubbing) improves the model fit (R^2 increases from 0.32 to 0.79). The indirect effect through Partner Phubbing (IAS-PP-CB) is 0.1151, representing the estimated change in Couple Burnout associated with a one-unit change in Internet Addiction mediated by Partner Phubbing, the indirect effect through Partner Phubbing (IAS-PP-CB) is also significant with a p-value: 0.00.

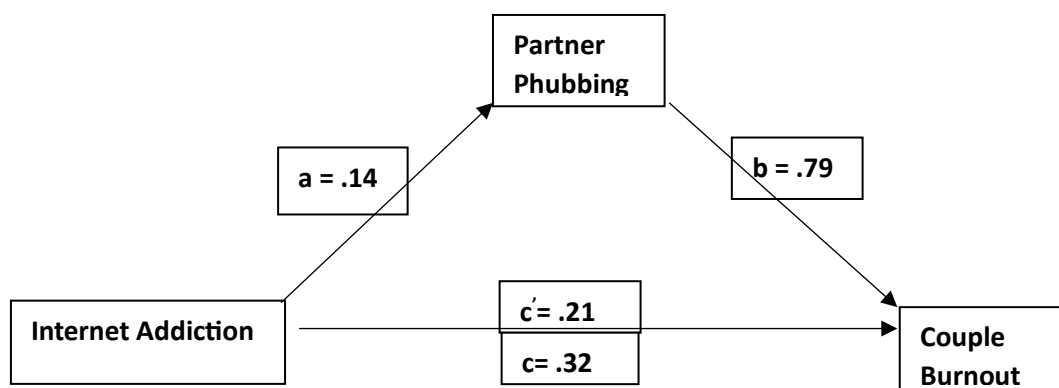
**Figure 2: Mediating Role of Partner Phubbing in the relationship between internet addiction and couple burnout**

Figure 2 shows that the magnitude of c' is less than c (0.32), providing evidence for mediation. This visual representation highlights that Partner Phubbing effectively functions as a mediator in the relationship between Internet Addiction and Couple Burnout.

4. Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate a particular connection between Internet Addiction, Phubbing Behavior, and couple burnout while considering various sociodemographic factors such as participant gender, age, educational level, and duration of the relationship or marriage. Instead of focusing exclusively on addiction to the internet, this study addressed wider themes. It explored how addiction to the internet and mobile phone use in the presence of a partner contribute to couple burnout. The first focus of the study was to determine a remarkable positive connection between IA, PP, and CB. Findings suggested a considerable correlation between IA, Partner Phubbing, and Couple Burnout is observed. These findings are aligned with past research findings (Reyhaneh et al., 2023). The following hypothesis was about the impact of IA and PP on CB. The regression analysis provides significant insights into the impact of internet addiction and partner phubbing on couple burnout. Internet addiction is shown to be a significant predictor of couple burnout, with a beta coefficient (β) of .239 ($p < .001$). This finding aligns with existing literature that links excessive internet use to relationship strain. For instance, a study (Young, 1998) identified that internet addiction can lead to neglect of relationship duties and reduced face-to-face interaction, contributing to emotional exhaustion and dissatisfaction in relationships. The positive association observed in this study suggests that as internet addiction intensifies, so does the likelihood of experiencing burnout in the relationship. Partner phubbing has an even more significant impact on couple burnout, with a beta coefficient (β) of .423 ($p < .001$). This finding is consistent with research by Roberts and David (2016), which found that partner phubbing significantly lowers relationship satisfaction by diverting attention away from meaningful interactions, thereby increasing stress and emotional exhaustion. The more substantial effect of phubbing compared to internet addiction suggests that the act of ignoring a partner in favor of digital devices is particularly damaging to relational health. A study by Wang and colleagues (2018) further supported this by demonstrating how phubbing undermines communication quality, a critical factor in maintaining a healthy relationship. Phubbing, which directly undermines relationship quality, is playing a more substantial role in exacerbating burnout.

The following Hypothesis Aimed to identify the mediating effect of Partner Phubbing in the connection amidst internet addiction and couple burnout. Results Demonstrated that Internet Addiction can anticipate Couple Burnout in Partners, with partner phubbing partially mediating this link. Partner phubbing creates a sense of neglect, ultimately increasing stress and dissatisfaction and significantly lowering relationship satisfaction, which leads to emotional exhaustion and contributes to burnout within the relationship (Roberts & David, 2016). Internet addiction often leads to excessive use of digital devices, which can manifest as phubbing. This behavior can strain relationships and exacerbate couple burnout (Young, 1998).

5. Conclusion

This study highlights that excessive internet use and phubbing can lead to burnout within romantic relationships. The findings provide important insights into the potential risks associated with the overuse of digital media and smartphones in relationships. These results contribute to the growing body of evidence on the complex dynamics of technology use and its effect on human interactions. Identifying potential technology use emphasizes the importance of addressing internet addiction and phubbing as potential contributors to couple burnout. Research professionals, Policy developers, and field professionals must acknowledge the significance of these connections, especially in locales such as South Punjab, where cultural factors may shape the prevalence and impact of these behaviors. As we continue to explore the intricate effects of Technology-based interaction on couples, there is an increasing need for targeted interventions and public awareness initiatives that can reduce the negative impacts of internet addiction and phubbing while enhancing more positive and cooperative relationships within this unique cultural setting. Couple therapists should be more aware of the risks associated with excessive internet use in marital relationships and encourage couples to optimize their internet usage to prevent adverse outcomes, particularly emotional burnout.

5.1. Limitations and Further Studies Recommendations

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact that the internet and mobile devices have on romantic and intimate relationships, future research needs to focus on examining other potential adverse effects. The study highlighted the intricate relationship between internet addiction, phubbing behavior, and couple burnout. Given the widespread occurrence and to determine a cause-and-effect relationship between digital addiction and its potential adverse effects, it is recommended to undertake an experimental study. Due to the limited time frame, the researcher focused solely on the increased use of the internet and smartphones impacting romantic relationships and contributing to couple burnout. Further research is needed to explore additional factors and uncover the underlying causes of couple burnout. Future researchers must consider collecting data from both partners to uncover more interesting facts. The study restricts the generalization of the findings to all couples in Pakistan. All data were self-reported, which is prone to measurement biases. The research suggested that Internet addiction is leading to couple-burnout. Conversely, couple burnout may lead to increased internet addiction amidst romantic companions. A deeper long-term study with more participant numbers is necessary to clarify the determinative relationships and design a more comprehensive model of how IA and couple burnout interact, particularly within Pakistan.

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