

Review

Problematic smartphone use and partner phubbing in romantic relationships: A critical narrative review and recursive systemic model

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Abstract

Smartphone use is embedded in contemporary couple relationships and is not inherently disruptive. Relational difficulties may emerge, however, when smartphone use becomes difficult to regulate or repeatedly displaces attention during interactions in which a partner expects availability. This critical narrative review examines the relationship between problematic smartphone use (PSU) and partner phubbing and proposes a recursive systemic model. Literature identified through searches of PubMed/MEDLINE, Academic Search Ultimate through EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar, supplemented by citation tracing, was critically synthesized across cross-sectional, experimental, daily-diary, dyadic, longitudinal, qualitative, and intervention studies. The evidence indicates that PSU may increase vulnerability to phone-directed attentional disengagement, but does not by itself determine relational harm. Consequences depend on the context and function of use, couple norms, perceived responsiveness, attachment-related appraisals, and subsequent partner responses. Perceived partner phubbing is more consistently associated with relationship outcomes than self-reported enacted behavior, while shared or integrated phone use may reduce adverse effects. Partner phubbing is linked most consistently with lower relationship satisfaction and with disruptions in communication, intimacy, affection, and responsiveness; it may also contribute to jealousy, surveillance, conflict, withdrawal, and retaliatory phone use. Nevertheless, causal and longitudinal evidence remains limited, and findings support components of a reciprocal process more strongly than a complete causal pathway. A recursive systemic model is proposed in which individual vulnerabilities, interactional meanings, and couple responses mutually influence phone use and relational distress. Research and clinical practice should therefore move beyond screen time toward the regulation, meaning, and organization of smartphone use within the couple relationship.

Keywords: Problematic smartphone use; Partner phubbing; Technoference; Romantic relationships; Relationship satisfaction; Systemic perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Smartphones are embedded in contemporary couple life: they sustain contact, coordinate responsibilities, and can become shared resources for enjoyment and connection (Duran et al., 2011; Kelly & Miller-Ott, 2022; Pickens & Whiting, 2020). Their presence is therefore not inherently disruptive. Relational difficulty is more likely when use is difficult to regulate, repeatedly interrupts shared activity, or displaces attention during moments in which a partner expects availability (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2015). This distinction is important because the literature often moves too quickly from frequent smartphone use to addiction, and from co-present use to relational harm.

The broader term problematic smartphone use (PSU) is used here for patterns marked by impaired regulation, persistence despite negative consequences, or interference with functioning. This language avoids treating all heavy use as a unitary disorder while retaining dependence-related features such as salience, conflict, withdrawal, and loss of control (Griffiths, 2005). Within romantic relationships, salience and impaired control may become visible when phone-related activity repeatedly captures attention despite competing relational demands, whereas conflict and persistence despite negative consequences may be reflected in continued use after a partner has communicated distress. These dependence-related features may increase the likelihood of partner phubbing, but partner phubbing itself should not be treated as evidence of addiction. PSU may arise through different pathways, including impulsivity, reassurance seeking, avoidance, fear of missing out (FoMO), boredom, and emotion regulation (Billieux et al., 2015; Elhai et al., 2019; Holte, 2025; Stirnberg et al., 2024). The smartphone may also provide access to problematic social media use, gaming, or messaging rather than constitute a single object of addiction (Billieux et al., 2015). Partner phubbing, by contrast, concerns how phone-directed attention enters a specific romantic interaction. It is related to

PSU but neither equivalent to it nor an inevitable consequence of it.

Phubbing refers to attending to a phone rather than a physically present person (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016; Karadağ et al., 2015). Partner phubbing usually denotes smartphone-related inattention toward a romantic partner and is commonly measured from the recipient's perspective (Roberts & David, 2016). Across studies, perceived partner phubbing is associated with lower satisfaction and relationship quality, reduced intimacy and responsiveness, and greater conflict, jealousy, emotional loneliness, surveillance, and communication difficulty (Arshad & Imran, 2022; Beukeboom & Pollmann, 2021; Denes et al., 2025; Ni et al., 2025; Schokkenbroek et al., 2022; Wang & Zhao, 2023). Findings from Türkiye broadly converge, linking partner phubbing with satisfaction, communication, commitment, mindfulness, and self-disclosure (Aslanturk & Arslan, 2025; Kılıçarslan & Parmaksız, 2023; Öncü & Kuşcu, 2024; Tiryaki Göksu et al., 2025; Türk Kurtça, 2026).

The majority of the literature is cross-sectional, individual, and perception-based. Partners may disagree about whether an interruption occurred, whether it was justified, and what it communicated. Perceived phubbing and negative evaluations of phone use appear more consistently associated with daily relationship quality than the partner's self-reported enacted behavior, while shared or integrated use can weaken adverse associations (Beukeboom & Pollmann, 2021; Carnelley et al., 2023; Frackowiak et al., 2022; Kelly & Miller-Ott, 2022). Daily and dyadic studies further suggest anger, retaliation, actor-partner differences, demand-withdraw patterns, and reciprocal phone use rather than a one-directional effect (Bröning & Wartberg, 2022; Carnelley et al., 2026; Mosley et al., 2025; Thomas et al., 2022; Togar et al., 2023). Longitudinal findings are similarly qualified: reciprocal links have been reported among phubbing, need fulfilment, and satisfaction, but complete indirect pathways through responsiveness have not consistently persisted over time (Booth et al., 2021; Li et al., 2026).

Existing reviews provide important foundations for this synthesis. Ni et al. (2025) pooled findings from 52 studies to examine associations between partner phubbing and individual antecedents, relational outcomes, and potential moderators. Putri and Hasanati (2026) organized recent empirical findings into psychological and relational antecedents and consequences. Both reviews discuss relational mechanisms, and their coverage includes studies of perception and reciprocal responses. The present review therefore does not claim that these topics were previously absent. Its contribution is to examine how differences in informant, measurement, and research design affect the interpretation of those mechanisms, and to integrate shared phone use and feedback processes into a model whose evidential limits are explicit. In particular, associations based on a recipient's report are distinguished from enacted behavior, concurrent mediation from temporal processes, and proposed feedback from directly tested relationships. Drawing on systemic accounts of interdependence and circular influence (Hertlein & Twist, 2019; Watzlawick et al., 1967), this review aims to clarify the relationship between PSU and partner phubbing, critically evaluate evidence for the processes connecting phone use with relationship functioning, and develop a recursive systemic model to guide further research.

METHODS

A critical narrative design was selected because the evidence spans cross-sectional surveys, qualitative studies, experiments, daily diaries, dyadic analyses, longitudinal research, and limited intervention evidence. The aim was to compare assumptions, methods, convergent findings, and contradictions rather than estimate a single pooled effect (Ferrari, 2015; Grant & Booth, 2009; Green et al., 2006). The review was developed with reference to SANRA to support a clear rationale, transparent search, appropriate referencing, critical appraisal of the evidence, and conclusions proportionate to the data (Baethge et al., 2019). SANRA was used as a narrative-review quality framework, not as a

systematic-review reporting guideline or study-level risk-of-bias tool. Ethics committee approval and informed consent were not required because this article is a critical narrative review of previously published literature.

PubMed/MEDLINE, Academic Search Ultimate through EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar were searched between June and July 2026, with the original final searches conducted on 21 July 2026. During revision, verification searches were conducted in PubMed/MEDLINE and Academic Search Ultimate through EBSCOhost on 3 September 2026, and Google Scholar on 4 September 2026. These searches were used to cross-check the existing references and identify potentially relevant omissions; they were not an exact rerun of the original searches. Publication eligibility retained a cutoff of 21 July 2026, based on the first peer-reviewed publication date, including online-first publication. No lower publication-year limit or publication-date filter was applied at retrieval; later issue dates were distinguished from first publication dates during eligibility checks. Searches were conducted in English and Turkish.

The core PubMed query combined title/abstract terms with MeSH terms for spouses and marriage and was submitted as follows: ((phubb*[Title/Abstract] OR pphubb*[Title/Abstract] OR "phone snubbing"[Title/Abstract] OR technoferen*[Title/Abstract]) OR "technology interference"[Title/Abstract] OR "technological interference"[Title/Abstract] OR "phone interference"[Title/Abstract] OR "smartphone interference"[Title/Abstract] OR ((smartphone*[Title/Abstract] OR "mobile phone"[Title/Abstract] OR "mobile phones"[Title/Abstract] OR "cell phone"[Title/Abstract] OR "cell phones"[Title/Abstract])) AND (interrupt*[Title/Abstract] OR interferen*[Title/Abstract])) AND (romantic*[Title/Abstract] OR partner*[Title/Abstract] OR couple[Title/Abstract] OR couples[Title/Abstract] OR spous*[Title/Abstract] OR marital[Title/Abstract] OR marri*[Title/Abstract] OR cohabit*[Title/Abstract] OR

dating[Title/Abstract] OR “Spouses”[MeSH Terms] OR “Marriage”[MeSH Terms]). This query returned 67 records.

The first supplementary PubMed query examined the association between problematic smartphone use and phubbing: (“problematic smartphone use”[Title/Abstract] OR “problematic mobile phone use”[Title/Abstract] OR “smartphone addiction”[Title/Abstract] OR “mobile phone addiction”[Title/Abstract] OR “cell phone addiction”[Title/Abstract] OR “smartphone dependence”[Title/Abstract] OR “mobile phone dependence”[Title/Abstract]) AND (phubb*[Title/Abstract] OR pphubb*[Title/Abstract] OR “phone snubbing”[Title/Abstract] OR technoferen*[Title/Abstract]). This query returned 53 records.

A second supplementary PubMed query addressed potential psychological mechanisms: (“problematic smartphone use”[Title/Abstract] OR “problematic mobile phone use”[Title/Abstract] OR “smartphone addiction”[Title/Abstract] OR “mobile phone addiction”[Title/Abstract] OR “cell phone addiction”[Title/Abstract] OR “smartphone dependence”[Title/Abstract] OR “mobile phone dependence”[Title/Abstract]) AND (attachment[Title/Abstract] OR “fear of missing out”[Title/Abstract] OR FOMO[Title/Abstract] OR “emotion regulation”[Title/Abstract] OR “emotional regulation”[Title/Abstract] OR “self regulation”[Title/Abstract] OR “self-regulation”[Title/Abstract] OR “self control”[Title/Abstract] OR “self-control”[Title/Abstract] OR “compensatory internet use”[Title/Abstract]). This query returned 380 records. The supplementary searches were not restricted to romantic-couple samples and served to identify contextual evidence rather than exclusively partner-phubbing research.

Together, the three PubMed searches returned 500 record occurrences, yielding 484 unique PubMed records after resolving 16 repeated occurrences by PMID. No publication-date, age, human, article-type, or full-text filters were applied. PubMed’s

query translations and warnings were retained in the search log, including a phrase-not-found warning for “smartphone interference” in the core query.

The Academic Search Ultimate (EBSCOhost) query used title (TI) and abstract (AB) fields: (TI (phubb* OR pphubb* OR “phone snubbing” OR technoferen*) OR AB (phubb* OR pphubb* OR “phone snubbing” OR technoferen*)) OR ((TI (smartphone* OR “mobile phone” OR “cell phone” OR technolog*) OR AB (smartphone* OR “mobile phone” OR “cell phone” OR technolog*)) AND (TI (interferen* OR interrupt*) OR AB (interferen* OR interrupt*))) AND (TI (romantic* OR partner* OR couple OR couples OR spous* OR marital OR marri* OR cohabit* OR dating) OR AB (romantic* OR partner* OR couple OR couples OR spous* OR marital OR marri* OR cohabit* OR dating)). The search returned 337 records, all of which were exported as bibliographic metadata, with abstracts where available. Results were displayed by relevance with “All dates” selected and no active filters shown. The initial 709-result search attempt was not included in these retrieval counts.

Google Scholar was searched using four queries: “partner phubbing”, technoferece couples, “problematic smartphone use” phubbing, and “partner sosyotelizmi”. The first 100 relevance-ranked results were captured for the first query and the first 50 for each of the remaining queries, producing 250 captured result positions. Searches used the “Any time” setting, with patents excluded and citation-only records included. These counts represent the results actually captured, not Google Scholar’s estimated totals or a deduplicated publication count. The reduction of the initial Google Scholar search plan after collection of the first query’s results was recorded in the search log.

Because source selection was iterative and purposive rather than based on a fixed systematic screening workflow, definitive numbers of records screened and studies retained were not generated and could not be reconstructed reliably. The source-specific

figures reported above therefore represent records retrieved or result positions captured, rather than a PRISMA-style screening denominator or final inclusion count.

Peer-reviewed studies of adults in romantic relationships were included when they directly examined partner phubbing, technofence, or smartphone-related interference in couple processes. General-phubbing studies were retained when they clarified individual vulnerabilities or the proposed pathway from PSU to partner phubbing. Study identification, selection, and synthesis were conducted by the author. Selection was iterative and purposive: sources were retained on the basis of their relevance to the review questions, contribution to conceptual clarification, methodological strength, or capacity to explain convergent, contradictory, or reciprocal findings. Conceptual contribution was assessed according to whether a source clarified construct boundaries, informed a proposed pathway, or challenged the emerging interpretation. Methodological appraisal considered sampling, measurement overlap and reliability, temporal ordering, partner interdependence, and alternative explanations; no numerical quality scores were assigned. The final evidence set included empirical studies using cross-sectional, qualitative, experimental, daily-diary, dyadic, longitudinal, and intervention designs, together with relevant meta-analytic, review, and theoretical sources.

Findings were organized around construct definition, individual vulnerabilities, relational appraisals, proximal mechanisms, outcomes, and reciprocal processes. Evidence was interpreted in relation to study design and the claims each design could support. Meta-analytic findings were used to assess convergence across studies, whereas experimental, daily-diary, dyadic, longitudinal, and intervention research received particular attention when evaluating temporal, interpersonal, or causal interpretations. Cross-sectional mediation was treated as covariation compatible with a proposed mechanism rather than evidence of temporal

ordering. No formal study-level risk-of-bias assessment or quantitative certainty grading was conducted. Consistent with the critical narrative design, the review does not claim exhaustive systematic coverage.

Critical synthesis of the evidence

Conceptual Boundaries and PSU as a Vulnerability

Partner phubbing requires a distinction between phone-directed behavior, a recipient's report of that behavior, and the meaning assigned to it. Enacted partner phubbing refers to the user's own reported or observed phone-directed disengagement during couple interaction. Perceived partner phubbing refers to a recipient's report of the partner's phone-related inattention; this report is not equivalent to direct observation or necessarily to a separate feeling of exclusion (Carnelley et al., 2023; Roberts & David, 2016). Measures differ in how much they combine descriptions of behavior with judgments of neglect or disruption (Campbell & Murray, 2015; Çizmeçi, 2017; Lapierre & Zhao, 2024). A high score may reflect recurrent disengagement, sensitivity to inattention, prior rejection, existing dissatisfaction, or their interaction. General phubbing is not partner-specific, whereas technofence encompasses interruptions from phones and other technologies (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). Integrated or shared phone use includes the partner in the activity, for example through joint viewing or planning, and should not automatically be classified as phubbing (Beukeboom & Pollmann, 2021; Kelly & Miller-Ott, 2022). **Table 1** summarizes these distinctions and gives examples of measurement instruments.

Context further limits behavior-only definitions. Expectations of attention are stronger during disclosure, support seeking, conflict, dates, or bids for affection than during loosely structured shared time. Expectancy Violations Theory accordingly locates the effect in whether behavior is expected and how the violation is evaluated, rather than in phone use alone (Burgoon, 1993; Miller-Ott & Kelly,

Table 1: Conceptual distinctions among smartphone-related constructs in romantic relationships

Construct	Primary level	Core feature	Measurement examples / operationalization	Relevance to romantic relationships	Representative sources
Problematic smartphone use	Individual	Difficulty regulating smartphone use and continued use despite impairment or conflict	Impairment and regulation questionnaires, for example the Smartphone Addiction Scale–Short Version (SAS-SV); interpretation requires validation for the target population.	May increase the likelihood that phone-directed attention displaces couple interaction	Billieux et al. (2015); Kwon et al. (2013)
Smartphone addiction	Individual	Addiction-model symptoms such as salience, withdrawal, tolerance, conflict, and relapse	Addiction-labelled symptom measures, for example SAS-SV; a questionnaire score is not by itself a diagnosis.	Common in the literature but diagnostically and conceptually contested	Billieux et al. (2015); Griffiths (2005); Kwon et al. (2013)
General phubbing	Interpersonal	Attending to a phone rather than a physically present person	Phubbing Scale (Karadağ et al., 2015), assessing communication disturbance and phone obsession.	Provides antecedent evidence but is not specific to romantic relationships	Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas (2016); Karadağ et al. (2015)
Partner phubbing	Couple interaction	Phone-related disengagement during interaction with a romantic partner	Partner Phubbing Scale (Roberts & David, 2016); its original nine-item form is recipient-rated.	Directly concerns attention, availability, and relational priority	Roberts & David (2016)
Perceived partner phubbing	Recipient perception	Recipient-reported phone-related inattention during couple interaction	Recipient-rated Partner Phubbing Scale or diary adaptations; records reported phone-related inattention, not direct observation.	Most consistently associated with daily relationship quality and satisfaction	Carnelley et al. (2023); Frackowiak et al. (2022)
Enacted partner phubbing	Actor behavior	Phone use reported or displayed by the person using the device	Actor-worded daily reports of own phone-directed behavior; observational coding when available. Self-report remains distinct from observed behavior.	May not correspond closely with the partner's perception	Carnelley et al. (2023)
Technoference	Interactional or family-system level	Interruption of interaction by phones or other technologies	Technology Device Interference Scale (TDIS) and Technology Interference in Life Examples Scale (TILES); conflict should be measured separately.	Assesses broader technology interruptions; not equivalent to PSU or phone-specific phubbing	Lapierre & Zhao (2024); McDaniel & Coyne (2016)
Integrated or shared phone use	Dyadic interaction	Phone use that includes both partners in the activity	Study-specific reports of including the partner in phone use, such as shared viewing or content exchange; no single standard measure is assumed.	May facilitate connection and should not automatically be classified as phubbing	Beukeboom & Pollmann (2021); Kelly & Miller-Ott (2022)

Note: The categories overlap but are not interchangeable. The same instrument may be used under different construct labels, so item wording and informant must be checked. SAS-SV was originally validated in adolescents; its inclusion is an instrument example, not an endorsement of its original thresholds for adults or a claim that all reviewed studies used it. Most partner-phubbing research assesses recipient reports rather than observed behavior.

2015; Roberts & David, 2024). Couples develop explicit or implicit rules about meals, bedtime, privacy, work availability, outside contacts, and response times; dissatisfaction may arise when these rules differ or become visible only after a perceived violation (Duran et al., 2011; Miller-Ott et al., 2012; Pickens & Whiting, 2020). Conversely, phones can be incorporated into joint activity, and shared use can buffer some negative associations (Beukeboom & Pollmann, 2021; Kelly & Miller-Ott, 2022). Accordingly, the relational consequences of phone use depend partly on whether the use includes the partner, fits the context, and is adequately explained.

Evidence nevertheless supports PSU as an important antecedent. General phubbing is associated with mobile phone, internet, messaging, gaming, and social-media difficulties, lower self-control, FoMO, and social comparison (Bajwa et al., 2023; Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016; Karadağ et al., 2015). In Ni et al.'s (2025) meta-analysis, media addiction was the strongest antecedent of partner phubbing among the variables examined. Yet much of this evidence comes from student samples, general-phubbing measures, and cross-sectional self-report. It supports a vulnerability pathway, not a universal causal chain. PSU may increase attentional capture and difficulty disengaging, whereas relational consequences emerge more proximally when that use interrupts the couple's interaction (Lapierre & Zhao, 2024). An individual planning intervention reduced self-reported phubbing but did not improve intimacy, depressive symptoms, or life satisfaction, suggesting that reducing phubbing alone may be insufficient to change broader relational or individual outcomes (Radtke et al., 2024).

The function of use also matters. Similar outward behavior may reflect habitual checking, social reassurance, anxiety reduction, boredom, reward seeking, or withdrawal from an uncomfortable exchange (Billieux et al., 2015; Elhai et al., 2019; Holte, 2025; Stirnberg et al., 2024). Screen time alone therefore cannot establish either PSU or relational harm. More relevant indicators include

impaired control, salience, cue-driven attention, persistence despite conflict, and displacement of valued interaction. Equally, relational distress may increase the appeal of the phone, making problematic engagement both a possible antecedent and a response. Cross-sectional pathways from problematic media use through responsiveness to relationship outcomes received limited longitudinal support, illustrating why statistical mediation should not be mistaken for a confirmed sequence (Booth et al., 2021).

For this review, partner phubbing is defined as smartphone-related attentional disengagement during couple interaction that is enacted or perceived as reducing availability to the partner. This formulation preserves a behavioral component while recognizing that consequences depend on regulation, context, expectations, appraisal, and response. PSU may function as one antecedent of partner phubbing; however, the constructs remain conceptually distinct, and partner phubbing may also occur in the absence of PSU.

Individual Vulnerabilities, Appraisals, and Couple Norms

Attachment insecurity, FoMO, self-regulation, and emotion-related coping may explain both why attention moves toward the phone and why the movement becomes threatening. In general-phubbing studies, anxious and avoidant attachment have been associated with phubbing partly through PSU; avoidant attachment has also been linked through smartphone attachment and lower self-regulation (Sun & Miller, 2023a, 2023b). Holte (2025) reframed the device as a potential refuge that offers reassurance or emotional security, while longitudinal evidence suggests that seeking positive emotion and escaping negative emotion partly connect FoMO or depressive symptoms with later PSU (Stirnberg et al., 2024). These findings are more informative when treated functionally: attachment does not mechanically produce phubbing, but may shape what the phone provides when closeness, autonomy, or emotional regulation becomes difficult.

Self-control accounts are therefore necessary but insufficient. Lower self-control and self-regulation are associated with smartphone addiction and phubbing (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016; Sun & Miller, 2023b), yet regulation is context dependent. Turning to a phone during conflict may reflect cue-driven habit and an attempt to reduce activation or avoid escalation. Likewise, FoMO and social comparison may keep attention oriented toward online activity even during valued face-to-face contact (Bajwa et al., 2023), but the available studies do not establish that these motives operate during particular couple episodes.

Attachment also organizes the recipient's appraisal. Experimental and survey findings indicate that partner phubbing can evoke jealousy and poorer evaluations, with stronger jealousy among more anxiously attached individuals (David & Roberts, 2021). On days of higher perceived partner phubbing, participants reported greater resentment, curiosity, conflict, and retaliation. Higher depressed mood and lower self-esteem were particularly evident among individuals higher in attachment anxiety (Carnelley et al., 2026). Dyadic evidence is mixed: attachment anxiety shows actor associations with perceived phubbing, avoidant partners may be perceived as more disengaged, and effects can differ by gender and relationship duration (Bröning & Warthberg, 2022; Mosley & Parker, 2023). Thus, attachment may shape the user's motive, the recipient's interpretation, and the subsequent response, but no single attachment pathway is consistently supported across designs.

Relational norms translate these vulnerabilities into interactional meaning. An unexplained check during a vulnerable disclosure leaves the recipient to infer whether the behavior signifies urgency, boredom, avoidance, secrecy, or low priority. A generally responsive partner may receive a more benign interpretation, whereas repeated interruptions can become evidence of an established pattern (Roberts & David, 2022, 2024). Once negative expectations form, ambiguous use may be noticed more readily

and interpreted more harshly; the appraisal of one episode therefore changes the context of the next. This is not evidence that perception is inaccurate. It indicates that perceived partner phubbing is jointly organized by current behavior and relational history.

A systemic account also requires attention to disagreement and power. One partner may regard an unspoken rule as obvious while the other sees no violation; requests for attention may then be framed as care or control, and continued use as autonomy or neglect. Such circularity does not imply equal responsibility. Persistent use despite clearly communicated consequences remains the user's responsibility, and uncertainty does not justify coercive surveillance or demands for device access. Dyadic evidence suggests that power imbalance and income disparity may shape some associations among partner phubbing, mobile-phone conflict, and relationship satisfaction (Togar et al., 2023). More broadly, power may also affect whose expectations and definitions of acceptable phone use prevail within the relationship, although these processes have received limited direct investigation.

Relational Mechanisms, Outcomes, and Recursive Couple Processes

Across studies, the most plausible proximal mechanism is not the device itself but disruption of the processes through which partners communicate availability. Perceived exclusion, lower responsiveness, communication dissatisfaction, reduced positive interaction, diminished intimacy, and affection deprivation are repeatedly associated with partner phubbing and relationship evaluations (Beukeboom & Pollmann, 2021; Booth et al., 2021; Denes et al., 2025; Kılıçarslan & Parmaksız, 2023; Mushquash et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2025). These constructs overlap, and many are reported by the same individual at the same time; a series of significant indirect effects does not establish a fixed causal sequence. Taken together, these findings suggest that phone-directed disengagement becomes harmful when it interrupts contingent attention,

validation, disclosure, affectionate exchange, or repair.

Evidence across designs sharpens this conclusion. Shared phone use weakens some associations because the device no longer clearly excludes the partner (Beukeboom & Pollmann, 2021). Daily increases in technofence co-occur with poorer face-to-face interaction, more technology conflict, negative mood, and lower relationship quality (McDaniel & Drouin, 2019). Daily studies indicate that perceived partner phubbing is more consistently associated with relationship quality than enacted phubbing (Carnelley et al., 2023; Frackowiak et al., 2022). In Carnelley et al. (2023), however, these daily associations did not persist over time. Cross-sectional dyadic pathways through responsiveness are stronger than longitudinal ones, suggesting that responsiveness may be an immediate, interaction-level process rather than a stable year-to-year mediator (Booth et al., 2021). These differences in timescale are theoretically informative, not merely inconsistent.

Communication and affection findings likewise converge at the process level. Effective communication statistically accounts for associations between phubbing and marital satisfaction, while appraisal and communication dissatisfaction connect technofence with intimacy (Kılıçarslan & Parmaksız, 2023; Mushquash et al., 2022). Lower positive marital interaction and greater conflict form related pathways (Wang & Zhao, 2023), and perceived relationship quality is associated with reduced self-disclosure in Turkish participants (Tiryaki Göksu et al., 2025). Dyadic findings link phubbing with affection deprivation and satisfaction, yet similarity between partners' phubbing does not protect the relationship (Denes et al., 2025). Mutual disengagement may normalize the behavior without meeting either partner's needs.

When reduced availability is interpreted as threatening or rejecting, disconnection may escalate into jealousy, surveillance, or conflict. Experimental

findings support an immediate jealousy response, particularly under attachment anxiety, while cross-sectional evidence links phubbing with jealousy in married adults (Arshad & Imran, 2022; David & Roberts, 2021). Perceived partner phubbing is also associated with electronic surveillance through uncertainty and lower responsiveness (Schokkenbroek et al., 2022). These pathways remain temporally uncertain: mistrust may heighten surveillance and phubbing perceptions, and surveillance can provoke greater secrecy or defensiveness. The literature also insufficiently distinguishes reassurance seeking from coercive monitoring. Relational context can explain how surveillance enters a cycle without excusing intrusive or controlling behavior.

Conflict and demand-withdraw findings make circularity more explicit. Phone-related conflict rises on days of greater technofence, and reduced positive interaction may accompany greater marital conflict (McDaniel & Drouin, 2019; Roberts & David, 2016; Wang & Zhao, 2023). In dyadic couples, demand-withdraw patterns statistically connect perceived partner phubbing with both partners' satisfaction (Mosley et al., 2025). The smartphone may be both the target of pursuit and a means of withdrawal: one partner demands attention, the other turns further toward the device, and increased withdrawal intensifies pursuit. Roles can also shift as the recipient retaliates through their own phone use for revenge, distraction, support, or autonomy (Carnelley et al., 2026; Thomas et al., 2022). The evidence supports interconnected segments of this cycle, although the complete sequence has rarely been tested prospectively.

Relationship satisfaction is the most consistent outcome, with convergent associations across dating, cohabiting, married, and culturally diverse samples (Arshad & Imran, 2022; Beukeboom & Pollmann, 2021; Denes et al., 2025; Ni et al., 2025; Roberts & David, 2016; Wang & Zhao, 2023). Yet satisfaction is broad, overlaps with communication and intimacy, and may color reports of partner behavior.

Daily within-person evidence supports short-term covariation rather than inevitable deterioration (Carnelley et al., 2023; McDaniel & Drouin, 2019). Dyadic studies show robust actor effects but mixed partner effects and moderation, indicating that one partner's experience is not uniformly transmitted to the other (Bröning & Wartberg, 2022; Mosley & Parker, 2023; Türk Kurtça, 2026).

The evidence for intimacy, commitment, and well-being is promising but thinner. Meta-analytic and mechanism studies link partner phubbing with lower intimacy and closeness (Beukeboom & Pollmann, 2021; Ni et al., 2025), while affection deprivation appears relevant to both partners' satisfaction (Denes et al., 2025). Emotional loneliness and satisfaction statistically connect phubbing with lower commitment in Türkiye, but cross-sectional data cannot establish whether disengagement reduces commitment or lower commitment encourages independent phone use (Aslanturk & Arslan, 2025). Partner phubbing has also been linked to lower life satisfaction and greater depressive symptoms through relationship conflict and satisfaction (Roberts & David, 2016). Daily studies further indicate greater anger and, particularly among individuals higher in attachment anxiety, poorer mood and self-esteem on days of increased perceived phubbing (Carnelley et al., 2026; Thomas et al., 2022).

Longitudinal evidence provides the clearest test of the proposed direction and remains mixed. Among Chinese newlyweds, longitudinal associations between perceived partner phubbing, need fulfilment, and marital satisfaction varied by gender. Bidirectional associations were more evident among husbands, whereas findings for wives were primarily unidirectional (Li et al., 2026). In contrast, annual dyadic data offered little support for complete longitudinal mediation from problematic media use through responsiveness to relationship outcomes (Booth et al., 2021). The difference may reflect constructs, developmental stage, and measurement interval: responsiveness can change within seconds, retaliation within an interaction, daily quality across

hours, and commitment across months or years. A process can be consequential at one timescale without producing a stable cross-lagged effect at another.

Taken together, the evidence supports a recursive, multilevel formulation. PSU, attentional capture, and emotion-related motives may increase enacted disengagement. Context and couple norms shape whether it is perceived as a relational violation. Perceived exclusion or low responsiveness can evoke withdrawal, criticism, jealousy, surveillance, or reciprocal phone use. These reactions may increase conflict and reduce intimacy, satisfaction, or commitment; relational distress can then increase vigilance toward phone use or make the device more attractive as refuge and avoidance. Repetition may create a "social allergen" effect in which later interruptions are evaluated more negatively as irritation and adverse expectations accumulate (Roberts & David, 2022). Table 2 compares selected studies central to these claims by sample, design, measurement, findings, and limitations; it is not a complete inventory of every source cited in the review.

Table 2: Selected empirical studies informing the critical synthesis and proposed model

Studies are grouped by design. Dyadic describes the use of data from both partners and can apply to cross-sectional, diary, or longitudinal research. The table is illustrative, not a complete list of included sources. Sample descriptions and measure labels are kept at the level established in the source; unspecified instrument versions are not inferred.

Study / design	Sample	Phubbing or related measure	Other variables	Principal findings	Main limitations
Beukeboom & Pollmann (2021) Cross-sectional surveys	Two samples of adults in romantic relationships; N = 507 and 386.	Recipient-rated partner-phubbing questionnaire; shared-use reports.	Exclusion, responsiveness, intimacy, jealousy, phone conflict, satisfaction.	Phubbing was associated with poorer satisfaction; exclusion and related appraisals were candidate explanatory variables. Shared use attenuated some negative associations.	Concurrent, single-informant measures; item overlap and indirect effects cannot establish temporal mediation.
Kılıçarslan & Parmaksız (2023) Cross-sectional survey	712 married adults in Central Anatolia, Türkiye; 347 women, 365 men.	General Phubbing Scale; not equivalent to recipient-rated partner phubbing.	Effective communication and marital satisfaction.	Higher phubbing tendencies were associated with poorer communication and marital satisfaction; a statistical indirect association was reported.	Individual reports, not paired couple data; general phubbing does not isolate a particular partner interaction.
Aslanturk & Arslan (2025) Cross-sectional survey	320 adults in Türkiye; 75.6% women, 76.2% unmarried; ages 18–55.	Nine-item Partner Phubbing Scale, Turkish adaptation.	Emotional loneliness, relationship satisfaction, commitment.	Perceived phubbing was linked to commitment through concurrent associations involving loneliness and satisfaction.	Predominantly young, female sample; one partner reports all variables; temporal order remains unresolved.
David & Roberts (2021) Experiment and survey	Adults reporting on romantic relationships in an experimental study and a separate survey.	Manipulated partner-phubbing scenario in Study 1; reported partner phubbing in the survey.	Jealousy, attachment anxiety, relationship satisfaction.	Experimental phubbing affected immediate jealousy and relationship evaluations; attachment anxiety qualified jealousy responses.	Experimental evidence concerns the manipulated episode and immediate responses, not long-term change or the entire recursive model.
McDaniel & Drouin (2019) Dyadic daily diary	Both partners in 173 romantic relationships; 14 days.	Daily reports of technology interruptions during couple interaction.	Relationship quality, technology conflict, interaction quality, mood.	More technofence than usual co-occurred with poorer relationship evaluations, more technology conflict, and worse mood.	Within-person covariation remains observational; interruptions involve technologies beyond smartphones.
Frackowiak et al. (2022) Daily diary	133 adults in intimate relationships; seven days.	Daily occurrence and intensity reports, with separate appraisal questions.	Perceived responsiveness, moral judgments, relationship quality.	Phubbing occurrence alone did not distinguish satisfaction across days; greater intensity was associated with more negative appraisals and lower responsiveness.	One-person diary reports; same-day association does not establish causal direction or objective behavior.
Carnelley et al. (2023) Dyadic daily diary and follow-up	Romantic couples completing daily reports, with relationship outcomes assessed again two months later.	Separate daily recipient-rated phubbing and actor reports of own enacted phubbing.	Relationship quality; attachment anxiety and avoidance.	Perceived phubbing was associated with lower daily quality; enacted reports were not. Perceived-phubbing associations did not persist at follow-up.	Self-reported enacted behavior is not observation; diary and follow-up results depend on timescale and model.
Bröning & Wartberg (2022) Cross-sectional dyadic	163 German heterosexual couples in long-term relationships.	Recipient reports of partner phubbing from both members.	Attachment and relationship satisfaction.	Actor and partner associations differed; attachment-related patterns were not uniform across partners.	Dyadic modelling handles interdependence but cannot establish temporal or causal paths; restricted couple composition.
Mosley et al. (2025) Cross-sectional dyadic mediation	103 heterosexual couples.	Perceived partner phubbing reported by each partner.	Demand–withdraw patterns and couple satisfaction.	Demand–withdraw patterns statistically linked phubbing with couple satisfaction, providing evidence for an interpersonal association.	Concurrent mediation does not demonstrate that demands cause subsequent phone withdrawal or vice versa.

Table 2 (Continued)

Türk Kurtça (2026) Cross-sectional dyadic mediation	704 unmarried heterosexual couples in Türkiye; N = 1,408, ages 18–35.	Perceived partner-phubbing measure completed by both partners.	Relationship mindfulness and perceived relationship quality.	Actor-level indirect associations through mindfulness were supported; partner-level indirect findings were partial.	No temporal ordering; restricted age and relationship groups; partner mindfulness did not directly predict the other partner's quality.
Booth et al. (2021) Longitudinal dyadic	Married couples; both spouses surveyed at three time points one year apart.	Problematic media-use measures; broader than a phone-specific partner-phubbing scale.	Partner responsiveness and relationship outcomes.	Concurrent indirect associations were clearer than complete prospective mediation through responsiveness.	Annual spacing may miss brief interaction processes; problematic media use and partner phubbing are not interchangeable constructs.
Li et al. (2026) Longitudinal dyadic	310 Chinese heterosexual newlywed couples; three waves six months apart.	Repeated recipient reports of partner phubbing.	Need fulfilment and marital satisfaction.	Bidirectional links involving need fulfilment were found for husbands. Wives' findings included paths from satisfaction to later phubbing.	Gender-specific paths and newlywed sample constrain generalization; observational cross-lagged findings do not prove causation.
Radtke et al. (2024) Randomized intervention	208 cohabiting individuals, ages 18–65; one partner per relationship; three measurements.	Self-reported own phubbing; individual action/coping planning versus information control.	Intimacy, interaction quality, depressive symptoms, life satisfaction.	Planning reduced self-reported phubbing; improvements in intimacy or individual well-being were not established.	One partner participated; no evidence that a dyadic treatment, negotiated rules, or systemic intervention is effective.

Note: Sample sizes refer to individuals unless explicitly identified as couples. Findings are paraphrased for comparison rather than pooled. “Indirect association” does not imply a demonstrated mechanism. Studies that assessed general phubbing or problematic media use are explicitly identified because they provide indirect support for partner-specific claims.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual synthesis of the reviewed literature, organizing partner phubbing as a recursive systemic process rather than a strictly linear pathway. The figure separates pathways supported by converging evidence from reciprocal pathways that remain primarily theoretical.

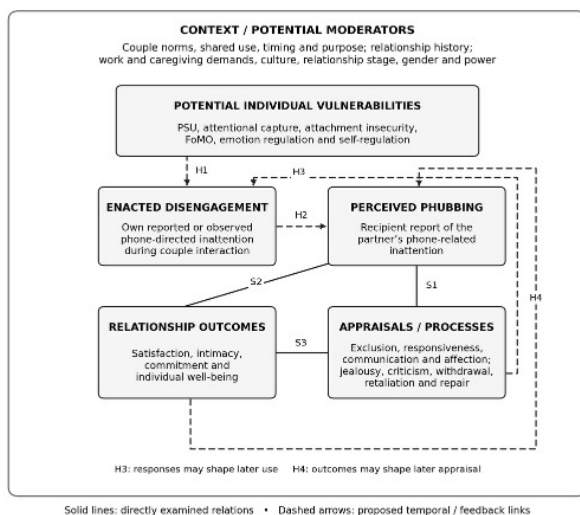


Figure 1. Proposed recursive systemic model of smartphone use and partner phubbing

Note. Solid lines (S1–S3) indicate directly examined associations, predominantly observational; they do not establish causation or temporal order. Support concerns the relations specified in the evidence key, not every construct in the connected boxes. Dashed arrows (H1–H4) indicate proposed temporal or feedback pathways with indirect, mixed, or incomplete evidence. Contextual factors are not assumed to moderate every connection. Enacted behavior and recipient reports are distinct sources; appraisals and relational processes require item-level separation from phubbing measures. PSU = problematic smartphone use; FoMO = fear of missing out. The complete sequence is untested; reciprocity does not imply equal responsibility. Evidence key. S1: Perceived phubbing is associated with exclusion, responsiveness, and related processes (Beukeboom & Pollmann, 2021); experimental evidence addresses selected immediate responses such as jealousy (David & Roberts, 2021). S2: Perceived phubbing is associated with relationship outcomes across surveys and daily studies (Carnelley et al., 2023; Ni et al., 2025). S3: Relational processes and outcomes are

associated in cross-sectional dyadic models (Mosley et al., 2025); prospective mediation is less consistent (Booth et al., 2021). H1: General-phubbing and media-use findings support potential vulnerabilities, but do not establish the proposed transition within a couple (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016; Ni et al., 2025). H2: The interpretation of enacted behavior is a proposed contextual process; enacted and perceived reports do not show equivalent outcome associations (Carnelley et al., 2023). H3: Daily retaliation supports concurrent links with reciprocal phone use, but not the full episode-level feedback sequence (Thomas et al., 2022). H4: Feedback from relationship functioning to phone use or appraisal is only partly addressed by mixed longitudinal findings (Booth et al., 2021; Li et al., 2026).

Cultural Context and Evidence from Türkiye

Research from Türkiye broadens the evidence beyond relationship satisfaction by linking partner phubbing with effective communication, self-disclosure, emotional loneliness, commitment, mindfulness, and dyadic relationship quality (Aslanturk & Arslan, 2025; Karaman & Arslan, 2024; Kılıçarslan & Parmaksız, 2023; Öncü & Kuşcu, 2024; Tiryaki Göksu et al., 2025; Türk Kurtça, 2026). However, their samples and measures are not interchangeable. Kılıçarslan and Parmaksız (2023) studied 712 married adults using a general Phubbing Scale, alongside communication and marital-satisfaction measures; this assesses a different construct from a recipient-rated Partner Phubbing Scale. Aslanturk and Arslan (2025) used the Turkish adaptation of the latter in 320 adults in romantic relationships, predominantly women and unmarried participants, to examine emotional loneliness, satisfaction, and commitment. These cross-sectional, individual-report findings do not establish partner effects or temporal mediation. Çakır and Köseliören (2022) assessed broader technoference, satisfaction, and conflict in 264 married people in Istanbul; the sample should not be read as 264 matched couples. General-phubbing research from Türkiye also informs the study of

individual vulnerabilities, but cannot by itself establish partner-specific mechanisms (Karadağ et al., 2015).

Dyadic evidence offers a useful extension. Türk Kurtça (2026) examined 704 unmarried heterosexual couples aged 18–35 and found actor-level indirect associations through relationship mindfulness, with only partial support for partner-level indirect pathways. This permits analysis of interdependence, but the cross-sectional design still cannot establish a causal sequence. The combination of clearer actor findings and more qualified partner findings resembles patterns in international dyadic research (Bröning & Wartberg, 2022; Mosley & Parker, 2023). Other cross-sectional work examines social media addiction, phubbing, relational needs, and satisfaction (Karaman & Arslan, 2024). Other studies address self-disclosure and perceived relationship quality (Tiryaki Göksu et al., 2025), relationship satisfaction (Öncü & Kuşcu, 2024), and subgroup differences in recipient-rated phubbing (Soyer & Ömür Sünbül, 2026). Their extension to additional constructs should not be mistaken for stronger causal evidence. Collectively, the studies support the relevance of these associations in Türkiye while retaining limitations related to self-report, sample composition, and measurement heterogeneity.

The findings should not be explained through untested cultural generalizations. Claims that collectivism or family cohesion makes phubbing uniquely harmful require direct comparative evidence. Within Türkiye, expectations about attention, privacy, work accessibility, family contact, gender, and autonomy likely vary by age, socioeconomic position, relationship stage, and context; subgroup differences caution against treating Turkish couples as homogeneous (Soyer & Ömür Sünbül, 2026). More informative cross-cultural research would test measurement invariance and compare the norms and meanings that organize phone use, rather than merely asking whether a negative correlation replicates.

DISCUSSION

An Integrative Systemic Account

The central conclusion is that partner phubbing is neither a synonym for PSU nor simply poor communication. PSU helps explain why attention may be captured and difficult to redirect; relationship science explains why that shift becomes consequential. Partner phubbing is the relational interface between these levels: a phone-directed behavior becomes meaningful through the interaction in which it occurs. This formulation avoids reducing partner phubbing either to an addiction symptom or to a communication problem. An exclusively addiction-based account overlooks context, appraisal, shared use, and reciprocity, whereas an exclusively relational account overlooks impaired control, cue-driven attention, FoMO, and emotion-regulation motives (Billieux et al., 2015; Elhai et al., 2019; Holte, 2025; Stirnberg et al., 2024).

Consistent with systemic accounts of interdependence and circular influence (Hertlein & Twist, 2019; Watzlawick et al., 1967), the model begins with individual vulnerabilities but locates the maintenance of partner phubbing within recursive couple interaction. A partner may turn toward the phone automatically, for reassurance, or to withdraw from discomfort. The recipient may experience exclusion and respond with a direct request, criticism, jealousy, surveillance, withdrawal, or retaliation. The user's response—repair, explanation, defensiveness, or further disengagement—changes the meaning of the original interruption. Over time, repeated episodes influence rules, expectations, and sensitivity to later events. Lower satisfaction and intimacy are therefore not only endpoints; they become contexts that shape subsequent phone use and appraisal.

Evidence across research designs supports different segments of the proposed model, including associations between PSU and phubbing, immediate appraisals, daily retaliation, actor-partner variation,

and reciprocal longitudinal associations (Booth et al., 2021; Carnelley et al., 2023, 2026; David & Roberts, 2021; Li et al., 2026; Ni et al., 2025). To the best of the author's knowledge, no study identified in this review has tested the complete recursive sequence.

The perceived-enacted distinction is central. Stronger effects for perceived phubbing do not mean that behavior is irrelevant or that recipients are "too sensitive." They show that relational consequences operate through meaning, while also raising shared-method concerns. Agreement and disagreement between partners are themselves systemic data: they may reveal low awareness, different rules, defensive attribution, or unequal authority to define what counts as an interruption. The findings on shared phone use further demonstrate that technological presence is not inherently disruptive; its consequences depend partly on how attention is organized between partners (Beukeboom & Pollmann, 2021; Kelly & Miller-Ott, 2022).

Clinical and Research Implications

The clinical implications are proposals derived from the synthesis and systemic model, rather than established treatments for partner phubbing. Radtke et al. (2024) found that an individual planning intervention reduced self-reported phubbing, without establishing improvements in intimacy, depressive symptoms, or life satisfaction. The findings therefore do not demonstrate that reducing phubbing alone improves broader relational or individual functioning. Within clinical assessment, it may be useful to distinguish high but functional use from impaired regulation, clarify the activities accessed through the phone, and explore whether use serves reassurance, stimulation, avoidance, or emotion regulation. Inviting both partners to describe specific episodes could help identify differences in perceived interruption, intention, impact, and response. These assessment considerations require evaluation in couple-based research.

Possible topics for collaborative discussion include expectations about attention, explanations for

work or caregiving interruptions, shared phone use, and responses to perceived neglect. Negotiated agreements, specific requests for attention, acknowledgment of impact, and efforts to restore responsiveness may be considered in case formulation, but their effectiveness for partner phubbing has not been established by the evidence reviewed here. Trials are needed to determine whether these approaches improve outcomes beyond reducing phone use. Assessment of surveillance, power, and coercive control remains important; a recursive formulation neither assigns equal responsibility to both partners nor justifies intrusive monitoring.

Future research should prioritize designs that match the timescale of the proposed process. Dyadic experience sampling can assess both partners' enacted and perceived phubbing, appraisals, bids, criticism, withdrawal, retaliation, and repair within episodes. Observational studies can test whether interruptions alter responsiveness and whether explanations or negotiated rules change the response. Longer follow-up can examine accumulation, commitment, and stability. Objective smartphone logs can improve measurement of frequency and checking but cannot determine whether use was urgent, shared, or rejecting; they should supplement rather than replace contextual and dyadic reports.

Measurement requires clearer separation of PSU, enacted phubbing, perceived partner phubbing, technofence, phone conflict, and appraisal. Disagreement should be analyzed rather than averaged away. Research should also test thresholds and couple profiles: high PSU with accepted use, low-frequency but highly conflictual interruption, reciprocal disengagement, occupationally driven use, or attachment-related surveillance may represent different processes. More diverse samples are needed across age, relationship duration, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic position, parenting status, and treatment-seeking contexts.

Null and contradictory findings are theoretically essential. Nonsignificant partner effects, weak longitudinal mediation, the buffering role of shared

use, and the absence of well-being change after reduced phubbing all challenge a simple dose-response model (Booth et al., 2021; Carnelley et al., 2023; Radtke et al., 2024). Intervention trials should include both partners and compare individual regulation strategies with dyadic approaches targeting expectations, responsiveness, and interactional cycles. Trials should test whether improvement is driven by reduced phone use, changes in couple norms and appraisals, better repair, or changes in the regulatory function served by the device.

Limitations of the Review

This review was purposive rather than exhaustive. Searches were conducted in English and Turkish, which may have limited the identification of relevant evidence published in other languages. Because study selection and synthesis were conducted by one author, interpretive and selection bias cannot be excluded. No formal study-level risk-of-bias or certainty grading was applied. Conceptual overlap and heterogeneous measures also limit direct comparison. Accordingly, the proposed systemic model should be regarded as an interpretive integration of converging evidence segments, not as a causal framework validated in its entirety.

CONCLUSION

PSU and partner phubbing are related but distinct constructs. Problematic use may increase vulnerability to phone-directed disengagement, yet phubbing can also occur without impaired regulation, and addiction cannot be inferred from phubbing alone. Associations with relationship functioning depend on what is measured, whose perspective is obtained, and the context of use. The proposed recursive systemic model integrates these distinctions with appraisals and couple responses while separating directly examined relations from unconfirmed temporal and feedback pathways. Its value lies in generating testable questions about how smartphone use and relationship processes become connected; the complete model and its proposed clinical applications require further empirical evaluation.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

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