



Phubbing Behaviour and Information Discernment among Students of the State Islamic University of North Sumatra

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of smartphone use, phubbing is becoming increasingly common in university settings. This condition not only affects social interaction but is also suspected to impact information discernment the ability to critically evaluate the credibility of information. This study aims to analyze phubbing behavior in relation to the information discernment of students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra, and to identify the efforts made by students to maintain the quality of their information evaluation. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach with purposive sampling involving six students who met the criteria for phubbing behavior. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using an interactive analysis model. The findings show that phubbing behavior manifests through four dimensions: nomophobia, interpersonal conflict, self-isolation, and problem acknowledgement. These four dimensions affect the information-reception process through attentional disruption, reduced learning engagement, and a tendency toward superficial information evaluation. Nevertheless, some students still make efforts to maintain information discernment by verifying information with lecturers or peers, reviewing course materials, and controlling smartphone use based on priority. These findings suggest that phubbing does not directly eliminate the capacity for information discernment, but rather increases vulnerability to declining information evaluation quality. Therefore, strengthening self-regulation, managing digital distractions, and improving information literacy are needed to support students' ability to critically evaluate information.

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Phubbing
Information Discernment
Information Behaviour
Mahasiswa

ABSTRAK

Perilaku phubbing semakin sering ditemukan di lingkungan perguruan tinggi seiring meningkatnya intensitas penggunaan smartphone. Kondisi ini tidak hanya memengaruhi interaksi sosial, tetapi juga diduga berdampak pada information discernment, yaitu kemampuan mengevaluasi kredibilitas informasi secara kritis. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis perilaku phubbing terhadap information discernment mahasiswa Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara serta mengidentifikasi upaya yang dilakukan mahasiswa untuk mempertahankan kualitas penilaian informasi. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik purposive sampling terhadap enam mahasiswa yang memenuhi kriteria perilaku phubbing. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model analisis interaktif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perilaku phubbing muncul melalui empat dimensi, yaitu nomophobia, interpersonal conflict, self-isolation, dan problem acknowledgement. Keempat dimensi tersebut memengaruhi proses penerimaan informasi melalui gangguan perhatian, berkurangnya keterlibatan dalam pembelajaran, serta kecenderungan melakukan evaluasi informasi secara dangkal. Meskipun demikian,



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sebagian mahasiswa tetap berupaya mempertahankan information discernment dengan memverifikasi informasi kepada dosen maupun teman, meninjau kembali materi pembelajaran, serta mengendalikan penggunaan smartphone berdasarkan skala prioritas. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa phubbing tidak secara langsung menghilangkan kemampuan information discernment, tetapi meningkatkan kerentanan terhadap menurunnya kualitas evaluasi informasi. Oleh karena itu, penguatan regulasi diri, pengelolaan distraksi digital, dan literasi informasi diperlukan untuk mendukung kemampuan mahasiswa mengevaluasi informasi secara kritis.

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1. Introduction

The advancement of the digital era compels society to continuously adapt to emerging information technologies. University students, in particular, have integrated smartphones and the internet into their daily academic routines. In Indonesia, internet penetration has steadily increased. According to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2025), internet penetration has reached 80.66%, representing approximately 229.4 million people, with an average daily usage of about seven hours. The productive age group, which includes university students, constitutes the largest demographic of internet users. The use of digital technologies such as smartphones facilitate the learning process, including access to scientific journals, reference searches, participation in online lectures, and academic communication without limitations of time and location (Aditia, 2021).

Despite these benefits, intensive smartphone use also has the potential to cause psychological and social consequences. High attachment to digital devices can lead to the tendency to constantly check notifications, social media, and messaging applications, even during direct interactions with others. This condition is known as phubbing (phone snubbing), which refers to the behaviour of ignoring one's interlocutor due to greater attention being focused on the smartphone (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018). Research by Lutfiana and Arviani (2024) shows that high screen time is associated with an increased tendency for phubbing among adolescents and young adults in major cities. In higher education environments, this behaviour is evident when students pay more attention to their smartphone screens than to lectures or group discussions (Sandrin Hura et al., 2021).

The term phubbing was first introduced in May 2012 in a linguistic campaign by the Macquarie Dictionary in collaboration with McCann Melbourne to describe this behaviour (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Phubbing is not only understood as a matter of social etiquette but also as a form of attentional dysregulation. When individuals continuously shift their focus from their real environment to digital devices, their attention is divided, requiring them to repeatedly switch between two different sources of information. According to Cognitive Load Theory, human working memory has limited capacity, so dividing attention among multiple stimuli simultaneously increases cognitive load and decreases the quality of information processing (Klepsch et al., 2017). In the context of learning, this condition makes it more difficult for students to maintain concentration, understand material deeply, and integrate new information with existing knowledge (Fatchurahman et al., 2023).

The increase in cognitive load serves as a mechanism that explains the relationship between phubbing and the ability to evaluate information. When most cognitive resources are used to shift attention due to digital activity, reflective and analytical thinking processes become less effective. Students tend to process information superficially (surface processing), more quickly accepting information without evaluating supporting evidence, and rarely verifying the sources of the information they obtain. In fact, the ability to distinguish accurate information from incorrect information is at the core of information discernment, which is defined as the individual's ability to seek, evaluate, compare, and assess the credibility of information before believing or

disseminating it (Pointon et al., 2023). Thus, theoretically, phubbing can be seen as a factor that indirectly reduces information discernment ability through attentional regulation disruption and increased cognitive load.

The decline in information discernment ability is becoming an increasingly important issue amid the rapid flow of digital information. Students are required not only to acquire information quickly but also to possess critical thinking skills in assessing the validity of sources, identifying misleading information, and making decisions based on accountable evidence. If these abilities decrease, students become more susceptible to the spread of disinformation and hoaxes that are increasingly prevalent across various digital platforms (Pointon et al., 2023).

Previous studies have revealed that smartphone addiction is correlated with increased phubbing behaviour (Putri et al., 2024; Salsabila et al., 2024). However, most research has focused on social consequences, such as decreased quality of interpersonal communication, relationship satisfaction, and social interaction. Studies that specifically explain how phubbing affects students' ability to evaluate digital information remain relatively limited. Thus, there is still a research gap regarding the mechanism linking phubbing behaviour and information discernment, especially in the context of university students.

Based on the research gap described above, the relationship between phubbing behaviour and information discernment in this study is understood through the mechanisms of attentional regulation and Cognitive Load Theory. High-intensity smartphone use increases the tendency for individuals to continuously monitor notifications and various digital information, thereby promoting phubbing behaviour. This condition leads to divided concentration between learning activities and digital devices, increasing cognitive load and reducing the quality of information processing (McGrew & Breakstone, 2023). As a result, students find it more difficult to understand material deeply, connect new information with prior knowledge, and critically evaluate the credibility of acquired information. Thus, phubbing is not seen as directly reducing information discernment ability, but rather operates through mechanisms of attentional disruption and increased cognitive load that affect the quality of information processing during learning (Saienko et al., 2022). Based on this conceptual framework, this study uses the theory of phubbing developed by Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2018), which sees phubbing as a multidimensional construct consisting of nomophobia, interpersonal conflict, self-isolation, and problem acknowledgement. Therefore, this study aims to understand how these four dimensions of phubbing behaviour relate to information discernment among students at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Patterns of Phubbing Behaviour

The term phubbing is derived from the combination of the words "phone" and "snubbing," which refers to the act of ignoring others due to excessive focus on a smartphone. According to Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas (2018), phubbing is a social behaviour characterised by an individual's tendency to prioritise smartphone use over direct interaction with those around them. In the context of university students, this behaviour is evident when an individual more frequently looks at their phone screen rather than paying attention to lecturers, discussion peers, or the surrounding learning environment.

According to Aditia (2021), phubbing represents a deviation in interpersonal communication ethics that occurs when individuals prioritise digital interaction over face-to-face communication. Thus, phubbing can be understood as a behaviour that undermines the quality of social interaction while also disrupting an individual's ability to receive information fully.

According to Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2018), the aspects of phubbing consist of:

2.1.1. Nomophobia

Nomophobia refers to the condition of "no-mobile-phone-phobia," describing a form of anxiety or stress that arises when individuals do not have direct access to their communication devices. This condition is the main trigger for phubbing behaviour, whereby a person persistently checks their phone screen even when engaged in social interactions.

2.1.2. Interpersonal conflict

Interpersonal conflict is defined as tension within relationships that arises between individuals due to inappropriate smartphone use. This issue emerges when notification sounds disrupt interpersonal communication, causing conversational partners to feel ignored. The consequences of such disruptions include dissatisfaction in social interactions and a decline in the quality of interpersonal relationships.

2.1.3. Self-isolation

Self-isolation occurs when an individual begins to withdraw from the social environment due to excessive smartphone use. This process begins with the gradual neglect of social interactions, where a phubber limits direct engagement, as indicated by the loss of eye contact during communication. Such a condition creates interpersonal distance, as the individual becomes more absorbed in their own world through the smartphone.

2.1.4. Problem acknowledgement

Problem acknowledgement is the stage at which an individual recognises their dependence on the smartphone as a problem. This awareness involves understanding that such behaviour is socially undesirable, yet the individual continues to feel a psychological urge to remain constantly connected to their smartphone.

2.2. Information Discernment

Information discernment is an individual's ability to critically and appropriately assess, understand, and use information. According to [Walton et al. \(2018\)](#) in their research in Online Information Review, information discernment is defined as a component of information literacy that characterizes how individuals make judgments regarding information.

The definition of information discernment according to [CILIP \(2018\)](#) is the ability to think critically and make balanced judgments about every piece of information encountered and used. Individuals with a high level of discernment will read in a structured and in-depth manner (focusing on text and evidence), whereas those with lower discernment tend to skim or focus on less important parts. The capacity to adopt a state of pro-active scepticism enables individuals to critically interrogate information sources rather than accept information at face value ([Walton et al., 2018](#)).

Based on the various definitions presented, information discernment can be concluded as an individual's ability to intelligently differentiate, filter, and assess the truth of information before believing or disseminating it. Individuals who are adept at discerning information remain calmer and physically healthier when confronted with fake news compared to those who are not.

2.3. Wilson's Information Behaviour

Information behaviour is a term used to describe the entire range of ways in which humans interact with information, beginning from recognizing information needs, engaging in the process of searching through various means, to utilizing or disseminating that information ([Wilson, 1999](#)). According to [Wilson \(2000\)](#), information behaviour encompasses the totality of human interactions with information, both actively and passively. It includes how individuals search for information, as well as how they select and evaluate that information.

In greater detail, [Wilson \(2000\)](#) divides information behaviour into several interrelated levels, namely:

- 2.3.1. Information behaviour refers to the totality of human actions related to various sources and channels of information, both those performed intentionally (active) and those received without planning (passive). This encompasses the full scope of interactions, from information exchange through direct face-to-face communication to the process of unintentionally absorbing information from the surrounding environment.
- 2.3.2. Information Seeking Behaviour: This refers to the deliberate effort to search for information to meet specific needs or objectives. During this process, individuals may

interact with manual information systems (such as newspapers or libraries) as well as computer-based systems.

- 2.3.3. Information Searching Behaviour: This is a micro-level behaviour that occurs when an individual directly interacts with an information system. It includes physical actions such as clicking on links or intellectual actions such as determining criteria for selecting the most relevant sources.
- 2.3.4. Information Use Behaviour: This refers to the physical and mental actions undertaken when an individual integrates newly found information into their existing knowledge base.

Based on the definitions and stages described, it can be concluded that information behaviour is not merely a technical process of searching for data, but rather a complex series of human interactions with information sources, both active and passive. This behaviour is driven by the presence of a cognitive gap, in which an individual feels that the information possessed is insufficient to solve a particular task or problem.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because the researcher aims to capture phenomena in depth, explore real-life experiences, and understand how subjects interpret phubbing behaviour in their daily lives. Data collection was conducted over one month within the environment of the State Islamic University of North Sumatra. The researcher focused observations on public areas that frequently serve as points of student interaction, such as canteens, libraries, and green open spaces.

The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling with strictly operationalised inclusion criteria. Selected informants had to meet the following criteria: (1) be registered as active students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra with a high intensity of smartphone use, as evidenced by screen time exceeding 5 hours per day ([Lutfiana & Arviani, 2024](#)); (2) visibly exhibit phubbing behaviour on campus, with indicators such as regularly looking at their screens when spoken to, holding devices during group discussions, and providing delayed responses due to focus on their devices ([Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018](#)); and (3) be willing to participate in interviews voluntarily. During fieldwork, the researcher acted directly as the key instrument, equipped with a semi-structured interview guide.

Data collection was carried out through direct observation of student interactions, document study, and in-depth interviews with six informants on campus. To ensure a depth of data variation and a representative range of perspectives, the six informants were mapped according to their diverse background profiles, including differences in faculty, semester level, gender, and daily smartphone usage duration. These aspects were recorded in detail for each informant for data registration and documentation purposes.

The collected field data were then analysed using the Interactive Analysis Model. This process began with data reduction, in which the researcher filtered, summarised, and discarded irrelevant raw information to remain focused on the core issues. The next step was data display in the form of systematically arranged narrative text. This presentation aimed to illustrate how attentional disruptions caused by phubbing habits can hinder students' cognitive processes. The final stage involved drawing conclusions and continuously verifying findings throughout the research process to formulate a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

To ensure the validity of the findings, the researcher applied source triangulation techniques by cross-checking information between informants. In the final stage, all field findings were classified using the four-dimensional phubbing framework formulated by [Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas \(2018\)](#), namely nomophobia, interpersonal conflict, self-isolation, and problem acknowledgement.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Patterns of Phubbing Behaviour

Phubbing (phone snubbing) is a social behaviour characterised by an individual's tendency to prioritise smartphone use over direct interaction with those around them. Among students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU), phubbing behaviour during academic interactions does not occur randomly, but rather forms specific patterns. These patterns are examined using the four aspects of phubbing outlined by [Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas \(2018\)](#), nomophobia, interpersonal conflict, self-isolation, and problem acknowledgement.

Table 1. Informants data

No	Initials	Article Initials	Study Programme	Semester	Age	Gender
1	S.D.Y.L	Informant 1	Library Science	7	21	Female
2	D.A	Informant 2	Management	7	21	Female
3	W.D	Informant 3	Management	7	21	Female
4	A.Y	Informant 4	Information Systems	5	20	Male
5	B.F.A	Informant 5	Information Systems	5	20	Male
6	H.M	Informant 6	Management	7	21	Female

Source: Research Document, 2026.

4.1.1. Nomophobia aspect

Nomophobia (no-mobile-phone-phobia) is marked by anxiety or reflexive urges when individuals do not have direct access to their smartphones. This condition triggers phubbing behaviour, as individuals continuously check their phone screens to ensure they do not miss any information or digital interaction. Informant 5 stated:

"I often open TikTok or WhatsApp groups during class, just in case there is information about gossip from the neighbouring circle or something that is currently trending on campus. I reflexively check my phone because I am afraid of missing the latest updates." (Informant 5, interview, 5 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

The fear of missing out on the latest information (FoMO) experienced by students is the main stimulus for nomophobia. This fear triggers a reflexive urge to constantly check social media timelines ([Sandrin Hura et al., 2021](#)). This phenomenon is reinforced by an interview with Informant 1, who stated:

"I counted it myself at the time. During one lecture, I opened my phone more than ten times. It wasn't always for something important; sometimes I just checked the time or the lock screen. But I still opened it." (Informant 1, interview, June 3, 2026; translated from Indonesian)

A similar experience was also shared by Informant 2, who admitted to missing some information when their attention shifted to replying to messages received via WhatsApp.

"That's right. While the lecturer was explaining the material, I briefly replied to a WhatsApp message, and I missed some of the information being explained." (Informant 2, interview, 3 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

The behaviour of repeatedly opening a smartphone without clear urgency reflects what is referred to in psychological literature as checking behaviour. This compulsive behaviour arises as a direct response aimed at alleviating anxiety caused by nomophobia. This phenomenon is further supported by the researcher's classroom observations, which found that students, on average, checked their smartphones 8 to 15 times during a 90-minute lecture session. This intensity increased significantly during lecture-based sessions compared to group discussions or presentations.

The high frequency of smartphone checking in classrooms strengthens the reflexive urge to remain connected to the device, ultimately shaping an instant mindset when students encounter new information. This is clearly illustrated by Informant 5's statement:

"It depends, if the information isn't interesting or is new to me, I just think, 'oh, okay', and just have an instant reaction." (Informant 5, interview, 5 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

The statements from these two informants illustrate that anxiety when not close to a smartphone can affect how students receive information. When the information obtained is considered uninteresting, informants tend to respond spontaneously without attempting to understand or examine it further. This condition indicates that students' attention is easily diverted, resulting in less optimal information processing. These findings support those of Putri et al. (2024), who state that high levels of social media addiction are associated with students' difficulty in controlling smartphone use. Consequently, attention is more easily fragmented, and focus during information seeking or comprehension may be disrupted. Based on these findings, it can be understood that a tendency toward nomophobia may affect the quality of students' information absorption, especially when learning processes require full concentration and engagement.

Nevertheless, the relationship between smartphone use and the ability to evaluate information does not always follow the same pattern. Research by Beene et al. (2023) indicates that students' ability to evaluate digital information can be enhanced through the strengthening of information literacy. Students who possess the skills to assess source credibility, examine supporting evidence, and compare information from various sources are still able to make more critical information judgements, even when interacting intensively with digital media. These findings also indicate that the use of digital media does not automatically reduce the quality of information discernment, but is influenced by the information literacy competence of the individual. In contrast to these results, the majority of informants in this study associated smartphone use during the learning process with reduced concentration, missing lecturers' explanations, and a tendency to accept information without conducting further investigation. This difference in findings suggests that the impact of phubbing on information discernment is determined not only by the intensity of smartphone use, but also by students' ability to control their attention and apply information evaluation skills when using digital devices. Thus, information literacy can be understood as a factor that has the potential to moderate the negative impact of phubbing behaviour on students' ability to critically evaluate information.

4.1.2. Interpersonal conflict aspect

This aspect of interpersonal conflict refers to the emergence of tension, misunderstandings, or feelings of neglect that arise in interpersonal relationships as a direct result of phubbing behaviour. In the classroom context, interpersonal conflict occurs primarily in two directions: between students and fellow group discussion members, and between students and lecturers (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018). Experiences of discomfort in interactions between students and lecturers due to phubbing behaviour in class were directly described by Informant 3, as follows:

"Once, a lecturer asked me a question in front of the class because they saw me holding my phone. I couldn't answer because I really wasn't listening. I was so embarrassed. Since then, I've been more careful." (Informant 3, interview, 29 May 2026; translated from Indonesian)

According to Informant 3, the interpersonal conflict aspect arising from phubbing behaviour often leads to spontaneous reprimands from lecturers, which are perceived by students as a form of social pressure. Such experiences may contribute to an uncomfortable learning atmosphere for students in the classroom. This conflict is not always explicit; in many cases, it is more apparent at the psychological level, with students feeling guilty for engaging in phubbing, while lecturers feel disrespected. This condition creates latent tension that affects the quality of pedagogical relationships between lecturers and students.

These findings are consistent with the research of Beukeboom and Pollmann (2021), which indicates that phubbing creates feelings of exclusion, decreases perceptions of attention and

responsiveness from conversation partners, and negatively impacts the quality of interpersonal relationships. Although that research was conducted in the context of interpersonal relationships outside the classroom, the mechanisms observed are similar to those found in this study. Students who are reprimanded for focusing too much on their smartphones not only lose the opportunity to optimally participate in the learning process but also experience psychological tension that can affect the quality of their interactions with lecturers during academic activities.

In addition to damaging relationships with lecturers, phubbing behaviour also creates destructive and unproductive dynamics within student group discussions. This was clearly stated by Informant 1:

"When I was explaining my idea to the group, another member just kept scrolling. It felt like talking to a wall. It made me not want to contribute ideas anymore." (Informant 1, interview, 3 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

The act of ignoring ideas and the feeling of being unappreciated within group discussions are clear manifestations of interpersonal conflict. When communication is blocked because other members are occupied with scrolling on their phones, students who feel ignored often choose to stop sharing their ideas. As a result, the process of exchanging and filtering important information within the group is stalled, leading to a decline in the quality of group decisions or assignments.

These findings further reinforce the notion that phubbing not only disrupts communication processes but also inhibits the development of effective group interaction. When the attention of group members is diverted by smartphones, others are likely to feel neglected, resulting in decreased participation in discussions. This situation has the potential to reduce the quality of information exchange, hinder collaboration, and lower the effectiveness of group decision-making. Similar findings have been reported in various studies, which show that phubbing is associated with increased interpersonal conflict, decreased relationship satisfaction, and the emergence of feelings of being neglected in face-to-face interactions.

4.1.3. Self-isolation aspect

Self-isolation occurs when individuals who engage in phubbing begin to withdraw from social interactions as a result of excessive smartphone use. This process occurs gradually, with phubbers reducing their participation in social interactions, as indicated by the loss of eye contact during conversations. This was described by Informants 3, 4, and 5 as follows:

"If I'm in the middle of a conversation and I suddenly check my phone, it's usually because the conversation is getting boring, so I open my phone and go on social media, so I don't get bored and the situation doesn't feel awkward." (Informant 3, interview, 3 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

"When I was in a group discussion, I reflexively opened my phone because I felt awkward." (Informant 4, interview, 29 May 2026; translated from Indonesian)

"I use my phone to scroll TikTok because I get bored in class." (Informant 5, interview, 5 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

The act of opening a phone to dispel boredom and awkwardness is part of the self-isolation aspect, not merely a matter of technological dependence, but also a coping strategy for social discomfort. Students use smartphones as an alternative space to divert their attention when feeling bored or awkward during learning. This digital space provides access to entertainment and more interesting content, so their attention gradually shifts from direct interaction to smartphone activities. The digital space may offer immediate entertainment, greater control over content, and temporary relief from academic pressure. These findings are consistent with the research by Koc and Caliskan (2022), which shows that phubbing behaviour in educational environments can reduce the quality of face-to-face interaction because individuals' attention is more focused on their smartphones than on ongoing communication. This situation reduces involvement in academic interactions, so the social relationships formed during the learning process do not develop optimally. In this study, students use smartphones as an escape when feeling bored or awkward during learning. As a result, attention to discussions or interactions with friends decreases, making them more likely to withdraw from active participation in class.

The findings of this study also show that the tendency to withdraw from direct interaction affects the way students receive information. Some informants admitted that they prefer to trust a friend's explanation rather than conduct independent research or verification. This condition indicates that attention diverted by smartphones not only affects the quality of communication but also reduces students' cognitive engagement in evaluating information. These results are consistent with the research of Pérez-Juárez et al. (2023), which shows that digital distractions during learning can decrease students' academic engagement and reduce their ability to concentrate on learning activities. The research also emphasises that self-control in using digital devices is an important factor for minimising the impact of distractions on the learning process.

Repeated self-isolation also encourages students to rely more on information from others, rather than carrying out direct verification themselves, as demonstrated by Informant 3's statement.

"Honestly, yes, sometimes I just say 'yes, yes' as if I've received new information I didn't know before, because I trust my friend to bring accurate information." (Informant 3, interview, 3 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

This statement illustrates how students who are accustomed to withdrawing from direct interaction tend to hand over the process of evaluating information to others in a passive manner, without making efforts to confirm its truth themselves. This tendency to withdraw also makes it difficult for students to think and contribute actively in discussions, as noted by Informant 5:

"If I get too absorbed in interesting content, it becomes hard to think of ideas, so I just want things to be instant and agree with whatever my groupmates suggest." (Informant 5, interview, 5 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

This statement demonstrates that self-isolation, triggered by immersion in digital content, not only causes students to distance themselves physically and emotionally from their group, but also weakens their capacity for active thinking, making them more likely to agree with others' opinions without critically processing them.

Repeated self-isolation forms a pattern of passive behaviour in class. Students who are accustomed to self-isolation via smartphones become increasingly reluctant to actively participate in discussions, ask questions, or respond to lecturers' questions. Their academic engagement progressively declines. This decline in academic engagement does not necessarily mean that students lose the ability to learn, but it does indicate that opportunities to exchange ideas, ask questions, and build mutual understanding become increasingly limited. In the long term, this condition has the potential to reduce the quality of the learning process, as students more often act as passive recipients of information rather than active participants who construct knowledge through discussion and reflection.

4.1.4. Problem acknowledgement aspect

Problem acknowledgement is the phase in which individuals who engage in phubbing recognise and admit that their phubbing habit is a problem and is socially undesirable, yet they still feel a psychological urge to continue the behaviour. This was acknowledged by Informant 5:

"Yes, I know that (phubbing) behaviour actually disrupts my concentration in class. That's why I try to make an instant priority scale now. So, if a notification comes in and it's important, I'll reply straight away. But if it's not important, I ignore it and focus on listening to the lecturer." (Informant 5, interview, 5 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

This statement demonstrates that Informant 5 has realised that their phubbing behaviour can disrupt concentration during learning. This awareness reflects the characteristics of the problem acknowledgement aspect, namely the individual's recognition that such habits have negative consequences even though the urge to use a smartphone still arises. Students acknowledge that smartphones can disrupt their focus in class. To address this, they deliberately create an instant priority scale in their minds. Students actively assess and separate which digital information is urgent and which can be postponed. By ignoring unimportant notifications, students strive to preserve their remaining concentration so that their minds can still absorb lecture material effectively.

This finding is also supported by Informant 2, who explained that when their attention is distracted by a smartphone, they do not immediately accept the information received, but choose to confirm it with friends or lecturers.

"I don't just believe it straight away, I usually double-check with a friend or the lecturer." (Informant 2, interview, 3 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

Awareness of the negative impact of phubbing also encourages some students to build verification mechanisms for the information they receive, as stated by Informant 6:

"In that situation, I don't immediately believe the information. I usually ask another friend, or if I'm still unsure, I ask the lecturer again." (Informant 6, interview, 5 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

Informant 6's statement illustrates another form of problem acknowledgement: the awareness that information received when attention is disrupted by phubbing cannot always be trusted immediately, and must therefore be reconfirmed with others. This strategy demonstrates students' efforts to compensate for weaknesses in independently assessing information due to divided focus.

Although most informants described phubbing behaviour as disruptive to the process of receiving and evaluating information, this study also found variation in informants' experiences. For example, Informant 2 stated that when they are unsure about the information they receive, they still confirm it with other friends or lecturers before believing it. Meanwhile, Informant 4 revealed that they rarely miss information because they are still able to divide their attention between listening to the lecturer and using their smartphone. This variation in findings indicates that the impact of phubbing on information discernment is not always the same for every student. These results are consistent with Chyne et al. (2023), who showed that the ability to evaluate digital information is influenced by mastery of information evaluation strategies. The findings of this study indicate that, in addition to smartphone use, the ability to verify and manage attention also contributes to maintaining the quality of information discernment for some students. Therefore, although phubbing can increase the risk of disrupted information discernment processes, the ability to verify information and control attention still enables some students to maintain the quality of information assessment they previously had. Thus, in this study, phubbing behaviour is better understood as a factor that increases vulnerability to reduced information discernment, rather than as a condition that automatically causes all students to lose the ability to critically and accurately manage information.

4.2. The Impact of Phubbing Behaviour on Information Discernment Ability

Phubbing (*phone snubbing*) is a behaviour where individuals ignore those around them due to excessive focus on smartphones. This behaviour not only damages social interaction but also has a negative impact on a person's ability to distinguish between valid and invalid information, known as information discernment. Information discernment, as defined by Walton et al. (2018), is the individual's ability to make judgements about information. The four previously discussed aspects of phubbing, namely nomophobia, interpersonal conflict, self-isolation, and problem acknowledgement, are fundamentally interconnected in reducing students' ability to critically evaluate information.

The nomophobia aspect serves as the starting point of the decline in information discernment, as the anxiety about needing to always be connected to a smartphone divides students' attention during information processing. This divided attention prevents students from allocating full attention and concentration to the messages received, even though such concentration is essential for understanding information accuracy (Pointon et al., 2023). Information discernment requires full attention, proactive scepticism, and the habit of checking sources before believing information. This condition is difficult to achieve when students' attention is constantly drawn to checking their phones.

This condition is worsened by the self-isolation aspect, where students who withdraw from direct interaction lose the opportunity for clarification or discussion that could deepen their understanding of certain information. Reliance on other people's judgments without independent verification, as seen in self-isolation patterns, contradicts the principle of proactive scepticism,

which is at the heart of *information discernment* according to [Walton et al. \(2018\)](#), namely, the ability to interrogate information sources critically rather than accept them passively. Meanwhile, the interpersonal conflict aspect further exacerbates this condition, as tension arising in discussions makes students reluctant to question or clarify doubtful information, thereby hindering the process of exchanging and filtering information within the group.

The most apparent consequence of these phubbing aspects is the emergence of superficial information processing, which involves judging information only at the surface level without analytical depth. This pattern of instant thinking, which arises from the urge to engage in checking behaviour associated with nomophobia and from absorption in digital content during self-isolation, is the antithesis of proactive scepticism. Instead of questioning, analysing, and verifying, students choose the easiest route by accepting and agreeing immediately. In the long term, this pattern forms cognitive habits that are very difficult to change, as the brain becomes accustomed to responses that do not require much effort.

Another consequence of these phubbing aspects is the tendency for students to engage in heuristic processing or simple information processing. This condition is evident when students' attention is divided due to smartphone use, making them more likely to accept information based on first impressions or others' explanations without in-depth processing. This pattern is seen in several informants who admitted to immediately agreeing with information conveyed by friends or only clarifying after realising that some information was missed. This finding is best explained by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which posits that when individuals have limited attention or cognitive resources, information processing tends to occur via the peripheral route, resulting in less in-depth evaluation of information ([Petty & Cacioppo, 1986](#); [Kitchen et al., 2014](#)). In this research context, attention diverted by phubbing behaviour means that some students do not fully elaborate on the information they receive, so verification and assessment of information credibility become less optimal.

The results of this study show that divided attention due to phubbing behaviour has the potential to reduce the quality of information processing. However, several studies indicate that the use of digital technology does not always have the same impact on all students. [Pérez-Juárez et al. \(2023\)](#) found that although digital devices can be a source of distraction during learning, the impact depends on students' self-control and their ability to manage technology use. In contrast to these findings, the majority of informants in this study admitted that they found it easier to accept information without in-depth processing when their attention was diverted by smartphones, especially due to notifications, social media, and entertainment content during learning. This difference indicates that the influence of phubbing on *information discernment* is not only related to the presence of smartphones but also to the individual's ability to manage attention and control digital distractions during the learning process.

Nevertheless, the results of this study also show that not all informants demonstrated the same pattern of information processing. Informant 2 stated that when they felt uncertain about the information they received, they chose to confirm it with other friends or lecturers before accepting it. This finding shows that the impact of phubbing on information discernment is not always uniform. Among some students, the habit of verification is still maintained even when their attention is diverted by smartphone use. On the other hand, the problem acknowledgement aspect also shows that some informants are beginning to recognise the negative impact of phubbing behaviour on their concentration and are trying to reduce its influence, for example by setting notification priority scales or reconfirming information received. These various efforts indicate an initial awareness to maintain the quality of information assessment, even though it has not yet developed into a consistent practice of information discernment.

From the perspective of [Wilson's \(2000\)](#) information behaviour model, failure in information discernment due to phubbing can be understood as a dysfunction in the stage of information use behaviour. This stage is where individuals should integrate new information into their existing knowledge base. When students' attention is divided due to phubbing, whether because of nomophobia, interpersonal conflict, withdrawal through self-isolation, or compensatory strategies at the problem acknowledgement stage, the integration process does not run optimally. The information received is not processed in depth, its accuracy is not verified, and its relevance is

not evaluated, so it fails to make a meaningful contribution to students' understanding and academic decision-making.

Although most informants described that phubbing behaviour makes it easier for attention to be diverted, resulting in less optimal information reception and evaluation, this study also found variation in experiences among informants. Informant 2 explained that when they feel uncertain about the information they receive, they still try to verify it by asking other friends or lecturers until they get information they consider correct. The informant stated,

"I don't just believe it straight away, I usually double-check with a friend or the lecturer."
(Informant 2, interview, 3 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

This finding shows that the impact of phubbing behaviour on information discernment is not always uniform. Although attention is sometimes diverted by smartphone use, some students still maintain the habit of verifying the information they receive. Thus, phubbing behaviour does not automatically eliminate the ability for information discernment, but its impact can differ depending on how individuals manage their attention and evaluate the information they obtain.

4.3. Students' Efforts to Maintain Information Discernment Amidst Phubbing Behaviour

The results of this study show that students do not completely lose the ability to maintain the quality of information when they experience distraction due to phubbing behaviour. Based on interviews, informants described various efforts made after their attention was diverted by smartphone use. These efforts arise from daily experiences during lectures and group discussions, and thus reflect adaptation to the situations encountered rather than consciously designed strategies. Therefore, the discussion in this section focuses on how students try to regain missed information and how these findings are understood through the concept of information discernment. The findings are analysed from two perspectives: the informants' experiences and the researcher's interpretation based on the theoretical framework used.

4.3.1. Informants' perspective: efforts based on firsthand experience

Based on the interview results, most informants stated that they tried to recover information they missed when they realised that their attention had been diverted by their smartphone. The most common method was to ask friends about the parts of the discussion they could not follow or to review the material that had been delivered. Some informants also admitted that they chose to postpone opening notifications if the incoming messages were not considered urgent, so that their attention could be redirected to the ongoing learning process.

"Yes, I know that (phubbing) behaviour actually disrupts my concentration in class. That's why I try to make an instant priority scale now. So, if a notification comes in and it's important, I'll reply straight away. But if it's not important, I ignore it and focus on listening to the lecturer." (interview, 5 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

"If I'm in that situation, I don't just believe it straight away, I'll ask another friend, or if I'm still unsure, I'll ask the lecturer." (interview, 5 June 2026; translated from Indonesian)

These various efforts show that informants are aware of the consequences of phubbing behaviour for the information reception process. However, the efforts made generally only emerge after they feel that they have missed some information during the learning process. This condition indicates that the actions taken are more a form of adjustment to situations that have occurred rather than a habit consistently directed at critically evaluating the quality of information. This finding is similar to research by Chyne et al. (2023), which shows that students' ability to evaluate digital information can be improved through the application of systematic information evaluation strategies, such as assessing the credibility of sources, claims, objectives, and the context of information. The research results indicate that the quality of information evaluation does not only depend on access to digital information, but also on the individual's ability to consistently apply evaluation strategies. In contrast to these findings, most informants in this study only carried out verification after realising that some information was missed due to divided attention during learning. This difference shows that the ability to maintain information discernment is influenced not only by awareness to verify, but also by the habit of applying information evaluation strategies continuously in learning situations.

4.3.2. Researcher's perspective: strategies based on theoretical analysis

Based on the analysis results, the researcher found that the various efforts made by informants were still oriented towards regaining information missed due to divided attention while using smartphones. Informants tended to rely on friends as a source of clarification or to reread material after the learning activities were completed. This pattern indicates that attention is an important factor in determining the quality of the information reception process. When attention is diverted, students not only lose part of the content of the discussion, but also risk losing the context needed to fully understand the information.

These findings can be understood through the concept of information discernment, which emphasises the importance of an individual's ability to evaluate credibility, compare various sources, and reflect on the reasons why certain information can be trusted (McGrew, 2020). In this study, that process is not yet fully visible because most informants focused more on efforts to regain information than on evaluating the quality of the information received. Thus, in this research, phubbing behaviour does not directly eliminate the ability of information discernment, but rather affects the early stages of information processing through reduced attention during the learning process.

Nevertheless, the results of this study also show that the impact of phubbing is not experienced uniformly by all informants. Some students still try to confirm information with friends or lecturers before believing it. These findings indicate that the ability to evaluate information is still influenced by individual factors, such as self-regulation, learning experience, and the habit of verification. This condition is in line with the concept of digital resilience, which emphasises that individuals have different abilities to face challenges in the digital environment through adaptation, reflection, and responsible decision-making regarding the information they receive (Hammond et al., 2024).

Overall, the results of this study show that students are aware of the need to reduce the impact of phubbing on the information reception process. However, the efforts made are still reactive and arise only after their attention is diverted by smartphone use. This finding indicates that information discernment depends not only on critical thinking skills but also on the individual's ability to manage attention, control digital distractions, and consistently practise evaluating information during the learning process. Thus, attention can be seen as one of the prerequisites that supports the effective process of information evaluation in the academic environment.

5. Conclusion

Phubbing behaviour among students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra can be observed in four aspects. First, nomophobia, which is the anxiety or fear that causes students to constantly check their phones. Second, the emergence of interpersonal conflict, where this habit creates tension during academic interactions. Third, self-isolation or withdrawal, meaning students become less likely to communicate directly with others. Fourth, problem acknowledgement, which means some students are actually aware that the phubbing habit is a problem they need to control.

These four aspects have an impact on the decline in students' ability to assess information (information discernment). This happens because their attention is divided, resulting in a less thorough process of evaluating information, and the habit of critically checking the truth of information also weakens.

Even so, this study also found that students have begun to take several measures to address this issue, such as rechecking the accuracy of information they receive, selecting which notifications are important to see first, reducing phone use while studying, and getting used to thinking critically and being more cautious (sceptical) in evaluating the information they receive.

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Authors' Contributions

Liza Octaviana: Writing and preparation of the original draft. Idea development; formulation or development of the main goals and objectives of the research. **Franindya Purwaningtyas:** Supervisor.

Conflict of Interests

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AI Usage Declaration

The authors acknowledge the use of AI tools (ChatGPT) only for language editing and readability enhancement. No AI tool was used to generate research ideas, perform data analysis, or draw scientific conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this manuscript.