



Partner phubbing and depression among married Chinese adults: The roles of relationship satisfaction and relationship length



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ABSTRACT

Although relationship satisfaction has been shown to play an important role in married adults' depression, it is less clear whether partner phubbing can undermine relationship satisfaction and increase the risk of depression. The current study investigated the indirect effect of partner phubbing on depression via relationship satisfaction and the moderating role of relationship length in this indirect effect. Two hundred forty-three married Chinese adults participated in the study. The results indicated that partner phubbing had a negative effect on relationship satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction had a negative effect on depression. Partner phubbing had an indirect positive impact on depression via relationship satisfaction, and this indirect effect only existed among those married more than seven years. Results indicate that partner phubbing is a significant risk factor for depression among those married more than seven years.

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1. Introduction

Depression is one of the most common mental health disorders and affects approximately 350 million people worldwide (Liu et al., 2016). As in other countries, depression is also a major public health issue in China, with the prevalence rates ranging from 5.9% to 30.39% in Chinese adults (Jiang, Li, Chen, & Chen, 2015; Lei, Xiao, Liu, & Li, 2016). Most importantly, depression creates a heavy burden on society. Thus, it is of theoretical and practical importance to explore those factors that may contribute to a decrease or increase in depression. According to the marital discord model of depression (MDMD), marital discord is a significant risk factor for depression because marital discord impairs spousal support and couple cohesion (Beach, Katz, Kim, & Brody, 2003; Beach & O'Leary, 1993; Miller et al., 2013). Specifically, lower relationship satisfaction and lower marital satisfaction have been associated with higher concurrent depression and a heightened risk of future depression (Dekel et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2013; Whisman & Bruce, 1999; Whisman & Uebelacker, 2009; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012b). Despite the robust empirical support for the MDMD (Brock & Lawrence, 2011; Miller et al., 2013; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007; Wang, Wang, Li, & Miller, 2014), it is less clear that those factors (e.g., partner phubbing) may undermine marital or relationship satisfaction and increase the risk of depression. Partner phubbing is the extent to which your romantic partner or spouse uses or is distracted by his/her cell phone while in your company (Roberts & David, 2016). Considering that time spent on

phone may displace or reduce meaningful interaction with one's spouse (Ahlstrom, Lundberg, Zabriskie, Eggett, & Lindsay, 2012), it is possible that the distractions caused by partner phubbing would undermine relationship satisfaction. Therefore, the current study would examine the effect of partner phubbing on relationship satisfaction among married Chinese adults and explore whether partner phubbing could exert significant indirect effect on depression via relationship satisfaction.

1.1. Relationship satisfaction and depression

In the previous literature, there are conceptual models and substantial findings for the direction of the relation between marital or relationship satisfaction and depression (Choi, 2016). The MDMD suggests that marital discord can contribute to an increase in depression for married adults (Beach & O'Leary, 1993). According to MDMD, individuals who are in distressed marriages are more likely to have depressive symptom via two etiological pathways (Choi, 2016; Wang et al., 2014). First, couples who are distressed by their marital relationships are more prone to show hostility, which in turn places them at a higher risk for depression. Second, couples with marital discord are less likely to provide and receive support and thus they are more prone to being depressed from other causes (Beach et al., 2003).

Indeed, a great deal of empirical evidence supports the MDMD. Numerous cross-sectional studies have shown a robust correlation between marital or relationship satisfaction and depression (Dekel et al., 2014; Levis et al., 2016; McPheters & Sandberg, 2010; Miller et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2014; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012a, 2012b; Whitton & Whisman, 2010). Furthermore, results from longitudinal studies can shed light on the stability of this relation. Though often debated, there

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is growing support among researchers for individuals who have high levels of marital satisfaction are less likely to get depression (Davila, Karney, Hall, & Bradbury, 2003; Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997; Kouros, Papp, & Cummings, 2008). Specifically, marital satisfaction can predict higher levels of depressive symptoms at one year later (Beach et al., 2003), one year and a half later (Fincham et al., 1997), two years later (Whisman & Uebelacker, 2009), and even seven years later (Brock & Lawrence, 2011). In addition, one meta-analysis shows that marital satisfaction is negatively related to depression, with the effect size of -0.42 for women and -0.37 for men (Whisman, 2001). Another meta-analysis shows that the longitudinal association between marital quality and personal well-being including life satisfaction and depression was stronger, when personal well-being rather than marital quality was treated as the dependent variable (Proulx et al., 2007).

1.2. Partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction

Considering that life has become a major distraction from our cell phones, it is of critical importance that increased research attention be focused on the impact that technology use has on relationship satisfaction (Roberts & David, 2016). According to the displacement hypothesis, partner phubbing may negatively affect on relationship satisfaction. This theory suggests that time spent on cell phones may displace or reduce meaningful interactions with one's couples, which may in turn undermine their relationship satisfaction. Similarly, cell phone use during face-to-face interactions makes persons less involved in the conversation, thereby decreasing the quality of the conversation (Turkle, 2011). One explanation for these negative outcomes may be that cell phone users risk mishearing things, which may lead to them asking to repeat or re-discuss information. As a result, the conversation partner of a cell phone user may feel awkward and find the conversation less qualitative (Humphreys, 2005).

Some empirical evidence has supported this hypothesis by showing that certain types of mobile technology use may become problematic in romantic relationship by increasing conflict and leading to poor relationship and marital satisfaction (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Roberts & David, 2016; Schade, Sandberg, Bean, Busby, & Coyne, 2013). The presence of smartphone during proximal interactions is negatively correlated with perceptions of emphatic concern and closeness to the conversation partner (Misra, Cheng, Genevieve, & Yuan, 2014). For instance, family members become frustrated when others do non-urgent activities on their phones in the presence of others (Oduor et al., 2016), and caretakers who are 'absorbed' in their smartphone have poor social interactions with their children (Radesky et al., 2014). Two cross-sectional studies have also shown that partner's playing game and partner phubbing are negatively associated with relationship and marital satisfaction (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Roberts & David, 2016). Furthermore, two experimental studies indicate that the presence of mobile phones can interfere with human relationships (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013), and mobile messaging behavior during an offline conversation can lead to more negative impression formation and perceptions of lower interaction quality (Vanden Abeele, Antheunis, & Schouten, 2016). More specifically, mere presence of cell phones can undermine perceived closeness, connection, and conversation quality (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013). Based on the theory and empirical results discussed above, sufficient evidence suggests that a partner's use of a cell phone while in the company of his or her romantic partner has a negative effect on relationship satisfaction.

1.3. Partner phubbing, relationship satisfaction and depression

Although considerable research has established the negative association between relationship satisfaction and depression as well as partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction, much less is known about

how partner phubbing increase the risk of depression. To our knowledge, there are only two studies that have tested the effects of partner phubbing and technoference on depression (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Roberts & David, 2016). Technoference, which is similar to partner phubbing, is defined as everyday intrusions or interruptions in couple interactions or time spent together that occur due to technology including cell or smart phones (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). They both found that partner's frequently engaging in phubbing behaviors or overuse of technology can directly and significantly affect individual's depression. However, in relation to the associations among partner phubbing (or technoference), relationship satisfaction, and depression, these two studies have not reached an agreement (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Roberts & David, 2016). More specifically, Roberts and David (2016) found that partner phubbing had an indirect positive impact on individuals' depression through relationship satisfaction and ultimately life satisfaction. In contrast, McDaniel and Coyne (2016) found that technoference did not indirectly impact depression through its impact on relationship satisfaction. It is important to note, however, that there may be one design problem in these two studies. They both ignored the fact that relationship length may moderate the association among partner phubbing, relationship satisfaction, and depression. As suggested by Roberts and David (2016), "it may be that some people are less likely to overuse technology, or frequently engaging in partner phubbing behaviors, in the early stages of their relationships." Therefore, the indirect effect of partner phubbing on depression via relationship satisfaction may only exist among individuals in long-term marriages (e.g., marriage more than seven years). For instance, husbands in longer term relationships are more vulnerable to depressive symptoms in the context of marital problems compared with husbands in shorter term relationships (Kouros et al., 2008).

Based on the above limitations, the aim of the current study was to examine the indirect effect of partner phubbing on depression via relationship satisfaction among married Chinese adults. According to the marital discord model of depression (Beach et al., 2003), individuals with high relationship dissatisfaction are less likely to receive from partners and thus they are more prone to being depressed from other causes, such as partner phubbing and technoference (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Roberts & David, 2016). Therefore, we proposed that partner phubbing would have an indirect positive impact on individual's depression via relationship satisfaction.

1.4. The role of relationship length

Although partner phubbing may impact individual's depression through the mediating role of relationship satisfaction, not all married adults who experience partner phubbing or technoference homogeneously experience decreased levels of relationship satisfaction and suffer from depression. Heterogeneity of outcomes may originate from relationship characteristics that moderate (i.e., buffer or exacerbate) the impact of partner phubbing on relationship satisfaction and depression, for example, relationship length. Identification of such moderators would help determine which individuals may be most at risk for relationship dissatisfaction and depression in the face of partner phubbing. According to interdependence theory, individual's outcomes are inherently influenced by their partners—what individual does or feels in a relationship can affect her/his partner (Rodriguez, Neighbors, & Klee, 2013). This pattern means that both positive and negative daily experiences may be shared or transmitted in interdependent couples, especially in longer term couples (Totenhagen, Butler, Curran, & Serido, 2015). As a consequence of interdependence, the behaviors of one dyad member likely affect the outcomes of the other dyad member in longer term relationships (McNulty & Karney, 2002; Rodriguez et al., 2013). However, this effect may be small or does not even exist in shorter term relationships. Therefore, we expected that individuals in longer term relationships would be more vulnerable to relationship dissatisfaction and depression in the context of partner phubbing

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