



# Digital akrasia: a qualitative study of phubbing

Jesper Aagaard<sup>1</sup>

Received: 4 October 2018 / Accepted: 3 January 2019 / Published online: 17 January 2019  
© Springer-Verlag London Ltd., part of Springer Nature 2019

## Abstract

The present article focuses on the issue of ignoring conversational partners in favor of one's phone, or what has also become known as phubbing. Prior research has shown that this behavior is associated with a host of negative interpersonal consequences. Since phubbing by definition entails adverse effects, however, it is interesting to explore why people continue to engage in this hurtful behavior: Are they unaware that phubbing is hurtful to others? Or do they simply not care? Building on interviews with students in a Danish business college, the article reveals a pronounced discrepancy in young people's relationship to phubbing: While they emphatically denounce phubbing as both annoying and disrespectful, they readily admit to phubbing others. In other words, they often act against their own moral convictions. Importantly, participants describe this discrepancy as a result of an unintentional inclination to divert attentional engagement. On the basis of these results, the article develops the notion of digital akrasia, which can be defined as a tendency to become swept up by one's digital devices in spite of better intentions. It is proposed that this phenomenon may be the result of bad technohabits. Further implications are discussed.

**Keywords** Attention · Distraction · Habits · Phubbing · Smartphones

## 1 Introduction

According to a Pew research report from 2018, 95% of teens now have access to a smartphone, and fully 45% of teens say that they are online 'almost constantly' (Anderson and Jiang 2018). In comparison, only 24% of teens reported being online 'almost constantly' in 2015 (Lenhart 2015). How this rapidly increasing hyperconnectivity affects our attentional capacity, however, is relatively unknown. We are, in other words, in the midst of a natural experiment with mankind's psychological makeup. In previous studies, students have described at least one way in which their attentional capacity is currently being challenged by the use of digital devices, namely a powerful attraction toward frequently visited but distracting websites during class (Aagaard 2015). In an attempt to gauge whether (and if so, how) such distraction intertwines with their broader life trajectories, this article explores the use of digital devices in settings that young people choose more freely: how do they use their phones when

sitting on the couch with their partners? Around the dinner table with their families? Or in cafés with their friends?

Specifically, the present article focuses on the issue of ignoring conversational partners in favor of one's phone. The scientific research literature has varyingly called this contemporary phenomenon *absent presence* (Gergen 2002), *technoference* (McDaniel and Coyne 2016a), and *parallel communication* (Kneidinger-Müller 2017), but this article will employ the increasingly popular concept of *phubbing* (Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas 2016) to describe what is at stake in such situations. The rest of the article is structured as follows: it begins with an overview of phubbing research, which shows that phubbing is associated with a host of negative interpersonal consequences. It proceeds to argue that, since phubbing by definition entails adverse effects, it is interesting to explore why people continue to engage in this hurtful behavior. The article then introduces the empirical study, describes its background assumptions, and presents its results with a particular emphasis on young people's pronounced discrepancy regarding phubbing: While they emphatically denounce phubbing as both annoying and disrespectful, they readily admit to phubbing others. In other words, they often act against their own moral convictions. On the basis of these results, the article develops the notion

✉ Jesper Aagaard  
jaagaard@psy.au.dk

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences, Aarhus University, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark

of digital akrasia, which can be defined as a tendency to become swept up by one's digital devices in spite of better intentions. It is proposed that this phenomenon may be the result of bad technohabits. Finally, the study's limitations are discussed and its implications are addressed.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Phubbing research

Phubbing is the phenomenon that occurs when a person suddenly turns their gaze slightly downwards and 'disappears' into their phone in the midst of a social interaction. The word itself is a portmanteau of the words *phone* and *snubbing* and refers to "the act of snubbing someone in a social setting using one's phone instead of talking to the person directly in one's company" (Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas 2016:10). In the twenty-first century, a significant and ever-growing number of people have experienced this phenomenon. In a Pew research report from 2014, 25% of married and partnered respondents and 42% of unmarried respondents in serious romantic relationships reported feeling that their partner had been distracted by their mobile phone during time spent together (Lenhart and Duggan 2014). In a study from 2016, 55% reported being phubbed at least twice daily (Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas 2016). Finally, in a Pew research report from 2018, 72% of parents reported that their teen is at least sometimes distracted by their cellphone when they are trying to have a conversation with them, but, at the same time, 51% of teens reported that their parent is distracted by their own cellphone at least sometimes during conversations (Jiang 2018).

Romantic relationships, social occasions, and parent/child interactions: it seems like no interpersonal arena is safe from phubbing. This is unfortunate, since empirical studies have also shown that phubbing is associated with a host of negative interpersonal consequences like lower perceived communication quality (Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas 2018), lower relationship satisfaction (McDaniel and Coyne 2016a; Roberts and David 2016), worse supervisor–employee relationships, which in turn harms employee engagement (Roberts and David 2017), less satisfaction with coparenting relationships (McDaniel and Coyne 2016b; McDaniel et al. 2018), problematic parent–child relationships and worse behavioral outcomes for children (McDaniel and Radesky 2018), and lower feelings of warmth from parents engaged in phubbing (Stockdale et al. 2018). Experimental research has further demonstrated that what is at stake in these interactions is not a matter of lower quality interactions inducing phubbing, but that phubbing is causally responsible for these negative effects (Vanden Abeele et al. 2016). In addition, qualitative research has indicated that the delayed responses,

mechanical intonation, motionless body, and lack of eye contact that are at stake in phubbing situations combine to signal apathy and discourage further conversation (Aagaard 2016). Finally, empirical studies have shown that phubbees often cope with this passive and marginalized condition by reciprocating phubbing behavior (i.e., "fighting fire with fire") (Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas 2016). Phubbing, in other words, tends to become a vicious, self-reinforcing cycle.

To fully appreciate meaning of phubbing, however, it is worth taking a close look at the word itself. As explained in the video *Phubbing: A Word is Born* (2013), the word phubbing came into existence in May 2012 when a consortium gathered at the University of Sydney to create a concept to describe the issue of ignoring another person in favor of one's phone. The word was meant to launch a critical conversation about this sort of behavior and get people to "put their phones down". From its inception, phubbing was thus as unabashedly normative term. This normativity is further evidenced by the fact that the verb snubbing means "to insult someone by not giving them any attention or treating them as if they are not important" (Cambridge English Dictionary). To call another person's phone use "phubbing" is therefore not a neutral description, but a normative judgment about undesirable (i.e., insulting) behavior. Due to this distinctly negative *desirability characterization* (Taylor 1980), it is unsurprising that phubbing is negatively associated with interpersonal variables like communication quality and relationship satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> Since phubbing by definition entails adverse effects, however, it is interesting to explore why people continue to engage in this hurtful behavior: Are they unaware that phubbing is hurtful to others? Or do they simply not care?

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Situating the present study

The empirical material presented here explores young people's normative relationship to phubbing. The material is part of a broader study on technological mediation of attention that was conducted as a long-term, multi-method qualitative inquiry at a Danish business college. In Denmark, a

<sup>1</sup> Although perhaps less evidently, other concepts in the field of phubbing research have similarly negative desirability characterizations in that these concepts explicitly refer to *illicit* disturbances of ongoing social interactions. Technoference, for instance, is a portmanteau of technology and *interference* (McDaniel and Coyne 2016b), while parallel communication refers to "the phenomenon of mobile mediated communication with absent people that *interrupts* ongoing face-to-face conversations with physically present interaction partners" (Keiding-Müller, 2017:328, emphasis added).

business college is an institution that provides general upper secondary education in commerce to students aged approximately 16–20 years. My fieldwork at the business college began in August 2013 and spanned a year and a half. After 6 months of open, ethnographic participant observation in various classrooms, I began formally interviewing individual students about their use of technologies. Twenty-five students were interviewed in total. All participants volunteered and were not paid for their involvement in the study. Informed consent was asked and given. The interviews were semi-structured, which means that they followed an interview guide, yet remained flexible enough to explore spontaneously occurring ‘red lights’ such as unusual terms or intonations in participants’ answers (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015:161).

The initial questions revolved around students’ use of technologies during class, but the interview guide also contained questions about students’ use of digital devices in their spare time (e.g., “How do you use technology outside of school?”, “Do you use social media when you are with your friends?”). On average, interviews lasted approximately 15 min (some a bit shorter, some a lot longer). Sound recordings were subsequently transcribed to text. The excerpts used below are those which best illustrate the points of interest. They have been translated from Danish to English and all names are pseudonyms. In these excerpts, one sees the so-called active interviews that do not aim for agreement between the interviewer and the participant (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). In addition to prompting, encouraging, and responding to participants’ remarks, active interviews involve pressing for contradictions and even challenging participants’ accounts. In accordance with this active interviewing style, I have strived to avoid interviewer deletion, which occurs when qualitative researchers remove their own contributions from the conversational extracts and thereby obscure the interactional quality of the research interview (Potter and Hepburn 2005).

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Finding oneself phubbing others

Let us start with a slightly long, but significant excerpt with the student Carol. In this extract, Carol initially insists that she and her (young) group of friends have more permissive norms regarding phone use than her (old) parents do.

CAROL: It’s mostly when I’m together with my family that they’ll say something like “put the phone away”.

JESPER: They’ll say something like that?

CAROL: Sure. But when I’m with my friends, they just take it for granted. They use it all the time, too, you know?

JESPER: Is there any time when it may not be appropriate to use it?

CAROL: Hmm, I don’t know. I can’t think of any.

JESPER: You say your family might say something like “put the phone away”. When do they do that?

CAROL: For instance, if we’re sitting in the living room talking, they think it’s pretty distracting and annoying that I have to have my head in the phone all the time, because it’s kind of impossible to get in touch with me. Then I might as well go sit in my room.

JESPER: What do you think about that?

CAROL: It’s true. I feel the same way when my mom or dad is on the phone, you know? I get annoyed about that, too. So it’s kind of hypocritical.

JESPER: But you still say that you don’t have that attitude in your group of friends?

CAROL: I think it’s because we all just use our phones constantly. It’s just different, I think. They’re not old. They’re young, so they’re like me.

JESPER: Even though you say that you “feel the same way”?

CAROL: Yeah, when I’m with my family, I do. And that’s a little bit hypocritical. But when I’m with my friends, then it’s not... Unless I’m explaining something to them that I want them to respond to, or how you’d put it, because then I think it’s extremely annoying and rude if they’re using their phone at the same time.

JESPER: Why?

CAROL: Because I just don’t feel that they’re focusing on what I’m trying to tell them. I feel like they’re focused on something else. There’s a lot of hypocrisy involved in this, as you can see [laughs].

In response to my insistent follow-up questions, Carol eventually admits that her attitude toward the use of phones during social interactions may not be as relaxed as she initially indicates. It is actually hard to get in touch with people who “have their head in the phone”, she argues, and she resents when friends and relatives use their phones while she is talking to them. Carol considers such behavior to be “extremely annoying and rude”. When challenged, Carol’s laissez-faire attitude to phubbing thus melts into the air. This exchange also contains another recurrent element from the interviews: parents gets annoyed when they get phubbed by their teenagers and vice versa (“I feel the same way when my mom or dad is on the phone, you know?”), but both parties

proceed to phub each other anyway. Here is a brief example from my interview with Jenny.

- JESPER: How do you react when your dad is sitting there, checking his emails?
- JENNY: I get pissed off. It's incredibly annoying when you're explaining something to him and he gets a message and he starts reading it. You're like, "... Hello? I was trying to tell you something". But I sometimes do it myself.
- JESPER: So there's an ambivalence there?
- JENNY: Yeah, it's huuuge.

Students' attitudes toward the use of phones during social interactions are characterized by an "ambivalence": On one hand, they resent when other people phub them, but, on the other hand, they often proceed to phub others. It is on this ambivalence (or what Carol calls "hypocrisy") that the rest of this article will focus. During an interview, the student Victoria describes her negative attitude toward other people's phubbing behaviors.

- VICTORIA: It's kind of annoying if you're sitting in a deep conversation and one person just takes out their phone.
- JESPER: Try to explain why it's "annoying".
- VICTORIA: Because then you don't really feel in touch with the person sitting across from you.
- JESPER: Why not?
- VICTORIA: Because the person is very absent, and they can't really multitask. So they reply kind of half-heartedly, lift their head and go, "Sorry, I didn't get that?" It's just annoying to have to repeat yourself.
- JESPER: Do you ever find yourself doing it?
- VICTORIA: [Laughs] Yeah, I also fall into that trap.

Victoria finds it annoying when other people take out their phone during a conversation, because this behavior shows a lack of commitment to the interaction (a "half-heartedness") that makes you feel out of touch with your conversational partner. In response, I ask Victoria whether she ever does the same thing herself (i.e., I ask her to switch perspectives) and she immediately admits to giving in to the same temptation. We thus see a pronounced discrepancy between Victoria's negative attitude toward phubbing and her own technologically mediated actions. This discrepancy would turn out to be quite common among students. In another interview, Anna espouses similar norms regarding phone use during social interactions.

- ANNA: I think we all do it to some extent. Check out stuff. But if me or one of my friends just sit

there, completely absorbed by the phone and not participating in anything that's going on, you're like, "Dude, if you're just going to do that, then why are you even here?" Because it's just so disrespectful if you're talking about something and one person's just—if we're sitting at a table—at the table like [*stares into the palm of her hand*]. It's *so* disrespectful. But I think that, because we're all on Facebook and Instagram and Pinterest and all that, we don't really mind if one person quickly checks something out and returns.

- JESPER: So it's more an issue if they're gone for a while? And you say it seems "disrespectful". Try to explain why.
- ANNA: It's just like, "Is this really such a bummer that you have to go look on Facebook instead?" Because it seems like you don't want to be together with the people you're with. And that's so annoying.
- JESPER: I get that you find it disrespectful when other people do it, but do you ever do it yourself?
- ANNA: [Laughs and nods]
- JESPER: Try to say something about that ambivalence.
- ANNA: Well... Uhhmm... Damn, that's a tough question [*laughs*].
- JESPER: I'm not trying to set you up. I know the feeling myself. It's just interesting.
- ANNA: It's just a tricky question, because I often think that I should behave in the way that I want other people to behave when they're with me. But I don't always do it. And I actually don't know why, because I find it really annoying when other people do it. I try to keep in mind not to do stuff that I would find annoying, but I don't succeed very often.

Like Victoria, Anna finds it annoying when her friends become engrossed in their phones, because this action signals that they do not wish to be together with the rest of the group. When probed, however, Anna admits to doing the same thing herself. She proceeds to tell me that she tries to adhere to an ethics of reciprocity (i.e., "do unto others as you would have them do unto you"), but consistently fails to live up to this ideal in the case of phubbing. Again, we see a pronounced discrepancy between attitude and action. It is interesting to note that Anna does not mind if people quickly use their phone to "check out stuff" and return to the conversation. It is only when people get absorbed by the phone that the behavior gets grating. Other students made similar distinctions. In this final excerpt, for instance, the student Kent distinguishes two different kinds of phone use.

- KENT: If you get a message on Facebook, it's okay to check it out. But just scrolling up and down your Facebook and Instagram? That annoys me.
- JESPER: Is there a distinction in that one thing is automatic, subconscious and annoying, but if there's a thought behind it, it's a bit more okay?
- KENT: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. But when I say that it's annoying and that it annoys me when other people do it, I actually find myself doing it, too, sometimes. And that's what's... Not frustrating, but weird, I think.

If the other person seems to be using their phone for a purpose, this activity is deemed acceptable, but, like the others, Kent finds it annoying when people become absorbed by their phones during social interactions. Hence, one thing that seems to define phubbing is the lack of purpose inherent in absentmindedly checking social media. Without having to probe him, however, Kent spontaneously admits to engaging in such automatic behavior himself. When Kent resorts to browsing Facebook or checking Instagram during a conversation, there is no purpose to this activity. It just happens. Kent is puzzled by this fact. It is “weird”, as he succinctly puts it. In summary, students are acutely aware of the negative consequences of phubbing. They know that phubbing is wrong and they want to abstain from doing it, but they continue to engage in this behavior.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Digital akrasia

Due to the high prevalence of phubbing, Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2016) ask the important question of how phubbing has become an acceptable feature of modern communication. According to this article, however, it has not. Just because a given behavior is empirically widespread does not mean that it is deemed normatively acceptable. At least that seems to be the case with phubbing. Across interviews, students unanimously denounce phubbing as morally wrong. Phubbing, they say, is both annoying and disrespectful. However, we also see an interesting dynamic in which students strongly criticize phubbing, yet openly admit to phubbing others. Although intimately familiar with the upsetting feeling of being snubbed in favor of a phone, they proceed to browse Facebook and check Instagram when spending time with their friends and family. When explaining the reasons for engaging in such behavior, students describe a peculiar tendency to become swept up by their digital devices in spite of better intentions. I propose to call this unintentional inclination to divert attentional engagement *digital akrasia*. Akrasia is Greek for “incontinence” or “weakness of will”,

and refers to situations in which a person acts against his or her own intentions or resolutions (Mele 2012). In other words, akrasia refers to the state in which I know that what I desire is not good, but I lack the self-control to refrain from pursuing such things. As Paul, the Apostle famously characterized this experience (without using the word akrasia): “For the good that I would do, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do” (Rom. 7:19).

As hinted by its Greek origins, akrasia is an ancient concept that was already discussed by philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, and “I want to do X, but I regrettably end up doing Y instead” is probably a fundamental human experience. What is remarkable about digital akrasia, however, is that this particular form of akrasia seems to be growing in proportion with the availability and use of digital devices like smartphones. According to a 2015 Pew research report, 82% of American adults say that it occasionally or frequently hurts the conversation when people use their phones during group encounters, but, at the same time, fully 89% of the respondents say that they themselves used their phone during their most recent time with others (Rainie and Zickuhr 2015). The report goes on to conclude that, “Mobile devices play a complex role in modern social interactions—many Americans view them as harmful and distracting to group dynamics, even as they cannot resist the temptation themselves” (p. 3). Taylor Dotson (2012) describes a similar issue with regard to the use of computers: The computer program Freedom is designed to block its user's Wi-Fi access until the computer is rebooted. Dotson uses this observation to critique the idea that digital technologies simply extend human agency and willpower. If mobile devices extended human agency in any straightforward way, Dotson argues, there would be no reason for programs like Freedom to exist. In other words, we must dispel the myth that human beings deliberately use technologies to accomplish certain predetermined goals.

### 5.2 Technohabits

While digital akrasia seems capable of standing on its own as a concept that describes occasions in which our technology use runs counter to our beliefs and values, the next step is to ask what lies behind such digital akrasia. If students truly believe that attentive presence is the best course of action, why do they continue to phub their conversational partners? How do we make sense of this pronounced discrepancy between their evaluative judgments and their use of mobile devices—what Carol calls her “hypocrisy”? I propose to view digital akrasia as it has been described in this article as the result of bad technohabits. (Of course, phubbing may sometimes be a very deliberate choice). According to this conceptualization, digital akrasia is the result of a prolonged sedimentation that makes our habits manifest



with a degree of automaticity and stubbornness that challenges the conventional conceptions of agency: sometimes, our habitual use of technologies inclines us do things that we do not intend to do. In favor of this view, Oulasvirta et al. (2012) argue that mobile phone users often develop checking habits that consist of brief, repetitive inspections of dynamic content accessible through the mobile device and often act as gateways to other applications. At the time of Oulasvirta and authors' data collection (between 2005 and 2010), this phenomenon was not yet perceived as a problematic by users who mostly used their phones to kill time when alone. In the past few years, however, this picture seems to have changed. Many people now perceive their embodied technohabits as problematic entities that often challenge and even subvert their conscious resolve.

As mentioned in the introduction, for instance, Aagaard (2015) found that students often experience habitual distraction in the form of a prereflective attraction towards certain frequently visited, but educationally irrelevant websites like Facebook. Due to deeply sedimented relational strategies that have been built, maintained, and solidified in the course of their everyday lives, the action of logging onto Facebook has become embodied in the students' hands and fingers and now occurs habitually. "It's just F, A, and Enter", as one student said. Succumbing to this habitual distraction is deceptively easy, since it occurs independently of students' conscious willpower. Similarly, analyzing survey data from 99daysoffreedom.com, Baumer et al. (2015) focused on people who volunteered to stay off Facebook for 99 days, but ended up returning before that. One participant described this experience accordingly: "In the first 10 days, whenever I opened up an internet browser, my fingers would automatically go to 'F'" (p. 9). Finally, discussing the issue of distracted driving, Rosenberger (2014) notes that, "Like the way those who habitually bite their nails will be on occasion surprised to look down and find they are once again biting their nails, drivers may slide inadvertently and unconsciously into the distracting habits of the phone" (p. 43). In conclusion, it seems that digital devices have the power to challenge our willpower and make us act in ways that goes against our consciously held values.

## 6 Limitations

### 6.1 Alternative interpretations

The empirical material presented here is, of course, open to alternative interpretations. From a discursive perspective, it could be argued that the students' accounts of digital akasia are simply narratives given in dialog to me, an outside observer, to justify certain socially problematic actions. Such an interpretation would regard the students' statements as

defensive remarks made as situated responses to an external interviewer's imposition of social norms. In other words, invoking digital akasia becomes an *excuse* for bad behavior: "In this sense, akasia can be understood as a specific kind of narration in which the actor attempts to absolve himself from the charge of having performed a problematic action deliberately, to preserve an imaginary harmony that has been temporarily infringed" (Romaoli et al. 2008:188). While this may, indeed, be the discursive function of the students' accounts, I hesitate to dismiss these statements as mere discursive moves. Instead, I wish to treat the students' accounts as vivid descriptions of a real phenomenon and thereby retain faith in the idea that we can use interview statements to truthfully describe delimited segments of peoples' lives outside of the interview (Miller and Glassner 2004). This idea may sound commonsensical, but it is actually controversial in some areas of qualitative research (Hammersley and Gomm 2008).

There are also interpretations that would not consider phubbing a bad habit and, thus, reject the notion of digital akasia. Whitney Erin Boesel (2013), for instance, argues that there is a distinct element of dominance in expecting other people to pay attention and celebrates the quiet resistance to such attentional norms that is inherent in phubbing: "It may look like thumbs on a screen, but in truth it's a middle finger raised straight in the face of power" (np.). Phubbing is thereby interpreted as pointing beyond itself to wider issues of power and resistance. From this perspective, worrying about phubbing may be interpreted as a normative project linked to domination (Goldberg 2016). It is instructive to take this interpretation seriously: By critically researching phubbing, are we seeking to discipline young people? Once again, it is important to note that what we have explored is students' everyday morality. In other words, we are not seeking to *prescribe* ethical guidelines for young people's technology use, but to *disclose* their own lived ethics. This point, however, does lead us to a real limitation, namely that, because the original research question concerned educational technology, this study focuses solely on students. This focus may have the unfortunate effect of limiting the conversation about digital akasia to teenagers. As the statistics cited throughout this article have demonstrated, however, digital akasia is a widespread phenomenon that in no way is reserved for this social group. Accordingly, if we limit our attention to young people's use of technologies, we risk trading in an important societal conversation with moral panic about Kids These Days.

## 7 Implications

### 7.1 An anti-pathologizing concept

Why add another concept to a field of research that is already teeming with concepts? A theoretical dispute is

starting to surface within the field of phubbing research: some researchers have tried to link phubbing to smartphone addiction (Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas 2016; Karadağ et al. 2015), while others have emphatically denied this link (McDaniel and Coyne 2016a). As McDaniel and Coyne (2016a) argue: “An individual does not necessarily need to have developed pathological or problematic use to experience everyday interruptions due to technology” (p. 89). Assuming that one focal point in this controversy is the lack of self-control that is involved in (some cases of) phubbing, the concept of digital akrasia helps us to bridge the gap between these two seemingly contradictory positions by acknowledging a domain-specific lack of self-control without pathologizing its existence: digital akrasia is not a pathological condition that requires professional treatment (i.e., an addiction), but a character flaw that is tied to bad technohabits (i.e., a vice). The major advantage of digital akrasia is, therefore, that the concept is explicitly normative while remaining distinctly anti-pathologizing (for arguments against overpathologization, see Billieux et al. 2015). The concept of digital akrasia thereby moves the scientific debate from the realm of pathology and addiction to the realm of morality and ethics. In the philosophy of technology, adopting such a virtue ethical approach has proved to be a promising way forward (e.g., Vallor 2016; Verbeek 2011). Perhaps it is helpful to integrate these philosophical insights into empirical research practice.

## 7.2 Setting up obstructions

Before we conclude that technohabits are an encroachment upon our lives that we must eliminate to become truly free, we must remember that habits constitute the very basis of our freedom (Crossley 2013). Accordingly, the question may not be one of “automatic habits versus conscious actions”, but of “good habits versus bad habits”. So what can we do about bad technohabits? Although it is outside the scope of this article to propose solutions to digital akrasia, the results support Dewey’s (2007) rejection of the idea that all that is required to break a bad habit is “will or wish on the part of the one who is to act” (p. 27). Kent, for instance, describes how he sometimes finds himself phubbing others and this notorious element of “aw shucks, I’m doing it again” is highly indicative of the chronological delay in reflective awareness that makes habit-breaking so difficult: Habit-breaking is hard precisely because conscious monitoring appears one step too late. This means that attacking habits from the cognitive perspective of reflective willpower and conscious resolve is often insufficient.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Dewey (2007) advocated changing a habit’s so-called objective conditions. With digital akrasia, such modifications might amount to setting up obstructions that reduce the availability of digital temptations and stops technohabits from unfolding

prereflectively. Previous research has shown that, in the case of laptops, such obstructions may include closing a specific tab in one’s browser (e.g., Facebook), closing the browser itself (e.g., Firefox), or closing the physical lid of the laptop (Aagaard 2015). In severe cases, designated programs like Freedom may be the only way to resist the pull of distraction, as Dotson (2012) has discussed. Future research should investigate which other strategies that young people employ to handle digital distraction.

## References

- Aagaard J (2015) Drawn to distraction: a qualitative study of off-task use of educational technology. *Comput Educ* 87:90–97
- Aagaard J (2016) Mobile devices, interaction, and distraction: a qualitative exploration of absent presence. *AI Soc* 31(2):223–231
- Anderson M, Jiang J (2018) Teens, social media & technology 2018. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>. Accessed 14 Jan 2019
- Baumer E, Guha S, Quan E, Mimmo D, Gay G (2015) Missing photos, suffering withdrawal, or finding freedom? How experiences of social media non-use influence the likelihood of reversion. *Soc Media Soc* 1(2):1–14
- Billieux J, Schimmetti A, Khazaal Y, Maurage P, Heeren A (2015) Are we overpathologizing everyday life? A tenable blueprint for behavioral addiction research. *J Behav Addict* 4(3):119–123
- Boesel W (2013) Rudeness as resistance: presence, power, and those Facebook Home Ads. *Cyborgology*. <http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2013/04/25/rudeness-as-resistance-presence-power-and-those-facebook-home-ads/>. Accessed 14 Jan 2019
- Brinkmann S, Kvale S (2015) *InterViews: learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*, 3rd edn. Sage, Thousand Oaks
- Chotpitayasunondh V, Douglas K (2016) How “Phubbing” becomes the norm: the antecedents and consequences of snubbing via smartphone. *Comput Hum Behav* 63:9–18
- Chotpitayasunondh V, Douglas K (2018) The Effects of “Phubbing” on Social Interaction. *J Appl Soc Psychol* 48(6):304–316
- Crossley N (2013) Habit and Habitus. *Body Soc* 19(2&3):136–161
- Dewey J (2007) *Human nature and conduct: an introduction to social psychology*. Cosimo Classics, New York
- Dotson T (2012) Technology, choice and the good life: questioning technological liberalism. *AI Soc* 34(4):326–336
- Gergen K (2002) The challenge of absent presence. In: Katz J, Aakhus M (eds) *Perpetual contact: mobile communication, private talk, public performance*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Goldberg G (2016) Antisocial media: digital dystopianism as a normative project. *New Media Soc* 18(5):784–799
- Hammersley M, Gomm R (2008) Assessing the radical critique of interviews. In: Hammersley M (ed) *Questioning qualitative inquiry: critical essays*. Sage Publications, London

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, empirical research on habit-breaking currently favors the reflective strategy of thinking, “Don’t do it” and being mindful of slips (Quinn et al. 2010). This result, however, may be an artifact of the study’s construction as a diary study in which participants were instructed to make reports “when they recognized the need for self-control” (p. 501). Participants were thus asked to report the strategies they employed *after* they became aware that they wished to refrain from performing certain behaviors.

- Jiang J (2018) How teens and parents navigate screen time and device distractions. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/08/22/how-teens-and-parents-navigate-screen-time-and-device-distractions/>. Accessed 14 Jan 2019
- Karadağ E, Tosuntas Ş, Erzen E, Duru P, Bostan N, Şahin B, Çulha I, Baradağ B (2015) Determinants of phubbing, which is the sum of many virtual additions: a structural equation model. *J Behav Addict* 4(2):60–74
- Kneidinger-Müller B (2017) Mobile communication as invader in face-to-face interactions: an analysis of predictors for parallel communication habits. *Comput Hum Behav* 73:328–335
- Lenhart A (2015) Teens, social media & technology overview 2015. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/>. Accessed 14 Jan 2019
- Lenhart A, Duggan M (2014) Couples, the internet, and social media. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/02/11/couples-the-internet-and-social-media/>. Accessed 14 Jan 2019
- McDaniel B, Coyne S (2016a) “Technoference”: the interference of technology in couple relationships and implications for women’s personal and relational well-being. *Psychol Popul Media Cult* 5(1):85–98
- McDaniel B, Coyne S (2016b) Technology interference in the parenting of young children: implications for mothers’ perceptions of coparenting. *Soc Sci J* 53(4):435–443
- McDaniel B, Radesky J (2018) Technoference: parent distraction with technology and associations with child behavior problems. *Child Dev* 89(1):100–109
- McDaniel B, Galovan A, Cravens J, Drouin M (2018) “Technoference” and implications for mothers’ and fathers’ couple and coparenting relationship quality. *Comput Hum Behav* 80:303–313
- Mele A (2012) Backsliding: understanding weakness of will. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Miller J, Glassner B (2004) The ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’: finding realities in interviews. In: Silverman D (ed) *Qualitative research: theory, method and practice*, 2nd edn. Sage, London
- Oulasvirta A, Rattenbury T, Ma L, Raita E (2012) Habits make smart-phone use more pervasive. *Pers Ubiquit Comput* 16(1):105–114
- Phubbing: A Word is Born (2013) Phubbing: A Word is Born [Video file]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBCYpA16jpk>. Accessed 14 Jan 2019
- Potter J, Hepburn A (2005) Qualitative interviews in psychology: problems and possibilities. *Qual Res Psychol* 2(4):281–307
- Quinn J, Pascoe A, Wood W, Neal D (2010) Can’t control yourself? monitor those bad habits. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 36(4):499–511
- Rainie L, Zickuhr K (2015) Americans’ views on mobile etiquette. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/26/americans-views-on-mobile-etiquette/>. Accessed 14 Jan 2019
- Roberts J, David M (2016) My life has become a major distraction from my cell phone: partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction among partners. *Comput Hum Behav* 54:134–141
- Roberts J, David M (2017) Put down your phone and listen to me: how boss phubbing undermines the psychological conditions necessary for employee engagement. *Comput Hum Behav* 75:206–217
- Romaoli D, Faccio E, Salvini A (2008) On acting against one’s best judgment: a social constructionist interpretation for the akrasia problem. *J Theory Soc Behav* 38(2):179–192
- Rosenberger R (2014) The phenomenological case for stricter regulation of cell phones and driving. *Techné* 18(1/2):20–47
- Stockdale L, Coyne S, Padilla-Walker L (2018) Parent and child technoference and socioemotional behavioral outcomes: a nationally representative study of 10- to 20-year-old adolescents. *Comput Hum Behav* 88:219–226
- Taylor C (1980) Understanding in human science. *Rev Metaphys* 34(1):25–38
- Vallor S (2016) *Technology and the virtues: a philosophical guide to a future worth wanting*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Vanden Abeele M, Antheunis M, Schouten A (2016) The effect of mobile messaging during a conversation on impression formation and interaction quality. *Comput Hum Behav* 62:562–569
- Verbeek PP (2011) *Moralizing technology: understanding and designing the morality of things*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago

**Publisher’s Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.