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Article

Absent-Minded, Present-Bodied: A Phenomenological Study of Adolescents' Experience of Parental Smartphone Distraction during Shared Family Time

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Abstract: This transcendental phenomenological study explores Turkish adolescents' lived experience with their parents' smartphone distraction during shared family time. Although research on parental phubbing and technoference has focus on behavioural frequency, relational outcomes, and psychological associations, relatively few studies have explored adolescents' first-person experiences of parental digital distraction. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used in a qualitative, phenomenological design with 12 Turkish adolescents aged 13–17 who reported frequent experiences of parental smartphone use during family activities. The data were analysed using the modified van Kaam method alongside phenomenological reduction and bracketing. Five interrelated themes emerged: (1) the split body—physically present yet relationally unreachable; (2) the waiting self—suspended family time; (3) silent competition with the device; (4) performing visibility; and (5) normalising partial absence. These themes together captured the essence of the phenomenon, which we labelled inhabited solitude: a physical togetherness with adolescents who feel relational loneliness due to parents' focus on the smartphone. This study is a novel exploration of the concept of responsive presence, as well as a further step in the research of parental phubbing, technoference, and the sociological phenomenology of family life. Results indicate that parental smartphone distraction is not just a behavioural interruption, but a lived disturbance of attention, recognition, temporality and intimacy of the family.

Keywords: *Adolescence, parental phubbing, parental smartphone distraction, technoference, transcendental phenomenology*

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Introduction

Smartphones have become part of the everyday arrangement of modern family life, such as eating together, spending time at home after school, watching TV together, travelling in the car and casual chats with parents and adolescents. They are not just about their technical roles, but about how they shift attention within close quarters. The parent's smartphone can become more than a device in a Turkish family context, where togetherness, intergenerational responsiveness and belonging in the family are important features of the life of adolescents. It could turn into a rival focus of attention in the home (Demirsu, 2022; Kılıç et al., 2025).

Recent research has theorised such interruptions as parental phubbing and parental technoference. Parental phubbing most often describes instances when parents are not engaged in interaction with their children due to smartphone use, while parental technoference is a broader term that encompasses disruptions to parent–child interaction resulting from digital device use (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018; Komanchuk et al., 2023). Systematic reviews and scoping reviews suggest that parental technoference is linked to changes in parent–child interaction, parent–adolescent attachment quality, mental health of adolescents, and problematic digital behaviours (Dixon et al., 2023; Komanchuk et al., 2023). Some emerging research in Turkey has started to quantify adolescents' perceived phubbing by parents and explore its relationship to digital addiction, prosocial behaviour, attachment, emotional autonomy, and psychological adjustment (Akbağ et al., 2025; Arıcı Doğan & Döğer Şenel, 2026; Yıldırım & Özteke Kozan, 2025).

Although this literature is valuable, it remains predominantly variable-oriented and outcome-focused. Previous studies typically focus on the prevalence of parental phubbing, the link between parental phubbing and adolescent adjustment, and the psychological pathways that could account for these relationships. While these studies are useful, they do not fully reflect the experience of adolescents in the moment when parents are distracted by digital devices.

These kinds of studies are required but are not a complete account of the phenomenon as experienced first person by the adolescent. It is not that they fail to reveal, in sufficient phenomenological detail, how an adolescent feels, when the parent looks away, or, when there is no reaction after he or she is notified, or, when he or she is expected to be there and he or she does not, or when the parent is not at the side, but the body is trying to be there. To fill this gap, the present study shifts from measuring parental smartphone distraction towards describing its lived structure.

This issue is particularly important during adolescence. Parental recognition and availability, as well as the quality of emotional attunement, continue to affect the adolescent's sense of being valued during his or her adolescence. The adolescent might not just see a parent using a device during shared family time. The adolescent may feel there is a problem with relational recognition – "I am here, but I am not being met." This could then impact on the adolescent's experience of self, time, body and relation when the parent is distracted. The family meal or sofa or living room can stay the same materially, but phenomenally be an address in suspension, an intimacy that is interrupted or a competition with the device.

This study adopts a transcendental phenomenology approach, which is derived from the philosophy of Husserl who calls for returning to the lifeworld, that is the world as it is experienced in living prior to any theoretical explanation (Husserl, 1913/1983). The study also is based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, particularly the difference between the body as physically present and the lived body as expressive, responsive and relationally available (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). But the analysis of intersubjectivity and shared temporality in family interaction can still be embraced within the phenomenology of the social world which was developed by Schütz (1967). The philosophical resources help to extend the focus on parental smartphone distraction beyond the mere frame of interfering with behaviour, to that of changing embodied co-presence.

The sociological and phenomenological significance of this phenomenon is highlighted in the Turkish context. The study does not consider Turkish family life as a cultural entity that remains fixed and homogenous. Instead, it puts the phenomenon in the context of the contemporary Turkish household where the notions of familial closeness and digitally mediated habits of attention coexist. In this context, the mobile phone can not only interfere with the communication, it can re-shape the felt position of the adolescent in the family scene. The question here is not just whether or not parental smartphone distraction takes place, but how it is experienced, understood and enacted by adolescents who experience this in the everyday flow of life in the Turkish family.

The purpose of this study is to systematically describe the lived experience of Turkish adolescents with their parents' distraction by using their smartphones during family time. The study aims to explore the invariant meanings and structures of this experience as lived through attention, recognition, temporality, embodiment, and family co-presence through semi-structured phenomenological interviews with adolescents aged 13–17. It is important because it shifts the conceptualization of

parental smartphone distraction from a behavioural construct to a lived disturbance of responsive presence in bodily proximity. The study places the phenomenon in the context of the family life in the present day, thereby continuing the research on parental phubbing, technoference, and the sociological phenomenology of family interaction. The research question is: What is the essential structure of this experience as lived and described by Turkish adolescents?

Research Problem

The problem that is addressed in this study is the lack of phenomenological knowledge about the experience of Turkish adolescents in relation to parental smartphone distraction in shared family time. Previous studies on parental phubbing and technoference have yielded valuable insights into the relationship between parental device use and adolescent outcomes, such as attachment, emotional adjustment, digital behaviours, and parent–child relational quality (Dixon et al., 2023; Komanchuk et al., 2023; McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). Similarly, emerging Turkish studies have explored perceived parental phubbing among adolescents, mostly using quantitative and psychometric designs (Akbağ et al., 2025; Arıcı Doğan & Döğer Şenel, 2026; Yıldırım & Özteke Kozan, 2025). These methods, however, are not adequate to shed light on the first-person framework of the experience itself.

The issue is not limited to the parents using the smartphone during family time, nor to the association of that behaviour with a measurable adolescent outcome. What is less known, however, is the lived experience of the moment when parental attention is no longer in the relational space and is taken up by the device, the deeper phenomenological problem. During these times, the parent can be physically present but not feeling fully responsive, available, or emotionally reachable. This results in a unique contradiction in family co-presence where the adolescent is not physically alone, but may feel unrecognized in the very space of togetherness.

This is particularly relevant in modern Turkish family life, where family interaction remains highly relational and intergenerational, and digital devices are more and more structuring attention in the home. The adolescent's feeling of parental smartphone distraction might thus be more than a nuisance or brief frustration. It can be a minor shift in how the adolescent feels visible, related to, expects time to pass, oriented to their body, and valued by others.

Literature Review and Theoretical Orientation

The empirical and theoretical literature outlined in this section provides a frame for judging parental smartphone distraction as a relational and phenomenological phenomenon. It first explores the definitions of parental phubbing and parental technoference, and places them in Turkish adolescent family life and phenomenological co-presence.

Parental Smartphone Distraction, Phubbing, and Technoference

Studies about digital distraction in family life have employed multiple parallel constructs, among them parental phubbing and parental technoference. Parental phubbing is defined as the situation where parents neglect, displace, or minimise attention towards a child/adolescent when their phone is in use. Technoference is a more general term that describes any co-interruption of interpersonal or family interactions by digital technologies in the presence of the parent (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018; Rosen & Samuel, 2015; Taneja et al., 2015; Pérez-Juárez et al., 2023)

Empirical studies have demonstrated that parental technoference can impact the nature of parent–child interaction and have been linked to various domains of child and adolescent development, such as behavioural, relational, mental health outcomes (Dixon et al., 2023; Komanchuk et al., 2023). These findings are of significance since they show that parental use of devices during interaction is not just a personal action but a relational action. Regularly having parental attention drawn to the device can lead to altered responsiveness from the parent to the child or adolescent.

However, much of this literature is preoccupied with measurement, prediction, and outcome. Research frequently aims to examine how often parental phubbing occurs, what it predicts, and which psychological factors mediate such effects. But something similar is part and parcel of the business, and it does not address the question of lived meaning. The phenomenological approach is different: it doesn't so much ask what parental smartphone distraction does but how.

Parental Phubbing in the Turkish Context

Some recent scholarship in Turkey has been conducted on the realization that parents may be phubbing adolescents. For instance, Akbağ et al. (2025) created the mother and father versions of a parental phubbing scale for Turkish adolescents, thus signalling that the phenomenon of parental phubbing is now a unique empirical object in Turkey. Arıcı Doğan and Döğer Şenel (2026) also explored how adolescents' perceptions of parental phubbing were associated with digital addiction and prosocial behaviour. The studies are important as they demonstrate that parental smartphone distraction is not a

problem solely in the global or Western context, but is a phenomenon that has been increasingly acknowledged in the field of Turkish adolescent and family studies.

Yet the literature for the Turkish language is still mostly psychometric and correlational. It offers means to measure perceived phubbing of parents and to explore its relationship with adolescent outcomes but it lacks a detailed phenomenological description of how Turkish adolescents experience such a distraction in everyday places of family life. The current research builds on this literature by examining the experience of the adolescent instead of phubbing as a measurable metric.

This Turkish context is important because it is not a social vacuum but a family interaction context. Shared family time is built into culturally structured expectations of closeness, respect, responsiveness, intergenerational obligation and everyday togetherness. Turkish family life is not argued to be fixed or uniform; instead, it is explored as part of the current life of Turkish families where digital consumption increasingly defines common attentional practices. In this context, the smartphone can not just be a communication interrupter. It can change the perceived role of the adolescent in the family dynamic.

From Bodily Co-Presence to Responsive Presence

Co-presence is at the heart of this study. Co-presence typically connotes shared social location, but parental smartphone distraction shows that co-located presence is not enough for lived togetherness. A parent might be sitting next to an adolescent, on a sofa, in the same room or at the same meal, and yet still be experienced as only partially present. The adolescent isn't just reacting to a parent's device use, but to the transformation in the quality of presence itself.

Goffman's (1963) description of face-to-face interaction also implies that being physically close does not guarantee social interaction. Interaction requires mutual attention, acknowledgement and responsiveness. In this view, parental distraction with the smartphone can undermine the interactional conditions that allow adolescents to feel recognised in shared family time.

Zhao and Elesh (2008) defined co-presence as more than just physical presence, and highlighted the need for co-awareness and co-involvement. This is especially important when it comes to parental smartphone distraction: a parent might be physically near an adolescent, but not fully present for reciprocal attention and engagement. So, co-location alone does not necessarily create a lived sense of togetherness.

This can be phenomenologically described as the difference between co-presence and responsive presence. Bodily co-presence is the physical presence in space of the parent. Responsive presence is

the parent's lived availability as an expressive, relationally accessible “other” who is attuned. Major changes in parental presence can become very meaningful when these two types of presence diverge — the parent is physically present, but the parent is no longer experientially present.

This qualification is particularly significant for adolescent family life. Adolescents, while more independent than younger children are still in need of some level of recognition, emotional atonement and relational confirmation from parents. A distracted parent might then feel experienced, not just as a person temporarily occupied, but as a person whose attention is in question or hard to regain. This ambiguity can influence the way adolescents think about their visibility, value, and sense of belonging during shared family time.

Phenomenological Orientation

The study is based on transcendental phenomenology, which focuses on Husserl's (1913/1983) appeal to return to the experience as it is given, prior to theoretical explanation. Thus, parental smartphone distraction is not seen as a behavioural problem, a parenting problem, or a cause of adolescent maladjustment, first and foremost. Instead, it is considered a lived experience: the adolescent's experience of being with a parent who is physically present but absorbed elsewhere.

One of the fundamental methodological concepts of transcendental phenomenology is bracketing, or epoché. Bracketing involves the researcher's conscious recognition and bracketing of the assumptions made in their study, for instance, "smartphone use is always harmful" for parents, "adolescent experiences of neglect are always negative" or "smartphone use automatically signals poor parenting. However these assumptions may seem socially plausible but shouldn't be allowed to prejudice the analysis. The task involves careful analysis of the way in which adolescents describe the phenomenon and of the core structures that they can uncover in their descriptions. (Moustakas, 1994)

The phenomenology of embodiment, undertaken by Merleau-Ponty, further underlies the analysis. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) does not simply assert that the body is a physical object in space, but also that it is the pivot of perception, expression and relation. This is important to recognise when it comes to comprehending parental phone distraction. The body of the parent may show to stay by the adolescent's side, but the rest of the body, eyes, face, hands, posture, and silence may manifest a withdrawal of responsiveness. Thus, the adolescent feels the presence of the parent's body, not merely physically, but also in terms of their presence or absence in the relational field.

The study is also shaped by Schütz's phenomenology of the social world, as intersubjectivity and shared time are crucial considerations. (Schütz, 1967). Family time is not simple time spent together in the same place. It's a co-created time space that's preserved through joint gazing, anticipating, and reacting. If the parent is engaged in his/her smartphone, the lived time of the adolescent might be waiting, suspension, interruption or doubt. The adolescent may delay in returning the parent's eye contact, in talking, or in returning the shared time.

Through these philosophical resources, the study can explore the phenomenon of parental smartphone distraction as a change in the familial pattern of co-presence. Husserl promotes the lived phenomenon, Merleau-Ponty elucidates the physical-responsiveness of presence, and Schütz places the experience in the intersubjective temporality of familial life. This theoretical perspective helps to transcend measuring parental phubbing as a variable and to describe the essential structure of parental phubbing imbued within Turkish adolescents' lived experiences.

Methodology Research Design

The design of this study was qualitative transcendental phenomenological. This design was chosen because the study aimed to describe the essential structure of a lived experience shared by multiple individuals, rather than to measure behavioural frequency, test causal relationships, or predict psychological outcomes. When the researcher's goal is to return to participants' descriptions of experience and to textually and structurally account for the phenomenon, transcendental phenomenology is especially suited (Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenon in this study is the experience of parental smartphone distraction during shared family time, which is experienced by the Turkish adolescents. The focus was not on whether the smartphone use of parents is objectively excessive or harmful or intentional, but on how adolescents experience the moment when a parent is physically present but absorbed in the smartphone. The design therefore enabled the study to investigate the phenomenon as it manifested in the participants' consciousness, focusing on the aspects of embodiment, temporality, relationality, spatiality, and recognition.

Setting and Participants

The study took place in the context of modern Turkish family life and targeted adolescents who live in urban household settings where smartphones are a part of the everyday life of the household. The participants were recruited from the Turkish community networks, secondary school parent groups, youth organizations, and social media advertisements that were controlled and targeted at families. The

study was advertised as an investigation of adolescent experiences of family time and parental smartphone use in recruitment materials.

The purposive sampling was conducted to identify the participants who had direct experience of the phenomenon under study. The sample consisted of 12 Turkish adolescents aged between 13 and 17 years. The sample size was determined as suitable for phenomenological inquiry as it provided for detailed examination of individual experiences and also allowed for the identification of structures that remained invariant across the various participants' accounts.

Participants met the following inclusion criteria: they were aged 13–17 years; lived with at least one parent or primary caregiver; self-identified as having regularly experienced a parent using a smartphone during shared family activities, such as meals, shared television watching, conversations, or outings; and were willing and able to describe their experience in a conversational interview. Participants were excluded if written informed consent could not be obtained from a parent or legal guardian, if the adolescent did not provide written assent, or if participation was considered likely to cause significant emotional distress.

Data Collection

In-depth semi-structured phenomenological interviews were used to collect data. The interview format was designed to provide for rich first-person descriptions rather than general opinions about smartphone use. The interviews lasted from 45 to 75 minutes and were held in a comfortable and private location of the participant's choosing and approved by the guardian, such as a quiet room in their own home, in a library room, or in a secure online video call.

Descriptive prompt was used to start the interview:

“Can you describe a specific occasion when you were spending time with your parent and they became absorbed in their smartphone? Please describe that moment as much as you can: what you saw, how you felt, what you thought, and what happened after.

Follow-up prompts were employed to deepen the phenomenological description, but not to impose interpretation. These were some of the examples of questions: What was happening just before that moment? Where were you sitting or standing? What did you notice in your parent's face, hands, or body? How did time feel in that moment? What did you do next? What did that moment mean to you? The following prompts were created to engage the different dimensions of the experience, namely the physical, temporal, spatial, emotional, and relational.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and guardian consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were checked against the recordings for accuracy. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and identifying information about schools, neighbourhoods, family members or location was redacted during transcription.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the modified van Kaam method as described by Moustakas (1994). This method was chosen for its similarity to transcendental phenomenology and its systematic procedure of arriving at a composite description of the essence of the phenomenon from its individual descriptions.

First, every transcript was read multiple times to get a full picture of the participant's account. Second, significant statement or horizons were identified. These encompassed expressions that directly highlighted the adolescent's experience of parental smartphone distraction. Third, reduction and elimination were performed. Each statement was evaluated based on the presence of a required moment of the experience and whether it could be interpreted as a separate meaning unit. Repetitive, vague or overlapping statements were eliminated.

Fourthly, Invariant meaning units were clustered into thematic categories. These clusters were not abstract codes removed from the participant's language, but phenomenological meanings with concrete descriptions. Fifth, individual textual descriptions were created to describe each participant's experience. Sixth, individual structural descriptions were written to describe the experience in terms of body, time, space and relation. Lastly, a composite textual-structural description was developed to capture the key structure of the phenomenon common to all participants.

The researcher oscillated between the whole transcript and specific meaning units throughout the analysis. This iterative movement enabled the maintenance of the idiographic quality of every participant's story and at the same time allowed common invariant forms to be discerned in the data.

Phenomenological Reduction and Bracketing

The study focused on phenomenological reduction. The researcher conducted a formal bracketing process prior to data collection to highlight assumptions regarding smartphones, parenting, adolescent, and family interaction. These assumptions encompassed “parental smartphone use weakens family intimacy”, “adolescents feel ignored when parents use smartphones”, and “good parenting requires uninterrupted attention”. These assumptions were documented in a reflexive journal and were revisited during the research process

Bracketing was not seen as the elimination of the researcher's voice or perspective, but as a disciplined attempt to make presuppositions conscious in order to approach the participants' descriptions with a more open perspective. The researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the recruitment, interviewing, transcription and analysis process. The journal recorded feelings, dilemmas, initial hypotheses, and decisions regarding analysis. Peer debriefing was also employed to explore whether developing themes were based on participants' accounts or on the researcher's expectation.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Prolonged engagement with the interview transcripts, careful use of participant quotations, and iterative movement between significant statements and whole accounts all contributed to credibility. Auditing procedures in recruitment, interview decision, transcript management, horizoning, theme development and creating textual-structural descriptions further strengthened dependability.

Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journalling and peer debriefing, which helped monitor the influence of researcher assumptions on interpretation. Thick description of the phenomenon, the participants, and the Turkish family context to which the phenomenon was related was used to support transferability. The study was not intended to be generalisable, but rather to give the reader enough phenomenological depth to gauge the resonance and relevance of the findings in similar contexts.

Ethical Considerations

This study was undertaken in an ethical manner due to the fact that the participants were minors. Prior to recruitment, ethical approval was given by the relevant institutional review board. Parents/legal guardians provided written informed consent, and adolescents provided written assent. Information sheets were presented in an age-appropriate manner and explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, data storage, and the right to withdraw without penalty.

The interviews were about normal family life, but they could be sad, frustrating, or uncomfortable. It was explained to the participants that they were free to refuse to answer any question or to terminate the interview at any time. Short debriefing was done following each interview and information on suitable emotional support resources was provided as necessary.

To ensure confidentiality, transcripts were de-identified by removing identifying details and using pseudonyms. All audio tapes and transcripts were kept in a secure place in which only the research

team had access to and were password protected and encrypted. Identifying details within direct quotations in the reports have been edited to preserve the meaning and voice of the participants.

Methodological Limitations

A phenomenological design was used in the study, which enabled an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of adolescents, yet it also had limitations. The sample was relatively small and purposive, suitable for phenomenological inquiry but not for statistical generalisation. The data were based on retrospective accounts and thus the descriptions of participants might have been influenced by memory and later interpretation. The study also only explored adolescents' perspectives and excluded parent interviews and direct observation. This was a conscious methodological choice, to maintain the adolescent's own perspective of the phenomenon; this does not allow claiming anything about the parents' intentions or actual behaviours during the events described.

Findings

Five interrelated themes emerged from the analysis that captured the lived experience of parental smartphone distraction during shared family time with adolescents. These themes were understood as aspects of a larger experience of physical closeness and relational unavailability.

The Split Body: Physically Present, Relationally Unreachable

The first theme was about the difference between being physically present and relationally available. Parents were seen as being close by during family time and being emotionally and attentively engaged in their smartphones. Eye contact, listening and responsive engagement seemed limited, although the parent was at the table, on the sofa, in the car or in the same room. Leila, aged 14, described this experience as follows:

"*She is sitting beside me on the sofa, and I can touch her arm, but her eyes are gone, and it is as though her face has left*".

This is an example of the distinction between "bodily co-presence" and "responsive presence. The parent was physically close, but the adolescent had low levels of recognition, listening and emotional availability.

This theme was present in all of the interviews. Adolescents didn't just toss off the line "parents used their phones". They characterized the shifts in body posture, face direction, voice tone and body response. A parent who still has physical contact may become emotionally detached. On the

phenomenological level parent's body was perceived as present but as a weak lived body. An adolescent thus lived in a space of bodily proximity in which there was no complete relational exchange.

The Waiting Self: Suspended Family Time

The second theme was the change of shared family time to a time of waiting. Participants talked about not knowing if parents would come back, if they would talk to them, and if they should keep talking or be silent. This was NOT waiting for something that had a definite end, like waiting for a ball to come to an end after it has been thrown. Instead, adolescents delay any return the parent's gaze, not knowing if and when the parent would return. Time became fragmented, disjointed and unclear.

At age 16, Jacob said this experience was like this:

"*You sit there with a question in your mind, but you wait. Not because you have to wait for something—but because you don't know if they will look up. You say something, they nod, but their eyes don't move. Then you wait again. And after a while, you stop counting the seconds. You just... sit there. The conversation is not a conversation anymore. It's like trying to catch someone's attention across a street that keeps getting wider*".

This account shows how parental distraction with their smartphones changed the temporal structure of family time. The participant did not report waiting for a predictable event, but rather he reported uncertainty about parental attention returning. Time was experienced as suspended, fragmented, and difficult to inhabit because the interaction lacked reciprocal engagement.

Silent Competition with the Device

The third theme was about the experience of competing with the smartphone. In many cases, participants evocatively referred to the device as having a sort of social force. It buzzed, glowed, moved, interfered and was able to get the parent's attention over and over again. Perhaps more than just an object in the parent's hands, it became an opposing figure in the family dynamic.

"*Younger than I am and taller. I am here, I'm speaking, I'm real, but the telephone! The telephone is glaring and it's buzzing and it's saying something, I can't say anything, I can't buzz, I can't glow, I lose". (Participant B, Male, Age 15).*

This adolescent is "real", but the device seems to be more effective at gaining parental attention.

The smartphone was not just an object, but a rival source of attention. Its notifications, light, sounds and constant presence seemed to make it more interactionally urgent than the adolescent's voice and presence. As one 14-year-old female participant explained:

"*Runners are quiet before a race. They don't talk—they focus. That's what it felt like. But I wasn't running. I was just sitting there, waiting for her to look at me. And I knew I was competing with the phone. But I also knew I would lose. Because the phone is always more urgent. It has notifications. It has messages. It has something new every second. I just had the same face. So I stopped trying to compete. I just sat there, and I let the phone win*". (Participant C, Female, Age 14)

Performing Visibility

The fourth theme was related to adolescents' attempts to attract parental attention. Participants reported asking questions again, talking louder, standing closer, touching a parent's arm, making jokes, or leaving the interaction. These actions were an attempt to become visible in an attentional space that is dominated by the smartphone.

These efforts did not always result in meaningful engagement. Minimal or no response from parents was associated with feelings of frustration, embarrassment, disappointment, or withdrawal. Performing visibility, then, was an active attempt to regain recognition, not a passive acceptance of parental distraction.

Maya, a 13-year old, said:

"*I began to sing loudly. Not really a song, just noise. I saw as though I needed to make enough noise, and she will have to look. But at that time she said 'Mm-hmm' without looking*".

Maya's account is an example of an attempt to get attention by making oneself visible. She tried to make herself visible, but without any engagement, there was only a little verbal reaction, without eye contact. These interactions seemed to increase the sense of being physically present but not adequately acknowledged by adolescents.

Normalising Partial Absence

The fifth theme was the gradual normalisation of partial parental absence. Smartphone distraction was frequently reported as a normal, expected, or "just how things are" experience in family time. This normalisation was not necessarily an acceptance, but rather an adaptation to repeated experiences of interrupted attention.

Thomas, aged 17, reflected:

"I'm not even angry anymore. Perhaps I was when I was a little younger. Now it's 'just' like one of the family. Very boring".

Thomas's report implies that the smartphone had become a regular part of family interaction. His decreased aggression seemed to be a response to repeated failures, not a lack of emotional response. The way Thomas's statement indicates that over time, he became part of the family's culture. The phone is not loved but it is “another family member” because of its secure role in family life. It is there at the same time, it's listened to and it 'reorganises interaction'. “Not angry anymore” seems to reflect affective exhaustion, rather than resolution. Anger has subsided when expectation is adjusted.

Throughout the interviews, normalisation appeared to function as an adaptive coping mechanism. Adolescents who handled distraction as a normal way of life minimized the discomfort of multiple times expecting someone's attention and being let down. There was a price to this adaptation, though. Whilst absence was normalised, there was no freeing of the desire for recognition; it was just a quieter, more subsumed, more covert desire to be recognised within the normal routine.

The Essence of the Phenomenon: Inhabited Solitude

Parental smartphone distraction in shared family time can be seen as a composite experience of solitude. This idea reflects the paradox of adolescents being physically in the same family space as a parent, but feeling lonely in the relationship because the parent is preoccupied with the smartphone. Inhabited solitude does not refer to physical isolation. Instead, it refers to a type of loneliness that occurs when someone is with another person. The parent can be at the table, on the sofa, or in the same room, but seem less emotionally available, responsive, or attentive. Adolescents thus have a conflict between physical proximity and relational distance.

In each of the five themes, inhabited solitude was characterized by physical closeness but not full responsiveness, by waiting for the parental attention to return, by competing with the device, by trying to become visible again, and by the gradual adaptation to repeated partial absence. The phenomenon was thus not only experienced as interruption, but as a disruption of responsive family co-presence.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe the necessary structure of Turkish adolescents’ lived experience of their adolescent children's smartphone distraction in family time. The results reveal that this experience is not just a minor disruption or an occurrence of parental cellphone use. Instead, adolescents reported a dis-regulation of family co-presence in which the parent's physical proximity was combined with a lack of responsiveness and recognition from the parent. This experience was

conceptualised as inhabited solitude, relational loneliness in the physical presence of family members. '*Inhabited Solitude* ' which is a type of loneliness in the presence of family.

This finding builds upon previous research focused on links between parental device use to adolescents' attachment, emotional adjustment, relationship quality, and problematic digital behaviour (Dixon et al., 2023; Komanchuk et al., 2023; McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). Turkish researchers have also started to research perceived parental phubbing using psychometric and correlational methods (Akbağ et al., 2025; Arıcı Doğan & Döğer Şenel, 2026). The present study makes a contribution by moving away from the measurement of the smartphone distraction behaviour, to the lived experience of parental smartphone distraction as an embodied, temporal, and relational experience.

The results help to clarify the difference between being physically present and being responsive. The parent can sit side by side, be in the same room, or share a family activity with the adolescent while being experienced as not being present, due to their gaze towards the smartphone, posture, voice, and attention. It reflects Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) conception of the body as lived, as expressive rather than physical. When the parent's body was for the participants, it was either responsive or withdrawn, available or unreachable. It was thus not only a loss of words but a loss of body, for the adolescent.

The results also shed light on the time structure of waiting. Adolescents were not simply aware of parental smartphone use, they felt a break in the time together. They waited for a father's eye to meet, for talk to be a two-way street, for that moment to be shared again. This is consistent with Husserl's (1991) account of lived time as structured through expectation. In the current study, the adolescent's sense of response was repeatedly interrupted, resulting in a heavy waiting experience: family time was uncertain and fragmented.

One more contribution is important in regard to the smartphone as a rivalling focus of attention.

the device was described as repeatedly drawing the parent’s attention away from the adolescent and the shared interaction. The telephone was then not only a thing but something that re-distributed attention in the family scene. When adolescents' voices or movements were not heard, they tried to make themselves heard louder or with more gestures and jokes, or by staying silent. They frequently tried harder to get their attention when they did not, but it made them feel even more invisible. This implies, that not only communication is influenced by parental distraction with their smartphone, but also the recognition of the adolescent in the family.

However, there was also an important shift towards the normalisation of parental smartphone distraction. For many adolescents, this type of distraction had become normal, but not necessarily a sign of acceptance. Instead, the normalisation was a common way to deal with repeated failure. To prevent emotional discomfort, the adolescents decreased their level of expectations for consistent parental attention. In this respect, normalisation can be interpreted as a kind of phenomenological anaesthetic: the distress can be less openly expressed but it doesn't necessarily go away.

The concept of *Inhabited Solitude* is the main theoretical contribution of this study. It embodies the contradiction of "together" and "alone. *Inhabited Solitude* encompasses the lived structure of distracted co-presence: spatial nearness, bodily withdrawal, suspended time, weakened recognition, and gradual adaptation, unlike the former two, parental phubbing and technoference, which are respectively represented by the ignoring of a parent on the phone and technological interruption. This notion can inform future studies that are not restricted to either absence or presence, but also focus on the more abstract presence/absence of digital family life.

In practice, the study's findings indicate that family guidance should be about more than just limiting screen time, but enhancing the quality of the attention when it does happen together in the family. Parents might not realize how the adolescent feels when they are interrupted repeatedly over a short period of time – as if they are losing something. Responsive presence, such as making eye contact, orienting the body, verbally acknowledging, and reengaging in interrupted interactions, could be a point of emphasis in parent education, school counselling, and family-based interventions in Türkiye. These suggestions must be non-moralizing: because the intent is not to prohibit the use of smartphones, but to create awareness in families on how smartphones indirectly influence intimacy, recognition, and shared time.

Conclusion

The present study focused on the lived experiences of the Turkish adolescents' parents' distraction with the smartphone in common family time by using a transcendental phenomenological approach. The results indicate that parental smartphone distraction did not only occur as a behavioural interruption but as a disruption to the co-presence of parents and their children in the family.

This study transcends the paradigm of measurement-based reports on parental phubbing and technoference, and offers a lived description of parental smartphone distraction through embodiment, temporality, attention, and recognition. For adolescents, there was a differentiation between the "body"

and the "responsive" body, a "disruption of co-presence", a kind of "competition in silence", efforts to re-establish the presence of the body, and a "slow normalization of partial absence.

Limitations of the study include the purposive sampling, the use of retrospective interviews, and the absence of any parental accounts or direct observation of the study's sample of adolescents. Future studies may explore this phenomenon in various parts of Türkiye, across age groups, in parent–adolescent dyads, or a combination of phenomenological interviews and observational approaches.

In general, the results indicate that in digitally saturated households, the presence of parents is not to be taken for granted based on their physical location. For adolescents it is important to be present in a responsive way, to be present with their words, their gestures, their feelings.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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