



The spiral of non-communication: an observational study of ritual co-presence in 36 families

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Abstract Mobile phones have profoundly reshaped the dynamics of family gatherings, transforming the traditional requirement of physical attendance into a modern compulsion of proximity. Within this setting, ritual co-presence exposes tensions between personal media habits and collective social expectations, offering a window into new patterns of communication in domestic life. This study draws on participatory observation and imaginary interactive interviews conducted among 36 multi-generational families during the Chinese Spring Festival, a key occasion of reunion. The qualitative data were coded and analyzed to identify major patterns of mobile-mediated interaction within family gatherings. Four communication modes emerged: alternative communication, facilitating communication, blocking communication, and rebuilding engagement. These modes reveal how mobile phones simultaneously sustain and fragment intergenerational bonds. The findings further show that phubbing—the act of neglecting others in favor of phone use—functions as a situated symbol whose behavioral contagion generates a spiral of non-communication. By examining how families negotiate co-presence and emotional connection in a mediated domestic sphere, this study highlights the boundary conditions of face-to-face interaction in contemporary society.

Keywords Ritual co-presence · Family communication · Involvement shield · Situated symbol · Phubbing

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Introduction

Technology continues to reshape everyday interaction patterns. Mobile phone-mediated communication organizes social behaviors on a micro scale, with an influence comparable to how the car reshaped patterns of travel and the structure of social life (Ling 2004). While phone use enables connectivity, it also interferes with social activities (McDaniel et al. 2019) and challenges human autonomy: individuals constantly struggle with decisions about when and where to connect or disconnect (Vanden Abeele 2021). Even in the mobile media era, on-site communication—face-to-face and physically co-present—remains a central mode of social interaction (Chen and Cai 2021). Understanding how mobile phones extend, transform, and potentially disrupt such interactions has become increasingly important.

The home is a crucial site for mediated communication and has been described as “the last vehicle” of stability in modernity (Virilio 1980). Digital media allow individuals to travel virtually and to bring distant experiences into the domestic sphere (Spigel 2001). Mobile phones, in particular, challenge the traditional notion of home by creating a mediated home and enabling the dislocation of domestic experience (Morley 2007, p. 278). In this context, physical presence is no longer a prerequisite for meaningful social connection. The traditional requirement to attend family gatherings, once a matter of social etiquette, has turned into what Boden and Molotch (1994) call a compulsion of proximity.

This study focuses on the concept of ritual co-presence, defined as the socially expected and symbolically meaningful gathering of family members in shared physical space. It represents a form of communication where bodily presence, emotional exchange, and social ritual intertwine. In today’s mobile environment, this form of co-presence is increasingly intertwined with individualized media practices. Mobile phones continuously channel information, entertainment, and social relationships into the domestic sphere, deconstructing and reconstructing traditional family interaction that used to be face-to-face, collective, and synchronous.

In China, the family remains the core social unit, and the Spring Festival represents its most significant occasion for reunion. During this time, multiple generations gather, making it an ideal site for observing how mobile phones mediate intergenerational interaction. The festival’s emphasis on togetherness and ritualized presence offers a culturally rich context to examine how technology redefines the boundaries of communication and noncommunication.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to observe and interpret mobile-mediated on-site communication within family gatherings. It asks how mobile phones reshape ritual co-presence, how different generations domesticate these devices, and how phubbing behavior evolves into what we term the spiral of non-communication.

Literature review and research questions

Ritual co-presence in communication

Thompson (1995) distinguished three basic types of human interaction: face-to-face interaction, mediated interaction, and quasi-mediated interaction. With the rise of networked media, a fourth type—mediated online interaction—has been added to this typology (Thompson 2020). These categories outline how communication technologies continually reconfigure the conditions of social presence.

In the mobile media era, communication is no longer bound by physical proximity. Mobile phones enable people to maintain a connected presence across distance (Licoppe 2004), while simultaneously fostering an absent presence—a state in which individuals are physically co-located but mentally or emotionally detached from the immediate situation (Zhu 2018). This dual condition, in which online and offline interactions overlap, has become a defining feature of contemporary face-to-face encounters. It raises critical questions: to what extent is such mediated presence socially acceptable? Has it reshaped interactional norms? And might it represent a new form of interpersonal communication in its own right?

Building on this shift, scholars have identified several configurations of co-presence supported by information and communication technologies (ICTs), including ritual co-presence, omnipresence, and reinforced co-presence (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016). Among these, ritual co-presence refers to the socially required, symbolically significant act of being physically present with family members. It is often considered the minimal condition for sustaining familial and intergenerational relationships.

Within the Chinese cultural tradition, family reunion embodies a moral and emotional imperative. Physical gathering is viewed as both an expression of affection and a reaffirmation of kinship bonds. Major festivals—particularly those that bring multiple generations together under one roof—carry deep social and symbolic meaning. Yet, with mobile phones now woven into nearly every aspect of interpersonal communication, these gatherings are increasingly shaped by individualized media practices. The question arises: how does the integration of mobile media transform the traditional patterns of ritual co-presence?

RQ1: Does the integration of mobile phones reshape communication patterns in the ritual co-presence within Chinese families?

Media domestication of the family

Research on media domestication originated with the integration of television into family life. The presence of television in the home provided the earliest example of how communication technologies reshape domestic routines and social relations. Families reorganized their living spaces around the television set and structured their daily schedules around program timetables (Morley 2007, p. 27). Beyond being a medium of home entertainment, television also became a social device outside the household, helping people pass time and socialize in public places such as workplaces (Anna 2001).

As the most family-oriented form of mass media, television has been directly affected by the rise of mobile technologies. Pessimists argue that social media have eroded the ritualized togetherness fostered by family television viewing, transforming domestic space into a realm of mobility and fragmentation. Optimists, however, contend that despite these shifts, television still anchors family space and maintains shared viewing as a form of symbolic unity (Yan 2020).

The theory of family modernization further suggests that the nuclear family—comprising a couple and their unmarried children—has become the dominant family structure, maintaining emotional but spatial distance from extended kin networks (Ma et al. 2011). In China, the traditional multi-generational family model has gradually dissolved under rapid urbanization, and family members are often geographically dispersed. Nevertheless, they continue to sustain intergenerational connections through mediated communication. Some younger people even describe themselves as having "broken up" with their relatives due to weakened family ties (Hu and Han 2022).

These changes raise a crucial question for the study of family media use: how do different generations perceive and domesticate mobile phones within these limited but symbolically loaded moments of intergenerational reunion?

RQ2: How do different generations in Chinese families domesticate mobile phones differently?

Phubbing behavior

Research on phubbing—the act of ignoring others in favor of mobile phone use—has examined a variety of social contexts, including parent–child interaction, intergenerational communication, romantic relationships, and workplace dynamics. Empirical studies show that parental phubbing diminishes the quality of parent–child communication and is associated with problematic behaviors in children (Xie et al. 2019). Both parental supervision and children’s self-control can moderate these negative outcomes (Niu et al. 2020). Other research has explored phubbing in peer or organizational settings: for example, Mariek et al. (2019) examined how phubbing frequency and duration affect perceived intimacy and distraction in student conversations. Similarly, Travis (2019) found that phubbing within intergenerational families can harm older adults’ well-being by violating expectations of attention and respect. In the workplace, manager phubbing undermines employees’ trust and engagement (Roberts and David 2017), while partner phubbing indirectly contributes to depression by reducing relationship satisfaction (Roberts and David 2016).

Despite these negative implications, scholars note that phubbing has become normalized in many everyday communication situations. People not only tolerate but often perpetuate this behavior as part of digital social norms. In family settings, especially during gatherings, phubbing may function as a behavioral adaptation—a strategy for avoiding social tension, filling conversational gaps, or managing one’s emotional comfort. It reflects both individual autonomy and collective negotiation of social presence.

From this perspective, phubbing is more than a form of impoliteness; it is a situated communicative act that reveals how individuals manage attention and involvement in hybrid physical–digital spaces. By observing how family members respond

to and regulate such behavior, this study seeks to explore its contagion mechanism and its implications for intergenerational relationships.

RQ3: How are phubbing behaviors addressed and mitigated in family communication?

Research design and process

Research methods and data collection

This study employed a combination of naturalistic observation and imaginary interactive interviews to investigate how mobile phones shape intergenerational family communication. The methodological design aimed to capture both observable behavioral patterns and the emotional meanings underlying them.

Naturalistic observation allowed researchers to document the establishment of family relationships and the transformation of dialogue forms in their natural settings. Similar to Nelly et al. (2021), who observed 58 Israeli families to examine how mobile phone use during restaurant meals affected parent–child communication, this study focused on how mobile phone use intervenes in the process of ritual co-presence within the home context.

To complement behavioral observation, imaginary interactive interviews were conducted to elicit participants' emotional perceptions of family communication (Rosenblatt and Meyer 1986). In these interviews, observers asked family members to imagine how they would react in hypothetical situations involving mobile phone use or attention withdrawal. This technique made it possible to understand emotional tensions and implicit norms that were difficult to observe directly.

The Spring Festival—the most significant occasion for family reunion in Chinese culture—provided a culturally meaningful setting for this study. It is one of the few times when multiple generations gather under one roof, allowing for an in-depth examination of how mobile technologies mediate both communication and noncommunication.

Sampling and observation procedures

A total of 48 trained observers (mainly university students) were recruited before the 2022 Spring Festival. They were instructed to conduct at least one hour of participatory observation in their own families, ensuring the presence of at least three generations (grandparents, parents, and children) and five or more participants in the same room. Each observer was required to record detailed field notes, collect supporting materials such as photographs, and provide follow-up interview transcripts.

Prior to data collection, the research team conducted a standardized training workshop to ensure methodological consistency. The training covered the purpose of the study, observation ethics, data recording formats, and strategies to minimize observer interference. Observers were explicitly instructed not to direct family behavior or reveal research intentions during the observation.

After the festival period (February 1–15, 2022), all observation notes were collected and reviewed for quality. Data that lacked sufficient detail, contextual photos, or completeness were excluded. Ultimately, 36 valid cases from 20 provinces across China were retained, yielding more than 110,000 Chinese characters of qualitative data (see Table 1.).

All participants were informed about the voluntary and confidential nature of the study. Observers obtained verbal consent from family members before recording any field data. To protect privacy, all personal identifiers were removed during transcription. The final dataset not only provides insights into everyday family interactions during a culturally significant period but also offers a foundation for understanding how mobile phone use transforms traditional Chinese notions of presence and communication.

Data coding analysis

NVivo 12.0 software was used to conduct open, axial, and selective coding. In the open coding phase, 42 preliminary categories were identified from the observation notes and interview transcripts. Inter-coder reliability was established through repeated cross-checking among the researchers and assistants. During axial coding, these categories were consolidated into 17 broader themes, which were then refined into four core categories during selective coding. The resulting coding structure formed the analytical basis for identifying patterns of media-based family communication.

Rather than applying grounded theory in its classical form, this study followed a constructivist grounded theory–inspired qualitative approach (Charmaz 2006). The analysis emphasized the co-construction of meaning between observers and participants, allowing theoretical categories to emerge inductively from the empirical material while remaining informed by existing frameworks of domestication and co-presence. This interpretive engagement enabled the researchers to transform

Table 1 Serial numbers and basic information of families

Number	Provinces	Number	Provinces	Number	Provinces
1CHL	Canton	13WF	Jiangxi	25SJY	Yunnan
2CR	Shandong	14YZY	Jiangxi	26KLJ	Henan
3FBL	Shandong	15JLP	Guizhou	27LRR	Henan
4LXY	Shandong	16WLX	Guizhou	28ZCY	Henan
5FXT	Shandong	17XLS	Hubei	29ZZX	Henan
6YX	Szechuan	18YSF	Shanxi	30LHY	Hebei
7LK	Szechuan	19BZY	Shanxi	31LHP	Hunan
8SJY	Szechuan	20YX	Chungking	32LQ	Inner Mongolia
9WYQ	Szechuan	21NK	Zhejiang	33LY	Shanxi
10HC	Szechuan	22CXY	Zhejiang	34WZY	Ji Lin
11LXY	Szechuan	23FDN	Hainan	35XWY	Guangxi
12TT	Szechuan	24HYX	Peking	36HSY	Fujian

observed behaviors into conceptual models that explain the dynamics of mobile-mediated family interaction (Table 2).

The four core categories—alternative communication, facilitating communication, blocking communication, and rebuilding engagement—represent distinct modes through which mobile phones intervene in family communication during ritual co-presence (see Table 3). These categories not only capture the behavioral diversity observed across generations but also provide a grounded foundation for theorizing the spiral of noncommunication in contemporary Chinese families.

Research result

Four communication types of media-based family communication (RQ1)

Based on the core codes generated from observations and in-depth interviews, this study summarizes four intergenerational mediated communication modes observed during the Spring Festival. These modes—alternative communication, facilitating communication, blocking communication, and rebuilding engagement—together answer RQ1 and illustrate how families negotiate intimacy, distance, and hierarchy through media in ritual contexts.

Table 2 Results of open coding (partial)

Categories	Source material representative language
Proactive reassurance	The magical device that parents use to soothe babies is playing their children's favorite cartoons on the phone rather than just cajoling or making faces. (26KLJ)
Companionship	In general, parents tend to spend a relatively short time with the family due to engaging in activities such as playing cards and other forms of entertainment. In contrast, the elderly typically spend a longer duration with the family, usually throughout the gathering. (10HC)
Ease embarrassment	You don't even know what to say without your phone. It's awkward. You can look at your phone screen to ease the awkwardness. (33LY)
Interference interrupts	I usually try to scare them or shake their gaze with my hand to make them stop ignoring me. (8SJY)
Look on	Middle-aged people often urge the younger generation to rush to the family WeChat group to claim red envelopes and actively discuss who received the largest packet and other related topics. However, the older generation is either busy in the kitchen or standing silently in the background. (6YX)
Absentmindedness	When you are in a good mood and want to share something with him, he might not respond or may reply with a cursory "Huh?" or "What?" without looking up at you. (25SJY)
Attention switch	My uncle sometimes chats while swiping his phone, but very briefly, and he may need to confirm certain messages. (1CHL)
Ask for help	Ask for help regarding creating contacts, taking photos, and sending pictures. (21NK)

Table 3 Three-level coding

Core categories	Main category	Initial category
Alternative communication	Social interaction avoidance	Avoidance of communication/active distancing
	Spiritual absence	Constantly offline/attention switching
	Psychological comfort	Embarrassment relieving/social loss relieving
	Communicative challenges	Lack of topics/generation gap
Facilitating communication	Child soothing	Soothing children/children crying for mobile phones
	Altruistic behavior	Accompanying/concession making
	Sharing and displaying	In-home information/media content sharing
	Topic provision	Discuss/topic suggesting
Blocking communication	Media addiction	Phone swiping/video watching/game playing
	Neglect	Nonresponding/absent-minded/reduced face-to-face conversation
	Being neglected	Getting used to it/Finding it understandable/obvious negative emotions
	Intervention	Making demands/interrupting/disciplining
Rebuilding engagement	Being intervened with	Acceptance/dissatisfaction/conflicts
	Home image creation	Photo and video shooting/posting short videos
	Technological feeding	Asking for help/inter-generational dependence/use difficulties/proactive teaching
	Sense of engagement	Technologically unsavvy/onlooking
	Family WeChat group	Online communication/Red envelope grabbing/posting and forwarding

Alternative communication: withdrawal from social interaction as the better option

Media often play a substitutive role in managing tension and conflict. In traditional Chinese families that emphasize harmony, members tend to adopt a passive stance toward internal pressure. Within intergenerational co-living environments, family members frequently use media to ease conflict or relieve negative emotions in moments such as children's tantrums, social awkwardness, or communication gaps.

"After the phone was taken away from her, the little girl started crying loudly, sat on the ground, and refused to calm down. The grandmother, feeling helpless, tried to gently calm her, but the little girl cried even louder, repeatedly insisting that she wanted the phone. Since it was a family gathering, the grandmother eventually relented and give her the phone to maintain peace." (10HC).
 "To stop him from crying and disturbing everyone, the parents turned on TikTok and let the two-year-old watch short videos." (17XLS).

The Spring Festival provides a rare opportunity for intergenerational gatherings. However, generational gaps and individual differences inevitably produce social barriers within families. In this context, media use becomes a temporary avoidance strategy and a performance prop, helping to preserve surface harmony. Rather than fostering genuine dialogue, media become a "preferred option" that temporarily conceals emotional distance and latent conflict between generations.

"Sometimes I am not interested in the topic, and I feel cramped just sitting and listening attentively, so I often check my phone, mainly to relieve my discomfort." (1CHL).

Facilitating communication: The "social currency" to fit in

During intergenerational gatherings, media also act as emotional intermediaries that help maintain family bonds. This is particularly evident among middle-aged and elderly members.

"Most of the time, I watch TV with my grandchildren, and the content is mostly cartoons that they choose themselves." (10HC).
 "To accommodate the young children, we switched the TV program from CCTV1 to CCTV14 (the children's channel), shifting the focus from national events such as the Winter Olympics to cartoons." (19BZY)

Observation notes reveal that media content—games, short videos, television programs—has become everyday entertainment for children. Middle-aged and elderly family members, though less engaged with this content, often accompany children during viewing to promote affection and maintain emotional proximity. Even when attention is divided, co-presence itself is valued.

Beyond the family, media also function as social currency in peer interactions. Sharing media content allows individuals to sustain social conversations and belonging in contemporary digital life.

"After a worship ceremony, my mother shared the short video she posted on TikTok with Aunt Si. Aunt Si watched and praised the video, then asked my mother about the filming techniques the special effects used." (23FDN)
 Middle-aged people use their WeChat circles to exchange pleasantries and updates, while teenagers find common ground through games such as King of Glory and Jedi Survival. (19BZY)

Blocking communication: barriers that disrupt traditional rituals

Family gatherings, such as meals and chats, function as ritualized expressions of intimacy. However, the pervasive presence of mobile media has disrupted these rituals, producing what participants describe as *spiritual absence*.

"Two teenage sisters had had dinner before arriving at the restaurant. The entire time, they sat in a corner, completely absorbed in their mobile phones, never looking up. From to my observation as I passed by, they were both using TikTok, and despite being of the same generation, they did not communicate with each other. This continued until the party ended." (6YX).

Media create virtual information boundaries, isolating those who are not part of the mediated flow. "Phubbing" not only interrupts traditional rituals but also erects symbolic barriers within families.

"We do not communicate as much as we used to. Sometimes it is sad, but now that everyone is on their phones, we do not talk." (29ZZX).
 "Every time I interrupt him while he's looking at his phone, he gets annoyed. I've decided to stop trying to get his attention..." (9WYQ).

Rebuilding engagement: reciprocal authorities in digital interactions

The spatial and social interventions of media use have restructured family authority. Hierarchies now shift between top-down and bottom-up influences, as younger members take initiative in shaping media-based family communication and establish new forms of digital participation.

He was surprised at how adeptly his little grandson could maneuver the game characters, making them jump and move in different directions. Eager to join in, he temporarily set aside his belief that games were harmful and wanted to try playing. When he saw Tong Tong lose again, he patted his head and asked him to teach him how to play. Tong Tong agreed and handed over the phone. The grandfather and the grandson happily played together for a long time. (9WYQ).

Over time, technology's impact on family dynamics becomes increasingly evident. Media create new modes of communication while setting entry barriers. Older family members, with limited digital access, are often excluded from mediated activities unless assisted. Traditional family rituals are declining, and new ones,

such as family WeChat groups, often fail to integrate everyone. Many older participants report a lack of engagement:

"Grabbing red envelopes is no better than handing them out directly. Besides, I don't grab them, and I don't use them." (21NK).

"I cannot use a mobile phone; I don't understand what you are talking about in the group, I do not have a group or know how to promote communication." (17XLS).

Effective inter-generational communication requires both linguistic and discursive negotiation between generations (Zhao 2018).

Psychological and behavioral characteristics of communication in the inter-generational family sphere (RQ2)

Building upon the four modes above, RQ2 explores the psychological and behavioral dynamics of three generational groups—children, parents, and grandparents—within media-based communication.

Children: Performance props for being spiritually absent

When faced with the discomfort of family socializing, children often exhibit social withdrawal rather than behaviors that foster connection. Mobile media act as both protective shells and performance props, allowing them to signal participation while remaining emotionally detached.

"This can be seen as the expression of escapist participation of this generation using mobile phones during family gatherings. Typical behaviors to avoid conversations with unfamiliar relatives include eating while playing and pretending to be occupied with their phones." (28ZCY).

"The younger generation mainly use mobile media and pay little attention to TV media. When using mobile phones in groups, they usually gather in separate rooms, separated from adults." (17XLS).

As digital natives, children not only shape the family's digital norms but also express tolerance toward the very behaviors they criticize.

"I understand this kind of situation because I also experience it. It is a habit to open your app during informal chat." (13WF).

Children frequently act as media mentors, teaching elders to use technology and, in doing so, strengthening emotional ties. Emotional closeness with grandparents enhances young people's well-being and intergenerational sensitivity (Duflos et al. 2020).

Personal media use also redefines the private–public boundary, promoting individualized attention and detachment from the collective space. As Morley (2007)

argues, such technologies are not merely tools for communication but serve as involvement shields that offer psychological security in a mobile, deterritorialized society.

Parents: multiple pressures as the “sandwich generation”

Parents, often described as the “sandwich generation,” occupy dual roles as both caregivers and children. They serve as emotional and logistical bridges between grandparents and grandchildren (Bangerter & Waldron 2014). Studies confirm that parent–child relationships mediate the emotional closeness between grandparents and grandchildren (Attar-Schwartz 2015), with parents functioning as gatekeepers of this bond (Tan et al. 2010).

In China’s family-oriented culture, this generation shoulders the primary responsibility for family harmony. Fathers are particularly active in family WeChat groups, sharing updates and organizing gatherings. However, compared to other generations, parents report the most negative emotions toward children’s media “addiction” and lack of face-to-face communication.

"(I'm) very anxious and angry. Your phubbers can be separate from your phone for even a second." (16WLX).

Interestingly, coding revealed that many parents also exhibited apparent phubbing behavior, often ignoring their family members due to their own media use. They are aware of their excessive use of mobile phones (Gong and Lei 2019). Fei Xiaotong, a renowned Chinese sociologist, introduced the concept of "social succession" which describes how new social elements inherit and replace old ones (Fei 2022). As these new elements, children must undergo socialization through parenting to become effective social successors. Fathers, who often bear the direct responsibility of raising their children, need to ensure family harmony and their children’s socialization. Consequently, compared to the other two generations, the parents experience a particular "worry" when faced with their children’s phubbing. This emotion stems from both their difficulties in disciplining their children and their own problematic mobile phone use.

"But looking back, if I don’t use my mobile phone, it feels like I don’t have any time to unwind. I still use it, and while I don’t consider myself addicted, I do not use it any less. I just don’t know how to manage either my phone use or my children." (30LHY).

Cultural norms of filial piety generate asymmetric tolerance: elders’ neglect is excused, while the same behavior in children is reprimanded.

"For those close to me, like my daughter, I will point out and criticize the behavior. However, if it is an older family member, I tend to overlook it and ignore the issue." (34WZY).

"When your grandfather is watching TikTok... if you shout, it is disrespectful. It’s a challenging situation." (6YX).

Grandparents: self-denial and adaptive adjustment as “outsiders”

Parents and grandparents both facilitate media-based interactions but in distinct ways. Parents use media to coordinate family relations, while grandparents use it to fit in and maintain presence. Consistent with Chinese parenting traditions that prioritize younger generations (Zhang 2018), older members often downplay their own needs:

"I have been part of this family for decades. I am happy as long as you are happy. No one cares about my thoughts, so I have no thoughts." (18YSF).

Compared to children's indulgence and parents' frustration, grandparents exhibit understanding and tolerance toward media-saturated family life, often justifying younger members' behavior by attributing it to “busyness”:

"I do not mind being accompanied or not. I feel happy for just sitting by the fire with them. They are all pretty occupied." (17XLS).

"[Laughs] They are busy making money. They won't listen to me (shaking head)." (21NK).

The Spring Festival holiday is when everyone has time off. Still, grandparents attribute the lack of inter-generational communication to the younger generation being busy. This helps alleviate the sense of self-denial in family interactions. Due to changes in social roles, the elderly shift their interpersonal focus to family interactions. Their relationships with their children and grandchildren significantly affect their satisfaction (Kaydlak 2019). According to the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), the expectation of real-life interaction is often disrupted by new media. To cope with the self-denial caused by these family dynamics, the elderly find reasons for the younger generation's "absent presence", which can help reduce cognitive dissonance.

In the digital age, the elderly are prone to self-identify as "outsiders". However, with the rise of new electronic media, however, an increasing number of elderly "phubbers" have emerged. The coding found that some elderly people are no longer "outsiders" in the traditional sense; once familiar with the media, they can become media reliant.

"My grandma has been using TikTok for the past two years... she watches short videos alone for one or two hours." (34WZY).

"My grandfather has hearing problems... now he plays card games on the computer and barely responds." (24HYX).

The imaginary interactive interviews show that the elderly are relatively tolerant of their children and grandchildren's absent-mindedness. However, this doesn't mean they are okay with the lack of intergenerational communication.

Mobile phones play a crucial role in sustaining everyday conversations and maintaining social bonds within families. Morley (2007, p. 107) distinguishes between “chatting” and “conversing”, noting that in domestic contexts, chatting often forms a more fundamental basis of interpersonal connection than formal conversation.

During the imaginary interactive interviews, many participants expressed disappointment and frustration over the frequent interruption of such casual chats in mediated family life. Echoing this concern, Turkle (2015) calls for a need to “reclaim conversation.” In the context of familial “non-communication” and the loneliness it produces, this study further argues for the necessity of “reclaiming chat”—the small, spontaneous exchanges that sustain emotional intimacy in everyday family interactions.

Phubbing, as a situated symbol, triggers behavioral contagion across the system (RQ3)

Family communication exists at the intersection of the public and private spheres. It operates as a behavioral system, where individuals continuously influence and adapt to each other (Schelling 1978, p. 27). Even loosely defined gatherings form situated environments in which each participant’s actions become part of the shared context (Goffman 1966, p. 241).

Historically, mass media have offered solutions to the discomfort of co-presence—newspapers once served as involvement shields, allowing individuals to appear engaged without interaction (Skinner and Alajalov 1995). In the digital era, mobile phones have inherited this function, offering a portable escape from “over-presence.”

Within family gatherings, phubbing becomes both a coping mechanism and a situated symbol of disengagement. Once one person begins using their phone, others quickly follow, creating a chain reaction of withdrawal. This mutual adaptation produces what this study conceptualizes as the spiral of non-communication—a state where everyone is physically present yet socially absent, until someone actively interrupts the cycle (see Fig. 1).

Discussion

This study set out to examine how mobile phones reshape face-to-face communication within Chinese intergenerational families during the Spring Festival—a context rich with ritual, emotion, and social expectation. By combining participant observation and imaginary interactive interviews with 36 families, the research sought to uncover the communicative dynamics and behavioral meanings of phubbing and ritual co-presence. The findings reveal that mobile media are deeply embedded in the moral, emotional, and structural dimensions of family life, forming not only new interactional habits but also new moral frameworks around attentiveness and absence.

The discussion below interprets these findings through three analytical lenses. First, it conceptualizes the emerging fifth type of communication—a hybridized form of presence that merges co-presence and mediation. Second, it explores situational obligation and digital morality, analyzing how family members negotiate

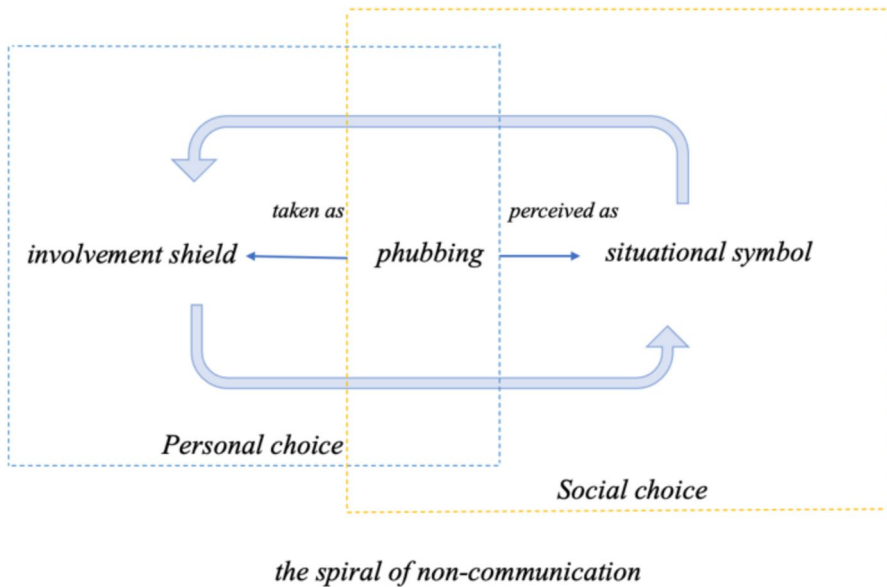


Fig. 1 The spiral of non-communication of on-site communications

moral hierarchies through media use. Finally, it examines attribution and behavioral contagion, interpreting phubbing as a collectively reinforced practice rather than a purely individual failure. Together, these dimensions illuminate how digital media transform everyday rituals of togetherness into complex ecologies of shared absence and mediated co-presence.

The emerging fifth type of communication

Through the observation and interviews of ritual co-presence in 36 families, this study theorizes the emergence of a fifth type of communication that transcends the traditional dichotomy of mediated versus non-mediated interaction. Mobile communication functions as a portable social support system with several implications. First, it simultaneously distances and reconnects human interaction; second, it compensates for rather than replaces interpersonal relationships; and third, it reflects a constant human desire for social connection achieved through shifting technological means (Hu 2020).

This hybrid form of presence allows individuals to be physically co-present yet mentally elsewhere, splitting attention between real and virtual worlds. As Campbell and Ross (2022) note, loneliness in digitally mediated settings is no longer defined by physical isolation but by emotional disconnection. Such hybridized communication transforms distraction into a normalized social practice—what Couldry (2012)

conceptualizes as “media as practice,” where media use becomes an embodied and habitual form of social existence rather than a distinct activity.

Hybridized presence and the normalization of distraction

In this context, the smartphone acts as what Goffman (1963) termed an “interaction shield,” reinterpreted here as a “personalized co-presence filter.” Within families, especially during the Spring Festival gatherings, members learn to balance the ritual of being together with the practical need for mediated escape. This mediated co-presence has become a socialized behavior, particularly among children, who learn from adults that limited disengagement is acceptable and even polite in maintaining emotional order.

This dynamic illustrates what Bandura (1977) described as social learning—individuals acquire behavioral norms by observing and reproducing others’ mediated actions. In this sense, the intergenerational transfer of “phubbing” is not mere imitation but a cultural socialization process. The act of “checking one’s phone” has evolved into a socially legitimate performance of attentiveness—being-with-others while elsewhere. As Hepp (2020) argues, such practices demonstrate the “deep mediatization” of everyday life, where digital media become integral to how people organize attention, emotion, and social belonging.

Situational obligation and digital morality

Situational obligations carry a moral dimension. As Goffman (1966, pp. 240–241) proposed, individuals are expected to sustain the moral order of a given situation; failure to comply results in social embarrassment or moral reproach. Within intergenerational Chinese families, this moral tension is magnified by the erosion of traditional authority and the ambiguous role of digital etiquette.

Parents, often serving as mediators between grandparents and children, experience moral anxiety over mobile phone use. They discipline children’s phubbing while feeling guilty for their own. This contradiction reveals the moralization of media use, where behavioral control becomes intertwined with family virtue. During significant occasions like the Spring Festival, digital manners are elevated into moral performance—discipline over “screen time” symbolizing responsibility and respect.

Relational morality and the erosion of hierarchical authority

The tension around digital morality in Chinese families reflects a broader cultural pattern. Drawing from Fei Xiaotong’s (1992) notion of the “differential mode of association” (差序格局), family morality in China is relational rather than contractual; ethical obligations flow through concentric circles of intimacy. As digital communication unsettles this pattern, authority becomes negotiated rather than imposed.

In contrast to Turkle's (2015) "ethics of conversation," which emphasizes individual responsibility to listen, Chinese digital morality emphasizes relational harmony—phubbing is condemned not merely for rudeness but for threatening the emotional hierarchy within kinship. Thus, digital morality in Chinese families represents a relational ethic, where technological behavior is judged through the lens of affection, hierarchy, and face (面子). The erosion of hierarchical authority transforms digital discipline from top-down control into mutual regulation, aligning with Couldry and Hepp's (2017) idea of "communicative figurations."

Fundamental attribution bias in phubbing behavior

Social psychology reminds us that human behavior is shaped more by social environment than personal disposition, yet individuals tend to overattribute others' actions to internal flaws—a pattern known as fundamental attribution bias. In the case of phubbing, observers often interpret the behavior as a sign of indifference or disrespect. However, as this study shows, phubbing is a socially contagious behavior, produced through environmental adaptation rather than moral decay.

When one person uses a phone in a shared space, others quickly follow, creating a "chain of behavioral normalization." This contagion is not simply mimicry; it reflects what Bandura (1986) called reciprocal determinism—a continuous feedback between personal behavior, environmental cues, and social reinforcement.

Behavioral contagion and media habituation

Phubbing thus operates as both a coping mechanism and a situated symbol of mediated disengagement. The "spiral of non-communication" conceptualized in this study describes a feedback loop in which individual withdrawal reinforces collective withdrawal, leading to the paradox of shared absence.

From the perspective of deep mediatization (Hepp 2020), this spiral is not accidental but structural: mobile phones provide an infrastructural framework that reshapes the moral and attentional economy of family life. Over time, these practices become habitual, marking a shift from situational adaptation to structural normalization. In other words, the family gathering, once a site of ritual face-to-face communication, now embodies a hybrid ecology—a coexistence of togetherness and solitude, connection and isolation.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing scholarship on family communication and mediatization by revealing how mobile phones restructure interpersonal dynamics in Chinese intergenerational settings. Through qualitative observation and interviews with 36 families during the Spring Festival, the research illustrates how digital

media reconfigure both the form and meaning of “being together.” The concept of ritual co-presence now exists in a hybrid state—anchored in physical gathering yet constantly mediated through screens.

The four identified modes—alternative communication, facilitating communication, blocking communication, and rebuilding engagement—demonstrate the ambivalence of technology: it both sustains and fragments emotional intimacy. The proposed model of the spiral of non-communication captures the behavioral contagion through which individual withdrawal becomes collective silence.

Ultimately, this study argues that mobile media are not merely disruptive but constitutive of contemporary family life. They reshape moral hierarchies, redefine attentional norms, and introduce new rituals of mediated togetherness. Future research should further explore how such hybridized co-presence evolves across cultural contexts, technologies, and life stages, thereby extending our understanding of communication in deeply mediatized societies.

Limitations

Due to travel restrictions during the epidemic, this study recruited observers to conduct structured observation at a single time point. To ensure consistent sample quality, methods included preliminary training, a fixed observation period, a standardized interview outline, and field photos. However, with many observers involved, more detailed information on individual factors is needed, which will require follow-up questioning of observers. Overall, the observation method requires further refinement.

The value of this study lies in the extensive effort to contextualize family communication through field and participatory observation. Given the uniqueness, culture, and Chinese characteristics of the Spring Festival, this study can be extended to track longitudinal changes and accumulate comparative insights.

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Author contributions Hui Qu, Shiyi Hong, and Jiayi Yang jointly conceived and designed the study. Data collection and preliminary analysis were conducted collaboratively. All authors contributed equally to data interpretation, manuscript drafting, and revision. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data availability The qualitative data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy considerations involving family observations, but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Code availability This study is based on qualitative observational and interview data analysis. No custom code or software scripts were generated or used for this research.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Ethical approval We hereby declare that this manuscript is an original work independently completed by the authors based on the reviewers' comments. Except for the quoted materials, this manuscript does not include any results that have been published or written by other individuals or groups. The three listed authors are the sole contributors to the conception and writing of this manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the paper, and collectively assume full legal responsibility for the contents of this declaration.

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