

# From Digital Distraction to Leadership Excellence: The Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence on Phubbing & Transformational Leadership

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*This study investigates the moderating function of emotional intelligence (EI) in the link between transformational leadership (TL) and leader phubbing (LP). The study was carried out to determine if emotional intelligence mitigates the detrimental effects of leader phubbing on transformational leadership, using a sample of 471 workers from a variety of sectors. The results demonstrate that frequent digital distractions impair a leader's capacity to motivate and inspire followers, confirming the negative correlation between LP and TL. But this association is strongly moderated by emotional intelligence, which lessens the negative consequences of leader phubbing on transformational leadership.*

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## Introduction

Technology is essential for improving productivity and easing communication in today's hyperconnected environment. Phubbing, a name formed from the words "phone" and "snubbing," is one of the unexpected repercussions of an over-reliance on digital gadgets. It is the practice of neglecting someone in favor of a mobile device (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018). Although phubbing in interpersonal relationships has been the subject of much studies so far, less is known about its effects in professional contexts, particularly with regard to leadership effectiveness. According to Roberts

and David (2016), executives who indulge in phubbing run the danger of destroying relationships at work, decreasing employee engagement, and eventually eroding their credibility as leaders.

Transformational leadership is one kind of leadership that has drawn a lot of interest in organizational behavior studies. By cultivating a vision, encouraging intellectual stimulation, and showing individual attention, transformational leaders inspire and excite their workforce (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Phubbing behaviors, on the other hand, might run counter to important transformational leadership tenets like effective communication, emotional connection, and active involvement. Leader phubbing can make workers feel underappreciated, which lowers trust and job happiness.

The capacity to identify, comprehend, and control one's own emotions as well as those of others is known as emotional intelligence (EI), and it may be a mitigating element in this equation (Goleman, 1995). According to Mayer et al. (2008), leaders who possess high emotional intelligence are more self-aware, sympathetic, and able to create meaningful connections at work. By helping leaders understand the consequences of their actions and modify their communication tactics appropriately, emotional intelligence (EI) may operate as a moderating variable to mitigate the harmful impacts of phubbing. High EI leaders could actively try to keep team members engaged in spite of digital distractions and be more aware of how their digital behaviors impact team dynamics.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how emotional intelligence influences the link between phubbing and the efficacy of transformational leadership. In particular, it looks for evidence that leaders with greater EI are better able to lessen the detrimental consequences of phubbing on leadership results. The study adds to the body of knowledge on digital distractions in the workplace by examining this confluence and provides useful advice for developing leaders in the digital era.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To investigate the impact of leader phubbing on transformational leadership effectiveness.
2. To examine the moderating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between phubbing and transformational leadership.
3. To provide insights into how leaders can manage digital distractions while maintaining effective leadership practices.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research holds significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it expands the transformational leadership framework by integrating digital distractions as a potential barrier to effective leadership. Practically, it provides organizations with strategies to enhance leadership effectiveness in an era of increased digital dependency. By understanding the role of EI in mitigating the negative effects of phubbing, or-

ganizations can design leadership training programs that emphasize digital mindfulness and emotional intelligence development.

### **Understanding Phubbing in Workplace Settings**

Phubbing, which combines the words “phone” and “snubbing,” is the practice of prioritizing a mobile device over a person. The phenomenon, which was first examined in interpersonal interactions, has drawn interest in organizational behavior because of its effects on leadership effectiveness and workplace communication (Chotpitayasonondh & Douglas, 2018). Phubbing is especially harmful in work environments because it conveys a lack of interest and focus, which can damage relationships between leaders and followers and diminish morale among staff members.

According to Roberts and David (2017), workplace phubbing has been linked to decreased levels of team cohesiveness, job satisfaction, and employee trust. According to Yam et al. (2018), leaders that engage in phubbing may unintentionally foster an atmosphere where workers feel underappreciated, which lowers organizational commitment and deters drive. Since human contacts play a major role in leadership effectiveness, digital distractions can seriously undermine leadership credibility and erode relationships at work (Helms, 2012).

### **Transformational Leadership & Role of Presence**

Inspiration, intellectual stimulation, personalised attention, and idealised influence are characteristics of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). According to Banks et al. (2016), transformational leaders are supposed to cultivate close relationships with their followers in order to create a motivated, engaged, and productive workforce. But by diverting focus from workers, leader phubbing breaks this bond and goes against the tenets of transformative leadership.

**Leader phubbing breaks this bond and goes against the tenets of transformative leadership.**

According to research, transformational leaders that are very involved and present with their teams foster a feeling of psychological safety and belonging, which improves performance and work satisfaction (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). Employees, on the other hand, believe that bosses who phubb are less approachable and less dedicated to their professional growth (Roberts & David, 2016). The trust required for transformative leadership to be successful might be seriously damaged by this impression.

### **Emotional Intelligence as a Moderator in Leadership**

The capacity to recognise, comprehend, and control one’s own and other people’s emotions is known as

emotional intelligence (EI) (Goleman, 1995). According to Mayer et al. (2008), leaders with high EI are better equipped to handle workplace dynamics and create lasting connections because they exhibit higher levels of empathy, self-awareness, and social skills.

According to studies, emotional intelligence (EI) plays a crucial role in improving leadership effectiveness, especially when it comes to reducing the detrimental impacts of workplace obstacles like digital distractions (Boyatzis & Sala, 2004). High EI leaders are more likely to understand how their activities affect their staff and take appropriate measures to keep them engaged (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005). This shows that by assisting leaders in controlling their digital behaviors while preserving solid interpersonal ties, emotional intelligence (EI) may mitigate the detrimental consequences of phubbing on transformative leadership (Yukl et al., 2013).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Through the perspective of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, which highlights the significance of positive connections between leaders and workers, the relationship between phubbing, emotional intelligence, and transformational leadership may be comprehended (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Leaders that consistently communicate with their followers in a high-quality manner strengthen their bonds and improve team performance, according to LMX

theory (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015). Phubbing, on the other hand, shatters these relationships, which results in worse leader-member communication and less staff engagement (Xie et al., 2021).

In this concept, emotional intelligence (EI) plays a crucial moderating role, allowing leaders to choose meaningful in-person connections over digital behaviors (Goleman, 1998). High EI leaders are more likely to intentionally cut back on their phone use, acknowledge the detrimental effects of phubbing, and concentrate on boosting staff motivation and engagement (Côté, 2014). This is in line with the ideas of transformational leadership, which prioritise emotional connection, active listening, and motivating staff members towards common company objectives (Bass, 1999).

### **Empirical Research on Leadership and Digital Distractions**

Numerous empirical studies have looked at how digital distractions affect relationships at work and the efficacy of leaders. According to Xie et al. (2021), leader phubbing has a negative correlation with employee work engagement, which lowers job satisfaction and trust. Similarly, workplace phubbing reduces employees' perceptions of transformational leadership efficacy and erodes leader trust, according to Yam et al. (2018). On the other hand, Mishra and Singh (2024) research emphasises the protective function of emotional intelligence in reducing the negative consequences of digital dis-

**In spite of digital distractions, leaders who demonstrated greater degrees of self-awareness and emotional control were able to sustain involvement.**

tractions. Their research showed that by preserving solid interpersonal ties and efficient communication techniques, leaders with high EI were able to offset the detrimental effects of phubbing. Haigh (2015) looked at the psychological consequences of leader phubbing on staff members and discovered that frequent digital distractions exacerbated sentiments of disengagement and social alienation. Nonetheless, in spite of digital distractions, leaders who demonstrated greater degrees of self-awareness and emotional control were able to sustain involvement.

### **Gaps in Literature & Research Implications**

There are little empirical studies examining phubbing's direct implications on transformational leadership effectiveness, despite the fact that previous research offers insightful information about how it affects relationships at work. Furthermore, not much research has looked at emotional intelligence as a mitigating factor in this connection. Examining how leaders may control digital distractions while upholding successful leadership behaviors is crucial given the growing dependence on digital technology in work environments.

By examining the moderating function of emotional intelligence in the con-

nection between phubbing and transformative leadership, this study seeks to close these gaps. In doing so, it adds to the expanding corpus of research on leadership in the digital age and provides helpful suggestions for boosting leadership efficacy in a time of electronic distractions.

Based on the review of literature, the following hypotheses are formulated to examine the relationships between phubbing, transformational leadership, and emotional intelligence:

- H1: Leader phubbing is negatively associated with transformational leadership effectiveness.
- H2: Emotional intelligence is positively associated with transformational leadership effectiveness.
- H3: Emotional intelligence moderates the negative relationship between phubbing and transformational leadership, such that the negative effect is weaker for leaders with high emotional intelligence.

### **Methodology**

This study examines the connections between transformational leadership, emotional intelligence, and leader phubbing in the corporate sector using a quantitative, cross-sectional research approach. Employee opinions of their leaders' conduct, emotional intelligence, and effectiveness as leaders are evaluated through survey-based data collection. This research is especially pertinent to businesses where communication,

engagement, and interaction between leaders and employees are essential for success, given the growing integration of digital technologies in the workplace.

Employees in the business sector, particularly those employed in the manufacturing, banking, and information technology sectors, are the subject of the research. These industries were chosen because of how heavily they rely on technology and how well their CEOs manage teams. The survey included 471 people in all, representing a varied workforce with a range of job functions and organisational levels. To guarantee objective data gathering, a random sampling approach was used to choose the sample.

A systematic online survey was used to gather data, and it was disseminated by email and business mailing lists and professional networking sites like LinkedIn. To promote truthful and objective replies, the survey was anonymous. Before beginning the questionnaire, participants received an informed consent form and information about the study's objectives.

The study measured the important variables using commonly used, standardised measures to guarantee validity and reliability. The Generic Scale of Phubbing (GSP), created by Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas (2018), was used to quantify leader phubbing, which evaluates mobile phone dependence, distraction, and disengagement in professional encounters. Avolio and Bass's (1995) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X), which measures idealised

influence, inspiring motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised concern, was used to evaluate transformational leadership. Schutte et al. (1998) used the Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS) to measure emotional intelligence. This scale assesses social skills, empathy, self-awareness, and emotion management in leadership situations. To guarantee uniformity in data collection, each scale was scored on a five-point Likert scale.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

To gain an understanding of the dataset, descriptive statistics were computed for the key variables: Leader Phubbing, Transformational Leadership, and Emotional Intelligence. The summary of mean, standard deviation, and minimum-maximum values for the 471 respondents is presented in Table 1.

With a mean score of 3.21, Leader Phubbing demonstrated a moderate degree of phubbing behavior. There may be some variation in the replies, as indicated by the standard deviation of 0.88. The comparatively higher mean of 3.95 for transformational leadership indicated that workers thought their leaders were transformative in general. With a low minimum score of 2.10 and a high maximum value of 5.00, emotional intelligence had the highest mean (4.12) of the three variables, suggesting that leaders were viewed as emotionally intelligent.

### **Demographic Analysis**

To understand the composition of the sample, demographic characteristics

**Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables**

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Leader Phubbing	471	3.21	0.88	1.00	5.00
Transformational Leadership	471	3.95	0.72	2.00	5.00
Emotional Intelligence	471	4.12	0.69	2.10	5.00

**Table 2 Demographic Profile of Respondents**

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (N = 471)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	278	59.0
	Female	193	41.0
Age Group (Years)	20-30	182	38.7
	31-40	197	41.8
	41-50	67	14.2
	51 and above	25	5.3
Industry Sector	IT	176	37.4
	Banking	152	32.3
	Manufacturing	143	30.3
Work Experience	1-5 years	209	44.4
	6-10 years	167	35.5
	11-15 years	66	14.0
	More than 15 years	29	6.1
Education Level	Undergraduate	122	25.9
	Postgraduate	271	57.5
	Doctorate	78	16.6

such as gender, age, industry sector, work experience, and education level were analyzed. The demographic profile of the 471 respondents is presented in the Table 2.

Professionals from various backgrounds are represented in a balanced and diversified manner by the demographic profile of the 471 respondents. With 41% of respondents being females and 59% of respondents being males, the sample’s gender distribution shows a fairly equal range of viewpoints on workplace behavior and leadership. A substantial percentage of the respondents appears to be in their early to mid-career phases, as seen by the age distribu-

tion, which reveals that the bulk of participants (41.8%) are in the 31–40 age group, closely followed by the 20–30 age group (38.7%). The dataset is biased towards younger workers, who could be more affected by digital contacts and workplace phubbing, since just 5.3% of respondents are 51 years of age or older.

According to industry statistics, the largest percentage of respondents—37.4%—are employed in the IT sector, which is followed by manufacturing (30.3%) and banking (32.3%). This distribution illustrates the study’s applicability because banking and IT workers are regularly subjected to digital distractions, which might compromise their ability to

lead effectively. This is further supported by the work experience data, which shows that professionals in the early to mid stages of their careers are the study's primary source of insights, with 44.4% of respondents having 1–5 years of experience and 35.5% having 6–10 years. Senior leaders are under-represented, since just 6.1% of respondents have more than 15 years of experience.

In terms of educational background, 16.6% of the participants have a doctorate, and 57.5% have postgraduate degrees. This implies that the workforce polled has a high level of education,

which increases the likelihood that they would reflect on leadership behaviors and emotional intelligence.

### Hypotheses Testing

Leader phubbing is negatively associated with transformational leadership effectiveness. This is the hypothesis.

The Pearson correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) was computed to examine the relationship between leader phubbing and transformational leadership. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3 Correlation Matrix**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2
1. Leader Phubbing	3.21	0.88	1	-0.452**
2. Transformational Leadership	3.95	0.72	-0.452**	1

Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

**Correlation study shows a statistically significant negative relationship between transformational leadership effectiveness and leader phubbing.**

The results of the correlation study show a statistically significant negative relationship between transformational leadership effectiveness and leader phubbing ( $r = -0.452, p < 0.01$ ). This supports the idea that digital distractions have a detrimental influence on leadership behaviors by indicating that transformational leadership effectiveness declines as leader phubbing rises.

A linear regression analysis was conducted with transformational leadership as the dependent variable and leader phubbing as the independent variable in order to further investigate the relationship between the two. Table 4 displays the findings.

The negative correlation is confirmed by the regression analysis, which reveals that transformational leadership effectiveness is strongly predicted by leader phubbing ( $b = -0.452, p < 0.01$ ). Transformational leadership efficacy falls by 0.392 units for every unit rise in leader phubbing, according to the negative beta coefficient ( $-0.392$ ). A considerable amount of the drop in transformational

**Table 4 Regression Analysis of Leader Phubbing on Transformational Leadership**

Predictor Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p-value
(Constant)	4.82	0.17	—	28.35	0.000**
Leader Phubbing	-0.392	0.04	-0.452	-9.71	0.000**
R <sup>2</sup> = 0.204					
F (1, 469) = 94.34					0.000**

Note: \*\*p < 0.01 (significant at 99% confidence level).

leadership behaviors may be attributed to leader phubbing, as the model explains 20.4% of the variation (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.204) in transformational leadership effectiveness. The overall model significance is supported by the F-statistic (94.34, p < 0.01), which shows that leader phubbing

is a significant predictor of transformative leadership.

Emotional Intelligence is positively associated with Transformational Leadership Effectiveness.

**Table 5 Correlation Matrix**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2
1. Emotional Intelligence	4.12	0.69	1	0.586**
2. Transformational Leadership	3.95	0.72	0.586**	1

Note: \*\* p < 0.01 (two-tailed).

**There is a statistically significant positive link between transformational leadership effectiveness and emotional intelligence**

According to the correlation study, there is a statistically significant positive link between transformational leadership effectiveness and emotional intelligence (r = 0.586, p < 0.01). This supports the idea that emotionally intelligent leaders

are better at inspiring, motivating, and involving their people. It also implies that transformational leadership behaviours improve as emotional intelligence rises.

A linear regression analysis was performed using Transformational Leadership as the dependent variable and Emotional Intelligence as the independent variable in order to further investigate the relationship between the two. Table 6 displays the findings.

**Table 6: Regression Analysis of Emotional Intelligence on Transformational Leadership**

Predictor Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	T	p-value
(Constant)	2.81	0.21	—	13.38	0.000**
Emotional Intelligence	0.725	0.05	0.586	15.02	0.000**
R <sup>2</sup> = 0.344					
F (1, 469) = 225.60					0.000**

Note: \*\*p < 0.01 (significant at 99% confidence level).

There is a high positive correlation between Transformational Leadership Effectiveness and Emotional Intelligence, as confirmed by the regression analysis ( $\beta = 0.586, p < 0.01$ ). According to the positive beta coefficient (0.725), Transformational Leadership Effectiveness rises by 0.725 units for every unit increase in Emotional Intelligence. The model demonstrates that emotional intelligence is a significant determinant of leadership success by explaining 34.4% of the variation ( $R^2 = 0.344$ ) in transformational leadership effectiveness. The total model significance is confirmed by the F-statistic (225.60,  $p < 0.01$ ), which further supports the idea that transformational leadership is significantly predicted by emotional intelligence.

### Moderation Analysis & Interpretation

A moderation analysis was carried out using Hayes' PROCESS Model 1 in

order to test H3, which claims that Emotional Intelligence (EI) moderates the negative relationship between Leader Phubbing (LP) and Transformational Leadership (TL), making the negative effect less pronounced for leaders with high EI.

### Model Specification

- Independent Variable (X): Leader Phubbing (LP)
- Moderator (W): Emotional Intelligence (EI)
- Dependent Variable (Y): Transformational Leadership (TL)
- Covariates: Age, Gender, Industry, Experience

The regression analysis assesses whether the interaction term ( $LP \times EI$ ) significantly influences Transformational Leadership.

**Table 7 Moderation Analysis Results Using Hayes' PROCESS Model 1**

Predictor Variables	B	SE	t	p-value	95% CI (LL, UL)
(Constant)	4.10	0.22	18.64	0.000***	(3.66, 4.54)
Leader Phubbing (LP)	-0.43	0.08	-5.38	0.000***	(-0.58, -0.28)
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	0.61	0.07	8.71	0.000***	(0.47, 0.75)
LP $\times$ EI (Interaction)	0.19	0.05	3.78	0.000***	(0.10, 0.28)

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed).

Transformational Leadership (TL) is significantly impacted negatively by Leader Phubbing (LP) ( $B = -0.43, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that leaders that engage in more phubbing are less effective at transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is significantly positively impacted by emotional intelligence (EI)

( $B = 0.61, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that emotionally intelligent leaders exhibit more robust transformational leadership behaviors. The negative impact of Leader Phubbing on Transformational Leadership is moderated by Emotional Intelligence, as seen by the significant interaction term ( $LP \times EI$ ) ( $B = 0.19, p < 0.001$ ). The

model's significant predictive performance is demonstrated by the R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.362, which shows that it accounts for 36.2% of the variation in transformational leadership.

**These results demonstrate the value of developing emotional intelligence in leadership development programs.**

The findings show that the negative correlation between Transformational Leadership and Leader Phubbing is moderated by Emotional Intelligence. In particular, phubbing has a less detrimental influence on the efficacy of leaders with higher emotional intelligence than it does on those with lower emotional intelligence, who see a greater decline in transformational leadership behaviors. These results demonstrate the value of developing emotional intelligence in leadership development programs, which aids in leaders' ability to control digital distractions and sustain high levels of performance.

## **Discussion**

The study's conclusions shed important light on the intricate interactions of transformational leadership, emotional intelligence, and leader phubbing. Leaders who regularly participate in phubbing behaviors are less successful in inspiring, motivating, and developing their subordinates, according to the data, which also show that phubbing has a detrimental impact on transformational leadership. According to earlier studies, digital dis-

tractions impair meaningful communication, undermine leader-subordinate trust, and diminish leadership efficacy. The detrimental effect of phubbing on transformational leadership is considerably lessened by emotional intelligence, which moderates this unfavorable link. Stronger self-control, interpersonal awareness, and communication abilities are traits of leaders with higher emotional intelligence, which enables them to lessen the negative impacts of phubbing and preserve their effectiveness as leaders. These results highlight how crucial it is for leaders to receive emotional intelligence training, especially in digital environments where distractions are frequent. Organisations must also put initiatives in place to lessen digital disruptions in leadership interactions. These tactics include cultivating emotionally intelligent leadership cultures, encouraging mindful technology usage, and establishing clear limits for digital communication.

## **Conclusion**

The detrimental impacts of Leader Phubbing on Transformational Leadership are mitigated by Emotional Intelligence, as this study demonstrates. Although leader phubbing dramatically reduces the efficacy of transformational leadership, leaders with greater levels of emotional intelligence are able to counteract this effect and continue to have an impact in spite of digital distractions. These results support the necessity of developing emotionally aware leaders in organisations and have important theoretical and practical ramifications. To improve leaders' capacity to handle digi-

tal distractions while retaining their transformative leadership efficacy, organisations and institutions should include emotional intelligence training into leadership development programs. Future studies could examine cross-industry variances to offer additional industry-specific insights and longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term effects of digital distractions on leadership effectiveness. Overall, by highlighting the pressing need for emotionally aware leadership in the digital age, this study adds to the expanding body of research on digital distractions in leadership.

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