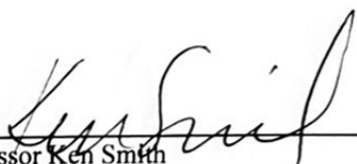# It's Time to Break Free from Phubbing

By

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A Thesis
Presented to the
Graduate College of
Radford University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements of the
Masters in Fine Arts Degree
Studio Art, Emphasis in graphic design

Professor Ken Smith   Date 3/28/18
Thesis Advisor

Professor John O'Connor   Date 3/28/18
Committee Member

Professor Andrew Ross   Date 3/28/18
Committee Member

Abstract

As a graphic design student, I have learned some methodologies and skills for creating attractive works, but I hope my design is not only used to advertise a product or an event, but also can be used to reflect some social problems and draw viewers' attention to these issues.

This thesis contains a series of original posters that focus on the phubbing problems in today's society. Phubbing, as a new word, is phone snubbing, which basically defines the habit of ignoring someone in favor of a mobile phone. In my posters, I present phone snubbing behaviors around me and try to appeal to people to break free from phubbing and enjoy the time with their families and friends.

In this work, vector art was employed to complete my series, because vector graphics realistically emphasize the phubbing subject in my posters, and it will help my posters to be exhibited without any loss of quality in the reproduction. In addition, digital manipulation techniques have also been employed on my reference photos to get a strong composition in each poster.

Xiaomeng Li, MFA
Art Department, 2018
Radford University

Acknowledgement

First, I would like to acknowledge God. Without His blessings I could not overcome frustrating phases during the poster design process and achieve the goal in the end.

Second, I would like to thank my advisor Professor Ken Smith for his contributions of time, knowledge, patience, and concern. Without his encouragement and support, I could not have completed this thesis. His expertise in graphic design and illustration are the major reasons that I could complete productive works in the past three years. Moreover, it is appreciated that he always patiently and kindly advised me or discussed with me when I had questions or met difficulties.

My gratitude is also extended to Professor John O'Connor, Professor Andrew Ross, and Dr. Roann Barris for guiding my thesis. I appreciate that they took time out of their busy schedules to meet with me and respond to my emails. They are always encouraging, motivating, enlightening, and helping me get new knowledge in graphic design, photography, and art history. In addition, I wish to give big thanks to my lovely friends, especially Lili Teng. They provided great assistance to me when I created my photo references. Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my husband; without their support and care, I could not have completed this thesis.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Fast information exchange and technology development make our world become more and more globalized. With the popularity of the smartphone, an increasing number of people rely on smartphones in their daily lives. People check emails, listen to music, purchase goods, and read news on their phones. However, a lot of research indicates that overusing cellphones may lead to some serious problems. My personal experience can serve as an example; since my husband has replaced his ordinary cellphone with a new smartphone, he always spends his leisure time playing with the smartphone. He checks emails, watches videos, and reads news on his phone instead of chatting with me while we are watching TV shows, eating in a restaurant, and shopping in a grocery store. I am dissatisfied with his behavior, and sometimes we have quarrels with his cellphone distraction. When I observed my surroundings, I found phone snubbing to be very common in the present day. I was inspired by this problem to create a series of posters to draw viewers' attention and make people care about interaction with their significant others.

I created six posters that focus on three different subjects including parents and kids, friends, and couples. The first topic shows that when parents spend a great deal of time on their cellphones, the quality of interaction between them and their kids is not as good as they think. Sometimes, when a child is in a dangerous situation, the parents may not realize the risk because of playing on their cellphones. The second topic reveals phubbing that happens between couples; although they are lying in the bed or eating in a restaurant, they prefer to check social media posts or play a fun game on their cellphones rather than talk to each other. The third topic demonstrates that when friends are busy on their cellphones, they lose the opportunity for true and authentic connection with another person during social events.

Vector art, a type of illustration, is created with vector illustration software, such as Adobe Illustrator or Corel Draw. I employed this technique to create my posters because the posters can be scaled and printed to any size without losing the quality of the image, making it perfect for gallery exhibition. Since every component in a vector graphic can be individually manipulated, it is easy for me to edit or revise each poster during the design process.

Inspiration

My inspiration to create this series of posters comes from my personal experience. When my husband and I waited to be served in a restaurant, he preferred to play with his smartphone rather than chat with me. A similar situation happened when we were in a checkout line of a grocery store, when we sat in a bus, and so forth. Looking at my surroundings, I found that I am not the only person who was snubbed by his or her romantic partner. My friend also gazed at her cellphone to check others' social media posts or purchase goods instead of playing a game with her child. I tried to capture these scenes to create realistic posters, and I hope to make phubbers pay more attention to their families and friends.

Figure 1: *100 Days of Secrets*. By Terence Eduarte. 2017.

The color pallet inspiration of my posters is from a Filipino illustrator, Terence Eduarte. His *100 Days of Secrets* (see Figures 1, 2, 3) is a unique series of artwork and accompanying

short stories of his friends or strangers who confess their personal secrets. He used gritty

textures, vector graphics, and a complementary color palette to create eye-catching illustrations.

His works inspired me to use complementary and saturated color to present my posters in an
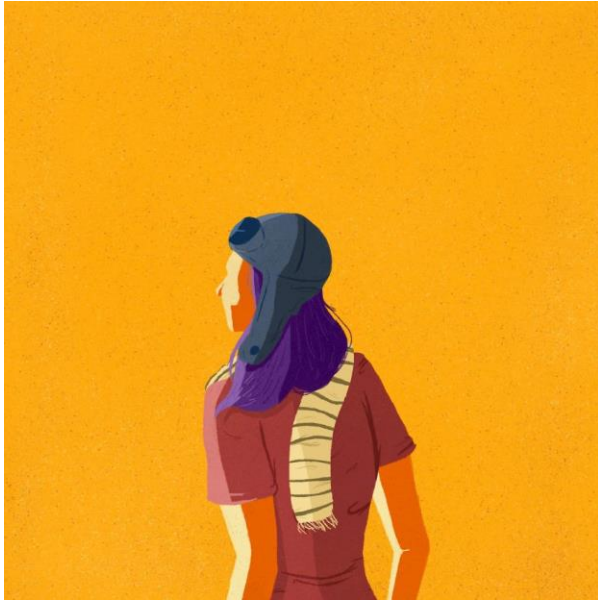
attractive visual format.

Figure 2 (Left): *Day 69*

Figure 3 (Right): *Day 64*

Poster Topics

In the first theme, I created two posters that focus on the phubbing behavior of parents. Many parents may think that accompanying their kids is enough for their relationship, but when they use a good portion of time to look at their cellphones rather than play with their children, the quality of interaction between parents and kids is worse than they expected.

When parents use their cellphones to check news and see what friends are posting on social media, they have less attention to give to their kids. They are not able to watch the kids' behaviors and clearly hear what they are saying. In a lot of families, smartphones look like the parents' "new baby." The kids are upset and feel like they are not important to their parents and even feel abandoned by their parents because of this "new baby." I noticed that in my friend's home, her son was acting out, and yelling angrily, while she was constantly scrolling on her cellphone screen rather than playing and talking to him. Therefore, I was inspired by this to create a scene with a mom busily playing on her cellphone and her kid yelling on a couch (see Figure 4).

In addition, a number of surveyed parents admit that they do not pay much attention to their physical environment when they are on their cellphones.[1] Distracted parents may not realize a potential unsafe action and situation to warn their children. It is easy for unsupervised kids to get lost in public areas, be injured, or even engage in life-threatening behaviors. A real event that happened in China can serve as an example. In October 2016, a young mother was checking her smartphone rather than watching her 2-year-old daughter, who wandered on the street and was

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[1] Cory A. Kildare and Wendy Middlemiss. "Impact of Parents Mobile Device Use on Parent-Child Interaction: A Literature Review," *Computers in Human Behavior* (2017): 579-593.

struck by a car and killed. When we open a newspaper, we will read a variety of bad news caused by phubbing. I designed a poster (see Figure 5) based on the above real news to draw parents' attention. I hope to appeal to parents to leave their cellphones in their pockets and supervise their kids to avoid something dangerous happening.
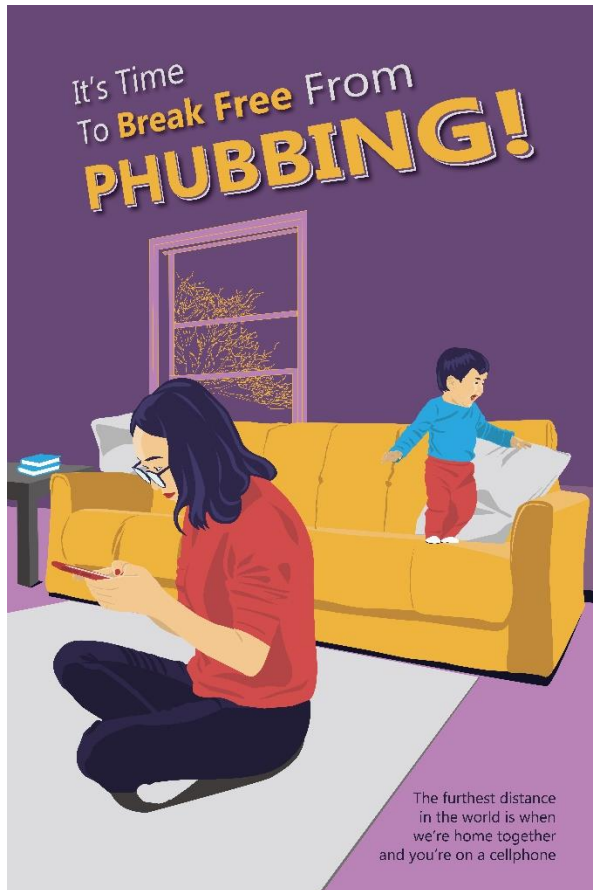

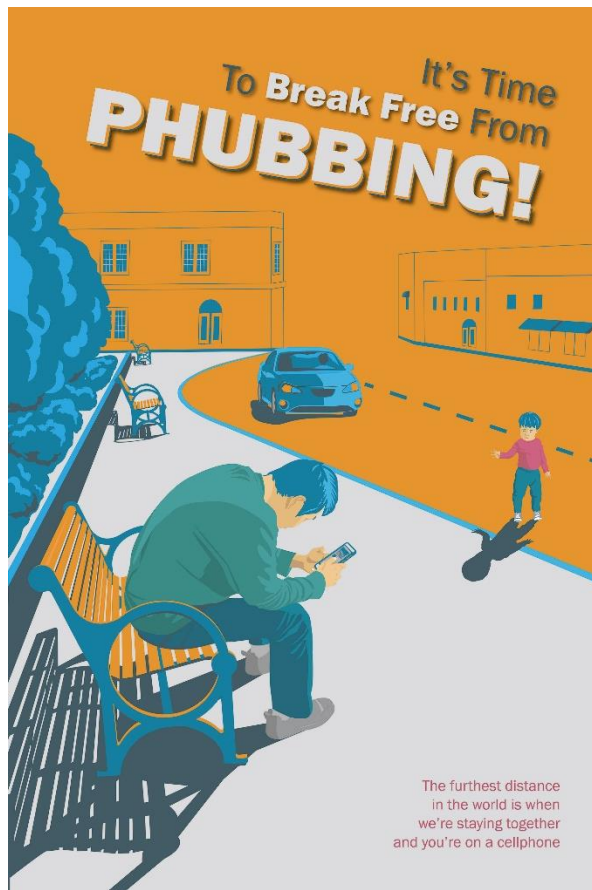Figure 4 (Left): Mom, Put Your Cellphone Down
Figure 5 (Right): Dad, Put Your Cellphone Down

In the second topic of my series, I focused on the partner phubbing theme. As I mentioned above, I feel disappointed and upset when my husband allows a cellphone to interrupt our meals or conversations. Sometimes I have to find something interesting on my cellphone to

relieve the boredom during our time together. I tried to capture the phubbing scenes appearing in

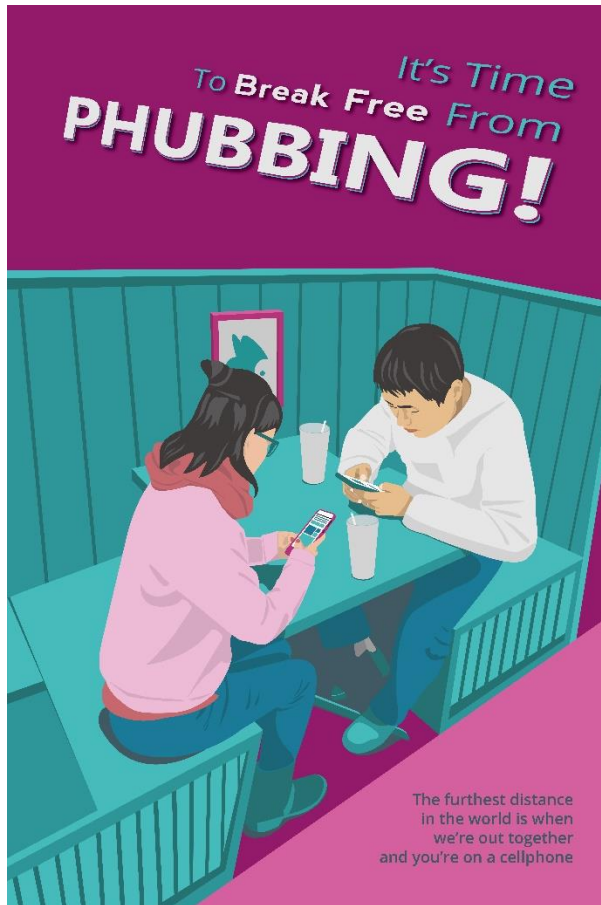my everyday life and even generally found in most couples' lives (see Figures 6, 7).

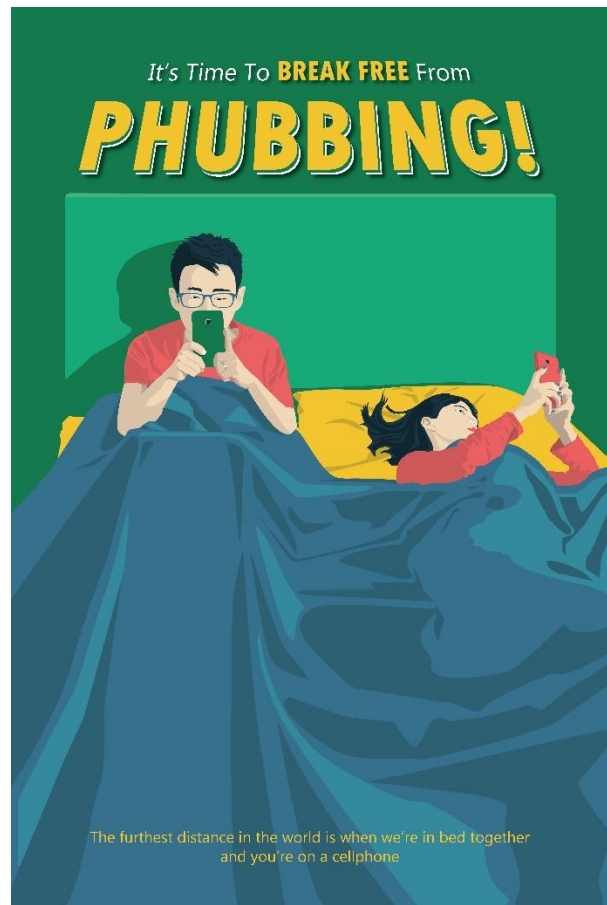Figure 6 (Left): Honey, Put Your Cellphone Down 1
Figure 7 (Right): Honey, Put Your Cellphone Down 2

Research indicates that displacing time spent with a romantic partner may lead to a

dissatisfied relationship with quarrels and marital conflict. [2] When a person is staring at the

phone screen to check emails or play games, he or she will not look at his or her significant

[2] Varoth Chotpitayasunondh and Karen M. Douglas. "How 'Phubbing' Becomes the Norm: The Antecedents and Consequences of Snubbing via Smartphone," *Computers in Human Behavior* 63 (2016): 9-18.

other's facial expression, not to mention hearing their tone of voice or noticing their body postures. As a result, although couples are physically together, they do not fully pay attention to each other during conversations or shared time. Phone snubbing behaviors may make a contribution to lower interaction quality with one's partner and even cause an increase in depression.[3] Therefore, I hope my posters draw partner phubbers' attention to put their cellphones down and have a meaningful interaction and communication with their romantic partners.

The third subject presents a theme of phone snubbing among friends. Cellphones were originally designed as a convenient tool for interpersonal communication, but ironically, in today's modern life, cellphone-related phubbing issues may deny people from having satisfying communication. When people use their cellphones to text messages, watch videos, and purchase goods, they possibly waste much more time on cellphones than they had planned, and it causes less time and attention to be given to others who are sitting next to them. Research shows that people of different ages are spending more and more time on their cellphones.[4] For instance, on average, it takes college students about 9 hours to play on their smartphones every day.[5] Sometimes, when they are hanging out or having coffee time with their friends, they still cannot get rid of phubbing. Based on my observation and personal experience, I created two posters in this theme (see Figures 8, 9).

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[3] Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas, 10.
[4] James A. Roberts and Meredith E. David. "My Life Has Become a Major Distraction from My Cell Phone: Partner Phubbing and Relationship Satisfaction among Romantic Partners," *Computers in Human Behavior* 54 (2016): 134-141.
[5] Roberts and David, 139.

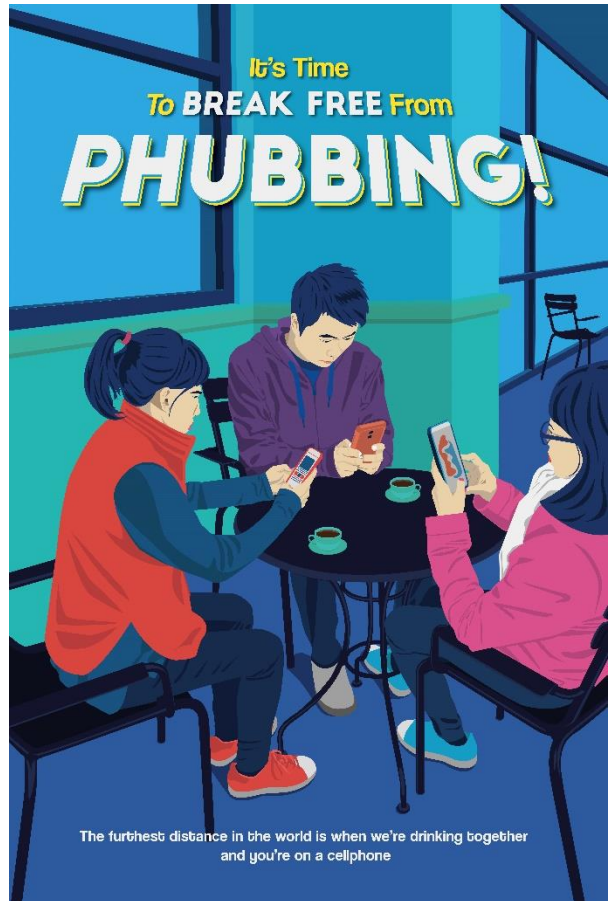Figure 8 (Left): Hey Guys, Put Your Cellphone Down 1

Figure 9 (Right): Hey Guys, Put Your Cellphone Down 2

Design Process

In my initial proposal, I planned to combine a photograph with an illustration as the primary image of my poster. For instance, I would draw main characters of my poster on the photographic background or use characters' photos and draw the poster background. I began with photographing, and asked my friends and their babies as my models to present phubbing themes. In the first photographic phase, I met some problems with my pictures. It was really difficult for me to work with a baby model and freeze her movement with a nice composition. Also, working with the wrong ISO made my pictures look dim and blurry. Professor Ross helped me a great deal in this phase and gave me good suggestions for taking photos of little kids.

After I shot more than 60 photos, I made two drafts to see if the pictures worked well with my initial ideas. I chose a photo of the main characters and drew a living room environment with line art as the background, but it did not look very good. Then I tried to use a black and white outdoor photo as my poster background and draw colorful characters on that. However, it was still weird and looked like two stickers pasted on a photo. I felt frustrated in that period because my initial ideas did not look great in the visual format and did not clearly render my intent. Therefore, I changed my concept to focus on illustration.

Since I used illustrations on my whole series, I did not need to set a perfect scene to get a nice shot for every poster; I could choose more than one photo to get the composition that I desired. For instance, in *Dad, Put Your Cellphone Down* and *Hey Guys, Put Your Cellphone Down 1*, I shot my models and the background separately, and composed these photos together to achieve the composition that I needed. Sometimes I took out several objects from the original photo and drew something on my poster, such as books or a land lamp, to make the composition more interesting. While I could manipulate photographic reference to create my illustrations, the

biggest challenge is that the lighting is different in some photos due to the different shooting times. I had to imagine where the light source came from, and then create related lighting and shadows.

After I finished shooting photos of these three topics, I used Adobe Photoshop to retouch my images. For example, I worked with Curves or Levels to make the photo contrast stronger. Before I began combining my photo references in Photoshop, I drew some rough sketches to plan what I wanted for each poster format. Then I dragged the composite references into Adobe Illustrator to draw my poster illustrations. In order to depict some details, I zoomed in and zoomed out my photo references back and forth on the screen. I used complementary colors on my posters to make them eye-catching. I tried to use saturated colors on my backgrounds to make phubbing behaviors pop out, and the line art building or windows (see Figures 4, 5) are helpful to avoid competing with front characters.

Initially, I chose 18x24 inches as my posters' size, but Professor Smith advised me to make them bigger to get a more impressive exhibition effect in the MFA show. I revised all of the poster sizes to 24x36 inches. This size is taller than the previous dimension, but the end result is satisfying because I got more negative space in the background to arrange my title.

During the initial design process, I had a big problem with my headline. I wanted to use a simple sentence like *Stop Phubbing and Save Your Kid* to tell my story, but Professor O'Connor thought it was not strong enough for my series and suggested that I think about a newspaper headline. As a non-native speaker of English, it was a little bit difficult for me to figure out a powerful headline in my second language. I did not have any good ideas about the poster headline until I accidentally saw a website advertisement of alcohol abstinence. Based on my

11

poster intent, I created the headline, *It's Time to Break Free from Phubbing,* to appeal to viewers

to put their phones down and have a worthwhile interaction with their families and friends.

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