



DIGITAL ATTACHMENT AND CHILD MENTAL HEALTH: A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF SMARTPHONE DEPENDENCE

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ABSTRACT

The present research addressed the relationship between digital attachment, smartphone dependence and child mental health psychologically. The data were gathered with the help of a descriptive and correlational research design and included 200 children between the ages of 10 and 16 years, who were randomly chosen in urban and semi-urban schools with the help of the stratified random sampling. Dependent variables were measured through standardized devices to determine smartphone dependence, emotional attachment to digital devices and mental health issues. The results indicated that a fairly decent percentage of children were dependent on smartphones and digitally attached, and emotional and behavioural problems were observed. Correlations analysis revealed that there were significant positive associations between the smartphone dependence, digital attachment and child mental health problems. Moreover, a multiple regression analysis revealed that both smartphone dependence and digital attachment had a significant forecasting effect on the mental health outcomes, which described a significant percentage of the variance. A comparative level analysis on levels of smartphone dependence indicated that there is a definite escalation on mental health issues between low and high dependence. In general, the research article noted that high levels of smartphone usage and emotional dependence on digital tools had a strong connection with poor mental health among children and was associated with the necessity to balance digital usage, monitor parental care, and implement preventative approaches at an early age to enhance healthy psychological maturation in a digital-based environment.

Keywords: *Digital Attachment, Smartphone Dependence, Child Mental Health, Emotional Well-Being, Psychological Development.*



1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technology has changed the daily life of children and the use of smartphones has become a part of communication, learning, entertainment, and socialization. Since their early childhood, children are subjected to more and more digital devices providing them with instant access to games, videos, social media, and virtual communication. Despite the great educational and social values that these technologies bring about, their ubiquitous nature has also brought serious psychological concerns. Digital attachment is one such issue that has been emerging wherein children gain some form of emotional attachment to smartphones, as they tend to think of these devices as sources of consolation, safety, and emotional control. This increased dependence has led to the investigation of psychologists and mental health professionals about the possibility of excessive use of a smartphone affecting the emotional, cognitive, and social development of children.

The concept of digital attachment can be applied in the perspective of the classical theory of attachment that stresses the significance of safe emotional relationships to a healthy psychological development. In the past, attachment figures were parents or individuals who took care of them; in the digital age, smartphones are becoming more and more of a proxy attachment figure. Children can resort to their devices to deal with stress, boredom, loneliness, or anxiety, which makes virtual interaction replace the face-to-face communication. This dependency pattern is capable of disrupting the acquisition of self-regulation, emotional stability and interpersonal effectiveness. In the course of time, the continuous necessity of the digital stimulus can change the attention span, the processing of rewards, and the emotional reactions, exposing children to the risks of behavioural and emotional challenges.

Dependence on Smartphones among children has also been indicated to cause various mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, sleep problems, irritability, poor academic achievement, and withdrawal. Unhealthy screen time habits (including sleep and exercise) disturb the natural patterns, and the unrealistic ideals and comparisons with others on the internet might harm the self-esteem and self-identity. Additionally, excessive use of smartphones can cut down on the possibility of real-life socialization, play and problem-solving, which are essential in facilitating healthy psychological development in childhood and adolescence.

It is within this context that the current psychological research endeavour Digital Attachment and Child Mental Health attempts to understand the nature of dependence on the smartphone, its scope and its impacts on child mental health. Through the analysis of trends in digital attachment and their connection with emotional well-being, behaviour, and social functioning, the study will give a more in-depth insight into the way digital environments influence child mental health. These insights are crucial in helping parents, teachers, clinicians and policymakers to devise balanced digital practices, early interventions and preventive strategies that will assist children to develop healthy psychological lives despite the fact that the world has become increasingly technology-oriented.

1.1. Digital Attachment in Children

Digital attachment is a term that is used to describe the emotional attachment between children and digital devices, especially smartphones. The modern digital world tends to turn smartphones not only as the means of communication and entertainment but also a source of comfort, security, and control of emotions. At times of boredom, stress, and loneliness, children can resort to their devices and slowly develop a dependency that is no longer functional. Such an emotional attachment may reflect the classic models of attachment, in which the gadget has become a steady and easily accessible comfort.

Several things affect the development of digital attachment, among them the early exposure of smartphones, the modelling of their use by parents, and a lack of face-to-face interaction. Children can easily get addicted to using smartphones to cope with emotions or escape awkward experiences, and this can lead to a higher level of dependence on digital interactions. This dependence can lead to a decrease in the ability to develop self-regulation skills and coping mechanisms to cope with feelings in the long run. Children who are highly digitally attached can also display distress when they are not near their devices, which suggests a psychological but not just preference dependence.

Although some moderate digital use can be safe and even beneficial in education and socialization, too much digital attachment can be a threat to the mental health and social life of children. Emotional dependence on smartphones is also very strong, which can disrupt social lives with peers, attention, and emotional display. It can also restrict chances to have imaginary play, physical and real-life problem solving which are crucial in healthy growth. Hence, it is

important to comprehend the digital attachment among children to facilitate the moderated use of technology and well-being in the general psychological state of the children.

1.2. Smartphone Dependence and Child Mental Health

Smartphone dependence is a phenomenon among children which is characterized by overuse and compulsive use of smartphones and disrupts normal functioning and mental health. As more children gain access to digital devices, smartphones are being used by them to communicate, perform games, entertainment, and learn. Nonetheless, in case of excessive use, children can start using smartphones as their main tool to contain their emotions, cope with stress, or find pleasure. This addiction has generally been described by withdrawal symptoms, irritability and anxiety in case limited access to the device is realized.

The effect of smartphone addiction on the mental health of children is varied. Anxiety, depression, mood instability and low self-esteem are some of the emotional issues that have been linked to excessive use of the smartphone. It is also capable of causing behavioural problems, such as irritability, aggression, and lack of impulse control. Additionally, excessive screen time can also interfere with sleep, focus, and academic scores, which further worsen mental health problems. The lack of socialization and emotional intelligence in children can also be caused by limited face-to-face communication caused by excessive use of smartphones.

The tendency of smartphone dependency can have a detrimental impact on the general development of the child in the context of the psychological domain since it lowers the chances of real-life interaction, physical activity, and the ability to engage in meaningful social interaction. Very frequent users of smartphones can regulate their emotions in a rather weak way and become more susceptible to stress and frustration. Consequently, parental monitoring, healthy digital habits, and awareness programs are necessary to ensure child mental health in the world that is becoming more digitalized.

1.3. Research Objectives

The research objectives of the study are:

- To test the extent of digital attachment and smartphone dependency in children aged 10-16 years.

- To examine the relationship between child mental health, smartphone dependence and digital attachment.
- To evaluate the predictive value of smartphone dependence and digital attachment on the mental health outcome of children.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Shang et al. (2024) investigated the effect of smartphone addiction on the mental health of college students at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the roles of resilience and parental attachment in particular. The researchers established that the more the smartphone addiction, the more the symptoms of anxiety and depression. This relationship was mediated by the concept of resilience that decreased the adverse psychological consequences of excessive smartphone usage. Protective factors that reduced the risk of developing addiction to smartphones and mental health issues were found to be secure parental attachment. The results underscored the value of emotional support and resources of coping at times of crisis.

Shyan and Arshat (2019) researched the connection between parental attachment, smartphone addiction, and stress in undergraduate students. The findings demonstrated that an insecure attachment to parents was strongly associated with an increased degree of smartphone addiction and perceived stress. Smartphone addiction was also identified to mediate the correlation between parental attachment and stress, and the respondents with less strong parental bonds were more likely to use smartphones to emotionally regulate themselves. The article focused on the importance of family attachment to determine the influence of digital behaviour and psychological well-being.

Um, Choi, and Yoo (2019) tested the connection between smartphone dependency and aggression in middle school students, as well as tested the mediating and moderating effects of ego-resilience, parenting behaviour, and peer attachment. The results showed that aggressive behaviour had a positive relationship with smartphone dependency. Ego-resilience was observed to mediate this effect by undermining the effects of dependency on the aggressiveness. Also, positive parenting behaviour and secure peer attachment intermediated the relationship that minimised negative behavioural consequences. The researchers concluded that the personal resilience and supportive social relationships were highly protective factors to counter the negative impacts of smartphone dependency.

Wang et al. (2024) evaluated the parent-child attachment and mental health connecting to college students considering the mediating psychological security and moderating problematic smartphone usage. This study discovered that the secure parent child attachment was positively correlated with desirable mental health outcomes. This relationship was mediated by psychological security through the following means: psychological security increased emotional stability. The moderating effect of the protective power of secure attachment was the problematic smartphone use, which diluted the association. The findings indicated that overuse of smartphone might compromise the emotional security and wellbeing.

Xiang, He, and Yuan (2023) examined how childhood maltreatment affects mobile phone addiction using the attachment theory. The findings showed that childhood maltreatment experiences were related to insecure attachment patterns. Weak attachment was observed to predispose one to mobile phone addiction. The research also suggested that people, who experienced negative childhood events, would resort to smartphones as a form of emotional reparation. The results pointed at the chronic effects of early attachment disturbances on digital addiction.

Zhang et al. (2023) tested the hypothesis of the association between childhood neglect and problematic smartphone use in Chinese young adults. The researchers established that childhood neglect had a positive relationship with problematic smartphone use. The mediating variables that were found to be significant in this relationship were peer attachment and fear of missing out. Poor peer attachment led to an increase in fear of missing out that subsequently boosted the reliance on smartphones. The results highlighted that the early neglect had effects on later digital behaviour by social and emotional mechanisms.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section describes the methodology used to investigate the digital attachment, smartphone dependence, and child mental health. It describes the research design, sample, data gathering instruments, data gathering process, variables, statistical methods, and ethical measures. The methodology was reliable, valid and objective in examining the psychological effect of smartphone dependence on children.

3.1. Research Design

The present study has considered a descriptive and correlational research design to measure the relationship between digital attachment and smartphone dependence and mental health in children. Such design was deemed suitable because it was possible to have a systematic evaluation of the psychological variables without controlling the environment in which the study was conducted. The aim of the study was to establish patterns, associations, and predictive relationships of smartphone use and child mental health indicators.

3.2. Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample was a group of children aged 10-16 years, which was chosen at the schools of urban and semi-urban areas. The stratified random sampling method was used to sample 200 participants to represent the age group and gender as well as the socio-economic background. The inclusion criteria were regular use of smartphones and parent consent and those children whose neurological or serious psychiatric disorders were known were excluded to ensure the homogeneity of the sample.

3.3. Tools and Instruments

The standardized psychological instruments were used to gather data. The dependency on smartphones was measured with the help of a Smartphone Addiction Scale among Children, which allowed evaluating the compulsive use, withdrawal, tolerance, and disturbance of life dimensions. Digital attachment was measured using Attachment to Digital Devices Scale that was adapted, the emphasis was on emotional dependence, comfort seeking behaviour and separation anxiety linked with smartphones. A Child Mental Health Questionnaire was used to assess child mental health, and included emotional symptoms, behavioural problems, peer relationships, and attention problems. The demonstrated tools had satisfactory reliability and validity in conducting psychological studies.

3.4. Procedure of Data Collection

School authorities and parents had been consulted and granted permission to proceed before data collection was done. Participation in the study was explained to the participants and their privacy guaranteed. The questionnaires were to be filled in the classrooms under the eye of the

researcher to make sure that there is clarity and consistency in the answers. Enough time was given to do it, and any uncertainty was clarified without being influential.

3.5. Variables of the Study

Digital attachment and smartphone dependence were the independent variables of the study. Child mental health was the dependent variable. Control variables included demographic variables like age, gender, family structure, and duration of the smartphone use in order to adjust individual differences.

3.6. Statistical Analysis

Statistical software was applied in analyzing the collected data. Data was summarized using descriptive statistics like mean, standard deviation and percentages. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis as a form of inferential statistics were used to test the relationships between variables as well as to determine the predictive strength of smartphone dependence on mental health outcomes. The significant level was established at 0.05.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

There were ethical principles of conducting research in psychology. Parents or guardians were informed and children were assented to. The participants were guaranteed of anonymity, confidentiality and their right to opt out of the study at any point. The information was applied academically and no physical or psychological damage to the research process was made.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The section gives and discusses the results of the study of digital attachment, smartphone dependency and child mental health. The findings are put together with descriptive and inferential statistics method in a bid to give a complete picture of the relationship between the research variables. The patterns, associations, and predictive influences are clearly described using tables and graphical representations and a combination of the discussion of the findings is provided. This method will allow making a systematic meaning of the connections between smartphone dependence and emotional attachment to digital devices and the mental health outcomes of children.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

This section presents the mean and the standard deviation of the smartphone dependence, digital attachment and child mental health problems where the extent of the average and their variation among the children is briefly described. Table 1 shows the data description of the primary study variables smartphone dependence, digital attachment and child mental health problems depending on the answers of 200 children. The table gives the mean and standard deviation of each variable, which gives an overview of the central tendency and dispersion of scores. These descriptive statistics are graphical representation in figure 1 which visually compares the average levels of the three variables in order to have easier understanding of their relative distribution within the sample.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 200)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Smartphone Dependence	62.45	10.38
Digital Attachment	58.72	9.64
Child Mental Health Problems	54.18	11.22

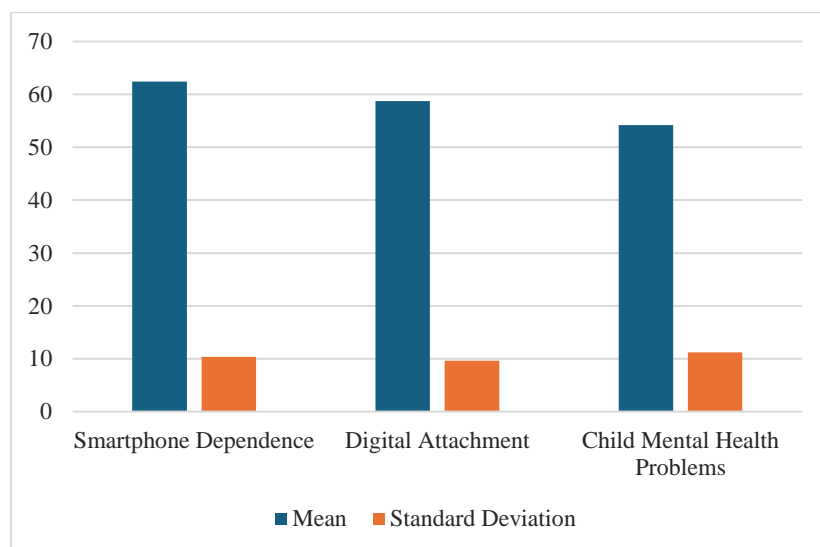


Figure 1: Graphical Representation of Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

The outcomes demonstrated that smartphone dependence had the greatest mean score ($M = 62.45$, $SD = 10.38$), then digital attachment ($M = 58.72$, $SD = 9.64$). The mean score of child mental health issues was 54.18 and the standard deviation was 11.22 which means that there were some emotional and behavioural issues observed among the subjects. These differences were well exemplified by the graphical expression in Figure 1, with the standard deviations portraying the variability in different experiences of children towards smartphone use, emotional attachment towards digital devices and mental health outcomes.

4.2. Correlation between Smartphone Dependence, Digital Attachment, and Child Mental Health

This section discusses the strength and orientation of the relationship among smartphone dependence, digital attachment and child mental health through the Pearson correlation analysis, which shows how the variables have significant relationship with each other. Table 2 demonstrates the correlation table indicating that there are interrelationships between smartphone dependence and digital attachment and child mental health. The coefficient of correlation between Pearson is utilized to test the level and direction of relationship between two variables. The level of statistical significance is also indicated in the table, and it is possible to make an evaluation of whether the observed relationships have sense in the sample of the study.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix among Key Variables

Variables	Smartphone Dependence	Digital Attachment	Child Mental Health
Smartphone Dependence	1	0.64**	0.58**
Digital Attachment	0.64**	1	0.52**
Child Mental Health	0.58**	0.52**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

The correlation analysis has found that there is a strong positive relationship between smartphone dependence and digital attachment ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.01$), which means that increased dependence on smartphones was strongly related to a stronger emotional attachment to digital

devices. Child mental health problems were also significantly positively correlated with Smartphone dependence ($r = 0.58, p < 0.01$), indicating that the higher the dependence, the greater the psychological problems. As well, digital attachment was positively correlated with child mental health issues ($r = 0.52, p < 0.01$), that is, the more children were emotionally dependent on smartphones, the more mental health issues were raised.

4.3. Predictive Influence of Smartphone Dependence and Digital Attachment

This section describes the relationship between smartphone addiction and digital attachment as predictors of child mental health outcomes on the basis of multiple regression analysis, demonstrating the level of influence of these factors in the combination to cause psychological problems in children. Table 3 shows the findings of a multiple regression analysis performed to discuss the predictive effect of smartphone dependence and digital attachment on child mental health. The table summarises the standardised beta coefficients (β), t-values, and levels of significance of each of the predictor variables. There is also the coefficient of determination (R^2) indicating the percentage variance in child mental health explained by the combined predictor as well.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Child Mental Health

Predictor Variables	β	t-value	Significance
Smartphone Dependence	0.41	6.28	0.000**
Digital Attachment	0.29	4.12	0.001**
$R^2 = 0.46$			

Note: $p < 0.01$

The regression analysis revealed that smartphone dependence was a strong predictor of child mental health problems ($\beta = 0.41, t = 6.28, p < 0.01$) which implies that attachment has a strong positive contribution to the problems in psychology. Child mental health issues were also identified to be highly predicted by digital attachment ($\beta = 0.29, t = 4.12, p < 0.01$), albeit with a relatively lower degree of prediction. According to the model, the dependence on smartphones and digital attachment as a whole helped to explain 46 percent of the variation in

child mental health outcomes ($R^2 = 0.46$), indicating that both factors significantly impacted the psychological well-being of children.

4.4. Comparison of Child Mental Health across Levels of Smartphone Dependence

This section is a comparison of the mental health of children according to the low levels with smartphone dependence, moderate levels with smartphone dependence, and high levels with smartphone dependence, and as the dependence increases, the level of mental health issues also increases. Table 4 compares the mean scores of children mental health of three levels of smartphone dependence, that is, low, moderate, and high. The table will further divide participants according to their degree of smartphone addiction and indicate the attendant means of mental health scores. In order to interpret this comparison graphically, a graphical representation of the comparison in Figure 2 was drawn to clearly show the difference of the mental health scores in the three levels of dependence.

Table 4: Comparison of Mental Health Scores Based on Smartphone Dependence Level

Smartphone Dependence Level	Mean Mental Health Score
Low Dependence	46.12
Moderate Dependence	53.68
High Dependence	61.94

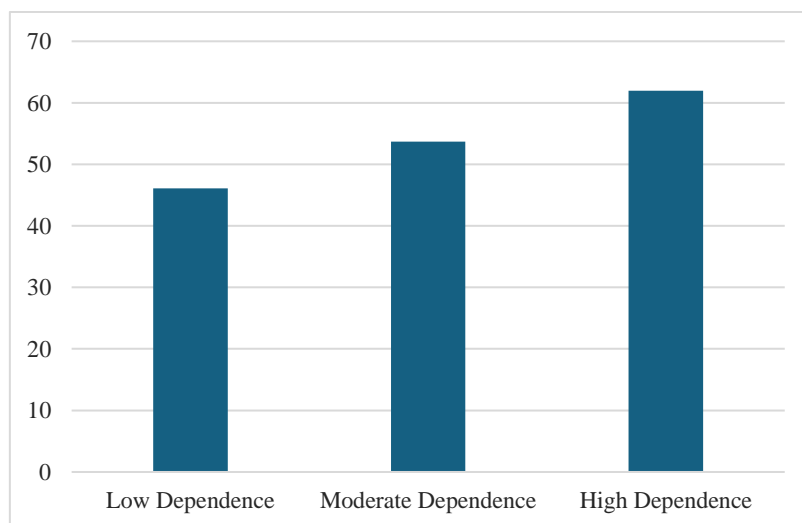


Figure 2: Graphical Representation of Comparison of Mental Health Scores Based on Smartphone Dependence Level

The findings revealed that the children with low level smartphone dependence were the ones with the lowest mean mental health score ($M = 46.12$), and those with moderate dependence had a higher mean score ($M = 53.68$). Children who were high smartphone dependent had the highest mean ($M = 61.94$) of the mental health score. This positive trend was well illustrated by the graphic presentation in Figure 2 which indicated that the greater the degree of smartphone dependence, the higher the degree of mental health issues among children.

4.5. Discussion of Findings

The results of the present research were also clear and confirmed that the smartphone dependence and digital attachment were the salient features among children and they were significantly related to their mental health status. Descriptive outcomes revealed that there were comparatively high mean scores of smartphone dependence and digital attachment, and this indicated that smartphones were now playing an important role in the lives of children, emotion-wise. The correlations between smartphone dependence and digital attachment to mental health issues among children were found to be positive, which validated the perception that overindulgence and emotionally motivated smartphone use could be correlated to higher emotional and behavioural troubles. These results were in line with psychological views that focus on the role of emotional dependence on external objects in affecting the self-regulation, attention, and emotional well-being of the children.

Moreover, it was found that using smartphone was a more powerful predictor of child mental health issues when compared to digital attachment, but both variables both significantly predicted psychological outcomes. The high percentage of the explained variance suggested that these digital factors were significant in the development of the mental health of children. This was supported by the comparison among levels of smartphone dependence whereby there was a clear development towards mental health problems as dependence levels were on the rise; between low to high dependence levels. The combination of these results implied that the high levels of smartphone use and the presence of an emotional connection during its use can make children more susceptible to psychological problems, which in turn can be mitigated

through balanced digital media use, parental supervision, and early preventative strategies to ensure healthy psychological growth.

5. CONCLUSION

The present research was able to establish that digital attachment and smartphone dependence can significantly and meaningfully affect child mental health. The results showed that there were quite high levels of emotional attachment of smartphones and reliance on digital devices in children, which were positively linked to emotional and behavioural problems. Smartphone dependence turned out to be an independent predictor of mental health issues than digital attachment but the two collectively accounted a significant percentage of variance in children psychological well-being. The gradual rise in mental health issues of low, moderate, and high scales of smartphone dependence only strengthened the negative impact of excessive and emotionally motivated smartphone use. On the whole, as the research has demonstrated, as much as smartphones have become an inseparable element of the life of children, overuse and emotional dependency can increase the susceptibility to psychological challenges. These results highlight the need to encourage moderated digital usage, reinforced parental supervision and nurturing, and early preventive and therapeutic measures to assist in encouraging healthy mental and emotional development in children in a world becoming more digitalized.

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