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Smartphone Addiction as a Predictor of Marital Dissatisfaction Among Married Couples: A Cross-Sectional Analysis

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Abstract: *The rapid integration of smartphones into daily life has transformed interpersonal communication but has also raised concerns regarding compulsive use and its implications for intimate relationships. The present study examined smartphone addiction as a predictor of marital satisfaction among married couples in Pakistan using a correlational, cross-sectional design. A sample of 150 married individuals (75 couples), aged 18–45 years, was recruited from Islamabad and Rawalpindi through purposive sampling. Participants completed the Smartphone Addiction Scale–Short Version (SAS-SV) and the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), along with a demographic information form. Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 20), employing reliability analysis and Pearson’s bivariate correlation. Results indicated satisfactory internal consistency for both instruments ($\alpha = .88$ for SAS-SV; $\alpha = .82$ for RAS). Findings revealed a significant negative correlation between smartphone addiction and marital satisfaction ($r = -.24, p < .01$), suggesting that higher levels of problematic smartphone use are associated with lower perceived marital satisfaction. These findings support displacement theory and technoference literature, highlighting how excessive smartphone engagement may disrupt emotional presence, communication quality, and relational intimacy. The study underscores the need for culturally sensitive digital wellness interventions and marital counseling strategies aimed at promoting healthy technology use within Pakistani marriages.*

Keywords: *Smartphone addiction, Marital Satisfaction, Technoference, Phubbing, Behavioral addiction, Married couples, Pakistan*

Introduction

Smartphones no longer remain mere communication tools, but have become multifunctional digital assistants that define the interactions, work, and social life of people. This extensive permeation of everyday life has led to the very far-reaching consequences of human behavior, thought, and interaction. Even though smartphones have undeniable advantages, such as the access to information, communication, and entertainment, they are also associated with the risks of compulsive and maladaptive habits of usage (Kwon et al., 2013). Although not an official clinical disorder identified in DSM-5, smartphone addiction is also becoming conceptualized as a behavioral addiction and operationalized through excessive use, impaired control, withdrawal symptoms, tolerance, and functional impairment (Billieux, 2012; Lin et al., 2014).

An emerging literature suggests that dysfunctional smartphone habit may have adverse effects on individual well-being, mental performance, and daily mental activities. Yet, the impact it has on intimate relationships, especially marital satisfaction, is one of the most worrying emerging fields. Marital satisfaction is what is considered as a subjective judgment of the quality and satisfaction of the marital relationship of an individual (Hendrick, 1988). Emotional presence, the quality of communication, empathy, reciprocal responsiveness, time together are important elements of healthy marriages that are easily disrupted by digital distractions (McDaniel and Coyne, 2016).

In the modern marital relationship, couples are less and less silent about smartphones disrupting their relationships, so-called phubbing (phone + snubbing) when one person focuses on his phone and not on his partner. Though viewed as a harmless behavior at first, it has now been proven to detract perceived intimacy, trust, the quality of communication, and satisfaction with the relationship overall (Roberts and David, 2016). When these behaviors are turned into habits or compulsions, this may create conflict in relations, become emotionally withdrawn and eventually reduce marital contentment.

Although there has been increased research on smartphone addiction in the world, much is lacking in terms of married individuals in the South Asian societies and more so in Pakistan. Existing Pakistani research has been majorly directed to students or adolescents, the general pattern of addiction but has not discussed the effects of addiction in connection in marriage (Ali et al., 2014). In addition to that, cultural norms regarding family cohesion, emotional expressiveness and marital roles vary significantly compared to societies in the West thus local research is necessary.

The current paper, therefore, examines the connection between smartphone addiction and marital satisfaction in married people. Knowledge of this relationship is important in guiding clinical intervention, practices of marriage counseling, and digital wellness practices in the changing Pakistani sociocultural environment.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of Smartphone addiction is based on the larger theoretical context of behavioral addictions, which includes compulsive behaviors of rewarding non-substance behavior (Griffiths, 2010). Behavioral addictions do not involve use of a chemical intoxication-like substance use disorders; they have psychological similarities such as reinforcement loop, withdrawal-like emotional suffering and functional impairment (Grant et al., 2010).

The Smartphone Addiction Scale developed by Min-Kwon et al. (2013) recognizes six main dimensions, namely: 1) Daily-life disturbance, 2) Positive anticipation, 3) Withdrawal, 4) Cyberspace-oriented relationships, 5) Overuse, 6) Tolerance. These dimensions represent a tendency of compulsive use with emotional, cognitive, and social satisfaction with the help of smartphones.

LaRose and Eastin (2004) Media Dependency Model suggest that consumers have a tendency to resort to digital devices to control their moods, social anxiety, or boredom. With time, device-based coping may turn into habit, and in the end develop maladaptive, automatic patterns of behaviour (Wood and Neal, 2007).

There are a few psychological and interpersonal theories that can be used to understand why overuse of smartphones may have a detrimental effect on marriage:

Displacement Theory

The hypothesis of displacement holds that the time and cognitive resources spent on digital interactions distract meaningful interpersonal interactions (Kraut et al., 1998). This competition is in the form of smartphone use against emotional presence, communication, and activities in the marital context.

Attachment Theory Perspective

Persons who experience insecure attachment styles might be more prone to finding digital solace by

being incessantly messaged or socially evaluated by social media (Jin and Phua, 2014). Such a pattern can increase the dependence on devices and a lack of emotional concern to a spouse.

Interference & Micro-Disruption Theory

McDaniel and Coyne (2016) have coined the technoferece term that means technological intrusion in the process of a face-to-face interaction. Even the frequent check-ins that are made short may add up, perceived responsiveness may decline, conflict may get bigger, and relational warmth may be destroyed.

Numerous researchers have associated problematic use of technology with marital dissatisfaction: Ahlstrom et al. (2012) have discovered that excessive internet gaming lowered the perceived relational intimacy between married couples. According to Coyne et al. (2014), more relational conflict and less satisfaction were predicted by technology-based interruptions. Przybylski and Weinstein (2012) proved that the presence of a smartphone alone may decrease the richness of interpersonal communication. Roberts & David (2016) established that phubbing caused conflict and perceived low partner responsiveness and low satisfaction.

These disruptions can be even more powerful in Pakistani families, where cultural values and traditions focus on the closeness of people, their routines, and the unity of their families. The studies on smartphone addiction in Pakistan have grown in the past decade, with the corresponding growth of the level of digital penetration: Ahmed et al. (2011) pointed at the aspect of overindulgence in phone use among students. Ali et al. (2014) determined the compulsive usage caused by social impact and stress. Kamran (2010) had recorded a high rate of texting among the youth. Nevertheless, little work has been done on married populations, although more cases of conflict and marital strain are associated with digital overuse.

Considering both theoretical and empirical documents, and the few studies exploring the topic in Pakistani married communities, the study at hand seeks to address the following question: Do there exist any negative correlations between smartphone addiction and marital satisfaction among married people? The research study is a timely and the first of its kind in the region and contributes to the understanding of researchers, therapists, and policymakers working in the area of digital overuse in marriage.

Methods

A correlational, cross-sectional design was used to examine associations between smartphone addiction and marital satisfaction among married adults. A total number of 150 individuals participated, which comprised of 75 couples with an age-range of 18-45 years. Participants were recruited from Islamabad and Rawalpindi while using purposive sampling technique.

Instruments include: Smartphone Addiction Scale – Short Version (SAS-SV), which is a 10 items scale rated on a 6-point Likert Scale developed by Kwon, M., and Lee, J. with Cronbach's α of 0.88. Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), which is 7-items measure assessing global romantic relationship satisfaction developed by Susan S. Hendrick, Amy Dicke, and Clyde Hendrick with Cronbach's α of 0.82. The demographic form included age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, occupation, and phone-use habits.

Analysis

In order to explore the effect of smartphone addiction on marital satisfaction, the data obtained was analyzed by the help of SPSS software (version 20). Analysis includes Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis in order to assess the reliability of scales. Correlation analysis was applied to identify the relationship between Smartphone Addiction and Marital Satisfaction.

Table 1

Frequencies and percentage of the Demographics Characteristics of Sample (N=150).

Characteristics of Participants	Categories	<i>f</i>	%
Gender	Male	75	50
	Female	75	50
Education	Below Graduation	9	6
	BS	93	62
	MS	42	28
	PhD	6	4
Socio Economic Status	Middle Class	94	62.7
	Upper Class	56	37.3
Employment Status	Not Working	32	21.3
	Working	118	78.7

Table 1 shows the descriptive statics of study variables. Sample of the study was of 150 participants. The sample was made up of 50% male and 50% female. Participants enrolled in below graduation were 6%, BS were 62%, MS were 28 %, PhD grade were 4 %. Participants belong to middle class were 62.7% and those belong to upper class were 37.3%. Working participant were 78.7% and not working were 21.3%.

Table 2

Psychometric Properties of Smartphone Addiction Scale – Short Version, Cognitive Failure Questionnaire and Relationship Assessment Scale (N=150)

	No of items	<i>a</i>	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
SAS-SV	10	.88	30.15	10.55	.19	-.75
RAS	7	.82	28.51	4.27	.50	-.67

SAS-SV = Smartphone Addiction Scale – Short Version, RAS = Relationship Assessment Scale

Table 2 revealed that the reliability of the scales is acceptable and appeared as satisfactory. The overall reliability of Smartphone Addiction Scale is .88 and the reliability of Relationship Assessment Scale is .82. Moreover, descriptive statistics also showed that overall sample was normally distributed and thereby all statistical test can be applied on this data.

Table 3

Pearson Bivariate Correlation of Smartphone Addiction, Cognitive Failure and Marital satisfaction (N=150).

	1	2
1. Smartphone Addiction	-	-.24
2. Marital Satisfaction	-.24	-

$p < .01$

Table 3 illustrates bivariate correlation to see the relationship between study variable. Smartphone addiction was negatively correlated with marital satisfaction ($r = -.24$, $p < 0.01$).

Discussion

The findings of the current study provide clear evidence that smartphone addiction is negatively associated with marital satisfaction among married individuals. This supports theoretical expectations from displacement theory and technoferece literature, indicating that frequent device interruptions erode communication quality, emotional presence, and perceived partner responsiveness.

The observed negative correlation is consistent with past empirical research in the world (Roberts and David, 2016; McDaniel and Coyne, 2016). The use of smartphones can be very disruptive in the Pakistani culture where social norms of cohesiveness and homeliness rank high. The findings propose that smartphone addiction can act as a relationship stressor by: minimizing the face-to-face interactions, increasing perceived abandonment or emotional separation, instigating disagreement about the boundaries of phone-use, breaking up intimacy, and shared routines and mutual involvement.

Clinical Implications

Digital hygiene training should be included in the work of marriage counselors. The patterns of phubbing, emotional withdrawal and intrusion by digital devices should be discussed in couples therapy. Couples can also develop technology boundaries through psychoeducation like device-free time or mutual agreements. The emotional regulation should be the focus of the interventions, particularly in people who use smartphones to overcome stress.

Future Recommendations

The design of longitudinal studies must be such that it tests causation. The mediating role of phubbing, emotional regulations, attachment styles should be investigated. Intercultural comparative studies and mixed-method studies with in-depth insights into relationships should be done.

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