

Role of Relationship Attachment in Smartphone Addiction and Marital Conflict among Couples

Mehwish Munir¹, Shazia Habib^{2*}, Saima Saeed³, Minahil Athar⁴, Mohsin Raza Shaokat⁵

ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to find out the role of relationship attachment in smartphone addiction and marital conflict among couples further focusing on gender differences. A cross-sectional research design was used in the current study. The data of married couples were selected from Faisalabad city. The sample of this study comprised of 65 married couples with age range of 20- 40 years (M =28.25, SD = 1.5) using purposive sampling strategy. The minimum qualification of research participants was intermediate. The duration of their marriage ranged between three to seven years. Adult Attachment Styles Scale-Revised (AAS-18: Collins & Read, 1996), Smartphone Addiction Scale-Short Version (SAS-SV-10: Kwon et al., 2013), Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS-39; Zacchilli et al., 2009) were used as study measures. The dependent attachment style was negatively correlated with smartphone addiction while smartphone addiction was found to be positively correlated with the domains of marital conflict (interactional reactivity and dominance). Furthermore, smartphone addiction was found to be a significant predictor of marital conflict. The results also revealed that husbands scored high on smartphone addiction as compared to wives. On the basis of the findings psychological interventions could be designed and implemented to manage marital conflicts in couples. To deal with the problem of smartphone addiction awareness workshops regarding the negative psychosocial impact of smartphone addiction on marital life specifically marital conflict can be arranged for the married couples.

Keyword: Relationship attachment, smartphone addiction, marital conflict.

Introduction

Relationship Attachment is defined as a deep enduring bond and psychological connectedness between individuals (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969). Attachment is not only a bond among human beings but it is an association just like a mother and a child. Through that attachment, individuals communicate with one another to develop a sense of self-concept (Collins & Read, 1990). Fraley (2010) described attachment in terms of three different attachment styles (secure, anxious, and avoidant). According to Haung (2020), attachment styles are formed when people begin to make personal relations other than intimate relationships (parents, peers, fellows, etc).

¹MS Clinical Psychology

²Assistant Professor (Assistant Professor) Department of Applied Psychology, Government College University, Faisalabad
ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2227-3141>

³(Assistant Professor) (Assistant Professor OPS) Department of Applied Psychology Government College University, Faisalabad ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7259-2186> Department of Applied Psychology, Government College University Faisalabad.

⁴Lecturer Department of applied Psychology Government College University, Faisalabad.

(MS Scholar) Department of Applied Psychology Government College University, Faisalabad ORCID: ORCID:

<http://orcid.org/0009-0002-8127-0485>

*Corresponding Author: Shazia Habib

Smartphone addiction is defined as the excessive use of smartphones when there is no need for communication (Chang-sup, 2012). No doubt smartphone is the easiest way to communicate with others. People use a smartphone for many helpful purposes like health services, learning something new, for GPS and navigation services. However, growing demands for this device cause serious problems in human life. Most researchers stated that excessive use of smartphones can have a serious impact on the personal, social, and psychological lives of individuals (Sarwar & Somroo, 2013).

The term marital conflict is defined as any kind of dispute, clash, and confrontation between two opposite genders regardless of their love and respect (White & Klein, 2002). Conflict occurs when the expectations of one person can't be fulfilled by another person (Rehman et al., 2011).

Senchak and Leonard (1992) conducted longitudinal research on attachment styles and marital adjustment in newly married couples. The findings of their study concluded that both partners who possess a secure attachment style showed more marital adjustment as compared to those in which one of the partners possesses an insecure attachment style. Another research in which attachment was seen as a moderator between smartphone interference and relationship satisfaction in couples. Results indicated a significant negative link between smartphone interference and romantic relationship satisfaction. It was also found that higher levels of smartphone interference predict lower marital satisfaction in couples (Polezoes, 2017).

Another study assessed the effects of smartphone addiction and marital adjustment among married individuals who worked in healthcare units. The findings showed an inverse correlation between smartphone dependency and marital adjustment in married individuals (Kumcagiz, et al., 2017).

The misuse of the smartphone not only effects physical health but also has a great impact on the psychological health of individuals i.e., irritability, aggression, sense of loneliness, low mood, etc. The latest studies mainly focused on the problem of smartphone addiction among undergraduate students or university students (Tangmunkongvorakul et al., 2019). While it is found that smartphone addiction has a different impact on married couples as it leads to relationship problems, marital dissatisfaction, and infidelity issues (Russell et al., 2013; Reizer & Hetsroni, 2014). The previous literature based on Western and Indigenous research specifically focuses on undergraduate students and unmarried couples. Therefore, a gap in the literature exists on the role of relationship attachment in smartphone addiction and marital conflict among couples in Pakistan.

Method

Participants

The present study consisted of 65 married couples (N=130) with an age range of 20- 40 years (M =28.25, SD = 1.5) selected through a purposive sampling strategy. The sample size was determined through the formula $N > 50 + 8 (K)$ (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The reason for the selection of this specific age range was that the rate of smartphone usage in the twenties was found to be the highest and twice greater than any other working adult group (Seoul, 2014). The duration of marriage was 3 to 7 years as after this duration other factors might influence their marital life (Proulx et al., 2007).

Measurement Tools

The demographic information sheet comprised data on different socio-demographic variables. Adult Attachment Styles Revised Scale (AAS-R-18; Collins & Read, 1996) consisted of 18 items, rated on a 5-point Likert type scale was used to measure the attachment styles. It has 3

sub-scales namely close, depend, and anxious. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the sub-scales is .82 for close, .80 for a dependent, and .83 for the anxious style of attachment (Collins & Read, 1996). A short version of the Smartphone Addiction Scale (SAS- S-10; Kwon et al., 2013) was used to measure the levels of smartphone addiction. This scale has 10 items rated on 6 6-point Likert-type scale "1= strongly disagree to 6= strongly agree". The alpha coefficient for the original version was .91. The Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS; Zacchilli et al., 2009) was used to measure marital conflict in couples. It has 6 sub-scales (compromise, avoidant, interactional reactivity, separation, dominance, and submissive). Test-retest

reliabilities for the sub-scales are strong, and alpha reliabilities have ranged from .82 to .96 (Zacchilli et al., 2009).

Procedure

Initially, for conducting this research approval was taken from the Department of Applied Psychology (Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan) and further from Advanced Studies and Institutional Ethical Review Board. The research aim was clearly described to the research participants and consent was taken from them to participate in the study willingly. The demographic sheet with other study measures was filled out by research participants. All the ethical considerations were kept in view while conducting the research such as informed consent, confidentiality, debriefing, and the right to withdraw from the research at any stage.

Results

The data of the present research was analyzed by using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. The data was screened out by looking for any errors, missing values, and outliers.

Table 1: Spearman Bivariate Correlation Between Study Variables N = 130

No. Variables	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Secure Attachment	17.5	4.68	.60	1									
2. Dependent Attachment	17.0	4.35	.50	.15	1								
3. Anxious Attachment	18.7	4.17	.62	-.32*	.10	1							
4. Smartphone Addiction	36.6	10.99	.91	-.02	-.20*	.15	1						
5. Compromise	35.4	11.21	.92	.19	.04	-.12	.03	1					
6. Avoidant	7.93	2.62	.81	.006	-.10	.04	.03	.57**	1				
7. IR	12.68	5.12	.74	-.30**	-.13	.41**	.29**	-.18*	.08	1			
8. Separation	10.92	4.05	.75	.15	.10	.05	.17	.53**	.36**	.12	1		
9. Dominance	12.42	5.43	.84	.01	-.10	.11	.19*	.08	.02	.36**	.14	1	
10. Submissive	10.53	3.90	.72	.10	.12	.17	.16	.32**	.13	.17	.44**	.26**	1

Note. $p^* < .05$, $p^{**} < .01$, IR= Interactional Reactivity

Spearman bivariate correlation revealed that only avoidant attachment style negatively correlated with smartphone addiction with a small effect size. Furthermore, secure attachment style negatively and anxious attachment style positively correlated with interactional reactivity with medium effect size. Interactional reactivity is one of the parameters of marital conflict. Smartphone addiction positively correlated with two components of marital conflict i.e.

interactional reactivity and dominance with medium to small effect size, revealing that the partners who engage most of the time on their smartphones, become more reactive and dominant in their relationship with the spouse.

Table 2: Stepwise Method in Multiple Regression Analysis to Predict Interactional Reactivity (N = 130)

Predictors	Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	ΔR^2	F
	B	SE	β		
Step I				.16	25.35
Anxious attachment	.50	.09	.41**		
Step II				.21	8.96
Anxious attachment	.45	.09	.37**		
Smartphone addiction	.11	.04	.24*		
Step III				.23	5.01
Anxious attachment	.38	.10	.31**		
Smartphone addiction	.11	.03	.24*		
Secure attachment	-.20	.10	-.18*		

Note. $p < .01$, $p^{**} < .00$

After analyzing the situation in the correlation matrix, only interactional reactivity i.e. a component of marital conflict was taken as an outcome variable in multiple regression analysis with the stepwise method. The results revealed that anxious attachment style negatively predicted interactional reactivity accounting for 16% variance in the model. After adding smartphone addiction in model 2, the total variance was improved to 21% for the model adding 5% in model 1. In model 3, the predictor variable secure attachment style positively predicted interactional reactivity accounting for an additional 2% of the variance in the model. The total variance explained by these three predictors reached up to 23% as a whole.

This finding means that relationship anxiety and smartphone addiction positively predict marital conflict through interactional reactivity while the feelings of closeness, comfort, and intimacy negatively predict irritable debates and verbal abuse (i.e. interactional reactivity) between the partners.

Table 3: independent sample t-test for group differences on attachment styles, smartphone addiction and marital conflict among married couples (N = 130)

DV's	Group		t	df	95% CI		Cohen's d
	Husband	Wife			LL	UL	
Anxious Attachment	17.97(4.62)	19.62(3.55)	-2.27*	128	-.21	-3.07	0.40
Smartphone Addiction	38.63(10.69)	34.72(11.02)	2.05*	128	.13	7.67	0.36

Note. $p < .05$, Only significant findings reported.

There is a significant difference between husband and wife on anxious attachment style with a higher mean score of wives reflecting their apprehensions in attachment with their partner. Moreover, smartphone addiction scores were significantly higher in husbands as compared to wives indicating a higher tendency to use smartphones in men. The effect size for both the differences remained medium.

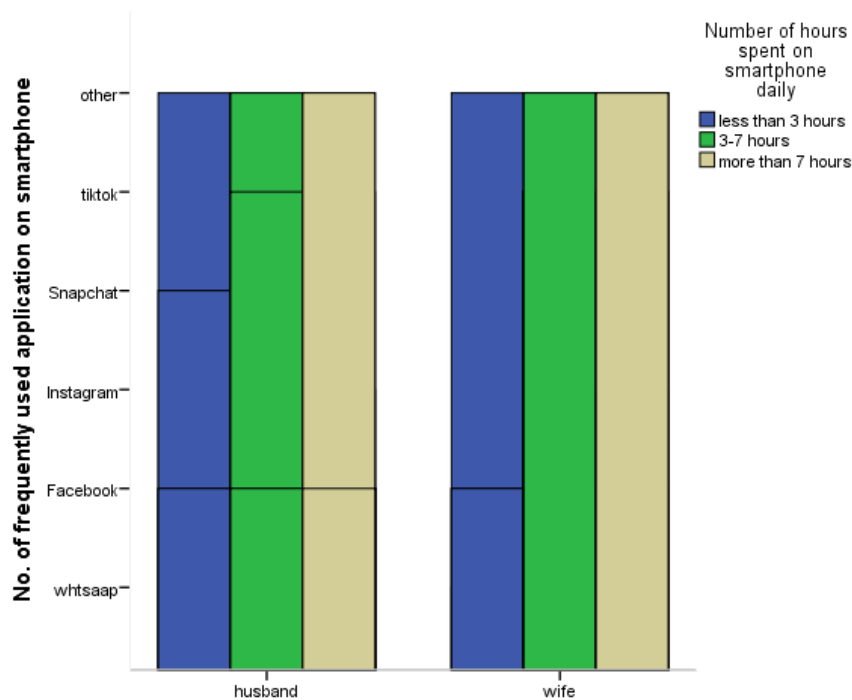


Figure 1: Graph Showing Frequently Used Social Media Apps and Daily Spent Hours Across Gender

The above graph shows that husbands’ more frequently used app is Facebook which is used for more than seven hours as compared to wives who use this app for less than three hours. Husbands also use TikTok for three to seven hours as compared to their wives who don’t use this app

Discussion

This research aims to explore the role of attachment styles in smartphone addiction and marital conflict in couples. In the present study, it was assumed that attachment styles and smartphone addiction are the predictors of marital conflict. Moreover, the group effect (being husband /wife) was also tested for the study variables. The result (see Table 1) of the inter-correlations showed that secure attachment style is negative and anxious attachment style is positively

correlated with interactional reactivity. Results found a significant negative correlation between dependent attachment style and marital conflict in couples. While smartphone addiction showed a positive correlation with interactional reactivity and dominance (types of marital conflict). The current study results are in line with previous studies which found negative (Mohammadi et al., 2014) while at another place, a non-significant correlation was reported between relationship attachment styles, and marital conflict (Vithanage, 2014). That indicates partners who possess a secure attachment style become less reactive and understand things in a better way as compared to the partners having other types of relationship attachment styles. The results of the multiple linear regression analysis (see Table 2) explained that smartphone addiction is a significant positive predictor of marital conflict among couples. The study results also displayed significant gender differences in the scores of anxious attachment styles and smartphone addiction (see Table 3). It was found that wives exhibit higher scores on anxious attachment styles as compared to their husbands. These findings are in line with the previous literature which concluded that women significantly score higher on anxious/ambivalent attachment style while men scored higher on avoidant attachment style (Gugova & Heretik, 2011; Arpaci et al., 2017) and a meta-analysis about attachment style depicted gender differences in the same direction as found in the present study (Del Giudice, 2011). These reported gender-based differences in terms of attachment styles can be discussed in terms of gender schema theory (Bem, 1983) which states that individuals usually develop their cognitive schemas throughout the childhood period and then become able to display various gender-appropriate activities. These schemas ultimately predispose men and women to develop and preserve their emotional bonds in different ways. Furthermore, in the present study, it was found that men (husbands) are more vulnerable to becoming addicted to their smartphones as compared to women (wives). We can find research both in favor and contrary to these findings related to gender differences in smartphone addiction. Various research in the past has revealed that men use technology more as compared to women, and they spend more time on devices like computers, laptops, and smartphones (Chen et al., 2017; Lee & Kim, 2018). While researches from other cultures have also revealed a contrary finding that women use communication, and smartphone apps, and score higher on problematic smartphone usage as compared to men (Taywade & Khubalkar, 2019; Andone et al., 2016). The men in our society have stronger and broader social networks as compared to the women. Moreover, women are more engaged in the household even if they are professionals. This gender role difference makes men more prone to being addicted to smartphones, not women.

Another interesting finding of the study reveals the nature of smartphone apps used by couples. It shows that husbands engage more with entertainment and connectivity apps (i.e. Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram) based apps while wives only engage with connectivity-based apps (i.e. Facebook). Facebook is the platform where they can connect with official and unofficial groups and individuals to improve their social networking.

The study provides a baseline by revealing the significant role of smartphone addiction and attachment styles in the development of marital conflict in young couples. However, these findings are limited to the sample size because an appropriate comparable group of husbands and wives couldn't be made for further analyses. For future directions, qualitative inquiry can be a good choice to further explore other related aspects of marital conflict among couples.

References

- Ainsworth, M. D. (1973). The development of infant-mother attachment. In Cardwell, B. & Ricciuti, H. (Eds.), *Review of child development research* (Vol. 3, pp. 1-94) Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arpaci, I., Baloglu, M., Kozan, H. I. O., & Kesici, S. (2017). Individual Differences in the Relationship Between Attachment and Nomophobia Among College Students: The Mediating Role of Mindfulness. *Journal of internet medical research*. doi: 10.2196/jmir.8847
- Bem, S. L. (1983). Gender schema theory and its implications for child development: raising gender-aschematic children in a gender-schematic society. *J Women Cult Soc*;8(4):598-616. [doi: 10.1086/493998]
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment. Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Loss*. New York: Basic Books.
- Chang-sup, L. (2012). Smartphone addiction: disease or obsession? I, Retrieved from http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2012/11/298_117506
- Chen, B., Liu, F., Ding, S., Ying, X., Wang, L., & Wen, Y. (2017). Gender differences in factor associated with smartphone addiction: A cross-sectional study among medical college students. *BMC Psychiatry*, 17(1), 341. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-017-1503-z>
- Collins, N. L., & Read, S. J. (1990). Adult attachment, working models, and relationship quality in dating couples. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58;644–663
- Collins, N. L., & Read, S. J. (1996). Revised Adult attachment Scale Close Relationships Version. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(4), 644-663
- Del Giudice, M. (2011). Sex Differences In Romantic Attachment: A Meta-Analysis. In *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 37, 2011, no. 2, pp. 193-214
- Fraley, R. C. (2010). A brief overview of adult attachment theory and research. Retrieved from <https://internal.psychology.illinois.edu/~rcfraley/attachment.htm>
- Gugová, G. R., & Heretik, A. (2011). Gender Differences in Attachment Styles Using Slovak Version of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R). *Journal of Acta Technologica Dubnicae*, 1(2):34-41
- Huang, S. (2020, Nov 03). Attachment styles. *Simply Psychology*. Retrieved from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/attachment-styles.htm>
- Kumcagiz, H., Sahin, C., & Koksall, B. (2017). The effects of smartphone addiction marital adjustment of partners. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*.751-758. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12513/1801>
- Kwon, M., Kim, D. J., Cho, H. & Yang, S. (2013). The Smartphone Addiction Scale: Development and Validation of a Short Version for Adolescents. *PLoS ONE* 8(12): e83558. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0083558>
- Lee, E. J., & Kim, H. S. (2018). Gender Differences in Smartphone Addiction Behaviors Associated With Parent-Child Bonding, Parent-Child Communication, and Parental Mediation Among Korean Elementary School Students. *Journal of Addictions Nursing*, 29(4), 244. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JAN.0000000000000254>
- Mohammadi, K., Samavi, A., & Ghazavi, Z. (2016, January 16). The Relationship between Attachment Styles and Lifestyle with Marital Satisfaction. *Faculty of Human Science, University of Hormozgan, Bandar Abbas. Iran Red Crescent Med J*. 18(4):e23839. doi: 10.5812/ircmj.23839

- Polezoes, S. (2017). Attachment as a Moderator Between Smartphone Interference and Relationship Satisfaction in Adult Couples. Purdue University
<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/dissertations/AAI10272380/>
- Proulx, C. M., Helms, H. M., & Buehler, C. (2007). Marital quality and personal well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(3), 576-593
- Rehman, U. S., Janssen, E., Newhouse, S., Heiman, J., Holtzworth-Munroe, A., Fallis, E., & Rafaeli, E. (2011). Marital satisfaction and communication behaviors during sexual and nonsexual conflict discussions in newlywed couples: A pilot study. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 37, 94-103. Retrieved from EbscoHost.
- Reizer, A., & Hetsroni, A. (2014). MEDIA EXPOSURE AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP QUALITY: *Psychological Reports*, 114(1), 231-249. doi:10.2466/21.07.PR0.114k11w6
- Russel, V. M., Baker, L. R., & McNulty, J. K. (2013). Attachment Insecurity and Infidelity in Marriage: Do Studies of Dating Relationships Really Inform Us About Marriage? *Journal of Family Psychology*; Vol. 27, No. 2, 242–251 doi: 10.1037/a0032118
- Sarwar, M., & Somroo, T. R. (2013). Impact of Smartphones on Society. *European Journal of Scientific Research*, Vol. 98 No 2 ISSN 1450-216X / 1450-202X
- Senchak, M., & Leonard, K. E. (1992). Attachment Styles and Marital Adjustment among Newlywed Couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 9(1), 51–64. doi:10.1177/0265407592091003
- Seoul, (2014). Korea Internet and Security Agency. Survey on mobile internet use. http://www.nia.or.kr/site/nia_kor/ex/bbs/View.do?cbIdx=65914&bcIdx=15445&parentSeq=15445
- Supriani, D., & Iqbal, M. (2019). The Influence of Smartphone Usage Intensity on Spouse Intimacy. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (ASSEHR)*, vol; 219. Atlantis Press.
- Tabachnick, B. G. & Fidell, L. S. (2013). *Multivariate Statistics*. Person, Boston.
- Tangmunkongvorakul, A., Musumari, P. M., Thongpibul, K., Srithanaviboonchai, K., Techasrivichien, T., Sugimoto, S. P., & Kihara, M. (2019). Association of excessive smartphone use with psychological well-being among university students in Chiang Mai, Thailand. *PloS one*, 14(1), e0210294
- Taywade, A., & Khubalkar, R. (2019). Gender differences in smartphone usage patterns of adolescents. *International Journal of Indian Psychology* 7(4):509-515
- Vithanage, R. D. H. (2014). The Influence of Adult Attachment Styles on Marital Satisfaction among Married Couples. *Journal of Social Sciences Sri Lanka*, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kelaniya. pp 46-65
- White, J. M., & Klein, D. M. (2002). *Family Theories* (2nd Ed.). California: Sage
- Zacchilli, T. L., Hendrick, C., & Hendrick, S. (2009). The Romantic Partner Conflict Scale: A new scale to measure conflict in dating relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 1073-1096