



Smartphone Addiction and Emotional Unavailability in Marriage: Perceived Neglect and Attachment Styles

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ABSTRACT

The growing reliance on smartphones has altered patterns of emotional interaction within marital relationships. Although smartphones support communication, excessive or compulsive use may interfere with emotional presence and intimacy between spouses.

The present study examined the relationship between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability in marriages, focusing on the mediating role of perceived neglect and the moderating role of attachment styles. Using a cross-sectional correlational design, data were collected from 352 married adults residing in urban areas of Pakistan through standardized Urdu-adapted measures. Emotional unavailability was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct including emotional withdrawal, lack of emotional responsiveness, and avoidance of emotional intimacy. Results indicated that smartphone addiction was positively associated with emotional unavailability and its subdimensions. Perceived neglect partially mediated these relationships, suggesting that feelings of being ignored play a central role in emotional disengagement. Furthermore, attachment styles moderated the associations, such that anxious and avoidant attachment strengthened, while secure attachment weakened, the relationship between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability. The findings highlight the emotional and relational implications of problematic smartphone use in marriages and underscore the importance of attachment-related vulnerabilities in shaping spouses' emotional experiences.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of smartphone use has fundamentally reshaped interpersonal communication, emotional regulation, and relational engagement across contemporary societies. Smartphones now function not only as tools for communication but also as constant mediators of attention, affect, and social presence. While these devices offer significant practical and social benefits, a growing body of research suggests that excessive or dysregulated smartphone use may have unintended psychological and relational consequences, particularly within intimate relationships such as marriage.

Marital relationships depend heavily on emotional availability, which refers to the capacity to remain emotionally present, responsive, and attuned to one's partner. Emotional availability fosters intimacy, trust, and relational security, whereas emotional unavailability is characterized by emotional withdrawal, reduced responsiveness, and avoidance of emotional closeness. Persistent emotional unavailability has been consistently linked to marital dissatisfaction, loneliness, and relational instability (Gottman & Silver, 2015; Lavner et al., 2016). In digitally saturated environments, smartphones may increasingly compete with spouses for emotional attention, potentially undermining emotional presence and intimacy within marriage.

Research on technology and close relationships has conceptualized these disruptions through the framework of *technoference*, which describes everyday interruptions in interpersonal interactions caused by digital devices (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). Smartphones are particularly intrusive due to their portability, constant notifications, and multifunctionality. Empirical studies conducted largely in Western contexts have demonstrated that problematic smartphone use is associated with lower relationship satisfaction, increased conflict, diminished emotional responsiveness, and heightened perceptions of partner neglect (Roberts & David, 2017; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). These findings suggest that smartphones may function as "digital intruders" that erode emotional connection by diverting attention away from relational engagement.

One psychological pathway through which smartphone addiction may influence marital functioning is perceived neglect. When one partner repeatedly prioritizes smartphone use during shared moments, the other partner may experience this behavior as emotional disregard or rejection. Perceived neglect is a subjective relational experience that can activate emotional insecurity, distress, and withdrawal, even when neglect is not intentional. Over time, repeated experiences of perceived neglect may weaken emotional bonds and contribute to emotional unavailability within marriage.

Attachment theory provides a well-established framework for understanding individual differences in emotional engagement and responses to perceived neglect. According to Bowlby (1969), early caregiving experiences shape internal working models that guide expectations of availability, responsiveness, and emotional security in adult relationships. Secure attachment is associated with emotional openness and effective regulation of distress, whereas anxious attachment involves heightened sensitivity to rejection and abandonment. Avoidant attachment, in contrast, is characterized by emotional distancing and discomfort with intimacy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These attachment orientations influence how individuals interpret relational cues and regulate emotions in the face of perceived unavailability.

Attachment processes are particularly relevant in the context of smartphone-related relational disruptions. Anxiously attached individuals may interpret smartphone use as a threat to relational security, intensifying feelings of neglect and emotional distress. Avoidantly attached individuals may respond to perceived neglect by further disengaging emotionally, reinforcing patterns of

emotional unavailability. Secure attachment may buffer against the emotional impact of perceived neglect by facilitating adaptive emotional regulation and relational communication (Collins & Read, 1990).

Within Pakistan, emerging national scholarship has begun to document the psychological and emotional consequences of contemporary digital engagement. Fareed et al. (2024) examined social media addiction among Pakistani young adults and reported significant associations between compulsive digital use, emotional dysregulation, and aggression. Although this work focused on individual-level outcomes rather than relational processes, it provides important empirical evidence that persistent digital engagement may destabilize emotional regulation in Pakistani populations—an issue that has clear implications for marital relationships, where emotional responsiveness and regulation are central.

Beyond individual outcomes, national research has increasingly situated emotional experience within broader sociocultural contexts. A scoping review by Latif et al. (2025) highlighted culturally embedded barriers to emotional expression and help-seeking among men in urban Pakistan, including norms of emotional restraint, relational silence, and stigmatization of vulnerability. These findings are particularly relevant for marital research, as they suggest that emotional unavailability and perceived neglect may reflect not only interpersonal dynamics but also culturally shaped patterns of emotional withdrawal and limited emotional expression within intimate relationships.

Additional national and regionally indexed scholarship has emphasized the complexity of emotional functioning within Pakistan's rapidly changing socio-digital landscape. Research archived on Zenodo and published in regional interdisciplinary outlets has examined psychological well-being, social stressors, and adaptive challenges in contemporary Pakistani society, highlighting how emotional experience is shaped by intersecting technological, cultural, and relational forces. Although these studies do not focus exclusively on marital relationships or smartphone addiction, they reinforce the need to understand emotional availability as part of a broader psychosocial ecology rather than as a simple consequence of individual behavior.

Taken together, national and international literature suggests that digital engagement, emotional regulation, and relational experience are deeply intertwined. However, despite growing scholarly attention to digital addiction and emotional outcomes in Pakistan, no existing study has systematically examined how smartphone addiction, perceived neglect, and emotional availability co-occur within marital relationships, nor how these associations are shaped by attachment orientations. The present study addresses this gap by integrating national scholarship with established relational theories to examine emotional unavailability as a relational and perceptual phenomenon in contemporary Pakistani marriages.

Objectives of the Study

The present study was designed to examine the relationship between smartphone addiction and emotional functioning within marital relationships, with particular attention to underlying psychological mechanisms and individual differences. Specifically, the objectives of the study were:

1. To examine the association between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability in marriages.

2. To examine the relationship between smartphone addiction and the specific dimensions of emotional unavailability, namely emotional withdrawal, lack of emotional responsiveness, and avoidance of emotional intimacy.
3. To investigate whether perceived neglect mediates the relationship between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability in marriages.
4. To examine whether attachment styles (secure, anxious, and avoidant) moderate the relationship between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability.

Hypotheses

Based on attachment theory, technofence theory, and prior empirical findings, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Smartphone addiction will be positively associated with emotional unavailability in marriages.

H1a: Smartphone addiction will be positively associated with emotional withdrawal.

H1b: Smartphone addiction will be positively associated with lack of emotional responsiveness.

H1c: Smartphone addiction will be positively associated with avoidance of emotional intimacy.

H2: Perceived neglect will mediate the relationship between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability in marriages.

H3: Attachment styles will moderate the relationship between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability such that anxious and avoidant attachment styles will strengthen, whereas secure attachment will weaken, the association between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Smartphone Addiction and Marital Relationships

Smartphone addiction refers to a pattern of excessive, compulsive, and poorly regulated smartphone use that interferes with daily functioning and interpersonal relationships. Unlike functional or task-oriented use, addictive smartphone engagement is characterized by loss of control, preoccupation, and continued use despite negative consequences. In intimate relationships, such patterns may reduce emotional presence, disrupt shared experiences, and interfere with relational responsiveness.

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that problematic smartphone use is associated with poorer relationship quality, increased conflict, and reduced emotional engagement between romantic partners (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Roberts & David, 2017). Smartphones often intrude into moments that traditionally foster intimacy, such as conversations, shared leisure, and emotional disclosure. Over time, these intrusions may weaken emotional bonds by signaling inattentiveness or disinterest.

In marital contexts, emotional engagement is not merely a desirable quality but a foundational requirement for relational stability. When smartphone use becomes habitual and intrusive, it may undermine spouses' sense of being emotionally prioritized, thereby contributing to emotional distancing and disengagement.

Emotional Unavailability in Marriages

Emotional unavailability refers to a pattern of limited emotional presence, reduced responsiveness, and avoidance of emotional intimacy within close relationships. It manifests through behaviors such as emotional withdrawal, lack of attunement to a partner's emotional needs, and reluctance to engage in emotional closeness. Emotional unavailability has been linked to marital dissatisfaction, loneliness, and increased risk of relational breakdown (Gottman & Silver, 2015; Lavner et al., 2016).

Contemporary research increasingly conceptualizes emotional unavailability as a multidimensional construct rather than a single trait. Emotional withdrawal reflects disengagement from emotional interaction, lack of emotional responsiveness reflects reduced validation and support, and avoidance of emotional intimacy reflects discomfort with closeness. These dimensions are particularly relevant in technologically mediated environments, where attentional resources are frequently divided.

Smartphone addiction may exacerbate emotional unavailability by reducing opportunities for emotional exchange and reinforcing patterns of disengagement. Over time, habitual smartphone use may normalize emotional absence and weaken expectations of emotional responsiveness within marriage.

Perceived Neglect as a Mediating Mechanism

Perceived neglect refers to an individual's subjective experience of being ignored, emotionally overlooked, or deprioritized by a partner. Importantly, perceived neglect does not require intentional disregard; rather, it reflects how relational behaviors are interpreted and emotionally experienced.

Research suggests that technology-related interruptions are often interpreted as neglect, particularly when they occur during moments of expected emotional engagement (Roberts & David, 2017). In marital relationships, repeated smartphone use during conversations or shared time may signal emotional unavailability, leading partners to feel undervalued or disconnected.

Perceived neglect plays a critical mediating role by translating observable behavior (smartphone use) into emotional meaning. Rather than smartphone addiction directly causing emotional unavailability, it is the perception of being neglected that activates emotional withdrawal, reduced responsiveness, and avoidance of intimacy. This mediational pathway emphasizes the importance of subjective relational meaning-making in understanding marital emotional dynamics.

Attachment Theory and Emotional Regulation in Marriage

Attachment theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding individual differences in emotional engagement and responses to perceived neglect. According to Bowlby (1969), early caregiving experiences shape internal working models that guide expectations of availability, responsiveness, and emotional security in adult relationships.

Secure attachment is associated with emotional openness, trust, and effective regulation of distress. In contrast, anxious attachment involves heightened sensitivity to rejection and abandonment, while avoidant attachment is characterized by discomfort with intimacy and emotional dependence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Attachment orientations influence how individuals interpret and respond to relational stressors, including smartphone-related neglect. Anxiously attached individuals may perceive smartphone

use as a threat to relational security, intensifying emotional distress and withdrawal. Avoidantly attached individuals may respond by further distancing themselves emotionally, reinforcing emotional unavailability. Secure attachment, however, may buffer against these effects by facilitating adaptive emotional regulation and relational communication (Collins & Read, 1990).

Technoference Theory and Emotional Disruption

Technoference theory explains how digital technologies disrupt interpersonal interactions by diverting attention and emotional presence (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). In marital relationships, repeated technology-based interruptions may undermine emotional attunement and responsiveness, leading to relational dissatisfaction.

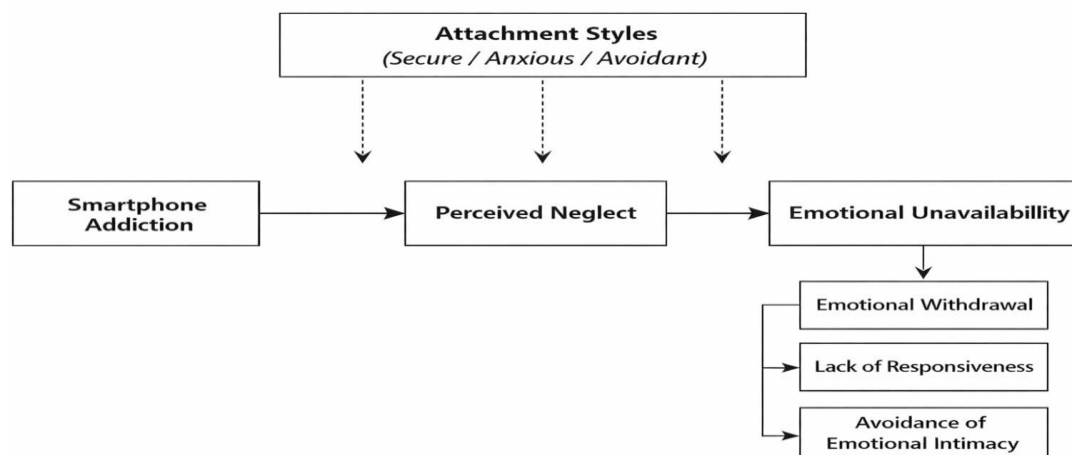
Technoference does not operate solely at the behavioral level; its impact is shaped by emotional interpretation and individual vulnerability. Attachment orientations determine whether smartphone interruptions are dismissed as benign or experienced as emotionally threatening. Thus, technoference theory complements attachment theory by explaining how digital behavior becomes emotionally consequential within intimate relationships.

Integrated Theoretical Framework

The present study integrates **attachment theory**, **technoference theory**, and **emotional responsiveness frameworks** to explain how smartphone addiction contributes to emotional unavailability in marriages. Smartphone addiction is conceptualized as a behavioral antecedent that increases the likelihood of perceived neglect. Perceived neglect functions as a psychological mechanism through which emotional meaning is constructed, leading to emotional unavailability. Attachment styles operate as moderating conditions that shape the strength of these associations.

This framework avoids simplistic causal assumptions and instead conceptualizes emotional unavailability as a relational and perceptual phenomenon shaped by technology use, emotional interpretation, and attachment-based vulnerabilities.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Smartphone Addiction, Perceived Neglect, Attachment Styles, and Emotional Unavailability in Marriages



As illustrated in Figure 1, smartphone addiction is conceptualized as a primary predictor of emotional unavailability in marriages, with perceived neglect functioning as a mediating mechanism. Attachment styles are modeled as moderating variables that influence the strength of this relationship. Emotional unavailability is further represented as a multidimensional construct

comprising emotional withdrawal, lack of emotional responsiveness, and avoidance of emotional intimacy.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study employed a **cross-sectional correlational research design** to examine the relationships among smartphone addiction, perceived neglect, attachment styles, and emotional unavailability in marital relationships. This design was considered appropriate as the study aimed to investigate associations, mediation, and moderation effects among psychological variables without manipulating any conditions.

Participants

The sample consisted of **352 married adults** residing in urban areas of Pakistan. Participants ranged in age from **22 to 55 years** ($M = 34.7$, $SD = 7.9$). An equal number of male ($n = 176$) and female ($n = 176$) participants were included to ensure gender balance. All participants had been married for a **minimum duration of one year**, allowing sufficient marital exposure for the assessment of emotional and relational dynamics.

Participants represented diverse educational backgrounds, including bachelor's, master's, and MPhil/PhD qualifications. Individuals who reported severe psychiatric illness or were currently undergoing marital therapy were excluded to minimize confounding influences on emotional functioning.

Sampling Technique

A **purposive sampling technique** was used to recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria. Recruitment was carried out through community contacts, professional networks, and online platforms. This approach was suitable given the study's focus on married adults and the need to access participants across different urban settings.

Measures

All instruments were administered in **Urdu**, using culturally adapted versions of standardized scales. Prior to data collection, the translated versions were reviewed for linguistic clarity and cultural relevance.

Smartphone Addiction

Smartphone addiction was measured using the **Smartphone Addiction Scale–Short Version** developed by Kwon et al. (2013). The scale assesses excessive and compulsive smartphone use that interferes with daily functioning. Higher scores indicate greater levels of smartphone addiction. In the present study, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

Perceived Neglect

Perceived neglect was assessed using an adapted measure based on technoferece research by McDaniel and Coyne (2016). The scale measures participants' perceptions of being ignored or emotionally overlooked by their spouse due to smartphone use. Higher scores reflect greater perceived neglect. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$).

Emotional Unavailability

Emotional unavailability was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct and measured through three components:

- **Emotional Withdrawal**, assessed using selected items from the Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007), measuring emotional disengagement from the spouse.
- **Lack of Emotional Responsiveness**, measured using the Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale (Reis et al., 2004), assessing perceived emotional attunement and validation.
- **Avoidance of Emotional Intimacy**, assessed using the avoidant attachment subscale from the Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990).

All subscales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .79 to .88.

Attachment Styles

Attachment styles were measured using the **Adult Attachment Scale** developed by Collins and Read (1990). The scale assesses secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment orientations. Participants responded based on their typical emotional experiences in close relationships. Reliability coefficients for the attachment subscales were satisfactory.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and informed that participation was voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Questionnaires were administered either in paper format or through secure online forms. Participants completed the measures individually and were instructed to respond honestly based on their marital experiences. No identifying information was collected.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)**. Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses were conducted to examine data distribution and internal consistency of the measures.

To test the study hypotheses:

- **Hierarchical regression analysis** was used to examine the predictive relationship between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability.
- **Mediation analysis** was conducted using bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples to examine the mediating role of perceived neglect.
- **Moderation analysis** was performed to test the moderating effects of attachment styles on the relationship between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability through interaction terms.

Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < .05$.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles outlined by the American Psychological Association. Participants’ anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

Results

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses were conducted to examine the distribution and internal consistency of the study variables. Inferential analyses included hierarchical regression, mediation analysis using bootstrapping, and moderation analysis to test the proposed relationships among smartphone addiction, perceived neglect, attachment styles, and emotional unavailability in marriages.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients of Study Variables (N = 352)

Variable	Mean	SD	Cronbach’s α
Smartphone Addiction	32.61	7.04	.89
Perceived Neglect	26.44	6.11	.85
Emotional Withdrawal	21.18	5.08	.81
Lack of Emotional Responsiveness	24.32	5.92	.88
Avoidance of Emotional Intimacy	19.67	4.73	.79

The results indicate moderate levels of smartphone addiction, perceived neglect, and emotional unavailability among the participants. All scales demonstrated acceptable to good internal consistency, suggesting that the measures were reliable and suitable for subsequent analyses.

Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Emotional Unavailability

Predictor	B	SE	β	t
Smartphone Addiction	.42	.05	.46***	8.40
Perceived Neglect	.39	.04	.44***	9.21

** $p < .001$

Smartphone addiction significantly and positively predicted emotional unavailability in marriages. When perceived neglect was included in the model, it also emerged as a significant predictor, and the effect of smartphone addiction was reduced but remained significant. This pattern indicates that perceived neglect partially explains the association between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability.

Table 3: Mediation Analysis: Indirect Effect of Smartphone Addiction on Emotional Unavailability Through Perceived Neglect

Indirect Path	Effect	SE	95% Confidence Interval
Smartphone Addiction → Perceived Neglect → Emotional Unavailability	.21	.04	[.14, .29]

The indirect effect of smartphone addiction on emotional unavailability through perceived neglect was statistically significant, as the confidence interval did not include zero. This finding confirms

that perceived neglect functions as a partial mediator in the relationship between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability.

Table 4: Moderating Effects of Attachment Styles on the Relationship Between Smartphone Addiction and Emotional Unavailability

Attachment Style	Interaction β	t
Secure Attachment	-.18*	-2.41
Anxious Attachment	.26***	4.19
Avoidant Attachment	.23***	3.87

$p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

The interaction effects indicate that attachment styles significantly moderated the relationship between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability. Secure attachment weakened the association, whereas anxious and avoidant attachment strengthened the relationship. These findings suggest that individuals with insecure attachment orientations are more vulnerable to emotional disengagement in the context of excessive smartphone use.

Summary

Smartphone addiction was significantly associated with emotional unavailability in marriages. Perceived neglect partially mediated this relationship, indicating a significant indirect effect. Attachment styles moderated the association between smartphone addiction and emotional unavailability, with secure attachment weakening and anxious and avoidant attachment strengthening the relationship. Overall, the proposed direct, indirect, and conditional effects were statistically supported.

Discussion

The present study examined how smartphone addiction is associated with emotional unavailability in marriages, with perceived neglect and attachment styles shaping this relationship. The findings demonstrate that excessive smartphone use is meaningfully linked with reduced emotional presence between spouses, reinforcing evidence that digital engagement influences emotional dynamics within intimate relationships. Smartphones appear to function as relational stressors by disrupting emotional responsiveness and intimacy.

Consistent with research on technoferece, smartphone addiction was associated with emotional withdrawal, diminished emotional responsiveness, and avoidance of emotional intimacy (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Roberts & David, 2017). These findings extend prior work by demonstrating that emotional disengagement manifests through specific emotional processes rather than only through global relationship dissatisfaction. By conceptualizing emotional unavailability as multidimensional, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of emotional disengagement in marital contexts.

A key contribution of the study is the identification of perceived neglect as a psychological mechanism linking smartphone addiction to emotional unavailability. The findings indicate that it is not smartphone use itself but its interpretation as neglectful that undermines emotional connection. This aligns with emotional responsiveness theory, which emphasizes that relational well-being depends on feeling emotionally valued rather than on objective behavior alone (Reis et al., 2004). Repeated experiences of perceived neglect may erode emotional security, leading to withdrawal and reduced intimacy.

Attachment theory further explains individual differences in vulnerability to smartphone-related neglect. Insecure attachment orientations intensified emotional disengagement, whereas secure attachment buffered against these effects. These patterns are consistent with attachment theory, which posits that perceived unavailability activates attachment-related regulatory strategies (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Secure attachment appears to promote emotional resilience and relational stability despite digital disruptions (Collins & Read, 1990).

Cultural context also plays a critical role in interpreting these findings. Pakistani scholarship has highlighted norms of emotional restraint and limited emotional expression, particularly among men (Latif et al., 2025). Within such a context, emotional unavailability may be normalized, allowing smartphone-related neglect to compound existing relational disengagement. Evidence linking problematic digital engagement to emotional dysregulation in Pakistani populations further supports this interpretation (Fareed et al., 2024).

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and the reliance on self-report measures may introduce shared method variance and subjective bias. Marital processes were examined from an individual rather than dyadic perspective, which restricts insight into reciprocal emotional dynamics. Additionally, the sample was drawn from urban populations, which may limit generalizability to rural contexts where digital access and emotional norms may differ.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the findings highlight the importance of attending to emotional meaning-making in understanding the relational impact of smartphone use. Emotional unavailability appears to emerge through subjective perceptions of neglect, shaped by attachment-related emotional regulation patterns. These results underscore the relevance of attachment-informed and emotionally sensitive approaches when addressing digital behaviors in marital contexts, particularly within cultures where emotional expression is constrained.

Conclusion

The present study provides evidence that smartphone addiction is associated with emotional unavailability in marriages through perceived neglect and attachment-based emotional regulation processes. By integrating digital behavior with attachment theory and emotional responsiveness frameworks in a Pakistani context, the study advances understanding of how contemporary technological engagement shapes emotional life within marriages. Emotional unavailability emerges as a relational and perceptual outcome influenced by digital practices, subjective interpretation, and enduring attachment orientations.

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