



**PARENTS, CHILDREN, AND SMARTPHONES: A
STUDY ON PARENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR
CHILDREN'S SMARTPHONE USAGE IN RURAL
FAMILIES IN INDIA**

Ms. G. Poomari Thilagam

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Abstract

Smartphones are one of the predominant digital gadgets used by masses in this digital era. Everyday communication, information and entertainment needs of individuals are met by smartphones with internet connectivity. They are an integral part of most of the families, specifically, parents, children, and elders. Research on use of smartphones by individuals especially adults reveal the influence of smartphones both positively and negatively on the society. Problematic smartphone use is an area of concern for parents and teachers when it is concerning children. Parents who can understand the scope and functioning of digital gadgets play a role in mediating the media use of children. In rural India where digital divide exists, to understand the negative or positive influence of smartphones on children is more complicated. However, in a post-Covid-19 pandemic scenario, use of smartphones has increased in rural regions and children access parents' smartphones. Parents in rural regions do comprehend the consequences of problematic smartphone use, however, not much research is available in this context. This paper tries to understand the parents' perception of their children's smartphone usage in rural families in India.

Keywords: Problematic Smartphone Use, Parents, Children, Parental mediation, Rural Families, family communication

Ph.D. Research Scholar Department of Communication Manonmaniam Sundaranar
University Tirunelveli

Email: g.p.thilagam@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

In a post-Covid-19 scenario, the use of smartphones has increased in India significantly. The major reason being the pandemic induced sudden lockdowns and the need for digital transactions, communication, entertainment, and services like healthcare, transport, education, almost everything digitalized. To access the digital services the maximum sought gadgets were smartphones. Smartphone use has impacted rural regions of India and made its way into households influencing the traditional forms of communication and entertainment within families. Online learning and coaching offered newer forms of experiences for students, teachers as well as parents. This increased the access of smartphones to children offering them different levels of attractions like online gaming, cartoons, and other entertainment content. The influence of smartphones among individuals, especially among children is an area of concern for parents and academicians. Parents observe smartphone use induced behavioral changes in children. Thus, children's use of smartphones affects how they interact with others. Therefore, there is a critical need for research that focuses on young people's smartphone use (Stevic & Matthes, 2021). This paper tries to understand parents' concerns and perception of their children's smartphone usage related behavioral changes in rural households.

Smartphones in Family Communication

Smartphone use by members in a family has changed the dynamics of family communication to a larger extent. Parents, children, elder people, and long distant relatives can connect frequently with one another with the help of smartphones. New family connections are being made possible by technology, and these

connections center around online communities and distant phone conversations (Kennedy, et al., 2008). Family members who are separated by distance communicate frequently and in a variety of ways to keep their bonds strong (Barakji, et al., 2019). Constant connectivity boosts the mental health of individuals enabling family bonding and closeness. Parents state they rely on phones more to be connected with the children and spouse when they are away from home. However, when individuals in families spend more time with the gadgets their family connectivity is disturbed.

Children and Smartphones

Parents, teachers, physicians, psychiatric professionals, and lawmakers have all expressed constant concern over children's usage of screens (Sinha & Patra, 2021). From an early age, kids become accustomed to a variety of online activities like quick social interactions, continual contact with their family and friends, accessibility to information on the Internet, online games, and so on (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2017). Baby sitters find smartphones as the immediate solution to engage or divert kids during feeding food. Children are exposed to smartphones even below one year of age by means of video calls, cartoons, and gaming apps. Similarly, college going students in India, below the age of eighteen are found to be using more of digital gadgets compared to traditional media platforms (Bathran, 2021). According to OECD (2017) report, in 2015 a typical 15-year-old reported using internet from the age 10 and spent minimum two hours online on weekdays and more than three hours on weekend days. However, children's use of digital gadgets beyond a certain age is unavoidable as well as required for their development. Navigating the digital spaces with adequate knowledge and security can contribute to the development of young

people. Parents digital media mediation should be able to involve children in deciding their digital media engagement in a meaningful way.

Problematic Use of Smartphones

Velthoven, et al., (2018) outlined the growing public health risk of inappropriate smartphone use, which has an impact on a large and growing number of people. A study by Matthes, et al., (2021), explains the conflict between parent's own smartphone use and parental regulation of children's smartphone use. Problematic use of smartphones involves excessive use for prolonged hours on a regular basis. According to research, the addictive behavior of smartphone users essentially causes the negative emotional effects of using smartphones, like anxiety and sadness (Andreassen et al., 2016). Concern over how technology affects children's minds, bodies, and their socioemotional, cognitive, and physical development has increased as children's usage of technology has increased OECD (2019). Research on smartphone use by parents shows that they are also found to engage with smartphones for prolonged hours causing interference with their parenting duties (Kushlev & Dunn, 2018). However, the parents are concerned of their children's smartphone use and related behavioral changes as well.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to identify the parents' concerns on their children's smartphone use in rural families. Also, it further tries to identify the smartphone induced behavioral changes perceived by parents in their children. It tries to understand if the hours of smartphone use by parents influence their children's smartphone use and related behavioral changes.

2. Method and Participants

The data was collected from either one of the parents who are using smartphones in rural households in Tenkasi district in Tamil Nadu, India. The criteria to select the parents is that they should have a minimum of one child above the age of 3 and below 18 years. The average age of the parents is 36.98 and that of the children is 12.35. A total of 250 participated in the household survey, with 44% male and 56% female respondents. This includes 56.4% from nuclear families and 43.6% from joint families. Since the study deals with the parent's concerns and perceptions of their children's smartphone use, data is collected from only parents.

Findings

Parents' Concerns on Children's Smartphone Usage

Table 1

Parents' Concerns on Children's Smartphone Usage	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The choice of apps and games concerns us	250	3.69	1.600
Children play online games sitting in one place without physical activities	250	3.39	1.603
They download apps and games on their own	250	3.31	1.709
Children use smartphones without elders' supervision	250	3.22	1.693
Children talk/SMS/chat with their friends	250	3.22	1.654

Table.1., shows the mean values on parents' concerns on their children's

smartphone usage. It is found that the construct 'The choice of apps and games

used by children', concerns the parents more with a mean value (μ) = 3.69 followed by the construct, 'Children play online games sitting in one place without any physical activities' with a mean value (μ) = 3.39. All the constructs have mean value equal to or above mean value (μ) = 3.22 which signifies that the parents are concerned over their children's smartphone usage.

Hours of Smartphone Use by Parents and their Concerns on Children's Smartphone Usage

Parents use of smartphones may or maynot be related to the concerns on their children's smartphone use. The related hypothesis testing is done as follows,

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant association between hours of smartphone use by parents and their concerns on their children's smartphone usage

ANOVA table

Table 2

Parent's Smartphone Usage in hours per day	Mean	Standard Deviation	'F' value	p value
½- 1 hour	15.99	6.881	1.602	0.160
1-2 hours	17.63	6.821		
2-3 hours	16.70	6.349		
3-4 hours	14.90	6.995		
4-5 hours	19.20	5.207		
Above 5 hours	18.88	6.771		

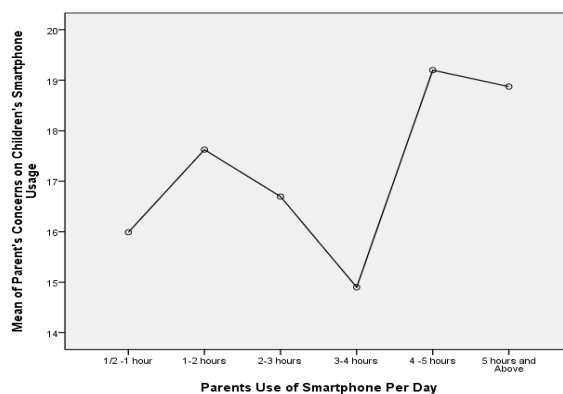


Figure 1

Table 2., shows that P value is greater than 0.01, $p=0.160$, and $F=1.602$, so, the null hypothesis is accepted, so there is no significant association between hours of smartphone use by parents and their concerns on their children's smartphone usage. Hence, there is a significant finding

that parents' smartphone usage hours do not impact parents and their concerns on their children's smartphone usage. Therefore, the concerns of parents about their children's smartphone usage are found to be independent of the hours parents spend on smartphones. They

hardly relate that when they have long hours of smartphone duration it can affect their children's usage.

Number of Children in the Family and Parental Concern's on their Children's Smartphone Use

Table 3

Number of Children in the Family	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
One Child	52	15.62	7.168
Two Children	160	16.99	6.423
Three and above children	38	17.89	7.101
Total	250	16.83	6.698

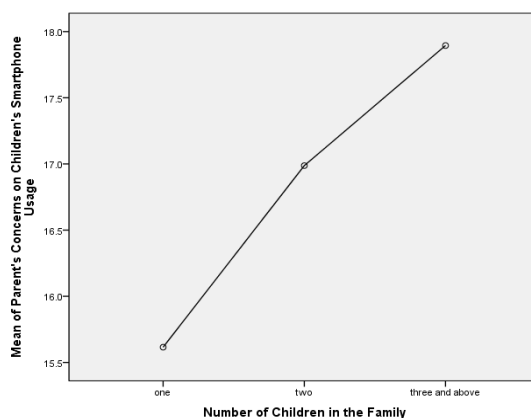


Figure 2

As the number of children increase in a family, the parents' concerns on their children's smartphone usage if found to increase in the given study. Figure 2, illustrates that parent with more number of

children are more concerned of their children's phone usage.

Smartphone induced Behavioral Changes Observed by Parents in their Children

Table 4

Smartphone induced Behavioural Changes Observed by Parents in their Children	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
My children access phones as soon as they wake up	250	3.57	1.649
Children fight among themselves for one phone	250	3.53	1.641
My children Sleep late at night due to phone usage	250	3.49	1.687
Children fight with us if we do not give the phone	250	3.33	1.671
If the phone is not given, they will not eat or study	250	3.21	1.692

Table.4., shows the mean values on the behavioural changes observed by parents based on their children's smartphone use.

It is found that the construct 'My children access phones as soon as they wake up', concerns the parents more with a mean

value (μ) = 3.57 followed by the construct, 'Children fight among themselves for one phone' with a mean value of mean value (μ) = 3.53. All the constructs have mean value (μ) \geq 3.21, which signifies that there exists a higher level of agreement among the parents on the behavioural changes observed due to their children's smartphone use. However, parents use of smartphones may or maynot be related to the behavioural changes observed by parents based on their children's

smartphone use. The related hypothesis testing is done as follows,

Hours of Smartphone Use by Parents and Smartphone Induced Behavioral Changes in Children

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant association between hours of smartphone use by parents and smartphone induced behavioural changes observed by parents in their children

ANOVA table

Table 5

Parent's Smartphone Usage in hours per day	Mean	Standard Deviation	'F' value	p value
½- 1 hour	15.92	6.887	1.960	0.085
1-2 hours	18.13	7.048		
2-3 hours	16.54	6.517		
3-4 hours	16.90	7.853		
4-5 hours	20.60	5.394		
Above 5 hours	18.13	7.464		

Since P value is greater than 0.01, $p=0.085$, and $F=1.960$, the null hypothesis is accepted, so there is no significant association between hours of smartphone use by parents and smartphone induced behavioural changes observed in their

children. Hence, there is a significant finding that parents' smartphone usage hours do not impact their perception on their children's smartphone induced behavioural change.

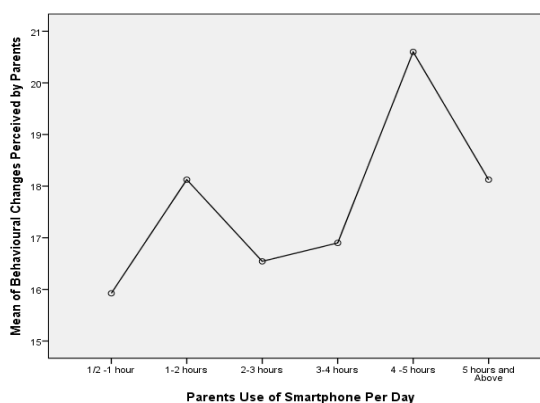


Figure 3

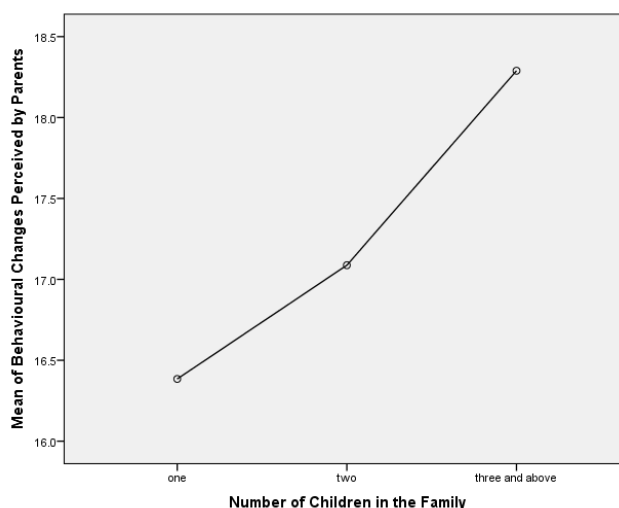
Parental Concern's on their Children's Smartphone Use Increases with the Number of Children in the Family

Table 6

Number of Children in the Family	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
One Child	52	16.38	7.190
Two Children	160	17.09	6.916
Three and above children	38	18.29	6.702
Total	250	17.12	6.937

As the number of children increase in a family, the parents' perceptions on the smartphone induced behavioral changes in their children increases. Figure, illustrates

that parent with more number of children perceive more about the smartphone induced behavioral changes in their children.



3. Conclusion

Digital parenting is challenging in a rural region with higher levels of the digital divide. Parents are hardly aware of the harms of problematic smartphone use from a technological and content perspective. However, they are aware of the physical consequences excess usage and addictive smartphone use can do on their children. Technologies become problematic when used inappropriately, however, informed and appropriate use of technology can foster better development and ease of life.

Solutions to overcome the problems caused by technology have always been available to address technology-mediated problems. Similarly, to overcome the problematic use of smartphones, several mechanisms and security solutions are provided. Concerning child-safe technology use, the availability of parental control provisions on devices and internet portals is advised to provide children safety. Co-sharing the screen media by watching/using the content together and having family time for screen media use has been suggested as a better solution in

screen media use guidelines. (Sinha & Patra, 2021). In the given rural context, digital literacy in rural regions is primary to mediate the effects of digital media use by bothered parents and children.

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