Influence of smartphone addiction proneness of young children on problematic behaviors and emotional intelligence: Mediating self-assessment effects of parents using smartphones

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1. Introduction

The smartphone is convenient to carry and provides not only voice communication, but also information management and various multimedia functions that are no longer limited to specific occupations or classes. Since the launch of the Apple iPhone in June 2007, the smartphone has been widely used by approximately three billion people to date. The number of smartphone users in 2020 is estimated to reach 6.1 billion people, which comprises almost 70% of the global population (Ericsson-LG, 2015, p. 6). In addition, the proliferation of smartphone use has led to new industries of application development and mobile marketing. As a creative business model, it is invigorating the overall global industry, which has recently been depressed (Chung, 2014, p. 106). Furthermore, the function, design, and various cost aspects of smartphones have become increasingly more customer-oriented such that their practical applications in daily life are expected to even further expand.

Nevertheless, despite the above advancements of smartphones, their detrimental effects are becoming ever more apparent. The related addiction phenomena and side effects have become significant social problems. Smartphone addictions present with direct symptoms of psychological anxiety, communication avoidance, weakening of social adaptations, and withdrawal symptoms that are similar to those of drug or alcohol addiction (Kim, 2013, p. 2). Moreover, smartphone addiction is often a factor in the exacerbation of Internet or online-gaming addictions because of its ease of use. Because smartphones can be frequently used, the related addiction is not easy to control. The addiction symptoms are serious because they are observed not only in adults, but also in adolescents and even elementary school students. According to the
Internet addiction research results conducted in 2013 by the National Information Society Agency, the risk level of smartphone addiction in adolescents is 25.5%, which is higher than the 8.9% risk level for adults. This shows that the addiction level of adolescents is much more severe than in adults. This level has shown a sharp increase each year: 11.4% in 2011, 18.4% in 2012, and 25.5% in 2012 (Korea Information Security Agency, 2013, pp. 117–118). Minors are more likely to have stronger addiction symptoms on account of their weak self-control abilities resulting from their immature self-identities (Park & Baik, 2014, p. 38). The addiction may inhibit their physical and emotional growth (Kim & Park, 2014, p. 434). Moreover, these harmful effects can have a significant influence on peers. Thus, multilateral social actions are imperative.

However, multilateral actions against smartphone addictions in youths have been focused on school-age children. Research and analysis of smartphone usage and addiction in preschoolers who are not influenced by institutional/school actions remain insignificant. As mentioned, most of the parents of these children are using smartphones. The scenario has increased of parents exposing their children to smartphones as a convenience of distraction to relieve parental emotional and physical exhaustion. Because children have less physical and mental maturity, the negative effects of this smartphone use can greatly influence them, and managerial considerations are needed. Despite such circumstances, research relating to smartphone addiction in young children is limited to specific ages or remains in the early stages of analyzing only parental and problematic behaviors (Lim & Kim, 2014; Na, 2013; Yim, Kim, & Hong, 2014).

Based on the above issues, the present research is intended to verify smartphone addiction of young children and determine whether differences statistically exist in addiction traits of the parents’ and children’s smartphone usage tendencies. We further examine whether smartphone addiction in young children is related to problematic behaviors or emotional intelligence. Accordingly, we then verify whether parental self-evaluation of smartphone usage has mediating effects. The self-evaluation of parental smartphone usage is assumed to have a mediating effect because children cannot have access to smartphones on their own, and the parental smartphone usage habits are likely to be reflected by the children. Therefore, parental self-evaluation is likely to have significant effects on the children’s smartphone addictions. Through the aforementioned process and its results, this research provides information on smartphone addiction of young children, which has not yet been actively researched. These results can be utilized as basic educational and sociological material to address smartphone utilization by young children.

2. Method of analysis

2.1. Related works

Studies on the addictive effects of smartphones targeting all age groups have been conducted. These studies have investigated the effects on minors rather than adults. Keum (2013) reported that the addictive tendency of Korean middle and high school students for smartphones directly influences various behavioral problems, such as depression, anxiety, impulsivity, and aggression, which can lead to serious social problems. Lee (2007) investigated the causal relationship of excessive use of smartphones by Korean teenagers resulting in problems of delinquency, aggression, and attention concentration. Lee (2013) confirmed the fact that smartphone addiction of some Korean elementary school students can result in serious mental health problems, such as social maladjustment. Derakhshani and Shirazi (2015) confirmed that smartphone addiction is closely related with the ability to control emotions among high school students in India. Bian and Leung (2015) proved the influence of the attitudes of ignoring harmfulness, obsession, lack of self-control, and anxiety when they analyzed the cause of smartphone addiction of Chinese college students. Kibona and Mgaya (2015) proved that the serious addiction of students in Tanzania has a direct relationship with their academic achievement.

2.2. Variable setting

The following variables were employed in this study for analysis purposes:

2.2.1. Smartphone addiction proneness of young children

The ages of the children in this study ranged from one to six years (i.e., children who do not yet attend elementary school). Seven-year-old children not yet admitted to elementary school were included as well; the resistance of the institutional space to smartphone usage could be gauged accordingly. An addiction tendency refers to the extent of using smartphones repeatedly without being separated from the device. These tendencies are comprised of traits of life disorders (cannot effectively manage daily life on account of smartphone usage), virtual-world orientation (being more satisfied with the virtual space within the smartphone than real-life activities), withdrawal symptoms (anxiety and nervousness arising from being unable to use the smartphone), and tolerance-building (an increase in the time spent using smartphones) (Moon & Choi, 2015, p. 265). The measurements of the variables were conducted through 18 questions that considered the Addiction Measurement Tools of Measuring Smartphone Addiction of Children-Adolescents of the Korea Network Information Center (Shin, Kim, & Jung, 2011). The questions measured the addiction tendencies of infants in the research of Jo and Hwang (2014).

2.2.2. Problematic behaviors and emotional intelligence

The problematic behaviors of children refer to behaviors that are uncustomary and deviant in terms of general social norms and ethics. It includes behaviors that harm not only the performer but also those around him/her (Strain & Hemmeter, 1997, p. 2). These behaviors include not only the maladjustment to socialization, but also the lack of will to address these problems, the resulting personalities, and the deterrence of emotional development (Hong & Moon, 2013, p. 246). Because they are linked to personality traits, they are multifaceted. Therefore, although it is difficult to unilaterally summarize problematic behaviors, they are expressed as aggression, hyperactivity, lying, kleptomania, bullying, withdrawn behavior, loneliness, depression, and fear (Kim, 2014, p. 139). If proper actions are not taken, the behavior frequency increases and will likely lead to anti-social personality disorders in adolescent and adult ages. It thus requires early action (Jokela, Power, & Kivimaki, 2009; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002; Sourander & Helstela, 2005; Stormont, Becker, Mitchell, & Richter, 2005).

The measurement of the variables was conducted through 30 questions that referenced the Korea Personality Inventory for Children (K-PIC) and Preschooler Behavior Questionnaire (PBQ) of Behar and Stringfield (1974). The emotional intelligence of children refers to the accurate realization and evaluation of one’s own emotions and others’ emotions, and the expressing and controlling of one’s own emotions in a proper way (Mayer & Salovey, 1996). Children with high emotional intelligence demonstrate human relationships with integrity and minimal aggression. They are much more popular through social actions and also show high academic achievements, problem-solving abilities, and creativity (Casey & Schlissor, 1994; Cha, 2003; Eisenberg, Fabers, & Losoya, 1997). The measurement of this variable was conducted through 31
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