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Research article

Effect of parental neglect on smartphone addiction in adolescents in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the importance of the relationships with parents, peers, and teachers as a cause of adolescents' smartphone addiction, and to examine the effect of parental neglect on smartphone addiction and the mediating effect of relational maladjustment in school, especially focusing on the relational maladjustment with peers and teachers. For this purpose, a survey was conducted of students from middle schools and high schools in four regions of South Korea. A total of 1170 middle-school students who reported using smartphone took part in this study. A multiple mediator model was analyzed using the bootstrapping mediation methods. Parental neglect was significantly associated with adolescents' smartphone addiction. Furthermore, in the relationship between parental neglect and smartphone addiction, parental neglect was not significantly associated with the relational maladjustment with peers, whereas the relational maladjustment with peers negatively influenced smartphone addiction. On the other hand, the relational maladjustment with teachers had a partial mediation effect between parental neglect and smartphone addiction. Based on the results of this study, some implications are suggested that include the need for (1) a customized program for adolescents who use smartphones addictively, (2) a family therapy program to strengthen family function, (3) an integrated case-management system to prevent the reoccurrence of parental neglect, (4) a program to improve relationships with teachers, and (5) expanding the leisure activity infrastructure to improve relationships with friends off-line.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the excessive use of smartphones has been gaining attention in Korea due to possible psychological, physiological, and behavioral problems. Especially in adolescents, the addictive use of, or excessive reliance on, smartphones are signs of depression, anxiety, aggressiveness, intimidation, a deficit of attention, and a negative self-concept (Block, 2008; Kim & Hwang, 2015, 2016; Shin & Baek, 2013; You, 2014). It is noticeable that these phenomena continue later in life (Kim, 2013; Thapar, Collishaw, Pine, & Thapar, 2012; Trzesniewski et al., 2006; Woodward & Fergusson, 2001). Despite the negative aspects of excessive smartphone use, the smartphone usage rate by adolescents has sharply increased from 12.3% in 2011–84.1% in 2014, with a continuous increase in an addiction risk group of adolescents after the initial survey in 2011, from 11.4% in 2011–29.2% in 2014. This rate is about 2.5 times higher than that for the adult risk group in 2014 (Ministry of Science, 2015).

Regarding the fact that smartphone communications are also based on human relationships (Han & Oh, 2006), it is important to

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note the relational aspects of others when dealing with smartphone addiction issues. Relationships within the family and school environment are core factors leading to smartphone addiction in adolescents. In family violence studies (Chang & Yang, 2007; Kim, 2014a, 2014b; Kim & Cho, 2007; You, 2014), youths with experience of physical abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect are more likely to experience adverse psychological outcomes including depression, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal, consequently resulting in smartphone addiction.

Most previous research studies have validated that all types of child maltreatment including physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect affect media addiction, such as Internet addiction, Internet game addiction, and cell phone addiction (Kim, 2001; Kim & Cho, 2007; Pyo & Kim, 2012; Woo, 2013). However, studies of the effect of parental neglect on smartphone addiction are very rare. An attitude of parental neglect toward child-rearing increases children's depression, and they use smartphones addictively as a means of solving their depression (Choi & Kim, 2013). Thus, parental neglect can affect smartphone addiction directly, or it can mediate the psychological variables that create negative emotions (Jang & Yang, 2015).

Neglect is not the only form of abuse by parents; another form is the absence of a positive relationship, creating a gap in communication. In South Korea, the prevalence of overlapping forms of abuse is 48%, and the prevalence of neglect itself is 18.6%, demonstrating the severity of neglect as a single abusive pattern (Ministry of Health & Welfare, 2015). In relapsing abuse, neglect has a higher prevalence (22.5%), indicating that the relapsing rate is also highest with neglect. This implies the need for prevention and protection not only against physical or emotional abuse but also against neglect, which itself has been a neglected field of study in our society.

The existing literature has demonstrated that parental neglect impedes adolescent development in a variety of aspects. Neglected children suffer from psychological problems, including depression and anxiety (Kim, 2015; Kim & Choi, 2012; Park, 2014) as well as school adjustment problems (An, Son, & Nam, 2014; Emery & Yang, 2015; Kim, Yim, & Chung, 2014). Specifically, a prior history of parental physical abuse affects development in adolescence, causing psychosocial maladjustment (Kim & Yang, 1998; Lee and Yang, 2015; Park & Chung, 2012). Having maladjustment problems leads to adolescents spending more time on the Internet, using the virtual space as a means of avoiding interpersonal conflicts, and they are eventually more likely to be addicted to the Internet, games, and smartphones (Chang & Yang, 2015; Choi & Kim, 2013; Kim & Cho, 2007; Kim, Lee, & Yoon, 2011).

In addition, relationships with peers and teachers affect adolescents' emotional and social development. However, previous studies have found inconsistent outcomes regarding peer influence on smartphone addiction, with increased smartphone use following positive and negative peer relationships (Kim & Hong, 2014; Lee, Lee, & Shin, 2009; Sung, 2008). Positive relationships with teachers are reflected in lowered smartphone addiction (Jeong, 2015; Roh, 2013), whereas negative relationships are related to a higher dependency on smartphones (Chang, Song, & Cho, 2011).

There has been limited research examining the impact of the school environment on smartphone addiction. Previous studies have put more effort into investigating the relationships with peers and teachers as one of the criteria of school adjustment. The lack of consideration of the interpersonal relationships within the school has been a limitation of previous studies. Based on the understanding of ecological perspectives, including the familial and school environment, studies need to focus on examining the impact of an adverse environment, including relational problems and lack of conversation, on the manifestation of smartphone addiction.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants were 2182 adolescents from the first grade in middle school to the second year in high school. The study was conducted in four regions in South Korea, including Seoul and the metropolitan area, Chungcheong district, Jeonla district, and Gyeongsang district. The purposive sampling method was used to select a total of eight middle schools and five high schools. Participants completed a self-administered questionnaire. A total of 2182 participants provided data (age range: 14–19 years), including 1292 middle-school students and 890 high-school students. Considering the significance of the higher smartphone addiction rate in the early age groups and the importance of early intervention (Hur, 2006; Lee & Kwon, 2014; Ministry of Science, 2015), 1170 middle-school students who reported using smartphone were included in the final analysis. The written informed consent of the participants in the study was obtained from their parents, and the adolescents after the nature of the study were fully explained. All current analysis were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Yonsei University (1040917-201411-HRBR-257-03).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Dependent variable

2.2.1.1. Smartphone addiction. Smartphone addiction was assessed using 20 items taken from the modified version of Internet Addiction Test (Young, 1998). The items asked whether participants have difficulties in daily life such as tolerance of withdrawal due to smartphone overuse. Participants completed a self-administered questionnaire about their smartphone overuse patterns. A higher score indicates the higher level of addiction which causes problems with smartphone usage. On the basis of the total score obtained in the test, the individual is placed into one of three categories: 1) an average smartphone user (score from 20 to 39) who has full control of his or her usage, 2) a user who experiences frequent problems because of excessive smartphone use (score from 40 to 69), and 3) a user who has significant problems because of smartphone use (score from 70 to 100). From the summed score, the mean score was used. The reliability of the questionnaire, regarding internal consistency, was computed using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = 0.921$).

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