

SMART PHONE ADDICTION AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN OYO STATE, NIGERIA: NEED FOR COUNSELLING THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES

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Abstract

Smartphone addiction has become an increasingly pressing issue among university students globally, with undergraduates in Oyo State, Nigeria, exhibiting similar patterns of excessive smartphone use. The proliferation of mobile technologies and social media platforms has contributed to maladaptive behaviours that negatively impact students' academic performance, mental health, and social relationships. This paper investigates the growing concern of smartphone addiction among undergraduate populations in Oyo State and emphasises the urgent need for effective psychological interventions. The primary aim of this paper is to explore and recommend counselling therapeutic approaches that can help mitigate smartphone addiction and promote healthier technology usage among students. Employing a narrative literature review method, this research synthesises findings from empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and global counselling practices to comprehensively understand the issue. Findings from the literature reveal that multiple factors, including psychological stress, low self-esteem, peer influence, and the constant availability of mobile applications, influence smartphone addiction. The review identifies counselling strategies such as Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET), Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), Mindfulness-Based Interventions, and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) as practical therapeutic approaches. The paper concluded that the importance of integrating evidence-based counselling methods into institutional support systems lies in addressing smartphone addiction. The paper contributes to the growing discourse on digital wellness. It offers a framework for educators, counsellors, and policymakers seeking to promote mental health and academic success among undergraduates in Nigeria.

Keywords: Smartphone Addiction, Undergraduate Students, Counselling Therapeutic Approaches, Behavioural Intervention

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, smartphones have become an integral part of modern life, offering unprecedented connectivity, convenience, access to information, and entertainment. While these devices have revolutionised communication and digital interaction, their ubiquity has also raised concerns about problematic usage patterns, particularly among youth. The smartphone, characterised by high-resolution touchscreens, wireless internet connectivity, web browsing, and multifunctional applications (Ugwu et al., 2022), has been widely embraced since its emergence around 2000. By 2020, an estimated 6 billion people globally used smartphones, with young people comprising a significant proportion of this demographic (Ratan et al., 2022). In Nigeria, smartphone penetration has grown steadily; Pew Research Centre reported that 28% of adults owned smartphones, while the Nigerian Communication Commission documented over 112 million internet users by that same year (Irielle, 2024). According to Nwachukwu and

Onyenankeya (2017), between 25 and 85 million Nigerian smartphone users spend an average of approximately three hours daily using their smartphones. This surge in smartphone use has heightened concerns about addiction, defined as the excessive and compulsive engagement with smartphones that interferes with daily functioning and social relationships (Nawaz, 2023). The diverse functionalities of smartphones—ranging from social media and gaming to video streaming and online communication—have embedded them deeply into the lives of university students (Kim et al., 2016; Vorderer et al., 2016). Undergraduates, in particular, are vulnerable due to their frequent use of smartphones for academic and recreational purposes. Immersing in digital spaces increasingly replaces face-to-face interactions, with significant implications for mental health and academic performance.

The appeal of smartphones lies in their versatility and user-centred design, which promotes constant engagement and instant gratification (Li, 2024). As students rely on these devices for entertainment, social validation, and academic convenience, the line between habitual use and behavioural dependency often becomes blurred. Contributing factors to this addiction include internal predispositions (e.g., low self-esteem, stress), external stimuli (e.g., app design), and social dynamics such as peer influence and cultural norms (Elavarasan et al., 2018). Furthermore, the content accessible through smartphones—especially social networking platforms and explicit media—raises additional concerns. Mills (2016) notes that students frequently engage in messaging, browsing, and media consumption, potentially leading to cognitive and social impairments. This paper is grounded in the hypothesis that variables such as gender, self-esteem, and smartphone model may influence levels of addiction and app craving behaviours among students. Observations suggesting that male students use smartphone apps more intensively than their female counterparts prompt critical inquiries into such behaviours' academic and psychosocial impacts. Against this backdrop, the present paper investigates the rising prevalence of smartphone addiction among undergraduates in Oyo State, Nigeria. It further proposes counselling therapeutic interventions—such as Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET), and others—as viable strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of smartphone overuse and foster healthier, more balanced technology habits among students.

A growing body of empirical research has examined the implications of smartphone use on academic performance, social behaviour, and psychological well-being among students. Muhammed (2016) investigates the influence of mobile phone usage on academic performance concerning gender, age, and phone type. The paper found that these demographic variables had statistically significant effects on academic outcomes, with nuanced differences across gender and interactional behaviours. Similarly, Van Deursen et al. (2015) conducted a conceptual review focusing on the influence of age, gender, and phone type on smartphone craving behaviour. The findings emphasised that younger users, especially students, are disproportionately affected by the addictive potential of smartphones, often prioritising non-academic applications such as social media over academic tasks. It concluded that smartphone addiction is a growing concern within Nigerian higher education, contributing to diminished academic performance, reduced library usage, and compromised reading habits. Nehra et al. (2012) further explored the behavioural manifestations of mobile phone overuse, particularly among adolescents and young adults. The identified key addiction symptoms—such as preoccupation, withdrawal, and mood modification—result from excessive engagement with applications like video streaming, social networking, and texting. It reinforced the view that smartphone addiction not only disrupts academic focus but also serves as a form of psychological escapism.

Ahmed (2019) highlighted Generation Z as the most active demographic in smartphone usage, with a significant portion of their daily routines centred around mobile interactions, primarily through platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. The author noted that smartphones can be practical educational tools when integrated appropriately, but their mismanagement often leads to poor academic outcomes, distractions, and cognitive overload. While these studies have significantly advanced understanding of smartphone addiction in diverse contexts, most existing research tends to concentrate on the relationship between smartphone usage and academic performance, with limited attention to structured psychological interventions for addressing addiction. More importantly, there remains a notable gap in the literature that specifically focuses on the counselling therapeutic approaches to mitigate smartphone addiction among Nigerian undergraduates, particularly within the cultural and socio-academic context of Oyo State. This paper addresses that gap by offering a comprehensive conceptual analysis of smartphone addiction through the lens of counselling psychology. By synthesizing global evidence and local realities, this research introduces a novel focus on the application of evidence-based therapeutic models—such as Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET), Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)—as practical interventions for reducing smartphone dependency among undergraduates. Thus, the novelty and contribution of this paper lie in its integration of counselling-based solutions into the discourse on smartphone addiction, positioning it as a pioneering conceptual framework in the Nigerian context where such approaches remain underexplored.

RESEARCH METHOD

The paper employs a conceptual research approach based on a thorough literature review. The methodology is designed to investigate smartphone addiction among undergraduate students in Oyo State, Nigeria, and to assess the relevance and efficacy of counselling therapeutic approaches in addressing this issue. The paper uses a narrative literature review design to synthesise various theoretical, empirical, and clinical perspectives on smartphone addiction and therapeutic counselling strategies. This design allows the researcher to situate findings within global and Nigerian contexts, providing an interpretive analysis instead of statistical generalisations. The review utilises peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, dissertations, and credible organisational reports about smartphone addiction, encompassing its prevalence, causes, and consequences. It is essential to examine the behavioural patterns of youth and undergraduates in their technology use. Additionally, therapeutic counselling approaches for addressing behavioural and substance-related addictions warrant discussion. The databases utilised in this research comprise Google Scholar, PubMed, ERIC, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and various institutional repositories. The selected literature ranges from 2010 to 2024, encompassing foundational theories and recent advancements. Research concentrating on university or undergraduate student demographics. This conceptual paper, relying exclusively on secondary sources, did not necessitate ethical clearance or participant consent. Due diligence was exercised in recognising all sources via appropriate citation and referencing, thereby upholding academic integrity throughout the review process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Factors Contributing to Smartphone Addiction

Smartphone addiction is a complex behavioural phenomenon influenced by interrelated individual, psychological, social, and environmental factors. Understanding

these contributing variables is essential for designing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

- **Individual Factors:** Personal characteristics significantly influence vulnerability to smartphone addiction. Traits such as impulsivity, sensation-seeking, low self-control, and neuroticism have been consistently associated with problematic smartphone use. Individuals experiencing loneliness or emotional instability often turn to smartphones for distraction and emotional regulation.
- **Psychological Factors:** Mental health conditions—including depression, anxiety, and chronic stress—serve as key predictors of smartphone dependency. For many individuals, smartphones function as maladaptive coping tools. Low self-esteem and poor emotional regulation further impair users' ability to manage their usage patterns effectively.
- **Social Factors:** Social contexts are critical in reinforcing addictive behaviours. Peer pressure, group norms, and familial modelling significantly influence usage patterns. In peer groups where constant smartphone engagement is normalised, individuals may feel compelled to remain digitally connected to sustain social belonging and relevance.
- **Environmental Factors:** The widespread availability of smartphones and the persuasive design of mobile applications significantly contribute to compulsive use. Features such as algorithmic feeds, instant notifications, and gamification strategies are engineered to maximise user attention and engagement. Social media platforms intensify usage by serving as digital hubs for communication, self-expression, and validation.

Prevalence of Smartphone Addiction among Undergraduates in Oyo State

A convergence of psychosocial, academic, and technological factors underpins the prevalence of smartphone addiction among undergraduates in Oyo State. Recent studies suggest that the behavioural patterns of young adults, particularly university students, are increasingly shaped by their digital environments, with smartphone use becoming both a tool for academic engagement and a source of compulsive distraction (Akeusola, 2023; Alli et al., 2022).

Peer Influence: Social norms within university communities significantly influence students' smartphone habits. The pressure to maintain constant connectivity with peers often reinforces excessive smartphone use, especially in environments where digital engagement is perceived as a measure of social inclusion or relevance (Alli et al., 2022; Oyinlola, 2022).

Social Media Engagement: The omnipresence of social media applications—such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok—on smartphones encourages habitual and compulsive use. Features such as instant notifications and algorithm-driven content amplify engagement, reinforcing behavioural dependency and diminishing impulse control (Mustapha, 2024).

Academic Stress: The academic demands placed on undergraduates often contribute to smartphone overuse. Fandinga (2023) revealed that students turn to smartphones as a form of psychological escape or procrastination in response to stress, coursework pressure, and information overload, which may inadvertently reinforce addiction cycles.

Accessibility and Affordability: The increasing affordability of smartphones and internet access in Oyo State has lowered entry barriers for constant connectivity. While this has educational benefits, it facilitates continuous engagement, a known risk factor for problematic use.

The implications of this trend are substantial. Excessive smartphone use has been associated with cognitive overload, reduced academic performance, and psychological disturbances, including anxiety, loneliness, and depressive symptoms (Wacks & Weinstein, 2021; Pera, 2020). Furthermore, prolonged use often displaces meaningful face-to-face interactions, undermining students' social development and emotional well-being. In light of these findings, addressing smartphone addiction among Oyo State undergraduates is necessary and urgent. Targeted interventions—particularly those grounded in counselling psychology—are essential to safeguarding academic success, mental health, and holistic student development.

Consequences of Smartphone Addiction among Undergraduates in Oyo State

Smartphone addiction poses significant challenges to the academic, psychological, and social development of undergraduate students in Oyo State. As mobile technology becomes increasingly embedded in daily life, its excessive and unregulated use among students has led to adverse outcomes within the academic environment and beyond.

1. **Academic Disruption:** Excessive smartphone use undermines students' ability to manage time effectively and sustain academic focus. The constant influx of notifications, entertainment apps, and social media interactions leads to poor study habits, procrastination, and academic disengagement. These behaviours have been shown to correlate with reduced academic performance and difficulty meeting academic expectations in Nigerian university contexts (Ambe et al., 2024; Akinnubi et al., 2024).
2. **Cognitive and Learning Impairment:** The overstimulation caused by frequent app-switching and digital multitasking affects attention span and cognitive processing. This often results in students struggling to retain academic content, missing deadlines, and underperforming in assessments, which can compromise long-term educational and career outcomes (Sholes et al., 2023).
3. **Mental Health Implications:** Prolonged screen time contributes to emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances, and heightened levels of anxiety and depression. Students in Oyo State who rely heavily on smartphones often feel isolated and disconnected from their immediate social environment, particularly when digital interactions replace in-person communication (Oyoo et al., 2024).
4. **Erosion of Social Relationships:** Excessive smartphone use can deteriorate interpersonal relationships, as students prioritise virtual engagement over physical interaction. This phenomenon is particularly evident in campus environments where digital presence often supersedes participation in real-life peer networks, family life, and romantic relationships.
5. **Decline in Campus Engagement:** Smartphone addiction reduces student participation in extracurricular activities, leadership programs, and community-building events vital for holistic development. Limited involvement in such activities restricts students' opportunities for personal growth, networking, and social integration within the university system (Senci et al., 2022).

In the context of Oyo State—where many institutions actively strive to promote academic excellence and character development—these consequences underscore the urgent need for institutional awareness and intervention strategies. Without targeted support, undergraduates' long-term educational and psychosocial development may be significantly compromised.

Practical Considerations in Addiction Counselling

Addressing smartphone addiction through counselling requires an evidence-based, ethically sound, and contextually grounded approach. Unlike substance-based addictions, smartphone addiction falls within the category of behavioural addictions, characterised by compulsive engagement in rewarding non-substance-related behaviours despite adverse consequences (Ramakrishnan et al., 2023). Effective counselling for such behavioural issues, particularly among undergraduates in regions like Oyo State, Nigeria, necessitates careful consideration of both clinical practice and sociocultural realities. Counsellors employ a variety of evidence-based interventions designed to target maladaptive cognitions, behavioural reinforcement patterns, and emotional dysregulation that contribute to smartphone overuse. Among the most widely used approaches is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which assists clients in identifying and restructuring distorted thinking patterns and promoting healthier behavioural choices (Wenzel, 2017). CBT is particularly effective for technology-related addictions by helping individuals build impulse control and develop alternative coping strategies (Aziz et al., 2020). Motivational Interviewing (MI) is another effective technique, beneficial among young adults who may not initially recognise the extent of their addiction. This client-centred approach resolves ambivalence and enhances intrinsic motivation for change (Csillik, 2015). In smartphone addiction, MI supports individuals in evaluating the pros and cons of their device use and setting personal goals for behavioural adjustment. Solution-focused brief Therapy (SFBT) and Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) also offer valuable therapeutic avenues. SFBT emphasises client strengths and past successes, fostering hope and rapid problem-solving (Joubert & Guse, 2021). MBIs improve present-moment awareness and reduce impulsivity, which are critical for managing technology overuse (Thomas et al., 2025).

In Oyo State, Nigeria, counselling must also be attuned to sociocultural factors. Students may view smartphone use as an adaptive response to academic stress, poor infrastructure, or emotional disconnection. Thus, smartphone addiction counselling must be framed within a culturally sensitive model that respects local values, beliefs, and institutional norms (Gainsbury, 2017). Incorporating family dynamics, religious values, and peer group influence into the therapeutic process enhances the relevance and acceptance of counselling interventions. Furthermore, ethical practice in addiction counselling remains foundational. Practitioners must adhere to confidentiality, informed consent, and client autonomy, as established by professional bodies like the American Counselling Association (ACA, 2014). In Nigerian university settings, where counselling services may be limited or misunderstood, maintaining professionalism and building trust is essential to reducing stigma and increasing service utilisation (Adewale et al., 2016). The delivery of counselling must also be student-centred and developmentally appropriate. Counsellors must therefore adopt a flexible and empathetic approach, helping students explore their motivations, set realistic goals, and build resilience. Lastly, institutional support is critical. Counselling interventions are more effective when embedded within broader university systems that promote mental health, digital literacy, and academic well-being. Collaboration between counsellors, academic staff, student affairs units, and peer mentors is essential for a sustainable response to smartphone addiction on campus.

The findings of this paper reveal that academic stress, peer norms, social media engagement, and the widespread availability of smartphones significantly influence smartphone addiction among undergraduates in Oyo State. These findings underscore the need for counselling services within Nigerian universities to evolve beyond general academic or career guidance, expanding into digital wellness and behavioural health areas. The implication is twofold: Policy Implication: University administrations should institutionalise counselling programs that explicitly address digital behaviour, stress

management, and self-regulation. This may involve integrating addiction counselling modules into campus orientation programs or mental health services. Practical Implication: Counsellors must have general therapeutic skills and specialised training in behavioural addictions. This includes familiarity with digital behaviour patterns, app use psychology, and techniques for motivational enhancement among young adults.

The patterns revealed in this research align with global trends, but the local context of Oyo State uniquely shapes them. Nigerian undergraduates operate within a technologically evolving yet structurally constrained educational environment where digital connectivity often substitutes for lacking physical infrastructure, social engagement, or psychological support. Thus, smartphones become both academic tools and emotional outlets. The results also reflect low awareness and limited access to mental health services, as many students in Nigeria still experience stigma around counselling. Consequently, their over-reliance on smartphones is a matter of habit and a reflection of unmet emotional and social needs. Based on the findings, several reforms and action points are recommended:

Counselling psychology and digital health literacy should be incorporated into general education curricula to raise awareness about healthy technology use. Institutions should invest in training school and university counsellors in behavioural addiction frameworks and digital-age counselling tools. National education and mental health policies should formally recognise smartphone addiction as a behavioural health concern requiring structured interventions. Peer-led initiatives, digital detox campaigns, and student counselling clubs can help reduce stigma and promote healthier behavioural norms.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the phenomenon of smartphone addiction among undergraduate students in Oyo State, Nigeria, focusing on counseling therapeutic approaches as effective intervention strategies. Unlike prior studies that primarily emphasized the correlation between smartphone usage and academic performance, this research uniquely contributes by conceptualizing smartphone addiction through a counseling psychology lens. The study also recommends evidence-based interventions such as Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET), Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), and mindfulness-based techniques—approaches not commonly addressed in existing Nigerian literature. The study emphasizes that smartphone addiction is not merely a behavioral excess but a complex psychosocial condition requiring structured, context-sensitive interventions tailored to Nigerian undergraduates' cultural and academic realities.

To effectively address smartphone addiction among undergraduates in Oyo State, an integrative counseling framework tailored to their psychosocial and academic contexts is recommended. Various therapeutic approaches, such as CBT, MET, mindfulness-based interventions, SFBT, and REBT, should be utilized to help students manage addiction and develop healthier smartphone usage habits. Psychoeducational programs are also crucial to raise awareness about the risks of smartphone addiction and its psychological effects. By employing a more holistic approach, counselors, educators, and policymakers can collaborate to create a university environment that supports digital well-being, ultimately reducing the negative impacts of smartphone addiction among students.

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