



The Psychological Impact of Nomophobia on Young Adults: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

Nomophobia, defined as the fear or anxiety experienced when individuals are unable to access or use their smartphones, has emerged as an important psychological concern among young adults in the digital era. The increasing reliance on smartphones for communication, education, entertainment, and social networking has contributed to excessive smartphone dependence, raising concerns about its impact on mental health. This comprehensive review aims to synthesise the current evidence on the psychological consequences of nomophobia among young adults. Relevant peer-reviewed studies were critically reviewed to examine the relationship between nomophobia and anxiety, depression, stress, sleep quality, academic performance, self-esteem, loneliness, and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). The findings consistently indicate that higher levels of nomophobia are associated with greater psychological distress, poor sleep quality, reduced academic performance, and lower psychological well-being. The review also identifies psychosocial factors, including low self-esteem and FoMO, as important contributors to smartphone dependence. However, most existing studies are cross-sectional and primarily involve university students, which limits causal inference and generalizability. The review emphasizes the need for longitudinal and intervention-based research to better understand the mechanisms underlying nomophobia. Promoting digital well-being, responsible smartphone use, and early psychological interventions may help reduce the adverse psychological consequences of excessive smartphone dependence among young adults.

Keywords: Nomophobia; Smartphone Dependence; Mental Health; Anxiety; Depression; Young Adults.

1. Introduction

Smartphone technology has quickly changed how people communicate, learn, work, and connect with others. For many young adults, smartphones are essential for education, socialising,

entertainment, banking, and getting health information. Although smartphones offer many benefits, excessive use can lead to psychological problems. One major issue is nomophobia, which means feeling fear, anxiety, or discomfort when you cannot use your phone.

Nomophobia, short for No-Mobile-Phone Phobia, was first mentioned in 2008 after a survey in the United Kingdom highlighted the anxiety people experience when they do not have access to their mobile phones. Although nomophobia is not officially recognised as a psychiatric disorder in the DSM-5-TR or ICD-11, more researchers now view it as a behavioural and psychological issue connected to problematic smartphone use, technology dependence, and anxiety symptoms.

Young adulthood, usually considered to be ages 18 to 30, is a time when people form their identities, adjust to changes in school or work, build new relationships, and become more independent. Smartphones help young adults stay connected and manage their daily lives. As a result, they may depend more on their phones and be at higher risk for nomophobia. Studies show that university students often report more nomophobia than other age groups, which suggests that targeted support and intervention are needed.

Recent studies show that nomophobia is more than just being attached to your phone. People with higher levels of nomophobia often feel more anxious, stressed, or depressed. They may also have mood swings, trouble sleeping, trouble focusing, lower grades, and worse mental health overall. Using smartphones too much can make people feel isolated, worry about missing out (FoMO), spend less time with others in person, and have less self-control. Although researchers are still figuring out how these problems are connected, current studies agree that nomophobia is linked to poorer mental health in young adults.

Smartphones are now widely available, and people have been using digital technology even more since the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media platforms have also grown, raising concerns about problematic smartphone use. Recent studies from several countries, including India, show that many university students experience moderate to severe nomophobia. This issue has become a major public health concern and needs more attention from psychologists, educators, healthcare workers, and policymakers.

Despite growing research on nomophobia, evidence remains scattered across psychological outcomes, hindering a full understanding of its impact on mental health. Most studies focus on isolated issues like anxiety, depression, or stress, while few reviews synthesise these findings broadly. Therefore, a comprehensive review is needed to consolidate evidence, highlight trends, identify gaps, and propose future research directions.

The primary objective of this review is to examine the psychological impact of nomophobia among young adults by critically discussing its relationship with anxiety, depression, stress, sleep quality, academic functioning, and overall psychological well-being. In addition, this review highlights potential risk factors, protective strategies, and future research priorities for preventing and managing nomophobia in the increasingly digital era.

Definition and Concept of Nomophobia

Nomophobia, short for "*No-Mobile-Phone Phobia*," is the fear, anxiety, or discomfort people feel when they cannot use or reach their mobile phones. Although people often call it a "phobia," it does not meet the official standards for a specific phobia in psychiatric guidelines. Researchers view nomophobia as a complex psychological issue connected to problematic smartphone use, behavioural addiction, technology dependence, and anxiety symptoms.

Smartphones are now used for much more than just communication. They are important for education, work, banking, entertainment, navigation, and staying connected with others. As a result, many people feel strongly attached to their phones. When some users are separated from their devices, they may feel upset, irritable, nervous, worried about missing out, or have trouble focusing. These feelings are signs of nomophobia.

Researchers believe that nomophobia develops slowly as people become more dependent on their smartphones. Many starts using their devices too much to manage emotions, seek approval from others, and handle daily tasks. As this dependence grows, being without a smartphone can cause anxiety and discomfort, much like the withdrawal symptoms seen in other behavioural addictions.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Evolution of Research on Nomophobia

Over the past decade, digital technology and smartphones have changed how people live and interact. Today, smartphones are important in education, work, entertainment, banking, healthcare, and social networking. While these advances make life more convenient and connected, researchers are increasingly worried about people relying too much on smartphones and the psychological effects that come with it. As a result, nomophobia has become a key focus in psychological research.

Nomophobia was first described as the fear, anxiety, or discomfort people feel when they cannot use their mobile phones or stay connected. Yildirim and Correia (2015) advanced research by developing the Nomophobia Questionnaire (NMP-Q). This tool measures four main areas: being unable to communicate, losing a sense of connection, being unable to access information, and giving up convenience. The NMP-Q remains the most common and trusted instrument for studying nomophobia across cultures.

After the NMP-Q was published, research on nomophobia grew quickly in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Translated and adapted versions of the questionnaire have shown strong reliability and validity, which allows researchers compare results from different populations. This growth shows that nomophobia is seen as a global behavioural and psychological issue, not just a problem in one country or culture.

Early research focused on the prevalence of nomophobia among university students. More recent studies have looked at how nomophobia relates to anxiety, depression, stress, sleep problems, fear of missing out (FoMO), loneliness, emotional regulation, self-esteem, academic performance,

and mental health in general. As a result, nomophobia is now seen as a complex psychological issue that can affect mental health in different ways.

2.2 Prevalence of Nomophobia among Young Adults

A consistent finding in the literature is that nomophobia is especially prevalent among adolescents and young adults, particularly university students. This demographic relies extensively on smartphones for academic tasks, social networking, entertainment, online learning, financial transactions, and daily communication. Such pervasive dependence increases the risk of anxiety when smartphone access is disrupted.

International studies indicate that estimates of nomophobia prevalence vary significantly due to differences in sampling methods, cultural contexts, and definitional criteria. However, systematic reviews consistently report that moderate nomophobia is most prevalent, while a substantial proportion of young adults experience severe nomophobia that warrants intervention by educators and mental health professionals.

Rodríguez-García and colleagues (2020) conducted a review of international studies and found that most research on nomophobia focuses on university students and utilizes cross-sectional designs. Their analysis revealed associations between nomophobia and variables including anxiety, stress, poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and impaired psychological functioning. The authors contend that nomophobia constitutes an emerging public health concern because of its rising prevalence and its potential impact on the emotional well-being of young people.

2.3 Nomophobia and Anxiety

Anxiety represents the most prevalent psychological effect associated with excessive smartphone use. Given the significant role smartphones play in daily life, restricted access may induce feelings of insecurity, nervousness, or discomfort. King et al. (2010) were among the first to define nomophobia, characterizing it as the anxiety experienced when individuals are unable to communicate, remain connected, or access information through their phones. They observed that nomophobia exhibits characteristics similar to anxiety disorders, although it is not classified as a traditional phobia.

Yildirim and Correia (2015) developed the Nomophobia Questionnaire (NMP-Q) to facilitate the study of anxiety associated with smartphone use. Research utilizing this instrument indicates that individuals with higher nomophobia scores tend to experience greater anxiety. The primary factors contributing to this anxiety include fear of losing communication, inability to access information, and disconnection from online social networks.

Subsequent studies among university students in Turkey, India, Italy, Spain, Greece, Saudi Arabia, and other countries have consistently reported a positive association between nomophobia and anxiety symptoms. The strength of this relationship varies across studies, but anxiety remains the most frequently investigated psychological outcome. Rodríguez-García et al. (2020), in their systematic review, concluded that anxiety is one of the strongest and most

consistent correlates of nomophobia, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Similarly, Notara et al. (2021) observed that excessive smartphone dependence was associated with emotional instability, fear of social isolation, and increased psychological distress among university students.

Recent empirical evidence further strengthens this relationship. Gnardellis et al. (2023), in a large cross-sectional study involving more than 1,400 young adults in Greece, reported significant positive associations between nomophobia and anxiety measured using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21). Participants with higher NMP-Q scores consistently demonstrated higher anxiety levels even after considering demographic characteristics and self-esteem. These findings suggest that excessive dependence on smartphones may contribute to persistent emotional distress in young adults.

2.4 Nomophobia and Depression

Depression has also become a focus of research in recent years. Although the link between nomophobia and depression is usually not as strong as the link with anxiety, many studies show that people with higher levels of nomophobia are more likely to have symptoms of depression. Experts believe that relying too much on smartphones can lead to reduced in-person social interaction, difficulty managing emotions, poor sleep, and increased loneliness. These are all known risk factors for depression.

Rodríguez-García et al. (2020) reviewed the research and found that people with moderate to severe nomophobia often report depression. Similarly, Notara et al. (2021) found in their systematic review that depression is a main psychosocial effect linked to problematic smartphone use, though the strength of this link varies between groups.

Recent findings by Gnardellis et al. (2023) also demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship between nomophobia and depressive symptoms among young adults. Participants reporting severe nomophobia obtained higher depression scores than those with mild or moderate nomophobia, suggesting that increasing dependence on smartphones may be accompanied by deteriorating emotional well-being.

Recent studies indicate that depression is a significant psychological factor associated with nomophobia. However, additional longitudinal research is required to clarify the temporal relationship between these variables and to elucidate the underlying psychological mechanisms.

2.5 Nomophobia and Stress

Recent studies show that stress is an important psychological factor connected to nomophobia. Many young adults who rely on their smartphones say they feel stressed because they need to stay connected. This stress often comes from notifications, social interactions, school demands, and the fear of missing out. King, Valença, and Nardi (2010) found that people with nomophobia often feel emotional discomfort, such as nervousness, irritability, and stress when they cannot use their smartphones.

Multiple studies have established a clear link between nomophobia and increased stress. Rodríguez-García, Moreno-Guerrero, and López-Belmonte (2020) found that stress is among the most common psychological effects of nomophobia, particularly in university students. Notara et al. (2021) reported that students with moderate to severe nomophobia experienced greater stress and emotional exhaustion than those less dependent on smartphones. Similarly, Gnardellis et al. (2023) observed that higher Nomophobia Questionnaire (NMP-Q) scores were closely associated with higher Stress subscale scores on the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) in a Greek sample. Collectively, these findings indicate that excessive smartphone reliance may impair stress management and increase the risk of psychological issues.

2.6 Nomophobia and Sleep Quality

Rodríguez-García et al. (2020) identified sleep disturbances as a prevalent health issue associated with nomophobia. Additional recent reviews indicate that students experiencing moderate to severe nomophobia report higher rates of insomnia, increased daytime fatigue, and poorer sleep quality compared to those less reliant on smartphones. Impaired sleep may partially account for the association between nomophobia and increased anxiety, depression, and difficulties in emotional regulation. Consequently, sleep quality may function both as an outcome of nomophobia and as a mediating factor influencing its effects on mental health.

2.7 Nomophobia and Academic Performance

Research shows that students with high nomophobia scores tend to have lower academic grades, concentration difficulties, more frequent procrastination, and reduced learning efficiency. Rodríguez-García et al. (2020) found that excessive smartphone reliance impairs students' focus. Recent reviews indicate nomophobia reduces academic achievement by increasing distractions, encouraging multitasking, and complicating time management. Smartphones can facilitate learning, but unrestricted use may harm academic performance.

2.8 Research Gap

Although research on nomophobia has expanded considerably during the past decade, several important gaps remain. First, most available studies employ cross-sectional designs, making it difficult to establish causal relationships between nomophobia and psychological outcomes. Second, much of the existing evidence is based on university students from specific countries, limiting the generalizability of findings across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Third, relatively few longitudinal and intervention-based studies have examined whether reducing smartphone dependence leads to improvements in mental health. Finally, while previous studies have investigated anxiety, depression, stress, sleep quality, and academic performance separately, comparatively few reviews have integrated these psychological outcomes into a single comprehensive framework. Therefore, the present review aims to synthesize current evidence on the psychological impact of nomophobia among young adults and identify directions for future research and intervention.

3. Discussion

Recent studies have examined the impact of nomophobia on the mental health of young adults. The evidence demonstrates that nomophobia is associated with adverse outcomes, including anxiety, depression, stress, sleep disturbances, diminished academic performance, and reduced overall well-being. While smartphones support communication, learning, and social connectivity, excessive dependence on these devices can lead to significant mental health consequences (Rodríguez-García et al., 2020; Notara et al., 2021).

The literature consistently reports a strong association between nomophobia and anxiety. King et al. (2010) found that individuals who are separated from their mobile phones frequently experience discomfort, nervousness, and panic. Yildirim and Correia (2015) further demonstrated that the primary fears underlying nomophobia include loss of communication, restricted access to information, diminished social connection, and reduced convenience. Recent reviews corroborate that anxiety is the most prevalent psychological consequence of nomophobia, particularly among university students (Rodríguez-García et al., 2020; Notara et al., 2021).

The studies reviewed show a positive link between nomophobia and symptoms of depression. While this connection is not as strong as the link with anxiety, people with higher nomophobia scores often report lower psychological well-being, less emotional stability, and more loneliness. One reason for this may be that relying too much on smartphones can replace meaningful face-to-face interactions, leading to social isolation even when people are always online. Spending too much time on social media can also lead people to compare themselves to others, set unrealistic expectations, and feel dissatisfied with their own lives, which may add to depressive symptoms. However, since most studies are cross-sectional, it is still unclear whether nomophobia leads to depression or if people who are already depressed turn to their smartphones more to cope.

Recent research indicates that nomophobia is influenced by broader psychosocial factors such as low self-esteem, loneliness, and the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). Individuals with low self-esteem frequently use smartphones for reassurance and social validation, whereas FoMO contributes to repeated checking of messages and social media. Vagka et al. (2023) found that young adults with higher nomophobia scores exhibited greater psychological vulnerability and a stronger dependence on smartphones. These findings support the view that nomophobia is a multifaceted psychological issue shaped by emotional, cognitive, and social factors, rather than solely by excessive technology use.

In summary, the findings of this review demonstrate that nomophobia constitutes an emerging psychological challenge linked to anxiety, depression, stress, poor sleep quality, reduced academic performance, and diminished psychological well-being. While smartphones are essential tools in contemporary society, encouraging balanced, mindful use of technology may mitigate the psychological burden associated with excessive smartphone dependence. These results hold significant implications for psychologists, educators, healthcare professionals, parents, and policymakers aiming to foster healthier digital lifestyles among young adults.

4. Practical Implications

This review outlines practical steps for mental health professionals, educators, parents, and policymakers. Clinical psychologists and counsellors should routinely assess young adults for problematic smartphone use and nomophobia, especially when they present with anxiety, depression, stress, or sleep difficulties. Early identification of excessive smartphone dependence enables timely support and promotes well-being.

Educational institutions should promote digital well-being through awareness campaigns, workshops, and counselling. Universities can encourage responsible smartphone use by integrating digital wellness programs into student support services. Parents can foster healthy technology habits by encouraging balanced smartphone use, supporting in-person conversations, and modelling positive digital behaviour.

At the policy level, public health initiatives should focus on raising awareness of the mental health risks associated with excessive smartphone use. Collaboration among schools, healthcare professionals, and policymakers is essential to developing prevention strategies that promote healthier digital habits in young adults.

5. Limitations of the Review

There are several limitations to this review that readers should keep in mind. First, it mostly included studies published in English, which means research in other languages might have been missed. Second, most studies used cross-sectional designs, making it difficult to draw causal conclusions about the relationship between nomophobia and psychological outcomes. Third, since most studies focused on university students, the findings may not apply to other age groups or populations. Finally, differences in research methods, assessment tools, and cultural backgrounds could have led to variations in the results reported across studies.

6. Conclusion

Nomophobia is a growing psychological concern among young adults. Evidence shows that excessive smartphone use is linked to anxiety, depression, stress, poor sleep, lower academic performance, and reduced well-being. While smartphones offer educational and social advantages, unregulated use can harm mental health and daily life.

This review indicates that increased awareness of nomophobia is necessary among students, educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers. Promoting responsible smartphone use, fostering digital well-being, and providing early psychological support may mitigate the adverse effects of excessive smartphone use. Future research employing rigorous methodologies and diverse populations will further clarify this issue and inform the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies.

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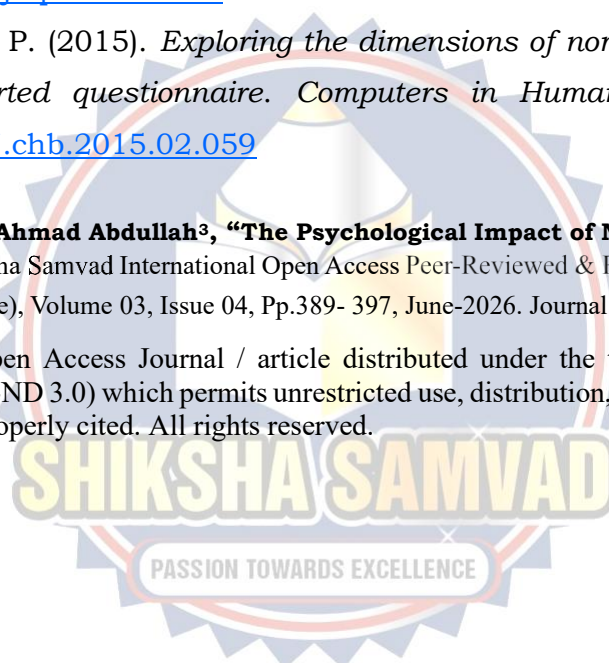
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