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Nomophobia in Adolescents: The Combined Roles of Attachment Styles, School Belongingness, and Life Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Although previous studies have identified associations between insecure attachment styles and nomophobia (NMP), the underlying psychological mechanisms remain underexplored. Grounded in attachment theory, this study investigates the mediating roles of school belongingness and life satisfaction in the relationship between attachment styles and NMP in adolescents.

Methods: The study was conducted with 230 adolescents aged 12 to 18, recruited from a child and adolescent psychiatry outpatient clinic. Participants completed the Attachment Styles Scale in Interpersonal Relationships (ASSIS), Nomophobia Questionnaire (NMP-Q), School Belongingness Scale (SBS), and Life Satisfaction Scale (LSS).

Results: Mediation analysis revealed that anxious attachment was associated with increased NMP through decreased school belongingness (β = 0.036, p = 0.043) and reduced life satisfaction (β = 0.059, p = 0.014). Similarly, secure attachment was associated with lower NMP via higher school belongingness (β = -0.054, p = 0.037) and life satisfaction (β = -0.056, p = 0.013). Avoidant attachment was not significantly associated with NMP or the proposed mediators.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that adolescents' attachment styles influence NMP through their senses of school belongingness and life satisfaction. Designing school-based psychosocial initiatives that cultivate relational anchoring and perceived life coherence may provide a developmentally attuned avenue to buffer NMP risk, particularly in adolescents exhibiting anxious attachment style.

Keywords: Adolescents, attachment styles, life satisfaction, nomophobia, school belongingness

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INTRODUCTION

The growing ubiquity of smartphones in everyday routines has transformed how adolescents access information, communicate, and manage daily tasks. Nevertheless, excessive use has been associated with psychological challenges, notably nomophobia (NMP), described by the fear of losing access to smartphone. This issue is particularly prevalent among adolescents, who are uniquely vulnerable due to their developmental stage (1). Therefore, it becomes critical to investigate the predictors and mechanisms that underlie NMP in adolescents navigating this sensitive developmental period. Some researchers argue that several predictors of NMP (2). Even so, research on NMP remains relatively nascent, and important psychological mechanisms, such as attachment, require further exploration. Attachment theory, as proposed by Bowlby (3), provides a valuable lens for understanding the emotional underpinnings of NMP (4). Consistent with this perspective, distinct attachment styles substantially influence how adolescents engage with their smartphones; for instance, securely attached individuals tend to exhibit more effective emotional regulation and adaptive responses to interpersonal challenges, reducing their likelihood of developing dependence on digital devices for psychological reassurance (5). In contrast, those with anxious attachment are prone to fear of abandonment and often seek constant reassurance, which may manifest through smartphone dependence. Such individuals are at higher risk of developing NMP due to their sensitivity to disconnection and need for relational proximity (6). By comparison,

Highlights

- **Secure and anxious attachment styles influence nomophobia through mediators.**
- **Avoidant attachment displayed no meaningful relationship with nomophobia.**
- **School-based actions supporting belongingness and life satisfaction may buffer nomophobia.**

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avoidantly attached adolescents tend to suppress emotional needs and avoid intimate connections, but may still use smartphones compulsively as a means of self-regulation or distraction, albeit with less overt emotional dependence (6). These nuances suggest that each attachment style may contribute to NMP through distinct psychological pathways.

Beyond these internal emotional structures, adolescents' vulnerability to NMP is also shaped by broader dimensions of well-being and environmental support. In this context, life satisfaction and school belongingness emerge as theoretically grounded and empirically supported constructs. Life satisfaction captures adolescents' global appraisal of their quality of life and is closely tied to their emotional resilience and self-regulation capacities, both of which are central in understanding dependence on digital devices for emotional compensation (7). Likewise, school belongingness a construct grounded in social connectedness theories, represents the extent to which adolescents feel accepted and valued within their academic environment, and has been shown to buffer against psychological distress and reduce the likelihood of maladaptive digital behaviors (8). Prior empirical findings indicate that adolescents with lower life satisfaction and school belongingness are more likely to experience emotional distress, which may lead them to engage in persistent smartphone use as a maladaptive coping strategy to regulate these negative affective states (9).

Given these theoretical foundations, the present study aims to examine the predictive roles of three distinct attachment styles—secure, anxious, and avoidant—in NMP, alongside the mediating contributions of school belongingness and life satisfaction. Although previous studies have offered valuable insights into the relationship between insecure attachment and NMP (10, 11), few have systematically addressed how internal attachment patterns and contextual constructs, such as school belongingness and life satisfaction, jointly contribute to NMP in adolescents (7, 9, 12). To address this gap, three mediation models were tested in the current study. The first hypothesis (H1) posits that anxious attachment will positively predict NMP through reduced school belongingness and life satisfaction. The second hypothesis (H2) suggests that avoidant attachment will indirectly predict higher levels of NMP via reduced school belongingness and life satisfaction. Lastly, the third hypothesis (H3) proposes that secure attachment will negatively predict NMP by facilitating adolescents' sense of school belongingness and life satisfaction. Altogether, through this multidimensional model, the study aims to advance theoretical understanding and practical interventions regarding adolescents' vulnerability to NMP.

METHODS

Research Design

This cross-sectional study without a control group was conducted between March 2024 and October 2024 at a child and adolescent psychiatry clinic. The exclusion of a control group aligns with the study's objectives to uncover specific relationships within the clinical population. A correlational design was used to evaluate the relationships between multiple variables within an observational framework. The analysis focused particularly on testing mediation models, in which attachment style served as the predictor, school belongingness and life satisfaction as mediators, and NMP as the outcome variable.

Sampling

The sample size was determined using an a priori power analysis for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Based on a structural equation model with four latent and twelve observed variables, assuming a medium effect size (0.3), 80% power, and a 95% confidence interval, a minimum of 200 participants was required. Considering potential data loss, the target sample was set at 230 participants.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from adolescents aged 12 to 18 who visited the clinic and had owned a smartphone for at least one year. Inclusion criteria required active school enrollment and sufficient cognitive capacity to comprehend and respond to self-report instruments, as assessed by the attending clinician. Exclusion criteria included schizophrenia spectrum disorders, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and bipolar disorder. These conditions were excluded due to their potential to impair comprehension, emotional regulation, or consistency in self-report measures. In particular, bipolar disorder was excluded because its mood instability and reactivity may confound responses related to attachment, school belongingness, and life satisfaction, thereby reducing internal validity (13).

Measures

Personal Information Form

This form, developed by the researchers, is designed to capture sociodemographic and clinical information from the sample group. It was completed by the researcher during the interview with the participants. The form includes data on the individual's gender, age, psychiatric diagnosis, current psychiatric treatments, any family history of psychiatric diagnosis, screen time, and the purpose of phone use.

Attachment Styles Scale in Interpersonal Relationships (ASSIS)

ASSIS was developed by Kandemir and İlhan (2017) as a 7-point Likert-type instrument, consisting of 21 items distributed across three sub-dimensions (14). Factor analysis and internal consistency results (α = 0.72 – 0.80) provided evidence that the measurement tool is valid and reliable (14). In the current study, the internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) calculated for the sub-dimensions of the ASSIS were found to be lower than those reported in the original study (14). Specifically, the reliability coefficients were α = 0.466 for the secure attachment, α = 0.382 for the anxious attachment, and α = 0.168 for the avoidant attachment.

School Belongingness Scale (SBS)

The SBS (15) assesses school belongingness through 10 items in 2 subscales: the School Exclusion Scale (SES) and the School Inclusion Scale (SIS). Responses are scored on a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating a stronger school belongingness. The psychometric properties of the measurement tool were demonstrated to be adequate through evidence of internal consistency (α= 0.86) as well as construct and convergent validity. In the current study, internal consistency coefficients for the subscales of the SBS were found to be lower than those reported in the original validation. Specifically, the Cronbach's alpha values were α = 0.468 for the SES, α = 0.420 for the SIS, and α = 0.573 for the total scale.

Life Satisfaction Scale (LSS)

LSS is a 5-item self-report measure of general life satisfaction (16). The LSS was adapted for Turkish populations by Dağlı and Baysal (2014) and has been demonstrated to be a valid and reliable measurement tool through construct validity, internal consistency (α = 0.88), and test-retest reliability (17). In the present study, the internal consistency of the LSS was found to be lower than previously reported, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of α = 0.528.

Nomophobia Questionnaire (NMP-Q)

The NMP-Q was developed by Yildirim et al. (2015) to assess the fear or discomfort experienced when mobile devices are not accessible (18). The 20-item NMP-Q uses a 7-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate greater degrees of NMP. Evidence from construct validity, internal consistency (α = 0.95), and convergent validity demonstrated that the NMP-Q is a valid and reliable measurement tool for the Turkish adolescent sample. In the present study, the internal consistency of the NMP-Q was found to be acceptable, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of α = 0.794.

Statistical Analysis

Differences between groups and relationships between variables were analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. The skewness values ranged between 0.159 and 0.344, while the kurtosis values ranged between -0.470 and 1.089, suggesting a normal distribution. An independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA were conducted to examine group differences, while chi-square analysis was used for categorical variables. The least significant difference (LSD) tests were used for pairwise comparisons among the three groups. Pearson correlations were employed to investigate the relationships among the study variables.

The mediating role of school belongingness and life satisfaction in the relationship between attachment styles (secure, anxious, and avoidant) and NMP was tested. Mediation analysis was conducted using the JAMM package within JAMOVI (Version 2.3.28) (19), a comprehensive statistical software. The analysis utilized 95% confidence intervals (CIs), with the indirect effect considered statistically significant if the interval did not include zero and $p<0.05$.

Statement of Ethical Considerations

The Izmir City Hospital Ethical Committee regarding non-interventional clinical research reviewed and approved the study on March 13, 2024 (No: 2024/25). Participants and their parents provided written informed consent after being informed of the study's purpose. Confidentiality was maintained, and access to personal information was restricted to the research team.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics and Preliminary Results

The study sample consisted of 230 voluntary participants aged 12–18 years (M= 14.97 ± 1.84), including 114 females and 116 males. There were no significant differences between genders in terms of age [t(228)= 1.545, p = 0.124], psychiatric diagnosis [(χ^2(1)= 1.811, p= 0.178], or phone screen time [t(228)= 0.491, p= 0.624], indicating equivalence between genders for these variables.

69.6% (n= 160) of the participants had a psychiatric diagnosis, while 29.6% (n= 68) had a family history of psychiatric diagnosis. Individuals with and without psychiatric diagnoses were equivalent in terms of their school belongingness [t(228)= 0.426, p= 0.671], life satisfaction [t(228)= -0.399, p= 0.690], anxious attachment [t(228) = 1.597, p= 0.112], secure attachment [t(228)= 1.284, p= 0.200], avoidant attachment [t(228)= 0.029, p= 0.977], NMP [t(228)= 0.665, p= 0.507], and phone screen time scores [t(228)= 0.531, p= 0.596]. The bivariate correlations among attachment styles, school belongingness, life satisfaction, NMP, and screen time are presented in Table 1.

Significant correlations were found between school belongingness, life satisfaction, NMP, secure and anxious attachment styles, while the correlation between avoidant attachment and other study variables was non-significant. Screen time was significantly negatively correlated with school belongingness and life satisfaction, while significantly positively correlated with NMP and anxious attachment.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether screen time varied based on the purpose of phone use. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (p= 0.071). Results revealed significant differences in screen time based on the purpose of phone use [(F(2, 227)= 4.210, p= 0.016)]. Pairwise comparisons indicated that individuals using their phones primarily for social media had significantly higher screen time (M= 6.19 ± 3.98) compared to those using it for gaming (M= 4.86 ± 2.62, $\Delta\overline{X}$= 1.329, p= 0.016) and messaging (M= 4.77±3.69, $\Delta\overline{X}$= 1.418, p=0.014).

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analyses were performed to examine the mediating roles of school belongingness and life satisfaction in the relationships between secure and anxious attachment styles and NMP. Avoidant attachment was excluded from the mediation analysis owing to its lack of significant associations with any of the study variables. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Anxious attachment was significantly associated with NMP through the parallel mediation of school belongingness and life satisfaction. The direct relationship between anxious attachment and NMP was non-significant, indicating full mediation. Figure 1 summarizes the results of the mediation analysis.

Secure attachment significantly predicted NMP through the parallel mediation of school belongingness and life satisfaction. The direct relationship between secure attachment and NMP was non-significant after accounting for the mediators, suggesting full mediation. The analysis results are presented in Figure 2.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the extent to which adolescents' attachment styles bear upon NMP, and whether school belongingness and life satisfaction function as intermediary mechanisms in this association. The results revealed that while anxious attachment exhibited a positive indirect association with NMP, secure attachment predicted lower levels of NMP through the mediating roles of school belongingness and life satisfaction. In contrast, avoidant attachment was not significantly related to either the mediators or the outcome variable. These findings highlight how adolescents' attachment styles and sense of social connectedness play

Table 1. Bivariate correlations among attachment styles, school belongingness, life satisfaction, and nomophobia

Variables	Mean± SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. School belongingness	25.708±5.508	-						
2. Life satisfaction	14.495±4.191	0.394*	-					
3. Nomophobia	74.383±20.931	-0.276*	-0.300*	-				
4. Secure attachment	27.630±7.471	0.346*	0.270*	-0.219†	-			
5. Anxious attachment	25.452±7.686	-0.205†	-0.294*	0.197†	-0.062	-		
6. Avoidant attachment	25.700±6.326	0.003	-0.057	-0.061	-0.097	0.038	-	
7. Screen time	5.374±3.560	-0.160‡	-0.226‡	0.299*	-0.071	0.184†	-0.003	-

SD: Standard Deviation; *$p<0.001$, †$p<0.01$, ‡$p<0.05$

Table 2. Results of mediation analysis

Predictor: Anxious attachment								
				95% CI (a)				
Type	**Effect**	**Estimate**	**SE**	**Lower**	**Upper**	β	**z**	**p**
Indirect	AA ⇒ SB ⇒ NMP	0.098	0.049	0.003	0.194	0.036	2.020	0.043
	AA ⇒ LS ⇒ NMP	0.160	0.065	0.033	0.288	0.059	2.466	0.014
Component	AA ⇒ SB	-0.147	0.046	-0.238	-0.056	-0.205	-3.176	0.001
	SB ⇒ NMP	-0.670	0.256	-1.171	-0.168	-0.176	-2.618	0.009
	AA ⇒ LS	-0.160	0.034	-0.228	-0.093	-0.294	-4.668	< 0.001
	LS ⇒ NMP	-0.999	0.344	-1.675	-0.325	-0.200	-2.905	0.004
Direct	AA ⇒ NMP	0.277	0.176	-0.068	0.623	0.102	1.572	0.116
Total	AA ⇒ NMP	0.536	0.176	0.190	0.882	0.197	3.037	0.002
Predictor: Secure attachment								
				95% CI (a)				
Type	**Effect**	**Estimate**	**SE**	**Lower**	**Upper**	β	**z**	**p**
Indirect	SA ⇒ SB ⇒ NMP	-0.151	0.073	-0.293	-0.009	-0.054	-2.085	0.037
	SA ⇒ LS ⇒ NMP	-0.158	0.063	-0.282	-0.034	-0.056	-2.494	0.013
Component	SA ⇒ SB	0.255	0.046	0.165	0.344	0.346	5.585	< 0.001
	SB ⇒ NMP	-0.594	0.264	-1.111	-0.076	-0.156	-2.247	0.025
	SA ⇒ LS	0.151	0.036	0.081	0.221	0.270	4.247	< 0.001
	LS ⇒ NMP	-1.042	0.338	-1.706	-0.379	-0.209	-3.081	0.002
Direct	SA ⇒ NMP	-0.304	0.186	-0.669	-0.060	-0.109	-1.636	0.102
Total	SA ⇒ NMP	-0.613	0.181	-0.967	-0.259	-0.219	-3.394	< 0.001

N: 230; AA: Anxious attachment; CI: Confidence interval; LS: Life satisfaction; NMP: Nomophobia; SA: Secure attachment; SB: School belongingness; SE: Standardized error.

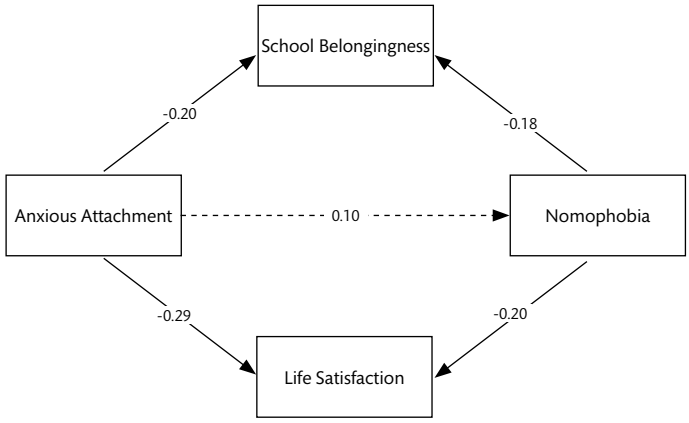

Figure 1. Indirect relationship between anxious attachment and nomophobia through the parallel mediation of school belongingness and life satisfaction.

All statistically significant parameters are marked as significant at p<0.05. Solid lines depict significant paths, whereas dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths.

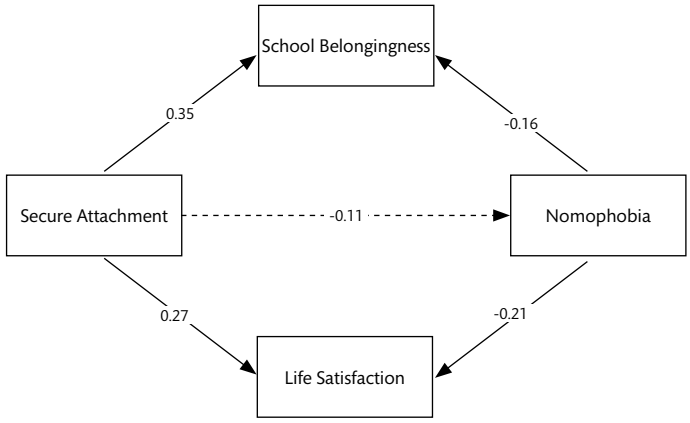

Figure 2. Indirect relationship between secure attachment and nomophobia through the parallel mediation of school belongingness and life satisfaction.

All statistically significant parameters are marked as significant at p<0.05. Solid lines depict significant paths, whereas dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths.

a key role in increasing their risk of NMP, which reflects their need for emotional security and positive life experiences (20).

Specifically, our results revealed that adolescents with anxious attachment often experience low levels of school belongingness and life satisfaction. As a result, they are more prone to seeking digital proximity through their smartphones to regulate distress and fulfill unmet relational needs. This pattern aligns with previous findings that show how anxious attachment is a risk factor for smartphone overuse and dependency, particularly when adolescents or youth lack meaningful school connections and exhibit low life satisfaction (6, 7, 9). Taken together, the convergence of emotional insecurity and contextual isolation may push adolescents toward excessive smartphone use as a maladaptive strategy for alleviating anxiety, thus contributing to NMP.

Conversely, avoidant attachment did not exhibit a significant effect on NMP in this study. Avoidantly attached adolescents generally minimize emotional needs and may disengage from both social and digital sources of comfort. Although some earlier work reported negative associations or even compensatory smartphone behaviors among avoidant individuals (10, 21), our findings are consistent with studies reporting no significant link between avoidant attachment and NMP (22). Avoidantly attached adolescents may use smartphones functionally rather than emotionally, thereby limiting the development of nomophobic behaviors. Nevertheless, this area remains theoretically complex and requires further empirical exploration across diverse adolescent samples.

In line with expectations, secure attachment was found to be negatively associated with NMP through the mediating roles of school belongingness and life satisfaction. Adolescents with secure attachment tend to exhibit stronger social bonds, adaptive coping mechanisms, and greater emotional stability, all of which reduce dependence on smartphones as a source of psychological security (5, 9). The mediating role of school belongingness and life satisfaction in this context finds indirect support in Arslan and Duru's work, which linked secure attachment to higher perceived belongingness (15), and in Dilsiz and Kandemir's findings, where life satisfaction functioned as a mediator between attachment patterns and problematic digital media use (23), although neither study directly examined NMP. Nevertheless, prior research conceptualizes NMP as part of the broader spectrum of problematic smartphone use and digital media behaviors, sharing underlying mechanisms such as emotional dysregulation and attachment-related insecurity (5, 24). In this regard, findings from research on problematic smartphone use offer a theoretical parallel to the NMP observed in the current study.

Overall, these findings underscore the necessity of considering both internal emotional structures (attachment styles) and contextual supports (school belongingness and life satisfaction) when understanding NMP in adolescents. The combined influence of anxious attachment, weakened school belongingness, and low life satisfaction creates an environment in which NMP becomes more likely. On the other hand, the presence of secure relationships, life satisfaction, and school belongingness serves as a protective triad against NMP.

In conclusion, the study suggests that interventions targeting life satisfaction and school belongingness may effectively buffer adolescents, particularly those with anxious attachment, against NMP. School-based programs that promote connectedness, emotional support, and well-being could serve as critical tools for reducing NMP as a compensatory mechanism. By addressing both internal emotional needs and external social contexts, future efforts may promote healthier digital habits for adolescents.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation. Importantly, no specific psychiatric diagnostic subgroup was isolated, as the sampling strategy aimed to reflect ecologically valid clinical intake patterns. Although this increases external relevance, it may constrain diagnostic precision. Additionally, the brevity of some scales (LSS and SBS) may have limited the depth of psychological measurement. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and diagnostically stratified samples to improve generalizability and conceptual clarity.

Ethics Approval: Ethics committee approval was obtained from the Izmir City Hospital Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee (Approval No: 2024/25; Date: 13 March 2024).

Informed Consent: Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their written consent was obtained.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

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