

Beyond the Screen: Assessing the Role of Smartphone Addiction, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), and Leisure Boredom on Podcast Consumption

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of smartphone-based media has transformed the way people access, select and consume digital content. Among the many forms of mobile media, podcasts have become increasingly relevant because they combine flexibility, personalization and the possibility of multitasking. This paper examines the relationship between smartphone addiction, fear of missing out (FOMO), leisure boredom and podcast consumption. Drawing on the literature on problematic smartphone use, uses and gratifications theory, FOMO and leisure boredom, the paper argues that podcast consumption should not be understood only as an informational or entertainment practice, but also as part of a broader pattern of digital self-regulation. The study proposes that smartphone addiction may increase podcast consumption directly, by encouraging repeated mobile engagement, and indirectly, through FOMO and leisure boredom. Individuals who experience high levels of FOMO may use podcasts to remain connected to trends, conversations and cultural knowledge, while those experiencing leisure boredom may use podcasts as a convenient way to fill empty time and avoid inactivity. The paper contributes to existing literature by integrating three psychological predictors into a conceptual explanation of podcast consumption. The expected impact of this research lies in improving the understanding of digital media habits and supporting healthier, more intentional forms of smartphone and podcast use.

Keywords: smartphone addiction, fear of missing out, FOMO, leisure boredom, podcast consumption, digital media, mobile media.

1. Introduction

Smartphones have become one of the central infrastructures of everyday life. They are not merely communication devices, but portable gateways to social interaction, entertainment, news, education and self-presentation. In this context, podcasts have gained significant visibility as a flexible form of digital media, accessible through smartphones and compatible with daily routines such as commuting, exercising, working, studying or household activities. Unlike traditional radio, podcasts are on-demand, personalized and often consumed through mobile applications, which makes them particularly relevant for understanding contemporary digital behaviour.

This paper covers the relationship between smartphone addiction, fear of missing out (FOMO), leisure boredom and podcast consumption. More precisely, it investigates whether excessive or compulsive smartphone use may influence how frequently individuals consume podcasts, what role FOMO plays in motivating constant connection to audio or video content, and how leisure boredom encourages individuals to fill idle time with easily accessible digital media. The subject is important because podcast consumption is not only a media preference; it may also reflect deeper psychological and behavioural patterns associated with digital dependency, emotional regulation and the avoidance of boredom.

The relevance of this topic is strengthened by the broader social concern surrounding problematic smartphone use. Research has associated excessive mobile phone use with anxiety, reduced academic performance, sleep disruption and lower well-being (Lepp, Barkley and Karpinski, 2014; Elhai et al., 2017). At the same time, FOMO has been conceptualized as a pervasive apprehension that others may be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, combined with the desire to remain continually connected (Przybylski et

al., 2013). Leisure boredom, in turn, refers to the perception that free time lacks meaning, stimulation or satisfying engagement (Iso-Ahola and Weissinger, 1990). These three constructs are particularly relevant in the smartphone era, where individuals can instantly access podcasts and other digital content whenever they experience uncertainty, social anxiety or boredom.

The paper intends to answer this matter through a theoretical and literature-based analysis. It reviews specialized literature on smartphone addiction, FOMO, leisure boredom and podcast consumption, then proposes a conceptual framework explaining how these factors may interact. The paper does not claim to present original empirical data, but rather to synthesize previous research and formulate a research model that can be tested in future quantitative or mixed-method studies.

The relationship between this paper and the existing specialized literature is therefore integrative. Previous studies have examined smartphone addiction (Kwon et al., 2013), FOMO (Przybylski et al., 2013), leisure boredom (Iso-Ahola and Weissinger, 1990) and podcast motivations (McClung and Johnson, 2010; Perks and Turner, 2019; Tobin and Guadagno, 2022). However, these topics are often discussed separately. This paper contributes by bringing them together and by positioning podcast consumption as a behavioural outcome shaped by both technological accessibility and psychological need. In doing so, it extends the literature on digital media consumption and offers a clearer explanation of why podcasts may become embedded in smartphone-centered lifestyles.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Smartphone Addiction and Problematic Smartphone Use

Smartphone addiction is usually understood as excessive, uncontrolled or compulsive smartphone use that interferes with daily life, productivity, social relationships or psychological well-being. Although the term “addiction” remains debated, many researchers use related concepts such as “problematic smartphone use” or “smartphone dependency” to describe behaviours involving loss of control, withdrawal-like discomfort, overuse and negative consequences (Billieux, 2012; Kwon et al., 2013).

Kwon et al. (2013) contributed significantly to the measurement of smartphone addiction through the development and validation of the Smartphone Addiction Scale. Their work helped establish smartphone addiction as a measurable behavioural phenomenon, especially among younger users. Other studies have shown that frequent mobile phone use can be associated with anxiety and lower life satisfaction (Lepp, Barkley and Karpinski, 2014). Elhai et al. (2017) also linked problematic smartphone use to anxiety and depression, suggesting that smartphone overuse may function as both a cause and consequence of emotional distress.

The addictive potential of smartphones lies partly in their design and affordances. Smartphones provide instant access to social media, entertainment platforms, messaging services, news feeds and audio content. Notifications, algorithmic recommendations and infinite-scroll interfaces encourage repeated checking behavior. This constant availability makes the smartphone not only a tool, but also a default response to discomfort, uncertainty or inactivity.

In relation to podcast consumption, smartphone addiction may increase exposure to podcasts simply because the device is constantly present. Individuals who frequently use smartphones are more likely to discover podcasts through apps, social media recommendations, streaming platforms or algorithmic suggestions. Therefore, podcast consumption may become part of a wider cycle of habitual mobile use.

2.2 Fear of Missing Out

Fear of Missing Out, commonly known as FOMO, was defined by Przybylski et al. (2013) as a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent. FOMO includes both emotional and behavioural dimensions: anxiety about exclusion and the desire to stay continuously connected. It is closely linked with social media use, notification checking and digital engagement.

FOMO is relevant to smartphone addiction because smartphones allow users to monitor social environments in real time. Through messages, stories, posts, podcasts, reels and news updates, individuals can remain connected to social and cultural conversations. However, this constant monitoring may reinforce anxiety rather than reduce it. The more individuals check their devices, the more they become aware of new content, new conversations and new opportunities to miss something.

In the context of podcast consumption, FOMO may operate in several ways. First, users may listen to podcasts in order to stay informed about current events, professional trends, cultural debates or niche

communities. Second, users may follow popular podcasts because these programs become part of social conversation. Third, the growth of video podcasts and platform-based recommendations may increase the sense that there is always another episode, another discussion or another expert opinion that should be consumed.

From this perspective, podcast listening may be both enriching and anxiety-driven. A person may listen to a podcast to learn, relax or feel entertained, but also to avoid feeling uninformed, excluded or culturally behind. FOMO therefore provides an important psychological mechanism linking smartphone dependency to repeated podcast consumption.

2.3 Leisure Boredom

Leisure boredom refers to a subjective state in which individuals perceive their free time as insufficiently meaningful, stimulating or satisfying. Iso-Ahola and Weissinger (1990) conceptualized leisure boredom as a specific form of boredom occurring during free time, when individuals have available time but lack engaging activities. This is particularly relevant in contemporary societies, where digital entertainment is abundant, but meaningful leisure may still be difficult to achieve.

Smartphones offer a quick solution to leisure boredom. Instead of tolerating idle moments, individuals can immediately access music, podcasts, videos, games, messages or social feeds. This may provide short-term relief, but it can also reduce the ability to engage in deeper or more intentional leisure activities. In other words, smartphones may transform boredom from a signal for reflection or creativity into a trigger for automatic digital consumption.

Podcasts occupy a special position in this process. They are less visually demanding than many digital media formats and can be consumed while doing other things. This makes them attractive for filling transitional or low-stimulation moments: commuting, walking, cleaning, waiting, cooking or exercising. Podcasts can make empty time feel productive, educational or emotionally comforting.

However, when podcast consumption is primarily driven by boredom avoidance, it may become repetitive and automatic. Users may listen not because they actively choose the content, but because silence, inactivity or mental space feels uncomfortable. Leisure boredom may therefore predict not only podcast consumption frequency, but also passive or compulsive listening patterns.

2.4 Podcast Consumption in the Digital Media Environment

Podcasts are on-demand audio or video programs distributed through digital platforms. They cover a wide range of topics, including news, politics, science, comedy, self-improvement, education, business, health, entertainment and personal storytelling. Their growth reflects the broader shift from scheduled broadcasting to personalized, platform-based media consumption.

Uses and gratifications theory provides a useful framework for understanding podcast consumption. According to Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973), audiences actively select media to satisfy specific needs, such as information, entertainment, social interaction or escape. Ruggiero (2000) later argued that uses and gratifications theory remains particularly relevant in the internet age because digital media increase user control, interactivity and choice.

Studies on podcast users have identified several motivations, including entertainment, information, companionship, time-shifting, habit and multitasking (McClung and Johnson, 2010; Perks and Turner, 2019). Tobin and Guadagno (2022) also explored psychological predictors and outcomes of podcast listening, suggesting that podcast use may relate to curiosity, social engagement and informational needs.

Recent industry data also confirm the increasing importance of podcasts. Edison Research reported that podcast consumption reached record levels in 2025, with 73% of people aged 12+ in the United States having ever consumed a podcast and 55% having consumed one in the last month (Edison Research, 2025). Although such data are market-specific, they illustrate the growing normalization of podcast consumption as part of everyday digital life.

Because podcasts are often consumed through smartphones, they are deeply connected to mobile habits. The smartphone does not merely provide access to podcasts; it structures how, when and why people consume them. Podcast listening may therefore be interpreted as a form of mobile media behaviour influenced by psychological needs, digital routines and platform design.

3. Conceptual Framework

This paper proposes that smartphone addiction, FOMO and leisure boredom may influence podcast consumption through interconnected pathways.

First, smartphone addiction may have a direct effect on podcast consumption. Individuals who use smartphones excessively are more likely to encounter, download, stream and repeatedly consume podcasts. The smartphone becomes a habitual media environment, and podcasts become one of the many content forms integrated into this environment.

Second, FOMO may mediate the relationship between smartphone addiction and podcast consumption. Users who experience FOMO may rely on smartphones to remain informed and socially connected. Podcasts may satisfy the need to stay up to date with conversations, expert opinions, cultural trends or community-specific knowledge. Therefore, FOMO may transform podcast consumption into a strategy for avoiding exclusion.

Third, leisure boredom may also mediate the relationship between smartphone addiction and podcast consumption. Individuals who find leisure time unstimulating may use podcasts to fill silence, avoid restlessness and create a sense of productivity. In this case, podcasts function as a boredom-management tool.

Fourth, FOMO and leisure boredom may interact. A bored individual may open a smartphone to seek stimulation and then encounter podcast recommendations that also activate FOMO. Similarly, a person who fears missing out may consume multiple episodes or follow several podcasts, eventually turning this behavior into a routine response to idle time.

The proposed framework can be expressed through the following assumptions:

1. Higher levels of smartphone addiction are associated with higher levels of podcast consumption.
2. Higher levels of FOMO are associated with more frequent podcast consumption, especially informational, cultural or trend-oriented podcasts.
3. Higher levels of leisure boredom are associated with more frequent podcast consumption during idle or transitional moments.
4. FOMO and leisure boredom mediate the relationship between smartphone addiction and podcast consumption.
5. Podcast consumption may be both beneficial and problematic, depending on whether it reflects intentional media use or compulsive digital avoidance.

4. Discussion

The relationship between smartphone addiction and podcast consumption should not be understood as inherently negative. Podcasts can provide educational value, emotional support, entertainment and access to diverse perspectives. For many individuals, they represent a meaningful alternative to visual screen time. Podcasts may support learning, improve language exposure, foster curiosity and create a sense of companionship. However, the same features that make podcasts valuable also make them susceptible to overconsumption. Their portability, low visual demand and compatibility with multitasking mean that they can enter almost every moment of daily life. A person can listen while walking, driving, cooking, working, exercising or preparing to sleep. As a result, podcast consumption may reduce moments of silence and reflection.

This is particularly relevant in relation to leisure boredom. Boredom can have adaptive functions. It may signal the need for change, creativity or more meaningful engagement. If every moment of boredom is immediately filled with digital content, individuals may lose opportunities for reflection, imagination or offline social interaction. In this sense, podcasts can become part of a broader culture of constant stimulation.

FOMO adds another layer to this issue. Many podcasts are connected to current events, public debates, professional knowledge or fan communities. This can create pressure to remain updated. Listeners may feel that they need to follow certain shows to participate in conversations or remain culturally informed. In this case, podcast consumption is not simply chosen; it is experienced as a requirement of belonging.

The role of smartphones is central because they create the conditions for constant availability. Before smartphones, audio consumption was more limited by devices, schedules and contexts. Today, podcasts are immediately available through platforms that recommend new episodes, track listening behaviour and encourage continuous engagement. This platform environment may intensify both FOMO and boredom-driven use.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggested by this conceptual analysis have implications for educators, media producers, mental health professionals and users. Educators can use podcasts as learning tools while encouraging reflective consumption. Media producers can design content that supports meaningful engagement

rather than compulsive binge-listening. Mental health professionals can explore podcast habits as part of broader digital well-being assessments. Users can become more aware of whether they listen intentionally or automatically.

The key point is balance. Podcast consumption should not be treated as a problem simply because it occurs frequently. The problem appears when listening is driven primarily by anxiety, avoidance or loss of control. A healthy relationship with podcasts involves intentional selection, meaningful engagement and the ability to disconnect.

5. Proposed Methodological Direction for Future Empirical Testing

Although this paper is theoretical, the proposed framework can be tested empirically. A future study could use a quantitative survey design among university students, young professionals or general smartphone users. The following constructs could be measured:

- smartphone addiction, using the Smartphone Addiction Scale or its short version;
- FOMO, using the Fear of Missing Out Scale developed by Przybylski et al. (2013);
- leisure boredom, using the Leisure Boredom Scale developed by Iso-Ahola and Weissinger (1990);
- podcast consumption, measured through frequency, duration, preferred genres, platform choice and listening context.

The study could apply correlation analysis, regression analysis or structural equation modelling to test whether FOMO and leisure boredom mediate the relationship between smartphone addiction and podcast consumption. A mixed-method design could also include interviews, allowing participants to explain why they listen to podcasts and how podcast use fits into their daily routines.

Such a methodology would help distinguish between intentional podcast use and compulsive podcast use. This distinction is important because two individuals may listen to podcasts for the same amount of time, but for very different reasons. One may listen to deepen knowledge, while another may listen to avoid silence, anxiety or boredom.

6. Conclusions

This paper examined the role of smartphone addiction, fear of missing out and leisure boredom in shaping podcast consumption. The main outcome is that podcast consumption should be understood not only as a media habit, but also as a psychological and behavioural practice embedded in smartphone-centered lifestyles. Smartphone addiction may increase podcast consumption by intensifying mobile engagement. FOMO may encourage individuals to consume podcasts in order to remain informed, connected and socially relevant. Leisure boredom may motivate podcast listening as a way to fill idle time and avoid unstimulating leisure moments.

The expected impact of these research outcomes lies in a more nuanced understanding of digital media behavior. Podcasts can be valuable sources of education, entertainment and connection, but they can also become part of compulsive digital routines. Understanding the psychological motives behind podcast consumption may help researchers, educators, clinicians and media producers promote healthier forms of digital engagement. Rather than discouraging podcast use, the aim should be to encourage intentional, balanced and meaningful consumption.

Further research should empirically test the conceptual model proposed in this paper. Future studies could examine different demographic groups, compare audio-only and video podcast consumption, investigate genre preferences and explore the role of platform algorithms in shaping listening behaviour. Longitudinal research would be especially useful for determining whether smartphone addiction, FOMO and leisure boredom predict podcast consumption over time, or whether heavy podcast consumption also reinforces smartphone dependency. Future research could also explore protective factors, such as digital mindfulness, offline leisure satisfaction and self-regulation strategies.

In conclusion, podcasts represent more than a convenient form of digital content. They are part of a broader transformation in how individuals manage attention, boredom, social belonging and personal time. Understanding the relationship between smartphone addiction, FOMO, leisure boredom and podcast consumption is therefore essential for assessing digital well-being in contemporary society.

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