# *Digital Behaviors and Well-Being During Social Distancing:*

*Evidence from an Exploratory Study During COVID-19*

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## Introduction

On April 8, 2020—during the peak of social distancing in the United States (Gollwitzer et al., 2020; Tibbetts et al., 2021)—we explored to what extent smartphone behaviors predicted positive and negative aspects of well-being.

## Methods

**Participants.** N = 569 adults from MTurk and CloudResearch Panels.

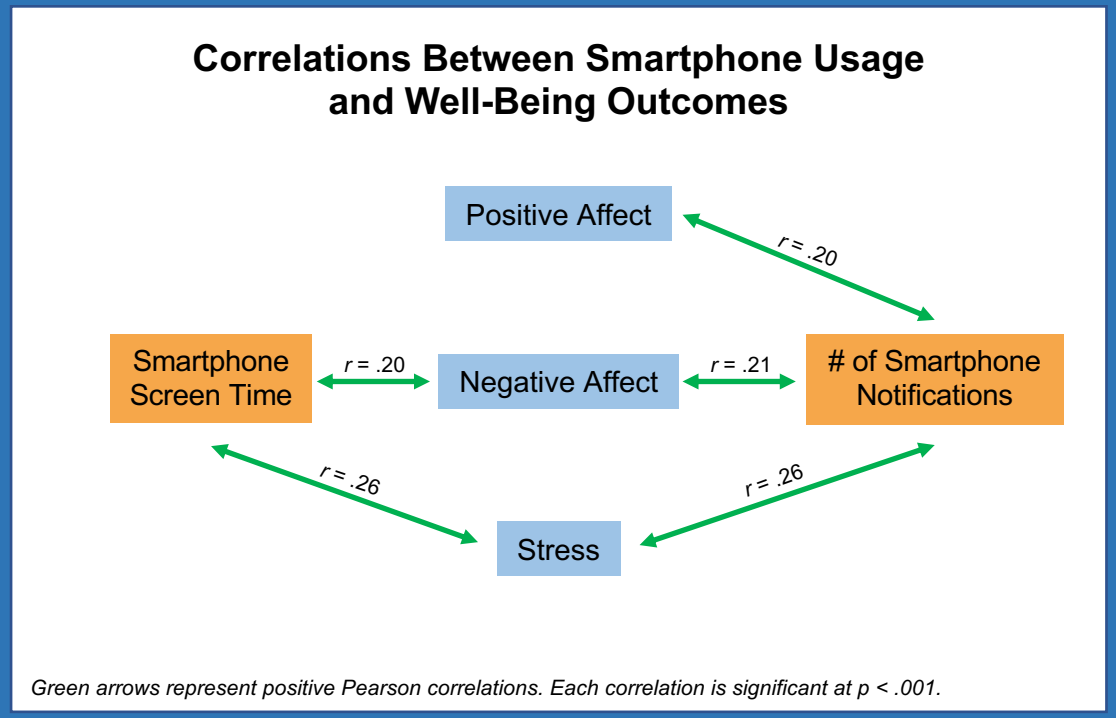
**Predictors.** Participants reported their average daily smartphone screen time and notifications over the past week using a sliding scale (*0 to 12 hours* for screen time; *0 to 400* for notifications). We also asked participants to compare other digital behaviors over the past week, such as texting and email, to their "normal" (-5 = *much less/far fewer*; 0 = *just about the same*; 5 = *a lot more*).

**Outcomes.** We measured positive and negative affect (SPANE; Diener et al., 2010) and stress (Perceived Stress Scale; Cohen & Williamson,1988).

## Results

During the early COVID-19 pandemic, increased use of one's smartphone predicted both negative and positive well-being outcomes. Smartphone screen time and number of smartphone notifications were both associated with increased negative affect and increased stress (Table 1), but number of smartphone notifications also predicted increased positive affect, $r = .20$, $p < .001$.

# One month into the COVID-19 pandemic, **more smartphone use** predicted **greater negative affect,** but also **greater positive affect.**

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## Results (cont.)

Breaking down notifications by type, we found a similar pattern for text messages exchanged, which was associated with greater positive affect and more stress. Emails received was also associated with greater negative affect, increased stress, and increased positive affect (Table 2). See SOM for details on other digital behaviors.

Table 1

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Positive affect | | | | |
| 2. Negative affect | -.57*** | | | |
| 3. Stress | -.57*** | .79*** | | |
| 4. Phone screen time | .05 | .20*** | .26*** | |
| 5. Phone notifications | .20*** | .21*** | .26*** | .57*** |

*Note. ***p < .001. **p < .05. *p <.10.*

Table 2

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Positive affect | | | | |
| 2. Negative affect | -.57*** | | | |
| 3. Stress | -.57*** | .79*** | | |
| 4. Texts exchanged | .18*** | .08 | .08* | |
| 5. Emails received | .13** | .11** | .10* | .43*** |

*Note. ***p < .001. **p < .05. *p <.10.*

## Discussion

At the peak of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital behaviors that more obviously implied social interaction, like getting more notifications and sending more texts, were the ones that predicted increased positive affect, along with increased negative affect and stress. Of course, we can make no causal conclusions, and our results can only be generalized to a small timeframe during the pandemic.