

PRACTICE REFLECTIONS

Digitally Mediated Attachment Regulation: A Conceptual Clinical Model

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Minimal digital cues—read receipts, online status indicators, and response latency—can acquire disproportionate emotional significance for individuals with high attachment vulnerability. This paper proposes a conceptual model of digitally mediated attachment regulation, developed through psychodynamic and attachment-informed clinical reflection and illustrated by three cases (H10, S40, and T89) drawn from private practice. Whereas classical attachment triggers are largely episodic, the model suggests that contemporary digital affordances may reorganise attachment dynamics towards a near-continuous state of hyperactivation. The cases illustrate a recurring five-phase sequence: cue detection, threat-biased interpretation, affective destabilisation, regulatory enactment, and transient stabilisation. The paper conceptualises the smartphone not as a transitional object under the subject's omnipotent control, but as a structurally unstable medium that continuously reflects the uncontrollable autonomy of the attachment figure. The configuration is offered as a clinical proposal, object-bound and meaning-driven, to be distinguished from generalised anxiety, behavioural addiction, and obsessive-compulsive phenomena, and inviting empirical investigation.

Digitally Mediated Attachment Regulation: A Conceptual Clinical Model

Minimal digital cues can acquire striking emotional significance in contemporary communication. A delayed reply, a read receipt, an “online” indicator, or the visible timing of another person's response may appear trivial from the outside, yet in some clients these signals become the immediate surface on which the state of a relationship is monitored, feared, and temporarily stabilised. The issue addressed in this paper is therefore not a catchy public label, but a clinically recognisable configuration in which

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digitally mediated cues become integrated into the regulation of a psychically central attachment bond. What matters is not the cue itself, but the meaning it acquires within a vulnerable relational system (Schoore, 2007).

This paper treats the emphasised digital cues as a structural modification of how attachment threat may be encountered in modern everyday life. Classic social and interpersonal triggers are mainly event-bound and semantically rich: they can be an explicit rejection, a physical separation, a conflict, or a comparable event. Digital cues, however, are different in character. They are sparse in content, more implicit, persistently available, and temporally extended. While they are often highly ambiguous, they remain continuously available for inspection. Their importance therefore lies in the space they open for interpretation: in clients whose internal working models (IWM) are already organised around inconsistency, abandonment, devaluation, or rejection, the phone is not a neutral device. It becomes an unstable interface through which the state of a psychically central bond appears to unfold in real time.

The present work does not set out to define a novel disorder or to inflate diagnostics. It offers a theory-building clinical account of a phenomenon that clinicians may already encounter but not yet sufficiently articulate: cases in which a specific attachment bond becomes regulated through the temporal and symbolic structure of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Convergent clinical material is used as illustrative constraint, in order to clarify the configuration, specify its proposed mechanism, and distinguish it from flatter readings—ordinary problematic smartphone use, generic anxiety, or sensitivity to uncertainty in a general respect. The contribution of this work lies in its conceptual precision about how known attachment dynamics may be intensified, temporally reorganised, and clinically misread under contemporary digital conditions. The clinical utility lies in recognising that apparently trivial digital behaviours may be the manifest surface of object-bound attachment dysregulation.

Existing frameworks capture partial aspects of the phenomena described but leave a gap at a critical point. Models of problematic smartphone use or behavioural addiction account for repetitive checking, yet do not explain why the behaviour remains strictly organised around a single attachment figure and collapses in its absence. Obsessive-compulsive formulations capture repetitive monitoring but do not account for the reality-linked, relationally specific nature of the cues or the absence of symbolic or preventive logic. General models of anxiety or intolerance of uncertainty describe heightened reactivity to ambiguity but remain too diffuse to explain the tightly object-bound and temporally structured regulation observed here. What remains unaccounted for is a configuration in which minimal, continuously available digital signals organise a recurrent regulatory sequence tied to the perceived availability of a specific other. It is this gap that the present model addresses.

Theoretical Foundation: A Conceptual Model of Digitally Mediated Attachment

Internal Working Models and Affect Regulation

In attachment theory, the concept of the IWM is central to understanding the cognitive–affective schemas that guide individuals’ perceptions of themselves, others, and relationships (Bretherton, 1992). These mental representations fundamentally influence how individuals determine their own self-worth on the basis of others’ behaviour towards them and how they navigate social relationships throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1969, 1988). Attachment is a necessary human function for survival, as infants are unable to care for themselves; through repeated interaction with primary caregivers, infants begin to develop mental representations of these relationships, building a foundation for future relational patterns. These include expectations of one’s own behaviour and of the behaviour of others (Bowlby, 1969; De Carli et al., 2016). Such early relational patterns function as implicit templates that continue to organise how individuals anticipate, interpret, and respond to the availability of significant others across the lifespan, with available and affectionate caregiving fostering a stable sense of self, whereas unstable and inconsistent caregiving is reflected in later poor self-image and heightened insecurity in relationships (Eells, 2001).

Hyperactivation and Interpretive Bias in High-Vulnerability Cases

Attachment theory provides a framework for understanding a range of psychopathological developments rooted in early relational experiences. Under conditions of insecurity and unpredictability from the caregiver, individuals internalise expectations of inconsistent availability and develop heightened sensitivity to cues of rejection or absence (Ainsworth, 1969). Given the dependency of the infant on the caregiver, such experiences can have profound effects on the development of stable self- and other-representations (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

The anxious-ambivalent (or anxious-preoccupied) attachment style describes individuals who chronically worry about their partner’s availability, require repeated reassurance, and depend strongly on external validation (Levy & Davis, 1988). Shaver and Mikulincer (2007) describe this pattern as a hyperactivation of the attachment system in response to inconsistent caregiving, while Collins and Allard (2001) highlight the persistent expectation of being rejected, deprioritised, or unseen in one’s relational needs, resulting in a strong dependence on external cues for relational security. This dependence is not merely a preference for closeness, but a regulatory necessity: the individual’s affective stability becomes contingent on signals of the other’s availability. Attachment-related distress in situations of uncertainty or perceived threat to the bond is therefore not merely social discomfort but reflects a destabilisation of the individual’s sense of relational security (Ma, 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, 2012).

Individuals with high vulnerability tend to rely strongly on, and often to over-interpret, social cues in a way that confirms their existing expectations (Bowlby, 1969; Zayas et al., 2009). Research further indicates an asymmetry in cue processing: sensitivity to potential rejection cues is heightened, while positive or neutral cues are less effective in stabilising affect (Downey et al., 2004). Under these conditions, perception is not neutral but organised around the anticipated loss or instability of a specific attachment bond, leading to a cycle in which ambiguous cues are rapidly resolved in line with threat-biased expectations.

This paper deliberately focuses on the hyperactivating (anxious-preoccupied) pole of attachment insecurity, and a word on that choice is warranted. The regulatory behaviours of interest here—surveillant monitoring, repeated reassurance-seeking, and protest at perceived unavailability—are the behavioural signature of hyperactivating strategies, which intensify rather than suppress proximity-seeking under threat (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Deactivating (dismissing-avoidant) strategies, by contrast, characteristically down-regulate attachment cues and minimise dependence, and would be expected to manifest in disengagement from, rather than vigilance towards, digital availability cues. Consistent with this, contemporary research indicates that attachment anxiety, but not avoidance, predicts heightened electronic monitoring and problematic digital engagement (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Huang et al., 2024; Marshall et al., 2013). The configuration described here is therefore theoretically specific to the hyperactivating pole; how deactivating strategies interact with the same affordances is a distinct question, and one this paper does not attempt to answer.

The Digital Interface: Structural and Temporal Modifications

Within CMC, the dynamics described above unfold under significantly altered conditions. Compared with face-to-face interaction, CMC lacks nonverbal cues—such as tone of voice and facial expression—that are central to conveying emotional and relational meaning (Mehrabian, 1971). As Derks et al. (2008) and Krystal (2019) note, meaning in CMC is therefore often incomplete and must be inferred from limited textual or symbolic information, or through additional context such as emoticons that partially function as a replacement.

The clinical significance of CMC, however, lies less in this reduction of information than in the specific form of visibility it introduces, through novel affordances such as read receipts, online status indicators, and response latency, which make aspects of the other person's availability continuously visible and directly palpable. These features create a condition in which the absence, delay, or timing of a response becomes a salient and repeatedly accessible signal. This paper conceptualises these signals as a structural modification of attachment triggers. Unlike classical triggers, which are

typically discrete interpersonal events, digital triggers are characterised by: (1) low semantic density, (2) continuous or repeated availability, (3) temporal extension, and (4) inherent ambiguity under visibility.

In individuals with hyperactivated attachment systems, this combination of reduced contextual information and increased visibility of response dynamics alters the temporal structure of attachment regulation. Ambiguous cues are not only present but continuously updated, and can therefore repeatedly activate attachment-related expectations and pseudo-confirmations of distorted biases. What emerges is not simply increased reactivity, but a qualitative shift in regulation: attachment-related distress is no longer primarily event-driven, but organised as a near-continuous process structured around the ongoing possibility of relational confirmation or loss. Following Stiles's (2003) perspective on interpretive inquiry, this paper views these digital triggers not as neutral data points, but as the primary interface through which the IWM are currently negotiated and through which enactments are triggered.

A growing body of cyberpsychology research has documented associations consistent with this view, and it is important to situate the present proposal in relation to it. Attachment anxiety has repeatedly been linked to interpersonal electronic surveillance—the covert use of digital technology to monitor a partner's activity (Tokunaga, 2011)—and to online jealousy, with anxious, but not avoidant, individuals engaging in more frequent monitoring of partners' profiles, status, and connections (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Marshall et al., 2013). At the population level, meta-analytic work indicates that attachment anxiety is moderately to strongly associated with problematic social media and smartphone use, whereas avoidance shows only weak associations (Huang et al., 2024); a systematic review similarly concludes that insecure attachment, and anxiety in particular, shapes how individuals engage social-network affordances (Stöven & Herzberg, 2021). This literature establishes that such associations are robust and patterned by attachment style. It does not, however, specify the mechanism by which low-information cues couple with high-affect internal representations, nor the temporal reorganisation of regulation that the present model addresses; and it rests almost entirely on self-report survey and diary methods in non-clinical samples. The contribution proposed here is therefore complementary rather than competing: a clinical-conceptual account of how, and with what phenomenology, these documented tendencies are lived and regulated in highly vulnerable individuals.

The Smartphone as a Digital Unstable Medium

Although originally described in early development, transitional phenomena persist in transformed forms in adult life, where external objects may be recruited into regulatory functions analogous to transitional or self-object processes (Bollas, 1987; Kohut, 1971, 1977; Winnicott, 1971). Within this framework, the device through which these dynamics are enacted is not neutral; it approximates the functions of an external object (Ribak,

2009; Winnicott, 1953, 1971), but differs from classic transitional objects in some crucial properties. This is consistent with findings linking attachment configurations to patterns of smartphone use (Konok et al., 2016).

This paper specifies a crucial structural instability in this digital function. Unlike the classical transitional object, which is characterised by the individual's omnipotent control, the smartphone is structurally open to the autonomy of the other. It continuously reflects the other's availability or absence through externally generated signals (e.g., the "online" status). Consequently, the device assumes a dual function: it provides a medium for potential stabilisation while simultaneously exposing the subject to ongoing uncertainty and perceived relational threat. The ongoing exposure to the uncontrollable reality of the other's independence, outside the relational bond, can in particular become a source of persisting distress. Herein lies a paradox regarding the device itself: while it is the medium that holds access to the attachment figure, it is also the site at which the fragility and risk of the bond become most visible. The model proposed here suggests that it is this very duality that may maintain the attachment system in a state of chronic hyperactivation—the promise of connection coupled with continuous exposure to potential abandonment.

Approach to the Clinical Material

Conceptual Status and Use of Clinical Illustration

This paper is a conceptual and theoretical contribution rather than an empirical study. It does not test hypotheses, establish prevalence, or claim nomothetic generalisation. Its aim is to articulate, with as much precision as possible, a clinically recognisable configuration in which digitally mediated cues become integrated into the regulation of a central attachment bond, and to distinguish that configuration from adjacent constructs. The clinical material is used illustratively: the three cases are presented not as evidence that establishes the model, but as detailed exemplars that motivate it, give it phenomenological texture, and discipline its claims. The conceptual project itself arose after the author observed a cluster of comparable presentations in practice; it was not formulated in advance of, and did not shape, the clinical work from which the material derives.

The cases were selected purposively. From a larger group of clients presenting comparable difficulties, three were chosen as paradigmatic—high-severity presentations in which the structural features of interest appear in their clearest form. This is a deliberate sampling logic rather than a convenience: extreme or paradigmatic cases often render visible the mechanisms that remain obscured under milder conditions (Flyvbjerg, 2006). More specifically, the three were selected because they showed, among the comparable cases, the most limited capacity for mentalisation and self-regulation, and correspondingly the most pronounced suffering—conditions under which a regulatory system that lacks internal buffering, and therefore depends on external confirmation, becomes most legible. The corresponding

limitation—that such cases illustrate the configuration at its most florid and may not represent more typical presentations—is taken up explicitly in the Limitations section. Throughout, interpretive claims are advanced tentatively and are tied to explicitly described sequences rather than to global impressions; competing explanations are considered and retained or set aside on conceptual grounds rather than on the basis of frequency.

Interpretive Stance

The approach is interpretive and psychodynamically informed. Following Stiles's (2003) critique of bracketing, it does not assume theory-free observation; interpretive assumptions are made explicit and treated as revisable in the light of the material, so that theoretical understanding remains responsive to the clinical phenomena. The author's clinical orientation is grounded in psychoanalytic theory, ego psychology, object-relations theory, and the psychoanalytic perspective on personality disorders, alongside extensive experience working with couples. This forms the lens through which the cases are read. This lens is important because it shapes what is noticed and how it is interpreted.

Two points of transparency follow. First, the attachment-style descriptions used in this paper are clinical and theoretical characterisations consistent with anxious-preoccupied (hyperactivating) organisation; they are not the product of a validated attachment-classification instrument such as the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), and are not offered as formal classifications. Second, the comparison across cases is itself interpretive rather than a coding procedure. Rather than analysing data in an empirical sense, the author looked for recurring features in (a) triggering conditions, such as visibility and response latency, (b) affective response sequences, and (c) regulatory behaviours, and treated only those features that recurred and remained coherent across cases as candidates for the proposed configuration. The aim is not to infer a category from isolated impressions, but to specify a recurrent clinical pattern by showing how known attachment dynamics may be reorganised under conditions of digital mediation.

Clinical Documentation, Consent, and Peer Consultation

The clinical material derives from the author's private practice and from detailed session notes taken during each session and completed immediately afterwards. Sessions were not audio- or video-recorded. Accordingly, the quotations presented in the case descriptions are close reconstructions based on these contemporaneous notes—representative of the clients' expressions and, where possible, their wording—rather than verbatim transcriptions. Throughout, a distinction was maintained between client-reported experience, clinician observation, and interpretive inference.

To reduce the risk of idiosyncratic overreading, the emerging formulation was discussed in peer consultation with two experienced clinicians, one of which is trained in AAI. These discussions included the affective pull experienced in the work itself (see the Countertransference section) and

served as a check on whether the identified patterns corresponded to clinically recognisable structures rather than to the author's expectations alone, anchoring the analysis within established psychodynamic and attachment-informed frameworks.

The work constitutes a retrospective conceptualisation of material arising in the course of routine clinical care, rather than prospective research, and under the applicable national framework such reporting does not require research-ethics-committee review. The principal safeguard is informed consent. In this practice, clients provide written consent at the outset of treatment to the potential later use of anonymised clinical material for research and academic publication, including open-access publication; they are further informed of any specific planned use, are given access to the relevant manuscript, and retain the right to decline prior to submission. All three clients were informed of this specific work, had access to the manuscript, and did not object. All identifying biographical details have been altered or omitted—ages are approximate or unspecified and contextual identifiers removed—so that anonymity is protected without distorting the clinical meaning of the material. The work was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and with all applicable data-protection requirements.

Case Presentations

The three cases presented here were selected because, despite important differences in biography and relational context, they share a consistent experiential configuration. In each case, one specific person becomes the central attachment focus. Across all three, affective stability is strongly dependent on the availability, responsiveness, and digital traceability of that person. The smartphone is not a neutral communication device in these constellations; it becomes the arena through which waiting, monitoring, anticipation, distress, relief, and renewed destabilisation are enacted throughout the day. Contact is associated with immediate calming, whereas absence, delay, ambiguity, or perceived competition is associated with rapid affective destabilisation. The result is not episodic worry but a near-continuous state of preoccupation in which the client's day is structured around the possibility of digital contact. All three clients experience this preoccupation as ego-dystonic and describe marked psychological strain.

Case H10

H10 is a man in his mid-twenties in a long-term relationship. At the time described, his life context is destabilised by a reduction in structure and purpose. Although financially secure, he reports diminished purpose and a growing sense of worthlessness. Within this context, a platonic friendship with another woman has become the central axis of his emotional life, which he describes as the most severe psychological state he has experienced. The attachment is experienced as overwhelming and involuntary. He does not understand why this particular friend, rather than his girlfriend, has

become central. This lack of explanation does not alter the fact that his day becomes organised around her. He explicitly denies romantic or sexual interest. Thoughts about her, which he describes as obsessive, are present upon waking, persist throughout the day, and continue until sleep. Other tasks, interests, obligations, and relationships recede behind one dominant concern: whether contact will occur and how it will unfold.

The phenomenology is sharply state-dependent. When H10 is in contact with her, particularly in person, he experiences immediate relief and temporary stabilisation. When contact is delayed, interrupted, or uncertain, his affect deteriorates rapidly. He describes repeated cycles of intense craving, temporary relief, and renewed destabilisation several times per day. The relief does not consolidate into lasting security but diminishes shortly after contact ends, returning him to preoccupation and distress. He himself compares this pattern to addiction, particularly in the rapid alternation between relief and renewed need.

The digital environment is where this dependency becomes most observable. H10 remains in her chat window for extended periods, monitoring signs of availability. He tracks her online status closely. If she comes online and does not respond, his anxiety increases; delay is not experienced as neutral but as potentially meaningful. The critical element is not only absence, but the ambiguity surrounding it. To reduce this ambiguity, he extends monitoring beyond her directly: he checks the online status of her brother to infer whether she may be engaged elsewhere. The checking behaviour is not random but serves a regulatory function, attempting to reduce uncertainty through available digital cues.

In digital communication, H10 frequently interprets neutral messages as potentially negative. Minor variations—such as punctuation, the absence of emojis, or message tone—are experienced as ambiguous and require resolution. This leads to recurrent reassurance-seeking behaviours. He sends explicit affirmations (e.g., “You’re my best friend”, “I am happy to have you”) in order to elicit reciprocal confirmation. He distinguishes between spontaneous reassurance and elicited reassurance, experiencing the latter as less stabilising but still necessary. These sequences can occur several times per day. He describes his own behaviour as disproportionate and experiences it as incongruent with his self-image.

His daily structure becomes organised around anticipated availability. He knows her schedule in advance and finds periods of predictable unavailability easier to tolerate than unexplained delays, as they provide an external explanation that reduces ambiguity. He plans his activities to remain available for potential contact, postpones obligations, and maintains psychological readiness for interaction. Even in the absence of planned communication, he keeps time open for her. His day is therefore structured not by his own priorities, but by the possibility of contact.

H10 reports high levels of distress, describing the experience as exhausting and difficult to sustain. He reports passive suicidal ideation in the sense of not wanting to continue in this state. Contact with the attachment figure is described as the only reliably stabilising factor. He is aware that the dependency is excessive and inconsistent with his values. This awareness does not reduce the behaviour but coexists with it, contributing to additional shame and internal conflict. He also reports emerging behaviours aimed at preserving access to the attachment figure, including subtle competitiveness and attempts to secure his position relative to others. The case presents a man with intact reality testing who nevertheless shows pronounced affective dependence on the digitally mediated availability of one person.

Case S40

S40 is a woman in her mid-thirties in a long-term relationship. Outwardly, her life remains functional. Inwardly, it is dominated by an attachment to a man she has never met in person and does not realistically expect to meet. Among many online contacts, this man has become the exclusive centre of her emotional focus. Over time, the content of their communication has become secondary; what matters is whether contact occurs at all: whether he is available, whether he replies, how quickly he replies, and whether his attention appears directed towards her.

S40's distress is substantial and largely concealed. Her partner is aware that she spends considerable time messaging online, but does not know the extent or intensity of what is occurring. She withdraws to hide episodes of distress when the man does not respond. This concealment indicates that the pattern is not limited to visible digital overuse, but can coexist with an externally intact daily functioning while privately organising her emotional experience. Her day becomes structured around indicators of his activity, including online status changes and message timing. She engages in frequent checking behaviour, attempting to infer whether he has opened or prioritised other conversations. Periods of waiting are characterised by continuous interpretation and anticipation. She organises daily routines around potential contact, including adjusting work behaviour and maintaining constant digital availability. Sleep is affected by rumination and night-time checking. The phone functions as the primary site through which expectations of contact are monitored.

When contact is absent or delayed, S40 reports marked agitation, anxiety, jealousy, and a pronounced sense of inner tension and devaluation. She describes crying episodes, somatic arousal (e.g., shaking, shortness of breath), and headaches with nausea. Minimal contact produces immediate but short-lived relief. This relief does not stabilise the overall pattern but is followed by renewed monitoring and anticipation of the next response. Her affect fluctuates closely with the timing and perceived quality of his responsiveness, resulting in a persistent state of insecurity.

A significant feature of the case is an exploitative interactional dynamic. The man elicits financial support by invoking distress, which is followed by attention and affirming messages. S40 describes this pattern as systematic and is aware that she is not in an actual relationship with him. Despite this, she continues the interaction, indicating that insight does not interrupt the regulatory cycle. The case thus illustrates a pattern in which digitally mediated cues—particularly availability, response latency, and perceived attention—function as recurrent triggers for affective shifts and corresponding regulatory behaviours.

Case T89

T89 is a man in his late twenties attached to a woman with whom he is in a transitional, not yet fully established romantic relationship. He has had strong feelings for her for approximately five years, during which they were good friends without romantic involvement. After two years without contact, during which both were in other relationships, renewed contact reactivated the attachment rapidly and with an intensity similar to earlier experiences. He describes this not as ordinary longing, but as the re-emergence of a previously known pattern of strong emotional dependency.

As in the other cases, his cognitive field becomes focused on one person. Thoughts about her are frequent and repetitive, predominantly involving concerns about not being sufficient, the potential loss of her interest, or the presence of alternative partners. T89 describes a persistent anticipatory anxiety that she might send a message confirming these fears. Waiting is experienced not as neutral anticipation but as a state of tension, and the absence of contact remains difficult to tolerate. During work, reduced access to his phone temporarily interrupts monitoring behaviour, but simultaneously increases anxiety about later confronting a potentially negative message.

He reports a high degree of interpretation of digital communication, particularly of messages with a neutral tone. He attends closely to punctuation, length, wording, and the use of emojis. Messages that are retrospectively identified as neutral are experienced in the moment as ambiguous and potentially negative. Only clearly positive messages are experienced as stabilising. In response to ambiguous messages, he engages in reassurance-seeking behaviours (e.g., “is anything wrong”, “are you upset”), which he recognises as contributing to relational tension. He describes a recurrent sequence: ambiguous cue → perceived threat → reassurance-seeking → defensive reaction from the other person.

Digital contact functions as a primary regulator of his affective state. When engaged in direct or positively perceived communication, he experiences temporary calm and a sense of control. Upon separation, this stabilising effect diminishes, and he reports feelings of insecurity, emptiness, and a renewed need for contact. He engages in repeated checking behaviour, monitoring for replies and changes in online status. Delays in response are associated with increasing agitation. He describes prolonged periods of waiting in which

attention is focused on the communication interface. The pattern is characterised by short cycles of stabilisation following contact and a subsequent return of tension in the absence of response.

A distinguishing feature of T89 is the extent to which the pattern affects his behaviour and self-representation. In order to maintain the connection, he adapts his actions to the perceived preferences of the other person. He agrees to activities he does not prefer, minimises disagreement, and increases availability. He also reports modifying aspects of his presentation, such as clothing, without explicit external demand. He experiences these adjustments as necessary to prevent relational loss rather than as deliberate choices. The pattern reflects a progressive reduction of self-directed behaviour in favour of maintaining perceived relational security.

T89 reports low self-worth in relation to the attachment figure and remains highly attentive to potential signs of preference for others. Active communication provides a temporary sense of relational access and perceived influence over the interaction. In the absence of such interaction, he experiences a loss of control over his affective state. He describes his own behaviour as disproportionate and inconsistent with his self-concept, yet this awareness does not interrupt the pattern and contributes to additional self-evaluative distress.

The Proposed Configuration: Recurring Features Across the Cases

Drawing together the recurring features of H10, S40, and T89, the cases suggest a consistent configuration, which is described below. This configuration is not proposed as a normative description of digital communication; it is explicitly bounded to high-vulnerability cases characterised by pre-existing attachment insecurity and fragile self-experience, as reflected in the clinical material. Bearing in mind the limits of three illustrative cases, the following four dimensions are offered as a proposal open to refinement.

1. A shift in the temporal structure of attachment regulation. In classical formulations, the attachment system is typically activated episodically, in response to discrete interpersonal events or threats (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1969). The cases suggest that digital affordances—specifically visibility through online status, read receipts, and response latency—may reorganise this process towards a near-continuous state of activation. Because the digital interface provides something like a live dashboard of the other's availability, the subject is exposed to a stream of recurrent micro-triggers. The attachment system may then not return to a baseline of security but remain in a state of chronic hyperactivation, in which the day is structured around the possibility of digital contact rather than around the subject's own autonomous priorities.

2. A recurring regulatory sequence that operates largely outside volitional control. The clinical material suggests a sequence of five phases:

- **Cue detection:** A minimal, passive digital signal (e.g., a read receipt without a reply, or a change in “online” status) is registered.
- **Threat-biased interpretation:** Owing to pre-existing IWM organised around expectations of rejection or deprioritisation (Bretherton, 1992; Collins & Allard, 2001), the ambiguous cue is interpreted as a relational threat.
- **Affective destabilisation:** This interpretation triggers rapid affective destabilisation, ranging from catastrophic rumination to somatic arousal such as shaking, shortness of breath, sobbing, or panic.
- **Regulatory enactment:** To neutralise the threat, the subject engages in compensatory behaviours, such as surveillant monitoring, explicit reassurance-seeking, or elicitation of contact.
- **Transient stabilisation and decay:** While contact or reassurance produces immediate relief (functioning as a kind of “digital fix”), this stabilisation is structurally fragile and decays rapidly, reinstating the initial vulnerability and returning the subject to the first phase.

3. Distress that is meaning-driven and object-bound. While the phenomenology may superficially resemble behavioural addiction or generalised problematic smartphone use, the cases suggest that the device is not the target of the dependency. The smartphone functions instead as the interface of representation for a single, psychically central attachment figure, and is better understood as the system-inherent carrier of the dynamic. As Schore (2007) suggests, communication involves an implicit layer of affect regulation; here, the digital device becomes the primary surface on which the perceived fate of the bond appears to unfold. The device remains structurally unstable because it continuously reflects the uncontrollable autonomy of the other, which is experienced as a latent and uncontrollable threat—a feature that distinguishes it from a classic transitional object.

4. A consistent pull in the clinical encounter. Across the cases, a distinctive countertransference was experienced, marked by urgency and heightened vigilance and by a pressure on the clinician to provide the same reassurance the client sought from the digital interface. This is offered here as a clinical observation rather than as an established feature of the configuration, and it is developed further in the Countertransference section.

Taken together, this synthesis suggests that the digital environment may not introduce a novel pathology so much as specify how known attachment dynamics operate under the structural conditions of contemporary communication: the interaction between a vulnerable attachment system and a communication medium that produces continuous, low-information, but

high-salience signals may give rise to a distinctive presentation of an otherwise well-established set of attachment dynamics, accompanied by a high level of suffering. That a similar configuration appears across differing personal and relational contexts is itself suggestive, although three cases can do no more than motivate the proposal.

Interpretation and Discussion

Conceptualising the Attachment System under Digital Conditions

The present work proposes that the suffering described in the illustrative cases is not adequately captured by generalised models of problematic smartphone use or surface-level anxiety. The cases instead suggest a more specific configuration in which a single person assumes a central regulatory function for the subject's affective organisation, while the digital device becomes the immediate medium through which stability is maintained, threatened, lost, and temporarily restored. Within this framework, the essential clinical unit of analysis is the attachment system under digital conditions. The smartphone is relevant only insofar as it provides a concrete surface on which the perceived fate of the bond appears to unfold: the subject scans for signs of continued relevance and is repeatedly confronted with structural ambiguity. These cues extend the regulatory field beyond actual interaction, so that the bond is continuously monitored even in the absence of direct communication. This configuration suggests how pre-existing insecurities in self-experience, which might otherwise remain latent, may become increasingly difficult to regulate under the structural conditions of contemporary communication.

Mechanism: Low-Information Input and High-Affect Interpretation

The proposed model suggests that these phenomena represent the activation of established IWM under conditions of persistent digital ambiguity. Because CMC lacks the implicit layer of nonverbal cues such as tone of voice and facial expression (Derks et al., 2008; Krystal, 2019; Mehrabian, 1971), it produces a low-information input that requires heavy interpretive labour. In individuals with insecure attachment who already harbour heightened expectations of inconsistency or rejection (Ainsworth, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Collins & Allard, 2001), this creates a systematic coupling of low-information input with high-affect interpretation. This interpretive process is not neutral or open-ended, but strongly constrained by pre-existing expectations of relational instability, leading to a rapid resolution of ambiguity in the direction of perceived threat.

As seen across the cases, ambiguity is not tolerated as an open state but is rapidly resolved in line with threat-biased expectations (Bowlby, 1969; Downey et al., 2004; Zayas et al., 2009). For H10, neutral messages are experienced as dismissive; for S40, absence triggers somatic distress; for T89, mere variations in punctuation require immediate clarification. Digital

mediation therefore does not create distortion so much as provide a continuous stream of minimally specified cues through which an already biased system repeatedly confirms itself.

The Smartphone as a Structurally Unstable Medium

The smartphone has been discussed as approximating functions reminiscent of transitional objects (cf. Konok et al., 2016; Ribak, 2009; Sugarman, 2017; Winnicott, 1953, 1971). In the present framework, it holds the possibility of return and preserves the continuity of the bond in the object's absence. The present model, however, specifies a crucial structural instability that distinguishes the smartphone from the classical transitional object: whereas the classical object (e.g., a blanket) is under the subject's omnipotent control, the smartphone is structurally open to the autonomy of the other. It continuously reflects the other's availability, absence, or delay through externally generated signals, rather than through the subject's projection. The device therefore occupies a paradoxical position: it functions as a regulator of proximity while simultaneously confronting the subject with the uncontrollable independence of the attachment figure. This difference is arguably not gradual but categorical, since it disrupts the defining condition of transitional phenomena—the maintenance of an illusion of presence under the subject's control—by reintroducing the other's independent agency as a continuously operative variable. As the case material illustrates, this duality may induce a near-continuous state of hyperactivation in which the source of comfort is simultaneously the surface on which the subject encounters uncontrollable relational threat. T89's case is illustrative here: he describes returning to the phone in anticipation of the very message he fears, so that the device that might reassure him is also the one he approaches with dread.

A Functional Regulatory Sequence

The proposed sequence (cue detection through transient stabilisation and decay) is best understood as occurring largely outside volitional control, and it suggests that the observed behaviours are not arbitrary “addictions” but functionally organised attempts to stabilise a system that lacks internal regulatory buffering and cannot maintain security without external confirmation. The sequence reflects a closed regulatory loop in which each attempt at stabilisation contains the conditions for its own rapid collapse.

Differentiation from Adjacent Constructs and Boundary Conditions

The relevant question is not whether adjacent models capture partial features of the phenomenon, but whether any of them can account for the full set of features described above without remainder. To avoid conceptual inflation or overreach, the proposed configuration should be distinguished carefully from a number of superficially similar phenomena (Buckner et al., 2010; Clark & Wells, 1995).

Obsessive-Compulsive Phenomena

Repetitive checking is present, but it is not an obsessive-compulsive ritual aimed at neutralising intrusive thoughts, and it carries no symbolic character. It is, rather, a highly directed attempt to assess the state of a specific attachment bond. Within the model proposed here, one could imagine the checking being replaced by alternative behaviour, but only insofar as that behaviour would deliver the same result for the subject; the behaviour is therefore reality-linked and object-specific rather than driven by internally generated intrusive content requiring ritualistic neutralisation. Nor is there any magical or preventive logic of the kind seen in obsessive-compulsive phenomena. In the proposed configuration, the symptom collapses without the specific object.

Behavioural Addiction

Although clients often use the language of addiction, the proposed mechanism is not generalised reward-seeking or dopamine-based “hijacking”, but is strictly object-bound and meaning-driven. There is little pleasure involved; on the contrary, were the initial perception of the bond intact, the behaviour would not occur at all. There are accordingly no variable reinforcement schedules to be identified as the origin, since the activity itself is not inherently rewarding. What is reinforced is not the behaviour itself, but the temporary restoration of perceived access to the attachment figure. This distinction is consistent with population-level findings that the association between attachment anxiety and problematic digital use is patterned by attachment style rather than reflecting a uniform reward dynamic, with anxiety, but not avoidance, strongly implicated (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Huang et al., 2024; Marshall et al., 2013).

Intolerance of Uncertainty and Generalised Anxiety

Related constructs such as intolerance of uncertainty may capture one component of the process but remain insufficient: the issue is not uncertainty in general, but the affective overloading of ambiguity within a specific attachment bond, in which minimal cues are interpreted as indicators of relational loss or devaluation. The configuration is object-bound in a way that diffuse anxiety is not.

Limerence and Intrusive Fantasy

Unlike limerence or intrusive fantasy (Tennov, 1979), which can be sustained internally, this configuration is maintained by a constant stream of real-time micro-signals provided by digital platforms; it is anchored in, and collapses without, the external interface.

Dependent Personality Features

Dependent personality features may be relevant in some cases but do not exhaust the phenomenon: the present model specifies how attachment vulnerability is temporally reorganised through digital affordances, rather than describing dependency as a general personality style.

The distinguishing feature across these comparisons is therefore not the presence of distress, but the way in which it is organised: a continuous, object-bound regulatory loop driven by persistent, low-information signals rather than by discrete interpersonal events. The present work explicitly bounds its claims to high-vulnerability cases. It does not propose a general theory of digital communication, but specifies how known attachment dynamics may undergo a temporal restructuring—moving from episodic to near-continuous activation under the particular conditions of digital visibility and latency.

Countertransference

A recurring feature of the clinical encounters, offered here as a clinical observation rather than a formal finding, was a distinctive countertransference. In sessions, the author experienced a pull towards urgency and heightened vigilance, and at times a pressure to provide the very reassurance the client sought from the digital interface; alongside this was a felt sense of the clients' despair, which at moments approached the limits of what the author could comfortably hold. This was noted in the immediate post-session reflections and was taken to peer consultation, where it functioned both as clinical material and as a check on interpretation. If the configuration tended to reproduce itself in the consulting room—an intolerance of relational ambiguity enacted in the transference—this lent some tentative support to reading the clients' digital behaviour as an attempt to manage that same ambiguity; at the same time, naming it in consultation guarded against the risk of the author over-identifying with the clients' urgency and thereby overreading the material. During sessions, this pressure was often marked by direct appeals for the clinician's reading of the other person ("Do you think they...?"), which may be understood as a further attempt at external affect regulation. Because these observations derive from a single clinician's experience, they are advanced tentatively and would benefit from more systematic exploration.

Limitations

Several limitations follow directly from the nature of this work. First, this is a conceptual paper illustrated by a small number of deliberately selected cases; it offers no estimate of prevalence and makes no claim to nomothetic generalisation. Because the cases were chosen as high-severity, paradigmatic presentations, they illustrate the configuration at its most florid,

and more typical or milder presentations may differ in important respects; the transferability of the proposal to such presentations remains an open question.

Second, the material derives from a single clinician's private practice and from session notes rather than recordings, and the quotations are reconstructions from contemporaneous notes rather than verbatim transcripts. The interpretations are therefore subject to own interpretation bias: the same psychodynamic lens that makes certain features visible may also shape what is noticed and how it is read. Peer consultation was used to mitigate this risk, but never eliminates it, and the countertransference observations in particular rest on one clinician's experience.

Third, the focus on the hyperactivating pole of attachment insecurity is deliberate and theoretically motivated, but it means the model is silent on how deactivating strategies might interact with the same digital affordances. Relatedly, no standardised attachment measure or classification instrument was used; the attachment-style descriptions are clinical characterisations rather than validated classifications.

Fourth, the findings are bound to a specific clinical and cultural context. The contemporary empirical literature on attachment and digital communication, while consistent with the present proposal, is itself drawn largely from non-clinical, predominantly Western samples (Stöven & Herzberg, 2021), and the interaction of the proposed configuration with culture, age, platform, and gender remains to be examined. The model is accordingly offered as a hypothesis-generating framework rather than as a validated account, and its central claims invite empirical testing.

Conclusion

This paper proposes a conceptual model of digitally mediated attachment regulation, developed from the recurring features of the illustrative cases of H10, S40, and T89. By examining the disproportionate affective relevance acquired by minimal digital cues, the analysis has sought to clarify a clinically significant configuration in which affective stability becomes organised around the perceived availability of a single attachment figure, mediated through visibility and latency cues, with a fragility that cannot be internally stabilised.

The configuration is best understood not as an ontologically new form of pathology, but as a structural modification of known attachment dynamics operating under contemporary conditions. Attachment theory provides the essential foundation: IWM, as enduring cognitive–affective blueprints, are characterised in these cases by persistent expectations of inconsistency, rejection, or deprioritisation. Within the prevailing digital environment, these models encounter a condition of low-information input combined with continuous visibility. This combination introduces a structural ambiguity that vulnerable subjects find difficult to tolerate, resulting in a coupling of minimal digital input with high-affect interpretation. The primary contribution of this work lies in specifying how this environment may

reorganise attachment regulation into a near-continuous, object-bound process rather than an episodic response to discrete relational events—and in situating that proposal in relation to a contemporary empirical literature that has documented the relevant correlations without yet specifying their mechanism.

Drawing on the concept of transitional phenomena, the work also specifies the functional role of the smartphone as a structurally unstable medium (cf. Konok et al., 2016; Ribak, 2009; Sugarman, 2017; Winnicott, 1953, 1971). The device provisionally maintains the continuity of the bond in the object's absence while simultaneously exposing the subject to the uncontrollable autonomy of the other. It therefore occupies a paradoxical role: enabling regulation while simultaneously destabilising it through continuous exposure to the other's independence. The observed regulatory behaviours—ranging from surveillant monitoring and reassurance-seeking to self-sedation—appear to follow a consistent functional sequence and to be largely outside voluntary control. Although experienced as ego-dystonic, the resulting distress overrides volitional control, maintaining the regulatory loop despite insight.

By framing the cases as illustrative material that motivates and informs the proposed conceptualisation, this paper offers a way of thinking about a configuration that clinicians may already observe but not yet precisely articulate. Its clinical utility lies in enabling practitioners to interpret seemingly trivial digital behaviours as potential manifestations of object-bound attachment dysregulation, rather than reducing them to generalised anxiety or problematic device use.

As a theory-building clinical paper grounded in interpretive analysis, these reflections are necessarily bound to the specific clinical and cultural contexts described (Stiles, 2003). While the proposed model specifies a recurrent structural configuration of triggers, it does not claim to describe normative digital behaviour or general population effects. It offers, rather, a precise conceptual framework for recognising how attachment vulnerability may be intensified and temporally reorganised under conditions of persistent digital visibility and ambiguity—and a set of claims that future empirical work can refine or refute.

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