




The relationship between parental screen guilt and subjective well-being in mothers

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the relationship between Parental Screen Guilt (PSG) and Subjective Well-Being (SWB) among mothers with children under 18 years old. PSG refers to the guilt parents feel when they perceive their children's screen use as inconsistent with ideal parenting standards. SWB was assessed through two affective components: Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA). This research employed a quantitative correlational design, involving 171 mothers recruited through purposive sampling. The instruments used were the 5-item PSG scale adapted from Wolfers et al. (2024) and the I-PANAS-SF to measure PA and NA. The findings show that PSG is positively associated with both PA and NA, indicating that higher levels of guilt are linked to a greater tendency to experience both positive and negative affect in daily life. These results highlight that guilt in digital parenting elicits multifaceted emotional responses, where PSG operates as a dual-function psychological mechanism that may generate emotional discomfort while simultaneously promoting awareness and self-correction. Furthermore, guilt is shaped not only by the child's screen time duration but also by the discrepancy between ideal digital parenting standards and everyday screen-use practices. Thus, PSG can be understood as a form of dissonance between parental values and the realities of real-life parenting. Overall, this study enriches the theoretical understanding of moral emotions in digital parenting and offers practical implications for developing educational programs and interventions to help parents manage guilt in healthier, more constructive ways.

Keywords: parental screen guilt, subjective well being, positive affect, negative affect, digital parenting

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1. Introduction

In today's digital era, the internet and digital devices shape daily life. Data show Indonesian internet use continues to rise. Nearly half of users are under 18 (Haryanto, 2024; Sihombing, 2025). Children and adolescents are growing up surrounded by digital technology and social media. Digital technology offers benefits in communication, entertainment, and information access. However, many studies link excessive screen use to mental health problems in adolescents. These include depression, anxiety, stress, sleep disturbances, low self-esteem, and social anxiety (Sohn et al., 2019; Azem et al., 2023).

High screen use among children and adolescents concerns many parents. Surveys reveal parental worries about exposure to inappropriate content, screen addiction, and mental health effects (Singh, 2025). Research shows that parents' own device use is linked to increased children's screen time (Davis, 2024). These circumstances place parents in a dilemma, especially if they feel unable to limit their children's screen use in line with perceived ideal parenting standards. This may cause feelings of guilt, particularly among mothers, who often play the primary caregiving role.

Screen time issues become more complex when they are connected to children's developmental stages. Adolescence features identity formation, autonomy-seeking, and intense emotional experiences (Papalia & Martorell, 2021). Adolescents often develop lifestyles that differ from those of their parents. This individuation

process involves setting boundaries and can trigger family conflict. Adolescents value privacy and autonomy, including controlling their screen use. These conditions make parents vulnerable to emotional pressure and dilemmas, leading to guilt when they feel unable to meet ideal parenting standards.

Recent research introduces Parental Screen Guilt (PSG), defined as the guilt parents feel for allowing children to use screens (television, tablets, smartphones) in ways that are inconsistent with their values or ideals (Wolfers et al., 2024). The identity of being a “good parent” is central to many parenting roles. Excessive screen time may strongly trigger feelings of guilt (Findley et al., 2022, as cited in Wolfers et al., 2024). However, definitions of “excessive use” vary based on children’s age, family values, and perceived risks. PSG relates not to the duration of screen use alone, but to the gap between ideal standards and actual practices. PSG is also identified as an independent predictor of parenting stress and parent–child relationship satisfaction, regardless of screen time duration (Wolfers et al., 2024).

Guilt may encourage reflection and behavioral improvement, but it can become maladaptive when prolonged or poorly managed (Barrett, 1995; Ferguson & Stegge, 1998, as cited in Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2018). O’Keefe (2000) describes guilt as an unpleasant emotional state. It arises from wrongful actions, missed actions, situations beyond one’s control, and self-evaluation based on internal standards. Shalev et al. (2023) found that excessive parental guilt is linked to depression, anxiety, and greater emotional burden in parenting. These findings show that maladaptive guilt may reduce parents’ subjective well-being.

Subjective Well-Being (SWB) is an individual’s evaluation of their life, including affective and cognitive components (Biswas-Diener et al., 2004). This study focuses on the affective aspect: the balance between positive and negative emotions. Positive affect means pleasant emotional experiences. Negative affect means unpleasant emotions. Persistent guilt may increase negative affect and reduce positive affect among mothers. Previous studies show excessive guilt is linked to emotional distress, depression, and anxiety in parenting (Shalev et al., 2023). Yet, studies on the link between Parental Screen Guilt (PSG) and Subjective Well-Being (SWB), especially among mothers, are limited.

Previous studies show that Parental Screen Guilt (PSG) is associated with parenting stress and parent–child relationship satisfaction (Wolfers et al., 2024). Excessive guilt is also linked to emotional distress, depression, and anxiety in parenting (Shalev et al., 2023). Still, research on PSG and Subjective Well-Being (SWB), especially among mothers, is limited. Persistent guilt can affect the balance between positive and negative affect, key components of SWB. Studies on PSG within Indonesian families are scarce. Thus, this study aims to analyze PSG and SWB among mothers with children under 18 years old. The study assumes that higher PSG is associated with lower subjective well-being, as reflected in less positive affect and/or more negative affect.

2. Method

This study involved 171 mothers with children under 18 years old, aged 25 to 63. A purposive sampling technique was employed, selecting participants who were mothers of children under 18. The minimum required sample size was determined using an a priori power analysis conducted with G*Power (effect size = 0.30, α = 0.05, power = 0.95), which indicated a minimum requirement of 115 participants. Therefore, the number of participants in this study exceeded the required minimum sample size. This study employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between Parental Screen Guilt (PSG) and Subjective Well-Being (SWB) among mothers.

This study used the Parental Screen Guilt (PSG) scale developed by Wolfers et al. (2024) to assess mothers’ guilt regarding their children’s digital media use (screen time) over the past week. The instrument consisted of five items, each measured on a Likert scale from 0 to 4 (0 = not at all, 4 = very much). An example item is: “I feel guilty about my child’s screen use (smartphone, tablet, television, computer/laptop, game console) during the past week.” Construct validity was examined using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), which showed that all items had factor loadings ranging from 0.593 to 0.889, indicating that all items were valid. The instrument demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of .880.

Subjective well-being was measured with the International Positive and Negative Affect Schedule–Short Form (I-PANAS-SF; Thompson, as cited in Karim et al., 2011). This instrument has two dimensions: Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA). There are 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. CFA results indicated that 9 items were valid, with factor loadings from 0.554 to 0.844. Reliability was strong, with Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients of .793 for PA and .866 for NA.

The research procedure began with a preparation stage, which included adapting the PSG instrument through expert judgment and content validity testing to ensure the appropriateness and clarity of each item. After the instrument was deemed suitable, data collection was conducted through both online and offline methods. For the online procedure, questionnaires were distributed via Google Forms shared through social media platforms and the researcher’s personal networks. For the offline procedure, questionnaires were

distributed to students at a junior high school to be delivered to their mothers. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the study's purpose and asked to provide informed consent. Participants then completed the questionnaires independently based on their experiences during the past week.

Data processing was conducted using Jamovi version 2.3.28. The first step involved data cleaning. After the data were prepared, coding and score calculations were performed according to the instruments used. Prior to the main analysis, validity testing was conducted. Construct validity was analyzed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to examine whether the items in the PSG and SWB scales (PA and NA) formed a unidimensional factor structure consistent with the theoretical model. Assumption testing was subsequently performed to ensure that the data met the requirements for parametric analysis, including normality testing using the Shapiro–Wilk test and reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha for each scale. After the data were found to meet the required criteria, appropriate statistical analyses were conducted to describe the data's general characteristics. The relationship between maternal guilt (PSG) and positive and negative affect, a nonparametric Spearman's rho correlation was used because the data did not meet the assumption of normality.

3. Result

Descriptive analyses provided a general overview of each variable's distribution. For PSG, the empirical mean was 1.96 compared to a hypothetical mean of 2.00, indicating relatively low reported guilt among mothers. The empirical mean for Positive Affect (PA) was 3.58, compared with a hypothetical mean of 3.00, suggesting relatively high positive affect. For Negative Affect (NA), the empirical mean was 2.29, reflecting relatively low negative affect.

Normality testing was conducted using the Shapiro–Wilk test for Parental Screen Guilt (PSG), Positive Affect (PA), and Negative Affect (NA). The results indicated that all variables had significance values below .05, namely PSG: $W = .983$, $p = .037$; PA: $W = .977$, $p = .007$; and NA: $W = .943$, $p < .001$. These findings indicate that PSG, PA, and NA were not normally distributed. Therefore, nonparametric Spearman's rho correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships among variables.

The results showed that Parental Screen Guilt (PSG) was positively and significantly correlated with Positive Affect (PA; $r = .364$, $df = 169$, $p < .001$). In addition, PSG was also positively and significantly correlated with Negative Affect (NA; $r = .408$, $df = 169$, and $p < .001$). These findings suggest that higher levels of maternal guilt related to children's screen time (Parental Screen Guilt) were associated with higher levels of both positive affect and negative affect. The results indicate that guilt may evoke negative affect due to moral discomfort, while also generating positive affect associated with motivation to improve digital parenting practices.

Table 1. Correlation Between PSG and SWB Variables (PA and NA Dimensions)

Variabel	Spearman's rho	df	P-value
PSG – PA	0.364	169	< .001
PSG - NA	0.408	169	< .001

The results showed no significant relationship between PSG (parenting style group; as measured in this study) and mothers' screen time ($r_s = -.030$, $p = .697$) or children's screen time ($r_s = .090$, $p = .243$). There was also no significant relationship between mothers' and children's screen time ($r_s = .060$, $p = .436$). The Kruskal–Wallis test, a non-parametric method for comparing multiple groups, found no significant differences in PSG levels based on children's or mothers' screen time categories (children: $\chi^2 = 1.57$, $p = .665$; mothers: $\chi^2 = 0.153$, $p = .926$). The Dwass–Steel–Critchlow–Fligner follow-up test, which assesses all pairwise group differences, also found that all comparisons were non-significant.

The Kruskal–Wallis test, a nonparametric statistical test used to compare medians among three or more groups, found no significant differences in Positive Affect (PA) or Negative Affect (NA) for children's or mothers' screen time categories (children: PA: $\chi^2 = 0.610$, $p = .894$; NA: $\chi^2 = 1.617$, $p = .656$; mothers: PA: $\chi^2 = 0.487$, $p = .784$; NA: $\chi^2 = 0.325$, $p = .850$).

We conducted moderation analyses to test whether the number of children's media devices, the number of mothers' media devices, and mothers' screen time duration moderated the relationship between Parental Screen Guilt (PSG) and Subjective Well-Being (SWB), measured as Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA). Results showed that the number of children's media devices did not directly affect Negative Affect or moderate the relationship between PSG and either PA or NA (all $p > .05$). See Tables 2 and 3 for details.

Table 2. Moderation Analysis of the Number of Children's Screen Media Devices in the Relationship Between PSG and Negative Affect

	Estimate	SE	Z	p
PSG	0.35721	0.0595	6.0085	< .001
media anak	-0.18711	0.2853	-0.6557	0.512
PSGt * media anak	0.00468	0.0553	0.0847	0.932

Table 3. Moderation Analysis of the Number of Children's Screen Media Devices in the Relationship Between PSG and Positive Affect

	Estimate	SE	Z	p
PSG	0.2943	0.0580	5.073	< .001
media anak	-0.0639	0.2784	-0.230	0.818
PSGt * media anak	-0.0143	0.0539	-0.266	0.790

In addition, the number of mothers' media devices did not moderate the relationship between PSG and either PA or NA. However, a significant negative direct effect of the number of mothers' media devices on PA was found (Estimate = -0.660 , $p = .017$), indicating that the greater the number of media devices used by mothers, the lower the level of positive affect experienced. The interaction effect between PSG and the number of mothers' media devices was not significant (Estimate = 0.007 , $SE = 0.063$, $Z = 0.115$, $p = .909$), indicating that the number of mothers' media devices did not moderate the relationship between PSG and PA.

The number of mothers' media devices also did not have a significant effect on Negative Affect (Estimate = 0.006 , $SE = 0.286$, $Z = 0.021$, $p = .983$), nor was the interaction with PSG significant (Estimate = -0.079 , $SE = 0.066$, $Z = -1.202$, $p = .229$).

Furthermore, mothers' screen time duration did not have a significant direct effect on either PA or NA, nor did it moderate the relationship between PSG and both dimensions (all $p > .05$). Further details are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Moderation Analysis of Mothers' Screen Time Duration in the Relationship Between PSG and Positive Affect

	Estimate	SE	Z	p
PSG	0.2984	0.0577	5.167	< .001
SCortu	0.0730	0.1705	0.428	0.668
PSG * SCortu	-0.0414	0.0356	-1.163	0.245

Table 5. Moderation Analysis of Mothers' Screen Time Duration in the Relationship Between PSG and Negative Affect

	Estimate	SE	Z	p
PSG	0.3649	0.0593	6.152	< .001
SCortu	0.1549	0.1751	0.885	0.376
PSG * SCortu	-0.0220	0.0366	-0.601	0.548

Based on the results, the hypothesis that higher Parental Screen Guilt (PSG) would be associated with lower positive affect was not supported. In contrast, the hypothesis stating that higher PSG would be associated with higher negative affect was supported.

Overall, the findings show that mothers reported low Parental Screen Guilt (PSG), high positive affect, and low negative affect. Further analysis showed that PSG was strongly and positively linked with both positive and negative affect. Thus, higher PSG is associated with stronger pleasant and unpleasant emotions toward children's screen use.

PSG was not significantly related to screen time duration for either mothers or children. Additionally, mothers' and children's screen time durations were not significantly associated. PSG levels did not differ significantly across screen time categories in either group. Also, no significant differences in positive or negative affect were found based on screen time categories for mothers or children.

Moderation analyses showed that neither the number of children's media devices, the number of mothers' media devices, nor mothers' screen time duration moderated the relationship between PSG and either positive or negative affect. While mothers' use of more media devices was linked to lower positive affect, this did not alter PSG's influence. These findings suggest that PSG is an emotional variable directly linked to mothers' affective states, regardless of digital behaviors like screen time or device count. Thus, mothers' emotional well-being appears more closely linked to their guilt about digital parenting than to the extent of their screen use.

4. Discussion

Descriptive analysis showed that, overall, mothers reported relatively low levels of Parental Screen Guilt (PSG). This finding indicates that most mothers were not experiencing intense or chronic guilt related to digital parenting. At the same time, mothers demonstrated relatively high levels of positive affect and relatively low levels of negative affect, reflecting generally favorable subjective well-being. These findings suggest that although mothers face challenges related to digital parenting, their overall emotional well-being tends to remain stable.

The findings demonstrated that higher levels of PSG among mothers were associated with both increased positive affect and heightened negative affect. This pattern suggests that PSG is not only a response to emotional distress but also reflects emotional involvement in digital parenting. In such contexts, guilt may function adaptively, encouraging self-reflection, vigilance, and motivation to improve parenting practices. The dual nature of guilt aligns with the view that it is a moral emotion with both adaptive and maladaptive aspects (Ferguson & Stegge, 1998, as cited in Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2018; Tangney et al., 2007).

Conversely, the positive association between PSG and negative affect underscores the inherently unpleasant aspect of guilt, often accompanied by feelings of anxiety, restlessness, or distress. When mothers repeatedly experience guilt without utilizing adaptive coping strategies, their emotional well-being may suffer. This observation mirrors findings by Wolfers et al. (2024), who linked PSG to increased parenting stress and emotional tension in mother–child relationships. Thus, PSG emerges as a psychological mechanism with a dual role: it generates emotional discomfort while simultaneously promoting self-awareness and motivating behavioral improvements.

No significant association emerged between PSG and either mothers' or children's screen time duration, nor were there significant differences in PSG across screen time categories. Rather than screen time duration itself, guilt appears to be more heavily influenced by the discrepancy between ideals of digital parenting and everyday screen use practices. Mothers may struggle to balance ideal expectations with practical realities, which can fuel feelings of guilt (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Thompson et al., 2023, as cited in Wolfers et al., 2024). Nabi and Keblusek (as cited in Wolfers et al., 2024) highlighted that subjective perceptions play a greater role than objective screen time in shaping screen time–related guilt, a notion further supported by these results.

Additional findings indicated that mothers' and children's screen time durations were not significantly associated. This result does not fully support Bandura's observational learning theory (as cited in Santrock, 2021), which suggests that children learn through observing parental behavior. In this study, children's digital media use may be more strongly influenced by factors such as peer influence, academic demands, personal preferences, and family rules. As a result, children's screen time duration does not necessarily reflect their mothers' screen time duration.

The moderation analysis showed that the number of children's media devices, the number of mothers' media devices, and mothers' screen time duration did not moderate the relationship between PSG and either positive affect or negative affect. These findings indicate that the influence of PSG on mothers' emotional conditions operates directly and is not shaped by the intensity of digital media use within the family. Thus, mothers' emotional well-being appears to be more closely related to how they perceive and evaluate screen

use rather than to the number of media devices or the duration of use itself. However, the number of media devices used by mothers was negatively associated with positive affect. This finding suggests that using a greater variety of media devices is associated with lower levels of positive affect, which may reflect digital fatigue or burnout.

Overall, the findings of this study strengthen the understanding that PSG represents a significant emotional response associated with mothers' subjective well-being, beyond digital behavior indicators such as screen time duration or the number of media devices used. These findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing excessive guilt should focus more on perception management and emotion regulation than on limiting screen time alone. Guilt in digital parenting is not always maladaptive; in certain situations, it may encourage self-reflection and motivate improvements in parenting practices. Therefore, approaches focused on emotion regulation and self-compassion may help mothers manage guilt in a healthier, more adaptive way.

In addition, the findings indicate that mothers' emotional experiences are influenced more by their perceptions and evaluations of screen use than by screen time duration itself. Therefore, digital parenting education should not focus solely on limiting screen time, but also on promoting more realistic, nonjudgmental perspectives on technology use within families. Although no significant relationship was found between mothers' and children's screen time, mothers still play an important role in shaping children's digital habits alongside other factors such as peer influence, family rules, academic demands, and digital access.

In addition, the findings indicate that mothers' emotional experiences are influenced more by their perceptions and evaluations of screen use than by screen time duration itself. The results also showed that the number of media devices and screen time duration did not moderate the relationship between PSG and mothers' affect, suggesting that PSG's influence on emotional well-being operates directly. These findings imply that mothers' emotional well-being is more closely related to how they evaluate themselves in their digital parenting role than to the intensity of family media use. Therefore, digital parenting education should not focus solely on limiting screen time, but also on promoting more realistic and nonjudgmental understandings of technology use within families. Parenting education programs may emphasize that screen use is not inherently harmful and that excessive guilt may arise from disproportionate social expectations. Furthermore, although no significant relationship was found between mothers' and children's screen time, mothers still play an important role in shaping children's digital habits alongside other factors such as peer influence, family rules, academic demands, and digital access.

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions about the relationship between PSG and subjective well-being. Second, screen time data for both mothers and children were based on mothers' estimated reports, which may be subject to bias and limited accuracy. Third, the study included mothers with children under 18 years of age without distinguishing between developmental stages, even though patterns of media use and parenting dynamics may differ across age groups. In addition, this study did not examine differences in PSG by demographic characteristics, such as mothers' age, occupation, and educational background. Finally, the study did not include other psychological variables that may influence the relationship between PSG and emotional well-being, such as parenting stress, emotion regulation, and parenting style.

This study demonstrates that Parental Screen Guilt (PSG) is significantly associated with mothers' subjective well-being, particularly in positive and negative affect. Higher levels of PSG were associated with both higher negative and positive affect. These findings suggest that guilt in digital parenting is not always maladaptive; rather, it may also function adaptively by encouraging self-reflection, vigilance, and motivation to improve digital parenting practices.

The study also found no significant association between PSG and screen time duration for mothers or children. The number of media devices and screen time did not moderate the relationship between PSG and mothers' affect. These findings indicate that perceptions, self-evaluations, and ideal parenting standards influence mothers' digital parenting emotions more than objective measures of media use.

Overall, this study expands the understanding of PSG as a complex emotional response within the context of modern digital parenting. The findings highlight the importance of digital parenting approaches that focus not only on limiting screen time but also on emotional regulation, self-management, and developing more realistic perceptions of technology use within families. Furthermore, this study provides an initial contribution to the limited literature on PSG and mothers' subjective well-being in the Indonesian context.

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