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GOVERNING THE SMARTPHONE GENERATION: A COMPARATIVE DOCUMENT ANALYSIS OF ADOLESCENT SMARTPHONE REGULATION IN INDIA AND SELECTED COUNTRIES

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of smartphone use among adolescents has generated increasing policy concern regarding distraction, academic engagement, digital well-being, online safety, and classroom discipline. This study examines how educational authorities regulate adolescent smartphone use through a qualitative comparative document analysis of policy and regulatory instruments in India and selected international contexts. The analysis employs a structured framework comprising six dimensions: scope and intensity of restriction, target population, policy rationale, regulatory mechanism, permitted exceptions, and governance and enforcement arrangements. The document corpus comprises 32 identified references/documents published between 2009 and 2026, selected purposively on the basis of their direct relevance to school-level smartphone regulation and their availability as government, legislative, educational-authority, or recognised institutional documents; secondary news reports were used only for contextual triangulation where appropriate. The analysis compares national and subnational regulatory approaches, recognising differences in educational governance across jurisdictions. The findings indicate that smartphone regulation is not characterised by a uniform global model. Instead, three broad approaches emerge: prohibition-oriented regulation, which restricts possession or access during the school day; controlled-use regulation, which permits smartphones under specified educational, health, accessibility, or emergency conditions; and responsible-use approaches, which emphasise digital well-being, parental supervision, and educationally purposeful use. Across the cases, policy documents commonly frame smartphones as potential sources of distraction, reduced classroom engagement, online harms, and threats to student well-being; these rationales are treated in this study as policy constructions rather than independently demonstrated causal effects. India demonstrates a particularly decentralised and multi-level governance pattern, with the Union Government providing broad guidance while States, Union Territories, and educational authorities develop context-specific restrictions. Internationally, more comprehensive whole-school restrictions are evident in several jurisdictions, although exceptions and implementation mechanisms vary considerably. The study argues that smartphone governance is best understood not simply as a question of banning or permitting devices, but as a policy process through which educational systems construct digital risk, adolescent responsibility, learning, and the legitimate conditions for technology use in schools.

Keywords: *adolescent smartphone use; smartphone restrictions; mobile-phone policy; document analysis; policy analysis; educational governance; India; international comparison; school regulation; digital governance.*

Introduction

Smartphones have become an integral component of adolescents' everyday lives, transforming the ways in which young people communicate, access information, learn, socialise, and

participate in digital environments. Their increasing presence in schools, however, has generated a policy debate concerning the appropriate balance between the educational potential of digital technologies and the risks associated with unrestricted personal-device use. Concerns surrounding smartphones include classroom distraction, reduced concentration, cyberbullying, inappropriate online content, disruption of school life, and excessive screen exposure. Consequently, governments and educational authorities in several countries have introduced policies restricting or regulating smartphone use in educational institutions. UNESCO reported that by the end of 2024, 79 education systems, representing approximately 40% of those monitored, had policies or laws banning smartphone use in schools, demonstrating the rapid expansion of this policy trend.

The policy debate, however, is not simply about whether smartphones should be banned. Contemporary regulatory approaches increasingly distinguish between personal and pedagogical use, and many policies allow exceptions for educational purposes, health requirements, disability-related needs, emergencies, or other exceptional circumstances. France, for example, established a legal prohibition on student mobile-phone use in schools and collèges through Law No. 2018-698 of 3 August 2018, while permitting specified exceptions, including pedagogical use. The French approach has subsequently developed through the *Portable en pause* initiative, which was generalised in collèges from the 2025 school year and involves physically separating students from their phones during the school day.

Australia represents a different regulatory structure. Rather than a single national statutory prohibition, smartphone restrictions have been implemented through State and Territory education systems. By April 2024, Australian Education Ministers reported that all States and Territories had policies preventing personal mobile-phone use in government schools. The Australian model therefore provides an important comparative case for examining how a broadly shared policy objective can be implemented through decentralised educational governance.

The Indian context presents another distinctive policy landscape. Smartphone regulation in India is characterised by multi-level governance, involving the Union Government, State and Union Territory administrations, education departments, school boards, and individual institutions. The Ministry of Education's PRAGYATA Guidelines on Digital Education (2020) recognised the need for age-appropriate management of digital learning and screen exposure. More recently, a Lok Sabha question answered by the Department of School Education and Literacy on 23 March 2026 specifically addressed the regulation of smartphone use in schools. The Ministry indicated that India does not operate through a single nationwide smartphone restriction and highlighted the role of States and educational authorities in implementing relevant measures.

This variation makes India particularly significant for document-based comparative research. Different States and educational authorities have adopted different regulatory mechanisms, including restrictions on carrying phones, prohibitions on use during school hours, classroom-specific restrictions, controlled educational use, and school-level disciplinary provisions. Consequently, examining individual policy documents can reveal not only where restrictions exist, but also how policymakers conceptualise the problem of smartphone use and what educational, social, behavioural, and wellbeing concerns inform regulation.

Despite the rapid expansion of smartphone restrictions, there remains a need for systematic comparative analysis of the underlying policy discourse. Existing discussions often focus on whether smartphones improve or undermine learning, whereas less attention is given to the policy construction of adolescent smartphone use as an educational governance issue. A document-analysis approach can address this gap by systematically examining the language,

objectives, regulatory mechanisms, target populations, exceptions, and justifications contained in official policy documents.

Therefore, this study comparatively examines Indian and selected international policy responses to adolescent smartphone use in schools. Rather than assuming that all restrictions constitute complete bans, the study conceptualises smartphone regulation as a continuum ranging from unrestricted use to partial restriction, supervised use, and complete prohibition.

Literature Review

The growing presence of smartphones in adolescents' everyday lives has generated extensive research on their educational, behavioural, social, and psychological implications. A substantial body of literature has examined the relationship between smartphone use and academic performance, attention, classroom engagement, and student wellbeing. Amez and Baert (2020), in their review of the literature, reported that smartphone use is generally associated with poorer academic outcomes, although the evidence varies considerably across studies and does not establish a straightforward causal relationship. Similarly, research on problematic smartphone use has identified associations with academic difficulties and behavioural changes among adolescents (Sohn et al., 2024; Yadav et al., 2021). These findings have contributed to growing concern among educators and policymakers about the place of personal smartphones within formal educational settings. However, the empirical literature primarily focuses on **what** smartphone use does to students, rather than on how educational authorities define and regulate smartphone use as a policy problem.

A related body of research has examined school-level smartphone restrictions and bans. Earlier studies demonstrate substantial variation in school mobile-phone policies according to educational level, institutional context, scope of restriction, and enforcement mechanisms (Gao et al., 2014). Policies may prohibit phones completely, restrict their use during instructional periods, require devices to remain switched off or stored away, or permit their use under specified circumstances. Gao et al. (2017) further showed that teachers, parents, and students can hold different perceptions of the purposes and effectiveness of school mobile-phone policies, highlighting the importance of implementation and stakeholder interpretation. More recent scholarship has questioned the assumption that stricter restrictions necessarily produce better educational outcomes. Campbell et al. (2024), through a scoping review of research from multiple countries, found considerable variation in the evidence concerning the effects of school phone bans on academic achievement, wellbeing, behaviour, and cyberbullying. Thus, the literature suggests that the question is not simply whether smartphones should be banned, but how restrictions are designed, justified, implemented, and experienced within particular educational contexts.

Recent research has consequently begun to move from the binary question of "ban or no ban" towards the policy design and governance of smartphone use. Studies of school policies have examined how institutions balance concerns about distraction and discipline with the educational, communicative, and practical functions of smartphones. Sheng and Lipscombe's systematic review and document analysis, for example, demonstrates the value of examining policy documents to understand the challenges associated with developing and implementing mobile-phone policies in schools. Other qualitative research similarly indicates that restrictive and permissive policies can have different implications depending on institutional context and students' needs. This emerging literature suggests that smartphone regulation is not merely a response to student behaviour; it is also a process through which educational institutions define

acceptable technology use, allocate responsibility, and establish boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate digital practices.

At the international level, smartphone regulation has increasingly become an issue of educational digital governance. UNESCO's monitoring indicates a rapid expansion of national and subnational restrictions on smartphone use in schools. However, regulatory approaches remain diverse, ranging from classroom-specific restrictions to whole-school-day prohibitions, with many policies providing exceptions for educational purposes, health conditions, disability, or emergencies. Such variation demonstrates that smartphone regulation cannot be understood simply through the presence or absence of a ban. Rather, attention needs to be given to the policy problem being constructed, the intensity of regulation, permitted exceptions, enforcement arrangements, and the actors responsible for implementation. This perspective also makes it possible to examine how policy documents represent adolescents—as learners requiring protection, responsible digital users, subjects requiring behavioural regulation, or users whose access to technology may be legitimate under particular conditions.

Within India, research has primarily examined adolescents' smartphone dependence, academic outcomes, behavioural changes, and perceptions of smartphone use. For example, Yadav et al. (2021) examined the relationship between mobile-phone dependence, behaviour, and academic performance among adolescents, while research in Assam has explored students' perceptions and possible institutional approaches to smartphone use. Although these studies contribute to understanding the educational context of smartphone use in India, relatively limited attention has been given to the formal policy and regulatory frameworks through which different educational authorities govern such use. This is particularly significant because India does not have a single nationwide prohibition on student smartphone use. Instead, regulation operates through multiple levels, including the Union Government, State and Union Territory administrations, education departments, school boards, and individual schools. The Ministry of Education's PRAGYATA Guidelines (2020), for instance, provide broader guidance on age-appropriate digital education and screen use, while specific restrictions may be formulated by State or institutional authorities.

Research Gap

The literature therefore reveals three important gaps. First, existing research is predominantly concerned with the effects of smartphone use or the effectiveness of restrictions, rather than with the policy discourses through which smartphone use is constructed as an educational problem. Second, although emerging studies examine school policy and implementation, systematic comparative analysis of the content of government and educational policy instruments remains limited. Third, within India, there is insufficient comparative attention to how different levels of educational governance formulate smartphone restrictions and how this decentralisation produces variation in regulatory scope, rationale, exceptions, and enforcement.

The present study addresses these gaps by treating smartphone regulation as a form of educational digital governance and using qualitative comparative document analysis to examine how policy instruments regulate adolescent smartphone use. Rather than treating restrictions as simply “bans,” the study analyses them across four interconnected dimensions: policy problem, regulatory intensity, exceptions, and enforcement, while also examining how policies construct adolescents, digital risk, responsibility, and legitimate educational use. India is treated as the principal case of multi-level educational governance, while selected international contexts provide comparative reference points. This approach shifts the focus

from whether smartphone restrictions are effective to how educational authorities construct and govern the relationship between adolescents, smartphones, and schooling.

Theoretical Lens

The central contribution of this study is to shift the analysis of school smartphone regulation from the question of whether smartphones should be banned to the question of how educational authorities construct and govern adolescent smartphone use as a policy problem. Existing debates have largely concentrated on the educational benefits and risks of smartphone use, including distraction, concentration, learning, wellbeing, and digital dependency. While these concerns are important, a policy-oriented analysis requires attention to the processes through which particular concerns are translated into regulatory categories, institutional responsibilities, restrictions, and exceptions. This study therefore examines smartphone regulation as a form of educational digital governance, focusing on how policy documents define legitimate and illegitimate forms of adolescent device use within school spaces. The manuscript's document-analysis approach is particularly suited to this purpose because it examines the language, objectives, regulatory mechanisms, exceptions, and institutional responsibilities embedded in formal policy instruments.

The theoretical lens draws primarily on a governance-oriented understanding of policy regulation, supplemented by a policy-subjectivity perspective. Regulation is conceptualised not simply as a binary distinction between prohibition and permission, but as a continuum through which educational authorities organise access to smartphones according to particular conditions, purposes, spaces, and times. The analysis consequently distinguishes between classroom restrictions, school-day restrictions, controlled or supervised use, educationally authorised use, and more comprehensive prohibitions. This conceptualisation responds to the manuscript's existing observation that contemporary policies increasingly distinguish between personal and pedagogical use and provide exceptions for educational, health, disability-related, and emergency purposes.

The policy-subjectivity perspective further directs attention to how adolescents are represented within regulatory discourse. Rather than treating students merely as recipients of restrictions, the study examines how policies position them variously as learners requiring protection from distraction and digital risk, as subjects responsible for appropriate technology use, as participants in institutional disciplinary arrangements, and as legitimate users of digital technologies when educational, health, accessibility, or emergency needs arise. The analysis therefore asks what kinds of adolescent behaviour and responsibility are made visible and governable through smartphone policies. This perspective enables the study to move beyond cataloguing restrictions towards examining the relationship between technology, institutional authority, adolescent agency, and educational norms.

India provides the principal analytical site for developing this contribution because smartphone regulation operates through a multi-level educational governance structure involving the Union Government, State and Union Territory administrations, education departments, school boards, and educational institutions. The Ministry of Education's 2026 parliamentary response explicitly indicates that India does not operate through a single nationwide smartphone restriction and highlights the role of States and educational authorities. This decentralised configuration makes India analytically significant: variation between Indian jurisdictions is not treated merely as geographical variation, but as an opportunity to examine how different governance levels shape the form, rationale, scope, and enforceability of smartphone

regulation. The international cases are consequently used as comparative reference points rather than as a simple country ranking.

The study thus makes three related contributions. First, it contributes to the emerging literature on digital governance in education by examining smartphone regulation as a policy and governance phenomenon rather than solely as a question of technological impact. Second, it contributes a comparative document-analysis framework that enables regulations to be examined through common dimensions of policy problem, regulatory intensity, exceptions, enforcement, governance level, and policy subjectivities. Third, it develops India as a case of multi-level educational governance, demonstrating how decentralised authority can produce differentiated regulatory responses to a broadly shared policy concern. The study therefore asks not only where smartphone restrictions exist, but also what educational problem these restrictions seek to govern, how authority is organised to govern it, and what conception of the adolescent learner is produced through the resulting policy arrangements.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do national and subnational educational policy instruments regulate adolescent smartphone use in schools, particularly in terms of policy problems, regulatory intensity, exceptions, and enforcement mechanisms?

RQ2. How do these regulatory arrangements construct adolescents, digital risk, responsibility, and legitimate educational use across different levels of educational governance?

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative document analysis to examine how educational authorities conceptualise and regulate adolescent smartphone use in schools. Document analysis is appropriate because the study is concerned not only with the existence of restrictions but also with the ways in which policy documents define the problem of smartphone use, identify policy objectives, establish regulatory mechanisms, and specify the circumstances under which smartphone use is permitted or prohibited. The analysis therefore treats policy documents as institutional texts that reflect particular understandings of adolescents, digital risk, educational purposes, responsibility, and school governance.

The study conceptualises smartphone regulation as a continuum of regulatory intensity, ranging from recommendations for responsible use and supervised use to classroom restrictions, restrictions on carrying devices, whole-school-day restrictions, and complete prohibition. This approach avoids treating all smartphone policies as equivalent "bans" and enables comparison of differences in regulatory scope and implementation.

India is examined as a multi-level educational governance context, rather than as a single homogeneous jurisdiction. The Indian document corpus therefore includes documents issued at the Union level as well as by selected State and Union Territory education authorities and school boards. This is important because responsibility for school education and the implementation of school-level regulations is distributed across different levels of government. The existing manuscript already identifies this multi-level character as a central feature of the Indian policy landscape.

Document Corpus and Selection

The document corpus was constructed through a purposive search of policy and regulatory materials concerning smartphone or mobile-phone use in school education. The search covered

the period 2009–2026, beginning with the earliest relevant policy document identified in the study and extending to the study's stated temporal cut-off.

Documents were identified through targeted searches of official government and education-authority websites and through supplementary web searches using combinations of terms such as *"mobile phone use in schools," "smartphone restrictions in schools," "smartphone ban in schools," "mobile phone policy for students," "school smartphone regulation,"* and *"mobile phone restrictions in classrooms."* Where multiple versions of a policy were identified, the most authoritative and most recent applicable version was retained for analysis, while superseded or duplicate versions were excluded unless they were necessary for establishing policy development over time.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. The document addressed the use, possession, carrying, or regulation of mobile phones or smartphones in schools.
2. The document applied to school-age students, particularly adolescents, or to the broader school community in a manner relevant to student smartphone use.
3. The document constituted a formal policy, law, regulation, notification, circular, guideline, advisory, official proceeding, parliamentary document, or recognised intergovernmental policy report.
4. The document contained sufficient information to identify the regulatory approach, target population, policy rationale, implementation mechanism, or permitted exceptions.
5. For international comparison, the document represented a national or subnational educational policy that could be meaningfully compared with the Indian cases.

Documents were excluded when they: (a) dealt exclusively with higher education; (b) concerned digital education generally without substantive reference to personal smartphone or mobile-phone use; (c) duplicated another document without adding substantive regulatory information; (d) consisted solely of opinion or commentary; or (e) could not be sufficiently verified or did not provide adequate information for systematic coding.

Source Hierarchy

To strengthen the credibility and reproducibility of the corpus, sources were organised according to a three-level hierarchy.

Tier 1: Primary regulatory sources. These included legislation, government notifications, departmental circulars, official guidelines, regulations, proceedings, parliamentary documents, and formal directives issued by competent educational or governmental authorities.

Tier 2: Official institutional and intergovernmental sources. These included publications by government agencies, education ministries, school boards, and international organisations such as UNESCO that provide authoritative policy-level information or comparative evidence.

Tier 3: Secondary sources. Reputable newspaper reports and other secondary sources were used only to identify, contextualise, or triangulate policy developments when the primary document was unavailable or when a secondary source provided evidence concerning the announcement or public reporting of a policy. Secondary sources were not treated as equivalent to primary regulatory instruments.

This hierarchy is particularly important because the current manuscript combines government documents, institutional reports, and newspaper material in its reference list.

No.	Jurisdiction	Issuing authority	Year	Document type	Governance level	Source hierarchy
1	India	Ministry of Education	2020	PRAGYATA Guidelines	National	Tier 1
2	India	Ministry of Education/Parliament	2026	Parliamentary Q&A	National	Tier 1
3	Himachal Pradesh	Education Department	2026	Instruction	State	Tier 1
4	Gujarat	Government/secondary report	2025	Policy announcement/report	State	Tier 2/3
5	Karnataka	Education Department	2019/2024	Guidelines	State	Tier 1
6	Andhra Pradesh	Commission on School Education	2023	Proceedings	State	Tier 1
7	West Bengal	WBCHSE	2026	Notification	State	Tier 1
8	Delhi	Directorate of Education	2023	Advisory	UT	Tier 1
9	Rajasthan	Education Department	2024/2026	Instructions/SOP Sta	State	Tier 1
10	Tamil Nadu	School Education Department	2022/2025	Direction/advisory	State	Tier 2/3
11	Maharashtra	Education Department	2009/2025	Policy/guidelines	State	Tier 1/3
12	Tripura	Directorate of Secondary Education	2009/2025	Circular/policy	State	Tier 1/3
13	China	Ministry of Education	2021	National notice	National	Tier 1
14	Greece	Ministry of Education	2024	Regulation	National	Tier 1
15	Brazil	Government of Brazil	2025	Law	National	Tier 1
16	Cambodia	Ministry of Education	2023	Guidance	National	Tier 1
17	South Korea	National Assembly	2025	Legislation	National	Tier 1
18	New Zealand	Ministry of Education	2024	National policy	National	Tier 1
19	Poland	Government	2026	Draft legislation	National	Tier 1
20	Germany	Hesse Ministry of Education	2025	State policy	Subnational	Tier 1

21	Denmark	Government	2025	Policy response	National	Tier 1/2
22	Switzerland	Federal/cantonal authorities	2025	Policy discussion	Federal/cantonal	Tier 1/2
23	Portugal	Ministry of Education	2025	National recommendations/regulation	National	Tier 1
24	Croatia	Ministry of Science, Education and Youth	2026	Regulation amendment	National	Tier 1
25	UNESCO	UNESCO	2023	GEM Report	International	Tier 2
26	UNESCO	UNESCO	2025	Global monitoring report	International	Tier 2

Case Selection

The Indian cases were selected purposively to capture variation in regulatory approaches across States, Union Territories, and education authorities. The purpose was not to claim that the selected jurisdictions constitute a statistically representative sample of India, but **to examine** the diversity of policy responses within India's decentralised educational governance structure. The international cases were similarly selected purposively to provide policy variation rather than geographical representativeness. Cases were included where they demonstrated distinct approaches to smartphone regulation, such as statutory prohibition, whole-school-day restriction, classroom-based restriction, decentralised State or provincial regulation, or controlled educational use. Australia and France, for example, provide contrasting governance structures: Australia's approach is largely implemented through State and Territory education systems, whereas France provides a national statutory framework. The manuscript identifies these differences as particularly relevant to comparative analysis.

UNESCO documents were used as an international comparative and contextual source rather than treated as equivalent to a national regulatory jurisdiction.

Case Selection and Comparability

The study treats the jurisdiction responsible for issuing and implementing the relevant school-level regulation as the unit of comparison. Accordingly, countries are represented by national-level policy instruments where smartphone regulation is established through national legislation, regulation, or ministry-level policy. Where educational governance is substantially decentralised, the study treats the relevant subnational education system as the case, rather than assuming that a state or regional policy represents the entire country. Thus, England, rather than the United Kingdom, is used as the unit of comparison when the identified policy applies specifically to the English education system. Similarly, selected states are treated as subnational cases where smartphone regulation falls within state-level educational authority. This approach is particularly relevant to India, Australia, Germany, and Switzerland, where educational governance is distributed across national and subnational levels.

Subnational and national cases are made comparable not on the basis of territorial size or constitutional status, but through a common analytical framework focused on the content and regulatory function of school smartphone policies. Each case is coded according to the same

dimensions: (1) regulatory scope and intensity, (2) target population, (3) policy rationale, (4) regulatory mechanism, (5) permitted exceptions, and (6) enforcement or institutional responsibility. A state-level regulation is therefore compared with a national regulation only in terms of these common policy dimensions. The analysis does not claim that a subnational policy represents the regulatory position of the entire country. Instead, each case is understood as a distinct education-governance unit operating within its particular constitutional and administrative context. This distinction enables meaningful cross-case comparison while preserving differences in the level at which educational authority is exercised.

For India, the study adopts a multi-level governance perspective because school education is regulated through interacting national, state, board, and institutional authorities. Consequently, selected Indian States and Union Territories are treated as individual subnational cases, while CBSE and Union-level documents are analysed separately as national or supra-state instruments. In Australia, where school education is primarily administered by states and territories, relevant state or territory policies are treated as subnational education-system cases rather than as automatically representative of Australia as a whole. In Germany, the relevant Länder are treated as subnational education systems because school education is principally governed at the state level. Likewise, where a Swiss cantonal policy is examined, the canton, rather than Switzerland as a whole, constitutes the case. The same principle is applied consistently throughout the international sample: the geographical label in the analysis corresponds to the jurisdictional scope of the document being analysed.

Analytic Framework

The documents were analysed using a structured coding framework developed from the study's research questions and the recurring regulatory features identified in the policy literature. Each document was examined across the following six analytical dimensions:

1. Scope and intensity of restriction – whether the policy recommends, regulates, restricts, or prohibits smartphone use and whether the restriction applies to classrooms, the school day, school premises, or particular activities.
2. Target population – the students, age groups, teachers, or other members of the school community to whom the regulation applies.
3. Policy rationale – the concerns or objectives explicitly articulated in the document, such as concentration, learning, distraction, wellbeing, discipline, online safety, cyberbullying, social interaction, or excessive screen exposure.
4. Regulatory mechanism – the means through which compliance is expected to occur, including prohibition, collection or safekeeping of devices, switching devices off, storage requirements, supervised use, authorisation, or school-level disciplinary measures.
5. Permitted exceptions – circumstances in which smartphone use remains permitted, including educational or pedagogical purposes, health or medical needs, disability-related requirements, emergencies, or authorised use.
6. Governance and enforcement – the authority responsible for implementation, monitoring, disciplinary action, and institutional enforcement.

The coding framework enables comparison across documents while preserving differences in terminology and institutional context. The analysis distinguishes between what a policy states as a rationale and what empirical research demonstrates as an outcome. Thus, if a policy states that smartphone restriction is intended to improve concentration, the study records this as a

policy objective rather than treating improved concentration as an established effect of the policy.

Data Analysis Procedure

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the identified documents were screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria and classified according to source hierarchy, jurisdiction, issuing authority, year, and document type. Second, relevant textual sections concerning restrictions, rationales, exceptions, implementation, and enforcement were extracted and coded according to the analytical framework. Third, within-case analysis was conducted to identify the regulatory characteristics of individual Indian and international jurisdictions. Finally, cross-case comparison was undertaken to identify similarities, differences, and patterns across the Indian and international contexts.

For India, particular attention was given to the relationship between different levels of educational governance and the extent to which regulatory authority, policy scope, and enforcement mechanisms vary across jurisdictions. For the international cases, comparison focused on the form and intensity of regulation, the balance between prohibition and educational use, the treatment of exceptions, and the institutional level at which regulation is established.

The comparative analysis therefore moves beyond a simple classification of countries or States as having or not having a smartphone ban. Instead, it examines how regulation is constructed, what forms of digital risk are identified, how adolescents are positioned as subjects of regulation, and how educational authorities negotiate the tension between the pedagogical potential of smartphones and concerns about their unrestricted use. This approach is consistent with the study's broader objective of examining smartphone regulation as an issue of digital educational governance.

Analysis

Rajasthan Government issued an SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) in March 2026 (2019, 2024) to regulate children's mobile phone use and prevent them from cybercrime and cyberbullying under the age of 16. The education directorate has written to all district education officers to obey this SOP. The Government identifies several emerging digital risks like cybercrime, cyberbulling, online gromming, privacy violations, excessive online gaming, and digital addiction. schools are instructed to prohibit smartphone use in classrooms, school buses, and playgrounds to prevent unauthorized recording and cyberbullying. The SOPs also recommend age-appropriate online behaviour, parental supervision, anonymous online identities for children, and restrictions on communication with strangers. This demonstrates that smartphone regulation is increasingly linked to child online protection rather than solely academic discipline. The key provisions include a ban on mobile phones in schools, through exceptions are made for safety reasons, requiring students to deposit devices at schools. Additionally, parents are encouraged to maintain device placement guidelines, such as keeping devices in living rooms, and allow their children only certain permissible mobile applications.

The Ministry of Education does not recommend a nationwide prohibition on smartphones. Instead, it emphasizes age-appropriate regulation through the PRAGYATA Guidelines (2020), which recommend screen-time limits, parental monitoring, balanced online and offline activities, and safeguarding students' physical and mental well-being. The Ministry also states that education falls under the Concurrent List, leaving the regulation of smartphones largely to State Governments and Union Territories. This reflects a decentralised policy framework in

which the Union Government provides broad guidance while individual states formulate context-specific regulations.

In West Bengal, the regulatory approach reflects a classroom- and academic-activity-based restriction on students' mobile-phone use. The notification issued by the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education (WBCHSE) in July 2026, titled *Restriction on Carrying & Using Mobile Phones by the Students in the Classrooms*, establishes a regulatory boundary around mobile-phone possession and use within formal academic settings. Accordingly, the document may be coded as R2 Classroom and Academic-Activity Restriction, defined as a restriction that limits students' access to or use of mobile phones during instructional and other officially organised academic activities rather than imposing an unconditional prohibition across all contexts. Where the notification links such restrictions to maintaining the conditions of teaching and orderly academic functioning, these provisions may additionally be coded as P1 Attention/Distraction Management and P7 Institutional/Academic Order. The latter code refers specifically to policy provisions concerned with regulating student conduct in ways intended to preserve the orderly functioning of formal educational activities. Importantly, these codes represent an analytical interpretation of the regulatory provisions and should not be treated as empirically demonstrated effects of smartphone use. The provision for exceptional use with institutional authorisation further indicates that the West Bengal approach combines restriction with administrative discretion, positioning smartphone access as conditionally permissible when it is compatible with the requirements of formal educational activity.

On March 2026 Himachal Pradesh Government (Directorate of Higher Education) notification adopts a restrictive approach to smartphone use in educational institutions by prohibiting the use of mobile phones in classrooms and on school campuses to maintain academic discipline and enhance the teaching–learning environment and minimize distractions caused by mobile phones. The document identifies mobile phones as potential sources of distraction that can reduce students' concentration, classroom participation, and academic performance. It places responsibility for implementation on school authorities, requiring principals to enforce the policy and communicate it to parents, while allowing limited exceptions for safety or medical emergencies with prior approval. Overall, the notification reflects a disciplinary and preventive policy framework that prioritizes institutional order and uninterrupted learning over the educational integration of digital technologies.

On January 2025 Gujarat Government's (News report (PTI), not an official government notification) by emphasizing the reduction of excessive screen time and encouraging greater participation in academic and outdoor activities. Rather than introducing a new blanket prohibition, the proposal strengthens enforcement of the existing ban on mobile phones in primary schools while planning comprehensive guidelines developed through expert consultation. The policy highlights awareness campaigns involving teachers, parents, and students, reflecting a collaborative governance model that combines regulatory measures with behavioural education to promote children's educational development and digital well-being.

On January 2022 Tamil Nadu adopts a restrictive and discipline-oriented approach (News report describing statements and directions issued by the Tamil Nadu School Education Department (not the full government notification) to smartphone use in schools by prohibiting students from bringing mobile phones onto school premises to reduce classroom distractions and improve academic engagement. While acknowledging the educational role of smartphones during the COVID-19 pandemic, the policy emphasizes that in-person schooling requires minimizing digital interruptions to strengthen concentration, classroom discipline, and the effectiveness of teaching. The responsibility for implementation rests with school authorities, who are empowered to enforce the restriction through institutional regulation.

On February 2009 Maharashtra adopts a regulated and discipline-oriented approach (News report describing implementation and enforcement of Maharashtra's school mobile phone policy (not the original government resolution) to smartphone use in schools by restricting students' use of mobile phones during school hours while permitting teachers to use them for educational purposes under institutional supervision. The policy aims to reduce classroom distractions, improve students' concentration, and strengthen academic discipline without completely excluding digital technology from the teaching–learning process. Its differentiated approach reflects an effort to balance educational innovation with effective classroom management and institutional accountability.

Tripura Government announced its mobile phone restriction policy on 28 November 2009, and it was publicly reported on 29 November 2009. The policy prohibited students from carrying mobile phones to school and imposed restrictions on teachers' mobile phone use during school hours across 3,884 schools in the state. The government justified the measure as necessary to protect classroom discipline and improve the academic environment, citing concerns that mobile phone use was disrupting teaching and learning. Overall, the policy reflects a strict disciplinary and prohibition-based approach that prioritizes institutional order and academic engagement over the educational integration of digital technologies.

On 23 April 2026, Kerala State Commission for Protection of Child Rights recommended comprehensive restrictions on students' mobile phone use in schools, with implementation proposed from the 2026–27 academic year. The recommendations prohibit students from bringing or using mobile phones in schools except in exceptional circumstances with parental consent, while emphasizing digital well-being, child protection, and responsible technology use. Unlike discipline-focused policies adopted in some other states, Kerala's approach integrates school regulation with parental involvement, digital awareness programmes, and promotion of healthy offline activities, reflecting a holistic child-centred model of smartphone governance.

The United Kingdom (England) adopted a comprehensive mobile phone-free school policy, initially publishing guidance on 19 February 2024, strengthening it in January 2026, and making it statutory on 29 June 2026, with implementation expected from 1 September 2026. The policy requires schools to prohibit students' access to mobile phones throughout the school day, including lessons, breaks, and lunchtime. It aims to improve academic engagement, reduce classroom distractions, address cyberbullying and online harms, and strengthen student wellbeing through a whole-school approach involving school leaders, teachers, pupils, and parents. The policy represents a preventive, behaviour-focused, and safeguarding-oriented model of smartphone governance.

The United States has adopted a decentralized approach to regulating smartphone use in schools, with individual states introducing legislation and guidance rather than a nationwide federal policy. Since 2023, states such as Florida have restricted student mobile phone use during instructional time, while California's Phone-Free School Act, enacted on 23 September 2024, requires school districts to establish smartphone restriction policies by 1 July 2026. Across states, these policies seek to improve academic performance, reduce classroom distractions, enhance student mental health, and address cyberbullying and excessive social media use. Overall, the U.S. model combines state-level legislation with local implementation, reflecting an evidence-informed and flexible approach to smartphone governance in schools.

UNESCO is treated in this study as a transnational policy actor rather than as a national education system. Its role is primarily normative and contextual, exercised through policy guidance, monitoring, and knowledge production rather than direct regulatory enforcement. Therefore, UNESCO documents are not included as a jurisdictional case in the comparative analysis but are used to situate national and subnational smartphone regulations within the

wider international policy discourse. The 2023 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report frames educational technology in terms of appropriateness, equity, evidence, and sustainability. Rather than advocating an unconditional ban on smartphones, UNESCO distinguishes between technology that supports learning and use that may distract from educational activities. This position is relevant to the present analysis because similar distinctions between educationally legitimate and non-educational smartphone use appear across several national and subnational policies. UNESCO's monitoring also indicates the growing international adoption of school smartphone restrictions. By March 2026, UNESCO reported that 114 education systems, representing 58% of countries, had national bans or restrictions on mobile-phone use in schools. This figure demonstrates the wider policy movement but should not be interpreted as evidence of a uniform UNESCO model or recommendation for prohibition. Importantly, UNESCO also appears within the Indian policy discourse. The Andhra Pradesh proceedings refer to the UNESCO GEM Report while discussing the benefits and potential detriments of mobile-phone use in education. Thus, UNESCO can be understood as part of the transnational policy environment within which national and subnational authorities formulate smartphone regulations. Its inclusion in this study therefore provides contextual insight into global policy discourse while maintaining a clear analytical distinction between transnational governance and jurisdiction-level regulation.

Netherlands introduced a national agreement on 4 July 2023 to restrict mobile phones, tablets, and smartwatches in classrooms, with implementation beginning in secondary schools on 1 January 2024 and extending to primary and special education from the 2024–2025 academic year. The policy is based on a "No, unless…" principle, under which personal devices are prohibited during lessons except when required for educational purposes, medical needs, or disabilities. The Dutch approach emphasizes improving students' concentration, strengthening classroom engagement, and encouraging face-to-face social interaction, while allowing schools flexibility in implementation. Early government monitoring indicated that teachers and school leaders observed more focused lessons and improved student interaction following the policy's introduction.

China introduced a nationwide policy on 18 January 2021 through the Ministry of Education's Notice on Strengthening the Management of Mobile Phones for Primary and Secondary School Students, with public implementation beginning in February 2021. The policy establishes that students should generally not bring personal mobile phones to school; if necessary, written parental consent and school approval are required, and phones must be stored centrally rather than carried into classrooms. The policy seeks to protect the teaching–learning environment while addressing concerns about internet addiction, excessive screen time, declining eyesight, and students' physical and mental well-being. Overall, China's approach represents a preventive, health-oriented, and centrally regulated model of smartphone governance, combining strict school management with parental involvement to promote healthy digital habits.

Greece strengthened its policy on mobile phone use in schools through reforms announced on 29 August 2024, which took effect on 11 September 2024. Students are required to keep mobile phones in their bags throughout the school day, and visible use is prohibited. The policy combines classroom discipline with strong child-protection measures by imposing increasingly severe penalties for unauthorized photographing, filming, or recording of classmates and teachers, particularly where cyberbullying or privacy violations are involved. Overall, Greece's approach represents a disciplinary and safeguarding-oriented model that seeks to improve learning, protect student privacy, and reduce cyberbullying through clear national regulations and graduated enforcement.

Brazil enacted Law No. 15,100/2025, signed by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on 15 January 2025, establishing nationwide restrictions on students' mobile phone use in public and private schools. The legislation prohibits smartphone use during classes, breaks, and other school activities, while allowing exceptions for educational purposes, accessibility, health needs, and emergencies. The policy aims to improve academic concentration, reduce classroom distractions, protect children's and adolescents' mental health, and promote greater face-to-face social interaction. Overall, Brazil's approach represents a child-centred, health-oriented, and evidence-informed model of smartphone governance, balancing educational discipline with student well-being and inclusive access to technology.

Cambodia introduced nationwide guidance on smartphone use in public schools in November 2023, when the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport instructed schools to restrict the use of smartphones and other electronic devices for non-educational purposes. The policy seeks to improve classroom discipline, reduce distractions, and encourage students to use digital technologies only when they support teaching and learning. Rather than imposing a complete ban, Cambodia adopts a regulated-use approach, permitting teacher-authorized educational use while discouraging gaming, social media, and other non-academic activities during school hours. The policy also emphasizes the shared responsibility of schools, teachers, parents, and communities in fostering responsible digital behaviour among adolescents.

South Korea enacted nationwide legislation on 27 August 2025 restricting students' use of smartphones and other smart devices during classroom instruction, with implementation scheduled for March 2026. Although many schools had already enforced local restrictions, the new law establishes a uniform national framework that strengthens teachers' authority to maintain distraction-free classrooms. The policy is intended to improve academic concentration, protect teachers' instructional authority, and address growing concerns about adolescent smartphone and social media addiction. By allowing limited exceptions for educational activities, emergencies, and students with disabilities, South Korea adopts a discipline-oriented and child-development-focused model of smartphone governance that balances educational regulation with practical flexibility.

New Zealand introduced its nationwide "Phones Away for the Day" policy on 30 April 2024, following the Government's announcement on 29 November 2023. The policy prohibits students from using or accessing mobile phones throughout the entire school day, including during classes, recess, and lunch breaks, while allowing limited exceptions for health, disability, educational activities, and exceptional personal circumstances. The policy aims to improve academic achievement, enhance classroom concentration, and encourage face-to-face social interaction among students. Early government evaluations indicate positive outcomes in student behaviour, classroom focus, and learning, making New Zealand's approach a whole-school, achievement-oriented, and evidence-informed model of smartphone governance.

Poland's approach to smartphone regulation in schools evolved from school-level autonomy in 2024 to a national legislative framework in 2026. On 2 June 2026, the government approved a draft amendment to the Education Law that would prohibit primary school students from using mobile phones during the entire school day, including classes, breaks, and educational activities outside school, with implementation proposed from 1 September 2026. The policy is intended to improve academic concentration, strengthen classroom discipline, and protect children from digital addiction while allowing exceptions for educational activities, emergencies, health conditions, and disabilities. Overall, Poland adopts a child-protection, discipline-oriented, and preventive model of smartphone governance that combines national regulation with school-level implementation.

Germany does not have a nationwide law regulating smartphone use in schools; instead, responsibility rests with the country's 16 federal states (Länder). During 2024–2025, several

states, particularly Hesse, proposed stricter statewide restrictions on private smartphone use, while others continued to allow schools to establish their own rules. German policies aim to improve classroom concentration, reduce digital distractions, promote students' mental well-being, and encourage responsible digital behaviour. At the same time, they generally permit smartphones for educational activities, accessibility, and emergencies. Overall, Germany represents a decentralized and balanced model of smartphone governance, combining state-level autonomy with school-level flexibility while prioritizing learning and digital well-being.
Denmark announced a national policy in February 2025 to make public primary and lower secondary schools and after-school programmes mobile phone-free, following recommendations from the Danish Wellbeing Commission. The policy seeks to improve students' concentration, strengthen face-to-face social interaction, and protect children's mental well-being by reducing excessive smartphone use during the school day. Unlike policies focused solely on classroom discipline, Denmark frames smartphone regulation as part of a broader child well-being strategy aimed at restoring a healthier balance between digital and offline life. Overall, Denmark represents a preventive, child-centred, and well-being-oriented model of smartphone governance in education.
Switzerland has no nationwide legal ban on smartphones in schools because education is governed by its 26 cantons. During 2024–2025, several cantons strengthened restrictions on smartphone use, while the Swiss Federal Council began examining proposals for broader national measures concerning children under 16. Swiss policies aim to improve classroom concentration, reduce digital distractions, promote face-to-face social interaction, and support children's mental well-being. At the same time, smartphones are generally permitted for educational activities, health-related needs, accessibility, and emergencies. Overall, Switzerland represents a decentralized, canton-led, and balanced model of smartphone governance that combines local autonomy with increasing national attention to digital well-being.
Portugal adopted a phased, evidence-based approach to regulating smartphone use in schools. In September 2024, the Ministry of Education issued national recommendations encouraging schools to prohibit smartphones in primary education and restrict their use in lower secondary schools. After evaluating the positive effects of these measures, including reductions in bullying, indiscipline, and physical confrontations, the government approved a nationwide regulation on 4 July 2025, prohibiting mobile phones and internet-enabled devices for students up to Grade 6 in both public and private schools from the 2025–2026 academic year. The policy allows exceptions for educational activities, health, accessibility, and translation needs. Overall, Portugal represents an evidence-based, developmental, and balanced model of smartphone governance, combining rigorous protection for younger learners with more flexible, responsible-use policies for older students.
Croatia introduced a nationwide policy on 4 March 2026 through amendments to the Regulation on Criteria for Pedagogical Measures, prohibiting the use of mobile phones in all primary schools during the entire school day while allowing students to keep devices stored in bags or lockers. In secondary schools, mobile phones remain prohibited during teaching activities, although schools may adopt stricter rules through their internal regulations. The policy aims to improve classroom concentration, strengthen school discipline, enhance safety, and create a more effective learning environment while allowing exceptions for educational and health-related purposes. Overall, Croatia represents a nationally regulated, discipline-

oriented, and balanced model of smartphone governance that combines strong protection for younger learners with greater flexibility for secondary education.

Comparative Findings

Rather than treating each jurisdiction as an isolated policy case, the documents were compared thematically across five analytical dimensions: the policy problem constructed by the regulation, the intensity of restriction, permitted exceptions, enforcement and institutional responsibility, and the policy subjectivities attributed to students and other educational actors. This approach enables comparison across national and subnational education systems while avoiding the assumption that differences in constitutional or administrative structure are equivalent to differences in regulatory substance. Each document was therefore coded using the same analytical framework, while its jurisdictional level was retained as a contextual variable.

Policy Problem: From Distraction to Educational and Social Risk

Across the corpus, smartphone regulation is commonly organised around a perceived tension between students' access to digital technologies and the conditions required for formal schooling. Documents variously frame mobile phones as sources of distraction, interruptions to classroom attention, threats to academic engagement, or potential challenges to student wellbeing and orderly educational activity. These concerns should be understood as policy constructions rather than empirical findings generated by the present study. The analysis therefore distinguishes between what regulations identify as a policy problem and what empirical research has demonstrated about smartphone use. In this respect, the policy documents do more than prohibit or limit a device; they define circumstances under which smartphone access is considered incompatible with the purposes of schooling.

Regulatory Intensity: A Continuum Rather Than a Binary Ban

The comparative documents demonstrate considerable variation in regulatory intensity. Rather than classifying jurisdictions simply as either “banning” or “not banning” smartphones, the study conceptualises regulation as a continuum ranging from recommendations and controlled use to classroom restrictions, school-day restrictions, and more comprehensive prohibitions. This distinction is important because apparently similar policies may regulate different aspects of smartphone access. Some instruments primarily restrict use, whereas others regulate possession or carrying; some apply only during lessons, while others extend across the school day or to particular school activities. Regulatory intensity is therefore coded according to the scope, duration, and object of the restriction.

Exceptions and Educationally Legitimate Uses

Restrictions are rarely entirely unconditional. Across the corpus, exceptions are associated with educational purposes, medical or health requirements, disability and accessibility, emergencies, and authorised institutional use. These provisions reveal an important distinction between the device itself and particular forms of its use. A regulation may construct recreational or unsupervised smartphone use as inappropriate within schooling while simultaneously recognising circumstances in which digital access is educationally or socially necessary. Exceptions therefore constitute an important analytical dimension because they indicate the boundaries within which student digital agency remains institutionally legitimate.

Enforcement and Institutional Responsibility

The documents also differ in how responsibility for implementing restrictions is distributed. Some regulations establish relatively explicit institutional responsibilities, while others leave substantial discretion to schools or school leaders. This variation is analytically significant

because a restriction does not operate only through the prohibition itself; it also depends on who is authorised to interpret, monitor, permit, confiscate, or otherwise enforce the rule. The analysis consequently codes enforcement provisions separately from regulatory intensity. This makes it possible to distinguish between a strong formal restriction and the degree of institutional discretion attached to its implementation.

Governance Level and Policy Subjectivities

Governance level provides a further basis for comparison. National regulations are analysed as national education-system cases, whereas state, territory, canton, or other subnational instruments are treated as distinct education-governance cases and are not assumed to represent the policy position of the entire country. India, Australia, Germany, and Switzerland therefore require particular attention to the level at which educational authority is exercised. The analysis retains this distinction while applying the same substantive coding dimensions across cases.

The documents also construct particular policy subjectivities around adolescents. Students are variously positioned as learners requiring protection from distraction and digital risks, as subjects whose conduct requires institutional regulation, and, in some circumstances, as legitimate users of digital technologies for educational, accessibility, health, or emergency purposes. This indicates that smartphone regulation is not solely a technological intervention; it is also a form of governance through which educational institutions define appropriate student conduct, responsible technology use, and the boundaries of adolescent autonomy within school space.

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