

FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) in the digital age: Analyzing the Psychological Consequences of Persistent Connectivity and Online Social Comparison in Adolescents

Dr. Shahnaz Bano¹, Dr. Nargish Bano²

¹Academic Consultant, CIET – NCERT

²Teacher, Upgraded High School, Bihar

Abstract: *The digital age has transformed social connections, offering both possibilities and challenges for adolescents. Among these challenges, the phenomenon of Fear of Missing out (FOMO) is a novel concept that has significant diagnostic implications in therapy procedures, which is made worse by constant connectivity and social comparison on digital platforms. This theoretical study examines the psychological effects of FOMO in adolescents. It uses Social Comparison and Self-Determination theory to study the effects of FOMO on anxiety, depression, self-esteem, academic performance, sleep habits, etc. The study emphasizes the urgent need for focused treatments to reduce the negative impacts of FOMO in adolescents by proposing measures such as digital literacy, mindfulness practices, encouraging offline activities, etc. Understanding and managing FOMO is critical for protecting adolescents' mental health in the digital era.*

Key Words: *FOMO (fear of missing out), social media, persistent connectivity, social comparison, mental health, adolescents.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the advent of digital technology has changed how people connect, acquire information, and perceive social realities. The emergence of digital technology has created new difficulties and possibilities. Continuous access to social networks makes it easier to connect, share, and interact with friends and acquaintances (Fuster et al., 2017). One prominent psychological problem that has emerged from this situation is the Fear of Missing out (FOMO). The digital age has contributed fresh dimensions to social interaction and self-perception, with important implications for adolescents, who are in a crucial developmental period and are particularly vulnerable to FOMO, a phenomenon fueled by

constant contact and a desire for social comparison on digital platforms.

The term FOMO, or "Fear of Missing Out," has evolved considerably over time, particularly with the development of digital technology and social media. Patrick J. McGinnis coined the acronym "FOMO" in 2004 while studying at Harvard Business School. He used the word in an article for the school's journal, "The Harbus," to explain the anxiety of missing out on social gatherings, professional prospects, and other experiences (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). With the growth of social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in the late 2000s and early 2010s, FOMO became a widespread phenomenon. It is anticipated that those who have more FOMO will be inclined to be constantly informed of what others are doing, possibly utilizing social media platforms. These platforms provide continuing connectivity and real-time updates on what others are doing, aggravating feelings of exclusion (Wegmann et al., 2017; Oulasvirta et al., 2012). When FOMO becomes beyond control, it can cause anxiety, interrupted sleep, trouble concentrating, and a dependency on social media for gratification (Kothari, 2023).

"Adolescents are particularly susceptible to the development of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) by using social media" (Bloemen & Coninck, 2020). Adolescents use social media platforms more than the average population does. They use them for learning, entertainment, and peer communication (Kothari, 2023). This paper examines the psychological consequences of FOMO in adolescents, specifically the constant connectedness and social comparison enabled by online social platforms.

Symptoms of FOMO

FOMO can have distinct symptoms, according to 2021 research published in Technological

Forecasting and Social Change. These symptoms include:

- Compulsion to constantly monitor social media to know what others are doing
- Feeling depressed when contrasting one's life with others on social media
- Mentally tired from the use of social media.
- Overscheduling, or attempting to be everywhere at once
- Withdrawing from other people
- Physically exhausted
- Experiencing feelings of sadness, anxiety, or depression
- Inability to concentrate
- Having difficulty in falling asleep

Relevance of the study

The study entitled "FOMO (fear of missing out) in the digital age: Analyzing the Psychological Consequences of Persistent Connectivity and Online Social Comparison in Adolescents" was motivated by the urgent need to understand the complex interactions that exist between the psychological health of adolescents and their use of digital platforms. Adolescents today confront difficulties never-before-seen with their sense of self, social interactions, and emotional stability in an age of constant connectedness and social media presence. Adolescents' widespread psychological phenomenon of FOMO has been shown to worsen anxiety, depressive symptoms, and negative self-esteem feelings. It is becoming more difficult for adolescents to detach and reduce the stress brought on by FOMO because of the constant connectedness that is made possible by digital devices. Moreover, adolescents' emotions of inadequacy and envy get worse with the widespread practice of online social comparison on social media platforms, since they are constantly comparing themselves to the well-controlled and frequently idealized portrayals of their peers. This study seeks to fill a significant gap in the literature by examining the psychological effects of persistent connectivity and online social comparison in particular on adolescents. It also aims to provide guidance for the development of targeted interventions and prevention strategies to protect adolescents' well-being in the digital age.

Key Terms:

- FOMO
- FOMO can be defined as an intrapersonal trait that makes people constantly check social media

platforms to see what other people are doing (Rooij et al., 2018). It is an intense curiosity about others' activities and experiences, which is frequently triggered by social media updates and digital interactions. It refers to the widespread fear that others are experiencing pleasant experiences from which one is excluded (Simon, 1982). It includes emotions of inadequacy, anxiety, and frustration that arise from the notion that one is missing out on pleasurable experiences (Hayran et al., 2020).

● Adolescents

Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage marked by a quest for identity, increasing peer influence, and heightened sensitivity to social dynamics (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescence as the period between the ages of 10 and 19. This period is characterized by profound physical, psychological, and social changes as individuals grow from infancy to maturity.

● Persistent Connectivity

The digital age has made it possible for adolescents to stay constantly connected via smartphones and social media platforms (Zhang & Dao, 1995). Smartphones, social media platforms, and instant messaging services keep people informed of current events, updates, and conversations (Fuster et al., 2017). This omnipresent connectedness ensures that adolescents are continuously aware of their friends' activities; this constant connectedness can worsen FOMO by bombarding people with real-time information regarding the lives of others.

● Social Comparison

According to social comparison theory, people assess their value by comparing themselves to others. Adolescents are especially vulnerable to this tendency, and social media is an excellent forum for such comparisons. Online platforms enhance this tendency by offering filtered glances into the lives of peers, which frequently depict an idealized version of reality. The organized and sometimes romanticized depictions of peers' lives on social media can lead to poor assessments of themselves and increased FOMO; this might lead to greater self-reflection and feelings of inadequacy. Social comparison is linked to several adverse outcomes; social comparison on a regular basis might cause emotions such as defensive behavior, regret, shame, and envy (White et al., 2006). These unpleasant emotions may result from comparisons that are made upward or downward (Vogel et al., 2014). It is determined that among adolescents, social comparison has a substantial positive relationship with FOMO (fear of missing

out). Additionally, it was determined that among adolescents, social comparison and FOMO (fear of missing out) strongly positively predict social media addiction (Putri et al., 2023).

Psychological consequences of FOMO

- **Anxiety**

FOMO has been related to higher rates of depression and anxiety in adolescents. The constant urge to be connected, along with the pressure to keep up with peers' experiences, can lead to a chronic state of psychological sadness. Serious mental health problems might arise from FOMO, and anxiety due to FOMO is also frequently linked to the tension, expectations, and pressures of daily life (Clark & Beck, 2010). Many researchers have looked into the different problems associated with anxiety and using technology. Obsessive smartphone users had a higher likelihood of anxiety than their peers who did not exhibit such a tendency (Lepp et al., 2014). Problematic smartphone use was strongly (positively) linked with anxiety and fear of missing out on opportunities (Elhai et al., 2016). Additionally, researchers have proposed that those who experience anxiety may use many social media accounts (Primack et al., 2017; Vannucci et al., 2017).

- **Depression**

According to past studies, FOMO has been linked to greater levels of depression (Hunt et al., 2018). This association may be explained by the discontent and dissatisfaction that FOMO causes. Stress and anxiety are other problems that FOMO can cause for mental health. (Beyens et al., 2016). A study on Instagram usage revealed that depression symptoms were indirectly predicted by social comparison (Lup et al., 2015).

- **Lower self-esteem**

Constant exposure to idealized depictions of peers' lifestyles might have a harmful influence on adolescents' self-esteem. Comparing their own life to the seemingly wonderful lives of others can cause feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. According to earlier studies, the more FOMO a person experiences, the lower their self-esteem they tend to have, which results in a poor self-concept (Buglass et al., 2017).

- **Impaired Academic Performance**

The distraction produced by the urge to remain up-to-date on social media might severely affect academic achievement. Constant connectedness can lead to poor concentration, delayed action, and academic disinterest (Azizi, 2019). Academic performance is negatively impacted by FoMO, which is strongly

linked to SNS use (Alt, 2018). Constant smartphone use can distract students from their studies and deteriorate cognitive function. Research has shown that those who multitask commit more errors and take longer to finish tasks (Ophir et al., 2009). Furthermore, excessive SNS use has been linked to lower academic achievement (Hur, 2013).

- **Sleep disturbances**

FOMO might disturb sleep habits because adolescents might skip sleep to use social media. Poor sleep hygiene can worsen anxiety, sadness, and cognitive impairment. Insomnia and consequently poor mental health outcomes are linked to interpersonal stress and fear of missing out (Adams et al., 2020). In a survey of 101 adolescents, pre-sleep concern and FOMO were associated with longer sleep delay and shorter sleep duration (Scott, 2018). Clinical studies have also clearly demonstrated that blue light from digital devices disrupts sleep (Mortazavi, 2018).

- **Lower life satisfaction**

Individuals with FOMO frequently report decreased levels of life satisfaction. Constant comparison to others' ideal lives can cause feelings of inadequacy and unhappiness with one's living situation. In addition to having a negative correlation with social self-efficacy, FOMO has also been linked to decreased life satisfaction (Deniz, 2021). According to the results of earlier studies, comparing oneself to others may be the cause of someone's FOMO and poor definition of their life satisfaction and self-efficacy.

- **Impaired cognitive function**

Persistent connectedness and the associated FOMO may hamper mental efficiency. The constant interruptions from reminders and the need to check social media might result in shorter attention spans, worse memory recall, and lower productivity. Negative ruminations such as constantly refreshing and checking social media for alerts and notifications are examples of how the cognitive part of FOMO manifests. As a result, anxiety levels rise to stay up to date with the theme and the expectation of a reward (Billieux, 2015). The fear of social exclusion is examined using the FoMO concept. 6.5% of the 1000 participants in the study reported using social networking sites excessively. These individuals also showed lower levels of emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, perceived control, and self-esteem, all of which may be risk factors for affective disorders (Shensa, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

- **Social Comparison Theory**

By comparing oneself with other people's abilities and perspectives, social comparison helps one to self-evaluate (Festinger, 1954). Past research has concentrated on social comparison activities as a whole (Burnell et al., 2019; Reer et al., 2019). Depending on "what" is being compared, social comparison activities consist of two different components: opinion and ability (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). But with the advent of social media, it gives users plenty of material to compare their talents with others in a social setting, including performance, looks, financial status, and accomplishments—all of which are disproportionately portrayed favorably on social media platforms (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). Because the comparison targets are usually perceived as performing better than themselves, such posts may elicit negative emotions in users (Tandoc et al., 2015). The Social Comparison Theory explains much of the FOMO sensation. The ease with which people may compare themselves to others online worsens feelings of inadequacy and increases the fear of missing out.

- **Self-determination Theory**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) presents an effective framework for comprehending FOMO. According to SDT, people have fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and belongingness. FOMO is an indication of unfulfilled desires for relatedness, as people seek validation and connection through digital connections.

Using Ryan et al.'s Self-Determination Theory (SDT), FOMO is frequently conceptualized and explained. As a theory, SDT concentrates on the idea of self and relatedness, or the fundamental need to connect with others, and how this notion fuels internal motivation. Przybylski used this idea to explain FOMO, characterizing it as an unpleasant emotion or emotional state brought on by a failure to fulfill social relatedness. People who have FOMO often feel alone and inadequate. The experience may include a sense of social exclusion from the activities of others, which may eventually lead to repetitive actions in order to sustain interpersonal relationships. When people experience FOMO, their urge to belong and feel connected to others can be interpreted in terms of the relatedness aspect of the SDT (Gupta & Sharma, 2021).

Implications for Mental Health Interventions

- **Digital Literacy Education**

Educating adolescents on the nature of social media and the controlled nature of internet content can assist in reducing the impacts of FOMO. Digital literacy initiatives should attempt to promote critical thinking and resilience to social comparison.

- **Digital Detox**

Encouraging people to take regular breaks from digital gadgets can help reduce the consequences of FOMO. Digital detox strategies can help to reduce anxiety and enhance overall well-being by limiting exposure to continuing social comparison.

- **Mindfulness and Self-Compassion**

Interventions that encourage mindfulness and self-compassion can help people cope with FOMO. Individuals could reduce the harmful effects of social comparisons by fostering a nonjudgmental awareness of the current moment and a gentler attitude toward oneself.

- **Encouraging offline activities**

Encouraging participation in offline activities that encourage real-life social connections and personal growth can give adolescents meaningful experiences that balance the attraction of digital involvement.

- **Parental and Educational Support**

Parents and educators play critical roles in reducing FOMO. Open communication about the effects of social media, setting realistic screen time restrictions, and encouraging healthy digital behaviors are critical tactics.

- **Promoting Genuine Connections**

Encourage meaningful, face-to-face connections that can help fulfill the desire for relatedness more successfully than online connections. This can help reduce dependency on digital validation and FOMO.

- **Recognizing Triggers**

It is frequently beneficial to identify the precise cause of FOMO symptoms; knowing and reducing triggers is important. Be purposeful and aware of your social media usage; recognize which accounts or apps tend to make you feel worse, unfollow or delete them.

- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can assist in overcoming FOMO-causing habits, such as excessive social media use. The primary objective in addressing FOMO should be control rather than abstinence.

CONCLUSION

FOMO in the digital age creates enormous psychological issues for adolescents. Constant connectedness and online social comparison have been associated with increased depression, anxiety,

and low self-esteem. Understanding the theoretical roots of FOMO allows stakeholders to create effective interventions to improve adolescent's mental health. Future studies should investigate the subtle effects of digital technology on adolescents and devise solutions to promote healthier digital engagement. It can be harmful to one's emotional and physical well-being to constantly feel FOMO, but it is also possible to enjoy social media without falling into FOMO. One can tackle FOMO by keeping in mind that social media is just one aspect of the story and by utilizing coping techniques. Establishing a sense of personal identity may make one feel more secure and in control.

Future Direction

In the era of digital technology, FOMO is a significant psychological concept. Globally, FOMO has been investigated and validated using a variety of self-report psychological measures and physiological monitoring. Studies have shown that FOMO is associated with increased SNS usage frequency, problematic SNS and smartphone use, more severe anxiety, depression, and negative affectivity, as well as a lower level of quality of life. Based on preliminary evidence, FOMO appears to be more associated with younger ages.

Future research may explore unresolved questions concerning the FOMO construct. FOMO has not been studied using neuroscientific methods to learn more about the brain mechanisms behind the pertinent concept. This is a striking absence and needs to be explored.

Subsequent research should investigate other psychological constructs that have preliminary connections with FOMO, such as the need for physical touch and behavioral activation, both of which are crucial for treating major depressive disorder.

Future studies ought to focus on obtaining empirical data on FOMO and social media in addition to comprehending how these factors could affect an individual and their self-evaluation.

Another important area of study could be the study of app design that could lessen the threat of FOMO by batching intrusive smartphone alerts, which is also crucial (Fitz et al., 2019).

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