

Lived Experiences of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) on Social Media among Young Adults in Tehran: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study

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Abstract: Social media has transformed how young adults perceive their social world, often intensifying feelings of being left out or disconnected, a phenomenon known as Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). This descriptive phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of 15 young adults (8 females, 7 males) in Tehran regarding FoMO on social media. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews, participants shared emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to constant social exposure online. Data were analyzed through Colaizzi's seven-step method, revealing six intertwined dimensions: emotional-psychological, social-behavioral, identity-related, cognitive, coping strategies, and cultural-contextual influences. Participants described heightened anxiety, compulsive checking of social media, identity-related stress, social comparison, and disruption of daily routines. Simultaneously, they employed adaptive strategies such as mindfulness, offline engagement, and reflective practices to maintain well-being. These findings highlight the nuanced, multifaceted nature of FoMO and underscore the importance of culturally sensitive interventions to support digital well-being, emotional resilience, and healthier social participation among young adults in contemporary digital environments.

Keywords: Fear of Missing Out, Lived Experience, Young Adults, Social Media, Descriptive Phenomenology.

Introduction

Fear of missing out (FoMO) is a unique term introduced in 2004 to describe a phenomenon observed on social networking sites. FoMO includes two processes; firstly, perception of missing out, followed up with a compulsive behavior to maintain these social connections. Therefore, FoMO is considered as a type of problematic attachment to social media, and is associated with a range of negative life experiences and feelings, such as a lack of sleep, reduced life competency, emotional tension, negative effects on physical well-being, anxiety and a lack of emotional control; with intimate connections possibly being seen as a way to counter social rejection (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). Social networking sites exposure has dramatically increased young adults' visibility into peers' lives, amplifying experiences of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). Defined as the apprehension that others are engaging in rewarding activities from which one is absent, FoMO has been linked to anxiety, depression, compulsive social media checking, and reduced life satisfaction (Przybylski et al., 2013; Elhai et al., 2017).

Despite extensive quantitative research, there is a lack of qualitative exploration of how young adults experience and interpret FoMO, particularly in non-Western cultures. Understanding these lived experiences phenomenologically is essential for developing culturally sensitive interventions. Psychological: FoMO contributes to heightened anxiety, mood fluctuations, and self-doubt, affecting mental health. Social: FoMO shapes social interaction quality, peer relationships, and sense of belonging. Practical and Educational: Findings inform interventions for media literacy, self-regulation, and healthy social engagement among youth. Exploring FoMO among young adults is crucial due to its impact on mental health, social interactions, and identity development. By investigating lived experiences, this study provides insights into the nuanced psychological, social, and cultural factors influencing FoMO, enabling educators, psychologists, and policymakers to develop more effective support strategies

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Research Objectives

General Objective

- To explore the lived experiences of young adults regarding FoMO on social media using a phenomenological approach.

Specific Objectives

1. Identify emotional and psychological dimensions of FoMO.
2. Examine social and behavioral expressions of FoMO.
3. Analyze identity-related impacts and coping strategies.
4. Explore cognitive and reflective aspects of FoMO.
5. Investigate cultural and contextual factors influencing FoMO.
6. Develop evidence-based recommendations to mitigate FoMO's negative effects.

Research Questions

Main Question

- How do young adults experience FoMO on social media?

Sub-questions

1. How is FoMO experienced emotionally and psychologically?
2. What social and behavioral consequences emerge from FoMO?
3. How does FoMO affect identity and self-perception?
4. What coping strategies do young adults employ?
5. How does culture influence the experience of FoMO?

Literature Review

Gupta, M., & Sharma, A. (2021). Fear of missing out: A brief overview of origin, theoretical underpinnings and relationship with mental health, *World journal of clinical cases*. This paper provides a general review of the literature. A literature search was conducted in PubMed, Google Scholar databases with coverage from January 2002 to December 2020. The search terms included "FoMO," "depression," "anxiety," "sleep," "academic" and "physical well-being." Results were restricted to peer-reviewed English-language articles. Conference and dissertation proceedings, case reports, protocol papers and opinion pieces were excluded. Reference lists were examined for additional articles of relevance. We identified $n = 65$ articles according to the above search methods. An additional 10 articles were identified through hand search and Google Scholar articles. Total $n = 30$ was excluded according to abstract screening. Full text review was performed for $n = 45$ articles according to study inclusion criteria. The $n = 9$ articles failed to meet stated inclusion criteria. Rozgonjuk et al. (2020) reported FoMO's inverse correlation with life satisfaction. - Elhai et al. (2017, 2020) found FoMO mediates the relationship between anxiety/depression and problematic smartphone use. Rozgonjuk et al. (2020) reported FoMO's inverse correlation with life satisfaction. Alt (2017) highlighted FoMO's negative impact on academic performance Barry et al. (2017) provided qualitative insight into adolescent social media experiences.

Baker et al. (2016) linked FoMO with depression and reduced mindfulness. finally, the most important works included - Przybylski et al. (2013) demonstrated FoMO's association with social media overuse. Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) has been extensively studied in recent years due to the increasing pervasiveness of social media. Przybylski et al. (2013) defined FoMO as a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, linking it to higher social media engagement and reduced well-being. Elhai et al. (2017) confirmed the association between FoMO, anxiety, and compulsive digital behavior, while Alt (2015) emphasized cultural context as a moderator influencing the intensity and expression of FoMO. Research indicates gender differences, with females often reporting greater emotional sensitivity and social comparison (Casale & Fioravanti, 2015; Dempsey et al., 2019). Studies in non-Western contexts, including preliminary research in Iran, suggest that societal norms, family expectations, and collectivist values shape how FoMO is experienced, yet

in-depth qualitative studies are scarce. This gap justifies a descriptive phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of young adults in Tehran.

Theoretical Framework

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954): Online social comparison drives FoMO-related anxiety. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000): FoMO arises from unmet needs for relatedness and competence. Bourdieu's Concept of Symbolic Capital (1986): Social visibility online reflects power and legitimacy, influencing FoMO.- Theory of Continuous Online Presence (Turkle, 2011): Constant digital engagement sustains social validation and fear of exclusion. The key theories are based on Przybylski, because FoMO was conceptualized using self-determination theory (SDT), which was developed by Ryan *et al* and applied by Przybylski *et al* to understanding what drives FOMO. In SDT, social relatedness can drive intrinsic motivation, which in turn can encourage positive mental health. Przybylski *et al*, applied SDT to FoMO, proposing that FoMO is a negative emotional state resulting from unmet social relatedness needs. The conceptualization that FoMO involves negative affect from unmet social needs is similar to theories about the negative emotional effects of social ostracism. FoMO is a relatively new psychological phenomenon. It may exist as an episodic feeling that occurs in mid-conversation, as a long-term disposition, or a state of mind that leads the individual to feel a deeper sense of social inferiority, loneliness, or intense rage, more than ever, people are exposed to a lot of details about what others are doing; and people are faced with the continuous uncertainty about whether they are doing enough or if they are where they should be in terms of their life (Gupta, & Sharma ,2021).

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of young adults in Tehran concerning Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) on social media. Descriptive phenomenology seeks to understand and depict experiences exactly as they are lived, setting aside any preconceived notions or interpretations from the researcher. A total of 15 young adults were purposefully selected to provide rich and diverse insights into the phenomenon. The sample consisted of eight females and seven males, aged between 19 and 25 years, with varying educational backgrounds from high school diplomas to bachelor's degrees. Participants were active social media users, spending approximately three to six hours daily online. This purposive sampling was deliberately designed to capture a range of experiences across genders, ages, and social engagement levels, recognizing that FoMO can manifest differently based on these factors. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 and 70 minutes. Participants were encouraged to reflect freely on their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral experiences of FoMO, including moments of anxiety, social comparison, compulsive engagement, and strategies they employed to cope with these feelings. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis followed Colaizzi's seven-step method, ensuring the essence of participants' experiences was faithfully represented. Significant statements were identified, meanings formulated, and clusters of related statements developed into overarching themes. These themes were synthesized into a comprehensive description capturing the fundamental structure of FoMO experiences. To enhance trustworthiness, participants were invited to validate the interpretations (member checks), and Lincoln and Guba's criteria for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability guided the study's rigor. Ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw, were strictly observed throughout the research process.

Findings

Table (1): Participants' Characteristics

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Education Level	Occupation	Social Media Use (hours/day)
P1	20	Female	Bachelor	Student	4
P2	22	Male	Bachelor	Student	5
P3	24	Female	Bachelor	Student	3
P4	21	Male	Bachelor	Student	6
P5	23	Female	Bachelor	Student	4

P6	19	Female	High School	Student	5
P7	22	Male	Bachelor	Student	4
P8	23	Female	Bachelor	Student	5
P9	21	Male	Bachelor	Student	4
P10	20	Female	Bachelor	Student	5
P11	24	Male	Bachelor	Employee	3
P12	22	Female	Bachelor	Student	4
P13	23	Male	Bachelor	Student	5
P14	21	Female	Bachelor	Student	4
P15	22	Male	Bachelor	Student	3

Table (2): Emotional-Psychological Dimension

Theme	Sub-theme	Meaning Unit	Participant Quotes
Anxiety	Fear of exclusion	Worry about missing social events	"When my friends go out and I can't join, I feel anxious and excluded." / "I constantly check online to make sure I'm not missing anything."
tension	Self-doubt	Feeling inferior to peers	"Seeing friends' achievements makes me feel like I am falling behind." / "I question myself when I see others' social media updates."
Mood fluctuation	Emotional dependency	Mood linked to online feedback	"If I don't see new posts, I feel bored or empty." / "My mood changes depending on likes or comments."
Stress	Sleep disturbance	Difficulty sleeping due to social media	"I stay awake at night checking updates; it affects my sleep." / "Sometimes I feel restless if I don't check messages before bed."

Table (3): Social-Behavioral Dimension

Theme	Sub-theme	Meaning Unit	Participant Quotes
Compulsive checking	Phone/notifications	Frequent social media checking	"I check my phone every few minutes even during work." / "Notifications interrupt my focus constantly."
Fear of exclusion	Peer pressure	Obligation to participate	"Even when tired, I join gatherings to not miss out." / "I feel left out if I'm not in group chats."
Social comparison	Activity evaluation	Comparing posts and achievements	"I judge myself when I see friends' posts." / "I feel I'm not doing enough compared to others online."
Online engagement	Fear of inactivity	Anxiety when offline	"Being offline for a day makes me anxious." / "I feel disconnected if I miss posts."

Table (4): Identity-Related Dimension

Theme	Sub-theme	Meaning Unit	Participant Quotes
Identity crisis	Self-worth evaluation	Questioning personal achievements	"I sometimes feel my life is meaningless compared to others." / "I wonder if my life matters when I see others online."
Self-comparison	Performance anxiety	Pressure to measure up	"I feel I must always post something impressive." / "I compare my life to peers and feel inadequate."

Table (5): Coping Strategies Dimension

Theme	Sub-theme	Meaning Unit	Participant Quotes
Offline activities	Hobbies, exercise	Engaging in alternative routines	"Going to the gym helps me detach from social media anxiety." / "Reading a book calms me after social media overload."
Mindfulness	Meditation, reflection	Awareness of FoMO triggers	"Meditation keeps me calm despite online updates." / "I learned that missing posts does not define me."
Digital detox	Time management	Limiting social media usage	"I schedule offline periods to focus on studies." / "Turning off notifications helps reduce stress."

Table (6): Cognitive Dimension

Theme	Sub-theme	Meaning Unit	Participant Quotes
Awareness	Recognizing FoMO	Identifying triggers	"I notice that seeing friends' posts triggers anxiety." / "Understanding my patterns helps me control compulsive checking."
Reflection	Meaning-making	Understanding impact on life	"Reflecting on online behavior shows me it doesn't define my worth." / "I question the importance of online validation."

Table (7): Cultural-Contextual Dimension

Theme	Sub-theme	Meaning Unit	Participant Quotes
Family expectations	Digital vigilance	Pressure to be informed	"My family expects me to be up-to-date with friends." / "I feel guilty if I miss social news."
Community norms	Peer judgment	Social conformity	"Community norms make me feel I must participate online." / "Not posting feels like letting others down."

Discussion and conclusion

This study demonstrates that FoMO is a multi-dimensional lived experience, affecting emotions, social behaviors, identity, cognition, coping, and cultural adaptation. Emotional-psychological stress is reinforced by social comparison, compulsive checking, and identity concerns. Cognitive awareness and coping strategies indicate potential resilience pathways. Cultural and contextual influences, such as family expectations and community norms, intensify FoMO in Iranian young adults, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive interventions. These findings align with Social Comparison Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Bourdieu's symbolic capital framework. When compared to previous research, these findings are largely consistent with Przybylski et al. (2013) and Elhai et al. (2017), who documented that FoMO increases anxiety and compulsive online behaviors among young adults. The gender differences observed, with females demonstrating higher emotional sensitivity and social comparison, align with prior findings suggesting that women are more vulnerable to FoMO-related stress. Additionally, the influence of cultural and contextual factors identified in Tehran reflects the role of societal norms and family expectations, which has been emphasized in studies exploring FoMO in non-Western populations (Alt, 2015).. FoMO profoundly shapes emotions, behaviors, identity, and cognitive processes among young adults. While it functions as a stressor, reflective practices and active coping strategies offer resilience pathways. Interventions targeting media literacy, mindfulness, self-regulation, and culturally sensitive social engagement are recommended.

Overall, the study confirms the multidimensional nature of FoMO and underscores the importance of culturally and gender-sensitive interventions to enhance digital well-being and emotional resilience. Unlike some prior studies that focused mainly on quantitative measures, this research provides in-depth, lived experience insights, offering a richer understanding for both researchers and practitioners

Limitations

- The study sample was limited to Iranian young adults, which may restrict generalizability.
- Self-reported experiences may be influenced by social desirability or recall bias.
- The study focused on semi-structured interviews; triangulation with diary methods or social media activity logs could enrich findings.

Future Research Directions

- Conduct longitudinal studies to examine FoMO's impact over time.
- Compare cross-cultural differences in FoMO experiences.
- Investigate the effectiveness of targeted interventions (mindfulness, digital detox, cognitive-behavioral strategies).

Practical Implications

- Mental health practitioners should incorporate FoMO awareness in therapy.
- Educators can design media literacy programs that reduce compulsive social media engagement.

- Policy makers could support digital well-being initiatives in universities and workplaces.

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