

Research Paper

Social Media Causes Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and Substance Abuse among Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Fear of missing out (FoMO) is a term introduced in 2004 to describe a phenomenon observed on social networking sites that refers to the feeling or perception that others are having more fun, living better lives, or experiencing better things than one is. FoMO includes two processes: the perception of missing out and compulsive behavior to maintain these social connections. FoMO predicts unhealthy relationships with social networking sites, and, its influence may span past the online domain. In this regard, Tomczyk and Selmanagic-Lizde (2018) argue that FoMO is a type of internet addiction that predominantly affects children and adolescents. We have provided a general review of the literature and summarized the findings concerning substance abuse and social media interaction among adolescents. Even though child or teenage drug use is an individual behavior, it is embedded in a socio-cultural context that strongly determines its character and manifestations. In an attempt to feel good about themselves or forget their pain, youngsters may turn to drugs. In some cases, some teenagers may take up drugs just because their friends or maybe a youth icon they idolize endorse drugs. Tobacco and alcohol is the most common form of substance abuse among adolescents followed by inhalants and cannabis. Social media is like a two-edged sword, it enables social interaction but it also inculcates compulsive behaviors and addictions.

Keywords: *Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), Substance Abuse, Young Adults, Mental Health, Adolescents, Social Media use*

In recent years, social media has reshaped the way individuals interact. On the one hand, it has provided new means to develop relationships and remain socially connected and has facilitated more reciprocal and continuous interactions among individuals, regardless of time and location. On the other hand, such novel social communication method has triggered a new range of negative consequences where virtual communities operate in different modalities in comparison to traditional communication and where a new set of interaction norms are perceived to exist by the individuals. Continued and frequent use of social network sites (SNS) has been linked to a fear of missing out (FOMO) and online self-promotion in the form of information disclosure.

Przybylski et al. (2013) define FoMO as “a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, FoMO is characterized by the

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Received: June 04, 2023; Revision Received: July 10, 2023; Accepted: July 14, 2023

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desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing”. FoMO can be defined as persistent anxiety revolving around the idea that friends or others are partaking in rewarding experiences from which the individual is absent (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013). Characteristically, individuals experiencing FoMO are driven to keep up with others and what they are doing, and this drive translates into their social behaviors. Research studies have shown that students who experience higher levels of FoMO are less intrinsically motivated to learn, and are more likely to engage in social media use in the classroom (Alt, 2015). When the need to be online and acquire information as gratification is not met, individuals experience negative emotions. The fear of missing out (FoMO) on social media refers to the apprehension that online content and interactions from others are unseen and reacted to in a timely fashion.

FoMO can become problematic, leading to anxiety, interrupted sleep, lack of concentration, and dependence on social media to generate gratification. (*Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2020). Through this theoretical lens, the FoMO phenomenon can be understood as a self-regulatory limbo arising from situational or chronic deficits in psychological need satisfaction. Abel et al. (2016) described FoMO as an overwhelming urge to be in two or more places at once. In their study, FoMO was measured by inadequacy, irritability, anxiety, and self-esteem items. Results suggested significant differences in social media use across the measured levels of FoMO.

Adolescence is a critical developmental period, marked by the increased importance of the peer group (Brown and Larson, 2009, Pombeni et al., 1990). During this stage of life, adolescents rely more and more on their peers and less on their parents. Peer networks expand and interactions with peers become more intimate and validation becomes a way of life (Steinberg, 2005). As a result, peers become primary sources of social support (Bokhorst, Sumter, & Westenberg, 2010). Adolescents, in particular, feel a strong need to affiliate with their peers and belong to their peers, as well as to feel popular among their peers. In this vein, scholars have suggested that SNSs may be excellent tools for adolescents to gratify their need to belong (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012) and their need for popularity (Utz et al., 2012).

FOMO AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The unique characteristics of the Internet, which make it attractive, are availability, accessibility, affordability, and anonymity (Greenfield, 1999). Moreover, the possibility to communicate with others results in a strong and intense commitment to stay online. A recent survey (Lenhart et al., 2015b) showed that 80% of teenagers admit they use texting as the most common way to get in touch with their friends. However, these characteristics can, in turn, promote Problematic Internet Use behaviors (van den Eijnden et al., 2010; Young, 1998) However, Internet use is not necessarily indicative of problematic use. It may become problematic only for those who are unable to control their online activities. Addicted individuals abandon their day-to-day activities and devote their time to the activities that they discover on the Internet (Wąsiński and Tomczyk, 2015). Problematic Internet Use (PIU) refers to the “use of the Internet that creates psychological, social, school and/or work difficulties in a person's life” (Beard and Wolf, 2001, p. 378).

Social networking sites (SNS) are a pervasive force in today's digitally driven society offering users the ability to develop and maintain their social spheres in interactive, multimedia-rich online environments (Boyd, 2007). Online vulnerability can be defined as an individual's capacity to experience detriments to their psychological, reputational, or

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physical wellbeing (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2013) as a result of the experiences that they may encounter whilst engaging in online activities. SNS use has been found to provide benefits for an individual's psycho-social well-being, including increase in social support, connectivity, and self-esteem (Burke and Kraut, 2014, Ellison et al., 2007) The perception and fear of online social ostracism have been most recently linked to FOMO. Feeling excluded from one's social connections has been seen to lead to a decrease in psychological well-being (Bevan, Pfyl, & Barclay, 2012). Higher levels of FoMO have been linked to increased disruptions due to smartphone notifications that could, eventually, lead to a more superficial approach to studying among college students (Rozgonjuk, Ryan, Kuljus, Täht, & Scott, 2019). It has been hypothesized that people with greater FoMO may be more vigilant towards notifications, and because some of their attentional resources are occupied, this may result in more distractions and poorer concentration.

FOMO AND DRUG ABUSE

The world of social media has in many ways replaced the real world. It has set up an unreasonably high standard of expectations. Most times adolescents give in to peer pressure and in order to fit in, indulge in the consumption of drugs and substances due to the inability to refuse. Students higher in FoMO may tend to drink more per occasion because they may be driven to have more socially rewarding experiences. Given that FoMO is inherently social in its nature, it seems plausible that a higher drive for rewarding social experiences may lead those higher in FoMO, to take more risks or engage in higher-risk drinking activities in order to maximize socialization opportunities (e.g., playing drinking games, drinking in unfamiliar locations, etc.). Secondly, those higher in fear of missing out who are motivated by the need for rewarding social experiences may be more sensitive to social information, particularly cues to their social inclusion/exclusion and behaviors that could compromise their social position. In order to combat FOMO, teenagers accept morally unacceptable behaviors only to fit in a social group.

FOMO AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS

FOMO has brought about significant negative changes in the psyche of teenagers, resulting in low self-esteem, the constant need for gratification, and the manifestation of uncontrollable compulsive behaviors. Social networking sites (SNS) provide a compensatory medium for adolescents with social anxiety (Clayton RB, Osborne RE, Miller BK, Oberle CD.) to address their unmet social needs in a manner other than face to face communication. However, this "social compensation" can be problematic when it reinforces avoidance for face-to-face and consequentially increasing social anxiety. The cognitive aspect of FoMO is manifested by negative ruminations like frequently checking and refreshing SNS for alerts and notifications. These subsequently heightens the levels of anxiety in order to keep up with the theme with anticipation of a reward (Billieux J, Philippot P, Schmid C, Maurage P, De Mol J, Van der Linden M.). FoMO has a relationship with the amount time spent on SNS as a predictor of emotional distress (Weinstein A, Dorani D, Elhadif R, Bukovza Y, Yarmulnik A, Dannon P. Internet). The constant "upward social comparisons" and unreasonable expectations can adversely impact one's self-esteem. These events are associated with emergence of depressive symptoms in some individuals (Steers MN, Wickham RE, Acitelli LK). These depressive symptoms may be further compounded by perceptions that one can avoid negative emotions when part of these online communities. The FoMO and interpersonal stress are associated with insomnia and subsequently poor mental health outcomes. In an Israeli university study of 40 participants who measured smartphone use at night, were at risk of reduced sleep quality and overall psychological health (Shoval D, Tal N, Tzischinsky O.). A survey of 101 adolescents linked

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pre-sleep worry and FoMO to longer sleep onset latency and reduced sleep duration. Apart from these, FoMO has somatic effects along with major psychological disturbances.

NEUROLOGY OF FOMO

The emergence of FoMO is based on excessive scale-free brain networks and further substantiates that loneliness and problematic SNS use serve as underlying mechanisms to explain the association of this topological deviation in complex brain networks with FoMO. The guide for neurogenesis is our DNA, which is directly affected by our epigenetics. Our nervous system creates neurons and electrical currents to house our fears within our nervous system, in accordance with our DNA. The FoMO emanates from the low delta frequencies (measured at .000625 hertz up to 1 hertz) and delta frequencies (measured at 1 hertz to 3 hertz). This is the range of intercellular communication that drives sensations and functions, as well as the animal instincts that drive us to fit in with a tribe in order to continue living. In today's society, fitting into a tribe is no longer a necessity for survival. However, our societies have exploited this guttural misinformed feeling of need, driven by fear, in order to further certain goals. It is far easier to tap into the tribal instincts of mankind in order to govern or lead herds of people (tribes), as opposed to attempting to govern or lead a collective of free-minded individuals.

CONCLUSION

FoMO has been linked with not only distractibility but an overall decline in productivity and worse mental health outcomes. Recent studies have established an association with sleep disturbances, social anxiety, clinical depression, and a decline in academic performance. It's not clear who all are vulnerable to FoMO, but it is observed that certain personality traits and one with underlying mental health problems could be more affected. This paper discusses how the fear of missing out drives mental health conditions that are brought about by social media. Adolescents indulge in excessive use of SNSs, the impacts of which are gradually but distinctly visible. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) addresses distorted cognitions which cause these conditions. The main treatment goal should be control rather than abstinence. FoMO reduction (FoMO-R) (Alutaybi A, Al-Thani D, McAlaney J, Ali R.) is a novel promising model specifically aimed at building resilience by focusing on a self-help literacy guide about the appropriate use of SNS. The effectiveness of cognitive reappraisal of anxiety has been recognized in helping people recognize and manage their digital addiction. Compulsive behaviors can be regulated using techniques such as distraction and reappraisal. Distraction avoidance techniques are also a part of FoMO-R. There is a positive correlation between social media usage and substance use due to FOMO.

FoMO is now an established entity in the research community. However, many practicing clinicians are not aware or educated about it affecting their population. Given, it has both diagnostic implications and could also be a confounding variable in those who do not respond to the treatment as usual. There is a need for further research which includes studies, psychological understanding, and more evidence-based prevention and treatment interventions.

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Acknowledgement

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Kothari, T. (2023). Social Media Causes Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and Substance Abuse among Adolescents. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(3), 415-420. DIP:18.01.038.20231103, DOI:10.25215/1103.038