

Perceived Stress, Loneliness and Fear of Missing Out: A Comparative Study between Gen Z and Millennials

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ABSTRACT

The development of social networking sites and internet usage has undoubtedly altered the way younger generations interact with the world. Gen Z, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, and Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, are the first generations to grow up with constant access to the internet and social media. With the advent of smartphones and social networking platforms, these cohorts are not only consuming information in novel ways but also dealing with complex social dynamics mediated by digital technology. Therefore, it was decided to conduct a study to explore generational differences in Perceived Stress, Loneliness, and Fear of Missing Out between Gen Z and Millennials. Additionally, it also investigated the relationships of Perceived Stress and Loneliness with Fear of Missing out. In the current study, a total of 214 participants (107 Gen Z, 107 Millennials) aged 15-40 were assessed using 3 tools known as the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10; Cohen et al., 1983), UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3; Russell, 1996) and Fear of Missing Out Scale (Przybylski et al., 2013). The findings revealed no significant differences in Perceived Stress and Loneliness between the two generational cohorts. However, an intriguing discovery emerged, indicating that Gen Z experiences a higher level of Fear of Missing Out compared to Millennials, signifying a significant difference between the groups on this aspect. Furthermore, the study identified significant positive correlations between Perceived Stress and Fear of Missing Out, as well as Loneliness and Fear of Missing Out. Moreover, Perceived Stress emerged as a significant predictor of Fear of Missing Out.

Keywords: *Gen Z, Millennials, Perceived Stress, Loneliness, Fear of Missing out*

Early researchers realised the importance of maintaining a stable internal environment known as homeostasis for survival. **Stress**, as named by Hans Selye, disrupts this internal balance. The "stressor" is an actual or perceived threat to an organism, and the "stress response" is the body's reaction to the stressor. While our bodies have natural stress reactions that help us adapt, prolonged or severe stress can lead to health problems. Stefaniak et al. (2022) showed that young adults had the highest overall daily stress levels, whereas older adults had the lowest perceived stress. According to the stress study by the American Psychological Association (2023), young adults in the United States experience higher levels of stress than older generations.

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Loneliness is the unpleasant sensation that arises when an individual feels that their social needs are not adequately met. It goes beyond being alone; it is a state of mind that prevents individuals from forming connections with others. Hawkley et al. (2022) revealed that loneliness is most prevalent in young adulthood, diminishes in middle adulthood and early old age, and then rises in old age. Victor and Yang (2012) noted a similar U-shaped distribution of loneliness in the United Kingdom.

The term **Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)** can be defined as a persistent apprehension that others are having pleasant experiences while one is missing out on them. FoMO can produce intense feelings of envy or dissatisfaction with one's own life. It often manifests as anxiety over not keeping up with others or living a less exciting life. Sharma et al. (2023) reported significantly higher levels of both time spent on Social Networking Sites and FoMO in Generation Z compared to Millennials.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

The aim of the current study is to investigate the relationship and difference in perceived stress, loneliness, and fear of missing out between Gen Z and Millennials.

Sample

Under non-probability, purposive was employed. The total number of participants were 214, comprising 107 each from both the generations of Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) and Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) residing in India. Out of the total participants, 101 were females, 57 were Gen Z and 44 were Millennials whereas 112 were males, 50 were Gen Z and 62 were Millennials. Out of the 214 participants, 1 millennial identified themselves as preferring not to say. The age group of all participants in this study was 15 to 40. This specific age range was chosen because it represents a critical developmental window for both Gen Z and Millennials.

Instruments

Total 3 research tools that were employed as follows-

- 1. Perceived Stress Scale:** Developed by Cohen et al. (1983), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) assesses the extent to which individuals perceive situations in their lives as stressful. It is a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Never to Very Often. The 10-item version was employed in the present study. Lee (2012) found that PSS-10 has a Cronbach's alpha and Test-retest reliability consistently exceeding .70 across studies.
- 2. UCLA Loneliness Scale:** The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3), developed by Russell (1996), consists of 20 items measuring subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Participants score each item on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 signifying Never and 4 representing Often. This scale has exhibited high reliability, with internal consistency coefficients ranging from .89 to .94 and a test-retest reliability of .73 over one year.
- 3. Fear of Missing Out Scale:** Przybylski et al. (2013) created the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) Scale which consists of 10 items measuring individuals' fear of missing out on social events, notably through social media. Respondents rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale from not at all true of me to extremely true of me. The scale demonstrates high internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$).

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Procedure

The present study aimed at comparing Gen Z and Millennials in the domains of perceived stress, loneliness and fear of missing out. The sample was decided to be 15 to 40 years old who are residing in India. After the sample was decided, data collection was done online using the services of Google forms as well as physical collection. It consisted of a consent form. The form also contained demographic details and items from three scales namely Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) and Fear of Missing Out Scale. Participants were requested to answer as honestly as possible. The entire process of data collection was conducted in accordance with APA 7 ethical guidelines. Originally, 239 responses were collected and thereafter, data collection was stopped and the results were scored. After filtration, a total of 232 responses were retained, 125 participants were Gen Z and 107 participants were Millennials as responses that didn't fit the age criteria or didn't gave their consent were deleted. For the sake of statistical analysis, responses from each category were equalized and 107 responses from each category were retained, a total sample of 214. Both descriptive (mean, SD, freq analysis) and inferential statistics (t-test, correlation, regression) were used to analyze the data.

RESULT

Table No. 1 Descriptive Statistics

	Generation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Perceived Stress	Gen Z	107	20.36	7.519	.727
	Millennials	107	18.90	6.513	.630
Loneliness	Gen Z	107	45.90	11.879	1.148
	Millennials	107	43.94	11.458	1.108
Fear of Missing Out	Gen Z	107	26.84	8.194	.792
	Millennials	107	22.97	7.990	.772

Table No. 2 Difference of Perceived Stress, Loneliness and Fear of Missing Out between Gen Z and Millennials

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Perceived Stress	Equal variances assumed	3.807	.052	1.526	212	.129	1.467	.962	-.428	3.363
	Equal variances not assumed			1.526	207.768	.129	1.467	.962	-.429	3.363
Loneliness	Equal variances assumed	.225	.636	1.224	212	.222	1.953	1.596	-1.192	5.098
	Equal variances not assumed			1.224	211.724	.222	1.953	1.596	-1.192	5.098

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		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
										Lower	Upper
Fear of Missing Out	Equal variances assumed	.000	.994	3.497	212	.001	3.869	1.106	1.688	6.050	
	Equal variances not assumed			3.497	211.866	.001	3.869	1.106	1.688	6.050	

Table No. 3 Correlation between Perceived Stress & Fear of Missing Out

		Perceived Stress	Fear of Missing Out
Perceived Stress	Pearson Correlation	1	.360 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	214	214
Fear of Missing Out	Pearson Correlation	.360**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	214	214

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table No. 4 Correlation between Loneliness & Fear of Missing Out

		Loneliness	Fear of Missing Out
Loneliness	Pearson Correlation	1	.295 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	214	214
Fear of Missing Out	Pearson Correlation	.295**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	214	214

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table No. 5 Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

Variable	B	SE	95%CI	β	p
Constant	16.582	1.572	[13.483, 19.681]	-	.000
Perceived Stress	.424	.075	[.275, .573]	.360	.000

Note. $R^2 = .130$, $F(1,212) = 31.638$

DISCUSSION

The study compared Gen Z and Millennials on perceived stress, loneliness, and fear of missing out (FoMO). Perceived stress and loneliness did not differ significantly between the two groups, rejecting the hypothesis of significant differences in these variables between Gen Z and Millennials. However, fear of missing out was notably higher in Gen Z ($M=26.84$) compared to Millennials ($M=22.97$), confirming the hypothesis of significant differences in fear of missing out between the generations ($t=3.50$, $p=0.001$). This aligns with prior research by Sharma et al. (2023), which similarly found higher levels of fear of missing out in Gen Z compared to Millennials. Gen Z's upbringing during a period of rapid technology advancement may make them more sensitive to social exclusion. Social media generates a steady stream of information about what others are doing, which may contribute to feelings of exclusion or missing out on online trends or experiences. Consider the possibility of missing out on a viral challenge or a fun event that one's friends are attending digitally. The need to maintain a well-maintained online presence, along with the worry of missing out on digital interactions, may further contribute to FOMO in this generation.

Additionally, perceived stress and loneliness were significantly related to fear of missing out ($r=0.360$ and $r=0.295$, respectively, $p<0.01$), supporting the hypotheses regarding the significant relationships between these variables. These findings are consistent with previous studies, such as Fu et al. (2023) demonstrated that stress perception is positively related to both FoMO and problematic social network use and Barry and Wong (2020) found that regardless of age, individuals with low self-esteem and loneliness reported higher levels of FoMO, especially if they were also active on social media platforms.

Regression analysis further revealed that perceived stress significantly predicted fear of missing out ($F=31.638$, $p<0.001$), explaining 13% of its variance ($R^2=0.130$). This indicates a positive influence of perceived stress on fear of missing out, highlighting its significance in shaping this phenomenon. When people are stressed, they may use social media more frequently as a coping mechanism or distraction. However, the continual exposure to other people's seemingly flawless lives on social media can lead to comparisons and feelings of inadequacy, thereby increasing FOMO. Furthermore, stress can cause increased rumination and negative thoughts, making people more concerned about what they may be missing out on and exacerbating FOMO.

CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to compare Gen Z and Millennials. The findings revealed no significant differences in perceived stress and loneliness between Gen Z and Millennials. However, a noticeable disparity arose in fear of missing out, with Gen Z showing higher levels than Millennials. This finding is consistent with prior studies, indicating a generational trend of heightened fear of missing out among young people. Furthermore, the study discovered strong positive links between perceived stress and fear of missing out, as well as loneliness and fear of missing out. This indicates a correlation between elevated levels of perceived stress and loneliness and heightened fear of missing out on activities. Remarkably, perceived stress was found to be a strong predictor of FOMO, demonstrating its substantial impact on this phenomena. Therefore, this research sheds light on how Gen Z and Millennials' psychological experiences differ, especially with regard to FOMO. It also highlights how loneliness, fear of missing out, and perceived stress are interrelated, offering important insights for interventions targeting these problems.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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