

Research Paper

Impact of FOMO on Social Avoidance Distress and Depression among College Students

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ABSTRACT

In today's digitally driven society, the phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has emerged as a significant psychological concern, particularly among college students who are immersed in social media. This study investigates the impact of FOMO on social avoidance distress and depression among college students in Kolhapur city, Maharashtra. A total sample of 150 students, comprising 75 with high FOMO and 75 with low FOMO, was selected using non-probability purposive sampling. The Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOs), the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SADS), and the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) were used for data collection. Statistical techniques including the independent samples t-test and Pearson's correlation coefficient were employed for analysis. Results revealed that students with high FOMO exhibited significantly higher levels of social avoidance distress ($M = 15.06$, $SD = 3.14$) compared to those with low FOMO ($M = 10.85$, $SD = 3.96$), $t(150) = 7.04$, $p < .01$. Similarly, depression scores were significantly elevated in the high FOMO group ($M = 30.48$, $SD = 3.69$) compared to the low FOMO group ($M = 22.87$, $SD = 4.70$), $t(150) = 13.96$, $p < .01$. A strong positive correlation ($r = .78$) was also observed between social avoidance distress and depression.

Keywords: *Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), social avoidance distress, depression, college students, digital anxiety, mental health*

In the contemporary digital era, the emergence of social media and online connectivity has significantly reshaped interpersonal relationships, communication dynamics, and psychological well-being, particularly among youth. One psychological phenomenon that has gained widespread attention is the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)—a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent. Przybylski et al. (2013) defined FOMO as a form of social anxiety stemming from the belief that others might be leading better or more enjoyable lives, often triggered by social media updates and peer comparisons. Among college students, who are already navigating a critical period of identity formation, academic stress, and social integration, FOMO can exert a particularly strong psychological toll.

College students frequently experience heightened vulnerability to psychological disturbances, including depression and social avoidance distress. These students often rely

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Received: February 24, 2025; Revision Received: March 28, 2025; Accepted: March 31, 2025

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heavily on digital platforms to foster social bonds, seek validation, and stay informed about peer activities. However, excessive exposure to curated online content can amplify feelings of inadequacy, exclusion, and dissatisfaction. FOMO can contribute to social avoidance distress—the fear or anxiety associated with participating in social events due to the anticipation of rejection or failure. Individuals suffering from FOMO may paradoxically withdraw from in-person interactions due to heightened social comparison, while simultaneously feeling distressed by their perceived exclusion. This behavioral pattern creates a vicious cycle of isolation, self-devaluation, and emotional suffering.

Empirical studies have indicated a robust correlation between FOMO and depressive symptoms. Depression, characterized by persistent sadness, hopelessness, fatigue, and loss of interest in activities, may be aggravated when students continuously perceive their lives as less fulfilling than those of their peers. The impact of FOMO extends beyond momentary dissatisfaction—it may exacerbate existing mental health issues or trigger new psychological vulnerabilities.

In the academic context, students overwhelmed by FOMO might display poor concentration, lack of motivation, and disinterest in academic tasks. Socially, the pressure to remain connected and relevant may cause emotional burnout and increase anxiety levels. Students may feel compelled to attend events or engage in online activities even when they are emotionally or physically exhausted, further straining their mental health.

Given the increasing prevalence of FOMO and its links to social and emotional maladjustments, it becomes imperative to explore how FOMO influences social avoidance distress and depression among college students. Understanding these interconnections can offer crucial insights for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers in designing effective interventions aimed at promoting emotional resilience and digital well-being in academic settings.

Przybylski, A. K., et al., (2013) This foundational study conceptualized and operationalized the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) as a measurable construct. Conducted across multiple samples of young adults, the research established a strong correlation between FOMO and negative mood, low life satisfaction, and increased engagement with social media. The study's findings emphasized how FOMO mediates the relationship between social needs and psychological well-being. This research is pivotal in laying the groundwork for exploring FOMO as a precursor to social anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Baker, Z. G., Krieger, H., & LeRoy, A. S. (2016) This study explored the interplay between FOMO and mental health by examining its impact on sleep, mood, and social well-being. The results revealed that individuals high in FOMO reported significantly lower sleep quality and elevated depressive symptoms. The study concluded that FOMO, often driven by social comparison, is a strong predictor of emotional dysregulation and avoidance behavior.

Dossey, L. (2014) In a more philosophical and observational analysis, Dossey argued that FOMO is becoming a defining psychological characteristic of the digital age, particularly among youth. The article highlighted the compulsive checking of smartphones and social media feeds as symptoms of deeper existential insecurity. Although not an empirical study, the work provides a valuable context for interpreting how FOMO intersects with anxiety and withdrawal from meaningful real-life engagements.

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Objectives:

- To examine the impact of fear of missing out on social avoidance distress among college students.
- To find out the impact of fear of missing out on depression among college students.
- To investigate the relationship between social avoidance distress and depression among college students.

Hypotheses:

- College students with a high fear of missing out will experience significantly higher social avoidance distress than those with a low fear of missing out.
- College students with a high fear of missing out will be significantly more depressed than those with a low fear of missing out.
- There should be a significant positive relationship between social avoidance distress and depression among college students.

Sample:

For the present research, the researcher initially selected 235 college students from Kolhapur City in Maharashtra State. These selected students were administered a FOMO test as part of a preliminary assessment. The researcher then analyzed the test results and categorized the students into two groups: high FOMO students and low FOMO students. Out of the 235 students, 76 were identified as having high FOMO, while the remaining 159 were categorized as low FOMO. For the study, the researcher selected 75 students from each group, totaling 150 participants (Mean = 20.15, SD = 3.45). Non-probability purposive sampling was employed in this selection process.

Research Tools:

- **Fear of missing out scale (FoMOs – 2013):** The Fear of Missing Out scale (FoMOs), developed by Przybylski et al. in 2013, comprises a single-factor structure with ten items. Each item is a self-report measure, such as "I get anxious when I do not know what my friends are up to," rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all true) to 5 (Absolutely true). Total scores on the scale fall between 10 and 50, with higher scores indicating greater fear of missing out. The original version of the scale demonstrates strong internal consistency, as evidenced by a Cronbach's α coefficient of .90.
- **Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SADS):** The Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SADS) consists of 28 items aimed at assessing social distress and isolation. Respondents indicate whether statements are true or false. The scale doesn't diagnose the presence or absence of a disorder but rather evaluates social anxiety and avoidance tendencies. Scores on the SADS are calculated by assigning one point for each "true" response to items 2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 18, 20, 21, 23, 24, and 26, and one point for each "false" response to items 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12, 15, 17, 19, 22, 25, 27, and 28. Watson and Friend reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.68 for the SADS.
- **Beck Depression Scale (BDI-II):** The Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) is a widely used self-report measure designed to assess the severity of depression symptoms in individuals aged 13 years and older. It was revised from the original Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) by Aaron T. Beck and his colleagues. The BDI-II consists of 21 items, each representing a specific symptom of depression such as sadness, guilt, or loss of interest. Respondents rate the severity of each symptom

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over the past two weeks using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating more severe depressive symptoms. The items cover various aspects of depression, including cognitive, affective, and somatic symptoms. The total score on the BDI-II ranges from 0 to 63, with scores categorized into different levels of depression severity: minimal (0-13), mild (14-19), moderate (20-28), and severe (29-63).

Variable

- **Independent variable-**
 - 1) **Types of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)**
 - a) High
 - b) Low
- **Dependent Variable**
 1. Fear of Missing out
 2. Social avoidance distress
 3. Depression

Statistical Analysis

t-test and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (Pearson r) was used for the present study.

STATISTICAL INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 Mean S.D., 't' value and Pearson r among college students on dimension fear of missing out, social avoidance distress and depression

Dimensions	Types of FOMO				DF	t	r
	High		Low				
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Social Avoidance Distress	15.06	3.14	10.85	3.96	150	7.04**	.78
Depression	30.48	3.69	22.87	4.70	150	13.96**	

The present study aimed to examine the impact of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) on social avoidance distress and depression among college students. The mean scores for individuals with high FOMO were significantly higher across both psychological dimensions. For social avoidance distress, students with high FOMO ($M = 15.06$, $SD = 3.14$) scored significantly more than those with low FOMO ($M = 10.85$, $SD = 3.96$). The computed t -value of 7.04 was statistically significant at the 0.01 level ($p < .01$), indicating that individuals experiencing high FOMO are likely to suffer greater levels of social distress. The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = .78$) also demonstrated a strong positive relationship between FOMO and social avoidance distress, suggesting that as FOMO increases, so does the tendency to avoid social interaction due to distress.

Similarly, depression scores revealed a significant disparity between the two groups. Students with high FOMO ($M = 30.48$, $SD = 3.69$) reported significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms compared to those with low FOMO ($M = 22.87$, $SD = 4.70$). The t -value of 13.96 was also significant at the 0.01 level, confirming that FOMO is strongly associated with depressive tendencies among college students. This finding supports earlier research by Przybylski et al. (2013), who identified FOMO as a critical psychological phenomenon linked to emotional instability and lower life satisfaction among young adults.

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These findings underscore the detrimental psychological consequences of high FOMO in the context of college life. The strong and statistically significant relationships highlight the urgent need for psychological interventions that address FOMO-related anxieties. Universities should consider promoting mental health programs that foster digital well-being, reduce compulsive social media use, and encourage face-to-face engagement. As supported by Baker et al. (2016), cognitive-behavioral strategies could help students reframe irrational fears associated with missing out, thus mitigating their susceptibility to both social avoidance and depressive symptoms.

CONCLUSIONS

1. High fear of missing out college students had significantly high social avoidance distress than the low fear of missing out college students.
2. High fear of missing out college students had significantly high depression than the low fear of missing out college students.
3. Positive correlation found between social avoidance distress and depression among college students.

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Acknowledgment

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: Nare, A.A. (2025). Impact of FOMO on Social Avoidance Distress and Depression among College Students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(1), 3283-3287. DIP:18.01.318.20251301, DOI:10.25215/1301.318