

Research Paper

Disconnect To Reconnect: The Psychology Behind Embracing the Pleasure of Missing Out (POMO)

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ABSTRACT

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has become a widespread challenge for adolescents navigating today's hyper-connected world, often contributing to anxiety, distraction, and diminished self-worth. In response, an encouraging trend is emerging as more young people adopt the Pleasure of Missing Out (POMO), intentionally stepping back from constant online engagement to prioritize personal well-being, authentic relationships, and self-discovery. This paper examines the psychological roots of FOMO, its emotional, cognitive, and social impacts on adolescents, and the cultural and personal factors driving the shift toward POMO. It explores the benefits of embracing POMO, including improved mental health, stronger self-esteem, and healthier relationships, while also addressing the barriers adolescents may face when attempting intentional disconnection. Strategies to support teens in practicing POMO are discussed, emphasizing the roles of families, educators, and communities in fostering healthier digital habits. By understanding the transition from FOMO to POMO, stakeholders can help adolescents build resilience, engage with technology more mindfully, and cultivate a more balanced and fulfilling life both online and offline.

Keywords: *Fear of Missing Out, Pleasure of Missing Out, adolescents, social media, mental health, digital wellness, intentional disconnection, self-esteem, technology use*

Adolescence and young adulthood are formative periods marked by intense exploration of identity, a heightened need for social belonging, and an emerging sense of autonomy. In today's hyper-connected world, these developmental milestones unfold in digital spaces where visibility and constant engagement are often perceived as essential for social acceptance. The widespread use of social media has amplified these pressures, fueling the pervasive phenomenon known as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), a persistent and often distressing sense that others are enjoying rewarding moments without one's participation.

Recent research highlights the scale of this challenge. A 2023 Pew Research Center report found that 59 percent of teens feel compelled to carefully curate their online presence, while more than a third worry about missing updates that could affect their social standing. Reports by media outlets such as The Guardian and BBC News have shared accounts of adolescents waking multiple times during the night to check notifications or experiencing

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anxiety upon seeing friends gather without them. These patterns reflect not only compulsive technology use but also a fragile sense of self-worth increasingly tied to online validation.

In contrast to these struggles, a promising shift is emerging. A growing number of adolescents and young adults are choosing what has been termed the Pleasure of Missing Out (POMO), which involves the conscious decision to step back from the constant stream of digital updates and focus on personal well-being, real-life connections, and meaningful offline experiences. Unlike FOMO, which traps individuals in cycles of comparison and insecurity, POMO invites intentionality and mindfulness into daily life. This trend is visible in the experiences of figures like Emma Chamberlain, who publicly shared her decision to take an extended break from social media to protect her mental health, a move covered by Insider and The New York Times. Hashtags such as #DigitalDetox and #JOMO (Joy of Missing Out) have also gained popularity, reflecting a cultural shift toward valuing presence over perpetual connectivity.

The movement from FOMO to POMO represents more than a passing social media trend. It signals a significant change in how young people relate to technology, friendships, and their own self-image. Understanding this evolution is essential for educators, parents, and mental health professionals who wish to support adolescents in building resilience, practicing self-regulation, and cultivating authentic connections in an increasingly digital world.

This paper explores the psychological foundations of FOMO, the negative impacts it can have on adolescent development, and the factors encouraging the rise of POMO. It also examines the benefits and challenges of adopting POMO and offers strategies to help adolescents form healthier, more intentional relationships with technology. By integrating research findings and real-world examples, this paper seeks to illuminate how the shift from FOMO to POMO can lead young people toward a more balanced and fulfilling digital life.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF FOMO

Fear of Missing Out, or FOMO, is closely tied to the developmental tasks adolescents face as they seek to establish identity, build social connections, and develop self-esteem. During this period, young people are especially attuned to peer approval and vulnerable to social comparison. Social media intensifies these tendencies by offering a constant stream of curated images and updates, creating an environment where comparing oneself to others becomes almost automatic.

The term FOMO was first coined by Patrick J. McGinnis in 2004 in an article for The Harbus, Harvard Business School's student magazine. While the feeling of being left out has existed throughout history, giving it a name marked a turning point in recognizing the unique anxieties emerging from modern digital culture. As social media platforms like Facebook gained popularity in the early 2010s, FOMO became a widespread experience, especially among adolescents, who began measuring their lives against the carefully edited posts of their peers.

Social comparison theory helps explain why FOMO affects adolescents so strongly. This theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their lives, achievements, and appearance to those of others. Adolescents, still developing their sense of self, often struggle to distinguish between online portrayals and reality. Seeing peers share moments of success, social gatherings, or material possessions can leave them feeling inadequate or excluded, even when they know these posts are selective highlights.

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Another significant factor is the adolescent brain's heightened sensitivity to social rewards. Developmental neuroscience has shown that teenagers' brains respond more intensely than adults' to positive social feedback, such as likes and comments. Social media platforms capitalize on this sensitivity by delivering unpredictable reinforcement: some posts attract significant attention, while others go unnoticed. This variability encourages compulsive checking, fueling cycles of anticipation and disappointment.

Real-life stories highlight the emotional impact of these patterns. The Guardian reported a case of a 16-year-old who described feeling "sick with worry" after seeing friends at a party she was not invited to, despite choosing to spend the evening studying. Such examples illustrate how quickly feelings of exclusion can arise and how strongly they affect adolescents' emotional well-being. A 2022 survey by Common Sense Media found that nearly 40 percent of teens feel anxious when they do not know what their friends are doing online, underscoring how deeply FOMO can disrupt peace of mind.

Platform design further intensifies FOMO. Features like Instagram and Snapchat Stories, which disappear after 24 hours, create a sense of urgency that compels users to check their feeds frequently to avoid missing out. These design elements exploit well-established behavioral psychology principles, promoting compulsive engagement and deepening fears of exclusion.

Understanding these psychological foundations reveals that FOMO is not simply a passing trend. Instead, it reflects a complex interplay of developmental needs, social pressures, and digital environments. Recognizing these factors is crucial for helping adolescents build healthier relationships with technology, develop resilience, and form a more secure sense of self in an age of constant online comparison.

Negative Impacts of FOMO on Adolescents

Although Fear of Missing Out is often portrayed as a lighthearted consequence of social media, its effects on adolescents can be serious and far-reaching. The emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral consequences of FOMO can undermine well-being and disrupt healthy development during a critical period of growth.

Emotional Consequences: FOMO is closely associated with heightened anxiety, sadness, and feelings of loneliness. Adolescents who constantly worry about missing experiences may experience chronic stress that affects mood stability and self-confidence. Reports from The Guardian have highlighted teenagers seeking counseling for anxiety rooted in seeing peers' social media posts, particularly photos of events they were not invited to or achievements they feel pressured to match. Persistent exposure to such situations can gradually erode self-esteem and contribute to depression.

Cognitive Consequences: FOMO often disrupts focus and impairs academic performance. The urge to stay updated on friends' activities leads many adolescents to check their phones frequently, interrupting sustained concentration essential for studying and learning. Research published in *Computers in Human Behavior* has shown that students with higher FOMO levels are more likely to multitask during schoolwork, resulting in reduced comprehension and lower grades. This constant distraction makes it difficult for adolescents to engage deeply with educational tasks or pursue creative activities.

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Social Consequences: Ironically, efforts to maintain an active online presence can weaken real-life relationships. Adolescents preoccupied with monitoring social media may spend less time nurturing face-to-face connections, resulting in more superficial friendships and fewer opportunities to build empathy or trust. In attempts to avoid exclusion, some teens attend events they do not enjoy or post exaggerated updates to appear socially engaged. These behaviors can lead to feelings of inauthenticity and deepen social dissatisfaction rather than alleviating it.

Physical and Behavioral Effects: The compulsive checking associated with FOMO can interfere with healthy sleep patterns. Many adolescents report waking up multiple times during the night to monitor notifications, leading to poor sleep quality and daytime fatigue. A 2022 study by the American Academy of Pediatrics found that teens with high FOMO scores were significantly more likely to experience sleep disturbances and difficulty concentrating in school, both of which can contribute to irritability and decreased academic motivation.

Risk-Taking Behaviors: In some cases, FOMO can push adolescents toward impulsive or risky decisions in pursuit of acceptance or social validation. This might include experimenting with substances, engaging in dangerous stunts, or participating in viral online challenges. BBC News has reported incidents of teens feeling compelled to join online trends despite personal discomfort or safety concerns, driven by a fear of appearing disconnected or irrelevant to their peers.

Collectively, these emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral impacts highlight that FOMO is not a harmless byproduct of digital life but a complex issue with the potential to undermine adolescents' mental health, relationships, and academic success. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is essential for helping young people develop resilience and a healthier sense of self-worth in a constantly connected world.

THE EMERGENCE OF POMO

While the pressures of social media have fueled widespread experiences of FOMO among adolescents, a notable shift has begun to emerge. Increasingly, young people are choosing to step back from the constant demands of digital engagement and embracing what is often called the Pleasure of Missing Out, or POMO. Rather than fearing exclusion, adolescents who adopt POMO find satisfaction in disconnecting from the flood of updates and focusing on personal well-being, deeper relationships, and real-life experiences.

Unlike FOMO, which has a clear origin, the term POMO does not have a definitive first use. It began appearing in lifestyle media and digital wellness discussions in the late 2010s, often as a playful counterpart to FOMO. Outlets such as Psychology Today and Refinery29 started highlighting POMO as the intentional choice to skip events or online chatter in favor of activities that support mental health and personal fulfillment. Closely related is the concept of Joy of Missing Out (JOMO), which gained popularity in the early 2010s and emphasizes the relief and happiness found in choosing not to participate in social or digital obligations. While the terms are often used interchangeably, POMO tends to highlight the proactive delight in missing out, while JOMO focuses on the sense of peace or contentment that follows.

POMO reflects a growing recognition among adolescents that constant comparison and online performance can negatively impact mental health. Many young people are beginning

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to see intentional disengagement as an act of self-care rather than a sign of social failure. This shift has been reinforced by cultural movements emphasizing mindfulness, minimalism, and authenticity, which prioritize meaningful connections over superficial engagement.

High-profile figures have helped normalize the decision to unplug. Emma Chamberlain, a YouTuber with millions of followers, publicly announced a social media hiatus, explaining that the pressure to constantly post was overwhelming and damaging to her mental well-being. Her decision, widely covered by Insider and The New York Times, resonated with many young people, who felt encouraged to set their own boundaries. Similarly, Selena Gomez has shared how deleting social media apps helped her feel more present and less anxious, a story she discussed on Good Morning America, which sparked conversations about healthier technology use.

Social media itself reflects signs of this shift. Hashtags like #DigitalDetox, #POMO, and #JOMO have gained traction, with growing communities supporting intentional technology breaks and offline activities. Adolescents are finding spaces to share experiences and encourage each other to value quality time over the pursuit of online validation.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this trend. Prolonged periods of social distancing prompted many young people to reflect on their digital habits. With fewer social events to attend, some adolescents began to question whether constant online engagement truly enhanced their lives or left them feeling drained. A 2021 Pew Research Center report found that more than half of teens surveyed felt relieved, rather than anxious, when they took breaks from social media during periods of lockdown.

The emergence of POMO represents more than a passing reaction to digital fatigue. It signals a meaningful rethinking of how adolescents approach technology, relationships, and self-care. By embracing POMO, young people are redefining what it means to stay connected, placing greater value on authentic relationships, personal growth, and mental well-being over the relentless pursuit of online relevance.

FACTORS DRIVING THE SHIFT FROM FOMO TO POMO

The growing embrace of intentional disconnection among adolescents is not happening by chance. Several interconnected factors are encouraging young people to move from fearing what they might miss online to taking pleasure in opting out, reshaping how they view social media, friendships, and self-worth.

- **Reflection During the Pandemic:** The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted routines and forced many young people to spend extended periods away from typical social activities. This break from constant socializing provided space for adolescents to reflect on how digital engagement affected their mood and relationships. Without the steady stream of social gatherings to watch online, many began questioning whether social media added value to their lives or increased stress. A 2021 Pew Research Center survey found that more than half of teens reported feeling relief rather than worry when they took breaks from social media during lockdowns, highlighting the beginning of a shift in attitudes.
- **Greater Awareness of Mental Health:** Greater Awareness of Mental Health: A growing focus on mental health among adolescents has also fueled the move toward POMO. Campaigns promoting conversations about anxiety and burnout have

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encouraged teens to prioritize emotional well-being over maintaining an active online presence. Public figures like Deepika Padukone, who openly spoke about her battle with depression and founded the *Live Love Laugh Foundation* to support mental health awareness, have helped normalize taking digital breaks as a form of self-care. Her advocacy, much like global icons such as Selena Gomez, empowers young people to view emotional well-being as a priority rather than viewing digital withdrawal as social failure.

- **Cultural Trends Favoring Mindfulness and Authenticity:** Cultural movements emphasizing mindfulness, minimalism, and authenticity have influenced how adolescents view social media. The rise of trends that encourage slow living, deeper connections, and intentional choices has led many teens to focus on real-life relationships and personal interests instead of chasing online approval. These shifts challenge the notion that being constantly connected is necessary for happiness or success.
- **Changing Peer Norms and Influencer Examples:** Influencers and everyday teens alike are publicly setting boundaries around their social media use, making digital breaks more socially acceptable. When a major Bollywood figure like Aamir Khan announced in mid-March 2021 that he was quitting social media to “completely focus on work” and step away from the digital noise, it sent a strong signal to millions of followers in India. His choice helped normalize taking intentional breaks, even for high-profile personalities, and inspired young people to consider disconnecting without fear of social repercussions.
- **Support from Schools and Families:** Some schools and families are actively encouraging healthier digital habits by promoting device-free times, offering digital literacy education, and fostering open discussions about technology use. These efforts help adolescents see stepping back from constant connectivity as a responsible and positive choice, reinforcing the idea that online absence can support overall well-being.
- **Online Communities Promoting Disconnection:** Ironically, online spaces themselves are nurturing this shift. Hashtags like #DigitalDetox, #JOMO, and #POMO connect adolescents who share their experiences with limiting screen time, finding joy in offline activities, and encouraging each other to choose intentional breaks. These communities provide social support and make it easier for teens to adopt POMO without feeling isolated.

Together, these factors are reshaping how adolescents understand digital engagement. They are recognizing that opting out does not mean losing connection but can instead lead to more authentic relationships, better focus, and a stronger sense of self-worth. This evolving mindset has laid the foundation for POMO to become a meaningful, positive approach to navigating life in a digital world.

BENEFITS OF POMO FOR ADOLESCENTS

As more adolescents choose the Pleasure of Missing Out, they are discovering that stepping back from constant digital engagement can bring significant benefits for their mental, emotional, and social well-being. Rather than isolating them, intentional disconnection can help teens develop confidence, focus, and stronger, more meaningful relationships.

- **Improved Emotional Well-Being:** By opting out of the endless cycle of online comparison, adolescents who practice POMO often experience reduced anxiety and

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greater emotional stability. Without constant exposure to carefully curated images of others' lives, they are less likely to feel inadequate or left out. A 2022 study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that teens who regularly took breaks from social media reported fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression, underscoring the protective effects of intentional disconnection.

- **Stronger Sense of Self:** POMO encourages adolescents to spend time exploring their own interests, goals, and values, rather than comparing themselves to others. This inward focus helps build a clearer sense of identity and promotes self-acceptance. By limiting exposure to unrealistic portrayals of perfection online, teens can develop more confidence in their unique strengths and feel less pressure to conform.
- **Enhanced Focus and Productivity:** Constant notifications and the urge to check updates can make it difficult for adolescents to concentrate on schoolwork or creative projects. Teens who adopt POMO often find they can complete assignments more efficiently and engage more fully in activities they enjoy. In interviews highlighted by *The New York Times*, teens who implemented phone-free study times reported feeling more productive and less stressed, as well as more satisfied with the quality of their work.
- **Healthier Relationships:** Taking breaks from social media allows adolescents to invest more time and attention in face-to-face interactions with family and friends. Without the distraction of notifications or the urge to document every moment, teens can be more present, which strengthens trust and emotional closeness. A 2023 article in *Psychology Today* described teens who reported feeling more connected to friends after reducing social media use, noting deeper conversations and more enjoyable shared experiences.
- **Better Sleep and Physical Health:** Reducing late-night social media use supports healthier sleep patterns, which are essential for adolescents' physical and mental well-being. Teens who practice POMO are less likely to stay up scrolling through updates, resulting in better sleep quality and more energy during the day. Studies from the American Academy of Pediatrics show that better sleep helps regulate mood, improve academic performance, and support overall health.
- **Greater Empowerment and Autonomy:** POMO empowers adolescents to set boundaries around their technology use, giving them a sense of control over their time and attention. This autonomy can boost resilience and help teens build the confidence to make choices that align with their values, rather than following social pressure or trends. Feeling capable of managing their own digital habits can also strengthen self-esteem and independence.

These benefits show that embracing POMO is not about disconnecting from life, but about reconnecting with what truly matters. By engaging more intentionally with both their online and offline worlds, adolescents can cultivate healthier self-esteem, strengthen relationships, and build a foundation for a more balanced, fulfilling life.

CHALLENGES IN ADOPTING POMO

While the benefits of embracing the Pleasure of Missing Out are clear, many adolescents find it difficult to put POMO into practice. Social expectations, platform designs, and personal fears often create barriers that can make intentional disconnection feel overwhelming, even when teens recognize the negative effects of constant online engagement.

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- **Social Pressures and Fear of Exclusion:** Adolescents worry that stepping back from social media will lead to missing out on important updates, inside jokes, or invitations. The fear of not knowing what friends are discussing can make disconnection seem risky. Reports from BBC News have described teens who attempted digital detoxes only to return quickly, concerned about being excluded from group chats or social circles.
- **Expectations of Constant Availability:** There is often an unspoken expectation among peers that everyone should be instantly reachable. Friendships, school projects, and even early romantic relationships may rely on fast replies through messaging apps or social media. For many teens, choosing POMO can feel like breaking social norms or letting friends down, especially when prompt responses are seen as a sign of loyalty and care.
- **Addictive Platform Designs:** Social media platforms use features like infinite scrolling, push notifications, and algorithm-driven feeds to keep users engaged as long as possible. These design elements intentionally exploit the brain's reward systems, making it challenging for adolescents to set limits even when they want to. Teens who try to practice POMO often find themselves drawn back by the platforms' carefully crafted hooks.
- **Concerns About Missing Opportunities:** Many adolescents believe that being constantly connected is essential for staying informed about social events, school updates, or extracurricular opportunities. This fear of missing important information can deter teens from taking breaks, as they worry that disconnection could cause them to lose out academically or socially.
- **Limited Support or Understanding:** Without support from family, teachers, or friends, it can be difficult for adolescents to build the confidence needed to practice POMO. When adults dismiss their concerns about social media or peers mock their efforts to disconnect, teens may feel isolated and discouraged from maintaining healthy boundaries around technology.
- **Dependence on Social Media Metrics:** For many adolescents, likes, comments, and follower counts have become measures of self-worth and popularity. Letting go of these external indicators can feel like losing recognition or status. A 2022 survey by Common Sense Media found that nearly half of teens said the number of likes on their posts affected how they believed others viewed them, highlighting how deeply online validation can shape self-esteem.

These challenges show that while POMO offers important benefits, adolescents need support and encouragement to navigate the obstacles they face in adopting intentional digital disconnection. Recognizing these barriers is essential for parents, educators, and mental health professionals working to help teens develop healthier relationships with technology.

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT ADOLESCENTS IN EMBRACING POMO

While embracing the Pleasure of Missing Out can bring important benefits, adolescents often need guidance and encouragement to adopt and sustain healthier digital habits. Parents, educators, and mental health professionals can play a vital role in helping teens set boundaries, build self-confidence, and find satisfaction in intentional disconnection.

- **Teach Digital Literacy:** Helping adolescents understand how social media platforms are designed to capture attention can empower them to make more mindful choices about their online behavior. Explaining algorithms, the impact of curated content,

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and the psychological tricks that keep users scrolling can reduce the power of online comparisons and encourage critical thinking.

- **Model Balanced Technology Use:** Adults set an important example for adolescents. When parents, caregivers, and teachers demonstrate healthy digital habits such as putting devices away during meals, limiting social media time, and prioritizing in-person interactions, teens are more likely to adopt similar patterns in their own lives.
- **Support Offline Interests:** Encouraging adolescents to explore hobbies, sports, creative pursuits, or volunteering can offer fulfilling alternatives to screen time. Engaging in offline activities helps teens build self-esteem, develop social skills, and discover passions that reduce dependence on online approval.
- **Establish Device-Free Times and Spaces:** Setting aside tech-free times, like family meals or an hour before bedtime, can help adolescents practice being present and enjoy moments without digital distractions. Schools can contribute by creating device-free zones or organizing unplugged events that reinforce the value of intentional breaks.
- **Reframe Disconnection as Self-Care:** Helping teens see that taking breaks from social media is a healthy, proactive choice can shift the narrative from avoidance to self-care. Discussing concepts like POMO and JOMO, along with examples of public figures who prioritize mental health over constant online engagement, can normalize and celebrate intentional disconnection.
- **Encourage Supportive Peer Communities:** Adolescents benefit from knowing they are not alone in wanting to set healthier digital boundaries. Connecting them with peers who value mindfulness, creativity, or in-person connections can offer positive reinforcement and show that choosing POMO doesn't mean sacrificing social ties.
- **Maintain Open Communication:** Creating an environment where adolescents feel safe discussing their digital experiences, challenges, and successes is essential. By listening without judgment and offering guidance when needed, adults can strengthen trust and help teens reflect on their online habits, making them more likely to seek support when they need it.

By combining education, modeling, encouragement, and open dialogue, adults can help adolescents embrace POMO with confidence. Supporting teens in developing intentional digital habits empowers them to build healthier relationships with technology, deepen their real-life connections, and cultivate resilience in an always-connected world.

CONCLUSION

The shift from FOMO to POMO represents a meaningful and encouraging evolution in how adolescents engage with technology, relationships, and their own sense of self. While Fear of Missing Out can leave young people feeling anxious, inadequate, and trapped in cycles of comparison, embracing the Pleasure of Missing Out offers a path toward greater self-awareness, emotional well-being, and authentic connection.

By intentionally stepping back from constant digital demands, adolescents can learn to focus on what truly matters: their own interests, values, and real-life relationships. Choosing POMO helps teens develop confidence in their unique identities and reduces the pressure to seek approval through curated online images. It encourages them to value presence over performance and quality of interaction over quantity of likes or followers.

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Although obstacles such as social expectations, addictive platform designs, and fears of missing important information can make practicing POMO challenging, supportive guidance can make a significant difference. When families, educators, and communities model healthy technology use, create open spaces for honest conversations, and encourage offline activities, adolescents are better equipped to set and maintain boundaries that align with their well-being.

Empowering adolescents to embrace POMO is not about rejecting technology altogether but about helping them develop a balanced, intentional relationship with it. By fostering critical thinking, resilience, and self-compassion, we can guide young people toward digital habits that support their mental health and enrich their offline lives. As more adolescents discover the pleasure of missing out, they can build a foundation for a more confident, connected, and fulfilling future, both online and beyond.

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