

Research Paper

An Empirical Investigation of Career FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and Its Association with Decision Paralysis Among Emerging Adults (18-25 Years) of Kerala

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ABSTRACT

The present empirical investigation examined relationships among social media intensity, Career Fear of Missing Out (Career FOMO), and career decision paralysis among young people in Kerala. A quantitative descriptive-correlational design was used with 138 participants recruited through purposive sampling. Data were collected using an adapted Social Media Intensity Scale, Career FOMO Scale, Decision Paralysis Scale, and a socio-demographic profile. Social media intensity was positively correlated with Career FOMO ($r = .367, p < .001$), while daily social media use was positively correlated with decision paralysis ($r = .502, p < .001$). Career FOMO was also positively associated with decision paralysis ($r = .340, p < .001$). Positive associations were observed across gender and several parental and residential subgroups. The findings highlight the relevance of social comparison, digital exposure, and uncertainty in career counselling.

Keywords: *social media intensity, Career FOMO, decision paralysis, career decision-making, Kerala*

The transition from education to employment is an important developmental period in which young people explore identity, aspirations, social roles, and future possibilities. Arnett (2000) described emerging adulthood as a period characterised by exploration, instability, and identity development. Career decisions during this period may be particularly demanding because individuals are required to integrate personal interests, abilities, family expectations, educational qualifications, labour-market opportunities, and perceptions of social success.

The digital environment has added a new dimension to this transition. Social networking platforms provide continuous exposure to information about other people's education, employment, promotions, international mobility, entrepreneurship, income, and lifestyles. LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms can therefore function not only as communication and information tools but also as environments for social comparison. Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory provides a useful framework for understanding this process: individuals evaluate themselves partly by comparing their

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abilities and circumstances with those of others. Digital platforms substantially expand the number and geographical range of comparison targets.

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) was conceptualised by Przybylski et al. (2013) as a pervasive apprehension that others may be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, accompanied by a desire to remain connected with what others are doing. In the present study, this concept is applied specifically to professional and career contexts. Career FOMO refers to concern that peers are obtaining better jobs, salaries, professional experiences, networks, or career trajectories. Repeated exposure to curated career achievements may encourage individuals to compare their own progress with highly selective representations of others' lives. Such comparisons may contribute to dissatisfaction, uncertainty, and difficulty committing to a career choice.

Career decision paralysis refers to difficulty committing to a professional course of action because of over-analysis, fear of regret, uncertainty, or the desire to preserve alternative possibilities. Schwartz's (2004) work on the paradox of choice suggests that an abundance of alternatives can increase the psychological burden of choosing. Career decision-making research has similarly identified the importance of uncertainty, information processing, self-knowledge, and perceived alternatives in career choice.

Kerala provides a relevant context for examining these processes. The thesis underlying the present study describes a highly educated population, strong migration aspirations, extensive family involvement in career choices, and substantial exposure to global professional narratives. Career aspirations in Kerala have historically been influenced by government employment and overseas migration, while contemporary aspirations include opportunities in countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Germany, and the United States. Social media makes these professional and lifestyle trajectories increasingly visible. As a result, local career opportunities may be evaluated against global and highly curated standards.

The study also draws on Self-Determination Theory and Conservation of Resources theory. Self-Determination Theory proposes that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are important psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Career comparison may challenge these needs when young people perceive themselves as less competent, less successful, or less autonomous than their peers. Conservation of Resources theory proposes that individuals seek to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Career security, skills, social connections, reputation, and future opportunities can be understood as valued resources; perceptions of falling behind may therefore generate anxiety and persistent searching for alternatives.

Although the broader literature has examined FOMO, social comparison, social media use, and career decision-making, the present thesis identifies a need to examine their relationship within the Kerala context. The study therefore focused on social media intensity, Career FOMO, and career decision paralysis among young people aged 18–25 years.

Objectives

The empirical investigation aimed to examine the relationship between social media usage intensity, Career FOMO, and career decision paralysis among emerging adults in Kerala. Specifically, it sought to:

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1. Assess Career FOMO among emerging adults across various educational backgrounds.
2. Examine the relationship between social media intensity and Career FOMO.
3. Examine the relationship between social media usage and career decision paralysis.
4. Examine the relationship between Career FOMO and career decision paralysis.
5. Examine whether the relationship between Career FOMO and decision paralysis differs across gender, parental education, parental occupation, and place of residence.

Hypotheses

- H0: There is no relationship between social media usage and decision paralysis
- H1: Social media intensity is significantly positively correlated with Career FOMO.
- H2: Career FOMO is significantly positively correlated with career decision paralysis.

Exploratory Subgroups:

- Career FOMO is significantly positively correlated with career decision paralysis across gender groups.
- Career FOMO is significantly positively correlated with career decision paralysis across parental education groups.
- Career FOMO is significantly positively correlated with career decision paralysis across parental occupation groups.
- Career FOMO is significantly positively correlated with career decision paralysis across residential groups.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Here, “empirical investigation” describes the overall nature of the research because the study collected and analysed primary data from participants; “descriptive-correlational” specifies the quantitative research design used to examine the observed relationships.

The empirical investigation employed a descriptive-correlational quantitative research design. The design was selected to describe the characteristics of the sample and examine statistical relationships among social media intensity, Career FOMO, and decision paralysis without manipulating participants' environments.

Participants and Sampling

The empirical investigation included 138 respondents. The study universe was defined as individuals aged 18–25 years residing in Kerala who were pursuing higher education, seeking employment, or navigating early career development. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who met the study criteria and were active social media users engaged in career decision-making or job seeking.

The sample included 79 female participants (57.24%) and 59 male participants (42.75%). Regarding age, 30 participants (21.74%) were aged 18–19, 41 (29.71%) were aged 20–22, and 67 (48.5%) were aged 23–25.

Most participants were from Science (33.3%) and professional courses (30.43%), followed by Arts (13.76%), Commerce (13.04%), and other fields (9.42%). Regarding current status, 52 participants (37.68%) were undergraduate students, 38 (27.53%) were postgraduate

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students, 29 (21.01%) were employed, 12 (8.69%) had completed undergraduate study, and 7 (5.07%) were classified as not applicable.

In terms of residence, 64 participants (46.37%) lived in rural areas, 39 (28.26%) in semi-urban areas, and 35 (25.36%) in urban areas. Participants were reported from all 14 districts of Kerala, although Idukki accounted for 50 participants (36.23%), followed by Ernakulam and Kottayam with 18 each (13.04%).

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire using a hybrid procedure. Physical questionnaires were administered in selected higher-education institutions in Idukki district after institutional permission, while an online Google Form was distributed through academic and social networks to reach respondents in other districts. Of 100 physical questionnaires distributed, 80 were retained as valid after excluding incomplete, blank, and uniform-response forms. A further 58 valid online responses were obtained, producing a final sample of 138.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw. Written consent procedures were included in the study materials.

Measures

A semi-structured socio-demographic profile collected information on age, gender, educational background, parental education and occupation, residence, district, and social media usage.

- **Social Media Intensity Scale:** A researcher-adapted version of the Social Media Intensity measure originally developed by Ellison et al. (2007) was used. The original measure was modified to reflect general social-media engagement relevant to the present study. The final scale consisted of 10 items rated on a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicated greater social-media intensity. The scoring range was 10-50. Preliminary internal consistency was assessed during a pilot study of 20 participants, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of .753.
- **Career FOMO Scale:** The Career FOMO Scale was researcher-adapted from the conceptualization and measurement of FOMO proposed by Przybylski et al. (2013). Items were modified to represent career-related concerns, including perceptions of missing professional opportunities, comparison with peers' career progress, and concern about falling behind. The resulting scale consisted of 10 items rated on a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicated greater Career FOMO. The scoring range was 10-50. Preliminary internal consistency in the pilot sample of 20 participants yielding a Cronbach's Alpha of .800.
- **Decision Paralysis Scale:** The Decision Paralysis Scale was researcher-developed to assess difficulty in making and committing to career decisions. Items addressed are over-analysis, fear of making the wrong choice, post-decisional regret, continued searching for alternatives, and difficulty committing to one career path. The scale consisted of 10 items rated on a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicated greater career decision paralysis. Preliminary internal consistency in the pilot sample was $\alpha = .732$

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Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics included frequencies, percentages, means, and medians. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine relationships among the principal variables and across selected demographic subgroups.

RESULTS

Social Media Intensity and Career FOMO

The mean social media intensity score was 31.51 (median = 31), while the mean Career FOMO score was 27.70 (median = 28). Pearson correlation showed a statistically significant positive association between social media intensity and Career FOMO, $r = .367$, $p < .001$. Thus, higher social media intensity was associated with higher Career FOMO in the sample.

The daily-use distribution showed that 19 participants (13.76%) reported less than one hour of social media use per day, 49 (35.5%) reported 1–3 hours, 43 (31.15%) reported 3–5 hours, and 27 (19.56%) reported more than five hours. Therefore, 66.65% of respondents reported between one and five hours of daily use.

The second hypothesis predicted that reduced social media use would be associated with increased Career FOMO. The observed relationship was positive rather than negative ($r = .367$, $p < .001$). The hypothesis was therefore not supported by the obtained data.

Social Media Usage and Decision Paralysis

Daily social media usage showed a statistically significant positive association with decision paralysis, $r = .502$, $p < .001$. The mean decision paralysis score was 30.86 (median = 30). This finding did not support the third hypothesis, which predicted no relationship between social media usage and decision paralysis.

At the item level, 40% of respondents reported delaying professional decisions because they feared regretting the outcome. Thirty-three percent reported continuing to look for better alternatives after making a career-related choice, while 36% reported difficulty committing to one career path because they did not want to close other doors. Approximately 39% reported that fear of making the wrong career move often resulted in doing nothing at all. These item-level results provide behavioural context for the overall correlation.

Career FOMO and Decision Paralysis

Career FOMO was significantly positively correlated with career decision paralysis, $r = .340$, $p < .001$. The finding supports the fourth hypothesis. The result indicates that participants reporting higher levels of career-related fear of missing out also tended to report greater difficulty with career decision-making.

Table 1 - Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

Variables	Mean	Median	Scale Range
Social Media Intensity	31.51	31	10 - 50
Career FOMO	27.70	28	10 – 50
Decision Paralysis	30.86	30	10 - 50

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Table 2 – Correlation Between Major Variable

Variables	Pearson's r	p-value	Interpretation
Social Media Intensity ↔ Career FOMO	.367	< .001	Significant positive correlation
Daily Social Media Use ↔ Decision Paralysis	.502	< .001	Significant positive correlation
Career FOMO ↔ Decision Paralysis	.340	< .001	Significant positive correlation

Gender

The relationship between Career FOMO and decision paralysis was significant for both male and female participants. For males (n = 59), $r = .440$, $p = .0005$. For females (n = 79), $r = .615$, $p < .001$. The source thesis reports a stronger correlation coefficient in the female subgroup. However, because the study did not report a formal statistical test comparing the two independent correlation coefficients, the difference between the correlations should be described as a difference in observed association rather than as proof of a statistically significant gender difference.

Table 3 – Gender-wise Correlation

Gender	Number n	Pearson's r	p-value	Interpretation
Male	59	.440	.0005	Significant positive correlation
Female	79	.615	< .001	Significant positive correlation

Parental Education

For fathers' education, correlations between Career FOMO and decision paralysis were $r = .305$ ($p = .076$) for the secondary-education group, $r = .735$ ($p < .001$) for the diploma group, and $r = .590$ ($p < .001$) for the undergraduate-and-above group. For mothers' education, the corresponding correlations were $r = .400$ ($p = .009$), $r = .592$ ($p = .005$), and $r = .663$ ($p < .001$), respectively. These findings indicate statistically significant associations in most parental-education subgroups, but the father's secondary-education subgroup did not reach conventional statistical significance.

Table 4 – Parental Education-wise Correlation

Parent	Education Group	Pearson's r	p-value	Significant?
Father	Secondary	.305	.076	No
Father	Diploma	.735	< .001	Yes
Father	UG & Above	.590	< .001	Yes
Mother	Secondary	.400	.009	Yes
Mother	Diploma	.592	.005	Yes
Mother	UG & Above	.663	< .001	Yes

Parental Occupation

For fathers' occupation, significant positive correlations were reported for private-sector employment ($r = .745$, $p < .001$), public-sector employment ($r = .675$, $p < .001$), self-employment/business ($r = .640$, $p < .001$), and agriculture ($r = .398$, $p = .049$). The daily-labour subgroup was not significant ($r = .142$, $p = .600$), while the “others” subgroup was too small for meaningful inferential testing.

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For mothers' occupation, significant associations were reported for private-sector employment ($r = .586$, $p < .001$), public-sector employment ($r = .604$, $p < .001$), self-employment/business ($r = .936$, $p < .001$), and housewife status ($r = .464$, $p = .001$). The daily-labour subgroup was not significant ($r = .244$, $p = .526$), and agriculture was not statistically significant ($r = .777$, $p = .069$). Because some subgroup sample sizes were small, these coefficients should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 5 – Parental Occupation-wise Correlation

Parent	Education Group	Pearson's r	p-value	Significant?
Father	Private sector	.745	< .001	Yes
Father	Public sector	.675	< .001	Yes
Father	Self-employed/Business	.640	< .001	Yes
Father	Agriculture	.398	.049	Yes
Father	Daily labour	.142	.600	No
Mother	Private sector	.586	< .001	Yes
Mother	Public sector	.604	< .001	Yes
Mother	Self-employed/Business	.936	< .001	Yes
Mother	Housewife	.464	.001	Yes
Mother	Daily labour	.244	.526	No
Mother	Agriculture	.777	.069	No

Place of Residence

Career FOMO and decision paralysis were significantly positively correlated in all three residential groups: rural ($r = .377$, $p = .002$), semi-urban ($r = .545$, $p < .001$), and urban ($r = .796$, $p < .001$). The coefficients therefore indicate an association in each subgroup, but the study design does not establish that residence causes differences in decision paralysis. Formal between-group tests would be needed to establish whether the observed correlation coefficients differ statistically.

Table 6 – Residence-wise Correlation

Residence	Pearson's r	p-value	Significant?
Rural	.377	.002	Yes
Semi-urban	.545	< .001	Yes
Urban	.796	< .001	Yes

DISCUSSION

The principal finding of the study was the significant positive relationship between social media intensity and Career FOMO. This result is consistent with the conceptualisation of FOMO as a state involving concern about missing rewarding experiences and a desire to remain connected to others' activities (Przybylski et al., 2013). The findings also fit Social Comparison Theory, because social media provides frequent access to information about peers' educational and professional achievements. Previous literature cited in the thesis has similarly associated social media comparison with career frustration, FOMO, and career-related concerns.

The finding that daily social media usage was positively associated with decision paralysis adds another dimension. The result suggests that the amount of time spent on social media is related to difficulties in career decision-making within this sample. However, the

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correlational design does not establish the direction of causality. It is possible that greater social media use contributes to decision difficulty, that individuals experiencing career uncertainty use social media more frequently to search for information and reassurance, or that both processes operate simultaneously.

Career FOMO was also positively associated with decision paralysis. This finding provides empirical support for the central conceptual pathway examined by the study: concern about missing better professional opportunities is related to difficulty committing to a career choice. The result can be interpreted through the paradox of choice, where extensive alternatives may increase comparison and regret. When young people perceive each choice as closing the door to numerous other possibilities, commitment may become psychologically difficult.

The item-level findings further illustrate this pattern. A substantial proportion of respondents reported fear of regret, continued searching for alternatives, difficulty closing career options, and inaction arising from fear of making the wrong move. At the same time, large neutral groups appeared across several items. This suggests that career decision difficulty may not be a constant experience for all participants and may vary according to the specific decision or circumstances.

The gender-stratified findings showed positive associations for both males and females, with a higher observed correlation among females. The study does not, however, establish that gender itself causes greater vulnerability. Differences could reflect sample composition, contextual factors, family expectations, educational pathways, or other variables not measured in the study. Future research should use formal moderation or between-correlation tests to investigate this question.

Parental education and occupation also showed associations across several subgroups. These findings are potentially relevant to the role of family context in career decision-making. In contexts where educational and occupational achievement carries strong social meaning, young people may perceive career choices as connected to family expectations and social status. Nevertheless, subgroup correlations should not be interpreted as evidence that parental education or occupation causes Career FOMO or decision paralysis. Several subgroups were small, and the resulting estimates may be unstable.

Residential differences were also observed, with the largest correlation coefficient occurring in the urban subgroup. The source thesis interprets this in relation to exposure to competitive environments, professional networking, and diverse career pathways. This is a plausible contextual interpretation, but the present data cannot independently establish the mechanism. Future studies could directly measure urban exposure, peer comparison, migration aspirations, family pressure, and access to career information.

The Kerala context is particularly relevant because the thesis frames career aspiration through education, migration, family expectations, and digital exposure. The study's findings are compatible with the possibility that global professional narratives can influence how young people evaluate local opportunities. However, the concept of a “Kerala Paradox” and claims about voluntary unemployment should be treated as contextual interpretations rather than direct conclusions from the present correlational data. The sample was purposively

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selected and was composed largely of students, so the findings cannot be generalized to all unemployed or working youth in Kerala.

The study has practical implications for psychological and career counselling. Career guidance may benefit from addressing not only occupational information but also social comparison, perfectionism, uncertainty tolerance, digital habits, and post-decisional regret. Digital literacy interventions could help students recognise that social-media content is selective and does not represent the full range of professional experiences. Counsellors may also help clients distinguish between useful career exploration and repetitive comparison-driven searching.

Implications

The findings have several implications for psychology and career counselling. First, career counselling programmes may incorporate digital literacy and social-comparison awareness. Young people can be encouraged to evaluate online career narratives critically rather than treating visible achievements as comprehensive indicators of professional success.

Second, interventions can address perfectionistic decision-making. Structured decision-making exercises may help individuals identify essential criteria, compare realistic alternatives, set decision deadlines, and tolerate uncertainty after making a choice.

Third, family-based interventions may be useful where career decisions are strongly influenced by parental expectations. Counsellors can facilitate communication between young people and parents and help distinguish supportive guidance from pressure related to prestige, migration, or social comparison.

Fourth, educational institutions can strengthen experiential career guidance through internships, mentoring, alumni interactions, and realistic information about entry-level work. Such approaches may reduce the gap between idealised online representations and actual occupational experiences.

Finally, psychological support should distinguish normal career exploration from clinically significant distress. Career FOMO and decision paralysis are constructs examined in this study and should not automatically be treated as psychiatric disorders.

Limitations

This empirical investigation has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small and was obtained through purposive, non-probability sampling, limiting generalisability. The study relied on self-report measures, which may be influenced by recall, response style, or social desirability. Data were collected within a limited time period. The design was cross-sectional and correlational; therefore, causal relationships among social media use, Career FOMO, and decision paralysis cannot be inferred.

CONCLUSION

This empirical investigation examined the relationships among social media intensity, Career FOMO, and career decision paralysis among 138 young people in Kerala. Social media intensity was significantly positively associated with Career FOMO, daily social media usage was significantly positively associated with decision paralysis, and Career FOMO was significantly positively associated with career decision paralysis. Positive

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associations were also observed across several gender, parental education, parental occupation, and residential subgroups.

Taken together, the findings suggest that digital exposure and career-related social comparison are relevant factors in understanding career decision difficulties in this sample. The results support the value of integrating digital literacy, social-comparison awareness, uncertainty management, and psychologically informed career counselling into support systems for young people transitioning from education to employment. Because the study is correlational and based on a purposive sample, these findings should be interpreted as evidence of association rather than proof that social media or Career FOMO causes career decision paralysis.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw. Written informed consent procedures were included in the study materials.

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Conflict of Interest

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