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FOMO: Understanding How Fear of Missing Out Impacts College Students

SHORT ARTICLE

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Abstract

Fear of missing out (FOMO) is experienced and determined by four key aspects: belonging, social anxiety, emotion, and acceptance—things experienced by all people, but with a greater impact on some. In the modern digital world, these aspects are deeply tied to social media use and daily online habits. This study examined the emotional experiences of FOMO among students at a small liberal arts college through a survey measuring screen time, social media behaviors, and personal responses to exclusion. Using a cross-sectional design and Likert-scale questionnaire, patterns were analyzed to reveal how students experience and report FOMO. Results suggest that while many students experience FOMO-related feelings, severity varies across individuals and gender groups. Campus culture, including involvement as a student athlete, likely influences how these experiences are reported.

Keywords: Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), social media use, college students, social comparison, digital behavior

Introduction

Whether online, in person, or across daily life, interactions between one person and another are shaped by an individual's sense of belonging, social anxiety, emotions, and desire for acceptance by others. These four key aspects are also what influence a person's fear of missing out from interactions, commonly referred to as FOMO. Researchers such as Liebowitz (1987), Przybylski (2013), and Elhai (2017) have examined these aspects of personal interaction, showing how unmet needs, anxious thoughts, and constant access to social media contribute to repeated cycles of FOMO. While FOMO may encourage social engagement, FOMO is often associated with negative outcomes such as anxiety, stress, and feelings of inadequacy. Understanding how these ideas work independently and collectively is necessary to reveal how FOMO is not simply about missing a concert or social event, but about deeper psychological needs that influence behavior.

On college campuses, FOMO is especially relevant because peer relationships, social comparison, and inclusion are central to student life. Students often feel pressure to check social media frequently, stay aware of social events, and remain updated on group activities out of fear that they might miss out on something important. Emotional discomfort resulting from FOMO can involve behavioral patterns such as constantly refreshing apps, feeling the urge to respond quickly to messages, or adjusting daily routines to avoid exclusion.

This study measured FOMO and related behaviors among students enrolled at a small, liberal arts college in order to better understand how digital connection, emotional experience, and campus culture intersect in shaping student experiences.

Literature Review

This study is grounded in four psychological components of FOMO: belonging, social anxiety, emotion, and acceptance. Together, these components illustrate how FOMO is not a single feeling, but an interaction of internal needs and external pressures that shape both behavior and self-perception. Although some of these sources are older, they are foundational to understanding the development of FOMO and social anxiety, and continue to be widely referenced in current research.

Belonging

Belonging shows how important it is for people to feel accepted and connected to others. It makes one feel as if one's worth is measured by one's ability to fit in with a certain group or status. According to Liebowitz (1987), individuals with social anxiety often avoid group interactions, which determines their sense of belonging. Although the term FOMO was originally coined by Patrick J. McGinnis (2004), Przybylski (2013) expanded this perspective by suggesting that FOMO emerges when basic needs are not met, specifically relatedness, or the need to feel socially connected and valued by others. Elhai (2017) added that unmet social needs drive compulsive phone and social media checking. Collectively, these researchers revealed that the desire to stay connected reflects an underlying fear of being excluded from meaningful opportunities or relationships.

Social Anxiety

Social anxiety places individuals in a difficult position: they want to belong, but are afraid of being judged. The Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS) captures this fear and avoidance (Liebowitz, 1987). The scale measures levels of social fear and avoidance across a range of everyday social situations, providing insight into how individuals experience and respond to social anxiety. Building on this understanding of social anxiety, Przybylski (2013) demonstrated that FOMO is tied to negative emotions and heightened self-monitoring. Similarly, Elhai (2017) found that FOMO often serves as the pathway between anxiety and smartphone use. Relying on screens may not lessen anxiety, but instead reinforces avoidance behaviors.

Emotion

Emotion is at the root of FOMO because fear, worry, and unhappiness shape how people experience missing out. Liebowitz (1987) emphasized fear and avoidance as central emotional responses in social anxiety. Expanding on this idea, Przybylski (2013) found that FOMO correlates with negative emotions such as worry and discontent when individuals are excluded from valued events. Emotion makes FOMO self-reinforcing, as these negative feelings increase online engagement, which can intensify comparison and stress.

Acceptance

Acceptance is a core part of human relationships because individuals naturally seek approval from others. Liebowitz (1987) showed that fear of rejection often leads to avoidance of social interactions, threatening one's sense of acceptance. Supporting this concept, Przybylski (2013) explained that FOMO arises when needs such as belonging and acceptance are unmet. Additionally, Elhai (2017) connects unmet acceptance needs with unhealthy phone use. In the context of seeking acceptance from others, recognition through likes and comments, as visible forms of social approval, can strengthen dependence on online validation.

Study Design

The design of this study aimed to measure FOMO and related behaviors among college students in a structured and reliable way. A survey-based approach was used because FOMO involves internal experiences and personal habits, best represented through self-reporting. Grounded in established FOMO research and key psychological components, the study design guided the selection of variables related to social media behaviors and emotional responses. The study specifically examined emotional experiences of FOMO through social media habits, screen time, triggers, and platform usage. Data were collected using a Google Forms survey distributed to participating students, faculty, and staff at a small liberal arts college. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The survey included demographic questions, daily screen time, social media usage, a FOMO scale, and open-ended responses. Likert-style questions strengthened reliability and aligned with previous FOMO research.

Survey questions measured anxiety about friends' activities, social media checking habits, discomfort when offline, comfort taking breaks, and questioning one's social life after viewing posts. Responses varied across participants, with many clustering around neutral or disagreeing options, though some indicated moderate

agreement with FOMO-related behaviors. Questions included: a) *on average, how much time do you spend on your phone each day* (Hours); b) *I get anxious when I don't know what my friends are doing* (Q1); c) *I often check social media to see what others are doing* (Q2); d) *I feel uncomfortable when I am offline for too long* (Q3); e) *I feel fine taking breaks from social media for a few days* (Q4); f) *seeing others' posts makes me question my own social life* (Q5); g) *which platform triggers your FOMO the most* (Q6); and h) *on a scale of 1–10, how often do you experience FOMO in your daily life* (Q7).

Population

The population for this study consisted of individuals who voluntarily responded to a survey about Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and social media behaviors. The survey was distributed to all members of the college community, including students, faculty, and staff, to increase the sample size and capture a broader range of perspectives. A total of 45 participants completed the survey. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 76 years old, although the majority of respondents were traditional college-age students between the ages of 18 and 25. Although the campus itself is in a rural setting, the college is a small, private, liberal arts institution with a close-knit student community and strong emphasis on undergraduate education. The student population includes individuals from both rural and urban backgrounds, reflecting a diverse mix of social experiences and levels of engagement, which provides a variety of perspectives on social media use and social comparison.

Data

The design of the survey questions was inspired by the LSAS scale, with wording adapted to fit the content of social media use and FOMO. The questions were organized into categories that focused on behavioral habits and emotional responses. Habit-based questions asked about frequency of social media use, screen time, and engagement patterns. Emotion-based questions explored feelings such as anxiety, exclusion, and the urge to stay connected. This structure allowed for a clearer understanding of how behaviors and emotions contribute to the experience of FOMO. Respondents were organized by gender and age group. Of the respondents, 12 identified as male, 26 as female, and 1 as nonbinary. The majority of the participants (38) were between the ages of 18 and 25, and no respondents fell within the 36–45 age range. Ultimately, participants over age 25 were excluded in order to have a meaningful analysis focused on traditional college-age students (Table 1).

Table 1

Responses from Participants Aged 18–25

No. (f/m)	Hours	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
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1 (f)	6–8	–	–	–	–	–	Instagram	9
3 (m)	4–6	–	–	–	–	–	Instagram	9
4 (m)	4–6	–	–	–	–	–	Other	2
7 (f)	4–6	d	–	–	–	–	Instagram	5
8 (f)	6–8	sd	–	–	–	–	Instagram	5
9 (f)	4–6	d	–	–	–	–	Instagram	7
10 (f)	6–8	n	–	–	–	–	TikTok	7
12 (m)	4–6	sa	–	–	–	–	Facebook	4
14 (f)	6–8	–	–	–	–	–	Snapchat	10
15 (m)	4–6	sd	–	–	–	–	TikTok	3
16 (f)	4–6	d	d	d	a	n	Instagram	4
17 (f)	2–4	sd	n	sd	sd	d	Snapchat	3
21 (m)	4–6	sd	sd	sd	a	sd	–	1
22 (m)	2–4	a	d	sd	a	n	Instagram	2
23 (f)	> 8	sd	a	a	d	a	Snapchat	6
24 (f)	4–6	d	sd	sd	sd	sd	Instagram	3
25 (f)	4–6	d	d	d	a	sa	Instagram	6
27 (f)	> 8	n	a	n	d	d	Snapchat	2
28 (f)	4–6	d	sa	d	a	sa	Snapchat	3
29 (m)	< 2	n	sd	d	a	d	Snapchat	2
30 (f)	4–6	d	a	n	n	n	Instagram	4
31 (f)	6–8	d	d	sd	d	sd	Instagram	3
32 (f)	4–6	sd	d	d	a	d	Instagram	6
33 (f)	4–6	sd	d	d	a	d	Snapchat	6

34 (f)	4–6	sa	n	sd	n	sd	Snapchat	2
35 (f)	4–6	a	a	n	d	n	Snapchat	8
36 (m)	2–4	a	n	d	n	a	Instagram	7
37 (f)	2–4	a	n	d	a	n	Instagram	6
38 (f)	2–4	sd	a	n	d	a	Instagram	8
39 (m)	4–6	d	n	d	n	d, n	TikTok	2
40 (m)	2–4	–	d	sd	n	sd	–	2
41 (m)	4–6	d	sd	d	sd	d	Snapchat	5
42 (f)	6–8	d	n	sd	d	n	Instagram	2
43 (f)	2–4	sd	n	d	d	n	TikTok	4
44 (m)	4–6	–	sd	sd	sd	sd	TikTok	2

Note. Respondents arranged by age (youngest to oldest). Abbreviations used include: agree (a), strongly agree (SA), neutral (n), disagree (d), strongly disagree (SD), and no response (–).

Findings

Overall, the results suggest that many students experience feelings related to FOMO, though severity differs. Some participants reported stronger concerns about social comparison and exclusion, while others reported lower levels of these feelings. More male participants reported that seeing posts from others made them question their own social lives more than female participants did. These differences may be influenced by factors such as maturity, social involvement, or campus culture. Some research has found that males report higher levels of FOMO among college-aged individuals (Brailovskaia et al., 2023; Qutishat et al., 2020). However, other studies have found little to no gender difference in FOMO experiences, suggesting that social comparison and online behavior patterns may play a larger role than gender alone (Servidio et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024). These mixed findings suggest that while gender may influence how some students experience social comparison online, other factors such as peer groups, campus involvement, and social media habits may also shape their experiences. The results of this study reflect a similar pattern, as male participants showed slightly stronger social comparison responses when viewing others' social media posts.

The college's large student-athlete population may have influenced the results. Student-athletes make up approximately 54% of the student body (T. Little, personal communication, Dec. 11, 2025). Student-athletes often have demanding schedules due to practices, games, and team commitments, which may reduce free time. Their social lives may center around teammates, potentially reducing reliance on social media for connection.

However, seeing events they cannot attend may also influence how they experience FOMO. Athletic involvement was not measured and may have acted as a confounding variable.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include sample size, incomplete responses, and lack of athletic participation data. Future studies should account for athletic involvement and expand participant numbers for stronger conclusions. A small sample size limits how well the findings can be generalized to a larger population. Incomplete responses might reduce the reliability of the data, as missing information can weaken overall patterns and interpretations. Additionally, not accounting for the athletic population overlooks an influential variable, as involvement in sports may affect time availability, social engagement, and social media use, all of which are connected to experiences of FOMO.

Conclusion

Among college students, digital platforms amplify feelings of belonging, acceptance, emotion, and social anxiety. These influences ultimately shape how exclusion is experienced. Findings suggest that while many students report moderate FOMO-related feelings, severity varies depending on individual and contextual factors. Campus culture, particularly athletic involvement, might influence how students experience social comparison and digital connection. Future research should repeat the study while accounting for athletic participation and expanding the sample size. Aside from these potential areas for broadening the research, information obtained in this study confirms the use of established measures related to belonging and social anxiety as means of measuring FOMO. Furthermore, it should be noted that understanding FOMO in college populations remains important for addressing student well-being and the impact of social media on mental health.

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