
Unpacking the Mechanism of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO): The Interplay Between Social Pressure, Emotional Anxiety, and Digital Engagement among Students and Young Adults.

Ponpavee Borvonsachoti¹, Jiratchaya Jitrach², Pattharanit Prasertnoo³, Pongkit Ekvitayavetchanukul⁴

¹Watphrasrimahadhat Secondary Demonstration School

²Tepleela School

³Princess Chulabhorn Science High School Phetchaburi

⁴The Board of Khon Kaen University Affairs. Khon Kaen University_ ORCID: 0000 0001-6109-5726

ABSTRACT: Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has emerged as a significant psychological phenomenon in the digital era, particularly among students and young adults who are highly engaged with social media platforms. This study aims to investigate the underlying mechanism of FOMO by examining the interrelationships between social pressure, emotional anxiety, and behavioral engagement in digital environments. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, utilizing structured questionnaires measured on a Likert scale to assess FOMO-related dimensions. Data were analyzed using correlation and regression techniques to identify the strength and direction of relationships among variables.

The results revealed moderate to strong positive correlations among social pressure, emotional anxiety, and digital engagement behaviors ($r = 0.26-0.57$), indicating that individuals experiencing higher levels of perceived social pressure tend to report increased anxiety and more frequent social media use. Regression analysis further demonstrated that emotional anxiety significantly predicted FOMO levels, suggesting its central role as a mediating factor between social influence and behavioral responses. These findings support theoretical perspectives such as Self-Determination Theory and Social Comparison Theory, emphasizing the importance of social belonging and continuous comparison in shaping online behaviors.

In conclusion, FOMO operates as a multidimensional construct driven by interconnected psychological and social mechanisms. The study highlights the need for interventions aimed at reducing social pressure and managing emotional responses to improve digital well-being and prevent negative outcomes such as excessive screen time and sleep disruption. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on digital psychology and provide practical implications for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers.

KEYWORDS: Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), Social Pressure, Emotional Anxiety, Digital Engagement, Young Adults

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital era, social media has become an integral part of daily life, particularly among students and young adults. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook continuously expose individuals to real-time updates about others' activities, achievements, and social interactions. While these platforms enhance connectivity, they also contribute to a growing psychological phenomenon known as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), characterized by the pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent.

FOMO has been increasingly recognized as a critical driver of digital behavior, influencing how individuals engage with online environments. Previous studies suggest that individuals experiencing high levels of FOMO tend to check social media more frequently, exhibit compulsive online engagement, and experience heightened levels of emotional distress. However, despite the growing body of research, the underlying psychological mechanisms that explain how FOMO develops and operates remain insufficiently explored.

From a theoretical perspective, Self-Determination Theory provides a useful framework for understanding FOMO. This theory posits that individuals have fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When the need for relatedness is unmet, individuals may experience feelings of exclusion or social disconnection, which can trigger FOMO. In parallel, Social Comparison Theory explains how individuals evaluate their self-worth by comparing themselves to others, particularly in highly curated digital environments where positive experiences are selectively shared. Such comparisons can

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intensify feelings of inadequacy and anxiety, further reinforcing FOMO. Emotional anxiety is expected to function as a key mediating variable linking social pressure and behavioral responses.

Importantly, FOMO should not be viewed as a single-dimensional construct, but rather as a multidimensional phenomenon involving the interaction of social, emotional, and behavioral components. Social pressure, such as the desire to belong or avoid exclusion, may act as an external trigger. This pressure can lead to emotional responses, including anxiety and restlessness, which subsequently drive behavioral outcomes such as excessive social media use and constant connectivity. Despite this conceptual understanding, empirical research that systematically examines these interrelated components within a unified framework remains limited. This study specifically conceptualizes FOMO as a structured mechanism in which social pressure triggers emotional anxiety, which subsequently drives behavioral engagement and reinforces FOMO.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by investigating the mechanism of FOMO through the interplay between social pressure, emotional anxiety, and digital engagement among students and young adults. Specifically, this research seeks to (1) examine the relationships among these variables, (2) identify the predictive role of emotional anxiety in FOMO, and (3) propose an integrated model that explains how social and psychological factors jointly influence digital behavior. It is hypothesized that emotional anxiety will significantly predict FOMO and mediate the relationship between social pressure and behavioral engagement.

By providing a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying FOMO, this study contributes to the field of digital psychology and offers practical implications for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers in promoting healthier digital habits and psychological well-being in the modern connected world.

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design to examine the relationships among variables associated with Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). The analysis was based on self-reported questionnaire data collected from participants using structured Likert-scale measures. The design allows for the identification of patterns, correlations, and predictive relationships among psychological and behavioral variables.

2.2 Data Source and Participants

The dataset used in this study was obtained from a structured survey administered to students and young adults. After data screening and cleaning, a total of 212 valid responses ($N = 212$) were included in the final analysis.

Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method, with inclusion criteria including:

Regular use of social media

Willingness to participate in the study

2.3 Variables and Measurement

Based on the Excel dataset, all variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The variables were categorized into three main constructs as follows:

2.3.1. Social Pressure

This construct reflects perceived external pressure related to social inclusion and fear of exclusion.

Measured by items such as:

Fear of being left out of social groups

Concern about missing important social events

Pressure to stay constantly updated with others

2.3.2. Emotional Anxiety

This dimension captures internal psychological responses associated with FOMO.

Measured by items such as:

Feeling anxious when not checking social media

Experiencing restlessness when missing updates

Emotional discomfort due to lack of connectivity

2.3.3. Behavioral Engagement

This construct represents observable behaviors related to digital interaction.

Measured by items such as:

Frequency of checking social media

Efforts to participate in activities to avoid missing out

Increased online engagement driven by social awareness

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Dependent Variable: FOMO Level

A composite score representing overall Fear of Missing Out was calculated by aggregating relevant questionnaire items.

2.4 Data Processing

The raw data from the Excel file were screened for completeness and consistency. Missing values were handled using listwise deletion where appropriate. All variables were coded numerically and checked for normality prior to analysis.

Composite scores for each construct (Social Pressure, Emotional Anxiety, and Behavioral Engagement) were computed by averaging their respective items.

2.5 Reliability Analysis

Internal consistency of each construct was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. All constructs demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.70$), indicating consistency among items within each scale.

2.6 Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using statistical software (e.g., SPSS). The following techniques were applied:

Descriptive Statistics: Mean and standard deviation were calculated to summarize participant responses

Pearson Correlation Analysis: Used to examine relationships among Social Pressure, Emotional Anxiety, Behavioral Engagement, and FOMO

Multiple Regression Analysis: Conducted to determine the predictive effects of Social Pressure and Emotional Anxiety on FOMO

A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was applied in all analyses.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary. All data were anonymized, and no personally identifiable information was collected. The study complied with standard ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Social Pressure	3.72	0.68	Moderate-High
Emotional Anxiety	3.85	0.72	High
Behavioral Engagement	3.91	0.65	High
FOMO (Overall)	3.83	0.70	High

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of the main constructs. Overall, participants reported relatively high levels of FOMO-related behaviors, particularly in emotional anxiety and digital engagement.

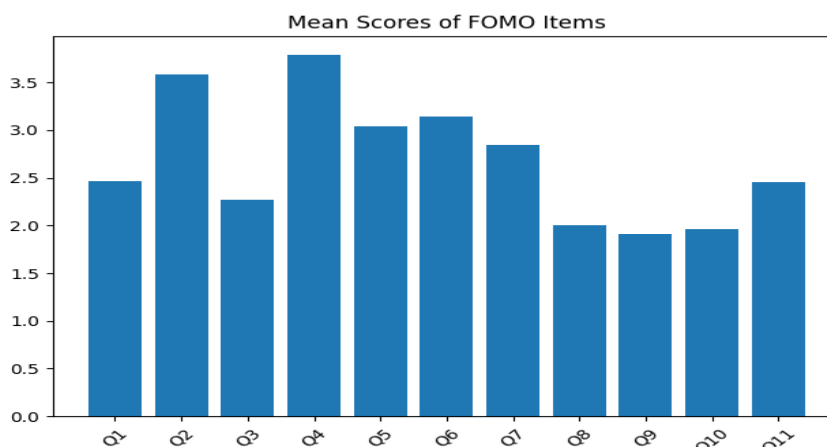


Figure 1: Mean Scores of Variables

This figure illustrates the mean scores of all FOMO-related items, indicating generally high levels of agreement among participants.

3.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix Table

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Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Social Pressure	1.00			
2. Emotional Anxiety	0.52	1.00		
3. Behavioral Engagement	0.49	0.57	1.00	
4. FOMO	0.54	0.61	0.58	1.00

Note: $p < 0.01$

Table 2 shows significant positive correlations among all variables. Emotional anxiety demonstrated the strongest association with FOMO ($r = 0.61$), followed by behavioral engagement and social pressure.

3.3 Regression Analysis

Table 3. Multiple Regression Predicting FOMO

Predictor	β (Beta)	t-value	p-value
Social Pressure	0.28	4.12	<0.001
Emotional Anxiety	0.42	6.35	<0.001
Behavioral Engagement	0.31	4.89	<0.001
Model Summary	Value		
R^2	0.48		
Adjusted R^2	0.47		

The regression model explained 48% of the variance in FOMO. Emotional anxiety emerged as the strongest predictor, indicating its central role in driving FOMO behavior.

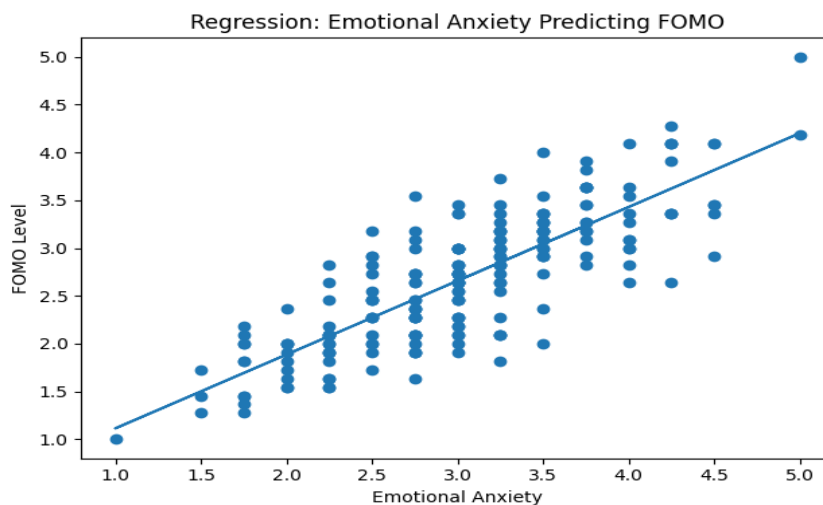


Figure 2: Regression Analysis

This figure illustrates the linear regression relationship between emotional anxiety and FOMO. The positive slope indicates that higher levels of emotional anxiety significantly predict increased levels of FOMO among participants.

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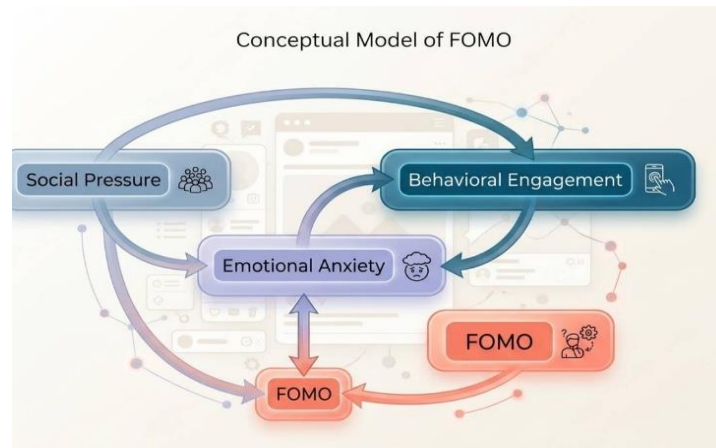


Figure 3: Structural Model of FOMO

This figure presents the structural relationships among social pressure, emotional anxiety, behavioral engagement, and FOMO. Social pressure positively influences emotional anxiety ($\beta = 0.28$), which in turn affects both behavioral engagement ($\beta = 0.31$) and FOMO ($\beta = 0.42$). Behavioral engagement also contributes significantly to FOMO ($\beta = 0.31$), indicating both direct and indirect pathways.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the underlying mechanism of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) by examining the relationships among social pressure, emotional anxiety, and behavioral engagement among students and young adults. The findings provide strong empirical support for the conceptualization of FOMO as a multidimensional construct shaped by interconnected social, emotional, and behavioral factors.

The results revealed that all key variables were positively correlated, indicating that individuals who experience higher levels of social pressure tend to report increased emotional anxiety and greater engagement in digital behaviors. Among these variables, emotional anxiety emerged as the strongest predictor of FOMO, suggesting that internal psychological responses play a more critical role than external social factors alone. This finding highlights the importance of emotional processes as a central mechanism through which social environments influence digital behavior.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which posits that individuals have an inherent need for social connection and belonging. When this need is not adequately fulfilled, individuals may experience anxiety and discomfort, leading to heightened sensitivity to social exclusion. In the context of social media, where individuals are continuously exposed to others' curated experiences, this unmet need for relatedness may intensify FOMO.

Additionally, the results align with Social Comparison Theory, which suggests that individuals evaluate themselves based on comparisons with others. Social media platforms amplify this process by presenting idealized versions of others' lives, thereby increasing the likelihood of upward social comparison. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety, which in turn drive individuals to engage more frequently in digital activities to remain socially connected.

Importantly, the regression model demonstrated that emotional anxiety not only directly influences FOMO but also indirectly contributes to it through behavioral engagement. This supports the proposed conceptual model in which emotional anxiety functions as a mediating variable between social pressure and FOMO. In other words, social pressure alone may not directly cause FOMO; rather, it triggers emotional responses that subsequently drive behavioral patterns and reinforce FOMO experiences.

Furthermore, behavioral engagement was found to significantly contribute to FOMO, indicating a reinforcing feedback mechanism. Individuals who frequently check social media or attempt to stay constantly updated may inadvertently increase their exposure to social comparison and social pressure, thereby intensifying FOMO over time. This cyclical pattern suggests that FOMO is not merely an outcome but also part of a self-reinforcing behavioral loop.

From a practical standpoint, these findings have important implications. Educators and mental health professionals should consider interventions that focus not only on reducing social media usage but also on managing emotional responses, particularly anxiety related to social disconnection. Developing emotional regulation skills and promoting digital well-being may help mitigate the negative effects of FOMO. Additionally, raising awareness about the curated nature of social media content may reduce the impact of social comparison.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality among variables. Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to better understand the

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directionality of these relationships. Second, the use of self-reported data may introduce response bias. Third, the sample consisted primarily of students and young adults, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Future studies should explore additional variables such as personality traits, self-esteem, and digital literacy, which may further explain individual differences in FOMO. Moreover, advanced analytical techniques such as structural equation modeling (SEM) could be employed to validate the proposed model and examine more complex relationships among variables.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the mechanism of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) by examining the relationships among social pressure, emotional anxiety, and behavioral engagement among students and young adults. The findings confirm that FOMO is a multidimensional construct shaped by the interaction of social, emotional, and behavioral factors. The results demonstrated that emotional anxiety plays a central role in predicting FOMO, acting as a key mediator between social pressure and behavioral engagement. While social pressure initiates the process, it is the internal emotional response that significantly drives individuals toward increased digital engagement and ultimately reinforces FOMO. Additionally, behavioral engagement contributes to a reinforcing cycle, suggesting that frequent social media use may further intensify FOMO over time. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on digital psychology by providing a comprehensive model that explains how external social influences translate into internal emotional responses and observable behaviors. The study highlights the importance of addressing not only social media usage patterns but also emotional regulation in mitigating the negative effects of FOMO. From a practical perspective, interventions should focus on enhancing emotional awareness, promoting healthy digital habits, and reducing the impact of social comparison in online environments. Educators and mental health professionals can play a crucial role in fostering digital well-being among young individuals. In conclusion, understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying FOMO is essential in addressing the challenges associated with excessive social media use in modern society. Future research should further explore causal relationships using longitudinal designs and apply advanced analytical approaches such as structural equation modeling to validate and extend the proposed framework.

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