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FEAR OF MISSING OUT (FOMO) AND ITS IMPACT ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF SOCIAL MEDIA USERS ACROSS GENERATIONS

Abstract

The phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) has increasingly emerged as a pressing psychological issue among social media users of all ages, particularly across Generation X, Millennials (Generation Y), and Generation Z. This study seeks to thoroughly examine the evolution of FoMO and its far-reaching implications for mental health, particularly anxiety and social connectedness. Employing a comprehensive literature review methodology, this research synthesizes findings from ten scholarly sources published between 2014 and 2024. The results consistently reveal a significant correlation between the frequency and intensity of social media engagement and elevated experiences of FoMO, which are often accompanied by emotional distress and behavioral concerns. Generation X often encounters FoMO through technological unfamiliarity and social comparison, leading to feelings of exclusion and unease. Millennials tend to experience heightened psychological pressure to remain perpetually connected, contributing to compulsive online behavior and greater vulnerability to stress. Although Generation Z is typically well-versed in digital environments, their constant desire to remain updated with peer activities and social trends renders them equally susceptible to the psychological effects of FoMO. This paper aims to contribute to the growing discourse on digital wellness by offering insights into the generational nuances of FoMO and its broader consequences for emotional resilience and mental well-being.

Keywords: Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), social media, anxiety, mental health, intergenerational behavior, digital dependency

INTRODUCTION

In today's hyper-connected digital environment, the term Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) has come to define a modern psychological struggle marked by anxiety, insecurity, and a compulsive need to remain continually engaged with social happenings often broadcasted via social media platforms. Originally coined by marketing strategist Dan Herman in 1996 and later popularized through academic research, FoMO describes the internal conflict that arises when individuals perceive others as having more rewarding or fulfilling experiences. Lim et al. (2024) emphasize that FoMO is fundamentally driven by digital social pressure, the fear of being left behind or excluded from collective experiences. This pressure is especially pronounced among digital natives such as Millennials and Generation Z, where social validation is largely driven by metrics such as likes, shares, and views. According to Tandon et al. (2021), the average person now spends approximately 135 minutes daily on social media, indicating that digital interactions have become a dominant mode of social connection.

In Indonesia, where internet penetration reached 79.5% by 2024, social media usage continues to grow rapidly. Users aged 18–25 represent the largest demographic, coinciding with the developmental stage of emerging adulthood, characterized by identity exploration and social

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experimentation. At this stage, individuals are especially vulnerable to FoMO as they strive to build social capital, both online and offline.

Historically, FoMO can be traced to earlier communication trends such as mass texting and word-of-mouth. However, the expansion of social media has greatly amplified the speed and scope of these experiences. As curated content becomes more central to self-image and social belonging, FoMO has evolved from a temporary feeling into a sustained psychological phenomenon. Research by Przybylski et al. (2013) links FoMO to deficits in autonomy, competence, and relatedness core needs identified in Self-Determination Theory. Muhammad (2024) further observes that Millennials may harness FoMO as motivation to seek new experiences, turning emotional discomfort into proactive exploration.

Nukman Luthfie, an Indonesian IT expert, categorizes users as either creators or conversationalists. Creators develop original content, while conversationalists consume and redistribute that content. Both user types are affected differently by FoMO; creators may feel performance anxiety, while conversationalists may struggle with social comparison and exclusion. Different generations engage with technology in unique ways. Generation X, born 1960–1980, were introduced to digital tools as adults and often exhibit skepticism or unease. Millennials (1980–1995) are transitional adopters who adapt quickly. Generation Z (1995–2010), born into a digital world, are highly fluent but deeply immersed, often to their detriment.

These generational distinctions shape how individuals experience FoMO. Generation X tends to value face-to-face communication. Millennials frequently use digital media for professional and personal expression. Generation Z often substitutes real-life interactions with digital ones, making them more dependent on virtual validation. This paper explores FoMO through a psychological and sociocultural lens, offering insights into how generational identity and technology intersect. The goal is to help practitioners, educators, and policymakers design better interventions for digital wellness across age groups.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literature review methodology to examine the relationship between Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and the mental health of social media users across different generations. A total of ten academic articles published between 2014 and 2024 were selected through a systematic search using databases such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and academic journal portals. The keywords used included: "Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)," "social media anxiety," "generational differences in digital behavior," "Millennials and social media," "Generation Z psychological impact," and "digital well-being."

Inclusion criteria were defined as follows: (1) studies focusing on adolescents or adult social media users; (2) research addressing psychological outcomes such as anxiety, compulsive behavior, or social comparison; (3) papers published in peer-reviewed journals between 2014 and 2024; and (4) studies that offered insights into generational experiences with social media. Articles not meeting these requirements or not available in English or Bahasa Indonesia were excluded.

The selected articles were analyzed for common themes, research findings, and theoretical frameworks. Special attention was given to studies that employed quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods to explore psychological symptoms linked to FoMO, especially in terms of social media usage patterns across Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z.

No.	Title & Year	Authors	Method	Key Finding
1	Hubungan antara FoMO dan Kecanduan Media Sosial pada Remaja (2020)	Ayu Pratiwi, Anggita Faxriani	Quantitative, correlational, cross-sectional approach	There is a significant relationship between FoMO and social media addiction ($p = 0.000$).

2	Hubungan FoMO dan Kecanduan Media Sosial Instagram pada Remaja (2022)	Emma Azizah, Fahyuni Baha	Systematic Literature Review (14 journals)	FoMO is positively associated with Instagram addiction. Adolescents are advised to practice self-control by engaging in positive extracurricular activities.
3	Kontrol Diri dan FoMO pada Remaja Pengguna Media Sosial (2022)	Safira Maza, Rizqi Amalia Aprianty	Quantitative, correlational	Self-control is significantly negatively correlated with FoMO ($r = -0.729$; $p = 0.000$).
4	FoMO dan Kecanduan Media Sosial pada Remaja Awal (2023)	Atasya D. Filibiana, Doddy H. Wibowo	Quantitative, correlational	FoMO affects the productivity and self-confidence of early adolescents.
5	Fenomena Kecanduan Media Sosial (FoMO) Remaja Banda Aceh (2023)	Mainidar Sachiya et al.	Qualitative, interviews, phenomenological approach	FoMO has a significant impact on adolescents' mental well-being.
6	Pengaruh FoMO dan Pengawasan Orang Tua terhadap Kecanduan TikTok (2023)	Nadia G. Aresti et al.	Quantitative, multiple linear regression	FoMO significantly affects TikTok addiction among adolescents ($p = 0.000$).
7	Kecenderungan Kecanduan Media Sosial dan Peran FoMO (2022)	Trianti A. Layla et al.	Quantitative, correlational	There is a significant positive relationship between FoMO and social media addiction ($r = 0.671$; $p = 0.000$).
8	Hubungan FoMO dengan Kecanduan Media Sosial (2022)	Salwa Nafisa, Irma Kusuma Salim	Quantitative, correlational	There is a significant positive relationship between FoMO and social media addiction ($r = 0.264$; $p = 0.008$).

9	Intensitas Penggunaan Media Sosial dan FoMO pada Dewasa Awal (2023)	Kezia Kusumaisna	Quantitative, correlational	A significant relationship was found between social media usage intensity and FoMO ($p = 0.000$).
10	Peranan FoMO terhadap Problematic Social Media Use (2019)	Keyda S. Risdyanti et al.	Quantitative, linear regression	FoMO accounts for 35.8% of problematic social media use.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings synthesized from the reviewed literature reveal a complex, multi-dimensional relationship between Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), generational identity, and social media use. Although FoMO is experienced across all generations, the triggers, manifestations, and consequences are nuanced and shaped by both psychological and technological factors unique to each cohort. This section is structured around generational experiences beginning with Generation X, followed by Millennials (Generation Y), and Generation Z before identifying key cross-generational themes and theoretical interpretations.

Generation X:

Generation X, born between approximately 1960 and 1980, is characterized as a cohort that transitioned into the digital age during adulthood. Their exposure to digital technology, particularly social media, came relatively late compared to younger generations. Consequently, their engagement with digital platforms is often marked by ambivalence, cautious adoption, and feelings of alienation. According to Marcela & Suryadi (2023), FoMO in this group emerges primarily from their efforts to “catch up” and stay socially relevant in a fast-paced digital environment. Many use platforms like Facebook or WhatsApp to maintain social ties, reconnect with former peers, or follow current events.

However, the limited digital fluency in this cohort often results in passive content consumption, which intensifies upward social comparison where individuals compare themselves with seemingly more active, connected, and fulfilled users. This can lead to negative emotional responses such as self-doubt, anxiety, and even resentment. The digital divide, both technical and psychological, serves as a barrier to full engagement and exacerbates feelings of exclusion. Unlike younger generations, Generation X rarely participates in content creation or trend participation, making them more likely to feel like observers rather than contributors in the digital world.

Millennials (Generation Y):

Millennials, or Generation Y, born between 1980 and 1995, are considered the bridge generation between analog and digital eras. They experienced the internet boom, the rise of social media, and the evolution of smartphones during their formative years. As a result, they tend to be highly adaptive to technology and deeply integrated into digital communication platforms.

However, this generation also bears the psychological burden of constant connectivity. As highlighted by Yunarti (2024), Millennials often feel compelled to maintain their online presence meticulously, resulting in compulsive behaviors such as frequent status updates, checking notifications, and curating “perfect” digital identities. This behavior stems from both internal motivations such as a desire for recognition and belonging—and external pressures, including professional branding and social comparison.

FoMO in this generation often correlates with heightened emotional reactivity, decreased focus, and anxiety linked to missing out on opportunities, social events, or emerging trends. The curated nature of social media content showcasing only the most glamorous, successful, or exciting

aspects of life fosters unrealistic standards and contributes to psychological distress. In some cases, FoMO manifests in the form of “anticipatory regret,” where individuals fear making the wrong choices because they are aware of better alternatives showcased online.

Furthermore, Millennials are uniquely susceptible to both professional and social FoMO, as platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter blur the lines between personal and career identities. The continuous need to remain updated, relevant, and visible fuels a cycle of performance anxiety and fear of social irrelevance.

Generation Z:

Generation Z, born approximately between 1995 and 2010, is the first generation to grow up fully immersed in digital technology. Social media is not an optional supplement to their lives—it is a foundational aspect of their communication, identity formation, and social learning. While their digital fluency grants them an unparalleled ability to navigate apps, trends, and online communities, it also exposes them to significant psychological vulnerability.

Studies such as Widiayanti et al. (2024) and Chakrabarti (2024) show that Generation Z faces a high risk of FoMO-related anxiety, particularly stemming from the fear of social exclusion and missing trending experiences. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat foster real-time visibility into others’ lives, amplifying feelings of inadequacy and envy. This generation is particularly prone to measuring self-worth by digital metrics like, comments, and followers making them highly sensitive to perceived neglect or social rejection online.

The addictive nature of algorithm-driven content, combined with their developmental need for peer approval, creates a precarious situation. Prolonged exposure to curated content can lead to poor self-image, increased depressive symptoms, and reduced satisfaction with one’s own life. The constant comparison to influencers, peers, and celebrities creates unreachable ideals that erode emotional resilience.

Moreover, Generation Z exhibits a decline in face-to-face communication skills, relying heavily on digital mediums even for emotionally significant conversations. This reliance further distances them from authentic social bonding and intensifies feelings of loneliness despite hyperconnectivity.

Cross-Generational Themes:

Despite the differences among generations, several unifying patterns emerge:

1. **Algorithmic Reinforcement:** All generations are affected by social media algorithms that prioritize emotionally stimulating content often creating an illusion that everyone else is more active, successful, or socially fulfilled. This curated reality feeds into Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which posits that individuals evaluate their self-worth based on how they compare to others.
2. **Psychological Needs and Self-Determination:** Based on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), FoMO is intensified when individuals experience a lack of autonomy, competence, or relatedness. For example, Generation X may feel digitally incompetent, Millennials may feel socially disconnected despite high engagement, and Gen Z may struggle with authentic connection.
3. **Internal vs. External FoMO:** Generation X is often driven by the fear of being left behind socially or technologically (external FoMO), while Millennials and Gen Z experience more internalized forms linked to identity, achievement, and belonging.
4. **Emotional and Behavioral Repercussions:** Across the board, FoMO leads to increased screen time, compulsive checking behaviors, interrupted sleep patterns, and heightened anxiety especially during periods of social comparison or social withdrawal.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) is a pervasive psychological phenomenon affecting social media users across all generations, albeit in nuanced ways. Generation X experiences FoMO as a result of limited digital familiarity and social exclusion, while Millennials struggle with performance pressure and image maintenance. Generation Z, despite

being digitally fluent, faces considerable challenges in maintaining emotional well-being due to constant digital exposure and comparison.

To address these challenges, it is essential to foster digital literacy programs tailored to each generational need. For Generation X, support should emphasize confidence-building in digital communication tools. For Millennials, interventions should promote mindfulness and balance in online self-presentation. Generation Z requires proactive strategies to build resilience, such as promoting media detox routines, encouraging face-to-face interaction, and educating about the curated nature of online content.

Mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers must collaborate to create inclusive and preventive strategies that mitigate the harmful effects of FoMO. This includes integrating digital well-being curricula in schools and universities, offering counseling services attuned to online behavior, and encouraging healthy, intentional social media habits. Through a multidimensional approach, we can support users in navigating the digital age with greater awareness, self-regulation, and emotional security.

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