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Impact of FOMO on NOMO Phobia and Internet Addiction

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Abstract

The current research examined the effect of fear of missing out (FOMO) on nomophobia (NOMO) and internet addiction among 300 university students aged 18–26 from Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Results, as rated on standardized scales, revealed a positive relationship among FOMO, NOMO, and internet addiction. FOMO influenced NOMO to a moderate degree, and internet addiction significantly. Although FOMO was not different between genders, NOMO and internet addiction were higher in males. These results point to the importance of FOMO in digital dependency and the necessity for interventions such as digital detox and mindfulness programs. Longitudinal and intervention-based studies should be pursued in the future.

Keywords: NOMO, FOMO, Social networking, Internet addiction

Introduction

The digital age has transformed the way individuals live, communicate, and engage with the world. For young people in general, the ubiquity of cellular phones and internet access has spawned new maladaptive behaviors that point towards excessive reliance on digital connectivity. One is the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)—a "pervasive concern that others may be having enjoyable experiences one is not present for (Przybylski et al., 2013). Known by marketing expert Dan Herman in 2000 and then operationalized by Przybylski et al. in 2013, FOMO is a latent fear of missing out on social relationships and a desire to remain constantly connected.

FOMO is most prevalent among teenagers and young adults, who are developmentally more prone to social comparison and peer acceptance. Based on a global survey by Statista (2023), over 70% of Gen Z social media consumers experience FOMO often. This constant state of connectedness and the necessity of being up to date have been at the root of disease like nomophobia—a term coined from "no mobile phone phobia" to refer to fear of losing one's cell phone or being denied its usage (King et al., 2013). King and colleagues were the first to empirically explore nomophobia and discovered that the condition is associated with anxiety, dependence, and emotional dysregulation, particularly in younger populations.

Parallel to nomophobia, internet addiction in the form of social network addiction has also become a behavioral addiction with the characteristics of compulsive with the use of social media, craving to use these sites, and devoting so much time and energy to them that it becomes an interference with other important areas of life (Andreassen et al., 2012). Studies estimate that roughly 30–40% of the world's young adults show symptoms consistent with problematic internet use (Kuss et al., 2014; WHO, 2022).

The psychological relationships among FOMO, nomophobia, and social networking addiction are complicated and bidirectional. For instance, FOMO triggers individuals to frequently check their phones and link with web-based information to avoid social rejection and thereby become vulnerable to nomophobia and overuse of the internet (Gezgin et al., 2018). Garg (2023) also derived a strong positive correlation between social networking addiction and FOMO, pointing out that individuals high in FOMO are likely to be addicted to internet usage. Similar to Gezgin et al. (2018) with Turkish university students, there was a moderate positive correlation with nomophobia and FOMO, further substantiating the point that FOMO is a primary driver of new digital addictions.

These tendencies are further increased by environmental mechanisms such as algorithmic feeds, push notifications, and social comparison architectures integrated into social media (Király et al., 2019). Neurobiologically, reward circuits with dopamine elicited by likes, messages, and online interaction create a feedback loop that maintains compulsivity (Montag et al., 2019). Since these processes are progressively demarcating youth's engagement with
virtual spaces, grasping and reacting to the psychological origins of FOMO—and its impact on nomophobia and internet addiction—is becoming progressively more pressing.

Theoretical Framework

1. Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory, advanced by Festinger (1954), declares that people gauge their self-esteem through comparisons with others. Social media amplifies this in the age of digital communication, as users are constantly exposed to idealized presentations of other people's lives, resulting in negative self-judgments. This is most applicable to the understanding of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), which arises from seeing others undertaking more gratifying or socially enriching experiences.

These theoretical predictions have been supported by recent empirical research. Appel, Gerlach, and Crusius (2016) uncovered that frequent social comparison on social media sites such as Facebook is positively linked with envy and symptoms of depression, psychological states that are in close relation with FOMO. Beyens, Frison, and Eggermont (2016) also illustrated that those adolescents who repeatedly make upward comparisons on social media are more prone to feel FOMO and exhibit greater levels of Facebook-induced stress. Garg (2023) also concurs with this perspective, highlighting a strong correlation between FOMO and social networking addiction, indicating that the relentless need to keep track of other people's actions on the internet is a source of compulsiveness. This result complements the theoretical argument that social comparison mechanisms, particularly on online media, are primary psychological drivers of FOMO, which in turn produce problematic internet behaviors like nomophobia and internet addiction.

2 Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, proposed by Bowlby (1969), describes how early emotional attachments affect behavior and emotional control across the lifespan. Anxious individuals are especially likely to suffer from separation anxiety, abandonment concerns, and hyper-emotional reactivity. In digital behavior, these individuals tend to develop emotional dependence on their mobile devices and digital communication as an alternative to actual relational security. This reliance shows itself as nomophobia—fear of being separated from one's mobile phone—and tends to cause compulsive internet or social media usage.

Empirical research strongly validates this use of Attachment Theory for digital addiction. Blackwell et al. (2017) discovered that anxious attachment types were significantly higher on FOMO and social media addiction scales, suggesting that such individuals might employ incessant online communication to meet unsatisfied relational needs. Elhai et al. (2017) also demonstrated

that anxiety disorders, and specifically those related to emotional dysregulation, are predictors of problematic smartphone use, further supporting the notion of emotionally insecure individuals being phone-dependent as coping mechanisms. Similarly, Balta et al. (2020) illustrated that perceived social support mediates the link between trait FOMO and addiction to social media, assuming that lower emotional security compels people to seek validation and social connection through digital media. This is consistent with Bowlby's theory, where attachment insecurity drives behavioral tendencies such as FOMO, nomophobia, and internet addiction.

Rationale

As mobile and internet usage has increased, young adults are more susceptible to internet addiction and FOMO due to perpetual online behavior and social comparison. Chronic connectivity also results in nomophobia. The research analyzes how FOMO, nomophobia, and internet addiction are connected and their effect on youth.

METHOD

Objective

- To identify how fear of missing out affects nomophobia and internet addiction
- To evaluate and analyze causes for nomophobia, FOMO, and internet addiction
- To investigate the link between FOMO, nomophobia, and internet addiction.

Hypothesis

1. FOMO, nomophobia, and internet addiction are significantly correlated with each other
2. FOMO leads to nomophobia and internet addiction among young adults
3. FOMO has a significant impact on nomophobia among younger adults compared to older adults
4. FOMO and nomophobia prevail more in young adults with higher education

Research Design and Sampling

This research is a cross-sectional survey research design. A sample of 300 young adults (18-26 years) was recruited using a simple random sampling technique from the universities of Rawalpindi/Islamabad.

Instrument

Fear of Missing Out Scale

Developed by Przybylski et al. (2013), this 10-item scale uses a 5-point Likert format to assess individuals' FOMO levels. It demonstrates high internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$) and strong construct validity (Przybylski et.al. a 2013).

Nomophobia Questionnaire (NMP-Q)

Created by Yildirim and Correia (2015), the NMP-Q includes 20 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Cut-off scores categorize nomophobia as none ($\leq$20), mild (21–59), moderate (60–99), or severe ($\geq$100). It includes subscales such as Emotional Comfort, Dependence, Anxiety, and Avoidance. The scale has strong reliability ($\alpha = .95$) (Yildirim & Correia, 2015).

Social Networking Addiction Scale (SNAS)

Shahnawaz and Rehman (2020) developed this 20-item scale, rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Scores above 84 indicate addiction. Subscales include Time Spent, Emotional Dependence, Social Withdrawal, and Compulsive Use. The scale shows solid construct validity (Shahnawaz & Rehman, 2020).

Procedure

Data were collected in person using structured self-report questionnaires administered to university students in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Participants, aged 18–26, were approached at academic institutions, provided they were active mobile phone users with internet access. Standardized

scales for Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), Nomophobia, and Social Networking Addiction were employed. Responses were coded and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained after briefing participants on the study's aims. Participation was voluntary, with anonymity and confidentiality assured. No incentives were offered, and participants could withdraw at any time. Ethical guidelines were followed to minimize any potential psychological discomfort. All instruments were used with appropriate permissions or were publicly accessible. Data were handled with transparency and integrity, with no manipulation or fabrication.

RESULTS

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation, Range, and Cronbach alpha reliability of Fear of Missing Out Scale, Nomophobia Questionnaire, and Social Networking Addiction Scale (N=300).

Variable	N	M	SD	Range	α
FOMO	300	24.3	7.01	35	.76
NOMO	300	79.5	20.7	109	.76
SNA	300	72.5	21.5	106	.89

Note: FOMO =fear of missing out; NOMO = No Mobile Phone Phobia; SNA = Social Networking Addiction N = Total Number of Participants; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; α = Cronbach alpha.

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, and normality result of the data. The results indicate that the data show mild deviation from the mean. The range values for the variables are 35, 109, and 106, respectively. The alpha reliability of the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) scale is .76, indicating acceptable reliability. The Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) scale also has an alpha reliability of .76, suggesting consistent internal reliability. The Social Networking Addiction Scale (SNAS) has an alpha reliability of .89, indicating high reliability.

Table 2

Descriptives of Socio-demographic variables of study participants (N = 300)

Variables	N	%
Age		
13-17	23	7.7
18-22	222	74
23-27	55	18.3
Gender		
Male	80	26.7
Female	220	73.3
Education		
Middle School	7	2.3
High School	15	5.0
University	278	92.7
Socioeconomic Status		
Lower	40	13.3
Middle	176	58.7
Upper	84	28.0

Note: %= Percentage

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentages of demographic characteristics. Frequency and percentages were performed across each of the demographic variables. The sample consisted of 300 participants, with the majority aged 18–22 years, followed by those aged 23–27 years, and 13–17 years. The gender distribution showed that 220 participants (73.3%) were female, while 80 (26.7%) were male. The educational background of most participants was university students (n = 278, 92.7%), while 15 participants (5%) had completed high school, and 7 participants (2.3%) had attended middle school. Socioeconomic status was categorized into lower (n = 40, 13.3%), middle (n = 176, 58.7%), and upper (n = 84, 28.0%) classes.

Table 3

Inter-correlation between FOMO, NOMO phobia, and Social Networking Addiction.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
1. FOMO	24.3	7.01	.	-	-
2.NOMO	79.5	20.7	.37**	.	-
3.SNA	72.5	21.5	.30**	.64**	.

Note: FOMO = fear of missing out; NOMO = no mobile phone phobia; NBAC = SNA= social networking addiction; = M = mean; SD = standard deviation (Significance level; p = < .05)

Table 3 shows the Pearson correlation among Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), Nomophobia (NOMO), and Internet Addiction (SNA). The results indicate that a positive moderate relationship exists between FOMO and NOMO. It is also evident that there is a positive moderate relationship between FOMO and SNA. Furthermore, a strong positive relationship is observed between NOMO and SNA. Hence, it is evident that there is a positive relationship among FOMO, NOMO, and SNA.

Table 4

Linear Regression coefficient of FOMO on social networking addiction

Variables	B	S.E	t	p
Constant	49.9	4.29	11.6	.000
FOMO	.92	.16	5.47	.000

Note: B = unstandardized beta; S.E = standard error; p = Significance level; CI = confidence interval; UL =upper limit; LL = lower limit (R^2= ·09)

Table 4 shows the linear regression between Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and the dependent variable. The results in this table show that FOMO is positively predicting the dependent variable (p = .000). The FOMO variable as a predictor is showing a significant variance in the dependent variable. The overall findings suggest that FOMO predicts social networking addiction among young adults with a small effect size (9%).

Table 5

Linear Regression coefficient of FOMO on NOMO (N = 300).

Variables	B	S.E	t	p
Constant	52.4	4.02	13	.000
FOMO	1.11	.15	7.01	.000

Note: B = unstandardized beta; S.E = standard error; p = Significance level; CI = confidence interval; UL =upper limit; LL = lower limit (R: .091) (R^2= .14)

Table 5 shows the linear regression of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) on Nomophobia. The results in this table show that FOMO is positively predicting Nomophobia (p = .000). The FOMO variable as a predictor is showing a significant variance in Nomophobia. The overall findings suggest that FOMO predicts Nomophobia among young adults with an effect size of 14%.

Table 6

Gender difference on Fear of Missing Out, Nomophobia, and Social Networking Addiction (N = 300)

	Male (N=80)		Female (N=220)				95% CL	
Variables	M	SD	M	SD	p	t	UL	LL
FOMO	24.2	6.43	24.4	7.23	.04	-.20	1.61	1.92
NOMO	82.5	21	78.5	20.5	.64	1.46	9.33	-1.31
SNA	75.4	21.9	71.5	21.3	.79	1.39	9.43	-1.60

Note: n = Total Number of Participants; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; p = Significance level i.e. <0.05; CI = Confidence interval; UL = Upper limit; LL = Lower limit; FOMO = Fear of Missing of Out; NOMO = no mobile phone phobia; SNA = social networking addiction.

Table 6 presents the statistical analysis comparing male and female participants on Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), Nomophobia (NOMO), and Social Networking Addiction (SNA). In FOMO, male participants (M = 24.2, SD = 6.43) and female participants (M = 24.4, SD = 7.23) had similar scores. On Nomophobia (NOMO), male participants (M = 82.5, SD = 21) had slightly higher scores compared to female participants (M = 78.5, SD = 20.5), For Social Networking Addiction (SNA), male participants (M = 75.4, SD = 21.9) had slightly higher scores than female participants (M = 71.5, SD = 21.3), Overall, the findings suggest that there are no significant gender differences in FOMO, Nomophobia, or Social Networking Addiction among young adults.

Table 7

Comparison of age groups on Fear of Missing Out, Nomophobia, and Social networking addiction (N=300).

	13-17 (N=23)		18-22 (N=222)		23-27 (N=55)		
Variables	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F
FOMO	26.7	7.57	24.2	7.10	23.7	6.31	4.21
NOMO	85.7	16.1	77.6	21.6	84.9	17.2	7.45
SNA	82.6	18.4	71.2	21.1	73.5	23.4	3.89

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; p = Significance level i.e. <0.05 FOMO = Fear of Missing of Out; NOMO = no mobile phone phobia; SNA = social networking addiction.

In this table, A One-Way ANOVA was performed to examine differences in FOMO, NOMO, and social network anxiety among three age groups (13-17, 18-22, and 23-27). Results show that FOMO and social network anxiety are highest in the 13-17 age group, while NOMO is highest in the 13-17 and 23-27 age groups.

Table 8

Comparison on education level, Fear of Missing Out, Nomophobia, and social networking addiction (N=300).

	Middle School N=7		High School N=15		University N=278		
Variables	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F
FOMO	24.4	4.92	25.1	7.46	24.3	7.05	0.90
NOMO	83.7	14.3	82.2	17.4	79.3	21.0	0.75
SNA	84.7	25.9	69.6	22.7	72.4	21.3	0.28

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; p = Significance level i.e. <0.05; FOMO = Fear of Missing of Out; NOMO = no mobile phone phobia; SNA = social networking addiction.

A One-Way ANOVA was conducted to examine the mean differences in FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), NOMO, and SNA (Social Network Anxiety) among middle school, high school, and university students. The results indicate that FOMO is highest among high school students (M = 25.1, SD = 7.46), followed by middle school students (M = 24.4, SD = 4.92) and university students (M = 24.3, SD = 7.05). However, the ANOVA result (F (2,297) = 0.90) suggests that this difference is not statistically significant. NOMO scores are highest among middle school students (M = 83.7, SD = 14.3) and lowest among university students (M = 79.3, SD = 21.0). social network anxiety is highest among middle school students (M = 84.7, SD = 25.9), compared to university students (M = 72.4, SD = 21.3) and high school students (M = 69.6, SD = 22.7). However, the result (F (2,297) = 0.28) suggests that this difference is not statistically significant.

Discussion

This study explored the interrelations among Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), nomophobia, and social networking addiction in a sample of 300 young adults aged 18–26 in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Correlational and regression analyses demonstrated significant positive relationships among these constructs, affirming Hypothesis 1. Higher FOMO scores were predictive of greater nomophobia and compulsive digital behavior, supporting Hypotheses two and three.

These findings can be interpreted through the lens of Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which suggests individuals evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to others. On social media, where curated content portrays idealized lives, users may perceive themselves as less successful or connected, intensifying their FOMO. This psychological discomfort leads them to stay continually connected through smartphones, often resulting in nomophobia and addiction-like patterns (Bajwa et al., 2023; Parveiz et al., 2023; Safdar et al., 2023).

In parallel, Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) elucidates how digital dependency stems from insecure attachment styles. Particularly, anxious attachment may foster compulsive checking behaviors, as individuals seek digital reassurance and connection (Munir & Gohar, 2022; Arpaci et al., 2017). Recent findings show that attachment insecurity strongly correlates with nomophobia and that mindfulness may mediate this relationship (Enez, 2024; Kaur, 2024).

Gender-based analyses showed no significant differences in levels of FOMO, nomophobia, or internet addiction, consistent with previous findings (Garg, 2023). This gender-neutral trend suggests the pervasiveness of digital overdependence among all young adults, possibly due to the ubiquitous presence of mobile technologies and cultural normalization of online connectivity.

Regarding Hypothesis four, FOMO and social networking addiction scores were marginally higher in the youngest age group (13–17), while nomophobia was elevated in both adolescents and older university students. This trend aligns with literature suggesting adolescence and emerging adulthood are vulnerable periods for digital overuse due to developmental needs for peer validation and identity formation (Tanrikulu, 2018; Dorani, 2021).

Concerning Hypothesis Five, comparisons at the educational level were non-significant but revealed a discernible trend: students in universities had higher FOMO and nomophobia. This could be an indication of the academic and social pressures to which they are subjected, coupled with their heavy dependence on mobile phones for both personal and academic activities (Hamzaa et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2024).

In general, the findings highlight that FOMO serves as a driver of maladaptive digital behavior in young adults. Social comparison and attachment insecurities fuel a vicious cycle of digital dependence that occurs in nomophobia and social networking addiction, eventually influencing mental health and academic performance. The findings have major implications for interventions like digital mindfulness, psychoeducation, and structured screen time management programs targeted for educational settings.

Implications

Excessive phone use negatively impacts both mental health and academic performance, calling for greater awareness of issues like FOMO and nomophobia in university environments. Counseling services should address emotional regulation and attachment concerns, and interventions need to be gender-inclusive. Promoting offline interactions and a balanced approach to screen time is also crucial for student well-being.

Limitations

The study's findings are constrained by self-reported data, which may be biased, and its cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to infer causality. Additionally, the sample is specific to a certain age group and region, with a gender imbalance that may affect generalizability. Important factors like broader mental health indicators and device use patterns were not included.

Suggestions

To mitigate the negative effects of excessive phone use, universities should implement digital well-being and time management programs, limit phone use during classes, and provide mental health support specifically targeting FoMO-related stress. Promoting offline social activities and peer support can help create healthier habits, and future studies should be long-term and qualitative to provide more comprehensive insights.

Conclusion

This study examined 300 young adults to explore the relationships among Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), nomophobia (NOMO), and internet addiction. Results showed a moderate positive correlation between FOMO and NOMO, indicating that higher FOMO increases nomophobia. A strong positive link was found between FOMO and internet addiction, suggesting FOMO as a key driver of compulsive online behavior. These dependencies were shown to negatively affect psychological well-being and academic performance. Gender differences were found to be non-significant, implying equal digital vulnerability across genders. Age differences showed peak FOMO and social anxiety in the 13–17 group, and higher nomophobia in both the 13–17 and 23–27 age groups. The interdependence of NOMOs and internet addiction underscores the need for balanced digital engagement. The study calls for interventions promoting digital mindfulness and self-regulation in youth.

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