

The Causes and Effects of Fear of Missing Out on Social Media

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Abstract: As the frequency of social media use increases, psychological problems such as social media misuse anxiety may arise. Perhaps many online users have experienced or are experiencing Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), so it is particularly important to explore the communication theories that underlie the operation of FoMO and its consequences from the users' perspective. After a general introduction to the origins of the term FoMO, Goffman's Theatre Theory, Self-Presentation Theory and Sociology's Social Comparison Theory are used to explain the reasons why mass social media users experience FoMO. Overall, this paper finds that social media users are interested in positive self-presentation on Internet platforms, people are always actively or passively exposed to massive amounts of information within limited energy and time, and Internet users are socially upgraded by the good life deliberately created by others in the social network, all of which may be facilitated to some extent by FoMO. At the same time, this paper also popularises the behaviour of social media fatigue caused by FoMO to show that FoMO is a staged process with antecedents and consequences.

Keywords: Fear of Missing Out, Social Media Fatigue, Communication, Social Media

1. Introduction

In the past several decades, social media have played an important role in digital Internet life. Human society has experienced four communication revolutions, the fourth of which was the spread of the use of Internet-related technologies and the resulting boom in new media. Social media can carry interactive information such as images, words and sounds posted by people and also empower people to communicate. Recently, the phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) has aroused people's concern. FoMO was first used as a novel phrase in 2004 and has since been widely used to describe a phenomenon seen on social networking sites; in 2013, it was finally accepted into the Oxford lexicon [1]. FoMO could be defined as a diffuse form of anxiety in which the individual is concerned about missing out on novel experiences or positive events for others [2]. Much previous research has focused on the statistical quantification of assessments and investigations of human psychology and behavior with FoMO. For example, Guanghai Cao et al. found that FoMO partially mediated the relationship between online social dependence and online social anxiety by using questionnaires for college students such as the Fear of Missing Out Scale [3]. It is worth mentioning that the majority of researches concentrate on psychology and psychiatry rather than communication studies. Based on

the approach presented in communication mechanisms, the purpose of this paper is to explain the reasons and influences of FoMO on social media. There are three parts to this paper: the first part broadly describes the origin of the FoMO concept and the development of its impact on people in terms of commercial advertising; the second part contains an analysis of the causes of the FoMO phenomenon from three perspectives: self-presentation, perceptual overload and social comparison; and the third part focuses on the experience of social media fatigue as a result of experiencing FoMO. The results of this paper are favourable for people to be able to deal with it objectively and consciously adjust their sub-healthy mental state.

2. The Profile of FoMO on Social Media

FoMO, known as fear of missing out, was first proposed by Joseph Reagle. The concept of the term first emerged in the field of business marketing when Dan Herman, in an academic article, raised the fear of missing out. So far, FoMO has also been used in brand marketing to create a sense of tension in the demand for goods that are in short supply in the market. What's more, the combination of FoMO and social media influencers (SMIs) uses the absorption-addiction model of celebrity worship to get consumers to follow suit and buy products associated with or recommended by the influencer. In the study, using a serial mediation model, the researchers found that individuals with higher levels of FoMO accessed the SMI's account profile more often, which led to more frequent purchases of SMI-recommended products [4]. This is a good thing for a business or company, but from the perspective of a social networking site user, FoMO feelings are easily amplified and built up as they are passed around the internet. This psychological phenomenon, which has received attention from British psychologists, has been defined as "a generalized fear that others are having positive experiences that they lack", and is characterized by a desire to stay in constant touch with what others are doing [1]. Particularly in the context of the widespread use of social media, the concept of FoMO has become narrower and more valid. In the case of WeChat, for example, people often find out what their friends are up to through their 'friends circle', and users feel anxious when they realize that they are not involved in the well-being of others. At the same time, users are always curious about what others are doing and want to find out. When people don't get timely feedback and fulfillment from their social network connections, they experience FoMO and constantly try to update their information to make up for the lack.

3. Explaining the Occurrence of FoMO through the View of Communication Studies

3.1. Self-presentation

Goffman first introduced the concepts of self-presentation and Dramaturgy. In *The Self-Presentation in Everyday Life*, he argues that people perform throughout their lives, that the vast society in which we live is a huge stage, and that there are often limitations to what people can perform in their everyday lives, limitations that on one level come from time and space. Actors on stage present themselves to the roles played by other actors within the context and protection of their roles, with an individual playing a role that plays to the roles played by others present, but these others also form the audience [5]. Therefore, online social media can be regarded as a kind of "stage", people can post information, give likes and comments, and make social interaction the front stage of the "performance", so as to achieve the purpose of self-presentation. Self-presentation can affect people's mental health and quality of life to some extent. Based on the findings of a single study, scholars suggested a possibly gender-specific association between attention to self-presentation and teenagers' anxiety and depressive symptoms as well as quality of life. Using blobbograms, standardized mean difference (SMD) and gender-specific linear regression models, the researchers examined the strength of the association between paying high attention to social media self-presentation and symptoms of

depression (0.75SMD) and anxiety (0.71SMD), which was large, while it was medium to large for quality of life (-0.58SMD). For symptoms of depression and quality of life, the association was stronger for girls than for boys [6]. Another finding suggests that consistently high levels of false self-presentation on Facebook may be linked to increased depression, anxiety, and stress among offline users [7]. Although less literature suggests a direct effect of self-presentation and FoMO, there is a large body of research illustrating an indirect relationship between the two. To be specific, a study showed positive and honest self-presentations have mediating and moderating roles between FoMO and online social anxiety (OSA) [8]. If a person is overly concerned and preoccupied with self-presented contents and behaviors on social media and is afraid of the appearance of social context collapse, FoMO will develop.

3.2. Perceptual Overload

With the rapid popularity of the Internet, more and more people are becoming exposed to and accustomed to logging into social media using their mobile devices. According to the 52nd Statistical Report on the Development of the Internet in China, as of June 2023, the number of internet users in China reached 1.079 billion, an increase of 11.09 million compared to December 2022, and the internet penetration rate reached 76.4% [9]. As McLuhan suggested, the spread of electronic media has brought the world closer together with approximately real-time speed of communication and a strong sense of immediacy, and human beings have been re-tribalised on a wider scale, turning the whole world into a new "global village". This network environment results in the Internet and smartphones enabling users to be permanently online and connected [10]. They always stay on a social network with constantly updated information. It can easily cause the appearance of perceptual overload, which means the user's subjective perception of social media content is beyond what the individual can process or effectively utilize. People will be attracted by something that others are doing right now if they consistently attend social events or check social media. They worry about missing something on the Internet so that people will unconsciously perceive and deal with an excessive amount of outside information and events from others, which can make people experience FoMO and social media addiction. In 2020, a study investigating the relationship between smartphone frequency, smartphone use problems, depression, anxiety and FoMO among 1,034 Chinese undergraduate students found that FoMO mediated the moderating role between smartphone frequency and smartphone use problems while significantly correlating with them [11].

3.3. Upward Social Comparison

Social media sites, as an open platform, give people all kinds of information in a timely manner. At the same time, it has also become a place for individuals to make social comparisons with others. This is because users tend to be more willing to present a positive self-image, which could be magnify a part of good life. As people browse through this information, they tend to subconsciously make comparisons and feel that other people's lives are better than their own, thus lowering their self-confidence and creating negative upward social comparisons. Coupled with the information cocoons created by big data algorithms to record and push the user's own preferences for viewing and using social networking sites, users can deepen such social comparisons, which can cause a certain amount of anxiety or even FoMO. It has been suggested that social media users' missed opportunities and the visibility of FoMO in online and offline activities may increase due to upward social comparisons on social networking sites, ultimately leading to FoMO. It has been suggested that the visibility of missed opportunities and FoMO experiences of social media users' online and offline activities may be enhanced by upward social comparison in social networking sites, ultimately inducing FoMO. This is because social media use takes up a large and limited amount of users' private time and energy, and

the 'always-on' and 'real-time dynamics' of social networking sites make it impossible for users to be involved in everything, and negative emotions such as tension, anxiety, feelings of exclusion and relative deprivation may be generated, which may lead to an increase in FoMO [12]. Long online experiences help to convince users themselves that others are having a better experience than they are, but they also mean that there is not enough time for offline social interactions, and the more interesting experiences of offline life are missed out on.

4. The Effect of FoMO: Social Media Fatigue

Social media fatigue manifests itself psychologically in the form of boredom, fatigue, and tedium with social networking activities, and behaviorally in the form of a desire to quit social media due to boredom with social networking and concerns about privacy exposure. The findings of Anushree Tandon et al. indicate that FoMO is positively associated with social media fatigue, which correlates well with the findings of previous academic studies. Tugtekin et al. found that FoMO was strongly associated with social networking fatigue. Furthermore, Whelan et al. reported that FoMO significantly influenced communication and information overloads, which are inherently related to the concept of fatigue [13]. The mental state of FoMO accumulates when people use social media to interact and connect, and the creation of FoMO motivates frequent and repeated use of social media, resulting in a habitual cycle that can have a negative impact on psychological health. However, in a seven-day social media abstinence trial, the results showed that 61 participants experienced a significant increase in mental wellbeing and social connectedness and a significant decrease in FoMO and smartphone use following social media abstinence [14]. This just goes to show the extent to which putting down the mobile and reducing online socialising can alleviate existing FoMO and focus on real life. Interestingly, a small percentage of internet users are now starting to become social network "niche retreaters". This is a phenomenon of social media abstinence known as JoMO, which refers to a mindset of actively choosing not to participate in certain activities, such as travel, social media use and entertainment [15]. In other words, if people find that using social media is interfering with some aspects of their lives, they will actively choose to be absent from social media and make the transition from FoMO to JoMO.

5. Conclusion

Overall, research on FoMO has gradually matured and diversified. It is a form of anxiety, but not to the extent that it meets the criteria for mental illness. It can be understood as a sub-healthy psychological state. From a social media perspective, there are three reasons for users to produce a state of FoMO. First, the public is faced with perception overload in the context of the rapidly developing Internet; second, people have an innate desire to engage in self-presentation, and social media provides just the right amount of openness for both the constant display of a well-packaged image and the over-attention to every feed for fear of missing out on new content; finally, the public's use of social networking sites creates the psychology of invisible social comparison. At the same time, the emergence of FoMO also raises the main issue of social media burnout, which rationally explains the behavioural logic of the current 'niche burnout' and hints at future attitudes and choices towards social media. Although this article has provided a general description of the phenomenon of FoMO in terms of connotation, cause and effect, the scientific research methods and models have not yet been discussed and only some communication mechanisms have been used to try to understand it. Future research will include quantitative evidence in the overall discussion, along with mentioning feasible solutions to FoMO, to make it more convincing to the readers and complete the structure of the article.

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