FOMO IN THE DIGITAL AGE: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES TEENAGERS' PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

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Abstract: Social media has become an important part of adolescents' everyday lives, providing opportunities for communication, social connection, and self-expression. However, constant exposure to other people's activities may also contribute to the fear of missing out (FoMO), a persistent concern that others are experiencing rewarding or meaningful events without oneself. This review examines how social media-related FoMO may be associated with teenagers' psychological well-being. Drawing on recent research, the review focuses on the relationships between FoMO, social comparison, self-esteem, anxiety, stress, sleep, and problematic social media use. The evidence suggests that FoMO is consistently associated with problematic patterns of social media use and may be linked to poorer psychological outcomes, although these relationships should not be interpreted as proof of direct causation. Individual factors, including self-esteem, social support, and patterns of online engagement, may influence how adolescents respond to social media. At the same time, social media can provide meaningful social connection and emotional support, indicating that its effects are not uniformly negative. The review therefore argues that promoting healthier digital habits should focus not only on reducing screen time but also on improving adolescents' awareness of their online behavior, reducing harmful social comparison, establishing reasonable boundaries, and maintaining meaningful offline relationships and activities.

Keywords: Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), social media, adolescents, psychological well-being, social comparison, problematic social media use

I. Introduction

Social media has become an important part of adolescents' everyday social lives, providing opportunities for communication, self-expression, and social connection. At the same time, adolescence is a developmental period characterized by important changes in self-concept, social relationships, and sensitivity to social feedback. These characteristics may make young people particularly responsive to experiences occurring on social media. Recent psychological research suggests that the effects of social media on adolescent well-being cannot be explained simply by the amount of time spent online; instead, researchers increasingly focus on the psychological processes through which social media may influence young people (Groenestein et al., 2024).

One psychological process that may help explain the relationship between social media and adolescent well-being is the fear of missing out (FoMO). FoMO refers to the persistent concern that others may be experiencing rewarding or meaningful events without oneself, accompanied by a desire to remain continually connected with what others are doing. Although the concept is now strongly associated with digital environments, FoMO is not limited to social media. It reflects a broader concern about social connection, exclusion, and missing meaningful experiences. Social media platforms may intensify this concern by providing users with continuous access to information about other people's activities, relationships, achievements, and experiences (Groenestein et al., 2024; Fioravanti et al., 2021).

FoMO may be particularly relevant to adolescent psychological well-being because it can encourage individuals to remain constantly connected to social media. When young people are concerned that others are experiencing rewarding events without them, they may feel a stronger need to check social media repeatedly. Over time, this pattern may contribute to problematic social media use, which has been associated with anxiety and stress among adolescents and young adults (Shannon et al., 2022; Du et al., 2024). However, the direction of these relationships is not always clear: FoMO may encourage more frequent checking, while problematic use may also reinforce feelings of FoMO.

The relationship between social media use and psychological well-being may also depend on the type and purpose of online engagement rather than simply the amount of time spent online. A teenager who uses social media to communicate with close friends may have a very different experience from someone who repeatedly checks other people's posts because of concerns about exclusion. This distinction suggests that understanding adolescent digital well-being requires attention to the psychological processes underlying social media use (Groenestein et al., 2024).

Another important dimension is sleep. Adolescents who feel pressure to remain connected may continue checking social media late at night, potentially interfering with healthy sleep habits. Notifications, messages, and updates can make it more difficult to disengage from social media before bedtime. Recent research has linked FoMO with several sleep-related difficulties, although these findings do not establish that FoMO directly causes poor sleep (Brombach et al., 2025).

Social comparison may provide another explanation for why social media-related FoMO is associated with psychological difficulties. Adolescents frequently encounter carefully selected images and updates about other people's lives. Comparing their own experiences with these seemingly positive portrayals may create the impression that others are having more exciting, successful, or socially fulfilling lives. As a result, some adolescents may become more concerned about being excluded from rewarding experiences and may feel a stronger need to remain connected online (Burnell et al., 2024).

Self-esteem may also influence how adolescents respond to social media. Teenagers who have a less positive view of themselves may be more vulnerable to negative social comparisons and may rely more heavily on online feedback when evaluating their social value. Seeing other people's achievements, friendships, appearance, or enjoyable experiences may therefore intensify feelings of inadequacy for some individuals. However, this relationship is unlikely to be identical for every adolescent, as personal characteristics, social relationships, and patterns of online engagement may influence how social media experiences are interpreted

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(Groenestein et al., 2024).

It is also important to recognize that social media and FoMO do not have exclusively negative implications. Social platforms can help adolescents maintain friendships, find communities based on shared interests, express themselves, and receive social support. For some young people, online interaction may therefore contribute to a sense of belonging rather than psychological distress. Potential difficulties may arise when the desire to remain connected becomes excessive or is driven primarily by anxiety about being excluded.

Although a substantial body of research has examined the relationship between social media use and adolescent well-being, important questions remain unanswered. Existing findings are often mixed, and researchers increasingly argue that the psychological effects of social media cannot be understood through screen time alone. More attention is needed to the psychological mechanisms that may explain why similar online experiences are associated with different outcomes among different adolescents. FoMO, social comparison, self-esteem, and patterns of online engagement may all be important factors in this relationship (Groenestein et al., 2024).

Therefore, this review examines how social media-related FoMO may be associated with teenagers' psychological well-being. It focuses particularly on the relationships between FoMO, social comparison, anxiety, stress, sleep, and problematic social media use. Rather than viewing social media as inherently harmful, this review considers how different patterns of online engagement and individual psychological factors may shape adolescents' experiences.

II. Literature Review

A. Understanding Fear of Missing Out

Fear of Missing Out is generally understood as a persistent concern that other people may be having rewarding experiences without oneself, accompanied by a desire to remain continuously connected with what others are doing. Although the concept has become strongly associated with social media, FoMO is not limited to digital environments. It reflects a broader psychological concern about social connection, exclusion, and missing meaningful experiences.

Recent research has shown that FoMO has been conceptualized in somewhat different ways across the literature. Nevertheless, a common feature is the unpleasant feeling associated with missing social experiences and the tendency to pay attention to what other people are doing. Social media provides an especially suitable environment for these concerns because information about other people's activities is available continuously and can be accessed almost immediately (Groenestein et al., 2024).

For adolescents, this environment may be particularly relevant. Peer relationships become increasingly important during adolescence, while sensitivity to social evaluation and acceptance also develops. Consequently, seeing friends or peers participating in activities without them may have a stronger emotional impact on some adolescents than it would in other stages of life.

B. FoMO and Social Media Use

Social media may provide an environment in which FoMO becomes especially noticeable because users are continuously exposed to information about other people's activities, relationships, achievements, and social events. This constant flow of social information can encourage repeated checking of social media in an attempt to remain informed and connected.

Research has consistently identified an association between FoMO and problematic social media use, although the direction of this relationship remains uncertain. FoMO may encourage individuals to check social media more frequently because they want to avoid missing social information. At the same time, frequent or problematic use may expose users to more social comparisons and updates, potentially reinforcing feelings of FoMO. The relationship may therefore be reciprocal rather than following a simple one-way pathway (Fioravanti et al., 2021; Shannon et al., 2022).

This distinction is important because frequent social media use alone does not necessarily indicate psychological difficulty. Some adolescents may use social media frequently while maintaining healthy relationships, routines, and emotional well-being. The psychological significance of social media use may depend more on whether it is voluntary and purposeful or driven by anxiety, social pressure, and an inability to disengage (Groenestein et al., 2024).

C. FoMO, Social Comparison, and Self-Esteem

Social comparison is an important psychological process that may help explain why FoMO is associated with negative experiences on social media. Platforms provide adolescents with large amounts of information about their peers, including their activities, friendships, achievements, appearance, and social experiences. Because adolescents are particularly sensitive to peer relationships and social evaluation, this environment may encourage frequent comparisons between their own lives and the lives presented by others.

The problem is that social media rarely provides a complete picture of another person's life. Users tend to share selected experiences, achievements, and positive moments. As a result, adolescents may compare the ordinary aspects of their own lives with an idealized presentation of someone else's. This comparison can create the impression that other people are happier, more successful, or more socially connected than they are.

Recent research involving adolescents has found that upward social comparisons on social media can be associated with poorer momentary self-evaluations. This does not mean that every comparison produces a negative outcome, but it suggests that the direction and psychological meaning of comparison may matter (Burnell et al., 2024).

FoMO may strengthen this process. When adolescents worry that they are missing experiences that their peers are enjoying, they may pay greater attention to what others are doing online. Increased attention to other people's experiences creates more opportunities for comparison, which may make differences between one's own life and the lives presented by others appear more significant.

Self-esteem may therefore play an important role in this relationship. Adolescents with lower self-esteem may be more vulnerable to negative comparisons and may interpret other people's online experiences more critically in relation to themselves. However, because much of the available re-

search is correlational, it would be inappropriate to claim that low self-esteem directly causes FoMO or that FoMO directly lowers self-esteem. These factors may influence one another within a broader psychological and social context (Groenestein et al., 2024).

D. FoMO, Anxiety, and Stress

One of the most important concerns surrounding FoMO is its relationship with anxiety and psychological stress. Adolescents who are constantly worried about missing social experiences may feel pressure to remain connected and updated. Consequently, checking social media may become less about enjoyment and more about reducing the discomfort associated with feeling excluded.

This pattern may create a cycle in which anxiety encourages more checking, while continued exposure to social information creates additional opportunities for comparison and concern about missing out. In this sense, the relationship between FoMO and social media use may involve both emotional and behavioral processes.

Recent research supports an association between problematic social networking use and several forms of anxiety. Studies have identified relationships involving generalized anxiety, social anxiety, and FoMO, although the strength of these relationships varies across populations and measurement methods (Du et al., 2024). Differences in age, gender, geographical region, and patterns of social media use may also influence the findings.

Stress may be connected to this relationship as well. Previous research involving adolescents and young adults has associated problematic social media use with higher levels of stress and anxiety (Shannon et al., 2022). Nevertheless, these findings should be interpreted carefully because much of the evidence is correlational. It would therefore be inaccurate to conclude that FoMO or social media use directly causes anxiety or stress in every teenager.

Individual differences are particularly important in this context. Existing psychological difficulties, self-esteem, social support, family relationships, and offline social experiences may influence how adolescents interpret online content. For one teenager, seeing friends at an event may simply be interesting; for another, the same post may create strong feelings of exclusion.

E. FoMO, Sleep, and Problematic Social Media Use

Sleep is another important aspect of adolescent well-being that may be related to FoMO. Adolescents who are concerned about missing social interactions may feel a need to remain connected even at bedtime. Notifications, messages, and updates can encourage young people to check their phones instead of disengaging from social media.

The desire to remain socially informed may also make it difficult for some adolescents to stop using social media before sleeping. This is particularly relevant because adolescence is already a period in which sleep patterns can be affected by academic demands, social activities, and biological changes.

Recent evidence has linked FoMO with several sleep-related outcomes, including poorer sleep quality, bedtime procrastination, and less healthy sleep habits. These findings suggest that FoMO may be relevant not only to how frequently adolescents use social media but also to when and why they use it. However, most of the available evidence is observational, meaning that it cannot establish that FoMO directly causes sleep problems (Brombach et al., 2025).

Problematic social media use may represent another pathway through which FoMO becomes relevant to psychological well-being. When checking social media becomes difficult to control or begins to interfere with everyday responsibilities, relationships, or sleep, social media use may become problematic. Research has found a substantial association between FoMO and problematic social networking use, as well as relationships between problematic use and anxiety (Fioravanti et al., 2021; Du et al., 2024).

Importantly, FoMO and problematic social media use may reinforce one another. An adolescent may check social media because of FoMO, encounter more social information, experience greater concern about what they may be missing, and consequently check again. This possible feedback loop provides one explanation for why FoMO may be relevant to psychological well-being.

F. Positive and Negative Effects of Social Media

Although social media may be associated with FoMO and psychological difficulties, its influence on adolescents is not necessarily negative. Social media can provide opportunities to maintain friendships, communicate with others, find communities based on shared interests, and receive emotional support. For adolescents who feel isolated in their offline environments, online communities may sometimes provide a valuable sense of belonging.

This positive potential is important because viewing social media only as a harmful influence can produce an incomplete understanding of adolescent digital life. Online communication may strengthen existing friendships, allow young people to express aspects of their identity, and provide access to people with similar interests or experiences.

At the same time, social media can become problematic when online engagement is driven mainly by fear of exclusion rather than genuine interest or social connection. Constant exposure to carefully selected images and updates may encourage social comparison and create unrealistic impressions of other people's lives. For some adolescents, this may contribute to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, or dissatisfaction.

The psychological impact of social media is therefore better understood as a complex relationship between the individual, the type of online activity, the social environment, and the psychological needs that social media is being used to meet. The important question is not simply how much teenagers use social media, but also how and why they use it.

G. Individual Differences

Not all teenagers respond to social media in the same way. Individual characteristics may influence whether social media becomes a source of connection and support or a source of stress and social pressure. Age, self-esteem, social sensitivity, existing psychological difficulties, social support, and patterns of online engagement may all influence adolescents' experiences.

Self-esteem may be particularly relevant to FoMO. Adolescents with lower self-esteem may be more sensitive to negative social evaluation and may interpret other people's online experiences more negatively. In contrast, stronger self-esteem and supportive social relationships may help some adolescents respond to online experiences more positively.

The type of social media activity may also matter. Active communication, such as talking with friends or participating in supportive communities, may provide opportunities for social connection. In contrast, passive browsing or repeatedly checking other people's updates may create more opportunities for comparison and FoMO. This distinction suggests that researchers should examine what adolescents actually do on social media rather than treating all forms of use as equivalent.

Overall, individual differences help explain why the same platform can have very different psychological effects on different teenagers. A balanced understanding of adolescent digital well-being therefore requires attention to both the online environment and the characteristics of the individual using it.

III. Managing and Reducing FoMO

A. Developing Self-Awareness

The first step in managing FoMO may be becoming more aware of the reasons behind social media use. Adolescents can ask themselves whether they are checking an application because they genuinely want to communicate or because they are worried that they might be missing something.

Recognizing this difference may help young people distinguish between purposeful social media use and checking driven by anxiety. Greater self-awareness can also make it easier to identify situations in which social media use becomes automatic rather than intentional.

B. Setting Healthy Boundaries

Another useful approach is establishing reasonable boundaries around social media use. Turning off unnecessary notifications, avoiding repeated checking during study or sleep periods, and creating times when the phone is not used may reduce opportunities for automatic checking.

The purpose of these boundaries is not complete avoidance. Instead, they can help adolescents regain greater control over when and why they engage with social media. This distinction is important because strict prohibition may not always be realistic or appropriate for teenagers whose social lives partly depend on digital communication.

C. Reducing Social Comparison

Reducing unnecessary social comparison may also help adolescents manage FoMO. Social media often presents selected and highly positive moments rather than a complete picture of a person's life. Remembering this may help adolescents avoid interpreting online content as an accurate representation of how well other people are actually living.

Media literacy may further support this process by encouraging young people to think critically about the content they encounter online. Rather than automatically accepting online portrayals as reality, adolescents can learn to consider why particular images or experiences are being presented and what may be absent from them.

The goal is not to eliminate social media, but to develop a healthier and more critical relationship with it.

D. Strengthening Offline Life and the "Joy of Missing Out"

Another possible way to manage FoMO is to strengthen activities and relationships outside social media. When adolescents have meaningful offline activities, close friendships, hobbies, academic goals, and opportunities for relaxation, they may become less dependent on social media for a sense of belonging or personal value.

This does not mean that online relationships are unimportant. Rather, a healthy balance between online and offline experiences may reduce the pressure to remain constantly connected.

This idea can be connected to the concept of the "Joy of Missing Out" (JOMO). JOMO describes being comfortable with not participating in every social activity or not knowing everything that others are doing. Instead of interpreting missed experiences as a personal loss, an adolescent may learn to value the experiences that are directly meaningful to them.

JOMO should not, however, be presented as a proven treatment for FoMO. At present, it is more appropriate to view it as a potentially useful perspective for developing healthier attitudes toward social connection and digital media. Future research should investigate whether interventions based on this idea can produce measurable improvements in FoMO and adolescent well-being.

E. Practical Implications

Taken together, the available evidence suggests that managing FoMO should involve more than simply reducing screen time. Adolescents may benefit from becoming more aware of why they use social media, establishing reasonable boundaries, reducing harmful social comparison, and maintaining meaningful offline activities and relationships.

Schools, parents, and youth organizations may also play a role by promoting digital literacy, healthy online habits, and open discussions about social pressure on social media. Instead of presenting social media as entirely good or entirely harmful, adults can help adolescents understand both its benefits and its potential challenges.

The aim should be to help teenagers use digital platforms intentionally rather than feeling controlled by the fear of missing out.

IV. Conclusion

Social media has become an important part of adolescents' social lives, but its relationship with psychological well-being is complex. This review suggests that Fear of Missing Out may be an important psychological factor connecting certain social media experiences with outcomes such as anxiety, stress, sleep difficulties, and problematic social media use. FoMO may also interact with social comparison and self-esteem, meaning that adolescents can respond differently to similar online experiences.

Importantly, the available evidence does not suggest that social media is inherently harmful to teenagers. Social platforms can provide communication, friendship, emotional support, self-expression, and opportunities for belonging. Potential risks appear to be more closely related to how and why adolescents use social media, particularly when online en-

gagement is driven by anxiety about exclusion or becomes difficult to control.

Therefore, focusing only on the amount of time teenagers spend online may provide an incomplete understanding of adolescent digital well-being. A more useful approach is to consider the psychological processes behind social media use, including FoMO, social comparison, self-esteem, and the individual's broader social environment.

A healthier approach is to help adolescents develop greater awareness and control over their digital behavior. Reducing unnecessary social comparison, establishing reasonable boundaries, strengthening offline relationships and activities, and developing critical media literacy may help young people build a more balanced relationship with social media. At the same time, future research should continue to investigate which strategies are most effective and how individual differences influence adolescents' experiences of FoMO.

The goal is not to help teenagers escape the digital world, but to help them live in it without being controlled by the fear of missing out.

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