Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out

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ABSTRACT

Social media utilities have made it easier than ever to know about the range of online or offline social activities one could be engaging. On the upside, these social resources provide a multitude of opportunities for interaction; on the downside, they often broadcast more options than can be pursued, given practical restrictions and limited time. This dual nature of social media has driven popular interest in the concept of *Fear of Missing Out* – popularly referred to as FoMO. Defined as a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, FoMO is characterized by the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing. The present research presents three studies conducted to advance an empirically based understanding of the fear of missing out phenomenon. The first study collected a diverse international sample of participants in order to create a robust individual differences measure of FoMO, the *Fear of Missing Out scale* (FoMOs); this study is the first to operationalize the construct. Study 2 recruited a nationally representative cohort to investigate how demographic, motivational and well-being factors relate to FoMO. Study 3 examined the behavioral and emotional correlates of fear of missing out in a sample of young adults. Implications of the FoMOs measure and for the future study of FoMO are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social media utilities provide increasingly abundant forms of social information. These mediums afford easy access to real-time information about the activities, events, and conversations happening across diverse social networks. This digitally fueled deluge of updates has kindled interest in and writing about a relatively new phenomenon termed *Fear of Missing Out*, popularly referred to as FoMO. Defined as a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, FoMO is characterized by the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing.

For those who fear missing out, participation in social media may be especially attractive. Services like Facebook, Twitter, and Foursquare are technological tools for seeking social connection and provide the promise of greater levels of social involvement (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). In many ways, social media utilities such as these can be thought of as reducing the "cost of admission" for being socially engaged. While these social tools provide advantages for the general population, it is likely they are a particular boon for those who grapple with fear of missing out.

Indeed, social media engagement presents a high efficiency low friction path for those who are oriented towards a continual connection with what is going on. There is good reason then to expect that those who are high in fear of missing out gravitate towards social media. Despite increased interest in and writing about FoMO, it is noteworthy that very little is empirically known about the phenomenon. To address this deficit, the present research applies a motivation-based perspective to delve deeper into fear of missing out and explore its motivational, behavioral, and well-being correlates.

1.1. Psychological needs perspective

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) a macro-theory of human motivation provides a useful perspective for framing an empirically based understanding of FoMO. According to SDT effective self-regulation and psychological health are based on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: competence – the capacity to effectively act on the world, autonomy – self-authorship or personal initiative, and relatedness – closeness or connectedness with others. Research conducted in the sports (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2007), education (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and video-gaming domains (Przybylski, Weinstein, Ryan, & Rigby,

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2009), indicate that basic need satisfaction is robustly associated with proactive behavioral regulation. Through this theoretical lens, the FoMO phenomenon can be understood as self-regulatory limbo arising from situational or chronic deficits in psychological need satisfactions.

Following this line of thought, low levels of basic need satisfaction may relate to FoMO and social media engagement in two ways. The link could be direct, individuals who are low in basic need satisfaction may gravitate towards social media use because it is perceived as a resource to get in touch with others, a tool to develop social competence, and an opportunity to deepen social ties. The relation between basic needs and social media engagement could also be indirect, that is, linked by way of FoMO. Providing that need deficits could lead some towards a general sensitivity to fear of missing out, it is possible that need satisfaction is linked to social media use only insofar as it is linked to FoMO. Said differently, fear of missing out could serve as a mediator linking deficits in psychological needs to social media engagement.

1.2. FoMO and functioning

Another important dimension of FoMO are its potential links with psychological health and well-being. In a recent book, Turkle (2011) advances the position that technology-mediated communication carries positive as well as negative influences. Turkle explores a number of case studies and outlines general conditions under which digital communication mediums can undermine self-reflection and ultimately degrade well-being. She argues the "tethered self" provided by always-on communication technologies can distract us from important social experiences in the here-and-now. Turkle advances the position a strong desire to stay continuously connected is potentially dangerous as it encourages people to check in with their digital technology even when they are operating motor vehicles. In line with this, accounts of FoMO presented by journalists writing for The New York Times (Wortham, 2011) and San Francisco Chronicle (Morford, 2010) highlight how a mix of social media and fear of missing out may be linked to general unhappiness. Wortham (2011) proposes that FoMO may be a source of negative mood or depressed feelings in part because it undermines the sense that one has made the best decisions in life.

Research focused on the motives underlying social media give additional reasons to expect FoMO linked to deficits in mood and satisfaction with life drive social media engagement. Research on internal motives for social media engagement indicates that avoiding negative emotional states such as loneliness (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010) and boredom (Lampe , Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007) compel Facebook use. In a similar vein, dissatisfaction with the present state of one's relationships has been identified as a motive undergirding social media use (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). These perspectives suggest social media affords an outlet for social and emotional frustrations. Taken together with the wider motivation literature, it appears that fear of missing out could serve an important role in linking individual variability in factors such as psychological need satisfaction, overall mood, and general life satisfaction to social media engagement.

1.3. Previous research

Some preliminary research has explored the prevalence of FoMO and its relation to social media (JWT, 2011, 2012). This survey work defined FoMO as "the uneasy and sometimes all-consuming feeling that you're missing out – that your peers are doing, in the know about, or in possession of more or something better than you". Under this framing of FoMO, nearly three quarters of young adults reported they experienced the phenomenon. This polling also indicated that younger people tended to experienced intense unease when they felt at risk for missing out on positive experience, and that males were more likely than females to turn to social media when struggling with a sense of FoMO. Taken together, findings from this initial examination of fear of missing out suggest it may be quite common among some groups. That said, these preliminary industry reports leave open wider questions about the operationalization, correlates, and overall relevance of FoMO.

1.4. Present research

The aim of the present research was to advance an empirically-based and theoretically-meaningful framing of the fear of missing out phenomenon. To this end, we designed and conducted three studies. In the first, we developed a self-report assessment that measured the FoMO construct as an individual difference. In the second, we explored how fear of missing out constellates with a range of demographic and individual difference factors linked to social media engagement. In the third, we examined its emotional and behavioral correlates.

In Study 1, we collected data from a large and diverse international sample of participants in order to create a robust individual differences measure of FoMO. Guided by extant writing about fear of missing out we drafted a pool of statements reflecting FoMO and used a data driven approach to select representative items with the best psychometric properties. Our aim in this first study was to create a sensitive self-report instrument, one that is informative for individuals with low, medium, and high latent levels of fear of missing out, and one that is useful for measuring FoMO in a wide range of research contexts.

In Study 2, we recruited a nationally representative sample to empirically evaluate fear of missing out from a broad perspective. This study was conducted with two aims in mind. First, we aimed to investigate demographic variability in FoMO, to explore who in the general population tended towards fear of missing out. Our second goal was to evaluate FoMO as a mediating factor linking individual differences identified in past motivation and social media research to behavioral engagement with social media.

In Study 3, we shifted focus from large-scale samples to a university cohort to fine-grained understanding of how FoMO related to emotion and behavior. In particular, our goal for this study was to understand how those high in fear of missing out felt about their social media usage, how frequently they used social media, and the extent to which FoMO enables social media as a distractor from other important responsibilities in everyday life.

2. Study 1: measuring FoMO

Our objective in the first study was to create a robust individual differences measure of fear of missing out. More specifically, we wanted to create a brief, self-report assessment that minimized participant burden and provided maximal information about an individual's level of FoMO. To achieve this goal we paired a theory-guided method with latent trait theory analysis to craft a robust assessment of fear of missing out.

To take full advantage of this approach we needed to start with a large pool of potential FoMO items. Based on a review of popular and industry writing on FoMO (e.g., JWT, 2011; Morford, 2010; Wortham, 2011) we drafted 32 items meant to reflect the fears, worries, and anxieties people may have in relation to being in (or out of) touch with the events, experiences, and conversations happening across their extended social circles. We framed participants' reading of and responses to scale items in terms of what really reflected their general experiences instead of what they thought their experiences should be.