



# Links between Adolescents' Deep and Surface Learning Approaches, Problematic Internet Use, and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Deep and surface approaches to learning  
Fear of Missing Out  
Problematic Internet Use  
Social networks  
Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)

## ABSTRACT

This study was aimed at exploring links between adolescents' deep and surface approaches to learning, Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), and Problematic Internet Use (PIU) by using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The analysis corroborated the postulated positive links between surface learning, FoMO, and PIU. Moreover, the FoMO construct represented a complimentary mediation between the surface learning approach and PIU constructs. This study may lead to a plausible inference according to which both FoMO and surface learning share a common core characteristic of decreased levels of self-regulation that might lead to PIU. Having students acquire and practice skills of self-regulation might help them control their levels of FoMO, and consequently their PIU at schools or out-of-school learning environments.

## 1. Introduction

Adolescent students are heavy users of social media tools relative to the general population and use them extensively for leisure, communication with peers, and learning (Lenhart et al., 2015a). The characteristics attributed typically to 'net generation' students are information technology mindset and highly developed multitasking skills (Carlisle et al., 2016). Previous work showed positive links between Internet information seeking and higher academic performance among high school students (Chen et al., 2014). However, Internet use may become problematic for students who are unable to control their activities (Wąsiński and Tomczyk, 2015).

Recently, several studies have raised awareness to a new phenomenon termed Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), associated with such Problematic Internet Use, specifically related to social media excessive use (Alt, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b). FoMO is characterized by the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing (Przybylski et al., 2013). In those studies, FoMO was found related to deficit in psychological needs, a-motivation for learning, poor adjustment to college life, and was linked to excessive use of social media platforms for activities unrelated to learning during lessons. With the growing attention paid to the connection between PIU by technology-enabled tools, learning underperformances, and FoMO, and the minimal attention devoted to understanding these connections among adolescents, it seems worthwhile to test how PIU and FoMO correlate with adolescents' deep and surface approaches to learning.

This study could give new insights into possible associations

between FoMO, PIU, and approaches to learning, and could raise educators' awareness toward possible similar features characterizing FoMO and surface learning, which might be useful to detect both phenomena and their contribution to PIU.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Problematic use of social media tools

Due to the widespread options of connecting online (through smartphone, tablet, computer, etc.), the Internet has become central in adolescents' lives, as they use it for leisure (e.g., listening to music, watching movies, playing online games), communication (with friends and family), and learning (school tasks, general knowledge; Carlisle et al., 2016; Wu and Chen, 2015). Several studies have examined the relationships between Internet use and academic performance, indicating positive links between the latter and Internet information seeking among high school students (Chen et al., 2014; Zhu et al., 2011). The American Pew Research Center (Lenhart et al., 2015a) reported that 92% of 13–17-year-old teenagers go online daily, with 24% using the Internet "almost constantly", and 56% connecting "several times a day". In addition, 91% of the teenagers reported going online using a mobile device. In the same route, according to an Israeli study (Sasson et al., 2012), 91% of the teenagers reported using social network sites, and 71% send or receive instant messages.

The unique characteristics of the Internet, which make it attractive, are availability, accessibility, affordability, and anonymity (Greenfield,

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1999). Moreover, the possibility to communicate with others results in a strong and intense commitment to stay online. A recent survey (Lenhart et al., 2015b) showed that 80% of teenagers admit they use texting as the most common way to get in touch with their friends. Feeling socially connected and accepted can be rewarding for adolescents. However, these characteristics can, in turn, promote Problematic Internet Use behaviors (van den Eijnden et al., 2010; Young, 1998). The combination of adolescence and the unique characteristics of the cyberspace put teenagers at risk for Problematic Internet Use. Developmental changes during adolescence involving pubertal maturation, continuing brain development, adolescents' sensitivity to stimulation, changing relationship with parents, and an expanding social peer environment, all contribute to a peak period of risk for the early onset of addictive behaviors (Chung, 2013).

However, Internet use is not necessarily indicative of problematic use. It may become problematic only for those who are unable to control their online activities. Addicted individuals abandon their everyday activities and devote their time to the activities that they discover on the Internet (Wąsiński and Tomczyk, 2015). Problematic Internet Use (PIU) refers to the “use of the Internet that creates psychological, social, school and/or work difficulties in a person's life” (Beard and Wolf, 2001, p. 378). Meaning that high levels of Internet use could interfere with daily life and well-being, reduce school performance, cause sleep deprivation, and result in social withdrawal and family problems (Fisher, 2010; Siciliano et al., 2015).

The literature on problematic Internet addiction shows high comorbidity of Internet addiction with psychiatric disorders, especially affective disorders (including depression), anxiety disorders (generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Several factors are predictive of PIU, including personality traits, parenting and familial factors, alcohol use, and social anxiety (Chen et al., 2016; Kim and Jeong, 2015; Weinstein and Lejoyeux, 2010).

PIU has different designations within the research literature: Internet addiction, Internet overuse, compulsive Internet use, excessive Internet use, pathological Internet use, and Internet dependency. However, Internet addiction disorder still has not been entered in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. The American Psychiatric Association has proposed it as a possible nonsubstance addiction within the DSM-5 category Substance Use and Addictive Disorders (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Moreover, this phenomenon is still under evaluation, due to the fast progress of Internet accessibility and usability, which forces us to understand the accurate definition of Internet addiction. A systematic review of 658 articles related to the emergent area of PIU research (Moreno et al., 2011), revealed that the evaluation of this phenomenon is hampered by methodological inconsistencies. In the present study, the term that will be used is PIU as it is related to the increased risk of addiction to the digital world among adolescents (Siciliano et al., 2015).

Among other correlates such as online gaming (Qiaolei, 2014; van Rooij et al., 2014), and social networking (Ryan et al., 2014; van den Eijnden et al., 2016), previous work connected the level of internet addiction to academic performance decrement (Qiaolei, 2014). Adolescents with PIU spend excessive amounts of their time on the Internet and fail to manage their time efficiently. As expected, the consequences for the adolescents involved are poor school attendance and neglect of academic work, lower grades and academic dismissal (Chen and Tzeng, 2010; Huang and Leung, 2009). Moreover, research has also indicated that adolescents who feel connected to school are less likely to develop PIU (Li et al., 2013). These studies' findings are consistent with those of Akhter (2013) who assessed the relationship between Internet addiction and academic performance among university undergraduates. The results showed an inverse relation between Internet addiction and academic performance. Mishra et al. (2014) also aimed at capturing data from a wide variety of college students to determine the various guises of Internet addiction, and the potential consequences of unfettered

access with the Grade Point Average (GPA) as the final measure of success or failure. The results indicated that there is an inverse relationship between the degree of Internet addiction and academic success. Similarly, Türel and Toraman (2015) have assessed the relationship between the Internet addiction level of secondary school students and their academic performances. Their findings showed that Internet addiction was inversely related to academic achievements of students.

## 2.2. Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

The above-mentioned literature is mainly focused on defining and measuring PIU that might lead to psychological, social, school and/or work difficulties (Beard and Wolf, 2001), hence, interfere with daily life and well-being. However, other studies have focused attention on several precursors to PIU, such as neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, aggression, and impulsivity (Kim et al., 2008; Samarein et al., 2013). A recent effort to detect psychological precursors of PIU has pointed to a relatively new psychological phenomenon termed FoMO (Przybylski et al., 2013). FoMO is defined as an anxiety, whereby one is compulsively concerned that he/she might miss an opportunity for social interaction, a rewarding experience, profitable investment or other satisfying events. The mediating role of FoMO linking deficits in psychological needs to excessive use of social media has been assessed in several studies. For example, Abel et al. (2016) described FoMO as an overwhelming urge to be in two or more places at once, fueled by the fear that missing out on something could put a dent in one's happiness. In their study, FoMO was measured by inadequacy, irritability, anxiety, and self-esteem items. Results suggested significant differences in social media use across the measured levels of FoMO. Przybylski et al. (2013) study's results indicated that individuals who evidenced less satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for competence (efficacy), autonomy (meaningful choice), and relatedness (connectedness to others) also reported higher levels of FoMO and increased behavioral engagement with social media.

Several studies tested these connections in higher education learning environments. For example, Alt's (2015) study illustrated the robust mediating role of FoMO in explaining disruptive behaviors in the classroom enabled by using social media technology. In this study, the assumption that low levels of basic need satisfaction may relate to FoMO and social media engagement was tested. Path analysis results have confirmed the assumption that extrinsically and a-motivated undergraduate students are more likely to use social media tools available in the classroom for leisure. However, when those links were mediated by the FoMO variable, insignificant direct relations between the above academic motivations and social media engagement were detected. Hence, both motivational variables were positively related to FoMO, which in turn was associated with increased levels of social media engagement in the classroom. The robust mediating role of FoMO in explaining disruptive behaviors of social media use during lectures was also validated in a recent study (Alt, 2016). In this study, it was postulated that maladjustment to college, as indicative of students' decreasing well-being, could lead some toward excessive social media engagement for leisure during class. Path analysis results showed that the maladjustment to college variable is linked to social media use only insofar as it is linked to FoMO.

## 2.3. Deep and surface approaches to learning

The increased growth of Internet usages and their centrality in adolescents' lives, establish a need for more knowledge about the effect of these complex, online environments on adolescents' approaches to learning. These approaches refer to how students perceive themselves going about learning in a specific learning situation and focus on how intention and process are combined in students' deep or surface learning (Biggs et al., 2001). Marton and Säljö's (1976) seminal work

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