

The psychology of FOMO

You might think of FOMO – fear of missing out – as a bit of a joke, or at worst an inevitable and mild side effect of having choices. But what is really going on when FOMO happens? **Matt Jarvis** explores the phenomenon

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Imagine you're invited to a party and a gig on the same night. You know that, whichever you choose, part of you will wish you were at the other. You're really tired and want to put your feet up with Netflix, but you just know you'll miss a great night out if you stay in. You have a nice friendship group, but you suspect that another 'faction' in your year group has more fun at the weekends. What these scenarios have in common is a degree of anxiety resulting from a perception that you are missing out on something. FOMO in some form is probably not entirely new, but in the era of social media it has become a significant problem.

The term 'FOMO' was first used in 2004 in the context of the study of social network sites. For context, Facebook was launched in 2004, and Twitter in 2006. Before their rise the dominant social media platform was Myspace. With the advent of social media like Myspace and Facebook we all became much more aware of what other people were doing, and so we have been constantly made aware of things we are missing out on. Although we now speak about FOMO in other contexts, it is currently mostly a social media problem. Platforms like Instagram are widely used precisely to show off – and even exaggerate – all the exciting things we

are doing, so we could argue that making others feel bad for missing out on our experiences has actually become one of the main uses of social media.

Exploring the nature of FOMO

Przybylski et al. (2013) defined FOMO as 'pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent' (2013: 1481). It may be partly a problem of relatedness to others, perhaps linked to unmet social needs (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). There are probably other factors at play, however. Gao (2023) suggests that, when we evaluate our use of time, we feel more pain over time not well spent than we do pleasure in time well spent. Therefore, unless what we are currently doing is significantly more pleasurable than what we are missing, we will generally feel bad whenever we compare the two. This phenomenon is called time loss aversion. Once you know about time loss aversion, you might want to re-evaluate the time you spend scrolling Instagram and Twitter looking at what others are up to – it will rarely improve your mood.

Psychological correlates of FOMO

We should be cautious before suggesting that there is a simple causal relationship between FOMO and psychological factors associated with it. Nonetheless there are strong statistical associations between FOMO and a range of negative factors. Studies conducted in a range of countries, e.g. China (Li et al., 2020) and Israel (Shoval, Tal & Tzischinski, 2020), have found negative correlations between social media use at night, FOMO and poor sleep quality. Poor sleep quality is in turn associated with a range of negative consequences. FOMO is also correlated with lower mood, academic performance and working productivity.

Fascinatingly, FOMO is also being linked with patterns of working in the current slightly confused climate where many people have become used to working at home, to the discomfort of some bosses.

Marsh, Vallejos & Spence (2024) surveyed 142 home-workers about their experiences of the downsides of remote working and found that FOMO was linked to information overload and stress – remote workers appear to seek and take on board too much information digitally because they are afraid of missing out on the information they would be able to access easily in the office. So, it may for some people be that what they gain in travel time and expense from remote working is outweighed by the effect of FOMO.

Limitations of the research

Most of the research into FOMO is correlational, and it is notoriously difficult to untangle causal relationships from correlations. There are for example likely confounding variables, in that FOMO is mostly a social media phenomenon, so where there is a correlation between FOMO and something harmful there are usually also correlations with social media use and phone use. Further research is needed to disentangle FOMO from social media use and phone use.

Activity

- 1 Consider the time you and people you know spend on social media. Do you notice the phenomenon of FOMO? This might make an interesting survey.
- 2 Some UK schools have recently banned mobile phones on the premises, and some students are reporting that their mood and peer relationships have improved as a result. Explain why this might be using the idea of FOMO.

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