

**The Digital Dilemma: Social Media's Impact on Mental Health and Fear of Missing Out
(FOMO)**

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Abstract

As online platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X dominate communication, the way people connect and express themselves has changed drastically. While social media offers access to global interaction and instant information sharing, it also presents new mental health challenges.

This literature review explores research surrounding compulsive social media behavior, emotional outcomes, and the moderating role of the fear of missing out (FOMO). Findings suggest that early family relationships may predict later dependence on online interaction. Across various populations, problematic social media use is consistently tied to greater anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. Studies show that heavy engagement tends to amplify FOMO, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that reduces overall life satisfaction. In contrast, limiting online activity has been found to ease psychological distress and improve well-being, especially in young adults. Collectively, research highlights the emotional trade-offs of constant connection and the importance of considering personal, developmental, and cultural influences when addressing social media's effects. Recommendations for prevention and culturally informed mental health approaches are also reviewed.

Keywords: social media, digital dependence, FOMO, psychological health, depression, anxiety

The Hidden Price of Digital Connection: Understanding Problematic Social Media Use and Mental Health

Social media has reshaped the way people form relationships and exchange information, creating a world where connection happens in seconds. Though it encourages communication and creativity, researchers are uncovering the emotional and psychological burdens that come with excessive use. Many studies have linked compulsive social media engagement to greater feelings

of stress, loneliness, and depression, often accompanied by the fear of being left out or forgotten online. These findings suggest that personal, environmental, and cultural factors all contribute to how individuals develop habits of unhealthy use.

The purpose of this review is to integrate current research on social media's psychological impact, with special attention to problematic usage patterns and FOMO as central factors. Drawing on findings from different age groups, personality frameworks, and cross-cultural contexts, this paper examines how dependence develops and how interventions can improve mental health outcomes. The goal is to provide a well-rounded understanding of the emotional costs of constant connection and to identify directions for promoting balance and digital wellness in the future.

Developmental and Emotional Influences

The rise of social media has reshaped self-expression and social belonging, but it has also heightened emotional vulnerability. Easy access to communication means constant exposure to feedback, comparison, and validation. Researchers have connected problematic social media use (PSMU) to emotional dysregulation, FOMO, and certain personality traits that increase dependency. These factors can lead to symptoms often associated with anxiety, depression, and behavioral addiction.

Blackwell et al. (2017) identified emotional instability and attachment insecurity as major contributors to excessive social media use. They discovered that individuals high in neuroticism and FOMO were more likely to display addictive behaviors online. The desire for reassurance

and fear of exclusion appeared to drive this pattern of compulsive engagement. Their findings imply that social media addiction is not merely about technology use but also about unmet emotional needs and difficulties in managing insecurity.

Further research emphasizes how early family environments influence later behavior online. Demers et al. (2025) followed participants for 15 years and found that adolescents with limited parental supervision were more likely to develop addictive social media habits as adults. Early exposure to chat rooms and later heavy online use mediated this link. Additionally, families marked by high conflict predicted increased risk for addiction without the mediation effect. These outcomes support social control theory, which suggests that weak parental ties can lead youth to seek comfort and belonging in virtual spaces—habits that may persist long-term. Together, this body of evidence reveals that early relationships and emotional regulation skills are crucial in preventing social media behaviors from turning problematic.

FOMO and the Cycle of Overuse

Li et al. (2025) conducted one of the most detailed longitudinal studies examining how FOMO drives problematic use. Surveying Chinese college students across three waves, they distinguished between **trait-FOMO** (a constant tendency to worry about missing out) and **state-FOMO** (temporary anxiety about missing current events online). Both forms were found to increase problematic social media engagement over time.

A key insight from their study was that self-control failures in managing online time were often triggered by heightened FOMO. The more anxious individuals felt about missing something, the

harder it became to resist checking their accounts, reinforcing a harmful loop. In this way, FOMO doesn't just predict compulsive use—it perpetuates it. Li et al.'s findings highlight both group-level and personal-level patterns: those with naturally higher FOMO scores were generally heavier users, but even within individuals, spikes in FOMO predicted short-term increases in use. This strengthens the argument that FOMO is an active driver, not just a side effect, of social media addiction.

Interventions and Cultural Context

Emerging studies continue to show how heavy social media consumption relates to emotional strain, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Davis and Goldfield (2025) tested a social media reduction program with participants reporting high stress levels. Those who restricted their online time to just 30 minutes per day experienced noticeable improvements in mood, decreased FOMO, and lower depression scores. These findings demonstrate that small, realistic changes in online habits can have significant benefits for mental health. Instead of promoting total avoidance, researchers recommend balanced moderation strategies that preserve connection while reducing psychological harm.

Cultural comparisons also reveal how social norms shape the emotional impact of social media.

Nurmala et al. (2025) explored problematic use among students in Indonesia and Taiwan, differentiating between general social media dependence and specific YouTube overuse. Both types correlated with greater emotional distress, but the patterns varied: Indonesian students reported higher overall social media use, while Taiwanese students' mental strain was more connected to YouTube engagement. These results suggest that the emotional consequences of

online behavior depend on cultural expectations and media preferences. What causes distress in one culture might not carry the same weight in another, emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to understanding and treating PSMU.

Conclusion

The evolution of social media has revolutionized human connection, but at a considerable emotional cost. New experimental and longitudinal evidence confirms that cutting back on screen time can reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, and sleep problems. These results underline the importance of healthy boundaries in a world that often rewards constant engagement.

The literature consistently reveals that problematic social media use stems from an intricate mix of emotional, developmental, and cultural influences. The true “cost of connection” lies in the dependence and emotional exhaustion that can accompany constant comparison and validation-seeking online. Future studies should continue to expand intervention-based and culturally grounded research, focusing on strategies that help individuals regain control over their digital habits. When balance replaces compulsion, social media can return to its original purpose—building connection that enhances, rather than harms, psychological well-being.

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