Information Management and Business Review (ISSN 2220-3796)
Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 443-447, September 2025

Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and Online Subjective Well-Being (OSWB): Examining the Mediating Role of Social Media Overload (SMO)

*Sazimah Mohamed Salleh, Erne Suzilla Kassim, Ramita Abdul Rahim, Veera Pandiyan Kaliani Sundram, Noor Zalina Zainal
Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
Email: *sazimah@uitm.edu.my
Corresponding Author: Sazimah Mohamed Salleh

Abstract: Social media has become essential in today's hyperconnected digital environment. Due to its widespread use and users' excessive dependence, the use of social media has raised concerns about its psychological impacts. One of the key factors that drives excessive social media engagement is Fear of missing out (FoMO). FoMo has been linked to negative outcomes, both at psychological and behavioral levels. However, the mechanisms through which FoMO contributes to social media overload through information and communication surplus, and how it affects online subjective well-being (OSWB), require further investigation. Hence, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to examine the connections between FoMO, social media overload, and online subjective well-being. Based on the research synthesis, a conceptual framework is proposed, which would advance theoretical understanding of the digital environment and well-being. It also serves as a foundation for future empirical research. Based on the framework, it offers practical insights for designing interventions to mitigate the psychological risks of social media use.

Keywords: *Fear of missing out, online subjective well-being, social media, social media platforms, social media overload, information overload, communication overload.*

1. Introduction and Background

The dream of the democratization of mind, ideas, and information flows is fueled by the digitally networked world. Massive networks underpin the dream. Facebook boasts 3 billion users, Twitter has a quarter-billion, and Instagram has 1.3 billion users as of 2023 (Statista, 2024). Given that Facebook was founded in 2004, Twitter in 2006, and Instagram in 2010, the era of social media is still in its infancy. Surprisingly, in 2022, it was reported that Facebook saw a percentage decline in the number of Malaysian users from 91.7% in 2020 to 87.5% (MCMC, 2024). Furthermore, the chart also reveals that TikTok's performance climbed in 2022 with 49.7%, achieving growth that outperformed Twitter (rebranded to 'X') users, likened to Twitter users of only 40.9%. There is not much talk about the mistakes made and what, overall, has not changed. Concerns regarding the potential of the internet to alter the established dynamics of access and inequality surrounding news and information have been growing for a while.

Few people realise how empowering social media has been, but knowledge truly is power. Social media provides an unfettered flow of information that empowers anyone online to expand their knowledge base. There is no denying that social media has a significant influence on our culture, economy, and worldview in the modern period. Social media is a brand-new platform that allows individuals to connect, relate to, and mobilise for a cause, share ideas, ask for and provide advice, and more. Academics are investigating the possible consequences Facebook may have on users' mental health and general wellbeing in light of the amount of time people spend on the social media platform, its variety of activities, and the psychological significance it has gained in people's lives (Braghieri, Levy & Makarin, 2022; Kross, et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2016).

Social media has broken down communication barriers, established decentralized channels for communication, and allowed everyone, even those living in oppressive nations, to engage democratically and have a voice, but a long attachment to it is able to create problems. Problematic social media use (PSMU) is linked to mental health issues like anxiety and depression symptoms (Marino et al., 2018; Hussain & Starcevic, 2020). Millions of people now use social media regularly, and this increased engagement has sparked worries about the possible drawbacks of excessive social networking site (SNS) use. FoMO is consistently associated with negative psychological outcomes, including reduced emotional well-being and personal relationship well-being (Stead and Bibby, 2017). It leads to sleep deprivation, loss of focus, and declined productivity (Hayran and Anik, 2021). While some revealed negative associations between social media use and well-being, others

revealed positive links or results that were moderated by individual differences (e.g., online social network size, depressive symptoms, gender, loneliness), Kross et. al (2021).

Social media is eroding the trust and comfort that were found in personal relationships, replacing the human connection, physical presence, and emotional support that people used to rely on with virtual interactions. It undermines self-control and the ability to think independently, making individuals more susceptible to joining groups that promote distorted or harmful messages—messages that cater to superficial desires and amuse the senses—without considering the potential consequences. The urge to constantly be aware of what other people are doing is what defines FOMO (Przybylski et al., 2013). A brief literature review on FoMO, thus, reveals two critical research gaps that limit the current understanding of FoMO:

- Insufficient evidentiary knowledge of FoMO manifestation and possible variations in user behavior and well-being in the context of Instagram and Snapchat (Tandon et al., 2021a) and
- limited knowledge of the underlying complex associations between FOMO and the emerging adverse consequences of social media platform (SMP) use, such as overload, fatigue, and compulsive social media use (Tandon et al., 2021c; Wang, 2021).

Therefore, the study aims to explore the relationship between FoMo and social media overload, and how the overload affects online subjective well-being.

2. Literature Review

Fear of missing out (FoMO)

FoMO represents social media users' continuous apprehension that others may be enjoying more fulfilling experiences when they are not connected with them in the online space (Przybylski et al., 2013). FoMO thus drives users to remain continuously connected to online platforms, leading to excessive use (Cao and Sun, 2018; Rosen et al., 2018) and associated adverse behaviors (Stead and Bibby, 2017). Notably, prior research has equated FoMO with a form of "technological anxiety," representing the unease that users feel when they are unable to engage with technological devices (Rosen et al., 2018). FoMO can be understood as an expression of an individual's need to seek relatedness and connection, which has been intrinsically associated with the use of SMPs and allied networking platforms (Przybylski et al., 2013). Furthermore, relatively few studies have investigated FoMO as a factor predicting individuals' experience of the dark side of social media phenomena, including fatigue, although recognized less than a decade ago (Tandon et al., 2021).

Information overload

Information overload represents a person's ability to comprehend the large volume of information he or she receives through various forms of media (Karr-Wisniewski and Lu, 2010). Scholars have suggested that social media users constantly experience overload because they are constantly bombarded by new information (Cao and Sun, 2018; Gezgin et al., 2017). For instance, Cao and Yu (2019) showed that excessive social and hedonic use of social media in a work environment increases technology–work conflict. The authors claim that this conflict arises from the overload that workers endure as a result of using social media for social, hedonistic, and cognitive tasks connected to their jobs. Examining the effects of technology overload on well-being is crucial since SMPs and IT are becoming essential parts of people's personal and professional lives.

Communication overload

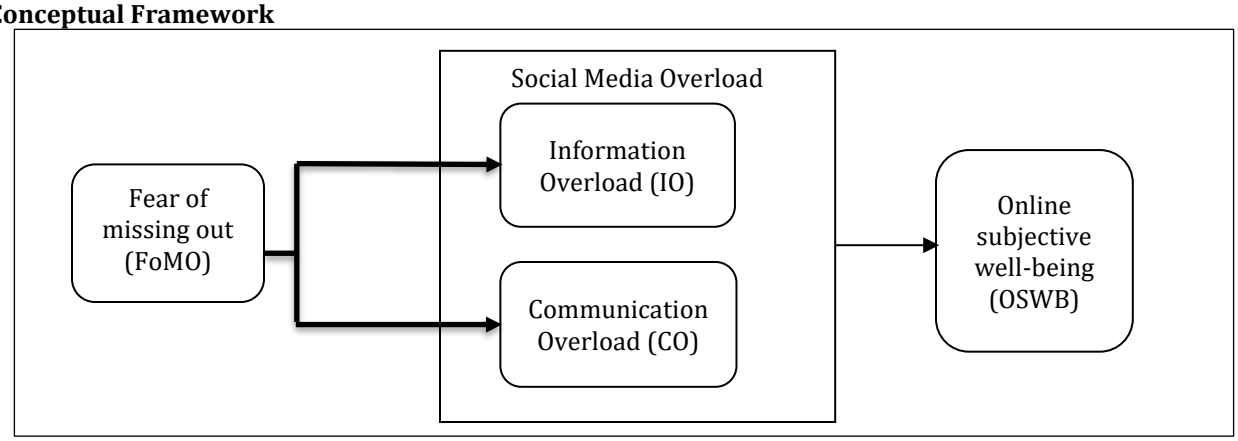
Communication overload refers to the constantly connected environment that technology creates, which produces situations where individuals can be overwhelmed by the communication demands they face (Cao and Sun, 2018). System-feature overload, which does not fall within the boundaries of our investigation, represents an individual's ability to cope with the number of features a system offers users to execute various tasks (Karr-Wisniewski and Lu, 2010). This form is excluded from the study following Islam et al. (2018), who conceptualized social media overload only in the forms of information and communication overload. Most young adults' proficiency in SMP usage in their daily lives should sufficiently familiarize them with the platforms' features and thus negate the possibility of them experiencing system-feature overload.

Online subjective well-being (OSWB)

Subjective well-being represents an individual's affirmative or adverse self-evaluation of his or her mental state

or condition (OECD, 2013, p. 29). SWB is a broad multidimensional concept, which has been well studied in the context of offline space, i.e., real-life (Diener et al., 2015; Verduyn et al., 2017). However, scholars have only recently begun examining various aspects of online SWB (OSWB), which is considered a vital issue among online social media users (Jung et al., 2017; Kaur et al., 2021; Nisar and Shafiq, 2019; Verduyn et al., 2017). OSWB refers to an individual's self-evaluation (positive or negative) of his or her own online social media life. For instance, if a person's online social media life is close to ideal and the person has gained something of importance from it, the person will evaluate his or her OSWB as excellent and satisfying (Kaur et al., 2021). Given that scholars have devoted attention to the relationship between FoMO and various well-being measures, such as life satisfaction (Przybylski et al., 2013; Ayyıldız and Sahin, 2022), anxiety (Dempsey et al., 2019), depression, and stress (Beyens et al., 2016; Kartol and Gündogan, 2020), it may be beneficial to examine the potential associations between OSWB and FoMO-driven SMP usage and thus develop a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of SMP users' psychology and expected benefits.

3. Conceptual Framework



Adapted from Hattingh et. al (2022) & Fu et. al (2020)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Theoretical implications

This study's findings offer novel insights into the role of SMO in the relationship between FoMO and OSWB in the context of social media. This study makes two key theoretical contributions. First, this study expands the current knowledge on the consequences of FoMO by determining its association with the relatively under-explored variables of information overload and communication overload. Because scholars have primarily investigated FoMO as an indirect influencer (Tandon et al., 2021), this study significantly advances understanding of FoMO's direct adverse behavioral and psychological consequences. At the same time, this study contributes to the OSWB literature by investigating its antecedents, including two more recently recognized and empirically investigated antecedents—IO and CO. Thus, the results advance knowledge regarding the dark side of social media in general and FoMO and OSWB in particular.

Secondly, this study contributes to FoMO towards online subjective well-being research with regard to the composition of information and communication overload and the empirical validation of their relationships. Specifically, this study conceptualized and empirically demonstrated how the two types of overloads are interconnected through social media overload. This insight is important because it extends FoMO literature with the relationships between the overload constructs that affect individuals' well-being (i.e., strain) through their individual and shared effects. Such a composition demonstrates the multifaceted nature of overload and its implications on social media use.

Practical implications

The study's findings offer two significant practical implications for social media administrators, developers, users, users' parents and guardians, and policymakers. First and foremost, young people who use social media, as well as their parents and guardians, should educate themselves and become more conscious of the possible negative effects of utilizing sites like Instagram and TikTok. Parents and guardians must comprehend the potentially detrimental consequences of platform-specific features that could lead their children (or wards) to

engage in risky activities. Parents and guardians may be able to take preventative action by monitoring their children's social media usage patterns or restricting their use of specific platforms as a result of this education and awareness. In order to urge the young people under their supervision to speak candidly if and when they encounter any negative consequences from their use of social media, parents and guardians should also encourage open communication with them.

Second, the findings can help social media producers and managers understand the effects of communication overload, information overload, and FOMO, which can lead to young users experiencing negative OSWB and quitting social media (Fu and Li, 2020). To lessen the negative effects that social media use may have, administrators and service developers must implement responsive design principles. For instance, they can provide reminders for users' digital well-being that ask them to stop using social media after a certain amount of time. In the near term, such measures could seem counterintuitive from a business standpoint, but we think they would be quite advantageous in the long run since social media users will trust the developers to safeguard their welfare.

Conclusion

A useful theoretical foundation for further research in this field has been effectively constructed in this paper. Overall, by illuminating the direct impacts of FOMO and its intricate interactions with communication and information overload, this work advances the theoretical landscape by providing a novel viewpoint on how these factors collectively affect online subjective well-being. The research contributes to the body of knowledge on the psychological effects of social media by providing empirical validation for these links. Practically speaking, the results highlight how critical it is to educate young people, parents, and other stakeholders about the dangers of excessive social media use. Additionally, the study promotes user-centred features and careful platform design to encourage better digital habits. Together, these contributions show how urgently more sustainable and wellbeing-oriented methods of social media interaction are needed.

Acknowledgment: The researchers extend sincere appreciation to the Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), for graciously providing the opportunity and unwavering support that facilitated the publication of this research paper.

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