

Digital Well-Being and Social Identity: Conceptualising Fear of Missing Out in the Hyperconnected Era

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Abstract

The modern world is defined by constant connectivity and the ever-increasing impact these digital spaces have on our identities and relationships. This hyperconnected world alongside opportunities for connection and belongingness has also created Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), a persistent anxiety that others are experiencing rewarding events without us. Prior researches have treated FoMO as a side effect of heavy social media use and excessive screen time, the current paper argues that FoMO is more deeply rooted in the social identity needs that drive human behaviour: the desire to belong, to feel valued by our groups, and to maintain a secure sense of self. Drawing on Social Identity theory and the nascent frameworks of digital health, we propose a conceptual model that reframes FoMO as an identity-centric phenomenon rather than a mere technological consequence. We believe that the pressures of comparison, the importance of identity, and the weak sense of self that teens have online make them more vulnerable to FoMO. By reframing FoMO through this lens, the paper provides novel theoretical insights and practical implications, advocating for a transition from simplistic “screen time” remedies to interventions that foster identity resilience and promote healthier patterns of digital belonging. Doing so opens pathways for future research across cultures and developmental stages, providing a stepping stone for improving mental health in a world where we are always connected to the internet.

Keywords: FoMO, Social Identity, Hyperconnectivity, digital well-being

Introduction

The era of the fourth industrial revolution has redefined the ways people relate to others, construct their identities, and how they measure their sense of wellness. Social networking platforms, instant messaging, and algorithm-driven feeds have changed the spatial boundaries enabling continuous and immediate access to peers, communities, and information. This hyperconnectivity is a defining feature of modern life (van Dijck, 2013; Castells, 2009). Even though it has opened new pathways for people to connect and feel that they belong, it has also created new psychological challenges. Among them Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) has emerged as one of the most pervasive anxieties of the digital age (Przybylski et al., 2013).

FOMO is characterized by a distressing apprehension that others are having rewarding experiences that one is missing out on, accompanied by the urge to stay continually connected (Przybylski et al., 2013). Adolescents and young adults are at increased risk due to the developmental period of life which they inhabit, a period associated with increased need for peer acceptance, identity exploration, and group membership (Erikson, 1968; Arnett, 2000). Studies have already shown its association with problematic social media use along with anxiety, depression and sleep disruption (Elhai et al., 2016; Blackwell et al., 2017). Despite the increasing attention given to it, FOMO is the focus of very few studies and most treat FOMO as a byproduct of technology use—a side effect of notifications, infinite scrolling and the attention economy (Alt, 2018). These interpretations, no matter how

necessary and valuable they may be, also risk simplifying the phenomenon by overlooking the deeper psychological and social mechanisms that give FoMO its power.

In this paper, a case is made that understanding FOMO adequately requires both moving beyond technological determinism and considering where its social identity takes root. This approach enables a more nuanced exploration of how FOMO influences behaviour and social interactions in various contexts. By examining the interplay between technology and social identity, we can better grasp the implications of FOMO in contemporary society. People identify with groups. These affiliations shape their experiences and perceptions, influencing how they engage with social media and the world around them. By examining the interplay between individual psychology and collective behaviour, we can gain more profound insights into the phenomenon of FOMO and its implications for mental health and social dynamics. Social Identity Theory (SIT) states that we derive a sense of who we are from the groups that we belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Group memberships offer belonging, validation and purpose, but they also create strains of comparison and exclusion. Digital space is a place where the perpetual performance, quantification, and assessment of social identities reach a culminating point. The failure of a post to be liked, a story to be seen, or an event to be interesting enough to warrant one's attendance can have implications for one's status in perceived groups and self-image. So FOMO can be considered a collateral expression of identity-based anxieties in the era of hyperconnectivity.

Meanwhile, the notion of digital well-being, understood generally as a balance between one's engagement with and health consequences from digital platforms (Vanden Abeele, 2021), is emerging as increasingly core to psychological research and policy. In the early discussions about digital well-being, an emphasis was placed on "screen time" and reducing it—but more recent work stresses the relevance of qualitative experiences related to technology use, such as meaning, autonomy and connectedness (Lupton 2017). FOMO challenges digital well-being by linking our identity-based needs for belongingness and connection with compulsive patterns of digital behavior. Rather than withdrawing, individuals stay connected and subjugate themselves to the platforms in an attempt to maintain or improve their social identity, even when doing so results in harm.

These insights notwithstanding, the existing literature seems to lack a separation of theory from practice. FOMO research has largely been conducted in isolation from identity-based frameworks, while digital well-being studies often neglect how group belonging and self-concept influence online experiences. As a result, our understanding of FOMO remains fragmented: rich in behavioral observations but thin in theoretical grounding. By viewing FOMO through the lens of social identity, we can elucidate why certain individuals exhibit greater vulnerability, why interventions aimed only on reducing technology usage falter, and how more healthier forms of digital belonging may be fostered.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to define FOMO as a social identity-based concept that has an instantaneous impact on digital well-being in the age of hyperconnectivity. A theoretical model, incorporating elements of social identity theory and nascent digital well-being models (Reinecke, 2016), is developed that posits links between identity salience, group validation, comparison processes and FOMO experiences as they relate to psychological health. Doing so, we advance in three (1) advancing social identity theory and FOMO beyond behavior rationalisations to identity factors and personal processes; (2) integrating social identity theory with digital psychology; and (3) developing a conceptual base for future theoretical and empirical research.

Literature Review & Theoretical Background

1. Digital Well-being

With the growing penetration of digital technologies into everyday life, the notion of digital well-being has become more significant. Initial public discussions on digital well-being tended to be dominated by the notion

that relatively low amounts of time online would reduce exposure to harms as a result of more leisure offline hours (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). Yet this reduction presents the criticism of being devoid of the quality dimension of digital experiences (Vanden Abeele, 2021).

Recent studies, however, contend that digital well-being involves a dynamic equilibrium between the affordances and challenges of digital engagement that is not limited to mental health concerns (Lupton 2017; Burr et al., 2020). Positive psychology-inspired frameworks have further extended this view by contextualising digital well-being within theories such as Seligman's PERMA framework (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment) (Seligman, 2011). Taking this view into account, digital interactions can either support flourishing- by enhancing connectedness and meaning or erode it through compulsive checking, comparison, and anxiety. Thus, digital well-being is not simply about time spent online, but about how digital tools interact with identity, relationships, and psychological needs.

2. Fear of Missing Out

FOMO has become one of the signature phenomena of hyperconnectivity. FOMO, which is described as the general fear of missing out on enjoyable experiences while others are not, significantly contribute to people's ongoing need to stay connected to social media (Przybylski et al., 2013). It has been associated with problematic smartphone use (Elhai et al., 2016), social media addiction (Blackwell et al., 2017), sleep difficulties (Wegmann et al., 2017), and decreased life satisfaction (Beyens et al., 2016).

FOMO is especially relevant to adolescents and young adults, as these demographic groups are developmentally conditioned to appreciate peer and social acceptance (Erikson, 1968; Arnett, 2000). The dread of being left out, which is made worse by real-time updates and carefully chosen online personalities, generates a feedback loop: people check more often to avoid FOMO, but checking often makes it worse (Alt, 2017).

3. Social Identity Theory

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) by Tajfel and Turner (2001) offers a strong perspective through which it is possible to interpret why digital setting provoke FOMO. SIT assumes that members of an individual group gain some of their self-concept through memberships in groups, which result in in-group loyalty, out-group comparison and, maintenance of self-distinctiveness. These processes become particularly salient in the context of adolescence and emerging adulthood, when the identity formation takes centre stage (Kroger, 2006).

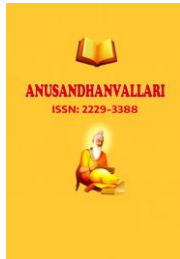
Social identity processes are intensified by digital spaces, which allow peer activities to become extremely visible and immediately comparable. Group validation is measured in terms of likes, shares and the number of followers. The failure to be tagged in a picture or to attend an event can be taken as an indication of non-belonging to valued groups and this will jeopardize the belongingness of a person. Studies on online communities have revealed that group centrality and identity salience play a very important role in digital behaviour, including content sharing or engagement in online trends (Ellemers et al., 2012).

In this sense, FOMO is not just a technology-related response, but a group-defining anxiety: the fear not to belong to the group. It is a conflict between the need to belong as a fundamental human desire and the constant exposure of the actions of other people in hyperconnected places.

4. Linking Social Identity and Digital Well-being

The combination of these strands would emphasise the importance of applying the social identity theory in the research of digital well-being. Available literature indicates that identity salience can affect digital behaviors at least in the following ways:

- Belongingness Needs: When individuals have strong identity salience, they might experience an increased pressure to keep up with the action of their group, and therefore, increased FOMO (Reer et al., 2019).
- Comparison Pressures: Social sites drive unremitting social comparison, in which group norms specify the preferred behaviors, accomplishments, or lifestyles (Vogel et al., 2014). This analogy strengthens FOMO and undermines digital health.



- Identity Fragility: Adolescents and young adults with less secure identity can be extremely dependent on internet validation thus more prone to distress caused by FOMO (Barry et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, the insights notwithstanding, empirical research seldom bridges the gap between digital well-being, FOMO, and social identity into one concept. There is an existing assumption that cutting down online life can be beneficial, but it has been proven that people tend to revisit the platforms due to the unmet identity needs (Beyens et al., 2021). Therefore, any interventions that does not focus on identity driven belonging might not to be a strong intervention.

Research Gap

The review reveals a clear gap:

1. The identity of FOMO is under-researched with many studies focusing on the behavioural phenomenon of technology-related response.
2. Digital well-being models recognise the presence of social and psychological factors, but seldom incorporate social identity processes.
3. Lack of detailed conceptual framework, which connects social identity- FOMO- digital wellbeing.

This gap provides foundation for the present paper, which proposes a theoretical framework to reposition FOMO as an identity-based construct central to digital well-being in the hyperconnected era.

Society Identity Roots Of Fomo In Digital Well-Being

This suggested framework is based on SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 2001) and modern models of digital well-being (Vanden Abeele, 2021), in which FOMO serves as one of the key variables that mediate and moderate the relationship between social identity processes and psychological outcomes in the hyperconnected age. This part moves three main directions forward and introduces a new dual-role conceptualisations of FOMO.

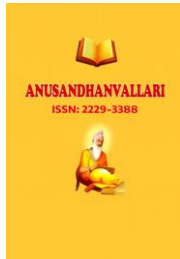
Identity Salience and Social Comparison- FOMO

The aspect of social identity is especially salient in the adolescence and the period of emerging adulthood when the individuals are in need of peer validation and belonging (Erikson, 1968; Arnett, 2000). Online peer activity visibility increases upward social comparisons (Festinger, 1954), which is a cause of fears about being left out. FOMO, therefore, becomes not merely a behavioural response to technology but a response to pressure of enhanced comparison that is identity based.

Proposition 1: Greater social identity salience FOMO through enhanced comparison pressures in hyperconnected digital environments.

Belonging Needs and Digital Hyperconnectivity- Digital Well-being

Persistent connectivity is motivated by human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Although digital platforms have the capacity to affirm belonging, it also breeds dependencies when the belonging is based on the presence of digital platforms. The overdependence of connectivity to affirm identity compromises the well-being of the digital environment, which is reflected in stress, distraction, and decreased life satisfaction (Beyens et al., 2016).



Proposition 2: FOMO mediates the correlation of belonging needs with digital well-being, which converts identity-based connectivity to flourish or strain relying on its strength.

Identity Fragility- Vulnerability to FOMO- Poorer Outcomes

People who have weak or uncertain identities are more vulnerable to validation by external factors (Barry et al., 2017). This is expressed in the form of increased FOMO in digital space. In the long run, the dependence on digital affirmation will destroy the resilience, making it a vicious cycle that strengthens the identity fragility and bad digital well-being.

Proposition 3: Identity fragility exacerbates susceptibility to FOMO, which consequently foretells worse digital well-being outcomes.

FOMO as Mediator and Moderator

One of the main inventions of this framework is the two-sided conceptualisation of FOMO:

As a mediator: FOMO reveals the relationship between social identity processes (salience, belonging, fragility) and the results of digital well-being.

As a moderator: FOMO determines that digital connectivity enhances or harms well-being to whom and when. The connectivity becomes stressful to high-FOMO people and enriching to low-FOMO people.

This twofold role provides a subtle framework of the mixed empirical evidence of the use of social media and well-being (Beyens et al., 2020).

Conceptual Model Description

The Conceptual Model of Social Identity Roots of FOMO suggested is designed in the following way:

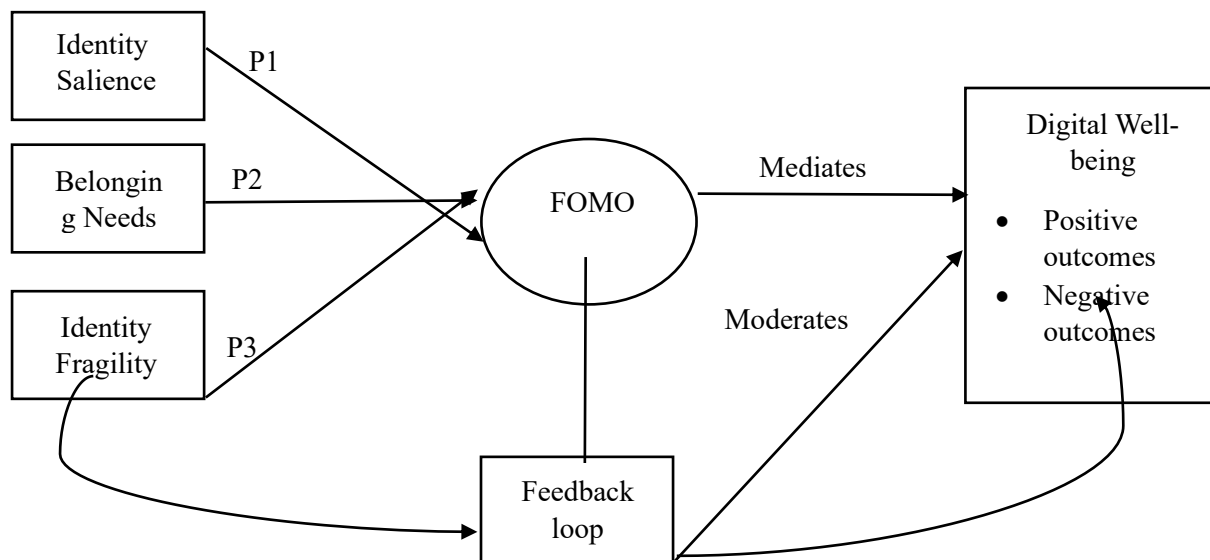
Input layer: Social identity processes (salience, belonging needs, identity fragility).

Core Construct: FOMO, which will be at the centre as both moderator and mediator.

Outcome Layer: Digital well-being, having positive (connection, meaning, engagement) and negative (stress, anxiety, distraction) pathways.

Feedback Loop: Identity fragility is supported by negative outcomes, and this cycle becomes FOMO.

This paradigm makes valuable contributions to the theoretical level of extending SIT to the digital age, to the empirical level of proposing testable hypotheses, and to the practical one of showing identity resilience as an intervention goal.



Conceptual Model of Social Identity Roots of FOMO

Implications

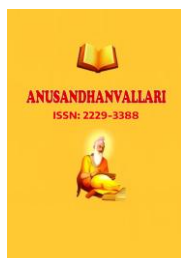
The theoretical framework used in this paper makes FOMO a mediating and moderating concept that bridges the gap between processes of social identity and outcomes of digital well-being. In addition to contributing to the theoretical knowledge, the framework has significant implications to the field of psychology, education, digital design, and future research.

Theoretical Implications

The most important theoretical contribution of this research is the reframing of FOMO from a by-product of technology to an identity-based phenomenon. Although much of the existing literature explained FOMO as a result of design elements of platforms like notifications, endless scroll, and algorithmic curation (Alter, 2018), this perspective is incomplete. By invoking SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 2001), the model highlights that FOMO stems from universal human needs for belongingness, recognition, and confirmation.

This reframing also assists in reconciling conflicting findings in online well-being research. Some research identifies social media use as a related to positive outcomes like enhanced connectedness, while others point out negative outcomes like depression and anxiety. The framework explains these conflicting findings by introducing FOMO as both a mediator and a moderator. As a mediator, FOMO accounts for how identity pressures are linked to digital well-being outcomes. As a moderator, it accounts when and among whom digital connectivity yields flourishing or strain. The dual function offer a more subtle theoretical framework upon which to examine mixed empirical evidence.

By including identity processes, this model enhances both digital well-being and SIT. It takes SIT into digital age, while situating digital well-being more firmly in underlying psychosocial processes. This yields an active model that can guide theoretical work in many fields in the future.



Practical Implications

1. Identity Resilience over Screen Time

Traditional interventions tend to center around limiting screen time or promoting digital detox (Syvertsen & Enli, 2000). Although helpful, these methods can fail to tackle the root causes of FOMO. If FOMO is the result of identity fragility, then interventions need to prioritize building identity resilience rather than merely curbing access to digital technology. Encouraging self-esteem, developing secure offline relationships, and cultivating healthier identity anchors are more long term solutions compared to merely restricting access to digital resources.

2. Educational Settings

Young adults and teenagers are particularly susceptible to the problem because identity exploration is a pivotal developmental task (Erikson, 1968; Arnett, 2000). Schools can intervene preventively by:

- a. Informing students of the psychological process underlying FOMO.
- b. Encouraging offline groups belonging through peer monitoring, sports and clubs, and creative activities.
- c. Including digital literacy programs that educate students about how to critically navigate online comparison and validation signals.

All these steps can enable youth to utilise online platforms for progress, not for dependency.

Clinical and Counselling Practice

Therapists and counsellors are increasingly faced with clients presenting with digital anxiety, compulsive connectivity, or exclusion-related stress (Elhai et al., 2016). Bringing the identity-based framework into clinical practice allows clinician to move away from symptom management to addressing the underlying causes. Techniques like cognitive-behavioural therapy can be reframed to address needs related to belonging and identity affirmation and decrease dependence on digital validation for self-esteem.

Implications for Platform Design

Digital platforms can also mitigate FOMO through ethical design. Current architectures often amplify comparison by showcasing likes, follower counts, and “seen by” metrics. Removing or de-emphasising such public signals, providing user-reflection tools, and prioritising meaningful interactions over passive consumption may reduce identity pressures (Burr et al., 2020). Policymakers and designers should collaborate to ensure digital environments support, rather than undermine, psychological health.

Future Research Directions

The framework opens fertile groundwork for empirical research.

Cross-cultural Studies: Social Identity processes differ across cultures. In collectivist cultures, where group membership is strongly valued, FOMO will be stronger, whereas in individualist cultures, the desire for personal validation will prevail. Cross-cultural studies can examine the model’s generalisability.

Longitudinal Research: Current FOMO research is predominantly cross sectional. Longitudinal studies might follow over time how identity salience, belonging needs, and digital well-being change, and elucidate causal pathways and feedback loops.

Developmental Trajectories: Late adolescence, emerging adulthood, and adolescence each pose distinctive challenges (Kroger, 2006). Distinguishing between developmental stages may uncover significant changes in vulnerability to FOMO.

Intervention Studies: Last but not least, intervention-based studies are essential. Empirical tests of identity-centred interventions e.g., offline belonging programs, platform design changes, or therapeutic interventions can confirm the efficacy of this model in practice.

Conclusion

This article has maintained that FOMO cannot be simplified to a mere behavioural byproduct of a technological design but must be appreciated as a psychosocial construct based on social identity processes. By synthesising Social Identity theory with the recent literature on digital well-being, the approach outlined here illustrates how identity salience, belonging needs, and identity fragility intersect to form digital experiences in an era of hyperconnectivity.

One key giveaway of this work is the double positioning of FOMO as mediator and moderator. As mediator, FOMO elucidates how key identity processes are converted to digital well-being outcomes; as moderator, it clarifies why the same digital spaces yield empowerment for some users but distress for others. This double role promotes theoretical accuracy, providing a route to harmonise inconsistent findings in the digital psychology literature.

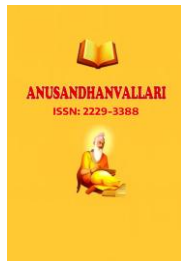
The implications are significant. For researchers, the model encourages a move away from platform-level explanations and towards models that locate digital phenomena with wider psychosocial identity, belonging, and resilience theories. For practitioners and policymakers, it emphasises that interventions for sustainability need to look beyond screen time control, instead aiming to enhance identity resilience, foster offline belonging, and foster healthier digital cultures. For platform designers, it highlights the moral obligation to design environments which reduce comparison pressures and facilitate meaningful connection.

The model also offers a transparent agenda for research in the future. Cross-cultural research must be conducted to investigate how collectivist and individualist environments structure the dynamics of FOMO; longitudinal research can shed light on feedback loops between identity fragility and digital well-being; and experimental interventions can be used to assess whether enhancing identity security diminishes the effects of FOMO. In brief, the model is both explanatory and generative, charting the way for cumulative research in psychology, communication studies, and digital health.

In summary, FOMO is most adequately explained, not as a technology artefact but as a reflection of human identity needs with hyperconnectivity. By basing digital well-being on the age-old quests for belonging and recognition, this approach puts new meaning into the way we understand the price and reward of digital life. It calls on researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to delve beneath the surface of digital behaviour and speak with the deeper psychosocial drivers that inform well-being in the 21st century.

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