

Analysis of the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) Phenomenon in Instagram Social Media Use Among Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

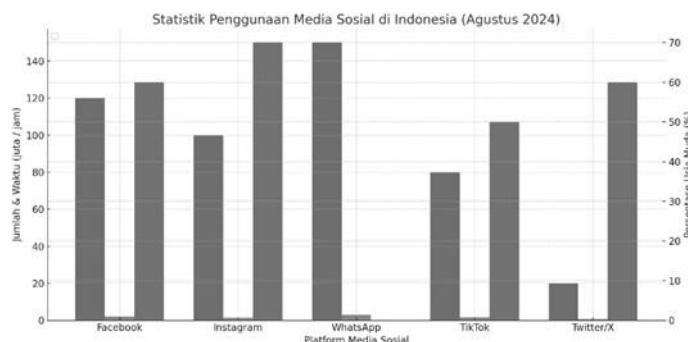
This study explored the phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) among Generation Z in their use of Instagram as a social media platform. The problem arose from the increasing tendency of young people to experience anxiety, social pressure, and identity challenges when exposed to constantly updated online content and trending activities. Using a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods, this research examined the subjective experiences of selected informants to capture how FoMO was felt, expressed, and interpreted in daily digital interactions. The analysis was supported by theoretical frameworks such as FoMO theory, Social Identity theory, and the Uses and Gratifications approach. The findings revealed that FoMO manifested in repeated scrolling behavior, impulsive decision-making to join social trends, and the need for social validation, which collectively influenced how Gen Z constructed their self-image and social relationships. Instagram's visual and interactive features were found to intensify these experiences. The study concluded that FoMO was not merely a psychological condition but also a social communication process shaped by identity, recognition, and the pursuit of belonging in digital culture.



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) has become an inseparable part of the dynamics of modern digital life, particularly among social media users. FoMO is defined as a psychological discomfort that arises when an individual feels anxious about missing out on better experiences that are being enjoyed by others. Przybylski (2013), as cited in McGinnis (2024:45), identifies FoMO as a psychological discomfort emerging when a person worries about missing more rewarding experiences encountered by others. This phenomenon is reinforced by social media exposure, where individuals frequently feel compelled to follow viral trends and activities in order to gain public acknowledgment and validation. Concrete examples of FoMO on social media include activities such as social gatherings at coffee shops, the purchase of viral food products, participation in music concerts, and engagement in sports trends such as running, all of which function as arenas for social existence and the pursuit of validation (Kusuma & Rahmawati, 2020).



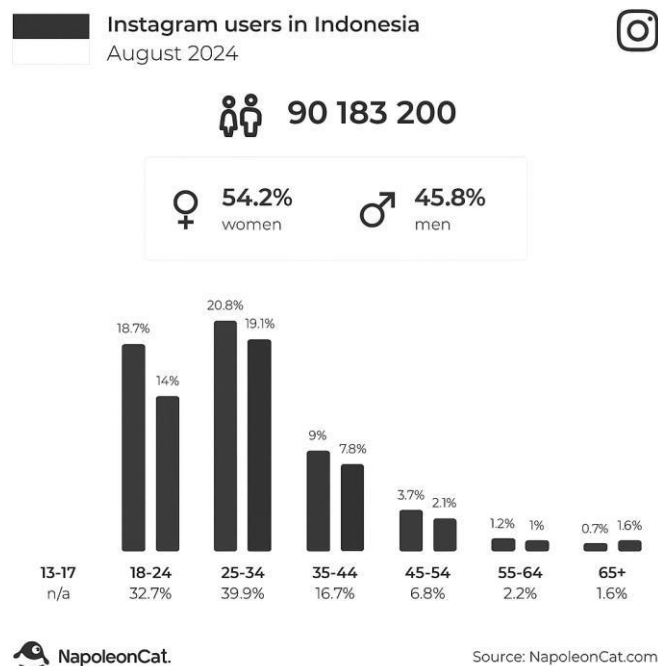
Picture 1 Social Media User Graph in Indonesia

In August 2024, social media usage in Indonesia demonstrated a wide variation across different platforms. Facebook emerged as the leading platform with the number of monthly active users reaching 120 million, of which 60% were between the ages of 18 and 34, spending an average of two hours per day on the platform. Meanwhile, Instagram, with 100 million active users, was dominated by a younger generation, with 70% of its users falling within the 18–34 age group, and they spent an average of 1.5 hours per day engaging with the platform.

WhatsApp, as an instant communication platform, has 150 million active users and is primarily utilized for personal as well as group communication, with an average usage time of three hours per day. TikTok, with 80 million active users, has become a major attraction for the younger generation, with 50% of its users aged between 16 and 24 years, and an average daily usage time of 1.8 hours. Twitter/X, with 20 million active users, is dominated by young male users, who account for 60% of the total user base, and the platform records an average daily usage time of 45 minutes.

Instagram has become the most popular and widely used social media platform among various groups, particularly Generation Z. Indonesia ranks fourth in the world in terms of the number of Instagram users, with the majority belonging to the 18–24 age group. Instagram occupies the second position after WhatsApp as the most widely used social media platform in Indonesia. According to data released by NapoleonCat in August 2024, the highest number of Instagram users in Indonesia reached 90,183,200, equivalent to 31.8% of the country's total population.

Generation Z (Gen Z), born between 1997 and 2012, are digital natives who have been highly accustomed to digital technology from an early age. Yazidiy (2022:3) stated that Generation Z is often referred to as the digital native generation because they were born and raised in an environment that has been filled with advances in digital technology. They are active users of various social media platforms, with Instagram being one of the most popular in Indonesia. Data indicate that the majority of Instagram users in Indonesia belong to the 18–24 age group (NapoleonCat, 2024), which is a segment of Generation Z.



Picture 2 Instagram user data graph 2024

Instagram enables Generation Z to express themselves, engage in social interaction, and construct their self-image online through visual content such as photos, videos, stories, and reels (Putri

& Sari, 2022). However, this intensive use of Instagram also correlates with an increase in FoMO symptoms, particularly among adolescents and university students (Sari & Yuliana, 2021:45). This finding is consistent with the research of Kusuma and Rahmawati (2020:45), who stated that there is a positive relationship between the level of FoMO and the emergence of social pressure and mild to moderate anxiety, particularly among social media users aged 18 to 24 years, commonly referred to as Generation Z. In that study, 72% of respondents reported experiencing feelings of pressure or anxiety when viewing their friends' posts showing them engaging in enjoyable activities. The data for this study were obtained through questionnaires distributed to 350 university students from five universities in Jakarta and its surrounding areas, all of whom were active users of social media, particularly Instagram and Twitter.

Although many studies have examined FoMO and its impact on individuals' psychological well-being, there remains a gap in in-depth research regarding how FoMO is formed, experienced, and interpreted personally by Generation Z. Previous research has tended to be quantitative and has only explained correlations without exploring the subjective and social experiences underlying the phenomenon. Therefore, this study aims to analyze in depth how the FoMO phenomenon manifests in the lives of Generation Z Instagram users and to examine its dynamics in relation to the quality of interpersonal communication and their psychological well-being.

In the ideal condition (*Das Sollen*), Generation Z, who are recognized as digital natives and have been accustomed to using digital technology from an early age, are expected to utilize social media wisely without being influenced by social pressures to continuously present a perfect self-image. However, in reality (*Das Sein*), Generation Z frequently experiences the FoMO phenomenon in their use of social media, particularly Instagram. This condition arises as a result of the persistent urge to follow popular online trends or activities in order to maintain their social existence and engagement within their digital communities.

This research specifically raises the question of how the FoMO phenomenon is experienced by Generation Z in their use of Instagram, as well as its impact on the process of constructing social identity and interpersonal interaction. The purpose of this study is to understand the essence of the FoMO experience and its influence on the behavior and psychological well-being of Instagram users from this generation. This study fills the gap in in-depth qualitative research that explores the subjective and social experiences of users, in contrast to previous studies that tended to be quantitative and correlational in nature (Kusuma & Rahmawati, 2020; Sari, 2020).

By understanding how FoMO symptoms are formed and experienced by Generation Z, this study is expected to make a scholarly contribution to the formulation of healthier and more balanced digital literacy strategies. In practical terms, the findings of this research can serve as a reference for educational institutions, parents, counselors, and policymakers in designing digital literacy programs aimed at raising awareness of the emotional and social impacts of excessive social media use.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method. The qualitative approach was chosen in order to understand the FoMO phenomenon in depth from the perspective of individuals, focusing on the experiences, perceptions, and meanings provided by the participants within their natural context. Moleong (2018:6) stated that the qualitative approach emphasizes experiences, perceptions, and meanings conveyed by participants in a natural setting. The phenomenological method was applied to explore and comprehend the essence of the FoMO experiences encountered by Generation Z in the context of Instagram use, allowing the researcher to examine in depth how individuals interpret and engage in processes of communication and media use in their daily lives. Rofiah (2023:25) asserted that phenomenological methods in qualitative research are oriented toward an in-depth exploration of individuals' subjective experiences and how they construct awareness of a given event or phenomenon.

The subjects of this study were individuals from Generation Z, aged 18–26 years, who actively used Instagram and had experienced anxiety or social pressure when viewing other people's posts on the platform. The selection of informants was carried out using purposive sampling, wherein participants were chosen based on specific criteria relevant to the objectives of the research, namely age, the intensity of Instagram usage, and experiences related to FoMO. Kumara (2023:9) stated that purposive sampling is a sampling technique conducted based on the researcher's specific considerations, in which the sample is chosen because it possesses particular characteristics deemed relevant to achieving the research objectives. Similarly, Putri and Cahyadi (2021:5) emphasized that the selection of participants should be based on how frequently and actively individuals engage in social media activities, so that researchers may gain a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The primary data collection techniques used were in-depth interviews and observation. Interviews were conducted to obtain detailed and comprehensive information regarding participants' experiences, perceptions, and viewpoints. Observation was conducted by directly examining behaviors, activities, or events occurring within the research setting, in order to obtain factual and contextual information (Mulyadi, 2018). The collected data were then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of three stages: data reduction (filtering and simplifying information), data display (organizing information in a structured form), and conclusion drawing and verification (identifying patterns and meanings, followed by testing validity through triangulation). In their study, Miles and Huberman (1992:16–18) argued that data reduction is dynamic and continuous, developing in parallel with the researcher's growing understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This stage plays a crucial role in sharpening the focus of analysis and facilitating the identification of thematic patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research identifies that the phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) experienced by Instagram users from Generation Z encompasses seven fundamental characteristics. These include social anxiety and the fear of being left behind, the persistent need to remain digitally connected, dissatisfaction with personal experiences as a consequence of social comparison, impulsive decision-making that frequently lacks rational consideration, diminished focus and productivity in everyday activities, the manifestation of emotional and physical symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and mental exhaustion, as well as a pronounced dependence on social validation expressed through likes, comments, and public interactions on social media platforms.

The three research participants consistently exhibited a strong drive to engage with trends that were currently viral on Instagram. This drive was not limited merely to participating in such activities, but rather extended to the maintenance of their social existence and the pursuit of validation from their digital communities. Instagram, in this regard, functions as an essential arena for Generation Z in affirming their social identity and in attaining social recognition.

The theory of Fear of Missing Out proposed by Andrew K. Przybylski serves as the primary theoretical foundation for this research in aligning the data to be collected and examined. In his study, Przybylski (2013:1842) states that Fear of Missing Out is the apprehension that other people might be having rewarding or positive experiences.

Social Anxiety and Fear of Being Left Behind the primary characteristic of FoMO identified in this study is social anxiety and the fear of being left behind, which drives the participants to continuously monitor digital social activities. This reflects one of the aspects described in FoMO theory, namely the feeling of unease when observing others who appear to be engaging in more appealing experiences (Przybylski, 2013). Such pressure reinforces the need not to miss important moments within the digital social group, thereby encouraging intensive monitoring activities. Within the dynamics of social media interaction, this condition emerges as a form of psychological adaptation that involves a continuous

sense of vigilance toward the social activities of others. This phenomenon also generates strong emotional effects, such as feelings of envy and anxiety, as reported by the participants Aldi and Elsa. The envy directed toward posts perceived as “cooler” or more exciting illustrates how social pressure on Instagram compels the participants to act in order to alleviate the sense of reduced social presence. The anxiety and concern about becoming irrelevant serve as triggers for more intensive active behavior on social media in order to maintain their social position

The Need to Always Stay Connected the participant Farhan explicitly described a conscious effort to continuously maintain connection with ongoing trends as a sustainable social strategy. This illustrates the FoMO characteristic that drives sustained social monitoring behavior in order to avoid losing relevance and recognition within the digital community. Instagram, with its real-time update features and interactive forms of engagement, is highly effective in reinforcing this need (Widiayanti et al., 2024). When individuals perceive themselves as disconnected or left behind, the desire to immediately access the latest information and to adapt themselves to the group becomes highly dominant. This demonstrates that social media is not merely a means of communication, but also a medium for maintaining the continuity of social identity and psychological existence

Dissatisfaction with Personal Experiences the phenomenon of FoMO generates a profound sense of dissatisfaction with personal life, which arises as a result of the intensity of social comparison on social media. The participant Elsa reported a pressing need to adjust her self-image and activities in accordance with the social standards constructed within the virtual world. The habitual tendency to compare oneself with the polished portrayals presented on Instagram creates psychological pressure in the form of feelings of inferiority and dissatisfaction, which become the root of the FoMO experience. These feelings give rise to a continuous need to follow both offline and online trends in order to feel “connected” and accepted by the community. Thus, FoMO is not solely associated with the fear of losing information, but is also closely related to the complex management of digital social identity, which significantly impacts psychological well-being

Impulsive Decision-Making and Consumptive Behavior the participants acknowledged being involved in impulsive decision-making that was often insufficiently based on personal needs or preferences. For instance, Aldi purchased trending shoes using a pay-later service, while Farhan engaged in the running trend despite not having any genuine interest in the activity. This behavior underscores the impulsive nature of FoMO, namely hasty decisions made to obtain social recognition and to maintain digital social existence. This phenomenon illustrates how social pressure and the need for validation can override rational considerations and genuine individual needs, thereby opening the possibility of financial risks and psychological stress resulting from unhealthy consumptive actions.

Disruptions in Focus and Productivity the persistent urge to continuously update information and follow social developments on Instagram caused cognitive disturbances that affected the participants’ ability to focus and maintain productivity. Aldi reported adverse effects such as disrupted mood and decreased efficiency in carrying out daily activities. This constant diversion of attention is consistent with FoMO theory, which describes cognitive distraction arising from the need to always stay updated. Such disturbances demonstrate that FoMO affects not only social and emotional aspects but also performance and balance in daily life. This is an important issue to be considered in the context of psychological well-being and productivity among social media users.

Emotional and Physical Symptoms emotional symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and overthinking, as well as physical symptoms such as mental fatigue, emerged as concrete manifestations of the psychological pressures associated with FoMO. The participant Elsa described a condition of prolonged anxiety stemming from the need for social validation and intensive digital interaction, which led to disturbances in emotional balance and patterns of thought. These manifestations indicate that excessive use of social media and the pressures of FoMO can have serious consequences for mental health. This understanding highlights the urgency of interventions and the need for healthy management of social media use.

Dependence on Social Validation Social validation in the form of likes, comments, and other digital responses emerged as a powerful driver of emotional attachment to social media. The participants reported that positive responses increased their self-confidence, while the absence of responses led to disappointment and dissatisfaction, thereby reinforcing the cycle of psychological pressure. This demonstrates how FoMO strengthens dependence on digital social recognition as a mechanism for maintaining psychological stability. Such a cycle is difficult to break and may diminish mental well-being if not accompanied by proper management.

The connection with theories and previous studies in this research reinforces the FoMO theory developed by Przybylski (2013), which emphasizes that FoMO is a psychological condition characterized by social anxiety and a constant need to remain connected in order to avoid the feeling of being excluded from social moments. These findings are also consistent with the studies conducted by Widiyanti et al. (2024) and Kusuma & Rahmawati (2020), which confirmed the strong relationship between FoMO, social anxiety, impulsive behavior, and pressures on productivity. In addition, the study conducted by Albari (2024:22) asserted that excessive exposure to social media content can generate feelings of fear of being left out and act as a negative trigger on the psychological well-being of users. This highlights that FoMO is frequently associated with diminished emotional and social well-being; the more intense the use of social media, the greater the likelihood of experiencing anxiety due to the perception of being left behind.

Furthermore, this research confirms the social identity theory of Tajfel (1982), which posits that individual identity is formed and reinforced through membership and interactions within social groups. Instagram, as a visually based social media platform, is not merely a communication tool but rather an arena for the construction of digital identity that generates psychological pressures in the form of FoMO. The participants demonstrated how the need for recognition, emotional attachment, and the construction of an idealized self-image can stimulate FoMO experiences while simultaneously intensifying social pressures within the online sphere.

Recognition and appreciation from members of social groups constitute essential elements of this theory. Based on the interviews, participants such as Farhan stated that his motivation for sharing activities on Instagram was to obtain praise and acknowledgment from his virtual community. When social responses in the form of likes and comments were unsatisfactory, he felt disappointed and insufficiently recognized. This finding aligns with the concept that social identity requires validation in order to endure and develop. The sense of being less existent or left behind is a psychological consequence of insufficient validation, which can trigger the FoMO phenomenon.

Emotional and Psychological Attachment this theory also underscores the importance of emotional bonds within social groups that generate a strong sense of attachment. Elsa and Aldi described their mixed feelings of curiosity and fear of being left behind, which prompted strong efforts to remain present and engaged in the activities of their social groups on Instagram. The concern of being perceived as less interesting or not updated by their peers constituted a psychological pressure that must be managed in order to preserve social identity. FoMO emerges as a manifestation of this emotional discomfort and functions as a mechanism for continuously building social attachment.

The Process of Identity Construction through Instagram serves as a platform that enables individuals to construct and express their social identity through the development of a digital self-image. The participant Elsa explained how Instagram operates as a medium for personal branding, where what she uploads often represents her preferred side of herself, even though it does not entirely reflect the reality of her daily life. This process of creating an idealized self-image generates psychological tension between digital identity and actual identity. This process simultaneously intensifies the FoMO experience when individuals find it difficult to meet the social standards constructed within online social groups.

The Role of Instagram in the Dynamics of Social Identity and FoMO Instagram is not merely a medium of communication, but rather an arena for the construction and reinforcement of social identity among Generation Z. The need to obtain recognition and to sustain emotional bonds with their social groups drives individuals to actively follow trends. However, these social pressures also produce psychological strains that amplify FoMO experiences, as individuals feel compelled to continuously participate in order to remain visible and acknowledged within their virtual communities.

In this way, the present study integrates psychological and social communication perspectives to understand the impact of social media on Generation Z. This research contributes academically by

providing an in-depth analysis of the subjective experiences of FoMO and its connection to the dynamics of digital social identity formation, which have not been extensively addressed in previous quantitative studies.

Comparison with Recent Studies

Several recent studies enrich the interpretation:

Rahmawati and Hidayati (2023) highlighted the role of Instagram's Stories and Reels features as triggers of instant updates that strengthen emotional attachment aligning with the informants' acknowledgment that story notifications are the primary driver of their "check habit."

Adani and Setianingrum (2024) found that personal branding among Gen Z on Instagram requires consistency between online and offline identities; your findings indicate that when this gap widens, FoMO-related anxiety increases.

The global study by Barry et al. (2024) reported that short digital-detox interventions reduce FoMO and stress, underscoring the urgency of digital literacy recommendations in your research.

Social and Communication Implications

These findings position FoMO not merely as a psychological disorder but as a social communication process influenced by group norms and platform algorithms. Digital literacy programs that emphasize emotional regulation, notification management, and algorithmic awareness become essential. Families, educational institutions, and online communities need to create ecosystems that support self-regulation, in line with the World Health Organization (2023) recommendations on digital mental health for adolescents.

Discussion Conclusion

This study confirms that:

Instagram's powerful visual and real-time features intensify Gen Z's FoMO dynamics. FoMO is rooted in the need for social identity and validation, but is exacerbated by mechanisms of instant gratification. Comparisons with recent research affirm that this phenomenon is global yet shaped by the urban context of Jakarta. Thus, FoMO should be understood as a complex interaction among technology, social identity, and digital culture. Intervention efforts must go beyond merely reducing screen time, targeting communication skills, emotional management, and critical awareness of social-media algorithms.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) among Generation Z Instagram users reflects complex psychosocial dynamics in today's digital sphere. Findings from observations and in-depth interviews reveal that FoMO is not merely a temporary anxiety but a psychological condition involving fear of missing important social experiences in digital environments. Generation Z, highly sensitive to viral trends, engages actively on Instagram to sustain social existence and connectedness, yet this behavior manifests in social anxiety, dissatisfaction, impulsive decision-making, reduced focus, stress, mental fatigue, and dependence on social validation. Anchored in social identity theory, the study highlights Instagram's dual role as a medium for self-representation and a source of psychological pressure. These insights underscore the necessity of digital literacy and healthy social media management, requiring collaborative efforts from educational institutions, families, and digital communities to help young people cultivate meaningful identity formation and relationships without becoming trapped in cycles of social anxiety.

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