

The FOMO Syndrome and the Perception of Personal Needs in Contemporary Society

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Abstract: *The development of social media and technological devices have led to a series of new events in the spectrum of mental illnesses. These manifestations are often unnoticeable, but they develop as a symptom of common psychological disorders, classified by worldwide mental health societies. A new pathology is described as “the FOMO Syndrome”. This disorder is in the same category as social anxiety, and the obsessive-compulsive component is probably the factor that contributes to the diminishing of the social circle of individuals and their personal autonomy, and also increases the risks of psycho-emotional and psychosomatic disorders. We intend to present the results of a study conducted on a group of 205 people, aged 21-45, regarding the use of the internet, the purpose being the creation of a clear image of individual particularities, which would be the basis for the implementation of a mental health program at community level.*

Keywords: FOMO; perception; adult; education; health.

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Introduction

Social media has become an integrative component of the modern world (Neofet, 2019), as many people cannot give up completely on them. This is one of the reasons why studies conducted (Rodideal, 2018) in this regard mostly focused on the daily time spent by individuals on social media platforms.

FOMO (Fear of missing out) is the fear and anxiety of people who are usually connected to and active on these platforms, manifested in situations when they cannot access them. The desire to be permanently connected to what others are doing outside social media is significantly lower.

In other words, FOMO is fuelled by technology, which makes the possibility of being permanently connected to what other people are doing and their lives.

A study performed in the spring of 2012 has concluded that over 56% of the people felt the effects of this affliction, but the number of youth are even higher. Most of the studies that have been conducted afterwards focused on this age group as compared to other demographical groups that could be less influenced by social pressure. The conclusion was different. For people with this syndrome, a high number of text messages and updated emails that gather up in case they do not check their social media platform, could be sometimes overwhelming (Skierkowski & Wood, 2012; Bernicot et al., 2012).

Psychologically speaking, new disorders seem to have been reported. The specialists' explanation (Huidu, 2018a, 2018b) for these phenomena is that what our acquaintances are doing makes us think of our own lives. The interesting things that take place in other people's lives make our own seem more basic and lacking excitement. This way, our self-esteem decreases and feelings of displeasure, even jealousy, start to form towards the ones that seem to have far more fascinating lives. All this feeds into our fear of failure, fear of worthlessness, fear of not achieving what we wish for and that we will be left alone. From this point on, depression and antisocial behaviours can occur. Out of the fear of not missing out on an event, a party, and the wish to be a witness to these types of moments, many people get to spend a lot of money, even if they cannot afford it, only to get to a certain place where their friends are (Bardi & Brady, 2010; Thomée et al., 2007).

Social media platforms feed into these fears and displeasure that each one of us have on different levels. This fear usually extends to other

areas, not only to life events: a new gadget, a new movie, a new book. And the more often we check what others have posted on social media, the more anxious affected by it we become.

For the people who work online and in promoting social media platforms, this phenomenon acquires ample implications. People are more and more interested in what is going on, what is new, and they want to be the first to know. People working in marketing fields need to know, before anybody else, what the new trends are, and they need to be trendsetters. Advertising companies fight to gain permanent status that nobody can miss out on.

All in all, the interest for this phenomenon has increased.

This syndrome was first mentioned in 1996 by Dr. Dan Herman (Herman, 2000; 2011) and defined in 2004 by Patrick James McGinnis from University of Harvard (McGinnis, 2004). In 2012, a first study was conducted, and in 2013 the term was introduced in the Oxford Dictionary (Grohol, 2018).

Today, more than ever before, our behavior is influenced by increasingly more factors. A sum of new aggressions appear and we discover their symptoms, give them a name, define them and search for solutions that are getting harder and harder to find.

Recent studies define this syndrome as a sensation of restlessness and fear that you might lose the contact with information about your acquaintances, or that they know more than you do and would eventually be better.

FOMO is described as a type of anticipation of anxiety, associated with preoccupation to find alternative ways in which we could do, be or have something else. It is like thinking that the grass is always greener on the other side. Experts say that the syndrome has been exaggerated by the internet itself, which makes it obvious about what we cannot achieve, cannot do or cannot have.

For people with this syndrome, the avalanche of updates, emails and text messages that pile up while they haven't been logged could be depressing. The FOMO syndrome is a disorder that manifests through a "pervasive perception that others might be having fulfilling experiences from which the patient might be excluded" (Walsh et al., 2011). This disorder is classified in the category of social anxiety.

The FOMO syndrome is also defined as a state of anguish which can lead to the compulsive preoccupation not to miss any occasion of social interaction, profitable opportunity or other satisfying events. FOMO supports the fear of having made a wrong decision regarding the way

individual time is spend, so that the patient cannot be asked things like “Can you imagine how things would’ve evolved if...?” (Ciubara, 2019).

Self-determination theory (SDT) affirms that the relatedness (the need to connect with others) is a legitimate psychological need that influences mental health.

In this theoretical way, the FOMO syndrome could be understood as a state of self-regulation that comes from a situational perception or, on a long term, that the needs of sad person are not met.

On the one hand, modern technology, such as mobile phones, smartphones and the social media services, offer the opportunity of a unique experience of engaging in a social environment with a “low cost admission”. On the other hand, the mediated communication perpetuates an increased online/virtual social network dependency (Ciubara, 2019).

From the theoretical perspective, FOMO could be attributed to situational deficiencies, or, on a long term, to the satisfaction of psychological needs of which prevalence contributes to a higher transparency of the social lives, and to an increased “hunger” for real time information.

The dependency becomes evident, studies that describe it being more intense as people have lower levels of ability, autonomy and integrity.

After a deep analysis of the syndrome, made by Norwegian Prof. Trine Syvertsen in 2019: “In this article we sustain that the texts of digital detoxification showcase the increase of a self regulatory society, where it is expected of the individuals to assume the personal responsibility for the balance of the risks and pressure, as also to represent a shape of self modification of the authenticity and nostalgia.” (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019; Ciubara, 2019).

The conclusion is that the virtual space of the internet should be carefully handled, with responsibility and always in constructive manners. (Ciubara, 2019).

Purpose

Our aim was the verification of the hypothesis that the use of mobile devices depends on the type of device used, age, gender and how it influences the consumer’s behavior.

Methodology

Questionnaire applied to a group of 205 people aged 21-45, 40% male and 60% female, 80% from urban environment, 20% from rural environment.

We identified the following categories: subjects that use the internet only for communication, others only for socializing, and some for both communication and socializing. Another category includes subjects that use the internet as a method of self-expression – opinions, personal comments. Another category is the use of internet strictly for professional, informative and cultural purposes.

The indexes are: time spent on the internet, quality/reason for using the internet and browsing frequency.

Another index is the decision of some subjects of not having an internet connection.

Results

The correlation of age and gender shows that:

- the most used social media platform is Instagram, being the most popular among both male and female subjects;

- all participants to the study have an account on a social media platform;

- most participants in group age 21 to 25 have a private account, while the majority in group age 31-45 have a public one;

- 75% of the subjects aged 35-45 have a Tinder account, are married and live in a rural environment;

- the Whatsapp social platform is used mostly for groups of communication between family members, even if they are living in different countries, but also for information regarding school or work groups – e.g., parents of children in the same class, students in the same university group.

The time spent on internet activities: the highest frequency is represented by people spending 3 to 5 hours on the internet, respectively 75% of the participants. One subject declared that he spend “the whole day” on the internet, two subjects declared “over 15 hours connected to the internet”. An explanation could be “Teens who believe they need to be available 24/7 to their friends, because, you know, someone might get dumped or into an argument with their parents. They need instant gratification and solace. Nobody can wait anymore – not because they can’t – but because they don’t need to.”

The mobile phone is used exclusively by 95% of the subjects. All the subjects have internet access on their mobile phone, and they are using internet subscriptions, some of which have modified theirs on the purpose of having more internet data. There is a 13% that use the videocall option for family members, and 5% that use the videocall with their partner. Communication with family member and partner or friends is mostly done through the internet and not the classical phone call.

Asked if it is important for them to have permanent access to the internet, 100% of the subjects responded affirmatively.

The reactions that they would have if there were no internet connection has been studied from two points of view: affective and behavioral. Behaviorally, we found only answers that are active and not passive, such as “I would access the mobile data, if I don’t have data, I look for places that have Wi-fi access”, or “I couldn’t have no data, I have an unlimited access subscription to mobile data”, or “I don’t know what to say”.

The affective reactions of the subjects where insecurity, anxiety, but also indifference, but these cannot be interpreted because they do not correlate to other answers.

A percentage of 70% of the subjects declared that they check daily what others have posted, while 35% of them do this every 30 minutes.

Another aspect is that 80% of the subjects do not personally know people in their online friend lists, but they check their activity, the criteria being that they are celebrities or people with public recognition. 35% of these subjects declared that they feel emotionally attached to these type of internet personalities, even if they do not know them in real life.

“Connected to this fear of missing out on something better that’s going on without you are these fake personas we promote on websites like Facebook. I say “fake” because we often present only the best side of our lives on social networking sites. After all, who wants to be “friends” with someone who’s always posting depressing status updates and who seems to be doing nothing interesting in their lives? So they are indeed fake, because instead of us being completely real, many (most?) of us censor what we post to our social media profile these days. The people on Facebook are often simply their idealized selves — with a bit of misery thrown in from time to time to “keep it real.” (Ciubara, 2019).

Amongst the reasons for which they have created an account on at least one social media platform is “the desire to be permanently connected to what others are doing”, given by 65% of the subjects.

“Technology that we’re at one with and that promotes social balance and harmony wouldn’t require such obsessive checking behavior, would it? It would understand and complement natural human social behavior. It would differentiate for us what’s important and what’s not (the idea of “smart agents” from a decade ago still resonates)” (Turkle, 2011).

Teens think they “get it” — that technology is a natural extension of their social lives. But they’re mistaken — they’re still crafting their lives around the technology and the social connections they entice us with, rather than the other way around. They stay up all night waiting for the next status update. They interrupt a face-to-face conversation to make sure whatever’s going on elsewhere isn’t better. I wonder how this is a good way to promote future, strong social connections?” (Turkle, 2011).

Another important aspect of this study is that there are many positive answers to the questions concerning medical problems such as spinal pain and distal upper limb pain. The clinical symptoms progressively worsened until they involved motor deficit and upper limb disfunction. This means that the global function of those persons is compromised.

Conclusions

The feeling of control and self-esteem results into a feeling of wellbeing and pride. The loss of these or the delegation of control towards somebody else, voluntarily or not, talking about known people or role-models, can lead to insecurity, shame, fear or doubt.

“As technology becomes ever more pervasive, our relationship to it becomes more intimate, granting it the power to influence decisions, moods and emotions. In a way, there’s an immaturity to our relationship with technology,” Sherry Turkle said, and “It’s still evolving.”

I think that succinctly summarizes the problem – our relationship with technology is still in its infancy, and we’re still feeling our ways around it. We don’t quite know how to interact well- mindfully, meaningfully – with it” (Turkle, 2011).

As a result, the FOMO syndrome is perceived only by mental health specialists as having a negative influence over the mental balance of the individuals. The understanding of adequate measures to prevent anxiety and the persistence of self regarding the reality could enhance the ability to behave autonomously, on condition that the individual’s needs are known.

This can be made possible through public information campaigns regarding the realities and the myths of the internet.

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