

When the fear of being left behind becomes a burden: A correlational study between fear of missing out and psychological distress among millennials

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Abstract

Life in the modern era has been characterized by increased social media use and heightened psychological pressures among millennials, including anxiety, stress, and depression. Fear of missing out (FoMO), defined as the apprehension of being left behind from others' social experiences, may contribute to elevated psychological distress. This study aimed to examine the relationship between FoMO and psychological distress among millennials. This study employed a quantitative approach with a bivariate correlational cross-sectional design. A total of 298 millennials aged 28–42 years who were active social media users participated in this study, selected incidental sampling. Data were collected using the Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOS) and the K-10 Psychological Distress Scale. Data were analyzed using Spearman's rho correlation. The results indicated a significant positive relationship between FoMO and psychological distress ($r = .200, p < .01$). This finding suggests that increases or decreases in FoMO levels among millennials are associated with corresponding increases or decreases in psychological distress. These findings highlight the important role of FoMO in explaining fluctuations in psychological distress among millennials living in an intensive digital environment.

Introduction

Living as part of the millennial generation entails navigating highly complex and challenging life dynamics. Emerging psychological issues have led millennials to confront profound life stressors (Saputra & Kurniawan, 2023). The diverse range of psychological pressures appears to have contributed to a diminishing sense of life philosophy among this generation. A report by Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) (Asyki, 2018) indicates that millennials are particularly vulnerable to mental health problems, as reflected in the rising prevalence of depression, anxiety, and unhealthy behaviors. Survey data from Populix conducted in Indonesia in 2023 further reported that millennials are highly susceptible to stress-related psychological problems (Pratiwi, 2023). These life challenges include financial difficulties, feelings of inferiority regarding peers' achievements, stagnant career development, loneliness, strained family relationships, and problematic romantic relationships (Pratiwi, 2023). Collectively, these conditions reflect the severity of psychological distress experienced by millennials.

In response to these issues, the researchers conducted a preliminary survey involving 50 millennials to examine psychological distress-related problems. The findings revealed that 41 respondents (82%) reported that their daily lives are consistently characterized by pressures that contribute to increasing depressive symptoms. Additionally, 45 respondents (90%) reported experiencing anxiety in their daily lives. Psychological distress among millennials may lead to various mental health disorders due to chronic stress, mental exhaustion, and emotional as well as physical difficulties (Lucero et al., 2021; Heng et al., 2023). Severe psychological distress has also been associated with an increased risk of premature mortality among millennials (Rizvi & Ilyaz, 2022; Chen et al., 2023). These findings indicate that psychological distress constitutes a significant and vulnerable mental health concern.

Psychological distress is conceptualized as an unstable psychological condition that affects individuals' emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and affective functioning. This condition may manifest in symptoms such as anxiety, mood disturbances, depression, fatigue or exhaustion, a persistent urge to remain active without rest, and feelings of worthlessness (Kessler et al., 2002). Psychological distress comprises two primary dimensions. The first is depression, characterized by profound sadness accompanied by self-blame. The second is anxiety, described as a condition marked by physiological arousal, tension, unpleasant emotional experiences, and a state of apprehension (Kessler et al., 2002).

High levels of psychological distress are associated with suicidal ideation, unhealthy lifestyle patterns, sleep disturbances, headaches, and feelings of helplessness (Docu, 2018; Fathadhika et al., 2019; Kannan & Kumar, 2022). Conversely, individuals with lower levels of psychological distress tend to experience greater calmness, happiness, and a stronger sense of self-worth (Dwivedi & Lewis, 2021; Bayu & Puti, 2023). Variations in psychological distress do not occur randomly but are influenced by two major factors. The first is interpersonal factors, including personality traits related to individuals' emotional tendencies. The second is situational factors, encompassing physiological, cognitive, and social aspects (Matthews, 2016). In addition, psychological distress is influenced by high levels of fear of missing out (FoMO) and social media fatigue (Zheng & Ling, 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). Among these determinants, FoMO is selected as the independent variable in this study, as rapid technological advancements require millennials to continuously adapt and avoid falling behind.

One of the primary challenges faced by millennials is FoMO, which arises from the perception of missing out on others' experiences (Przybylski et al., 2013). FoMO drives individuals to engage continuously with social media, monitor others' activities, and experience anxiety when they perceive that they are missing out (Yaputri et al., 2022). This excessive engagement may contribute to mental health problems (Dhir et al., 2018). Millennials are also more vulnerable to higher levels of psychological distress compared to previous generations, with FoMO identified as a contributing factor (Bayu & Puti, 2023). Anxiety and depression are prevalent among millennials and are often associated with high career expectations, economic uncertainty, and social pressures (American Psychological Association, 2019). Psychological distress may further exacerbate physical, psychological, and social vulnerabilities if FoMO is not effectively managed (Liang et al., 2022).

Although FoMO and psychological distress represent significant challenges for millennials, they remain substantial and persistent concerns. Therefore, further investigation is needed to understand how FoMO may increase or decrease individuals' levels of psychological distress within an increasingly progressive and competitive digital environment. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the relationship between FoMO and psychological distress among millennials. The proposed hypothesis is that there is a significant relationship between FoMO and psychological distress in the millennial population.

Methods

Design

This study employed a quantitative approach with a bivariate correlational cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between one independent variable (FoMO) and one dependent variable (psychological distress), particularly among millennials.

Participants

The population in this study consisted of millennials in Indonesia. The sampling technique used was incidental sampling, in which participants were selected based on convenience; individuals who were encountered by the researchers and met the inclusion criteria were recruited as participants. The inclusion criteria were millennials aged 28–42 years, active users of social media (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, TikTok, Telegram, Threads, and YouTube), and individuals who accessed social media for more than 3 hours per day. A total of 298 participants met these criteria and were included in the study.

All participants were asked to complete an informed consent form prior to participation. The informed consent provided information regarding the study procedures and the purpose of participation. Participants were then asked to indicate their willingness to participate. The demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant Classification	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	115	61.4%
	Female	183	38.6%
Age	28-32 years	224	75.2%
	33-37 years	47	15.8%
	38-42 years	27	9%
Number of social media platforms used (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, TikTok, Telegram, Threads, YouTube)	1	3	1%
	2	11	3.7%
	3	31	10.4%
	4	33	11.1%
	5	34	11.4%
	6	37	12.4%
	7	60	20.1%
	8	89	29.9%
Duration of daily social media use	3 hours	44	14.8%
	4 hours	79	26.5%
	5 hours	65	21.8%
	6 hours	72	24.2%
	> 6 hours	38	12.7%

Instruments

FoMO Scale

FoMO was measured using the Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOS) developed by Przybylski et al. (2013), based on several dimensions, including missed experiences, compulsion, comparison with others (represent comparison), and feelings of being left out. The scale was adapted into Indonesian by Kaloeti et al. (2021), with one dimension (being left out) removed during the adaptation process. The FoMO scale consisted of 12 items using a 5-point Likert response format: Not Appropriate (NA), Slightly Not Appropriate (SNA), Neutral (N), Slightly Appropriate (SA), and Appropriate (A). The scale demonstrated good reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .882.

Psychological Distress Scale

Psychological distress was measured using the Psychological Distress K-10 Scale developed by Kessler et al. (2002), which assesses two dimensions: depression and anxiety. The scale consisted of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale: Very Often (5), Often (4), Sometimes (3), Rarely (2), and Never (1). The results of the reliability analysis indicated that all items were valid, with a Cronbach's alpha of .875.

Procedure

The measurement procedure in this study involved the use of two psychological scales: FoMO and psychological distress. FoMO was assessed using the Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOS) developed by Przybylski et al. (2013), while psychological distress was measured using the Psychological Distress K-10 Scale developed by Kessler et al. (2002). Prior to administration, both scales were evaluated for construct validity and linguistic clarity by three experts in the field of psychology. Subsequently, the instruments were pilot-tested on 30 millennials who were not part of the main study sample to assess the appropriateness and relevance of each item to the constructs being measured. This study obtained research approval under permit number 167/PU-F.Psi/VI/2025.

This scale was administered using a Google Form. Data collection was conducted from February 13 to April 25, 2025. Prior to completing the scale, the researcher provided informed consent to ensure that participants were willing to fill out the Google Form. During the data collection process, the researcher offered a reward to 10 randomly selected participants in the amount of IDR 50,000 through a lottery system.

Data Analysis

The data analysis technique employed in this study was bivariate correlation using Spearman's rho. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26 for Windows

Results

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

The descriptive statistical results based on 298 participants (see Table 2) indicate that the FoMO variable had a minimum score of 12, a maximum score of 60, a mean of 40.52, and a standard deviation (SD) of 9.47. Meanwhile, psychological distress had a minimum score of 10, a maximum score of 50, a mean of 31.62, and a standard deviation of 8.34.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
FoMO	298	12	60	40.52	9.473
Psychological Distress	298	10	50	31.62	8.343

Hypothesis Testing

The results of the hypothesis test (see Table 3) indicate that FoMO is positively and significantly correlated with psychological distress ($r = .200, p < .01$). This finding suggests that higher levels of FoMO among millennials are associated with higher levels of psychological distress. Conversely, lower levels of FoMO are associated with lower levels of psychological distress.

Table 3. Spearman's Rho Correlation

	FoMO	Psychological Distress
FoMO	1	.200**
		.000
	298	298
Psychological Distress	.200**	1
	.000	
	298	298

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate a significant positive relationship between FoMO and psychological distress among millennials. These results are consistent with the perspective of Przybylski et al. (2013), suggesting that FoMO is significantly associated with psychological conditions that contribute to mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and mental fatigue. Millennials are particularly vulnerable to higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (American Psychological Association, 2019). Psychological distress is often triggered by the use of social media as a coping mechanism; however, it may ultimately exacerbate mental health problems (Elhai et al., 2020; Macias, 2024).

Supporting these findings, Soraci et al. (2025) reported that FoMO is significantly related to psychological distress. FoMO not only reflects individuals' fear of social exclusion but also contributes to increased psychological pressure, particularly in the context of digital technology and social media use. When individuals continuously feel left behind or excluded from online social activities, this may trigger stress, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness, ultimately worsening their mental well-being. Similarly, Roberts and David (2020) found that obsessive thoughts about missing out on information and feelings of exclusion reinforce the relationship between FoMO and unhealthy social media use. In this context, social media and digital devices, such as smartphones, are often used as coping mechanisms or as a means of escaping ongoing emotional pressures.

These findings have important implications for millennials, as this age group is increasingly exposed to complex modern life pressures. Anxiety and depression, for instance, have become common psychological issues among millennials, driven by high career expectations, global economic uncertainty, and increasing social pressures from both offline and online environments (American Psychological Association, 2019; Pehlivan et al., 2021). Persistent psychological distress, if not properly managed within today's digital culture, may be further intensified by FoMO. As noted by Liang et al. (2022), unmanaged FoMO can exacerbate psychological distress and accelerate the decline of overall mental well-being.

Millennials face unique pressures, including the impact of digital technological advancements, social media exposure, and economic instability. These factors contribute to the increasing prevalence of mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders within this population (Lucero et al., 2021). Such psychological pressures may also lead individuals to lose a sense of direction or meaning in life. This is consistent with findings by de Hoog and Verboon (2020), which indicate that frequent exposure to negative news is associated with increased negative emotions and reduced positive emotions. As exposure to social media content increases, individuals may feel a strong urge to stay constantly updated, thereby reinforcing FoMO behaviors. In line with this, Valkenburg (2022) reported that problematic social media use is negatively associated with psychological well-being and positively associated with depression and anxiety. Thus, social pressures arising from social media expectations, combined with continuous exposure to negative content, strengthen the relationship between FoMO and mental health problems among millennials.

Mental health is a fundamental human need that significantly influences individuals' well-being and daily functioning (Patalay & Gage, 2019). Good mental health enables individuals to function optimally in social interactions and effectively manage emotional and cognitive processes (Park et al., 2023). However, various contemporary challenges—such as digital technology, social media, academic pressure, and economic uncertainty—significantly affect the psychological condition of millennials.

Given the findings indicating a significant relationship between FoMO and psychological distress among millennials, it is important to implement appropriate responses in the form of mental health education and the promotion of healthy social media use. Naslund et al. (2020) emphasized that social media may exacerbate existing mental health symptoms, compromise privacy, and trigger interpersonal problems in real-life contexts. Therefore, considering millennials' vulnerability to digital pressures, adaptive and educational strategies are needed to help them manage stress and anxiety effectively while fostering a more balanced digital lifestyle.

The findings of this study highlight that FoMO is not merely a social media-related behavioral phenomenon but also a significant contributor to individuals' mental health. Millennials, as highly active social media users, are particularly vulnerable to psychological pressures such as anxiety, depression, and mental fatigue due to continuous exposure to social content and heightened social expectations. Therefore, increasing awareness of the impact of FoMO on mental health is essential. Preventive and educational efforts are needed to promote healthier and more balanced digital lifestyles.

Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Data collection was conducted online via social media, which may have resulted in a sample that is more digitally active and not fully representative of the broader millennial population. Additionally, the age distribution of respondents was uneven, limiting the generalizability of the findings, particularly for older millennials who may have different psychological experiences.

Conclusion

This study concludes that there is a significant positive relationship between FoMO and psychological distress among millennials. This indicates that higher levels of FoMO are associated with higher levels of psychological distress. These findings support existing theories and prior research suggesting that FoMO conceptualized as anxiety arising from the fear of missing out on others' social experiences can serve as a trigger for psychological distress, particularly within the context of intensive digital engagement among millennials.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that millennials increase their awareness of the potential negative effects of excessive social media use, particularly in relation to FoMO and psychological distress. Efforts should be made to use social media more mindfully, limit usage time, and prioritize face-to-face social interactions as part of maintaining healthy self-regulation and mental well-being. Psychology practitioners and mental health institutions are also encouraged to utilize these findings as a foundation for developing interventions or counseling programs that focus on managing FoMO and psychological distress. Furthermore, policymakers and educational institutions should provide appropriate education on digital mental health as a preventive measure to support individuals living in a fast-paced and highly competitive digital era. Future research is recommended to adopt longitudinal approaches in order to better understand the long-term effects of FoMO on psychological distress.

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Author Contribution Statement

In this study, all authors contributed fully to the research process, including the development of the study design, data collection, data analysis, and the writing of the manuscript. The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this research.

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