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Understanding The Impact Of Loneliness And Psychological Distress On Fear Of Missing Out Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

Fear of Missing out is the common psychological phenomena characterized by having serious anxiety over missing events or things which can significantly impact the mental health of university students such as missing social experiences is one of the biggest fears of these students. This study examined how loneliness and psychological distress contribute to fear of missing out (FOMO) among university students affecting their academic performance and social and emotional stability too. We examined the relationships between these factors and explored their predictive power on FOMO. Using a survey research design, convenience sampling technique was employed to reach participants. To explore this relationship, 350 students were tested using The Fear of Missing Out Scale (Przybylski et al., 2013), University of California, Los Angeles, Loneliness Scale UCLA (Russell, 1996) and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (KPD) (Kessler & behavior, 1979). Findings from this study suggested a significant positive correlation between loneliness and FOMO among university students. The findings also revealed significant change in the levels of sadness and anxiety between male and female university students. Additionally, Loneliness and psychological distress are significant predictors of FOMO among university students. knowing the meshing between loneliness, psychological distress, and FOMO is crucial for developing interventions that address these issues and promote the well-being of university students.

Keywords: Loneliness, Psychological Distress, Fear Of Missing Out

Introduction

The contemporary university experience is often characterized by a paradoxical blend of opportunities and pressures. While higher education offers avenues for personal and professional growth, students also face unique challenges, including academic demands, social pressures, and the ever-present influence of social media. One prominent issue arising in this context is the growing prevalence of fear of missing out (FOMO), a pervasive anxiety rooted in the perceived need to be constantly engaged in social activities and experiences. This study delves into the impact of loneliness and psychological distress on FOMO among university students, exploring the intricate relationships between these factors and their potential implications for student well-



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being.

Loneliness and its impact on university students:

Loneliness, characterized by a perceived lack of social connection and belonging, has become an increasingly prevalent concern among young adults, particularly within the university setting (Cacioppo et al., 2015). This social disconnect can stem from various factors, including academic pressure, difficulty forming meaningful relationships, and the transient nature of university life. Research suggests that loneliness is not merely a subjective feeling but has a profound impact on mental and physical health, leading to increased risk of depression, anxiety, and even physical health problems (Cacioppo et al., 2015).

Psychological distress and its association with FOMO:

Psychological distress encompasses a broad range of emotional and mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and stress (Beck et al., 1996). University life, with its inherent stressors and demands, can contribute to heightened levels of psychological distress among students. Research has indicated a strong link between psychological distress and FOMO, suggesting that students experiencing elevated levels of anxiety and depression may be more susceptible to the negative emotions associated with FOMO (Primack et al., 2017).

The role of social media in FOMO:

Social media platforms, while offering opportunities for connection, can also exacerbate feelings of FOMO by providing constant streams of idealized portrayals of others' lives. The seemingly effortless happiness and success portrayed on social media can create a sense of inadequacy and contribute to a desire to constantly seek out new experiences and social connections (Berryman et al., 2018). Furthermore, the pressure to document and share experiences through social media can further amplify FOMO, leading students to feel a sense of urgency to participate in events and activities that are deemed "worthy" of sharing.

A growing body of research highlights the detrimental effects of loneliness on both mental and physical well-being, especially among young adults (Cacioppo et al., 2015). Studies have shown that loneliness can increase the risk of depression, anxiety, and even cardiovascular disease (Hawkley et al., 2010). Within the university setting, the transient nature of social connections, academic pressures, and the challenge of establishing meaningful relationships can contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness. The pressures of university life, including academic demands, financial concerns, and social expectations, can significantly contribute to heightened levels of psychological distress among students. Studies have found a strong association between psychological distress and poor academic performance, with students experiencing anxiety and depression showing lower grades and increased rates of dropout (Evans et al., 2012; Benton et al., 2006).

While social media platforms offer opportunities for connection and communication, they can also play a role in exacerbating mental health challenges, including FOMO. Research has shown that excessive social media use is linked to increased anxiety, depression, and body image issues (Berryman et al., 2018; Primack et al., 2017). The constant exposure to idealized portrayals of others' lives can create feelings of inadequacy and a sense of urgency to participate in social activities and experiences, leading to amplified FOMO (Pittman & Reich, 2016).



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Fear of missing out (FOMO) has become a widespread concern, particularly among young adults. Research indicates that FOMO can negatively impact mental well-being, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and lower self-esteem (Przybylski et al., 2013). Individuals experiencing FOMO may engage in excessive social media use, seeking constant validation and reassurance from their online networks, further contributing to feelings of inadequacy and social comparison.

Rationale

The chronicity of loneliness, psychological distress, and fear of missing out (FOMO) among university students demands urgent attention. This study aims to explore the intricate relationships between these factors, recognizing their interconnectedness as key influences on student well-being. By investigating the predictive power of loneliness and psychological distress on FOMO, this research seeks to provide valuable insights for developing targeted interventions that promote healthier university experiences. This study holds significant potential to inform the development of tailored support services, enhance educational practices that address mental health and social media use, and empower students to recognize and manage their own emotional challenges.

Objectives

To assess the relationship between loneliness and fear of missing out (FOMO) among university students.

To compare the levels of psychological distress between male and female university students.

To predict the level of FOMO based on the extent of loneliness and psychological distress among university students.

Hypotheses

There will be a significant positive correlation between loneliness, psychological distress and FOMO among university students.

Loneliness and psychological distress will significantly predict FOMO among university students.

There will be a significant difference in the levels of loneliness, psychological distress, and FOMO between male and female university students.

Methods

Study design

This study was a non-funded project, a cross-sectional survey from institutions for the adolescent population (aged 18-26), conducted between November 2023 and January 2024. A total of 400 respondents were surveyed in South Punjab. To gain a proper representation of the Pakistani student population, a non-probability sampling technique was used. 363 samples were the main target of the study according to sample collecting criteria. 69.9% was the response rate of the survey.

One-on-one surveys were taken out in respondents' classrooms. The testing environment was well-lit and conducive to questionnaire concentration. Before administering the scales, the researcher made sure to establish a rapport with the participants to determine if they could understand the content of the scales. Then, the scales were administered to each participant individually, with the same presentation used for the entire sample.

Inclusion-Exclusion Criteria. Students who have smartphone access were taken in the study for the homogenous sample. Only students currently studying in university were taken for the study. Only students belonging to young adulthood were included and



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others were excluded. Only students belonging to Muslim communities were taken for the study. Students who did not have internet access were excluded. Students who have access to a smartphone but do not use any app in excess were excluded. Non-Muslim communities were removed.

Research Design and Sampling Method

This quantitative study used a cross-sectional research design which allows the inspector to check the connection between the testing variables at one time. The current study used a purposive sampling technique.

Sample Size Approximation

For prior power analysis G*power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2009) was used. To ensure that for the analysis of larger sample this study has enough power. Make. For linear regression, with an effect size of 0.15, power of 0.95, and alpha error of 0.05 a comprehensive sample size of 129 was decisive. For correlation, with an effect size of 0.3, power of 0.95, and alpha error of 0.05 a total sample size of 134 was determined. For the Independent sample t-test, with an effect size of 0.8, power of 0.95, and alpha error of 0.05 a total sample size of 94 was determined. The minimum required sample size for this study was 357 respondents. However, researchers collected data from 363 target respondents that exceeded the minimum required sample

Procedure

The objectives, procedure, and materials of the current research were inspected and consented to by the Women's University Board team. A permission letter from the research supervisor was presented to the administrators of the universities for their approval. The testing environment was well-lit and conducive to questionnaire concentration. Before administering the scales, the researcher made sure to establish a rapport with the participants to determine if they could understand the content of the scales. They were told the main idea of the research exploration and asked to voluntarily participate in it. Upon their rhetorical consent, a short idea of the research exploration was given to them, and their queries regarding the research were addressed. Participants were told about their authority as research subjects and were asked to mark the permission form before filling out the research scales. SPSS version 25.0 (Corporation, 2017) was used for the analysis of collected data. For the generalizable results quantitative research method was used which allowed us to determine the relationship between LS, PD, FOMO & SA including the representatives of university students both males and females. The descriptive method was accustomed on the desired population by executing four scientific scales.

Instruments

Demographic sheet. The demographic information sheet was self-constructed and used to record the demographic variables of participants which included basic information. Some information was used as inclusion-exclusion criteria like smartphone access. Other information, like gender, age, most application usage, religion, current education, and socioeconomic status was included as research variables.

Loneliness. Loneliness was assessed utilizing 20 items UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1978), which consists of the following items: “I am unhappy doing so many things alone”; “I have nobody to talk to”; “I cannot tolerate being so alone” and others. Each item was answered on a 4-point scale (0=never, 1=rarely, 2=sometimes, 3=often). The



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UCLA loneliness scale has shown satisfactory reliability and both concurrent and discriminant validity (Russell, 1996). In the present study, the 20-item UCLA Loneliness Scale showed acceptable internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.94$ to 0.96). The scores for each item were compute up to produce a loneliness scale from 20 to 80, with higher scores showing a greater degree of loneliness (Russell et al., 1978).

Psychological Distress. Kessler psychological distress scale was used to assess the distress in students who experienced distress in the past 4 weeks (Kessler & behavior, 1979). KPD comprises ten questions about individuals' feelings from minor to too 45 often. It is scored on a 5-point Likert scope i.e. the entire time, majority of the time, some little of the time, a little bit of the time, never—the Likert set ranges from 5= most extreme distress to 1= less extreme distress. The overall scores in KPD ranged from 10-50 where a high rise in score means an acute level of distress (Andrews & Slade, 2001). The causal plausibility is high in KPD ($\alpha=0.88$) and is steady over a prolonged period with test-retest reliability of 0.811 (Peixoto et al., 2021).

Fear of missing out. FOMO is the apprehensiveness that one is lacking in rewarding experiences that others are enjoying, often fueled by social media updates and online events (Przybylski et al., 2013). FOMO is an everyday experience test requiring a few minutes to complete. 10 item short scale was assessed. The statements were marked on a 5-point rating scope i.e. not at all true of me, slightly true of me, moderately true of me, very true of me, and extremely true of me. The total score on the scale can range from 10 to 50. The total score is interpreted in the following way a higher score indicates a higher FOMO. FOMO is a sustainable and trustworthy measure of problematic attachment to social media, in a study by Mazlum M., and Atalay A., (2022) an alpha coefficient of 0.88, CFI= 0.95, and a moderate correlation between the factors of 0.48.

Statistical Analysis

For the analysis of data SPSS (Version 25.0) was used (Corportation, 2017). To examine the average scores of the variables descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation are applied. To investigate the relationship between variables the correlation method was used. To determine a gender-wise comparison between FOMO and Psychological Distress a t-test was applied. Regression Analysis has been run to check the predictor of variables.

Results

The current research aims to explore the impact of loneliness and psychological distress on the fear of missing out and smartphone addiction. After collecting the data, scores of the loneliness scale (Russell, 1982), the psychological distress scale (Kessler & behavior, 1979), and the scale of fear of missing out (Przybylski et al., 2013) were analyzed, using their standard scoring procedures. Further, numeric analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, V-25.0) to assemble and complete the research outcomes in quantitative terms. Results tabulated the scores of each research scale into SPSS sheets and then used descriptive data, independent sample t-test, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, and regression analysis to determine and interpret the research details in statistical terms.



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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients of Study Variables (N=363)

| Variables | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|------------------------|-------|------|--------|--------|--------|---|
| Loneliness | 57.41 | 16.6 | | | | |
| Fear of missing out | 10.20 | 4.84 | .219** | | | |
| Psychological distress | 11.07 | 3.44 | .616** | .231** | .160** | |

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

It shows that Pearson’s correlation was used to examine the relationship between Loneliness, psychological distress, Fear of missing out, and Smartphone addiction, and loneliness shows a positive correlation with Fear of missing out. It is demonstrated that there was a significant positive correlation between loneliness and fear of missing out (among university students). Moreover, it also shows a correlation between psychological distress and fear of missing out. Psychological distress shows a positive relationship with Fear of missing out among university students. Furthermore, it also reveals that there is a positive relationship between loneliness and smartphone addiction, and shows the positive correlation between psychological distress and smartphone addiction.

Table 2 Regression coefficients of loneliness on fear of missing out (N=363)

| Variable | B | β | SE |
|------------|---------|---------|------|
| Constant | 21.61** | | .838 |
| Loneliness | .117** | .219 | .028 |
| R2 | .05 | | |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

The R-square value is .05 which means that the independent variable i.e. LS causes 05% change in the dependent variable i.e. FOMO. Furthermore, the beta value is positive, which indicates the positive relationship between Loneliness and Fear of missing out.

Table 3 Regression coefficients of psychological distress on fear of missing out (N=363)

| Variable | B | β | SE |
|------------------------|---------|---------|-------|
| Constant | 19.65** | | 1.208 |
| Psychological distress | .1781** | .231 | .039 |
| R2 | .051 | | |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

The R-square value is .051 which means that the independent variable i.e. Psychological distress causes 51% change in the dependent variable i.e. FOMO. Furthermore, the beta value is positive, which indicates the positive relationship between Psychological distress and Fear of missing out.

Table 4

Independent Sample t-test for Gender Difference in Study Variables

| | Male | Female | 95% CI |
|-----------|------|--------|--------|
| Cohen’s d | | | |



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| Variable | <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | <i>df</i> | <i>T</i> | <i>P</i> | <i>Ll</i> | <i>Ul</i> | | |
|----------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-------|--|
| FOMO | 25.3(6.17) | 24.6(6.74) | 361 | .984 | .326 | -.722 | 2.17 | 0.111 | |
| SA | 34.6(9.1) | 33.45(10.1) | 361 | 1.078 | .346 | -.978 | 3.35 | 0.181 | |

Note; FOMO= Fear of Missing Out, SA= Smartphone Addiction. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Results indicated the FOMO scores between males ($M = 25.3$, $SD = 6.17$) and females ($M = 24.6$, $SD = 6.74$), indicated $t(361) = 0.98$, $p = .326$, 95% CI [-0.72, 2.17], $d = 0.11$. This suggests that both male and female students experience similar levels of FOMO. Similarly, SA scores between males ($M = 34.6$, $SD = 9.10$) and females ($M = 33.45$, $SD = 10.10$), indicated $t(361) = 1.08$, $p = .346$, 95% CI [-0.98, 3.35], $d = 0.18$. This indicates that gender does not play a significant role in smartphone addiction levels among university students.

Discussion

The current study's first hypothesis was a significant relationship between LS, PD, FOMO, and SA according to findings .219** proved that the hypothesis was accepted. The findings of this research are consistent with previous research. A study examined the link between Facebook addiction, FOMO, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and loneliness in smartphone users. Consistent with the results it was found that loneliness is positively correlated with FOMO in smartphone users (Uram & Skalski, 2022). A study was conducted to find out the relationships between time spent on social networking sites the fear of missing out and loneliness among undergraduate students it was found that there is a predictive relationship between loneliness and FOMO (Bernard, 2020).

Another contrast study indicated that psychological distress and internet addiction with the mediator's fear of missing out. Consistent with the results it was found that psychological distress is positively correlated with FOMO (Liang et al., 2022). Another study also supports the results of the current findings. The study was done on undergraduates in Malaysia. as their findings also show that psychological distress significantly predicted smartphone addiction (Law & Yap, 2022)

The current study's hypothesis 2 claimed that there were male students more frequently feel FOMO as compared to female students according to findings of male students ($M=25.3$) as compared to female students (24.6) proving that the hypothesis was accepted. The results of the present study show that there is the slightest difference in having FOMO between males and females. Results are inconsistent with the previous research, the study has been done to check the association of FOMO with age and gender and the results show that FOMO is only associated with age it has nothing to do with age (Rozgonjuk, Sindermann, Elhai, Montag, et al., 2021). Another study has been done on gender comparison in Germany to check the value of social media addiction and FOMO, and the results are consistent with the current research shows that FOMO is more prevalent among males than females (Brailovskaia et al., 2023).

The next hypothesis stated that psychological distress is higher in smartphone users rather than in non-smartphone users. Results are consistent with previous research. A study has been done on young Italian adults to check the association between psychological distress and problematic smartphone use. The results of this study showed that there is a strong association between psychological distress and smartphone use (Della Vedova et al., 2022). Medical students have done another study to check the association between smartphone addiction and psychological distress, and the results revealed that there is a significant relationship between psychological distress and smartphone addiction as they are positively correlated which means more use of smartphones leads to psychological distress (Lei et al., 2020).



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FOMO was slightly higher in WhatsApp users than Twitter users. The results were consistent with the previous research. A study was done to check the FOMO and Social Media's impact on daily life and the results revealed that FOMO is correlated with WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat users disorder (Rozgonjuk, Sindermann, Elhai, & Montag, 2021).

The next hypothesis stated that loneliness would be a predictor of fear of missing out. The results of this study indicated that loneliness positively predicted fear of missing out. Results were consistent with previous research. A study had been done on undergraduates to check the relationship between time spent on social media, loneliness, and FOMO and the results revealed that loneliness is predictive of FOMO (Bernard, 2020). Another study had been done to find out whether FOMO is a generational phenomenon or an individual difference. It was found in outcomes that across age cohorts loneliness is associated with higher levels of FOMO (Barry & Wong, 2020).

Going onto the next hypothesis which stated that psychological distress predicted FOMO. The results indicated that psychological distress positively predicted the fear of missing out. This hypothesis was supported by results but earlier data failed to support our predictions that a person high in FOMO will experience distress. Earlier data results only revealed that FOMO is a predictor of psychological distress but it did not support our hypothesis which states psychological distress predicts FOMO (Savitri, 2019).

Next it stated that psychological distress was a significant predictor of smartphone addiction. The findings were from the previous research. A study had been done on university medical students to see the relationship between neuroticism, psychological health, and smartphone addiction. And results revealed that there was a strong positive correlation between psychological health and smartphone addiction (Lei et al., 2020).

Conclusion

To conclude the present study gave new insights regarding loneliness, psychological distress, FOMO, and smartphone addiction and presented significant findings. Findings suggested that loneliness and psychological distress lead to fear of missing out, as it has been seen the more the person feels internal loneliness more FOMO develops. It has also been observed that psychological distress also leads to smartphone addiction. It has been seen that the situation worsened with the increased level of loneliness and psychological distress. Smartphone addiction was also affected by loneliness; however, FOMO is affected by the specific group as it is found that FOMO and smartphone addiction were higher in males than females. Psychological distress was higher in smartphone users and FOMO showed a higher influence on WhatsApp users than Twitter users.

Limitations of the Study

This current study has some limitations as the research was carried out solely in South Punjab, Pakistan. Moreover, since the study employed quantitative approach, participants were not able to express their real emotions or to give their further remarks related to the variables which were being studied. Allowing the participants to share their valuable insights could have been more beneficial in reaching out the good findings.

Implications of the Study

This study provides valuable insights for valuable institutions based on its results. The research suggests that those university students who are dealing with loneliness, psychological distress, fear of missing out (FOMO), and smartphone addiction should prioritize on forming and nurturing their interpersonal relationships while seeking



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entertainment, and maintaining social identities. The findings of this study showed that the loneliness and psychological distress can negatively impact the fear of missing out and smartphone addiction, resulting in harmful effects.

Recommendation for Future Research

Though this study provided a great start to understanding the relationship between Loneliness, Psychological Distress, FOMO, & Smartphone Addiction among university students, more research is needed on how people's loneliness and psychological distress cause FOMO and Smartphone Addiction. Future research should focus on peer comparisons as well as continuing to explore how young adults are influenced by comparisons to others. Future studies should focus on the detrimental effects of technology addiction. To achieve this, policymakers and stakeholders such as individuals, families, and community members can be educated through various means of communication such as print and electronic media. It is important to emphasize that addiction is not only related to drugs, but non-chemical addictions, such as smartphone addiction, can also have adverse effects on one's life. Non-profit organizations that work towards social betterment can assist people in preventing and treating internet addiction. They can organize awareness programs, seminars, conferences, and other activities to highlight the negative consequences of problematic smartphone use and how to prevent it. Increasing the sample size and recruiting participants allowing different age ranges to be included for comparing people at the different phases of maturity would be beneficial for future researches.