

FEAR OF BEING OFFLINE (FOBO), SLEEP QUALITY, ANXIETY AND LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

¹Dr. Ankita Dalal

¹Assistant Professor

¹Amity Institute of Behavioural and Allied Sciences (AIBAS)

¹Amity University Haryana, Manesar, India

Abstract—The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed the daily lives of young adults, creating unprecedented levels of connectivity and dependence on online communication. One emerging psychological phenomenon associated with this transformation is the Fear of Being Offline (FOBO), characterized by discomfort, anxiety, and distress experienced when individuals are unable to access digital platforms, social networks, or online communication channels. The present qualitative study explored the lived experiences of young adults regarding FOBO and its perceived influence on sleep quality, anxiety, and life satisfaction. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 young adults aged 18-30 years who reported frequent engagement with digital technologies. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Four major themes emerged: (a) compulsive need for constant connectivity, (b) disrupted sleep and nighttime digital vigilance, (c) psychological distress and anticipatory anxiety, and (d) paradoxical effects on life satisfaction and well-being. Participants reported persistent urges to check notifications, fear of missing important information, sleep disturbances due to excessive nighttime screen use, heightened anxiety during periods of disconnection, and reduced satisfaction with life resulting from continuous social comparison. However, some participants also acknowledged benefits of digital connectivity, including social support and access to information. The findings suggest that FOBO represents an emerging psychosocial challenge among young adults and may have significant implications for mental health and well-being. Future interventions aimed at promoting digital well-being and healthy technology use may help mitigate the adverse consequences associated with FOBO.

Index Terms—Fear of Being Offline, FOBO, anxiety, sleep quality, life satisfaction, young adults, qualitative research, digital well-being

I. Introduction

The widespread adoption of smartphones, social networking sites, and digital communication platforms has transformed the way individuals interact, learn, work, and maintain relationships. Digital connectivity has become an integral aspect of modern life, particularly among young adults who are considered digital natives. While technological advancements have facilitated communication and access to information, concerns have emerged regarding excessive technology use and its psychological consequences (Przybylski et al., 2013).

One of the most notable concerns associated with digital engagement is the experience of psychological discomfort when disconnected from online environments. Researchers have increasingly explored concepts such as problematic smartphone use, internet addiction, nomophobia, and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) to understand technology-related psychological distress (Elhai et al., 2017; Przybylski et al., 2013). Recently, the concept of Fear of Being Offline (FOBO) has gained attention as a distinct phenomenon reflecting

individuals' anxiety and discomfort when disconnected from digital networks and online communication channels.

FOBO extends beyond the fear of missing social experiences and encompasses a broader concern about losing access to information, opportunities, social interactions, and digital identities. Individuals experiencing FOBO often feel compelled to remain continuously connected, frequently checking notifications, messages, emails, and social media updates. Such behaviours may contribute to heightened stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced psychological well-being.

Young adulthood represents a developmental stage characterized by identity exploration, social relationship formation, and academic or occupational transitions. Digital technologies play a significant role in facilitating these developmental processes. However, excessive dependence on digital connectivity may interfere with healthy functioning, particularly with respect to sleep quality, anxiety levels, and overall life satisfaction.

Sleep quality has emerged as a critical area of concern in technology-related research. Studies have consistently demonstrated associations between excessive screen time, nighttime technology use, and sleep disturbances (Levenson et al., 2017). Poor sleep quality has further been linked to increased anxiety, impaired emotional regulation, and reduced quality of life.

Similarly, anxiety has been identified as both a predictor and consequence of problematic technology use. Individuals who experience anxiety may seek reassurance through continuous online engagement, while excessive digital connectivity may reinforce anxious thoughts and behaviours (Elhai et al., 2017). Furthermore, persistent social comparison on digital platforms may negatively influence perceptions of life satisfaction and subjective well-being.

Despite growing interest in technology-related psychological phenomena, limited qualitative research has explored how young adults personally experience FOBO and perceive its impact on their daily lives. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing interventions that promote digital well-being and psychological resilience.

II. Review of Literature

Research examining technology-related psychological phenomena has expanded considerably over the past decade. One of the most influential concepts in this area is Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), defined as a pervasive apprehension that others may be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent (Przybylski et al., 2013). FoMO has been associated with increased social media engagement, psychological distress, and lower life satisfaction.

Elhai et al. (2017) reported significant relationships between problematic smartphone use, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Individuals experiencing elevated anxiety often rely heavily on smartphones as a means of emotional regulation and reassurance seeking. Such behaviors may create dependency patterns that contribute to greater psychological distress over time.

Sleep quality has also emerged as a major concern in relation to digital technology use. Levenson et al. (2017) found that greater social media use was associated with increased sleep disturbances among young adults. Nighttime engagement with digital devices may interfere with sleep onset, reduce sleep duration, and impair overall sleep quality.

Nomophobia, defined as the fear of being without one's mobile phone, represents another technology-related psychological construct closely related to FOBO. Yildirim and Correia (2015) suggested that individuals experiencing nomophobia often report anxiety, panic, and discomfort when separated from their devices. Similar emotional responses have been observed among individuals reporting fears related to digital disconnection.

Research has further demonstrated the impact of digital engagement on subjective well-being. Kross et al. (2013) found that greater social media use predicted declines in life satisfaction over time. Social

comparison processes and exposure to idealized online representations may contribute to dissatisfaction with one's own life circumstances.

Moreover, digital technologies have transformed social interactions, creating expectations of constant availability and responsiveness. Turkle (2015) argued that continuous connectivity may paradoxically reduce the quality of interpersonal relationships by fostering superficial interactions and increasing psychological dependency on digital communication.

Although these studies contribute valuable insights into technology-related psychological outcomes, FOBO remains relatively underexplored. Existing research has primarily focused on quantitative assessments of smartphone addiction, FoMO, and social media use, leaving a gap in understanding the subjective experiences of individuals who fear being disconnected from digital environments.

III. Rationale and Research Gap

Despite the rapid expansion of research on FoMO, smartphone addiction, and social media engagement, the emerging construct of Fear of Being Offline (FOBO) remains conceptually underdeveloped. Existing literature has predominantly relied on quantitative methodologies and has focused primarily on behavioural indicators of technology use. Limited research has qualitatively explored how young adults experience digital disconnection and how these experiences influence sleep quality, anxiety, and life satisfaction simultaneously. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of studies conducted within developing countries where digital penetration is increasing rapidly. The present study addresses this gap by providing an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences associated with FOBO and its psychological consequences among young adults.

IV. Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis.

Participants

Fifteen young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 years participated in the study. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Eligibility criteria included regular smartphone use, daily internet engagement, and self-reported discomfort during periods of digital disconnection.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes were conducted. Interviews explored participants' experiences of being offline, technology use patterns, emotional reactions to digital disconnection, sleep habits, anxiety experiences, and perceptions of life satisfaction.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. Coding was conducted manually, and recurring patterns were organized into broader themes.

Results

Thematic analysis yielded four major themes.

Theme 1: Compulsive Need for Constant Connectivity

Participants described an overwhelming urge to remain connected to digital platforms. Many reported checking notifications repeatedly, even in the absence of alerts.

One participant stated:

"I feel uncomfortable if I don't check my phone for even a few minutes because I think I might miss something important."

This finding aligns with previous research on FoMO and problematic smartphone use, which highlights the role of constant connectivity in maintaining psychological dependence (Przybylski et al., 2013).

Theme 2: Disrupted Sleep and Nighttime Digital Vigilance

Participants frequently reported difficulty sleeping due to late-night technology use. Several described checking messages immediately before sleeping and during nighttime awakenings.

One participant noted:

"I sleep with my phone next to my pillow and wake up several times just to see if anyone texted me."

These findings support previous evidence linking excessive digital engagement with poor sleep quality (Levenson et al., 2017).

Theme 3: Anxiety Associated With Digital Disconnection

Participants described feelings of nervousness, uncertainty, and restlessness when unable to access the internet or their devices.

A participant explained:

"When there is no network, I feel anxious because I don't know what is happening online."

The findings are consistent with studies suggesting that technology-related dependence may contribute to heightened anxiety and emotional distress (Elhai et al., 2017).

Theme 4: Reduced Life Satisfaction Through Continuous Comparison

Participants acknowledged that social media exposure often triggered comparisons with others, leading to dissatisfaction with their own achievements and lifestyles.

One participant shared:

"Sometimes I feel my life is not progressing because everyone online seems happier and more successful."

This observation supports findings by Kross et al. (2013), who reported negative associations between excessive social media use and life satisfaction.

Overall, the findings suggest that FOBO may function as a multidimensional psychological phenomenon involving behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. Constant connectivity appears to reinforce anxiety and sleep disturbances while simultaneously influencing subjective evaluations of well-being.

V. Discussion

The present study explored the experiences of young adults regarding Fear of Being Offline (FOBO) and its perceived impact on sleep quality, anxiety, and life satisfaction. The findings revealed four interrelated themes: (a) compulsive need for constant connectivity, (b) disrupted sleep and nighttime digital vigilance, (c) anxiety associated with digital disconnection, and (d) reduced life satisfaction through continuous social comparison. Collectively, these themes suggest that FOBO represents a multidimensional psychological phenomenon that extends beyond mere technology use and influences emotional, behavioral, and cognitive functioning among young adults.

The first theme, **compulsive need for constant connectivity**, highlighted participants' persistent desire to remain digitally connected and continuously monitor notifications, messages, and social media updates. This finding aligns with previous research on Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), which suggests that individuals experience a pervasive concern about missing rewarding experiences, information, or social interactions when disconnected from online platforms (Przybylski et al., 2013). Participants in the present study reported feelings of discomfort and restlessness when unable to access their devices, indicating that digital connectivity has become deeply embedded within their daily routines and social identities. Such behaviors may be understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, which posits that individuals seek connectedness and belongingness as fundamental psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Digital platforms provide immediate opportunities for social interaction and validation, potentially reinforcing compulsive checking behaviors. Furthermore, the findings support previous evidence suggesting that excessive smartphone engagement may develop into habitual or dependency-like patterns characterized by reduced self-regulation and heightened psychological reliance on digital communication (Elhai et al., 2017).

The second theme, **disrupted sleep and nighttime digital vigilance**, revealed that participants frequently engaged with their smartphones before bedtime and often checked notifications during nighttime awakenings. These findings are consistent with existing literature demonstrating significant associations between excessive technology use and poor sleep quality among young adults (Levenson et al., 2017). The use of digital devices before sleep may negatively influence sleep through multiple mechanisms, including exposure to blue light, heightened cognitive arousal, and emotional stimulation generated by online interactions (Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2016). Participants described difficulties falling asleep due to the anticipation of incoming messages and notifications, suggesting that FOBO may contribute to a state of hypervigilance that interferes with restorative sleep processes. Given that sleep plays a crucial role in emotional regulation, memory consolidation, and psychological well-being, chronic sleep disturbances associated with FOBO may increase vulnerability to broader mental health concerns, including anxiety and emotional exhaustion (Walker, 2017). These findings emphasize the importance of promoting healthy digital habits and sleep hygiene practices among young adults who experience difficulty disengaging from online environments.

The third theme, **anxiety associated with digital disconnection**, emerged as one of the most prominent findings of the study. Participants described feelings of nervousness, uncertainty, frustration, and distress when unable to access the internet or communicate through digital platforms. This finding is consistent with previous studies examining problematic smartphone use and nomophobia, which have reported significant associations between digital dependency and anxiety-related symptoms (Yildirim & Correia, 2015). The emotional responses reported by participants suggest that digital disconnection may be perceived as a threat to social connectedness, information access, and personal control. From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, repeated reassurance-seeking through digital communication may reinforce anxiety by creating a dependence on constant online engagement to regulate emotional discomfort (Elhai et al., 2017). Consequently, individuals may become increasingly sensitive to periods of disconnection, leading to heightened anticipatory anxiety and emotional distress. The findings further support the notion that FOBO may represent a unique manifestation of technology-related anxiety, extending beyond traditional concepts such as internet addiction and smartphone dependence. As digital communication becomes increasingly central to social and professional functioning, anxiety associated with disconnection may become a growing concern among younger generations.

The fourth theme, **reduced life satisfaction through continuous social comparison**, highlighted the negative impact of excessive online engagement on participants' perceptions of their own lives. Many participants reported comparing themselves with peers on social media platforms, often concluding that others appeared more successful, attractive, or fulfilled. These experiences frequently resulted in feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction. The findings support Social Comparison Theory, which suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, achievements, and circumstances with those of others (Festinger, 1954). Social media platforms provide continuous access to carefully curated representations of others' lives, increasing opportunities for upward social comparison and negative self-evaluation. Consistent with this interpretation, Kross et al. (2013) found that greater Facebook use predicted

declines in subjective well-being over time. Similarly, Verduyn et al. (2017) argued that passive social media consumption often contributes to negative emotional outcomes by encouraging comparisons that diminish self-esteem and life satisfaction. Participants in the present study acknowledged that while digital platforms provided entertainment and social connection, excessive engagement often led to dissatisfaction with personal accomplishments and life circumstances. These findings suggest that FOBO may contribute to diminished life satisfaction by increasing exposure to social comparison processes and fostering unrealistic expectations regarding success and happiness.

Taken together, the findings indicate that FOBO is closely linked to broader concerns regarding digital well-being and psychological health among young adults. The themes identified in the present study suggest a cyclical relationship in which fear of disconnection encourages excessive digital engagement, which in turn contributes to sleep disturbances, heightened anxiety, and reduced life satisfaction. These outcomes may reinforce the desire to remain constantly connected, perpetuating a cycle of dependence on digital technologies. The study contributes to the growing body of cyberpsychology literature by highlighting FOBO as a distinct and emerging phenomenon that warrants further empirical investigation. Understanding the psychological consequences of perpetual connectivity is particularly important in contemporary society, where digital technologies increasingly shape social relationships, educational experiences, and occupational functioning. Interventions aimed at fostering digital literacy, mindful technology use, and healthy boundaries around online engagement may be valuable in mitigating the adverse psychological effects associated with FOBO and promoting overall well-being among young adults.

VI. Limitations and Implications

The study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, limiting generalizability. Second, participants were recruited from a specific age group and cultural context. Third, the findings relied on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by recall bias.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the growing literature on digital well-being by highlighting FOBO as a distinct and emerging psychological construct. The findings may inform counselling interventions, digital wellness programs, and educational initiatives aimed at promoting healthy technology use among young adults.

VII. Suggestions for Future Research

1. Conduct large-scale quantitative studies examining the prevalence of FOBO.
2. Develop and validate a standardized FOBO assessment scale.
3. Investigate gender differences in experiences of FOBO.
4. Examine longitudinal relationships between FOBO, anxiety, and well-being.
5. Explore the effectiveness of digital detox interventions in reducing FOBO symptoms.
6. Conduct cross-cultural studies to understand variations in FOBO across different societies.
7. Investigate FOBO among adolescents, working professionals, and older adults.

VIII. Conclusion

The present study explored the experiences of young adults regarding Fear of Being Offline (FOBO) and its relationship with sleep quality, anxiety, and life satisfaction. The findings indicate that FOBO is characterized by a strong need for constant digital connectivity, heightened anxiety during periods of disconnection, disrupted sleep patterns, and reduced life satisfaction resulting from social comparison. As digital technologies continue to shape modern life, understanding the psychological consequences of perpetual connectivity becomes increasingly important. The study highlights the need for greater awareness

of digital well-being and the development of interventions that encourage balanced and mindful technology use.

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