

Relationship Between Fear of Missing out (FOMO) and Decisional Conflict: The Mediating Role of Rumination Among Young Adults

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Abstract

The present study examines the relationship between Fear of Missing Out, rumination and Decisional Conflict among young adults in Kerala, India which is a collectivistic culture. The study used a cross-sectional correlational design to investigate whether Rumination mediates the relationship between FOMO and Decisional Conflict. A sample of 157 young adults (100 females, 57 males, mean age = 21.5) was selected using convenience sampling. Participants completed responding to measures of FOMO, Decisional Conflict and Rumination through online survey. Significant positive correlation between FOMO and decisional conflict ($r=0.34$, $p<0.001$) as well as between rumination and decisional conflict ($r = 0.36$, $p< 0.001$) was revealed in Pearson correlation analysis. Mediation analysis revealed that rumination partially mediates the relationship between FOMO and decisional conflict. This suggest that the individuals with higher levels of FOMO are more likely to engage in rumination which in turn aggravate difficulty in decision making. The findings of this study highlight the psychological mechanism existing in decision making challenges in digital age and emphasize the need for interventions to reduce the impact of FOMO on cognitive and emotional wellbeing of individuals Future researches may explore cultural variations and other possible mediating factors influencing the relationship between FOMO and Decisional Conflict.

Keywords: Decisional Conflict, FOMO, Rumination, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary digital society, the pervasive use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook has given rise to a distinct psychological phenomenon - the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). First conceptualized by Patrick J. McGinnis and later operationalized by Przybylski et al. (2013), FOMO represents a pervasive apprehension that others might be experiencing rewarding events from which one is absent. This phenomenon has become increasingly prevalent, with research indicating that up to 70% of young adults experience FOMO-related distress (Milyavskaya et al., 2018).

The psychological impact of FOMO manifests across multiple domains. Cognitive-behavioural research has established strong associations between FOMO and problematic smartphone use (Elhai et al., 2016), nomophobia (Gezgin et al., 2018), and various indicators of psychological distress including anxiety, sleep disturbances, and emotional dysregulation (Altuwairiqi et al., 2019). These effects are particularly pronounced among young adults, who demonstrate the highest rates of social media engagement (Baker et al., 2016). The phenomenon operates through multiple pathways: social comparison processes

(Festinger, 1954), unmet psychological needs as outlined by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and cognitive distortions regarding peer experiences (Steers et al., 2014).

A critical yet understudied aspect of FOMO's impact involves its relationship with rumination - a maladaptive cognitive process characterized by persistent, repetitive negative thinking (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Rumination has been identified as a transdiagnostic factor in numerous psychological disorders (Ehring & Watkins, 2008) and significantly impairs executive functioning and decision-making capacity (Lyubomirsky et al., 2003). Emerging evidence suggests that individuals experiencing FOMO are particularly susceptible to ruminative thought patterns (Gupta & Sharma, 2021), creating a cognitive vulnerability that may exacerbate decision-making difficulties.

Decisional conflict, defined as the experience of uncertainty when facing important choices (Janis, 1959), represents a potentially significant consequence of this FOMO-rumination dynamic. Theoretical models suggest that both FOMO and rumination may contribute to decisional conflict through distinct mechanisms: FOMO by creating unrealistic expectations and social pressure (McGinnis, 2020), and rumination through cognitive overload and excessive risk assessment (Van Randenborgh et al., 2010). However, the precise nature of these relationships, particularly the mediating role of rumination, remains insufficiently examined in the literature.

This research examines how repetitive negative thinking (rumination) influences the connection between fear of missing out (FOMO) and difficulty in making decisions among Indian youth. The investigation focuses specifically on young adults in Kerala, where cultural values emphasizing group harmony may create different patterns of social media anxiety and decision-making struggles compared to Western populations (Hofstede, 2011). By analyzing these psychological processes in this understudied cultural context, the study provides new insights that can help develop both theoretical models and practical solutions for improving digital wellbeing and decision confidence in today's technology-driven world.

This study makes three key contributions to existing research: First, it investigates how FOMO leads to decisional difficulties through rumination within India's collectivistic cultural framework, addressing a gap in non-Western research. Second, it utilizes sophisticated mediation techniques to precisely measure these psychological connections. Third, it combines insights from three established theories - Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which explains motivational factors; Response Styles Theory (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991), which addresses thought patterns; and Janis's Conflict Theory (1977), which examines decision-making processes. These combined advances enable more effective strategies for reducing FOMO's harmful effects and enhancing digital-age decision quality.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample of the study consists of 157 young adults (Females = 100, Males = 57) from Kerala who are students between the ages of 18-25 with a mean age of 21.5. The samples were selected on the basis of convenient sampling and the data collection was done through self-reported questionnaire via google form.

Instruments

1. Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOs)

Przybylski and colleagues (2013) created this 10-item assessment tool to quantify individuals' anxiety about missing rewarding experiences. Participants rate each statement on a 5-point scale ranging from "not at all true of me" to "extremely true of me." The final score represents the mean of all responses, with elevated scores reflecting more intense FOMO experiences. Psychometric evaluations have confirmed the

scale's strong reliability, with internal consistency coefficients between .87 and .90.

2. Ruminative Responses Scale (RRS)

Adapted from the Response Styles Questionnaire, this 22-item measure (Treyner et al., 2003) evaluates habitual negative thinking patterns. Respondents indicate how frequently they engage in each ruminative thought on a 4-point frequency scale. Total scores are calculated by summing all item responses, where higher values indicate more frequent rumination. The instrument shows excellent reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values consistently above .78 in validation studies.

3. Decisional Conflict Scale (DCS)

O'Connor's (1993/2010) 16-item questionnaire assesses the psychological discomfort individuals experience when making difficult choices. Using a 5-point response format, the measure yields a standardized score ranging from 0 to 100 after averaging and converting responses, where increased scores denote greater decision-related distress. Extensive psychometric testing has established the scale's reliability, demonstrating test-retest stability and internal consistency above .78.

Procedure

The participants of this study were young adults aged 18-25 who were permanent residents of Kerala. Required standardized measures were used after finalising the research questions to collect data from the participants. A convenience sample of 161 was recruited out of which 157 participants completed the questionnaire. Data was collected via google forms which was provided after obtaining the informed consent of the participants and sociodemographic details was collected. Three standardized scales were used: the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) Scale, the Decisional Conflict Scale, and the Ruminative Response Scale. Clear instructions were provided into the participants for each scale. The survey was structured so that only those who provided informed consent could proceed to the questionnaire. Online media platforms were used to do the necessary sampling.

Data analysis was conducted using Jamovi software (version 2.4.14). The analysis involved Pearson correlation and mediational analysis. Initially, the data were assessed for normality to ensure the assumptions for parametric tests were met. Subsequently, the relationships between the variables were examined using Pearson correlation. Finally, a mediational analysis was performed to explore the potential mediating effects within the dataset.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Relationship between FOMO, Decisional Conflict and Rumination

Variables	FOMO	DECISIONAL CONFLICT	RUMINATION
FOMO			
Decisional conflict	0.340**		
Rumination	0.306**	0.357**	

**p<0.01

The table presents the correlation coefficients among FOMO, decisional conflict, and rumination. A significant positive correlation is observed between FOMO and decisional conflict ($r = .340, p < .01$), as

well as between FOMO and rumination ($r = .306, p < .01$). Decisional conflict and rumination also exhibit a significant positive correlation ($r = .357, p < .01$).

Table No.2 Results of the Mediation Analysis Examining the Role of Rumination Between FOMO and Decisional Conflict

Path/Effect	Estimate	SE	Z	p	% Mediation
Indirect	2.14	0.79	2.72	.006**	25.2
Direct	6.36	1.90	3.36	< .01**	74.8
FOMO → Rumination	5.11	1.27	4.03	< .01**	-
Rumination → Decisional Conflict	0.42	0.11	3.69	< .01**	-
FOMO → Decisional Conflict	6.36	1.90	3.36	< .01**	-

** $p < 0.01$

The table presents the indirect effect of FOMO on decisional conflict via rumination was significant ($b = 2.14, SE = 0.79, p = .006$), accounting for 25.2% of the total effect. The direct effect remained significant ($b = 6.36, SE = 1.90, p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. Total effect was also significant ($b = 6.36, SE = 1.90, p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

The study investigates the moderating role of rumination in the link between FOMO and decisional conflict. According to the correlation study, there is a positive correlation between FOMO and decisional conflict, meaning that those who have higher levels of FOMO are more likely to have trouble making decisions. Also, there was a moderately positive relationship between rumination and decisional conflict. It implies that people who are prone to thinking negatively on a regular basis are more likely to have trouble making judgements. According to mediation analysis, rumination partially mediates the relationship between FOMO and decisional conflict, highlighting its role as a cognitive mechanism that connects these two concepts.

These results are consistent with current literature that emphasizes FOMO's role in causing decisional conflict. This is particularly clear in areas like technology adoption (Gartner et al., 2022) and investment decisions (Güngör et al., 2022). Previous research indicates that FOMO may result in impulsive choices by directing attention towards immediate rewards or social acceptance, neglecting the long-term effects (Stillman & Ferguson, 2019). Although earlier studies have mainly focused on FOMO in specific areas like investment choices (Kärkkäinen, 2023) this current research expands that knowledge by investigating its influence on decision-making in a broader sense. This study integrates actual decision-making processes that may provide more substantial insights. In a comparable manner, Güngör et al. (2022) recognized constraints in their literature review, while this study combines a broader array of pertinent research to offer a more detailed viewpoint.

The findings further support existing evidence on the adverse effects of rumination on decision-making, especially in aggravating decisional conflict (van Randenborgh et al., 2010; Di Schiena et al., 2013).

Rumination perpetuates a cycle of persistent negative thinking (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008), heightening fixation on past events and lost opportunities, thereby hindering an impartial assessment of current options (van Randenborgh et al., 2010). While prior research has explored decision difficulty and confidence (van Randenborgh et al., 2010), this study expands on those insights by investigating rumination's specific role in fostering decisional conflict. Earlier work primarily centered on clinical groups, such as those with depression (Di Schiena et al., 2013), whereas this study examines these dynamics in a non-clinical sample, enhancing generalizability.

Mediation analysis indicated that although rumination partially accounts for the association between FOMO and decisional conflict, FOMO's direct influence was more pronounced. This implies that FOMO may affect decision-making through additional pathways beyond rumination. Individuals with high FOMO might experience cognitive overload, impairing their ability to evaluate choices even without excessive rumination. Other potential mediators, such as social comparison and perfectionism, could also play a role. For example, studies indicate that FOMO induces stress and anxiety (Altuwairiqi et al., 2019), which may disrupt logical decision-making. Future research should investigate other psychological mechanisms that may mediate this relationship.

The results aligns with established theoretical perspectives. Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) proposes that distress arises from a mismatch between one's actual and ideal self. In the case of FOMO, this gap between personal experiences and the seemingly superior experiences of others may fuel rumination, complicating decision-making. Similarly, Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) explains how self-evaluation through comparisons with others can intensify FOMO-related rumination, worsening decisional conflict. Constant comparisons may breed doubt, making it harder to commit to decisions.

The collectivistic context of Kerala (Hofstede, 2011) likely amplified the observed effects in three ways: (1) social comparisons extended beyond digital spaces to include immediate peer groups, intensifying FOMO; (2) decision-making carried heightened communal consequences, exacerbating conflict; and (3) cultural norms favouring deliberation may have reinforced ruminative tendencies. These factors suggest that FOMO interventions in collectivistic societies should address both digital behaviours and local social expectations

These findings have practical applications. Understanding the connection between FOMO, rumination, and decisional conflict can inform therapeutic approaches. Cognitive-behavioural techniques targeting dysfunctional thought patterns linked to FOMO and rumination may foster adaptive coping strategies. Encouraging cognitive restructuring and self-reflection could mitigate rumination and ease decision-related distress. Mindfulness practices, such as meditation and mindful decision-making, may also help individuals distance themselves from FOMO-induced anxiety, promoting clearer judgment. Raising awareness of FOMO's psychological impact could enable more deliberate, values-based decisions, reducing susceptibility to external influences.

This study focused on young adults in Kerala, India which is a collectivistic culture where social ties significantly influence decision-making. Unlike individualistic societies that prioritize personal autonomy, collectivistic cultures may emphasize group harmony, potentially shaping how FOMO operates. Individuals may not only compare themselves to online personas but also feel compelled to conform to their immediate social circles. Future studies should examine how cultural differences modulate the interplay between FOMO, rumination, and decision-making across diverse populations. Future studies

should also employ longitudinal designs, diverse samples, and multi-method assessments to better understand these relationships and identify protective factors against FOMO's negative effects.

In summary, this study advances understanding of how FOMO and rumination affect decision-making. It reaffirms rumination's detrimental role in decisional conflict while underscoring FOMO's potentially stronger direct impact. FOMO appears to both stimulate rumination and independently hinder decision-making processes. By examining these dynamics in a general population, the study broadens the scope of FOMO research beyond niche contexts. Identifying alternative mediators, like social comparison and anxiety, presents new research directions. The study emphasizes the need for psychological interventions to help individuals manage FOMO-related challenges and make better decisions. Ultimately, these insights deepen our knowledge of the cognitive factors shaping decision-making in an increasingly connected world.

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