

**Exploring Young Adults' Attitudes and Experiences with Fear of
Missing Out: A Qualitative Interview Study on Anxiety and
Perfectionism**

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Abstract

In an age of constant digital connectivity, young adults face increasing psychological challenges related to social belonging, and mental well-being. One issue that comes up often in this context is the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), which reflects deeper concerns around social comparison and self-worth. This thesis explores how young adults experience and interpret FoMO, and how it influences their anxiety and self-imposed perfectionism in the context of digital and real-life environments. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 university students, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

The findings reveal that FoMO is a frequent and emotionally charged experience, often triggered by social media and offline peer interactions. Participants reported a range of cognitive and emotional responses, including social pressure, overthinking, and physical symptoms of stress. FoMO was also found to contribute to perfectionistic behaviors, such as self-comparison, setting unrealistically high standards, and curating idealized online identities. Despite these challenges, participants actively employed coping strategies, such as social media breaks, peer support, cognitive reframing, and prioritizing offline activities.

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Introduction

In the era of social media and constant digital connectivity, young adults are exposed to a continuous stream of social media content, where social comparisons and idealized pictures of others' lives are all over. One such psychological phenomenon that has emerged together with the rise of social media is the Fear of Missing Out, also called FoMO, defined as the worry that others are enjoying rewarding experiences from which one is absent (Przybylski et al., 2013). In a recent survey conducted by Kong et al. (2024) with responses from over 1,500 university students, approximately 75% reported experiencing FoMO in their daily lives. University students are especially vulnerable to FoMO as they often face the combined challenges of maintaining strong academic performance while also trying to build friendships and feel socially accepted in a competitive and rapidly changing social environment (Ngo et al., 2023). According to Eurostat (2024) by the European Union, the most common internet activity among young people aged 16–29 in the EU in 2023 was participation in social networks, with 80% engagement. In comparison, 59% of the total EU population aged 16–74 participated in social networks in the same period. This was significantly higher compared to the total population, highlighting the important role of social media in young people's daily lives.

While FoMO is a growing phenomenon, anxiety is one of the fastest-growing mental health problems worldwide. Globally, anxiety disorders affect about 4.4% of the population, around 301 million people in 2019, which makes it one of the most common mental health conditions (World Health Organization, 2022). This is not a coincidence since FoMO has been linked to anxiety before. A research, by Liu et al. (2023), found a significant positive association between FoMO and anxiety, with social avoidance and loneliness playing a mediating role. One prevalent reason for anxiety in young people is the pressure to match the

idealized successes of peers which can lead individuals to set unrealistically high standards for themselves, which in turn worsens their anxiety (Abellana, Mendez, Subido, & Culajara, 2024). FoMO has been shown to increase anxiety, and perfectionism increases the pressure to meet unrealistic standards and anxiety. However, the interplay between these factors remains unexplored, leaving a highly important opportunity to explore it. This gap presents an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how these psychological factors are experienced and perceived by young people in their daily lives, and how they shape their well-being, self-esteem, and coping mechanisms. Consequently, understanding this interplay is crucial, as it can inform more effective mental health interventions connected to the challenges young people face in today's society. This study aims to explore young adults' attitudes and experiences with Fear of Missing Out and its relationship to anxiety and perfectionism by addressing the following objectives:

1. Examine the impact of FoMO and provide a deeper understanding of the lived experience of FoMO among young adults.
2. Identify coping strategies used by young adults to manage the effects of FoMO.
3. Deepen on the understanding of the interplay between FoMO, anxiety, and perfectionism.

Therefore, the central research question of this study is:

“How do young adults experience and perceive Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), and how does it shape their anxiety and perfectionism?”

The following sections explore how young adults experience FoMO in their daily lives, focusing on the feelings and meanings behind these experiences. It also examines the various ways they cope with the challenges and pressures that FoMO brings. Finally, the study investigates the complex connections between FoMO, anxiety, and perfectionism, and how these factors together impact young adults' well-being in today's digitally connected society.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the psychological background of FoMo, anxiety, and perfectionism requires a clear theoretical foundation. This section introduces the main ideas and theories that guide this study. FoMO is a fairly new concept, but it has become more common, especially among young adults in both digital and offline contexts. Along with FoMO, this study also looks at anxiety and perfectionism, focusing on how personal expectations and social comparison can create pressure. To better understand how these experiences affect one, this study also draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This theory explains how people are motivated and how they feel based on whether their basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are met or not. These concepts together provide the foundation for exploring how participants experience FoMO and its interplay with anxiety and perfectionism.

FoMO and Young Adults

FoMo can be defined as the fear that one is missing out on rewarding experiences from which one is absent, often due to seeing others' experiences through social media platforms (Przybylski et al., 2013). The research adds that the main characteristic of people who experience FoMO is the "desire to stay continually connected with what others are

doing”. It typically involves two processes, the first being the feeling that others are enjoying rewarding or meaningful experiences while one is not. Secondly, a resulting urge to stay continuously connected with others to avoid being left out (Gupta & Sharma, 2021).

According to Gupta and Sharma, FoMO arises from deep-rooted social and psychological needs and is closely linked to mental health concerns such as anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem, as individuals focus on what they are missing rather than appreciating their own experiences.

This experience is particularly present among young adults such as students, who are in a key phase of discovering as well as shaping their own personal identity and feeling social belonging (Elhai et al., 2020). The frequent exposure to social media platforms can make students feel like they are missing out on experiences, which in turn may contribute to the development of negative emotional states such as anxiety, and loneliness, ultimately affecting their overall psychological well-being (Hunt et al., 2018). FoMO can lead to uncontrollable social media usage, as individuals check their devices repeatedly to stay connected to the social activities they fear missing out on (Fioravanti et al., 2021). This, in turn, affects sleep quality, increases overall distress and leads individuals to neglect daily routines (Przybylski et al., 2013). FoMO can also trigger anxiety, which has been found to be linked to FoMO, and the use of social media. (Elhai et al., 2020). The corresponding sub-question is: *How does FoMO, triggered by digital and real-life content, impact young people’s experiences with anxiety?*

Anxiety

Anxiety is a common emotional reaction defined by feelings of tension and fear, negative thoughts, and physical signs like a racing heart or fast breathing (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). When these reactions become too frequent or become a long-

term situation, they may qualify as an anxiety disorder. Many young adults experience significant anxiety symptoms without a formal diagnosis. Bandelow and Michaelis (2015) found that a substantial number of college students report moderate to severe anxiety symptoms, showing how common anxiety symptoms are in this group even without clinical diagnosis. Beck and Clark (1997) explain anxiety as the result of negative thinking patterns and very heightened alertness to possible dangers. People who experience anxiety often tend to think of worst-case scenarios and possible risks (Beck & Clark, 1997). Anxiety and perfectionism are also closely connected. The related sub-question to explore this is: *Do young adults experience pressure to meet idealized standards due to FoMO?*

Perfectionism

In addition, FoMO can play a crucial role in increasing or even intensifying perfectionism-related traits. Frost et al. (1990, p. 540) describe perfectionism not simply as setting high standards but as a pattern of overly critical self-evaluation, particularly characteristic of neurotic perfectionists ((1978, as cited in Frost et al., 1990, p. 450). This type of perfectionists tend to set overly high expectations on themselves and struggle to accept mistakes or changes from their way to reaching their goals, leading to constant feelings that they are never good enough. This form of perfectionism is distinct from what Hamacheck (1978) calls “normal perfectionism,” which allows for flexibility and is often connected to positive feelings. The neurotic form, by contrast, is closely linked with psychological distress which can lead to self-criticism and anxiety (Hamacheck, 1978).

Perfectionistic individuals, those who set extremely high standards for themselves, typically experience more chronic worry and fear of failure (Frost et al., 1990, p. 540). In this cycle, anxiety drives perfectionism by making people feel they must always keep up while striving for perfection increases anxiety through constant self-judgment. With regard to social

media, platforms and their users tend to present only the most positive and curated moments of individuals' lives, often leaving out the ordinary or challenging aspects (Fardouly et al., 2015). As a result, Farouly et al. state that users may find themselves comparing their own lives to these cherry-picked images, which can lead to unrealistic expectations and unhealthy comparisons. These comparisons can increase feelings of insufficiency and pressure to meet these unfeasible standards (Vogel et al., 2014). The corresponding research question is: *How does this pressure contribute to perfectionism and FoMO?*

Self-Determination Theory

This study aims to build on existing theoretical frameworks to understand how FoMO, anxiety, and perfectionism interconnect. A central theoretical framework for understanding FOMO is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), presented by Ryan and Deci (2008). SDT states that human beings have three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are considered highly essential for healthy functioning and emotional well-being. Ryan & Deci mention that when these needs are fulfilled, individuals experience greater life satisfaction, motivation, and positive emotional well-being. However, when these needs are not met and ignored, individuals are more likely to experience negative emotional outcomes, including, as previously mentioned, anxiety, and above all, FoMO.

In the context of FOMO, the psychological need for relatedness plays a central role. According to SDT, relatedness involves the need for social connection and belonging Buckles et al. (2023), which is crucial for emotional well-being. When individuals perceive themselves as socially disconnected or excluded from others within their environment, this sense of isolation can trigger FoMO (Ryan & Deci,

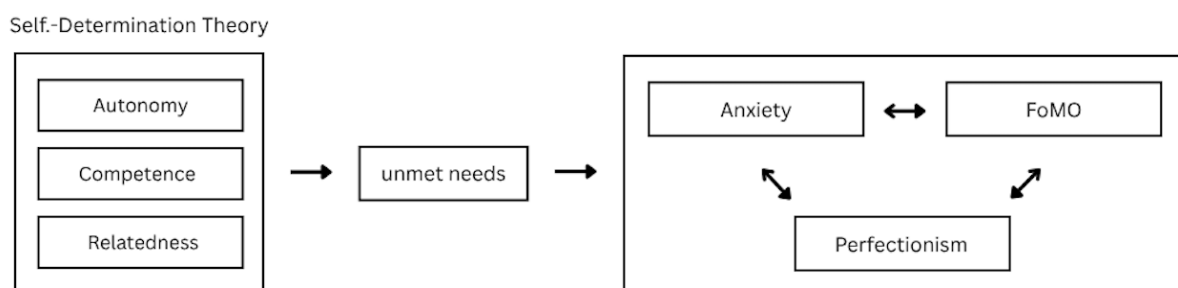
2008). The need for competence, or the desire to feel effective and capable, is often challenged by social comparisons such as on social media platforms. These platforms tend to promote idealized versions of others' lives, leading people to compare their own lives to unrealistic standards.

The third and last need that Ryan and Deci mention is the need for autonomy, which involves the ability to make independent choices and decisions based on one's own preferences, is also a key element of SDT. However, FoMO can significantly disrupt this need by causing individuals to feel disconnected from their ability to control their own actions and choices. When people believe they are missing out on rewarding experiences, it diminishes their sense of agency, leaving them feeling weak as their decisions are influenced by others, rather than by themselves.

This can result in heightened stress, frustration, and self-doubt (La Guardia et al., 2000). As individuals experience this lack of autonomy, they may have problems with feelings of deficiency, and start experiencing anxiety, as they are constantly measuring their lives against the activities and choices of others. The loss of autonomy not only affects their sense of control but creates emotional distress, potentially worsening mental health outcomes (Przybylski et al., 2013). Figure 1 visualizes the research expectations of this study.

Figure 1

Visualization of Research Expectations



In summary, the concepts of FoMO, anxiety, and perfectionism are deeply intertwined. FoMO can heighten anxious feelings when individuals compare themselves to others, and this anxiety in turn can trigger perfectionistic behaviour. Moreover, the Self-Determination Theory suggests that FoMO may arise from unmet needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The related sub-question is: *How does the experience of FoMO relate to the satisfaction or frustration of young adults' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness?* Lastly, the final sub-question is: *What coping strategies do young adults use to manage or decrease the effects of FoMO on their anxiety and perfectionism?*

Methods

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design, and, in particular, a semi-structured, in-depth interview. This method was chosen because it allows for an open and flexible way to explore how young adults experience and perceive FoMO, and how it relates to anxiety and perfectionism. It is also important to mention that in-depth interviews are especially well-suited for sensitive and personal topics, as they focus more on understanding the meaning behind people's feelings, perspectives, and behaviours (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). The interviews are semi-structured, which means that there is a set of main, guiding questions as well as different follow-up questions, but room is left for participants to talk freely (Kallio et al., 2016). This allows the researcher to dig deeper into interesting responses and gain deeper insight into the participants' lived experiences (Gill et al., 2008). This approach also helps create a more conversational setting, which is important when discussing sensitive topics.

The study is making use of the concept of Grounded Theory, a widely used qualitative research method that helps develop new understanding directly from the data collected (Jørgensen, 2001, p. 6396). Instead of starting with a fixed hypothesis, Grounded Theory utilizes an inductive approach, making it possible for themes and patterns to merge naturally during the research (Charmaz, 2006). This makes it a strong fit for this study, as the goal is to explore how FoMO, anxiety, and perfectionism are connected with one another.

Participants

The target group for this study is young adults aged between 18 and 30, and who are university students. This age group was chosen for this research for a reason, as people within this age group, as previously mentioned, are most active on social media (Eurostat, 2024), are developing their identities, and often face high social pressures. According to Callan et al. (2015), individuals aged between 18 to 30 are also referred to a group of young adults, which feel a higher level of exploration, and social comparison. These characteristics make this population especially suitable for this study.

A total of 20 participants were recruited to ensure a minimum of 15 rich and high-quality interviews, which is suitable for thematic analysis. (Byrne, 2021). To ensure data saturation, 20 participants were recruited. The sample aims for an equal gender division, as research shows that gender differences exist in experiences of anxiety, and perfectionism (McLean et al., 2011; Sand et al., 2021). This division helps to capture a wider range of perspectives within this research. Participants are found using non-probability sampling, specifically snowball sampling, where existing participants help recruit others from their social networks. This method is suitable for reaching individuals who fulfil the requirements, (Noy, 2008). At the end of the interview, participants get a chance to share any final thoughts and also get reminded of their right to withdraw.

Procedure

This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioral Sciences at the University of Twente (Approval Number: 250742). Before each interview, the oral consent of each participant was recorded separately. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, confidentiality, voluntary participation, possible risks, and their right to withdraw at any time. Possible risks of this interview include emotional discomfort when discussing sensitive topics like FoMO, anxiety, or perfectionism, which could temporarily affect participants' well-being. Interviews were conducted by a single researcher and in person. Each session aimed to last around 45 minutes, depending on each individual interview. During the interview, participants had the opportunity to ask questions and talk freely. The researcher, who is the interviewee, remained objective and only guided the interview. This ensured that the participants were not influenced and biased by the interviewee.

To check the reliability of the coding process, Cohen's Kappa coefficient was used to assess the level of agreement. One independent researcher coded one full interview transcript, and their coding was compared with the original coding. Cohen's Kappa was chosen because it looks out for agreement that could occur by chance, offering a more accurate measure (Cole, 2023). Cohen's Kappa was 0.78, which indicates substantial agreement and supports the reliability of the Thematic Analysis.

Materials

The interview guide is structured to start with general questions about demographics, daily life, and social media use, then shift toward more specific topics such as experiences

with FoMO, its emotional impact, connections to anxiety and perfectionism, and personal coping strategies.

Table 1 presents the structure of the semi-structured interview guide used in this study. The interview begins with a brief introduction asking participants to share a bit about themselves in their own words, followed by demographic questions on gender, age, and current study field. These demographics might help to understand the context later on. It also provides basic background information that supports the analysis. Following this, the conversation transitions naturally into a few informal warm-up questions about social media use. These early questions are not directly analyzed but serve to ease the participant into the interview as well as create the foundation to get a deeper understanding of the upcoming questions. The first main section explores personal experiences with FoMO, asking how participants define it and when they have felt it, both online and offline. These questions were informed by previous literature on FoMO such as by Przybylski et al. (2013) and its common triggers in digital and social settings. Next, the interview examines FoMO's connection to anxiety. Participants were informed that this is about general anxiety and not about clinical anxiety such as a diagnosed mental health condition. This distinction is important to ensure participants feel comfortable sharing personal reflections without feeling misunderstood. This is followed by questions on self-imposed perfectionism and the internal pressure to meet certain standards or present oneself in a specific way. The next section uses scenario-based questions based on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to explore how FoMO relates to the basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This theory was used as a guiding framework to better understand the psychological motivations behind FoMO and its emotional effects. The interview concludes with a discussion of coping strategies participants use to manage FoMO. Finally, they are asked if they want to share any additional thoughts,

they feel are important to add. The full interview guide can be found in the appendix (see Appendix C). This structure makes sure that each interview captures relevant statements and answers of each participant that can be used for data analysis by being meaningful and consistent across participants, while still capturing the individuality of each person.

Table 1

Examples of Interview Questions, divided into sections

Section	Main Questions	Follow-Up Questions
1. Demographics	Tell me a little bit about yourself.	To start off, would you mind telling me how old you are?
2. Warm-Up / Social Media Use	How frequently do you use social media platforms?	Would you say that has changed over the last few years?
3. Lived Experiences with FoMO	Can you recall a recent time you felt like you were missing out?	Would you say FoMO is something you experience regularly or only in certain situations?
4. FoMO and Anxiety	Do you think FoMO impacts your anxiety? If so, how?	Have you ever avoided social media or events because it made you anxious?
5. FoMO and Perfectionism	Do you feel pressure to present yourself a certain way to others?	What helps to ease or reduce this pressure for you?

6. Self-Determination Theory and FoMO/Perfectionism	Imagine you had planned to spend Saturday relaxing at home, but then you see on Instagram that your classmates spontaneously organized a day trip you were not part of. How would you feel about changing your plans? Would you feel like you had no choice but to join in?	
7. Coping Strategies	Have you found any strategies that help reduce stress or anxiety related to social comparisons?	Do you talk to others about these feelings?

Note. Follow-up questions were used flexibly depending on participants' responses.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Amberscript, a transcription tool provided by the BMS Lab. Additionally, the transcripts get rechecked and manually edited to ensure full accuracy. The transcripts are then analyzed using Atlas.ti®, a qualitative data analysis software that can be used for systematic coding, creation and organization of themes and concepts, and linking those across different transcript/datasets. This tool ensures a structured and transparent data analysis process.

Thematic Analysis was applied following the six-phase data analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), and further elaborated by Byrne (2021). The data analysis began with the so-called familiarization, where the researcher reads through all the interview transcripts several times to get a deep understanding of the content. During this stage, any first observations or interesting points will be noted down to help guide the later steps. In the second step, the researcher starts coding the data by highlighting meaningful pieces of text that relate to the research questions, such as experiences of anxiety, social comparison, or ways of dealing with FoMO. Next, the codes were grouped together to form possible themes. This means looking for patterns in the data, like ideas or feelings that come

up in different interviews. This can be done using inductive coding, where the themes come from the data itself, or deductive coding, where you use existing theories to help find the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once these themes are created, another review is necessary to make sure they fit well with both the coded sections and the overall raw data. At this point, it is possible that some themes get combined, changed, or even removed for a clearer analysis result. In the fifth step, each theme is clearly named and described to explain what it represents and these themes get connected with the research questions to see how they answer them.

Results

This section outlines the key findings from the thematic analysis of the interview data, focusing on how young adults experience and make sense of FoMO, and how it relates to feelings of anxiety and perfectionism. The themes identified in the analysis reflect both the psychological challenges associated with FoMO and the various strategies participants use to cope with these experiences. Particular attention is also given to how FoMO interacts with participants' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Table 2 presents an overview of the demographic characteristics of the study participants, including age, gender, and academic field. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 28 years, with a mean age of 23.06 years ($SD = 2.36$). The sample consisted of 11 female and 7 male participants. Regarding academic background, 13 participants were enrolled in programs within the social sciences, while 5 participants were pursuing studies in technical fields, such as Engineering or Computer Science. These demographic details help contextualize the individual perspectives and experiences explored in the interviews.

Table 2

Demographics of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Study Field
1	Female	21	Communication
2	Male	28	Communication
3	Female	23	Communication
4	Male	23	Communication
5	Female	23	Business
6	Female	24	Communication
7	Female	21	Communication
8	Male	19	Mechanical Engineering
9	Female	20	Psychology
10	Male	27	Information Science
11	Male	21	Communication
12	Male	25	Psychology
13	Female	24	Interaction Technology
14	Female	25	Modern East Asian Studies
15	Female	24	Business
16	Male	24	Computer Science
17	Female	22	Electrical Engineering
18	Female	21	Communication

Appendix D to G provides an overview of the themes and sub-themes identified through thematic analysis. These cover participants' social media use, their lived experiences of FoMO, the emotional and behavioural ways in which FoMO is linked to anxiety and perfectionism, and lastly coping strategies.

Social Media Use

As a foundation for understanding participants' experiences with FoMO, their general social media usage was explored in the introductory part of the interviews. Thematic analysis revealed several sub-themes (see Appendix D), including how frequently social media is being used, daily habits and routines, preferred platforms and content types, changes in usage over time, social media breaks or screen time, reduction, as well as emotional connectedness to social media.

All participants reported daily social media use, ranging from 30 minutes to eight hours per day. Some described a decrease in usage over time, "*I think I use it less than I used to.*" (P18), while others noted an increase depending on their schedule, "*It might actually be a bit more, I think.*" (P12). Usage patterns often vary with life situations, such as exam periods, "*It's super time dependent... in exam phase, I use it not that often.*" (P1). Participants typically used social media in the morning or evening, often during daily routines like eating or before bed. The most common platforms were Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn, with content consumed mostly for entertainment and social connection, and less for information, "Probably less for information and more for either of the other two." (Participant 13).

Regarding social media breaks, some reported taking intentional breaks during stressful periods, "I regularly take breaks during exams." (P18), while others never felt the need, "I never took a break. I was always on there." (P1). Most had stopped using platforms like X, also known as Twitter, and Snapchat, citing negativity or irrelevance. Emotional connections to social media vary. Some found it motivating, "Things that motivate me tend to make me a little happier." (P9), while others described a sense of dependency, "I think my phone and social media is just part of my life." (P15).

Lived Experiences of FoMO

Participants shared a wide range of perspectives on what Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) means to them, how they experience it in their daily lives, and how it influences their emotions and behaviours. Eight sub-themes were identified through thematic analysis (see Appendix E), reflecting the variety and depth of these experiences as well as how participants perceive FoMO in their lives.

Definitions of FoMO varied slightly, but most participants described it as a negative feeling of exclusion, missing out on social or personal opportunities, or falling behind peers, “FoMO is when I have a bad feeling, when I'm not connected or not knowing. Not aware of what's going on outside, and I feel like other people have a better life than I am living.” (P1). These definitions were often shaped by personal values and social media use patterns. There was a noticeable variation in how often participants reported experiencing FoMO. Eleven participants, including seven female participants, shared that they experience FoMO only in specific situations rather than frequently in their daily lives. As one participant put it, “I would say quite rarely. On in certain situations.” (P16). In contrast, seven participants stated that they experience FoMO on a more regular basis, I think it's there.” (P12). Moreover, in terms of how FoMO has developed over time, most participants felt that they experience less FoMO now than they did a few years ago. As Participant 5 described, “It affects me less.” The feelings usually last for a short amount of time for the majority, ranging from a few minutes to a few days. For instance, participant 13 explained that it does not affect them an entire day but only when they actively think about it. However, a few outliers mentioned that their experience has remained fairly consistent or even increased slightly, “I would say that it hasn't changed much. And my reactions to it are either the same or very similar as they were back then.” (P16).

Participants frequently described similar scenarios that triggered FoMO, such as hearing about events they were not part of or announcements of achievements, such as studies or travel, “It affects me in a way, since I don't have what other people have. With having that family time and getting to go home essentially, whenever they feel like it.” (P4). Some participants also mentioned they experience FoMO in regard to buying or consuming specific products, “I think skincare is kind of a good example because you see those trends online or all those influencers that talk about the certain benefits of some skincare. I think that's actually also FoMO.” (P13). These triggers were most often digital, particularly seeing group photos or videos from events they were not part of, “Especially when my family sends me pictures. I want to be there.” (P7), but some were also real-life, like overhearing plans or conversations, “I have friends, that are more over in The Hague, that are hanging out on their own because they're still closer together. And then like, I'll only hear of this quite late because I only see them every so often. I would have liked to have known that you guys were doing something because I would have loved to join.” (P9).

The emotional reactions after experiencing FoMO ranged from uneasiness to sadness and frustration, as well as confusion, just like how participant six described it: “Why do I feel like this now?”. Several participants reported a feeling of sadness, “It's like kind of a sadness.” (P13), often followed by a sense of regret, “Maybe I should have gone.” (P4). In a few cases, participants mentioned they take it with humour and respond back with sarcasm. Participant Six explained they would jokingly confront the other party, sharing her feelings about missing out. Apart from causing emotional reactions, FoMO often led to subsequent behaviours, such as impulsively joining events, replying to messages faster than usual, or even purchasing similar things, “Like then, I'm planning my next vacation, for example, or trying to get active about it.” (P1) or “So, I did buy the tickets.” (P7). In general, the majority had the feeling that they needed to recompensate for the feeling of missing out by doing

something similar to the missed experience, just as Participant 13 stated: “We were thinking, we kind of have to make up for it.”. Most participants also described positive retrospective realizations, in which they later recognized that the experience of FoMO had been exaggerated or irrational, “But sometimes I'm also so happy to be home after a long day.” (P7), “You know, I can't do everything with everyone and stuff like that.” (P2).

FoMO and Anxiety

Participants reflected on the ways in which FoMO contributes to feelings of anxiety in their everyday lives, especially in relation to digital and social environments. This section revealed seven sub-themes that illustrate how FoMO can trigger emotional, cognitive, and even physical responses associated with anxiety. These sub-themes also shed light on how participants understand the connection between FoMO and their feelings of anxiety (see Appendix F).

A majority described a lot of emotional and cognitive responses that illustrate the connection between FoMO and everyday anxiety. Many expressed experiencing social pressure to remain visible, active, or updated on social media and offline, which often led to worry when they felt disconnected. Participant Eleven expressed it “hard”, “Sometimes it can get quite hard to stay up to date.”. This pressure to stay engaged was closely connected to mental looping, where participants reported repetitive thoughts about what others were doing and thinking about them, what they might be missing, or whether they were falling behind socially. One communicated it as a lack of contribution socially, “I also feel a little bit excluded because then people can have a long conversation about this topic I cannot contribute.” (P15). However, a handful of participants said they do not think much about other’s lives and activities, “I think it's easy for me to not actively think too much about my friends because I have a very busy daily life.”.

Another common experience involved anxious thoughts about others' opinions. Some participants worried about how they were perceived based on their own actively, online and offline, leading to overthinking or hesitation before posting as well as attending an event. For instance, Participant Two described it like, "I'm just like, who do I talk to? Do I just stand there, and have everyone just kind of talk to me every once in a while?". As a result, several participants described avoidance behaviours, such as muting social media, deleting apps temporarily, or skipping social events to reduce FoMO-related anxiety. "I didn't go to the birthday of one of my best friends because I don't really know anyone there aside from him. So, I didn't go in the end because I was feeling too anxious to go." (P12). Nonetheless, there were also multiple answers, that demonstrated the opposite, "Not really. I cannot come up with a situation." (P1).

In some cases, participants also shared experiences of physical discomfort, such as tension, or restlessness after experiencing FoMO. Participant Nine described it as a tension around her body, as insecurity, and as a lack of confidence that things will go okay. They said this was related to social gatherings. Moreover, participant 15 mentioned a specific situation that happened because of anxiety and later one was the reason for FoMO, "This anxiety has lasted around a month because I was afraid to go to sleep. This again made me miss out on other things in life.". Beyond these symptoms, the overall emotional impact was significant for even more participants, with feelings of irritability or lack of enjoyment, that are response to exclusion or comparison, "I wouldn't really be able to enjoy myself." (P12). Some participants expressed it less negatively, "I feel a bit, I won't say disappoint, but not happy with myself." (P3). Finally, participants had mixed answers regarding their awareness of the FoMO and anxiety connection. While some clearly saw a link between their feelings of FoMO and anxious thoughts or behaviours, "I do think so, because, I mean, it is called fear of missing out. So the anxiety is kind of part of it." (P6), others acknowledged the emotional

effects without explicitly labelling it as anxiety or seeing a connection between each variable, “Honestly, I don't know if it affects my anxiety.” (P14).

FoMO and Perfectionism

In the next section, participants discussed if they experience any type of comparison pressure and how FoMO can contribute to perfectionistic expectations, particularly when comparing themselves to peers. Their responses reflect how social context and perceived social standards influence self-worth, and identity as well as set goals of one. Thematic analysis revealed five sub-themes, illustrating the ways in which FoMO reinforces the pressure to meet idealized standards and how this pressure may lead to perfectionism (see Appendix F).

Many participants described having high personal standards, particularly when it came to academics, social life and how one appeared to others, “I need to make sure that I engage with friends and have a social life. I need to make sure that I am maintaining and trying to keep up with my education.” (P9). For some, these expectations developed independently, but most shared that they were intensified by FoMO. Seeing others succeed or appear highly successful online, often made them feel like they, too, needed to meet those standards. Comparisons to others play a central role in this process. Participants frequently measured their own academic, career, or social progress against peers, often based on what was shared online. Regarding this, participant 15 said: “Every time when I go on LinkedIn, I see somebody saying, I got a very nice job at a very nice company. Immediate anxiety and immediate thoughts. I'm not doing enough.”. Even achievements they felt proud of before, lost value when compared to what others did. One participant noted that just seeing others’ updates made them question their own pace in life, “I should maybe be

at a different stage of life right now. I should be advanced. I should finish earlier or do more extracurricular stuff.” (P7).

As a result, several participants reported intentionally creating a curated online identity. While generally said that their online presence is quite reflective of them, posts were still edited, cherry-picked, and overthought in order to match a certain image that reflects success, happiness, or personal progress. For example, participant 14 said: “No, definitely not, because I just post when I'm happy.”, and participant five mentioned: “In some photos, I try to make my waist smaller.”. The goal is not only to impress others but to feel like they are keeping up with their peers. This perceived need to appear a certain way often led to a feeling of constant pressure to be productive. Participants constantly felt like they needed to be productive, “Looking at the comparing aspect, it also can affect me negatively. When I see, they're already finished with my studies and I'm still studying, I tell myself to do more than what I do right now.”.

Finally, the combination of high standards and social comparison often contributed to self-doubt. Despite rationally understanding that social media only reflects a small part of someone's reality, many participants still reported feeling inadequate, especially when others appeared to be doing better, “I want to present myself in a way that isn't embarrassing, I don't know. I think I always have the worry of being like cringe or something.” (P7).

Coping Strategies

In the last section of the interviews, participants described a variety of strategies they use to manage with FoMO. These ranged from reframing their thinking and limiting exposure to triggering content to seeking support from peers or prioritizing offline activities. Appendix G summarizes the main coping strategies identified during the analysis.

One of the most frequently mentioned strategies was cognitive reframing, where participants tried to consciously change how they interpreted the importance of social gatherings and social media or their own expectations. This often involved reminding themselves that online posts reflect curated moments, not the full reality. Some participants also described actively lowering their standards or shifting focus away from comparison-based thinking. For instance, Participant Seven responded with: “I see everyone has different faces and things they do. And often we catastrophize a lot for things that might not be that bad.”, and Participant Nine stated: “I think that what people learn is to compare themselves with their past selves as opposed to other individuals because you never know what goes well or what doesn't go well in people's lives.“.

When asked about peer support, many emphasized the importance of having a support system. Talking to friends, family members, or partners helped them process FoMO-related feelings, especially when they realized others were going through similar experiences, “I always talk to my mom. She's my therapist but I have really close friends that I go to in case for different problems.” (P17), “I usually talk to my boyfriend about this and also to one of my friends.“ (P15). These conversations were often described as relieving and helpful in reducing self-pressure or uneasy thoughts, as one mentioned: “So, talking about them with my friends, specifically in a small circle. I think that's very helpful to calm one down.“ (P11).

Another way participants coped with FoMO was by focusing more on their offline environments. Engaging in real-life activities, spending time outdoors, or being around close people, helped them disconnect from worrying and regain a fresh perspective. “I think that also helps me to less worry about missing out on good times because you worry less about the environment you're in.“ (P16). In terms of digital habits, so-called content curation was a common approach. This included unfollowing accounts that triggered FoMO or anxiety or following more positive and relatable creators. These actions allowed participants to create a

more emotionally manageable social media exposure, "I just unfollowed them and took them out of my following." (P3), "I also follow one account that is kind of like happy news." (P17).

Lastly, participants shared various self-regulation activities to help cope with FoMO-related feelings. These included journaling, cooking or engaging in solo hobbies, such as eating comfort food or watching a movie. Participant Two demonstrated well by saying: "That can be exercise. That can be cooking, like, just actually entertaining yourself, whether it's learning a new skill or practising something. We should be social and we should be busy, I think, as humans.". These small but conscious decisions were described as helpful in regaining control over their digital habits and emotional reactions.

Discussion

Main findings

To summarize, this study explored how young adults experience and perceive Fear of Missing Out, and how it influences their anxiety and perfectionism. The results of the thematic analysis present how FoMO is not only a digital phenomenon but also one that deeply affects one's emotions and self-perception.

This dynamic can be better understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which suggests that individuals are motivated by three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The findings indicate that FoMO often threatened participants' sense of relatedness, especially when they felt excluded from social experiences shared online or in person. This lack of connection often impacted their sense of competence, making them feel like they were falling behind or not doing enough in comparison to their peers. In some cases, changes in one's behaviour were

described, such as overcommitting to plans. as a way to regain a sense of control, which links to the need for autonomy.

One of the main findings in regards to FoMO is that it is widely recognized and experienced among young adults. However, its frequency and intensity varied. While some only experienced it occasionally, others reported regular feelings triggered by both digital content as well as offline occasions. These experiences were closely linked to emotional and cognitive responses such as worry and sadness, showing how FoMO can contribute to daily anxiety. In addition, the findings showed that FoMO often reinforced comparison with others, especially with peers, pushing participants towards perfectionistic goals, by adapting thinking and behaviour.

Lastly, participants shared a range of coping strategies, from reframing thoughts and engaging more in offline settings to curating their contacts and social media feeds. Many also valued peer support as a way to reduce internal pressure and gain validation. Finally, these findings support the central research question by underlining how FoMO can act as a trigger that shapes young adults' mental well-being, especially by increasing anxiety and pressure to meet idealized standards. Understanding these findings through the SDT framework adds depth to the analysis by highlighting how FoMO can disrupt core needs and lead to patterns of FoMO, anxiety, and perfectionism in response.

Theoretical Implications

This study adds to the literature by showing how FoMO can be understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Participants linked to their need for relatedness, for example when they felt excluded from social gatherings or had a low sense of belonging to their peer groups. In addition, the need for competence was challenged when participants compared their achievements and skills to others, leading to feelings of not

being competent enough. The third need, autonomy, was also affected when others influenced their choices, such as joining events just to avoid missing out rather than wanting to go. These insights support the theory's argument that unmet psychological needs can result in emotional distress, leading to additionally triggering feelings of FoMO.

This study shows that FoMO is not just about wanting to be included, but it is also deeply connected to internal motivations and the way young adults define their self-worth. Moreover, it contributes to research connecting FoMO with perfectionism, a relationship that is not widely explored yet, as mentioned previously. While past studies, such as by Fardouly et al. (2015) and Vogel et al. (2014), have linked social media with social comparison and low self-esteem, this study shows that FoMO can actively increase perfectionistic standards, especially in academic and career-related contexts.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has several limitations that need to be mentioned. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, with only 18 participants. While this size was appropriate for an in-depth qualitative analysis within the limited timeframe of the research, it means the sample is not fully representative of the entire population. Additionally, all participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which may reduce the generalization of the findings. Also, although there was equal gender division, other important, demographical factors were not explored in this study. In addition, only English-speaking participants were recruited which restricts the sample as well. Secondly, because FoMO is highly contextual and can change over time, this research design provided only a momentary insight into participants' experiences. A long-term research design could offer a richer understanding of how FoMO, anxiety, and perfectionism evolve over time and in specific life situations. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data of participants which means that the data might be

incomplete. Participants might have over- or under-reported their experiences of FoMO or anxiety.

Using semi-structured interviews was an effective choice for this study, as it allowed participants to speak openly and share their experiences and thoughts in a flexible and conversational way which is highly important, given the sensitivity of the topic. The use of Grounded Theory (Jørgensen, 2001, p. 6396), and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) worked well, as it made it easy to emerge themes organically, without being predetermined. The program, Atlas.ti, was a helpful tool for organizing and coding the qualitative data systematically.

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, Cohen's Kappa was used to test the consistency of the codebook, which added transparency. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that researcher bias can still influence how the data is interpreted, even when coding appears consistent. The design of the interview guide also played a key role in the quality of the data collected. While the majority of the previously presented interview guide was applied and remained the same, two questions were removed after the first round of interviews since they did not contribute much to the research questions and did not match with the interview flow. The following questions were removed: "Do you think you have become more aware of it or more sensitive to certain triggers?" and "What kind of actions (e.g., parties, achievements, social updates) tends to trigger anxiety for you?".

Practical Implications

This study highlights a few useful takeaways for educators, and mental health professionals. One key insight is the importance of raising awareness on how FoMO can contribute to anxiety and perfectionistic traits. Having open conversations about these feelings might help reduce the isolation and tension some young people experience.

Workshops, for example, could encourage students to think more critically about what they see online and how it affects their mental well-being. Previous research has shown that this kind of education can actually reduce stigma, and spread awareness (Nazari et al., 2024).

Another helpful strategy is promoting cognitive reframing by encouraging people to compare themselves to their past selves, rather than to others. Many participants found this mindset shift really helpful. It's also backed by similar research, which was conducted by Luo et al. (2020), showing that techniques like this, especially in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), can lower social anxiety and improve coping skills over time.

Conclusion

This study looked at how FoMO affects young adults' anxiety and perfectionism, and how they try to cope with those experiences. The results suggest that FoMO can lead to things like overthinking, emotional stress, getting away from social situations, and feeling like one is not good enough, which can add to overall stress levels. At the same time, it is encouraging to see how many participants found their own ways to deal with this with several coping strategies. Overall, this research shows that FoMO is more than just a trendy term. It reflects real emotional struggles that many young people face in today's fast-paced and digitalized world. By learning more about how FoMO works and how young adults are coping with it, one can find better ways to support their mental health in everyday life.

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Appendix

Appendix A

AI Statement

During the preparation of this work, the researcher, Merve Demir, made use of ChatGPT and Grammarly to support various aspects of the writing process. This included:

1. Generating ideas and brainstorming,
2. Assisting with grammar and spelling correction
3. Receiving assistance with structure and organization, and
4. Editing for clarity and conciseness of writing.

All content was carefully reviewed and revised by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final version of the work.

Appendix B

Oral Informed Consent Procedure

Informed Consent Procedure (Oral Consent)

Step 1: Introduction and Purpose of the Study

- Begin by greeting the participant and thanking them for their time.
- Explain the purpose of the study: This research aims to explore young adults' attitudes and experiences with Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and how it affects their mental well-being (anxiety) and perfectionism. Your insights will help us better understand these attitudes and experiences.

Step 2: Voluntary Participation

- Inform the participant that their participation is completely voluntary.
- Emphasize that they can withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without facing any consequences.

Step 3: Interview Process

- Explain that the interview will last approximately 45 minutes.
- Let them know that the discussion will be semi-structured, meaning I will ask open-ended questions but may also follow up based on their responses.
- Clarify that there are no right or wrong answers and that their honest opinions and experiences are valued.

Step 4: Audio Recording and Data Storage

- Inform them that the interview will be audio-recorded.
- Explain that their responses will remain confidential and will only be used for research purposes.
- Assure them that all recordings and transcripts will be securely stored securely and confidential.
- Clarify that all data will be permanently deleted once the final research assessment is received or by August 30, 2025, whichever comes first.

Step 5: Potential Risks and Benefits

- Acknowledge that while no major risks are anticipated, discussing this topic may bring up personal emotions.
→ To protect individuals who may be particularly vulnerable, students will be informed during the oral consent process that the interview covers sensitive topics such as mental well-being, anxiety, and perfectionism.
 - This study includes topics related to mental well-being, anxiety, and perfectionism. Are you aware that these may be sensitive, and do you feel comfortable discussing them today?
 - Are you currently in a stable mental state and do you feel emotionally well enough to participate in this interview?
- Assure them that they are free to skip any question or stop the interview at any time if they feel uncomfortable.
- Highlight that their participation may contribute to a better understanding of FOMO's impact on young adults, potentially benefiting future research.

Step 6: Questions and Clarifications

- Ask the participant if they have any questions before proceeding.

Step 7: Verbal Consent Statement

- Clearly asking: *"Do you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, understanding that your responses will be audio-recorded, kept confidential, and that you may withdraw at any time without consequences?"*
- Waiting for a clear "Yes" response before proceeding with the interview.
- Recording their response as confirmation of consent.

Appendix C

Complete Interview Guide & Questions

Section	Main Questions	Follow-Up Questions
1. Demographics	Tell me a little bit about yourself.	To start off, would you mind telling me how old you are?

		And what are you currently doing? Are you studying, working, or maybe doing a bit of both?
	How do you identify in terms of gender? (Optional: Feel free to share as much or as little as you're comfortable with.)	
2. Warm-Up / Social Media Use	How frequently do you use social media platforms?	Would you say that has changed over the last few years?
Explain that the overall topic is not just based on social media but it has plays a big role.		Are there certain times of day you tend to scroll more?
	Which platforms do you use most?	What do you usually do on [platform]?
		Are there certain types of content you enjoy the most on those platforms?
		Are those more for social connection, information, or entertainment?
	Are there any platforms you have stopped using? Why?	Have you ever taken a break from social media? What effect did it have?
3. Lived Experiences with FoMO	How would you describe what FoMO means to you personally?	
	Can you recall a recent time you felt like you were missing out?	Would you say FoMO is something you experience regularly or only in certain situations?
		What triggered that feeling, and how did you respond?
	Have you ever made a decision (e.g., buying or doing something) because you did not want to miss out?	

	<p>Do you think FoMO affects you more now than five years ago? Why?</p> <p>Can you tell me about a time when you felt like you were missing out, but which took you by surprise to feel that way?</p> <p>When you feel FoMO, how do you usually react?</p>	<p>Do you tend to do something about it, or just sit with the feeling? Why?</p>
<p>4. FoMO and Anxiety</p> <p>Explain this is about general, everyday anxiety, and not clinical anxiety or diagnosed mental health conditions.</p>	<p>Do you think FoMO impacts your anxiety? If so, how?</p> <p>Have you ever felt anxious or overwhelmed because of something you saw online or because of something you heard about?</p> <p>Have you ever felt nervous or tense before posting something?</p>	<p>Have you ever avoided social media or events because it made you anxious?</p> <p>Can you describe what that anxiety feels like in those moments?</p> <p>Do you think the pressure to always stay updated adds to your anxiety?</p> <p>How long did that feeling stay with you?</p> <p>What goes through your mind?</p> <p>How does that affect your willingness to share things online?</p>
<p>5. FoMO and Perfectionism</p>	<p>Do you feel pressure to present yourself a certain way to others?</p> <p>What expectations do you have for yourself when it comes to posting or staying visible?</p>	<p>Would you say you set high standards for yourself in certain areas such as in your social life or career? Why?</p> <p>Are there certain types of posts (e.g., academic success or appearance) that increase this pressure?</p>

		<p>What helps to ease or reduce this pressure for you?</p> <p>Do you think your online presence reflects your real life?</p> <p>In which areas (academics, social life, looks, etc.) do you feel the most pressure to be perfect?</p>
	<p>Do you find yourself comparing your own progress or goals to other'?</p> <p>How does it make yourself feel when seeing or hearing others' achievements? Does it affect you?</p>	
6. Self-Determination Theory and FoMO/Perfectionism	<p>Imagine you had planned to spend Saturday relaxing at home, but then you see on Instagram that your classmates spontaneously organized a day trip you were not part of. How would you feel about changing your plans? Would you feel like you had no choice but to join in?</p> <p>Picture yourself scrolling through LinkedIn and seeing a peer share they have landed their dream internship. How would you react? Would you feel proud for them, or would you start doubting your own skills?</p> <p>Think of a time when your friend group shared photos from a gathering you didn't attend. How did that affect your sense of belonging?</p> <p>Out of those three situations, changing your plans (autonomy), doubting your skills (competence), or feeling excluded (relatedness), which one usually hits you hardest when you experience FoMO? Can you tell me why?</p>	<p>Can you describe a moment when doing something just for yourself, like taking a break offline, completing a small personal goal, or hanging out with someone, helped you feel less worried about missing out?</p> <p>When you miss out on something social, do you ever feel like you're drifting away from that group or community?</p>

7. Coping Strategies	Have you found any strategies that help reduce stress or anxiety related to social comparisons?	Are there times when you intentionally disconnect from social media? What led to that decision?
	What advice would you give to someone your age dealing with similar feelings?	Are there people or communities (online or offline) that help you feel less pressure? Do you talk to others about these feelings?
	To wrap it up, is there anything you would like to add? Anything we did not discuss but is important for you?	

Note. Follow-up questions were used flexibly depending on participants' responses.

Appendix D

Sub-themes and Codes Reflecting Participants' Social Media Usage

Sub-theme	Code Name	Code Definition	Frequency
Social Media Use	1.1 Frequency	How often and long the participant uses social media platforms in their daily life	51
	1.2 Habits	Typical routines or patterns of social media usage	38
	1.3 Platform and Content Preferences	Preferred platforms and types of content consumed on those platforms	67
	1.4 Changes in Usage	Reported changes in use or amount of time over time	45
	1.5 Social Media Breaks/Reduction	Experiences with consciously taking a break, reducing usage, or stopping to use certain platforms	48

1.6 Emotional Connection	The emotional role or attachment felt toward social media	29
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Appendix E

Sub-Themes and Codes Addressing the Research Question: How Do Young Adults Experience and Perceive Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)?

Sub-theme	Code Name	Code Definition	Frequency
Lived Experiences of FoMO	2.1 Definitions	How participants describe and define what FoMO means to them	16
	2.2 Scenarios	Common reasons and situations where participants experience FoMO	47
	2.3 Emotional Reactions	Emotional responses of participants to FoMO	54
	2.4 Frequency and Intensity	How often and how intense FoMO is felt	62
	2.5 Change over Time	Whether FoMO has increased, decreased, or changed in nature for a participant over the years	23
	2.6 Subsequent Behavior	Impulsive or unplanned behavior caused by FoMO	41
	2.7 Retrospective Realizations	Personal realizations after experiencing FoMO	34
	2.8 Triggers	Specific triggers that provoke FoMO	48

Appendix F

Sub-Themes and Codes Addressing the Research Question: How does FoMO, triggered by digital and real-life contents, impact young peoples' experiences with anxiety?

Sub-theme	Code Name	Code Definition	Frequency
FoMO and Anxiety	3.1 Social Pressure	Anxiety from needing to stay updated or socially visible	40
	3.2 Mental Looping	Repetitive thoughts about missing out or others' activities/opinions	27
	3.3 Opinions	Anxious thoughts of what others think of one	21
	3.4 Avoidance Behaviour	Withdrawing from social media or events	34
	3.5 Physical Discomfort	Experiencing somatic symptoms due to FoMO	07
	3.6 Emotional Impact	Emotional distress that arises because of FoMO experience	33
	3.7 FoMO Connection	Participant's feeling if there is a correlation	22

Appendix F

Sub-Themes and Codes Addressing the Research Question: Do young adults experience pressure to meet idealized standards due to FoMO? And How does this pressure contribute to perfectionism and FoMO?

Sub-theme	Code Name	Code Definition	Frequency
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FoMO and Perfectionism	4.1 High Standards	Setting high personal expectations	51
	4.2 Comparison	Comparing self to others' achievements	62
	4.3 Curated Identity	Presenting an ideal version of oneself	32
	4.4 Productivity	Feeling the need to always do more	32
	4.5 Self-Doubt	Feeling inadequate when others seem to be doing better	39

Appendix G

Sub-Themes and Codes Addressing the Research Question: What coping strategies do young adults use to manage or decrease the effects of FoMO on their anxiety and perfectionism?

Sub-theme	Code Name	Code Definition	Frequency
Coping Strategies	5.1 Cognitive Reframing	Changing perspective or mindset	24
	5.2 Peer Support	Talking with peers or others about feelings	28
	5.3 Offline Focus	Prioritizing real-life activities and environments	06
	5.4 Content Curation	Managing and reprioritizing online content	07
	4.5 Self-Regulation	Using distractions like solo activities, etc.	17