

FOMO AND MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF TIKTOK ON GEN Z

Ahmad Taufik¹, Suhendar¹, Kurnia Nur Khodijah², Dita Putri Ramadhani³, Fathinah Hilaliah Putri⁴, Nur Choiro Siregar^{5*}, Nirwan Syafrin⁶

^{1,2,3,4,6} Master of Islamic Communication and Broadcasting, Graduate School of Ibn Khaldun University, Bogor

⁵ Universitas Muhammadiyah Tangerang
nur.choiro@umt.ac.id⁵

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Abstract

Media convergence has transformed communication patterns and intensified social media engagement among Generation Z (born 1997–2012). This group's constant connectivity increases their vulnerability to psychological pressure, particularly the fear of missing out (FOMO). This study aims to analyze how TikTok, as a dominant product of media convergence, contributes to the emergence and intensification of FOMO among adolescents. The research employed a descriptive qualitative method, involving semi-structured interviews with 12 Generation Z participants and non-participant observation of TikTok usage patterns over a four-week period. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring behavioral and psychological indicators of FOMO. The findings show that TikTok's algorithmic content flow, rapid trend cycles, and participatory culture significantly trigger FOMO, compelling individuals to frequently check updates, follow trends, and compare themselves with peers. Participants experiencing high FOMO also reported lower life satisfaction, increased anxiety, and difficulties maintaining emotional stability. These conditions were found to hinder aspects of adolescent development, particularly identity formation and autonomy. The study concludes that FOMO represents a critical psychosocial impact of media convergence and underscores the need for digital literacy and mental-health-oriented interventions to help Generation Z navigate online environments more healthily.

Keywords: *fear of missing out, media convergence, social media, generation z, tiktok*

Introduction

Media convergence has fundamentally reshaped digital communication by integrating traditional broadcasting, social networking, and participatory media within algorithm-driven platforms. TikTok represents a salient example of this convergence, combining short-form video, real-time trend circulation, and personalized content delivery. As the first generation raised in a fully digital ecosystem, Generation Z is particularly embedded in TikTok's converged media environment, where constant connectivity and algorithmic curation influence daily behavior and psychological well-being. While existing studies have examined Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) primarily on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, there remains a significant research gap regarding how TikTok's unique convergence features—especially algorithmic personalization and rapid trend diffusion—intensify FOMO and shape mental health outcomes among Gen Z. Addressing

this gap, this study aims to analyze TikTok as a product of media convergence and examine its role in amplifying FOMO and contributing to anxiety, reduced life satisfaction, and emotional instability among Generation Z. Specifically, the research investigates the relationship between TikTok usage, convergence-driven platform mechanisms, the emergence of FOMO, and their combined impact on Gen Z's mental health.

Generation Z (born 1997–2012), as the first cohort raised in a fully digital environment, is highly immersed in these converged media ecosystems. Their constant connectivity, particularly through TikTok, has shaped new behavioral patterns characterized by frequent scrolling, rapid trend adoption, and reliance on algorithmically curated content. National data show that TikTok is one of the most widely used platforms among Indonesian youth, with the majority of users aged 18–24. This immersion creates both convenience and psychological vulnerability. Prior studies show that many Gen Z individuals experience anxiety when disconnected from their devices, indicating early symptoms of digital dependency.

One notable psychological effect intensified by TikTok's media architecture is Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Unlike general social media FOMO, TikTok-induced FOMO is reinforced by the platform's algorithm, which constantly presents trending content, viral challenges, and socially valued activities in real time. This creates a cycle of comparison, pressure to stay updated, and fear of social exclusion. Existing research has widely explored FOMO on platforms like Instagram and Facebook; however, studies examining FOMO specifically within TikTok's convergence-driven environment where short-form videos, algorithmic personalization, and high-speed trend circulation intersect remain limited. This gap underscores the need to analyze how media convergence mechanisms shape psychological outcomes among youth.

Therefore, this study investigates TikTok as a product of media convergence and its role in amplifying FOMO and affecting mental health among Generation Z. The research focuses on understanding TikTok's convergence features its algorithm, participatory culture, and real-time trend diffusion and how these elements contribute to anxiety, reduced life satisfaction, and emotional instability among young users.

Based on this objective, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does TikTok usage influence the level of FOMO among Generation Z?
2. How do media convergence features within TikTok negatively affect Gen Z's mental health?
3. What is the relationship between TikTok's algorithmic environment, the emergence of FOMO, and mental health outcomes among Generation Z?

Method

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design to examine FOMO among Generation Z TikTok users as a consequence of media convergence. A qualitative approach is appropriate as it allows for in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, meanings, and emotional responses related to anxiety, social pressure, and digital engagement within algorithm-driven social media environments. The focus of analysis includes TikTok usage patterns, perceptions of viral content and social presence, lived experiences of FOMO, and the psychological and emotional impacts on mental health.

The participants consist of 3 Generation Z individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (A19, A20, and A21) who actively use TikTok on a daily basis. Participants are selected

through purposive sampling, with criteria including frequent TikTok use and direct experience with feelings of FOMO. Data collection is conducted both online and offline, depending on participant availability. The number of participants is determined based on data saturation, achieved when recurring themes emerge and no new substantive insights are identified.

Data are collected through three primary techniques. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted with each participant, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes, to explore personal experiences, emotional responses, and perceptions related to TikTok use and FOMO. Second, non-participatory digital observation is carried out over a two-week period, focusing on participants' interaction patterns, engagement with viral trends, scrolling behavior, and responses to algorithmically recommended content. Third, documentation analysis is used to support the findings, including screenshots of TikTok feeds, comments, shared content, and other relevant digital artifacts, with participants' consent.

Result and Discussion

TikTok Usage and the Intensification of FOMO among Generation Z

The findings indicate that intensive TikTok use functions as a key trigger for FOMO among Generation Z, primarily by amplifying perceptions of social exclusion and temporal urgency. Interview data reveal that informants consistently associated TikTok engagement with anxiety arising from the fear of being left out of social interactions, trends, or shared experiences. A 19-year-old female informant stated:

"When I see my friends hanging out and I am not invited, I feel uneasy. I keep scrolling TikTok to check what they are doing and whether I missed something important." (A19)

This response reflects how TikTok transforms social absence into a psychological threat, where exclusion is continuously visualized through algorithmically curated content. Rather than serving merely as entertainment, TikTok becomes a monitoring tool through which users assess their social relevance. Male informants expressed similar concerns, particularly regarding viral memes and challenges, reporting frequent checking behaviors to avoid social lag.

Observational data reinforce these interpretations, showing repeated scrolling behavior and phubbing during offline interactions. Such practices suggest that TikTok-induced FOMO disrupts present-moment social engagement, prioritizing digital awareness over physical interaction. Documentation of participants' For You Pages (FYPs) further demonstrates how viral content related to fashion, skincare, and technology fosters comparison and urgency (Marengo et al., 2022). Rather than passively consuming trends, users internalize them as social expectations, which intensifies compulsive engagement and reinforces FOMO-driven behavior (Huang et al., 2022).

Media Convergence and Its Psychological Impact on Mental Health

TikTok's convergence of entertainment, social interaction, and algorithmic visibility intensifies its psychological impact on Generation Z by embedding social comparison into everyday media consumption. Informants frequently interpreted TikTok content as

benchmarks for success, happiness, and attractiveness. A 20-year-old participant explained:

"Sometimes I feel my life is not as good as others when I see their videos. It makes me anxious and sometimes I feel like I am not enough." (A20)

This perception illustrates how media convergence blurs the boundary between personal reality and curated digital performance, leading to diminished self-worth and emotional discomfort. Observational findings show that participants often replicated viral dances or fashion trends, not purely for enjoyment but as a strategy for social validation. Repeated recording attempts and careful content curation indicate that self-presentation becomes labor-intensive and emotionally charged (Fabris et al., 2020).

Documentation analysis further reveals that engagement metrics (likes, views, and shares) are interpreted as indicators of social acceptance. Informants reported disappointment and anxiety when their content failed to reach the FYP, interpreting this outcome as social rejection. These reactions suggest that TikTok's convergence-driven feedback systems transform visibility into a psychological currency, linking self-esteem directly to algorithmic performance.

FOMO as a Mediating Mechanism between TikTok Use and Mental Health

The analysis shows that FOMO operates as a mediating mechanism between TikTok usage and declining mental health, particularly reduced life satisfaction and emotional stability. Informants experiencing higher levels of FOMO consistently reported dissatisfaction with their present lives and a persistent desire for change. A 21-year-old participant reflected:

"I often feel that my life is boring compared to what I see on TikTok. It makes me want to change everything and sometimes I feel I will never be satisfied." (A21)

This dissatisfaction stems not from direct deprivation, but from continuous upward social comparison, where algorithmic exposure to idealized lifestyles distorts personal expectations (Diener et al., 2018). Observational data confirm that participants frequently compared themselves to influencers and peers, resulting in diminished confidence and heightened self-criticism. Supporting documentation, including comments on viral content, further reflects emotions of envy, frustration, and inadequacy, reinforcing the psychological consequences of FOMO (Elhai et al., 2021; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2021).

Importantly, the findings suggest that TikTok-induced FOMO undermines identity development and autonomy among Generation Z. Informants increasingly evaluated their self-worth through external validation. One participant stated:

"If my video doesn't get likes, I feel like I am not good enough. Sometimes I delete it because I feel embarrassed." (A19)

This reliance on digital approval constrains independent self-definition, as users adjust behavior, consumption patterns, and self-presentation to align with algorithmic norms (Thomas et al., 2020). Observations revealed withdrawal from offline interactions in favor of content creation, limiting opportunities for authentic identity exploration. Participants also reported feeling pressured to purchase trending products or adopt viral

aesthetics, illustrating how TikTok's algorithm amplifies identity-related insecurities through persistent exposure to aspirational content.

Conclusion

One of the most prominent impacts of media convergence in today's digital era is the emergence of FOMO, a psychological condition where individuals experience persistent anxiety and worry about being excluded from the latest information, trends, or social interactions. This phenomenon is not merely a casual form of curiosity but a significant psychological and social issue that shapes the way adolescents, particularly Generation Z, interact with digital platforms. Through various cases such as the popularity of skincare routines, the spread of doll collection trends, and the cultural drive to constantly upgrade smartphones, it becomes evident that FOMO is closely tied to lifestyle choices and the construction of self-image within digital culture. The rise of platforms such as TikTok has created a digital environment where comparison, competition, and the pursuit of validation are constantly reinforced. Evidence from interviews, observations, and documentation highlights that adolescents who experience FOMO often immerse themselves in endless cycles of scrolling, liking, commenting, and content creation in order to maintain relevance and avoid exclusion. This compulsive behavior demonstrates that FOMO is not simply a by-product of curiosity, but rather a direct consequence of media convergence that blends entertainment, information, and social validation into one platform, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to disengage. As adolescents strive to keep up with the flood of content and trends, they develop patterns of digital dependency that erode the balance between online and offline life.

The need to stay connected and updated gradually shifts from a choice to an obligation, fostering a fragile sense of self-worth that depends heavily on recognition from peers in digital spaces. In this process, life satisfaction becomes compromised as well-being is measured not by personal growth or authentic experiences, but by digital approval and visibility. When life satisfaction declines, it creates a chain reaction that threatens mental health, manifesting in symptoms such as anxiety, low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, and emotional distress. This is especially concerning during adolescence, a critical stage of identity formation and independence. Instead of building strong personal values and aspirations, many adolescents become trapped in cycles of comparison and imitation, constantly seeking validation through likes, followers, or views. Over time, dependence on external validation weakens resilience and reduces autonomy, as behaviors and aspirations are increasingly shaped by external digital standards rather than internal convictions.

The inability to regulate the urge to remain constantly connected also diminishes meaningful offline interactions, where face-to-face communication is replaced by digital engagement, thus limiting opportunities for authentic self-expression and deeper social bonds. This study highlights the paradox of media convergence: while it provides unprecedented access to information, creativity, and connectivity, it simultaneously fosters dependency and insecurity that undermine psychological well-being. Adolescents caught in this cycle often report dissatisfaction with the present, a desire to change their circumstances, and uncertainty about the future, all of which erode their overall life satisfaction. This dissatisfaction, compounded by the pressure to conform to viral content, creates a generation increasingly vulnerable to inadequacy and alienation.

FOMO therefore emerges as both an individual and collective struggle, reflecting broader social changes shaped by digital culture. It shows how media convergence has transformed social existence, making digital participation the benchmark of belonging, recognition, and worth. Adolescents unable to keep up with rapid online trends perceive themselves as outsiders, reinforcing cycles of anxiety and doubt. The implications are profound: the more exposure adolescents have to converged media platforms, the greater the risk that their sense of identity and independence will be externally shaped.

FOMO, though simple in definition, carries multidimensional consequences extending to psychological health, social interaction, and long-term development. It not only challenges mental health stability but also complicates identity formation, leading to fragile self-concepts built on digital approval. The constant pressure to remain updated reduces reflective thinking, mindfulness, and genuine self-awareness, as attention is directed outward rather than inward. Continuous exposure to curated content portraying idealized lifestyles further distorts perceptions of reality, convincing adolescents that their lives are inadequate compared to digital narratives. Consequently, FOMO emerges as both a symptom and a catalyst of the broader issues of media convergence, underlining the urgent need for balanced media use, digital literacy, and psychological resilience. Encouraging awareness of FOMO risks, promoting healthier engagement, and creating environments where self-worth is grounded in authenticity rather than digital validation can mitigate these impacts. In conclusion, the rise of FOMO among Generation Z is a clear demonstration of how media convergence reshapes psychological and social dynamics. FOMO is not trivial but a major factor influencing well-being, life satisfaction, and identity development. Its presence as a by-product of technological advancement reflects both opportunities and dangers within digital culture, reminding us that while convergence enhances connectivity, it also contains hidden risks that, if left unaddressed, may hinder the healthy growth and independence of future generations.

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