

PASSIVE INSTAGRAM USE AND EMERGING INDIAN FEMALE ADULT WELLBEING: A MEDIATION ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL COMPARISON AND FOMO DURING COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies in cyberpsychology examined the phenomena of passive Social Networking Sites (SNSs) usage leading to social comparison and thereby leading to FoMO (Fear of Missing Out) [George et al. \(2019\)](#) in general. A review of prior research indicates that for women, but not for males, the relationships between social comparison and FOMO and self-perceived physical beauty were substantial [Myers and Crowther \(2009\)](#). The present study explores the relation between passive Instagram use, social comparison, and FoMO among the Emerging Indian female adults during the covid-19 pandemic.

The study focuses on the SNS (Instagram) and its impact on age and gender by undertaking cross-sectional research. It takes into account a diverse sample of college students (N = 302, Mage = 18-25, SD age = between 4 to 5, 100% female). To assess participants' engagement in technology-based social comparisons and feedback-seeking behaviours on Instagram, an 11-item social comparison orientation (INCOM, Iowa-Netherlands comparison orientation scale) English version is used.

Social comparison theory [Festinger \(1954\)](#) and Symbolic Interactionism are used to explain the study's results. The research outcome shows that there is a significant deviation in the mediation of social comparison and FoMO on the passive Instagram usage among the Emerging Indian Female Adults during the covid-19. While the studies conducted before the pandemic show otherwise [George et al. \(2019\)](#).

Keywords: Instagram, Social Comparison Theory, FoMo, Female Adolescent Well-Being, Symbolic Interactionism, Emerging Indian Female Adults

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet penetration rate in India is at 47 percent as of 2021, a consistent increase in internet accessibility compared to 27 per cent five years ago [Basuroy \(2022\)](#). Internet accessibility in India varied on factors like gender and socioeconomic divide. Statistics show that most of internet users are between 20 to 29 years of age and far more male than female users, with the digital gender gap increasing further in rural areas [Keelery \(2020\)](#). A majority of the digital population are mobile internet users due to the availability of cheap data plans owing to the digitisation policy of India [India \(2015\)](#) and increased competition among telecom

networks with the entry of jio Infocomm [Philipose \(2020\)](#) in to the 4G data market in September 2016 and emerged as one of the most popular internet-related service providers. This Digital revolution is met with much enthusiasm in India, and social networking sites have become the most widely used internet-based services among the Indian youth. Facebook and Instagram are two of the most popular social media platforms in India. Most of the Indian population uses these platforms, especially millennials and gen Z. In 2018, 73% of Facebook users in India were between 18 and 24 years old [Keelery \(2020\)](#). Instagram is also very popular among young adults, and in 2018 it had more than 80 million users in India. The United States and India jointly head the ranking of most Instagram users, with 140 million users in January 2021 [Tankovska \(2021\)](#).

Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media we communicate than by the content of the communication [Mcluhn and Fiore \(1967\)](#). In the age of mobile-mediated communication, SNSs provide an easy and innovative way of communication, like every medium of communication in the past this too has its unique advantages and disadvantages varying in the degree of its impact. The effectiveness of SNS depends on how it is used. Research shows that active social networking use is associated with increased subjective well-being. In contrast, passive SNS use is associated with reduced subjective well-being [Verduyn et al. \(2015\)](#), Prolonged SNS usage can lead to psychological disorders such as Depression, Fear of missing out etc... [Burnell et al. \(2019\)](#).

Research suggests that most young people spend their time on SNS passively browsing the content, such as updates, profiles etc. [Tiffany et al. \(2009\)](#). Furthermore, we point out mediators of social comparison and FoMO in relation to the effects of passive SNS use on various depressive symptoms and investigate the impact of social networking sites in general and Instagram in particular in the Indian context. This study becomes very significant as the number of Instagram users in India are the highest in the world along with United States of America [Keelery \(2020\)](#).

While India is in the process of catching up with use of internet with the global west till 2019, the covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of social networking sites and social media, with India and other countries going into lockdown in early 2020, forcing everyone to stay indoors and mobile and computer technologies mediated our personal, professional, and social lives with most of the users with the median age of 27.1 years in India [Keelery \(2020\)](#).

Pre-pandemic research shows social networking users tend to present themselves in a very positive way online [Vogel and Rose \(2016\)](#), This can be problematic for passive SNS users in two ways. First, other posts on social networks can represent positive social events [Hu et al. \(2014\)](#). Passive browsing can therefore lead to the perception that other people have a better social life than you, which can reduce your sense of belonging [Ashley and Frances \(2018\)](#). Second, a person's appearance on social networking sites can be enhanced through filtering and editing. Thus, affecting the self-perceptions of the Passive SNS users, especially in terms of physical attractiveness [Fardouly et al. \(2015\)](#). Exposure to these types of content can be harmful in two ways: a) by evoking harmful social comparisons, and b) by activating feelings of missing out [Burnell et al. \(2019\)](#). The pandemic lockdown has restricted the individuals to their homes, in turn restricting their social life. This current study examines the relation between passive Instagram use, social comparison, and FoMO with psychological well-being and its subscales of the Emerging Indian Female adults during the pandemic who have experienced various levels of FoMO before and after joining the Instagram.

2. THE CURRENT STUDY

This study examined how passive Instagram use by Emerging Indian Female adult during Covid-19 was associated with social comparison, FoMO, and psychological well-being. In several respects, this study will be a valuable addition to the existing literature in this area. **First**, this is one of the few studies that tested the pathway between passive Instagram use, social comparison, FoMO, psychological well-being and its subscales. This pathway has been suggested by other researchers for the social networking sites in general [Przybylski \(2013\)](#). Few studies tested it explicitly and followed a similar methodological and the extended study investigating passive SNS use and well-being [Kaitlyn et al. \(2019\)](#). **Second**, it is one of the few studies investigating passive Instagram usage. **Third**, A review of previous literature suggests that the pathway from social comparison and FoMO to self-perceived appearance is significant for women, but not for men [Myers and Crowther \(2009\)](#), the study focuses on a specific age group of female Instagram users(Emerging Adults) who are at a crucial and distinct stage of personality development and identity exploration [Arnett \(2000\)](#). **Fourth**, the study is being conducted during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. It analyses the Instagram usage and mediating roles of social comparison and FoMO and its relation to psychological well-being and its sub scales during pandemic, which makes it an important pandemic study. **Fifth**, the study investigates how psychological well-being affects the female users who felt FoMO before and after they are on Instagram.

There are multiple ordering methods for passive use of Instagram, FoMO, social comparison, and psychological well-being. The main hypothesis is that passive viewing of content posted on Instagram by other users may induce fear that other users are having more rewarding experiences than one's the users have, hence Instagram's use may induce FoMO. based on the idea that it can arouse the emotions of humans [Sarah et al. \(2017\)](#). This allows FoMO to follow Instagram's passive usage. If we consider FoMO as a kind of upward social comparison, FoMO follows social comparison. A study examining passive use of SNS found that once the process of passive browsing is initiated, users are typically expected to go through the comparison process before making explicit upward comparisons [Burnell et al. \(2019\)](#). Adverse mental health effects occur after these upward comparisons are made.

Alternatively, users with a high level of FoMO can turn to SNS such as Instagram for their connectivity needs of socialization [Przybylski \(2013\)](#), the study investigates both the phenomenon and its impact on psychological well-being. In turn, lower well-being might indicate depressive symptoms. The current research looks at the two opposing possibilities in detail.

H1A: Passive Instagram use positively predicts social comparison, which in turn predicts higher levels of FoMO, which subsequently predicts lower psychological well-being during a pandemic.

H1B: FoMO positively predicts passive Instagram usage, which predicts increased social comparison and lower psychological well-being during a pandemic.

Additionally, previous research suggests that declining well-being may lead to use of SNS and social media as a method of mood management (Instagram browsing, posting, liking, etc.). Interrelationships between Different Types of Instagram Use and Depressed Mood in Adolescents, 2017). Therefore, the current study tests that method as an exploratory analysis.

H1C: Lower psychological well-being predicts greater passive Instagram use, which predicts increased social comparison and FoMO during a pandemic.

H1D: Social comparison positively predicts higher levels of FOMO, which in turn predicts lower psychological well-being, which subsequently predicts greater Passive Instagram use during a pandemic

3. METHODS

3.1. PARTICIPANTS

A convenient sample of 325 female college students (mostly undergraduates) aged 18-25 took the survey from the different parts of India during the early 2nd wave of the covid-19 pandemic in the year 2021 (Mage = 20.07, SD age = 1.734, 100% female, 74.9% urban, 11.3% semi-urban, 13.8% rural). A very last pattern of 302 college students finished all of the survey items. Respondents of the survey are contacted through fellow teachers and principals of the different colleges in India. A survey questionnaire in the form of google form consisting of demographic, SNS and Instagram usage related questions and different scales measuring FOMO. Social comparison and psychological well-being was. circulated in the students' official WhatsApp groups, which are used by the faculty and management of the colleges for academic communication. Only measures that are relevant to the current study are reported.

3.2. MEASURES

3.2.1. PASSIVE INSTAGRAM USE

Initially, the participants are asked whether they own a smartphone or not? Because of the existing gender gap and digital divide, especially in rural India, followed by whether they are on Instagram? How much time per day is spent viewing other profiles? Whether they had experienced FOMO before they were on Instagram? And did the time spent on Instagram increased due to the pandemic? All the questions are multiple-choice questions differing in the number of choices. While 97.3% of students owned a personal smartphone, 2.7% didn't, 86.5% of female students were on Instagram, and the same sample is considered for the present study. On average, students passively browsed Instagram for 105minutes per day. When asked about whether they have experienced FoMO before joining Instagram, 39.4% of respondents said yes, 35.6 % said no, while 25% responded with maybe. 78.6% percentage of the respondents agreed that Instagram usage is increased during the pandemic due to the social restrictions, quarantines, and government lockdowns. When asked about which is their favourite social networking site? 70.4% of the respondents said it is Instagram, confirming the popularity of this particular SNS among the Emerging Indian female Adults. Even though the present study is unique considering the pandemic and a specific SNS, the current study's estimates exceed those of previous studies, indicating that young people typically spend an aggregate of one hour or more per day on social media. [Shensa et al. \(2015\)](#).

3.2.2. SOCIAL COMPARISON

A 11-Item Social Comparative Orientation Scale (INCOM, Iowa-Netherlands Comparative Orientation Scale) English version is adopted to measure the social comparison among the Emerging Indian female Instagram users as the Analysis of the data collected with the scale showed good psychometric properties. It

demonstrated the scales' ability to predict the comparison behaviour effectively [Gibbons and Buunk \(1999\)](#). Respondents answered items using five-point scale (1: "I disagree strongly" and 5: "I agree strongly"). The questionnaire is developed following [Festinger \(1954\)](#) differentiates between two distinct dimensions of social comparison: (a) Comparison of skills on "How are you?" (Items 1-6) (b) Comparison of opinions on questions "what shall I feel/think?" (Items 7-11) [Schneider and Schupp \(2011\)](#).

3.2.3. FEAR OF MISSING OUT

FoMO among the emerging Indian female Adults was measured using [Przybylski \(2013\)](#) 10- item FoMO scale. Items were answered using a 5-point scale by the respondents (1: "Not at all true of me", 5: "extremely true of me"). The individual scores to all the items calculated by the averaging responses and form a reliable composite measure ($\alpha = .87$ to .90) and are currently used as the primary assessment for measuring FoMO in social networking use [Burnell et al. \(2019\)](#).

3.2.4. PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

To measure the psychological well-being, 18-item Ryffs scale is used [Ryff and Keyes \(1995\)](#) to assess the psychological well-being of the Emerging Indian female Instagram users during the pandemic. The scale consists of six distinct dimensions of wellness, three questions in each subscale, namely, Self-acceptance (Q1, Q2, Q5), personal growth (Q11, Q12, Q14), Autonomy (Q15, Q17 and Q18), environmental mastery (Q4, Q8, Q9), positive relations with others (Q6, Q13, Q16), purpose in life (Q3, Q7, Q10). A six-factor model of psychological well-being provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for examining adolescent positive functioning. This study suggests that the theoretical model of Ryffs should be more age-specific and situational in order to better operationalize it [McLellan and Gao \(2018\)](#). Even though studies have reported inadequate validity and reliability of Ryffs scales, these are widely used in psychology and other interdisciplinary fields to measure psychological well-being. Respondents responded to items using a 7-point Likert scale (1: "strongly agree", 5: "strongly disagree"). Q13, Q11, Q1, Q2, Q3, Q8, Q9, Q12, and Q17, Q18 are reverse coded using the formula ((number of subscale points) +1) - (respondents answer). Higher scores indicate higher levels of psychological well-being.

4. ANALYTICAL APPROACH

We performed a series of path models and mediation analysis using R software (version 3.6.2, Lavaan package) to identify paths between passive Instagram use, social comparisons, FoMO, psychological well-being and combinations of their dimensions. All the Emerging Indian female Instagram users who have completed the scales were included in the models after performing an exploratory analysis of the data collected (N= 302). Models were specified using maximum likelihood estimation and bootstrapping.

5. RESULTS

5.1. HYPOTHESISED MODELS

To examine the hypothesis H1A, we tested a mediation pathway model in which passive Instagram use predicted social comparison, social comparison predicted FoMO, and FoMO predicted psychological well-being [Figure 1](#). Baseline

model test statistic is considered as the sample size is less, the model fit was good, $\chi^2(6) = 86.519$, $p = .001$, $CFI = 0.998$, $TFI = 0.994$, $RMSEA = 0.017$, 95% CI [.000, .117], $SRMR = .025$. while FoMO(indirect effect, $\beta = -0.30$, $p < 0.001$) fully mediated social comparison and psychological well-being, social comparison(indirect effect, $\beta = -0.03$, $p > 0.05$) did not mediated FoMO and passive Instagram usage among the emerging Indian female adults, passive Instagram usage has a direct impact on the psychological well-being(direct effect, $\beta = -0.07$, $p < 0.001$) and has a significant impact on the subscales of autonomy(direct effect, $\beta = -0.18$, $p < 0.001$), environmental mastery(direct effect, $\beta = -0.07$, $p < 0.001$) and personal relationship with others (direct effect, $\beta = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$) of the psychological well-being.

To examine hypothesis 1B, we tested our mediation pathway model using FoMO, which predicts passive Instagram use, and social comparison, which predicts psychological well-being. Model fit was poor, $\chi^2(6) = 86.519$, $p = .001$, $CFI = 0.332$, $TFI = -1.005$, $RMSEA = 0.298$, 95% CI [.234, .368], $SRMR = .135$. Thus, rejected hypothesis 1B. To test hypothesis 1C, we tested a psychological well-being mediated pathway model that predicts passive Instagram use. It predicts social comparison and predicts FoMO. To This model fit was poor, $\chi^2(6) = 86.519$, $p = .001$, $CFI = 0.912$, $TFI = 0.736$, $RMSEA = 0.108$, 95% CI [.044, .184], $SRMR = .059$.

Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. To test hypothesis 1D, we tested a social comparison mediation pathway model that predicts FoMO. FoMO predicts a decrease in psychological well-being, while psychological well-being predicts an increase in passive Instagram use. Model fit was perfect, $\chi^2(6) = 86.519$, $p = .001$, $CFI = 1.000$, $TFI = 1.021$, $RMSEA = 0.000$, 95% CI [.000, .104], $SRMR = .019$. FOMO and psychological well-being fully mediated the association between social comparison and passive Instagram usage (indirect effect $\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$, via FoMO and psychological well-being $\beta = -0.30$, $p < 0.001$). As mediators, FoMO and Psychological well-being was directly related to adult women's passive use of Instagram during pandemic ($\beta = -0.07$, $p < 0.001$ and $\beta = -0.04$, $p < 0.001$, respectively): Thus, the results supported the hypothesis 1D.

Table 1

Table 1 Correlations and Descriptive Statistics	
	mean (SD)
Passive Instagram usage (min). – PIU.	104.9(78.89)
Social comparison – SCS	34.30(5.04)
Fear of Missing Out – FoMOS.	29.25(8.26)
Psychological well-being – PWB.	81.45(15.2)
Autonomy. – AU.	13.85(3.9)
Environmental Mastery – EM.	13.00(3.85)
Personal growth – PG.	14.91(4.28)
Positive relationship with others – PRWO.	12.70(3.71)
Purpose in life – PIL.	13.24(3.41)
Social Acceptance – SA.	13.73(4.32)

Note: N=302, * $p < .01$, ** $p < 0.001$

Figure 1



Figure 1 $\chi^2(6) = 86.519, p = .001, CFI = 1.000,$
 $TFI = 1.021, RMSEA = 0.000, 95\% CI [0.000, .104],$
 $SRMR = .019.$
 PWB – psychological well being
 SCS – Social comparison
 FoMOS – Fear of missing out
 PIU – Passive Instagram Use (minutes)

Figure 2

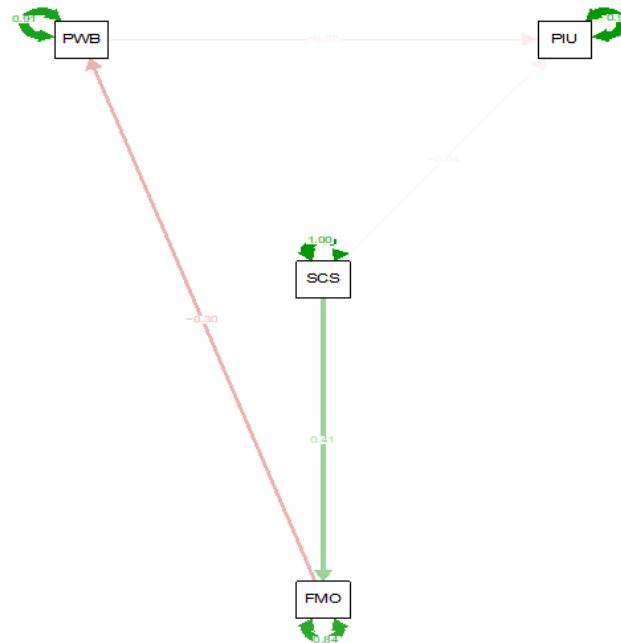


Figure 2 Mediation Path Model for Hypothesis 1D

6. EXPLORATORY MODELS

A sensitivity analysis is performed to test the robustness of the model presented in Hypothesis 1D. First, the model was asked to rate her age (18–25 years), gender (female), a measure of passive Instagram use (time spent on passive Instagram use), and her high-to-moderate FoMO experience. Held up when controlling. We then examined a set of models with constrained and unconstrained equality in multiple groups by age, her FoMO experience prior to joining Instagram, and passive use of Instagram to determine the differences between FoMO subsamples. I verified the difference between the models. The unconstrained model showed a weaker path.

A separate analysis was conducted for passive Instagram usage among the three different groups of people according to the level of FoMO experienced before joining Instagram (PIUOAFY- Users who have experienced high to moderate levels of FoMO before joining the Instagram, PIUOAFM - people who have experienced some level of FoMO before joining the Instagram, PIUOAFN - people who have experienced no FoMO before joining the Instagram, PIUAFY 18_20 – Users who have experienced high to moderate levels of FoMO before joining the Instagram aged between from 18 to 20 years of age), each of these models demonstrated acceptable fit [Table 2](#).

Table 2

Table 2 Fit Statistics for the Path Models Separated by Level of Fomo Experienced Before Joining Instagram					
	N	chi-square	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
1.	PIUOAFY	134.	$\chi^2(6) = 45.128$ p<.001. 0.997.	.022[.000, .174].	.035
2.	PIUOAFM.	74.	$\chi^2(6) = 86.519$ p<.001.	.000[.000, .215].	.038
3.	PIUOAFN.	94.	$\chi^2(6) = 86.519$ p<.001.	.000[.000, .000].	.009
4.	PIUOAFY18_20	84.	$\chi^2(6) = 30.272$ p<.001.	.131[.000, .284].	.067

Note: All models used the same path model as shown in [Figure 1](#).

7. DISCUSSION

Outcomes of the study indicate that passively browsing Instagram does not predict social comparison; instead have a direct impact on the psychological well-being of the user during the pandemic, while social comparison positively predicts High values of FoMO then predict low values of psychological well-being during. The study extends the previous research [Burnell et al. \(2019\)](#), suggesting that passive SNS usage leads to social comparison, which predicts FoMO and predicts more significant depressive symptoms among the SNS users. The study tested the mediation of FoMO and Social comparison among a varied sample of Emerging Indian female Instagram users, considering the level of FoMO experienced before joining the Social Networking platform (Instagram) during the covid-19 pandemic.

Social comparison theory [Festinger \(1954\)](#) suggests that people have an instinctive urge to compare themselves with others, even in the absence of objective information. Researchers have previously suggested that social comparison leads to

upward social comparison, which plays an important role in SNS [Verduyn et al. \(2015\)](#) In particular, passively browsing other users' content on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram can lead to positive social comparisons and negatively affect well-being. The finding of the current research is a particular case of the suggested path, which examined the impact of passive Instagram usage on the emerging Indian female psychological well-being during the pandemic; the current research considered the experience of FoMO before joining Instagram and studied the mediating roles of social comparison and FoMO in predicting the psychological well-being of the Emerging Indian female Instagram user during the pandemic.

The model tested is consistent across emerging Indian female Instagram users, which deviates from the path suggested by the previous research [Burnell et al. \(2019\)](#), validating the mediating roles of social comparison and FoMO on the impact of passive SNS usage on the depressive symptoms and well-being [Verduyn et al. \(2015\)](#). While Social comparison does not predict passive Instagram Usage among the emerging Indian female adults during the pandemic, FoMO predicts social comparison and mediates social comparison and psychological well-being among emerging Indian female adults during the pandemic. Secondly, passive Instagram use negatively predicts the psychological well-being of the user, impacting the subscales of autonomy, environmental mastery and personal growth, and does not have a significant impact on the subscales of positive relationships with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance during the pandemic.

The model was generally consistent across individuals who have experienced moderate to no FOMO before joining Instagram and individuals who have experienced High levels of FoMO before joining Instagram follows a different path model, in which FoMO and social comparison are the mediating factors while the social comparison is causing increased passive Instagram usage among the Emerging Indian Female adults during the pandemic. As the previous research suggests, it is surprising that passive SNSs use leads to social comparison, which does seem to be the case during a pandemic.

Current research points to some limitations. First, the research is cross-sectional. Longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to determine the causality of the constructs studied during the pandemic. Second, a relatively small, convenient sample size (N = 302) of college students was used, which limited generalization. Third, the presentation of measures is not balanced. Therefore, the results may have been influenced by the order of investigation. Fourth, Instagram passive usage ratings consisted of open-ended, self-reported items about viewing other profiles on Instagram and watching IGTV. Future research may look at other social networking platforms and passive use in general, and objectively assess the use of Instagram and other social networks.

Finally, the findings suggest that social comparison does not predict passive Instagram use during a pandemic. In contrast, FoMO positively predicts social comparison and mediates passive Instagram usage and psychological well-being; passive Instagram usage has a direct impact on the psychological well-being of the emerging Indian female adults and has a significant impact on autonomy, environmental mastery and personal growth and does not have a significant impact on the positive relationships with others, social acceptance, and purpose in life during the covid-19 pandemic.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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