

SOCIAL MEDIA ANCHORING AND OCD-LIKE BEHAVIORS: THE MEDIATING ROLES OF FOMO AND EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigated the relationship between social media anchoring and obsessive-compulsive-like behaviors among emerging adults aged 18 to 26, focusing on the mediating roles of fear of missing out (FoMO) and emotional dysregulation, and examining gender differences.

Method: A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 250 participants ($M_{age} = 21.2$, $SD = 2.4$; 53% female, 47% male). Participants completed validated instruments: Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS; $\alpha = .91$) to measure social media anchoring, Obsessive-Compulsive Inventory-Revised (OCI-R; $\alpha = .89$) to assess OCD-like behaviors, Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOS; $\alpha = .87$) for FoMO, and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale-16 (DERS-16; $\alpha = .90$) to evaluate emotional dysregulation. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test mediation effects, and multi-group SEM analyzed gender differences.

Results: Social media anchoring demonstrated a significant positive association with OCD-like behaviors. Both FoMO and emotional dysregulation mediated this relationship, indicating that higher social media reliance increases compulsive tendencies through cognitive and affective mechanisms. Multi-group analyses revealed that these mediation effects were more pronounced among female participants, suggesting gender moderates the indirect pathways.

Conclusion: The study provides empirical evidence that FoMO and emotional dysregulation are key mechanisms linking social media anchoring to OCD-like behaviors in emerging adults. Findings underscore the importance of designing interventions that address both cognitive concerns, such as FoMO, and emotional regulation skills to reduce compulsive social media behaviors, particularly among females.

Keywords: social media anchoring, OCD-like behaviors, FoMO, emotional dysregulation, emerging adults, gender differences

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an essential component of daily life for emerging adults, shaping their social interactions, self-perceptions, and identity development. For this age group, social media platforms serve not only

as tools for communication and entertainment but also as reference points for self-evaluation, social comparison, and validation. The concept of social media anchoring refers to the reliance on digital cues, including notifications, likes, comments, and peer feedback, as anchors for

regulating one's behavior, emotions, and sense of self (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). While such reliance can facilitate social connectedness, excessive dependence may foster compulsive engagement, resulting in behaviors analogous to obsessive-compulsive tendencies. These patterns are characterized by repetitive checking, heightened preoccupation with online content, and difficulties in disengaging from social media, which may have detrimental psychological consequences.

Theoretical Background

The **Compensatory Internet Use Theory (CIUT)** proposes that individuals engage in online behaviors to compensate for unmet psychological needs, such as the need for social validation, emotional regulation, or relief from negative affect (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). When such compensatory behaviors become habitual, they may evolve into maladaptive, compulsive patterns, especially in the presence of cognitive distortions and emotional vulnerabilities. Complementing this, the Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Pathological Internet Use posits that maladaptive cognitions—including overreliance on online feedback—drive persistent and excessive engagement with digital platforms (Davis, 2001).

Among these cognitive mechanisms, fear of missing out (FoMO) emerges as a critical factor that motivates frequent social media use. FoMO reflects a pervasive apprehension that others are experiencing rewarding events from which one is absent, prompting continuous online monitoring and engagement (Przybylski et al., 2013; Zhang, 2025). In parallel, **emotional dysregulation**, defined as persistent difficulties in modulating emotional responses, exacerbates vulnerability to compulsive behaviors in digital environments (Saladino et al., 2024).

Emerging adults aged 18 to 26 are particularly susceptible to these dynamics due to the developmental processes of identity exploration, heightened peer comparison, and increasing autonomy. Furthermore, empirical evidence indicates **gender differences** in both FoMO and emotional dysregulation, with females often demonstrating higher levels of both, which may amplify the risk of engaging in OCD-like behaviors within online contexts (Flack et al., 2024; Marino et al., 2021). These theoretical

perspectives collectively underscore the importance of examining cognitive and affective mechanisms through which social media anchoring may lead to compulsive behavioral outcomes.

Research Objectives

1. Examine the relationship between social media anchoring and OCD-like behaviors.
2. Investigate whether FoMO mediates this relationship.
3. Assess whether emotional dysregulation mediates this relationship.
4. Evaluate sequential mediation through FoMO and emotional dysregulation.
5. Determine gender differences in these pathways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies underscore that excessive reliance on social media can exacerbate compulsive checking, reassurance-seeking, and repetitive digital behaviors, closely resembling obsessive-compulsive patterns (Wegmann et al., 2020; Blackwell et al., 2019). These behaviors are characterized by frequent monitoring of notifications, intrusive preoccupation with online content, and difficulties disengaging from digital platforms, often leading to functional impairments in academic, social, and emotional domains. FoMO has emerged as a salient cognitive mechanism driving such compulsive engagement, with a consistent association reported between elevated FoMO, problematic social media use, and psychological distress, including anxiety and depressive symptoms (Fabris et al., 2020; Rozgonjuk et al., 2021).

In parallel, emotional dysregulation has been identified as a critical affective pathway influencing compulsive digital behaviors. Individuals with limited capacity to manage negative emotions or regulate affective responses are more prone to engage in maladaptive online behaviors, often using social media as a coping mechanism (Saladino et al., 2024; Elhai et al., 2020). Emotional dysregulation not only exacerbates the frequency and intensity of social media use but also amplifies the impact of FoMO on compulsive engagement, creating a feedback loop that reinforces maladaptive patterns.

Gender-specific investigations highlight that females often exhibit heightened levels of both FoMO and emotional dysregulation, which correlates with stronger compulsive behaviors and increased vulnerability to OCD-like tendencies in digital contexts (Flack et al., 2024; Marino et al., 2021). These findings suggest that gender functions as a moderator in the pathway from social media anchoring to compulsive behaviors, with females disproportionately affected by cognitive and affective risk factors. Indigenous research within Pakistan aligns with international trends, demonstrating that young adults and university students with high social media involvement experience elevated anxiety, compulsive checking, and impaired emotional regulation (Ahmed & Qureshi, 2021; Khan et al., 2022). For instance, Ahmed and Qureshi (2021) reported that excessive social media engagement predicted both FoMO and compulsive digital behaviors among Pakistani university students, while Khan et al. (2022) found emotional dysregulation to significantly mediate this relationship, particularly among females. Similarly, South Asian studies

emphasize cultural factors such as collectivist values and family expectations, which may intensify social comparison and amplify compulsive engagement on social media platforms (Patel et al., 2020).

Collectively, international and indigenous research underscores the intertwined roles of cognitive mechanisms (FoMO), affective dysregulation, and gender differences in explaining compulsive digital behaviors. These findings highlight the need for studies that integrate both global perspectives and local socio-cultural contexts, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the pathways linking social media anchoring to OCD-like behaviors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

The study is grounded in CIUT and the Cognitive-Behavioral Model. The hypothesized model suggests that **social media anchoring** increases OCD-like behaviors, mediated by cognitive (FoMO) and affective (emotional dysregulation) mechanisms.

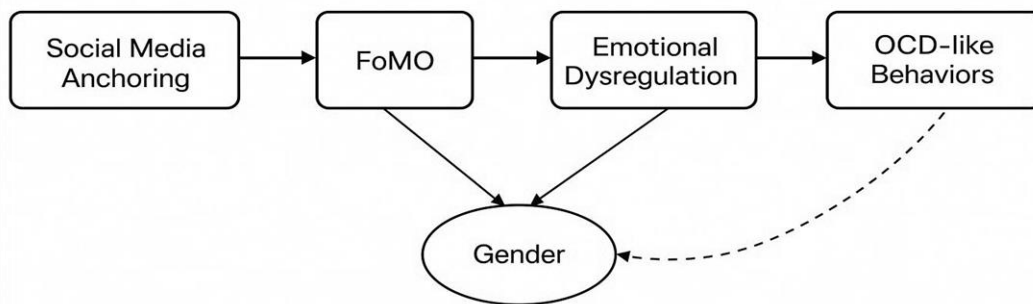


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: Social Media Anchoring, FoMO, Emotional Dysregulation, and OCD-like Behaviors with Gender

Methodology

Participants

The study recruited a sample of 250 emerging adults aged 18 to 26 (Mage = 21.2, SD = 2.4) through university mailing lists and social media platforms. The sample comprised 53% female

and 47% male participants. Inclusion criteria required participants to be daily users of social media and to provide informed consent prior to participation. This age group was selected due to the heightened vulnerability of emerging adults

to social comparison, identity exploration, and compulsive online behaviors.

Measures

Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS): The BSMAS assesses excessive reliance on social media, encompassing dimensions such as salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Internal consistency for this study was high ($\alpha = .91$) (Andreassen et al., 2012).

Obsessive-Compulsive Inventory-Revised (OCI-R): The OCI-R measures the severity of obsessive-compulsive-like behaviors across multiple domains, including checking, washing, and ordering. Reliability was satisfactory ($\alpha = .89$) (Foa et al., 2002).

Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOS): This instrument evaluates participants' apprehension about missing rewarding social experiences, which motivates frequent social media engagement. Internal consistency in this sample was $\alpha = .87$ (Przybylski et al., 2013).

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale-16 (DERS-16): The DERS-16 assesses emotion regulation difficulties across dimensions such as awareness, clarity, impulse control, and acceptance of emotions. Reliability in the

present study was excellent ($\alpha = .90$) (Bjureberg et al., 2016).

All scales had previously established psychometric validity. Where necessary, instruments were translated into the local language using standard back-translation procedures to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence.

Procedure and Data Analysis

Participants completed an online survey requiring approximately 20 minutes. The collected data were screened to remove missing or inconsistent entries, which accounted for less than 2% of the dataset. Data were analyzed using AMOS 26. Structural equation modeling (SEM) tested direct and indirect mediation pathways between social media anchoring, FoMO, emotional dysregulation, and OCD-like behaviors. Multi-group SEM was employed to examine gender differences in these pathways. Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations to assess associations among variables. All analyses were conducted with significance set at $p < .05$.

Results

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and mediation analyses are presented in tables. Interpretations are provided in paragraph form.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 250)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1 Social Media Anchoring	3.42	0.78	—			
2 FoMO	3.15	0.81	.52**	—		
3 Emotional Dysregulation	2.98	0.74	.46**	.49**	—	
4 OCD-like Behaviors	2.87	0.69	.48**	.44**	.42**	—

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; FoMO = fear of missing out. $p < .01$.

The results indicate that social media anchoring is positively and significantly correlated with FoMO, emotional dysregulation, and OCD-like behaviors. FoMO and emotional dysregulation are also positively intercorrelated, suggesting that these variables may act as mediators in the

relationship between social media anchoring and OCD-like behaviors. The strength of these correlations supports the conceptual model that cognitive (FoMO) and affective (emotional dysregulation) mechanisms play a central role in explaining compulsive digital behaviors.

Table 2
Structural Equation Modeling: Mediation Analysis (N = 250)

Path	β	SE	P
Anchoring \rightarrow FoMO	.52	.06	<.001
Anchoring \rightarrow Emotional Dysregulation	.46	.07	<.001
FoMO \rightarrow OCD-like Behaviors	.21	.05	<.001
Emotional Dysregulation \rightarrow OCD-like Behaviors	.18	.06	<.001
Indirect Effect (FoMO + Dysregulation)	.39	.08	<.001

Note. β = standardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; FoMO = fear of missing out.

The mediation analysis demonstrates that both FoMO and emotional dysregulation significantly mediate the relationship between social media anchoring and OCD-like behaviors. Social media anchoring has strong positive associations with both mediators, which in turn predict OCD-like behaviors. The combined indirect effect of .39 indicates a substantial mediation

pathway, supporting the theoretical model that cognitive and affective mechanisms jointly explain the influence of social media anchoring on compulsive behaviors. These findings suggest that interventions targeting FoMO and emotion regulation may be effective in reducing OCD-like tendencies among emerging adults.

Table 3
Multi-Group SEM: Gender Comparisons of Mediation Pathways (N = 250)

Path	Female β	Male β	$\Delta\chi^2$	p
Anchoring \rightarrow FoMO	.55	.48	4.2	.04
FoMO \rightarrow OCD-like Behaviors	.25	.17	6.1	.01
Emotional Dysregulation \rightarrow OCD-like Behaviors	.22	.14	5.8	.02

Note. β = standardized regression coefficient; $\Delta\chi^2$ = change in chi-square; FoMO = fear of missing out.

The results of the multi-group SEM indicate that mediation effects are stronger among female participants compared to males, suggesting that gender moderates the indirect pathways linking social media anchoring to OCD-like behaviors. Specifically, social media anchoring shows stronger associations with FoMO for females, and both FoMO and emotional dysregulation exert greater influence on OCD-like behaviors in female participants. These findings highlight that emerging adult females may be particularly vulnerable to cognitive and affective mechanisms underlying compulsive social media engagement, emphasizing the importance of gender-sensitive interventions targeting FoMO reduction and emotional regulation strategies.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between social media anchoring and obsessive-compulsive-like behaviors among emerging adults, investigating the mediating roles of fear of missing out (FoMO) and emotional dysregulation, with gender comparisons. Consistent with theoretical predictions derived

from the Compensatory Internet Use Theory (CIUT; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014) and the Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Pathological Internet Use (Davis, 2001), social media anchoring was positively associated with OCD-like behaviors, and this relationship was significantly mediated by both FoMO and emotional dysregulation. These findings underscore the critical role of cognitive and affective mechanisms in translating online behavioral patterns into compulsive tendencies. The mediating role of FoMO aligns with prior international research demonstrating that apprehension about missing rewarding experiences intensifies compulsive social media engagement (Fabris et al., 2020; Rozgonjuk et al., 2021; Blackwell et al., 2019). Similarly, emotional dysregulation emerged as a robust affective pathway, corroborating studies that highlight difficulties in managing negative emotions as a key predictor of maladaptive online behaviors (Saladino et al., 2024; Elhai et al., 2020). The interplay of these mechanisms suggests that individuals increasingly rely on social media to regulate unmet emotional and

cognitive needs, which in turn reinforces OCD-like behaviors.

Gender-specific analyses revealed stronger mediation effects among females, indicating heightened vulnerability to cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying compulsive digital engagement. This observation is consistent with prior evidence showing that females report higher FoMO, emotional dysregulation, and compulsive checking behaviors (Flack et al., 2024; Marino et al., 2021; Ahmed & Qureshi, 2021). Culturally, these patterns may be amplified in collectivist contexts where social comparison and peer evaluation are emphasized, making emerging adult females particularly sensitive to social media cues.

From a developmental perspective, emerging adults aged 18 to 26 are navigating identity formation, autonomy, and peer integration, which may increase susceptibility to social media anchoring and related maladaptive behaviors. The findings also align with indigenous research from Pakistan, where excessive social media use has been linked to FoMO, emotional dysregulation, and compulsive behaviors (Khan et al., 2022; Ahmed & Qureshi, 2021), highlighting the generalizability of these mechanisms across cultural contexts.

Practical implications of these findings include the development of targeted interventions focusing on FoMO reduction and emotion regulation strategies. Psychoeducational programs, mindfulness-based interventions, and cognitive-behavioral approaches could help emerging adults regulate online engagement and reduce OCD-like tendencies. Gender-sensitive approaches may further enhance effectiveness, addressing the unique vulnerabilities observed among females.

Limitations and future directions: Despite its contributions, the study is cross-sectional, limiting causal inferences. Self-reported measures may introduce bias, and the sample, although diverse, was limited to university populations. Future research could employ longitudinal designs, include clinical samples, and explore additional cultural moderators. Further, subscale analyses of instruments such as BSMAS, OCI-R, and DERS-16 may reveal nuanced patterns of compulsive behaviors and emotional regulation difficulties.

In conclusion, the study provides empirical evidence that social media anchoring predicts OCD-like behaviors through cognitive and affective mechanisms, with FoMO and emotional dysregulation playing central mediating roles. Gender differences underscore the need for targeted, developmentally and culturally informed interventions to mitigate compulsive digital engagement among emerging adults. These findings advance understanding of the psychological pathways linking social media use to maladaptive behaviors and offer actionable insights for researchers, clinicians, and policymakers.

Implications

The findings of this study carry important theoretical, practical, and policy implications. Theoretically, the study extends the Compensatory Internet Use Theory (CIUT) and the Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Pathological Internet Use by demonstrating that cognitive (FoMO) and affective (emotional dysregulation) mechanisms jointly mediate the relationship between social media anchoring and OCD-like behaviors in emerging adults. By incorporating gender as a moderating factor, the study also highlights the nuanced ways in which psychological processes may differentially operate across subgroups, emphasizing the importance of gender-sensitive theoretical models.

Practically, interventions designed to reduce compulsive social media engagement should target both cognitive and emotional pathways. Psychoeducational programs and workshops can teach strategies for managing FoMO and enhancing emotional regulation skills. Mindfulness-based interventions, cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques, and digital well-being programs may provide effective avenues to mitigate compulsive behaviors. Gender-specific adaptations may further enhance efficacy, as females demonstrated stronger vulnerability to these mediating mechanisms.

Policy-wise, educational institutions and mental health organizations may incorporate digital literacy programs that address the psychological risks associated with social media anchoring. Awareness campaigns can help emerging adults recognize maladaptive patterns of social media use and seek timely interventions.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

While the study contributes significantly to understanding the mechanisms linking social media anchoring to OCD-like behaviors, several gaps remain. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; longitudinal studies are needed to establish temporal relationships among variables. Second, the study relied on self-reported measures, which may be subject to social desirability or recall bias. Future research could incorporate behavioral tracking or experimental designs to enhance data validity. Third, although the sample was diverse within university populations, clinical populations or broader community samples could provide additional insights. Finally, subscale-level analyses of BSMAS, OCI-R, and DERS-16 may reveal differential patterns across specific behavioral and emotional dimensions, offering more nuanced intervention targets.

Conclusion

The present study provides compelling evidence that social media anchoring predicts OCD-like behaviors through the mediating roles of FoMO and emotional dysregulation among emerging adults aged 18–26. Gender differences highlight that females are particularly susceptible to these cognitive and affective mechanisms, emphasizing the need for tailored interventions. By integrating theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and indigenous research, this study advances understanding of the psychological pathways underlying compulsive digital engagement. The findings underscore the importance of targeted psychoeducational programs, emotion regulation strategies, and gender-sensitive approaches to mitigate OCD-like behaviors associated with social media use. Overall, the study offers actionable insights for researchers, clinicians, educators, and policymakers, contributing to both the scientific literature and practical mental health interventions in digital contexts.

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