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# THE Pervasiveness of Social Media Platforms Towards Social Media Fatigue and Fear of Missing Out: A Threat to the Mental Health of Students in China

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## ABSTRACT

When data shows an increase in students burnt out owing to meeting obligations as a student, the mental health of students in China is alarming. The high level of expectation in research has caused them to focus and ensure that the information is current and up to date. Students in China might experience fear of missing out (FoMO) and social media fatigue (SMF) because of their extended engagement with social media platforms as a result of this pressure. As a result, the purpose of this study is to determine the influence of social media platform use and its effect on social media fatigue and fear of missing out among Chinese students. These quantitative studies were conducted on students from Chinese public universities. There are 381 students who participated in the study. Stratified random sampling was used in getting the samples. Results show a positive relationship between Use of social media platform towards social media fatigue ( $r = .626$ ) and FoMO ( $r = .702$ ) among China students. Pearson's correlation analysis was utilised to detect the association, and regression was used to determine the weightage of the influence. Risk of students' mental health can be reduced by participation by the community at large. As discussed, life of a university student has frequently been burdened by high expectations established by parents, teachers, and society at large. As a result, mental health is something that society or relevant organisations may work on to alleviate student load and ensure study-life balance.

**Keywords:** *Social Media Platform, Social Media Fatigue, Fear of Missing Out, Students, China*

## INTRODUCTION

The history of the Internet is a narrative of the continuous transformation and evolution of subcultural communities (Li & Li, 2022). In China, the adoption of social media has

progressively become a fundamental component of the Internet, particularly the mobile Internet. It has evolved from the early days of Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and QQ groups to online forums, microblogs, WeChat, and the recent emergence of short video social media like TikTok. Instant messaging remains the most popular, with a staggering increase of 20.42 million users from December 2021, reaching an impressive usage rate of 97.7% as reported by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC, 2022). Online communities' success largely hinges on their members' dedication and contributions (Peeters & Pretorius, 2020). However, it is essential to acknowledge that, inevitably, online communities will experience member disengagement over time. Social media has become an indispensable facet of modern communication, and its impact in China is especially significant. China's social media landscape stands out due to the country's internet regulations and the dominance of local social media platforms. This phenomenon has left a profound imprint on various aspects of Chinese society, including business, politics, and culture, not to mention the younger generations.

One of China's standout social media platforms is WeChat, developed by Tencent. With over 1.2 billion monthly active users as of 2021, WeChat is an all-in-one app that integrates messaging, social networking, e-commerce, and mobile payments. It has revolutionised the way the Chinese people communicate, conduct business, and interact with the digital world (Yu & Sun, 2021). Notably, WeChat's "mini programmes" feature has empowered third-party developers to create small apps within the platform, leading to a wide array of services, from ride-hailing to food delivery. Weibo, often called China's equivalent to Twitter, is another influential platform in China (Statista, 2021). In 2021, it boasted over 550 million registered users. (Zhu et al., 2022). Weibo serves as a hub for real-time news updates, celebrity endorsements, and trending topics. It has been pivotal in shaping public opinion and supporting social movements (Nardini et al., 2021). For instance, the MeToo movement gained significant momentum on Weibo, enabling victims of sexual harassment to share their stories and seek justice. Douyin, internationally known as TikTok, has taken the world by storm and enjoyed substantial popularity within China. With over 600 million daily active users as of 2021, TikTok is a short-video platform that has ushered in a new era of content creation (Rosli, Adnan, & Abdul Aziz, 2021). It has empowered individuals to become "internet celebrities" or "key opinion leaders" (KOLs) and catalysed the rapid growth of the influencer marketing industry in China (Statista, 2021).

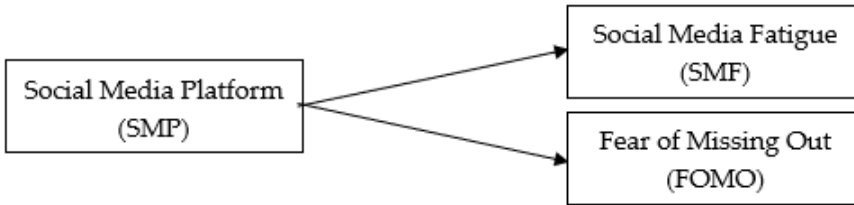
The advent of social media tools has made it easier to understand the diverse range of social activities in which individuals engage, both online and offline (Rawat et al., 2021). People actively participate in various social movements (Brooke & Jackson, 2020). Mikalef (2022) and three other researchers emphasised that this situation has a dual nature: on one hand, these social resources provide numerous opportunities for interaction and tend to offer an abundance of options to pursue, which can be overwhelming given the practical constraints and limited time. This duality inherent in social media usage brings attention to the phenomenon known as the "fear of missing out" or FoMO (Roberts & David, 2020). FoMO is a widespread apprehension that others may be experiencing enjoyable events or activities of which one is unaware (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). It is characterised by a constant desire to remain connected to the activities and experiences of others (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). Yet, the pervasiveness of social media platforms (SMP) in China has led to the symptoms of social media fatigue (SMF) and FoMO among its users, especially students who make up the highest number of SMP users.

Although social media is one of the most effective tools for effective engagement, the study by Zainal Abidin et al (2021) on communication management revealed that strategic communication refers to a communication process or data that fulfils an organisation or individual's long term plan in coordinating communication activities for commercial or non-commercial purposes. Social media has become an integral part of students' lives, influencing various aspects of their daily routines and perceptions. One of the primary motivations for students to engage with social media platforms is personal security. Erickson (2021) highlighted that many individuals turn to social media to establish a virtual safety net. This includes sharing their whereabouts, daily activities, or even their emotional state to stay connected with friends and family. Many individuals, especially the younger demographic, have leveraged on social media platforms to generate income. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok offer the potential to earn money through sponsorships, affiliate marketing, and brand collaborations. As such, social media serves as both a source of income and a gateway to financial independence. Additionally, access to information is another crucial aspect of social media's appeal to students. Students access a vast array of content, from news and educational resources to entertainment and hobbies. This accessibility not only broadens their knowledge base, but also enables them to stay informed about current events and trends. Social media platforms offer a space where information is easily shareable and digestible, making learning and staying updated more engaging and interactive.

Social interaction is at the core of social media platforms. Bhattacharya et al. (2019) found that for many students, social media provides a vital avenue for communication and relationship-building. These platforms facilitate one-on-one and group interactions, making it easier for individuals to maintain friendships and connect with like-minded people. It is not uncommon for students to rely on social media to plan events, chat with friends, or even participate in virtual communities that align with their interests. For many students, social media offers a means of staying in contact with their parents and family members. The younger generation's lifestyle often involves geographical separation from their families due to education or career opportunities. Social media bridges this physical gap, allowing them to communicate regularly, share updates, and feel closer to their loved ones despite the distance. However, this enhanced level of dependence on social media also comes with potential downsides. One in every four students reportedly claims that they "can't live" without social media, as per Erickson's findings (Zakaria & Adnan, 2022). This dependence can lead to addiction and negatively impacting their mental health, productivity, and real-life relationships.

These motivations have been uncovered in various research, highlighting the many functions that social media plays in the lives of students. As social media evolves and expands its effect, it will be critical for students to handle these variables cautiously to make the most of the digital age while protecting their well-being. As of 2021, the widespread adoption of social media was already significant, and it is expected to grow further. As a result, the negative consequences of its dependence have led to mental health threats among students, such as social media fatigue which refers to the subjective and self-evaluative fatigue of using social media (Dutt, 2023; Yifan & Adnan, 2021). Interestingly, a study asserts that the widespread adoption of social media platforms also leads to the symptoms of fear of missing out among the users (Wang et al., 2019). Moreover, Mayukh and Manaf (2022) who studied the relationship between social media and self-esteem among young adults revealed

that the amount and types of social media accounts have potentially negative effects on an individual's mental health.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- RO1: To investigate the impact of social media platforms on social media fatigue among students in China.
- RO2: To examine the impact of social media platforms on FoMO among students in China.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Social Media Platform (SMP)**

A SMP is an online digital service or website that allows users to create, share, and interact with content, as well as connect with other users. These platforms provide a virtual space for individuals to communicate, collaborate, and build communities around shared interests or connections. Social media platforms can include various forms of content such as texts, images, videos, and links, and they often offer features like profile creation, comments, likes, and messaging. In China, several social media platforms have gained prominence, catering to the unique preferences and restrictions of the country's internet landscape. WeChat, or known as "Weixin" in China, is a multipurpose messaging app developed by Tencent. It is one of the most popular and comprehensive social media platforms in China. WeChat combines messaging, social networking, payment services, and more. Users can send text and voice messages, share images and videos, make video calls, and access mini-programmes for various services. WeChat has over a billion users in China and is widely used for both personal and business communication (Wang et al., 2021). Sina Weibo is a microblogging platform like Twitter (Liu, 2021). It allows users to post short text updates, images, and videos. It gained popularity as a means for expressing opinions and sharing news and has been used by celebrities, influencers, and individuals to connect and engage with their followers (Yan & Wang, 2021).

Douyin, known as TikTok internationally, is a short video platform owned by ByteDance. It has gained global attention for its short, creative video content (Kaye, Chen & Zeng, 2021). Users can upload and share short videos, often set to music, and engage with a vast audience. While it started in China, TikTok has expanded to become a global phenomenon, attracting users from around the world (Ren et al., 2021). QQ is an instant messaging service also developed by Tencent. It offers features like chat, video calls, and online gaming. QQ has a long history and remains popular in China, particularly among younger users

(Statista, 2021). Baidu Tieba is a community-based forum platform. Users can create and join discussion boards (Tiebas) on a wide range of topics. It allows for in-depth discussions and information sharing (Sun et al., 2020). These platforms have transformed how people in China communicate and socialise and have also become integral to daily life and business activities. It is important to note that China's internet landscape is different from that of many other countries due to government censorship and restrictions, leading to the development of unique platforms that cater to local needs and preferences.

### **Social Media Fatigue (SMF)**

Information overload on social media can significantly impact social media fatigue. Information overload and social media burnout are closely related concepts and often lead to each other (Fu et al., 2020). Information overload leads to social media fatigue: information overload occurs when individuals are exposed to too much information and content, which can overwhelm their cognitive ability to process and make sense of it all (Jiang, 2022). Social media platforms are notorious for bombarding users with a constant stream of information that includes news, updates from friends, viral trends, adverts and more (Echeverría, 2023). However, this effect is not unidirectional; social media fatigue can exacerbate information overload (Islam et al., 2020). When burned out from using social media, individuals may become less discerning about the information they consume (Chou et al, 2021). This may cause them to unthinkingly scroll through their feeds without critically assessing the accuracy or relevance of the content (Jahanbakhsh et al., 2020).

In China, SMF among students due to information overload have recently become an alarming issue. Montag et al. (2019) divided social media users' transfer behaviour into three stages: initial, excessive, and fruitful, and subsequently analysed the characteristics of users in each stage. Meanwhile, Chen et al. (2023) found that unsustainable social media use intention is manifested by the reduction or cessation of social media use and platform transfer through the study of social interaction stressors. Taking WeChat as the research object, Pang and Ruan (2023) verified the positive relationship between social media user burnout and actual negative usage behaviour, and proposed that information overload, social overload, and service overload cause users' burnout, which in turn affects their behaviours such as diving, avoiding, ignoring, and quitting. Diving refers to users minimising their interactions on social media.

### **Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)**

FoMO is a psychological phenomenon characterised by anxiety, unease, or fear that one is missing out on a rewarding or exciting experience, event, or opportunity that others might be enjoying (Zhang et al., 2020). It often stems from the perception that others are having a better time, achieving more success, or participating in more exciting activities than oneself (Raynor, 2021). FoMO can be experienced in various contexts, including social interactions, personal achievements, cultural trends, and technological advancements. Odgers and Jensen (2020) explain that it has become particularly prominent in the digital age due to the widespread use of social media platforms, where people often curate and share their highlights, accomplishments, and experiences, potentially leading others to feel like they are missing out on a vibrant and fulfilling life.

FoMO has become a risk to students worldwide, yet in China's context, it is worrying as the data shows that heavy dependency on social media platforms has led students in China to suffer from FoMO. Some students may be more susceptible to FoMO due to factors like social media usage patterns, personal traits, and peer pressure (de Bruijn, 2021). The increasing use of social media and the widespread availability of smartphones have certainly made it easier for FoMO to manifest. However, whether it is becoming a significant risk for students depends on various factors, including how students manage their digital lives, their coping strategies, and the support they receive. Research has suggested that FoMO can negatively affect well-being and mental health. Therefore, it is important for educational institutions, parents, and students themselves to be aware of the potential risks of FoMO and to promote healthy and balanced use of technology and social media (Schmuck, 2021). Studies have supported the notion that students in China suffer heavily from FoMO (Alutaybi et al, 2020).

### **China Students and Mental Health**

The impact of heavy social media use on the mental health of Chinese students has been a subject of concern and research (Hussain et al, 2020). Chinese students often face intense academic pressure. Heavy use of social media, particularly when it involves excessive time spent on platforms like WeChat or Weibo, can distract students from their studies and lead to stress and anxiety. This pressure may stem from the desire to maintain an image of academic success or from comparing oneself to others on social media. Chinese students, like their counterparts worldwide, are vulnerable to online harassment and cyberbullying on social media platforms. These negative online experiences can significantly affect mental health by causing emotional distress and feelings of social isolation (Dagnino et al., 2020). Research has shown that extensive use of social media can lead to increased social comparison and negatively impact self-esteem.

Chinese students may compare their lives to those of their peers, celebrities, or online influencers, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy or dissatisfaction (Rounsefell et al., 2019). The fear of missing out is a phenomenon exacerbated by social media, as users often see others' highlights and positive experiences. Chinese students who spend significant time on social media may experience FoMO, leading to anxiety and dissatisfaction with their own lives (Li et al., 2022). Excessive use of social media, particularly before bedtime, can lead to sleep disturbances. Chinese students who engage in late-night social media use may experience poor sleep quality and related mental health issues, including increased stress and irritability (Nauman et al., 2023). This can negatively affect their academic performance by reducing time for studying and completing assignments (Madigan & Curran, 2021). Social media can be a significant source of distraction for students. Constant notifications, the temptation to check messages or updates, and the addictive nature of some platforms can make it difficult for students to focus on their studies.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study is quantitative in nature, employing 381 public university students in China as the study sample based on the Krejcie and Morgan table. The study aims to measure the effects of SMP on SMF and FoMO. Simple random sampling was used to ensure that the results obtained are generalisable to the total population of students in China.

**Table 1: Instrument Development**

Variable	Items Code	Items	References
<b>Section A</b> (Demographic)	A1	Gender	Pai (2023)
	A2	Year of Study	
	A3	Student Working Status	
	A4	Number of social media software frequently used	
	A5	Time Spent Using Social Media Per Day	
<b>Section B</b> Social Media Platform (SMP)	SMP1	Using social media, I feel self-confident in social situations as a university student.	Mustadi et al. (2021)
	SMP2	Using social media is a must for students in China.	Bi & Ren (2023)
	SMP3	Using social media keeps me up-to-date in getting the latest information about my study.	Fu et al. (2020)
	SMP4	Using social media keeps me up-to-date about what my peers are doing.	
<b>Section C</b> Social Media Fatigue (SMF)	SMF1	Using social media makes me feel tired in facing social situations as a university student.	Raza (2020)
	SMF2	Using social media makes me feel inadequate compared to my peers.	Naeem (2021)
	SMF3	Using social media makes me enjoy social roles less.	
	SMF4	Using social media makes me afraid of holding people's attention and interest.	
<b>Section D</b> Fear of Missing Out -FoMO (FOM)	FOM1	Using social media makes me feel eager to be the first to see new information on social media.	Moon et al. (2019)
	FOM2	The inability to use social media makes me feel uncomfortable and even lost.	Modzelewski (2020)
	FOM3	Leaving social media makes me feel "isolated".	
	FOM4	Not using social media is missing in my life.	
	FOM5	Not using social media makes me left out in coping with my academic problems.	

Instrument development was used to measure the respondents' responses. Table 1 below presents four sections, whereby each section consists of four to five items taken from previous studies. A five-point Likert Scale was used as a measure of the responses whereby 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Disagree. The instrument was later tested on 66 respondents to test its reliability.

The reliability of the data is shown in Table 2 below with Cronbach's Alpha results ranging from 0.846 to 0.962 (Good – Excellent). Therefore, the instrument was used for collecting the actual data.

**Table 2: Value of the Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient for Internal Consistency**

Section	Variable	Cronbach’s Alpha (a)	Internal Consistency
B	Social Media Platform (SMP)	0.846	Good
C	Social Media Fatigue (SMF)	0.962	Excellent
D	Fear of Missing Out -FoMO (FOM)	0.850	Good

**FINDINGS**

Table 3 presents the instruments utilised to gauge the demographic aspect of social media credibility in this study, along with their influence on the source credibility model. The questionnaire comprised five sections, with demographics allocated to Section A. It encompassed five questions covering gender, year of study, work experience, number of social media used, and frequency of social media usage. A total of 30 university students participated in the survey, and statistical analysis using SPSS was conducted to determine the frequency and percentage distribution of each option. In this census section, it was found that 53.3% of the university students are males, while 46.6% are females. The majority of the respondents were sophomores and juniors.

**Table 3: Demographic information**

Demographic Group	Item	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	16	53.30
	Female	14	46.60
Year of Study	Freshman Student	3	9.10
	Sophomore Student	12	42.40
	Junior Student	11	36.30
	Senior Student	4	12.1
Student Working Status	Never Worked	15	50.00
	0 to 1 Year	11	36.40
	1-2 Year	2	6.10
	More than 2 Years	2	7.60
Number of Social Media Software Frequently Used	1 to 3	18	59.10
	4 to 6	10	34.80
	7 to 10	1	3.00
	More than 10	1	3.00
Time Spent Using social media Per Day	Within 1 Hour	4	12.10
	1 to 3 Hours	8	25.80
	3 to 5 Hours	11	39.40
	5 to 7 Hours	4	12.10
	More than 7 Hours	3	10.60



Interestingly, the data indicated a need for more work experience among the students, with the average respondent reporting no prior work experience. Regarding social media usage, most of the students reported using between one to three social media platforms regularly. Additionally, 39.4% of the respondents reported spending 3 to 5 hours daily on social media. This study emphasises the achievement of a balanced demographic structure to ensure equitable representation and inclusivity, thereby avoiding the marginalisation or neglect of any specific group. Such balance not only fosters diversity of viewpoints, but also promotes fair treatment. Consequently, the researcher strived to implement a test structure that maintains balance to the greatest extent feasible throughout the study.

Pearson’s correlation coefficient is a statistical measure for quantifying the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two continuous variables (Pandey, 2020). It assesses how closely the data points in a scatter plot of two variables are aligned along a straight line. It is commonly used to assess the degree of association or correlation between variables. Researchers can use Pearson correlations to explore potential relationships between the variables of interest in a pilot study. This can help identify which variables may be worth investigating further in a full-scale study. Checking for correlations can also serve as a data quality check. Abnormal or unexpected correlations may indicate data quality issues, prompting researchers to investigate and resolve potential errors.

To achieve the study objective, Table 4 explains the Pearson correlation results and regressions of the relationship between the variables of SMP-SMF ( $\rho = .626$ ;  $r = .545$ ) and SMP-FOM ( $\rho = .702$ ;  $r = .682$ ), which are later interpreted as having moderate and strong impacts, respectively.

**Table 4: Summary of Pearson Correlation and Regression**

Hypothesis	Relationship	Pearson Correlation (p)	Regression (r)	Interpretation
H1	SMP - SMF	0.626	54.5 %	Moderate
H2	SMP- FOM	0.702	68.2%	Strong

According to the SPSS output, the significance of the analysis between SMP (Social Media Platform) and SMF (Social Media Fatigue) falls within a moderate range. This indicates that although some discernible relationships had emerged, they were not exceptionally robust or definitive. Furthermore, there appears to be some degree of variability in the responses, without a strong inclination towards either extreme.

The survey analyses suggest that the effect sizes observed are likely to be substantial, suggesting a relationship between SMP (Social Media Platform) and FOM (Fear of Missing Out) with significant practical importance. Additionally, the findings may hold clear and straightforward meanings that are easily interpretable and have practical implications for the study. The characterisation of the results as “strong” implies that they are dependable, significant, and meaningful, offering compelling evidence to support the research hypothesis or research question.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The influence of social media on the mental health of university students in China, particularly with regards to social media fatigue and FoMO, is a matter of increasing concern. The excessive use of social media platforms among students can have far-reaching consequences on their overall well-being. Failure to address these issues effectively could jeopardise the prospects of the new generation of Chinese students as they transition into adult life. SMF, characterised by a sense of exhaustion from constantly engaging with online platforms, and FoMO on social events or opportunities, are two psychological challenges that are exacerbated by the heavy use of social media. Students are often caught in a cycle of perpetual scrolling, comparing themselves to others, and feeling pressured to maintain an active online presence. The constant exposure to idealised representations of others' lives can lead to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. To address these concerns, the government of China must take a proactive role in acknowledging and mitigating the adverse effects of social media on students' mental health. It is crucial to reshape societal expectations and reduce the burden placed on students. High standards and expectations can be detrimental when they create unnecessary pressure and unrealistic comparisons.

Numerous academic studies support the notion that excessive time spent on social media platforms contributes to students' attempts to shape their identity according to certain standards prevalent on these platforms. This process can lead to a false sense of happiness and inspiration, driven by external validation. Reducing the use of social media platforms would enable students to experience a more typical and balanced life during their academic years. One effective strategy for addressing these issues is to encourage students to detach from their gadgets and establish control over their usage. Research conducted by scholars, such as Pandya and Lodha (2021), demonstrated that implementing limits on screen time and fostering periods of disconnection can significantly reduce stress and improve overall mental health. These efforts should be supported and promoted not only within educational institutions, but also at the family and societal levels.

In conclusion, social media's influence on the mental health of Chinese students is a pressing concern. The government of China must recognise these challenges and work to reshape societal expectations and reduce the burden on students. The excessive use of social media platforms can lead to SMF and FoMO, and addressing these issues is crucial for the well-being of the younger generation. By reducing social media consumption and promoting detachment from gadgets, students can enjoy a more balanced and mentally healthy life. It is essential to draw on existing research and expert opinions, like those of Dai et al. (2021), to inform and guide these initiatives for the benefit of the students in China.

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