



## Exploring University Student's Academic Anxiety in Online Learning from the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the emotional experiences of undergraduate students in online learning, focusing on academic anxiety and the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) phenomenon. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, this study involved nine students from various universities in Indonesia who had different experiences of online learning. In-depth interviews revealed key challenges such as decreased motivation, lack of interaction, and psychological pressure due to academic demands and social comparison on digital platforms. The findings show that students not only face academic burdens, but also internalized pressures related to digital presence and peer comparison achievements. Despite this, most informants demonstrated emotional resilience through adaptive strategies such as time management, self-reflection, and emotion regulation. The novelty in this study lies in its holistic perspective, which combines academic, emotional and social aspects to understand students' experiences during digital learning. Unlike previous research that tends to separate these factors, this study highlights the interconnectedness of these elements and encourages educational institutions to consider emotional sustainability as an important component in designing online learning systems.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The development of information technology has brought significant changes to the field of education, particularly through online learning systems that have now become an inseparable part of students' learning experiences in higher education. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, students have experienced a shift in the way they learn. Online learning has become the primary alternative, considered more flexible in terms of time, offering broad access to materials, and allowing them to study independently without the limitations of a physical classroom (Taufya Pontoh et al., n.d.). This condition has created opportunities for students to explore various learning resources independently and to adjust their study time according to their personal needs.

The continuous development of e-learning platforms has enriched their learning experiences with more interactive activities such as online discussions, collaborative assignments, and the use of multimedia as teaching materials (Magdalena et al., 2020). However, behind these conveniences, online learning also presents its own challenges, especially in emotional and social aspects. Limited social interaction, fatigue from prolonged screen time, and anxiety due to difficulties in understanding materials are some of the experiences students encounter in online learning (Yuliana Rahman et al., n.d.). These experiences can lead to feelings of isolation and negatively affect students' motivation and focus.

The impact of limited interaction and anxiety has contributed to the emergence of a psychological phenomenon known as Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), a form of anxiety that arises when an individual fears missing out on information, trends, or new experiences that others are having. This phenomenon has become increasingly relevant in the digital age, where access to other people's lives is made easier through social media and online platforms. In the context of online learning, FoMO arises not only from the fear of missing academic information or important discussions but also from the tendency to compare oneself with peers' achievements as portrayed on social media. Sometimes, students feel left behind when seeing the success of their peers, even though what is displayed does not necessarily reflect reality. The lack of face-to-face interaction and the increased use of social media during online learning raise the risk of experiencing FoMO, which in turn impacts students' mental well-being and academic performance (Azzahra et al., 2024a).

This condition is further exacerbated by the limited direct interaction, which makes it difficult for students to fully comprehend course materials. Research shows that students often struggle to understand online lecture content due to the lack of well-prepared delivery by lecturers and limited opportunities to ask questions (Fitriani et al., 2022). This widens the information gap and triggers a sense of being left behind. The FoMO experienced by students negatively affects their productivity, learning motivation, and emotional well-being (Puteri, 2024). Students often feel the need to always appear active and productive, thereby losing time for rest and experiencing mental fatigue. Previous studies have also revealed that FoMO has a significant correlation with academic stress (Polii et al., 2023), indicating that FoMO affects not only cognitive aspects but also emotional and social dimensions of students' daily lives.

On the other hand, academic anxiety is a form of psychological pressure that arises from high academic demands, fear of failure, and social pressure to achieve good academic performance. Students experiencing academic anxiety tend to feel restless, lack self-confidence, and struggle to concentrate while studying.

Although many studies have examined online learning, FoMO, and academic anxiety separately, in-depth research connecting all three remains limited. Some studies suggest that FoMO may increase as a result of online learning, while others indicate that FoMO exacerbates academic anxiety. However, the relationship between the three has not been thoroughly explained from the firsthand experiences of students. Therefore, this study is crucial to explore students' experiences in dealing with academic and emotional pressure, as well as the strategies they employ during online learning. This research is expected to provide new insights for developing a learning system that is more empathetic and responsive to the psychological dynamics of students. This study uses a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews to explore students' experiences in a contextual manner.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Theory of Online Learning*

The advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed the landscape of higher education, particularly through the widespread implementation of online learning since the COVID-19 pandemic. Online learning is widely acknowledged for offering various benefits, such as time flexibility, cost efficiency, and increased access to learning resources. However, theoretical frameworks reveal that these advantages are accompanied by critical challenges regarding the quality of learning and students' psychological well-being.

One of the central theories in understanding the dynamics of distance learning is the Transactional Distance Theory proposed by Moore (1993, cited in Alqurashi et al., 2022). This theory explains that the level of interaction and course structure in online education influences the psychological distance perceived by learners. The greater the lack of dialogue and structure, the higher the psychological gap, which may lead to increased confusion, disengagement, and emotional discomfort. Alqurashi et al., (2022) emphasize the continued relevance of this theory in contemporary online education settings, particularly in explaining the emergence of psychological distress resulting from insufficient instructional interaction and engagement. This perspective underlines the importance of communication quality and course design in fostering a psychologically supportive learning environment.

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

In the context of online learning, one psychological phenomenon that has gained increasing attention is the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) anxiety arising from the perception of being excluded from rewarding experiences, information, or achievements shared by others. This condition is often exacerbated by frequent

exposure to social media, where students witness peers' academic or social accomplishments.

According to the Self-Determination Theory developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, cited in Chiu, 2021), FoMO can be understood as a response to unmet psychological needs, such as relatedness, competence, and autonomy. These needs become more difficult to fulfill in online learning environments due to the limited opportunities for in-person interaction and connection. Chiu's., (2021) supports this view by demonstrating that students engaged in online learning who do not experience sufficient fulfillment of these basic needs are more likely to experience emotional distress, disengagement, and anxiety related to social exclusion or lack of information.

### *Academic Anxiety in Online Learning*

Closely related to FoMO is the issue of academic anxiety, which refers to emotional tension, worry, or fear associated with academic demands, examinations, and performance expectations. Academic anxiety is commonly intensified in digital learning contexts, where social comparisons and feelings of inadequacy are more prevalent.

Studies indicate that students frequently exposed to peers' performance-related posts on social media may feel overwhelmed, underachieving, or left behind factors that may contribute to academic stress. Tola et al., (2023) found that students with high FoMO scores are more prone to academic anxiety. Similarly, research by Polii et al., (2023) and Fitriani et al., (2022) identifies academic workload and evaluation systems as contributing factors to students' emotional strain and psychological discomfort.

### *Social Comparison Theory*

Social Comparison Theory, introduced by Festinger (1954, cited in Yi Ling et al., 2023), offers a psychological lens to explain the intensification of emotional distress in digital learning settings. According to this theory, individuals have a natural tendency to evaluate themselves in relation to others. With the pervasive presence of social media, such comparisons are more frequent and often occur unconsciously.

Yi Ling et al., (2023) found that upward social comparison comparing oneself to peers perceived as superior, can lead to feelings of envy, inadequacy, and even materialistic tendencies, all of which contribute to emotional distress and compulsive behaviors. Although the context of their research focuses on consumer behavior, the underlying psychological mechanisms are equally applicable in academic environments. Continuous exposure to curated representations of peer success on social media can diminish students' self-esteem, weaken motivation, and contribute to long-term academic anxiety if not mitigated by internal coping strategies or supportive environments.

In addition to international theoretical frameworks, several empirical studies in the Indonesian context have highlighted similar psychological challenges in online learning. Khotimah et al., (2023) noted that students often struggled to adapt to digital platforms and manage increased academic workloads during the pandemic. Sulistyio et al., (2025) emphasized that a lack of

interaction between lecturers and students contributed significantly to academic stress. Furthermore, Mayasari & Nurrahmi, (2023) found that intensive social media use was associated with increased social anxiety, while Tola et al., (2023) reported that students with high FoMO scores were more vulnerable to academic stress. Studies by Polii et al., (2023) and Fitriani et al., (2022) also confirmed that institutional assessment systems and heavy academic loads negatively impact students' mental well-being. These empirical findings support the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier and highlight the interconnectedness of psychological constructs such as transactional distance, FoMO, academic anxiety, and social comparison. Taken together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the emotional landscape of students in online learning. Understanding how these psychological dimensions interact is essential in guiding the development of more empathetic, engaging, and student-centered online learning environments.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive design, which aims to explore the subjective experiences of students in undergoing online learning, especially related to academic anxiety and the phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply explore students' meanings, perceptions, and adaptive strategies in dealing with psychological pressure without variable manipulation or statistical measurement.

This study involved nine active undergraduate students from various universities in Indonesia. The informants were selected using purposive sampling technique with the following inclusion criteria: (1) currently pursuing undergraduate education, (2) having online learning experiences during or after the COVID-19 pandemic, (3) experiencing academic anxiety, and (4) having FoMO-related tendencies or experiences in academic or social contexts. The selection of informants considered the diversity of university backgrounds, study programs, semesters, and geographical locations. To maintain confidentiality, informants' identities were disguised using codes (such as Informant A, B, C, etc.).

The main instrument in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. Questions were designed to be open-ended to allow participants to explain their experiences and perceptions in depth. In addition, the researcher also used field notes to record non-verbal observations during the interviews. To obtain rich and comprehensive data, this research utilized three data collection techniques, namely:

1. Semi-structured In-depth interviews.

Interviews were conducted individually with each informant, either online via Zoom or in person at a specific location. This technique was chosen to explore students' experiences in an in-depth and flexible manner, and to allow them to reflect on academic and social pressures in a narrative way. The duration of each interview ranged from 30-45 minutes, with questions

that were open-ended and exploratory to allow informants to explain their experiences without rigid boundaries.

Examples of opening questions include:

- "Can you tell me about your experience with online learning since the pandemic?"
- "Have you ever felt left behind by your friends during online learning, especially after seeing their activities on social media?"

The researcher also used an interview guide and took field notes to record key points and supplement the primary data.

## 2. Indirect Observation and Narrative Analysis

During the interview process, the researcher takes note of facial expressions, voice intonation, pauses, or body gestures that indicate emotional distress, confusion, or enthusiasm from the informant. These observations are indirect but important to capture the emotional context that is not always conveyed through words. In addition, spontaneous stories or informal narratives that emerged outside the main question guide were also analyzed as part of the psychological dynamics experienced by the informants. This technique helps deepen the understanding of students' subjective emotional experiences in the context of online learning.

## 3. Literature Study

To complement the field data, literature review was used to enrich the conceptual framework and compare the findings with previous studies. The literature reviewed included national and international scientific journal articles, academic books, and relevant research reports related to online learning, academic anxiety, and FoMO. This review also helped the researcher to position the research results in a broader theoretical context and strengthen the arguments developed in the discussion stage.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach consisting of five stages, namely verbatim transcription of interview results, data reduction to filter out relevant information, data presentation in the form of descriptive narratives, coding of emerging themes and patterns, and drawing and verifying conclusions so that the interpretations obtained truly reflect the authentic experiences of participants.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this research applied several complementary strategies. Triangulation was conducted on both sources and methods, combining interviews, observations and literature studies to enrich perspectives and minimize bias. Member checking was conducted by providing a summary of the interview results to the informant for confirmation. In addition, the researcher compiled a thick description to present a rich and authentic context of the experience under study. The audit trail was compiled in the form of documentation of the research process as a whole, starting from the planning, implementation, and analysis stages. Researcher reflection is also an important part of maintaining objectivity, namely by realizing the possibility of bias or interpretations influenced by the researcher's subjective position during the data collection and analysis process.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

This study involved nine undergraduate students from various universities in Indonesia who had diverse experiences in online learning. The participants came from different academic backgrounds, university types, and semester levels, and underwent various online learning systems, ranging from fully online to hybrid models. Thematic analysis revealed three dominant categories: (1) contextual challenges of online learning, (2) emotional pressure involving academic anxiety and FoMO, and (3) adaptive coping strategies. These categories are discussed narratively in the following sections with illustrative quotes to capture the lived experiences of participants.

Students expressed a wide range of perspectives on online learning. While some appreciated its flexibility, especially in managing time and personal activities, others found it difficult to stay motivated and engaged. "I often feel like I'm learning alone. If I don't understand the material, I don't know who to ask directly," said one participant (Informant D). Several students experienced difficulty concentrating at home, citing distractions and a lack of conducive learning space. One student shared, "I live with my siblings, and they're noisy during my Zoom class. It's hard to focus" (Informant E). Technical limitations also posed a serious challenge. Students in remote areas struggled with internet connectivity, which often disrupted their ability to follow lectures or submit assignments on time. "Sometimes I have to go to a café just to find stable internet to submit my assignments," stated Informant C. For some, online learning felt alienating. "I've never met my classmates in real life. It's hard to feel like I belong," explained a student from a fully online university (Informant F). These challenges illustrate how socio-economic and infrastructural factors intersect with students' emotional experiences in the digital classroom, often creating unequal conditions that affect learning quality and emotional resilience.

Academic anxiety was a consistent theme across participants. Students reported feeling overwhelmed by assignments, unclear instructions, and the pressure to perform independently. "I feel anxious when the deadline comes because I'm afraid I missed something important in class, but I don't know who to ask," said Informant G. Others admitted that they hesitated to ask questions during online sessions. "I don't want to seem stupid in the chat, so I just stay silent even when I'm confused" (Informant H). This indicates a breakdown in academic communication and the lack of supportive learning interaction, which further exacerbates anxiety. The phenomenon of FoMO (Fear of Missing Out) emerged strongly in students' narratives, especially regarding social comparison through digital platforms. "Sometimes I feel left behind. My friends are so active online, posting achievements, while I feel like I'm not doing anything meaningful," said Informant B. Another added, "I know someone who joined webinars almost every week and got certificates. I felt pressured to do the same even though I was already overwhelmed" (Informant I). Students also expressed concern about visibility and recognition in digital spaces. "Even if I attend class, if my camera is off or I don't say anything, it feels like no one notices I'm there," said Informant I. This illustrates how FoMO and academic anxiety often reinforce one another, creating a cycle of comparison, pressure, and emotional fatigue. The

sense of invisibility in online classrooms contributed to emotional fatigue and a diminished sense of belonging, especially when students felt unnoticed or disconnected despite being present in class. This emotional disconnection deepened their anxiety and further complicated their learning engagement.

Despite these challenges, participants described various coping mechanisms. Some relied on small routines, such as journaling, taking walks, or listening to music, to reduce stress. Others employed practical strategies like making to-do lists, rewatching lecture recordings, or discussing material with peers outside class. "Rewatching lectures really helps me because I often miss parts during the live session," said Informant A. A few students turned to emotional reframing. "Sometimes I remind myself that I'm doing my best and it's okay not to be perfect," shared Informant G. These responses demonstrate emotional regulation strategies and the role of self-awareness in psychological resilience. Such findings reveal students' agency in managing stress despite systemic limitations, showing that emotional endurance is a key part of online learning success.

Data saturation was achieved at the ninth participant interview, as no new themes emerged at the last interview. The consistency of responses across diverse backgrounds not only strengthens the credibility of the data but also affirms the universality of these emotional experiences among students in online learning settings. Taken together, these findings underscore the need for a more responsive and emotionally supportive digital learning environment.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of students' experiences in online learning environments. These experiences are strongly shaped by individual adaptability, socio-economic background, and access to technology. While the flexibility afforded by online learning is considered advantageous by some students, it poses substantial challenges for others, particularly those with limited self-regulation skills or who study in non-conducive home environments. This diversity in response underscores the importance of adopting a contextualized and differentiated approach when evaluating the effectiveness of online learning, especially in educational settings marked by inequality and digital divide.

Although online learning offers benefits in terms of efficiency and accessibility, it falls short in replicating the depth of interpersonal interactions and structured routines characteristic of traditional face-to-face learning. The absence of direct social engagement, peer collaboration, and classroom-based discipline has contributed to increased levels of academic anxiety and emotional fatigue among students. These negative impacts are particularly pronounced among first-year students and those residing in rural or under-resourced areas, who often feel disconnected from academic and social support systems. The lack of institutional mechanisms to address these emotional and social needs has further compounded the difficulties faced by these groups.

A key finding of this research concerns the psychological effects of prolonged digital exposure, particularly through the lens of the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) phenomenon. The constant stream of curated content on social

media platforms fosters social comparison and unrealistic expectations, which, in turn, exacerbate the academic and personal pressures faced by students. Many students not only strive to achieve high academic performance but also feel compelled to maintain a polished online image. This dual burden often results in internal conflicts between their actual academic capabilities and the idealized personas they present online. Such discrepancies can negatively affect self-esteem, emotional well-being, and intrinsic motivation to learn. This performative pressure not only blurs the line between genuine learning and image management, but also risks turning education into a competitive social display rather than a personal developmental journey. As a result, the learning process becomes less about growth and curiosity, and more about visibility and validation often leading to burnout, self-doubt, and disengagement from authentic academic engagement.

In other international contexts, studies have shown that students in countries such as China and the UK also experience increased academic stress and emotional fatigue during online learning. Factors such as limited interaction, high academic demands, and excessive exposure to social media contribute to feelings of isolation and anxiety. Globally, students with high levels of FoMO tend to be more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion and lower academic engagement. However, compared to those contexts, the challenges in Indonesia are often more severe due to the digital divide, limited access to mental health support, and cultural pressures to appear socially successful. These differences suggest that while FoMO is a common phenomenon worldwide, its expression and impact vary according to local educational and socio-economic realities.

Despite these considerable challenges, the study highlights students' capacity for resilience. Many students employ adaptive strategies, such as emotional regulation, seeking social support, reflective thinking, and time management to mitigate the psychological pressures of online learning. These coping mechanisms demonstrate that students are not merely passive recipients of stress but are active agents capable of constructing meaning, asserting control over their learning environments, and managing challenges in a constructive manner. However, these individual efforts must be complemented by institutional support. For example, several participants reported feeling "invisible" in class when their cameras were off or when they were too anxious to speak. Implementing empathy-based pedagogy and alternative participation mechanisms may directly alleviate these feelings of disengagement.

To address this, universities should adopt integrative emotional support strategies such as proactive counseling services targeting academic anxiety and FoMO, emotional literacy programs during student orientation, and ongoing training for lecturers on empathetic digital pedagogy. In addition, incorporating anonymous feedback channels and flexible deadlines can accommodate students facing emotional or technical constraints. By embedding these practices into the design of online learning, institutions can prioritize student well-being alongside academic achievement.

The implications of these findings are significant. First, they suggest that online education should be evaluated not only through the lens of academic

outcomes, but also through its emotional, psychological, and social consequences. Second, they underscore the need for a pedagogical shift from one that prioritizes performance and efficiency to one that values emotional resilience, empathy, and human connection. Educational institutions should incorporate mental health support into their learning frameworks, promote inclusive and interactive teaching practices, and ensure that students have equitable access to digital infrastructure and psychological resources.

In light of the ongoing evolution of digital learning, a more holistic and student-centered approach is required. The integration of hybrid learning models that combine the strengths of online and offline methods can offer a more balanced educational experience. Furthermore, policies aimed at improving digital access, particularly in marginalized communities, should be prioritized to bridge the digital divide. Curriculum design must also evolve to include assessments that consider the diverse learning conditions of students, promoting not just knowledge acquisition but also well-being and self-growth.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the hidden emotional labor that students endure in online learning contexts. It brings to the forefront the urgent need to develop learning environments that are not only technologically sophisticated but also emotionally attuned and socially equitable. By acknowledging and addressing the affective dimensions of learning, educators and policymakers can build a more compassionate and resilient education system one that supports students not only as learners, but as whole individuals navigating complex social, emotional, and academic realities. Moving toward such a future requires not only technological readiness, but a renewed ethical commitment to care, equity, and student agency at the heart of educational transformation.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This study reveals that the emotional landscape of online learning among undergraduate students is shaped by a convergence of academic demands, psychological stressors, and digital social dynamics. Academic anxiety and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) emerged as dominant emotional challenges, amplified by limited interaction, unclear communication, and constant exposure to peer achievements through social media. Students often internalized a sense of inadequacy, disengagement, and pressure to remain visibly productive, which blurred the line between authentic learning and performative participation.

Despite these pressures, the majority of participants exhibited a notable degree of emotional resilience. They engaged in adaptive strategies such as time management, reflective thinking, and self-regulation to sustain motivation and protect their mental well-being. These findings highlight that while students are capable of constructing their own coping systems, their emotional efforts often occur in isolation, without systemic support from institutional structures.

The study underscores that online learning is not a neutral medium – it shapes students' emotional experiences, influences their academic confidence, and impacts their sense of belonging. The emotional invisibility described by many participants points to the deeper affective costs of online education that are

often overlooked. Understanding these experiences is crucial for framing digital learning not solely as a technological adaptation, but as a complex human process that demands empathy, inclusion, and sustained emotional awareness. As digital learning continues to evolve, these insights offer a foundation for reimagining education systems that are not only accessible, but also psychologically sustainable.

### **FURTHER STUDY**

Given the exploratory nature of this study, several areas warrant further investigation to deepen the understanding of academic anxiety and FoMO in the context of online learning. While this research offers valuable insights into students' emotional experiences, future studies could enhance both the breadth and depth of inquiry through the following directions:

1. **Expand the Participant Base**

Future studies are encouraged to involve students from different educational levels, such as postgraduate or vocational learners, to compare emotional experiences across academic stages and institutional types.

2. **Adopt a Longitudinal Approach**

A longitudinal study design could be useful to track the progression or fluctuation of academic anxiety and FoMO over time, particularly in transitional periods such as the shift from fully online to hybrid learning models.

3. **Integrate Quantitative Methods**

Incorporating quantitative instruments, such as standardized psychological scales, could provide measurable insights into the intensity and correlations between FoMO, academic stress, and emotional regulation strategies.

4. **Evaluate Specific Interventions**

Future research may focus on assessing the effectiveness of targeted institutional interventions, such as anonymous feedback mechanisms, empathy-based pedagogy, or emotional literacy workshops in reducing students' emotional distress during online learning.

5. **Conduct Cross-Cultural and Institutional Comparisons**

Comparative studies across different regions, universities, or cultural contexts could enrich understanding of how socio-economic, technological, and cultural factors shape emotional experiences in digital education environments.

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