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Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) Toward ICT Use During Public Health Emergencies:
An Investigation on Predictors and Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has brought a great impact on people's lives around the world. This paper aims to study the influencing factors of people's fear of missing out (FOMO) toward personal ICT use and its further impact on life satisfaction during the pandemic. A sample consisting of 318 participants was obtained by an online survey in China. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used for data analysis. The results suggested that people's anxiety and boredom brought by the pandemic are positively correlated with their FOMO. People with higher FOMO used personal ICTs more frequently for both social and process purposes. Furthermore, the social use of ICTs promoted people's life satisfaction, while the process use of ICTs had no significant effect on life satisfaction. Several theoretical and practical implications were discussed based on the results.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), ICT Use, Life Satisfaction, Public Health Emergencies

INTRODUCTION

Public health emergencies pose great threats to people's health and life (Liang & Xue, 2004). At the end of 2019, a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was identified among people and soon became a global pandemic (WHO, 2020), which brought significant disruption to human society (Roy et al., 2020). On the one hand, as an infectious acute respiratory disease, COVID-19 threatens people's health and results in people's anxiety (Roy et al., 2020). On the other hand, many governments took varied initiatives to deal with the crisis, such as city lockdown, social distancing, and quarantine reactions, which might lead to a feeling of boredom (Chen et al., 2020; Roy et al., 2020). The negative psychological states trigger the public's motivations of wanting more information during the pandemic (Wang & Ahern, 2015; Kim & Park, 2020), resulting in a "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO).

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FOMO is defined as "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Przybylski et al., 2013, p.1841). Technology advancement, especially the development of mobile ICT, makes people connected tightly. When relevant information or people are just one-click away, people can hardly deny the options which further amplifies FOMO. Thus, FOMO in the digital environment can be conceived as a feeling of fearing loss when the wanted information is absent (Song et al., 2017). As reported by many prior studies, FOMO increases the adoption and use of personal information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Alt & Bonielnissim, 2018; Buglass et al., 2017; Elhai et al., 2018).

In this regard, we believe that FOMO may provide an appropriate theoretical lens to investigate the relationship between individual's psychological states and personal ICT use. Particularly during the COVID-19 epidemic, physical isolation and the maintenance of social distances for health reasons made personal ICTs the primary source of access to all types of information. However, to the best of our knowledge, few studies have empirically explored user FOMO perception and use of personal ICTs in the context of a global epidemic. Therefore, this paper aims to build the connections between people's psychological factors, ICT use behavior and life satisfaction under the lens of FOMO. It will expand the ICT use literature to the public emergency settings and provide implications for wellbeing improvement during the pandemic. The study aims to address the following questions: (1) how anxiety and boredom affect people's FOMO; (2) How FOMO affects people's social and process use behavior of personal ICT devices; and (3) How two types of ICT use affect people's life satisfaction during the pandemic.

BACKGROUND

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) Toward ICT Use

FOMO is a notable emerging phenomenon with the development of information and communication technologies and has attracted much research attention in recent years. FOMO is conceived as a subjective perception that people compulsively worry that they may miss social interaction with friends and important information, both offline and online (Alt & Bonielnissim, 2018). Previous studies suggested that FOMO is associated with negative psychological factors such as anxiety (Dempsey et al., 2019; Dhir et al., 2018), depression (Baker et al., 2016; Elhai et al., 2016), boredom proneness (Elhai et al., 2018), and low self-esteem (Buglass et al., 2017).

Perceived FOMO motivates people to frequently use personal ICTs to meet their information needs (Buglass et al., 2017; Elhai et al., 2018; Przybylski et al., 2013). People with high FOMO can hardly reject of receiving information, even when they perceived the information overload (Hanlon, 2016). Roberts and David (2020) borrowed information foraging theory to explain the relationship between FOMO and social media use. Like animal foraging, human beings have intrinsic motivations to seek information through various channels, especially the use of ICTs (Khapre & Basha, 2012). FOMO is considered to be related to social attachment, which motivates people to use or check social media frequently (Przybylski et al., 2013, Song et al., 2017). In addition to FOMO of social contact, people also have the feeling of fearing lose when they absent from non-social activities, such as news, business information and scientific knowledge (Alt, 2015; Elhai et al., 2020a; Hanlon, 2016).

Personal ICT Use and Life Satisfaction

Personal ICT use is an umbrella term that refers to the use of various IT artifacts (e.g., PC, smartphone, tablet, etc.) by individuals in their daily lives to meet the needs of information seeking, dissemination, communication and creation. This paper does not intend to distinguish these more fine-grained IT artifacts related to personal ICT use. Previous ICT use studies mainly focused on information system (IS) aspects and investigated IS success, IS for decision making, IS acceptance, and IS implementation (Burton-Jones & Straub, 2006). As suggested by some scholars, it is necessary to incorporate more