

Disconnected in a Connected World: FoMO, Social Media, and Cognitive Health in Indian Adults Aged 51-60

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Abstract: *This study examines the psychological dissonance experienced by Indian adults aged 51–60, who, despite being actively engaged on digital platforms, often feel emotionally unfulfilled and cognitively burdened. It investigates the influence of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and prolonged social media usage on attention span, emotional fatigue, memory, and perceived social isolation in this age group. A structured 22-item online survey was conducted between March and July 2025, targeting participants from urban, semi-urban, and rural regions, across the country. 75 valid responses were collected using purposive sampling. Quantitative analysis revealed recurring patterns of mental exhaustion, reduced focus, and emotional detachment linked to frequent digital engagement. Many participants expressed feelings of exclusion when not posting updates and viewed others' online lives as more engaging, pointing to the emotional toll of online comparison. Despite these challenges, a significant number showed willingness to cut down screen time in search of better mental clarity and balance. The findings underscore the cognitive-emotional impact of digital habits among mid-life adults and point to the urgent need for targeted digital wellness strategies tailored to this overlooked demographic.*

Keywords: Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), Social Media Usage, Cognitive Fatigue, Digital Disconnection, Screen Time, Indian Adults, Technology and Mental Health

1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has brought about profound changes in how individuals across age groups engage with the world. Social media platforms—once considered the domain of youth—are now widely embraced by older generations, including adults aged 51 to 60. In India, this demographic is becoming increasingly active on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. These tools offer convenience, entertainment, and avenues for maintaining long-distance relationships. However, this digital engagement also raises critical questions about its effects on emotional well-being and cognitive health.

One of the paradoxes of modern digital life is that increased virtual connectivity does not always equate to improved emotional or psychological fulfillment. While social media facilitates constant connection, many users report feelings of loneliness, restlessness, or mental exhaustion—suggesting a growing gap between online activity and offline well-being. Among middle-aged Indian adults, this paradox is particularly compelling. They stand at a transitional phase in life—approaching retirement, navigating shifting social roles, and balancing professional, familial, and personal responsibilities. For this group, the emotional and cognitive implications of sustained digital engagement warrant deeper examination.

Central to this study is the concept of **Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)**—a pervasive form of anxiety triggered by the belief that others are enjoying better experiences or gaining access to more valuable information. While FoMO has predominantly been associated with adolescents and young adults, evidence now points to its relevance in older

populations. In the context of social media, FoMO can manifest in various forms: compulsive checking of updates, emotional distress when not online, or dissatisfaction stemming from social comparison. For individuals aged 51–60, who are navigating a unique intersection of generational change and digital adaptation, FoMO can undermine emotional regulation and self-esteem.

Moreover, continuous and unregulated social media usage has been linked to a variety of **cognitive and emotional health concerns**. These include reduced attention span, disrupted sleep cycles, memory lapses, and emotional fatigue. For mid-life adults, who may already be experiencing age-related cognitive transitions, such effects can be particularly significant. The screen time dedicated to social media may also displace more meaningful offline interactions, leading to a reduction in the quality of personal relationships and an increased sense of isolation or disconnection.

This study is timely and necessary, as much of the existing literature on digital wellbeing and FoMO tends to focus on younger populations, leaving a substantial research gap regarding the experiences of older adults. In India, where internet penetration is growing rapidly—even in semi-urban and rural regions—the impact of digital behavior on mental health among older adults has significant social and public health implications.

Using a structured, self-administered online questionnaire, this study aims to explore the cognitive and emotional experiences of social media users aged 51–60 in India. The research investigates how patterns of usage relate to self-reported experiences of anxiety, attention issues, sleep disturbance, and real-world disconnection. By capturing

insights from individuals in this age group across urban, semi-urban, and rural settings, the study attempts to offer a holistic understanding of the interplay between digital habits and psychological well-being.

Ultimately, this research seeks to bridge a critical gap in the digital wellness discourse by focusing on a demographically important yet underrepresented group. It also provides evidence-based insights that can inform health professionals, educators, and policymakers seeking to design digital literacy campaigns, promote mindful tech use, and encourage healthier online-offline balance for India's aging but increasingly connected population.

2. Literature Review

The exponential rise in social media use over the past two decades has transformed not only how people communicate but also how they perceive themselves and others. While early research primarily focused on the impacts of social media on adolescents and young adults, recent studies have begun to recognize its psychological and cognitive implications across all age groups. This literature review outlines key contributions to the understanding of digital behavior, particularly through the lens of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), cognitive strain, and emotional fatigue, with a focus on gaps that relate to older adult populations in the Indian context.

FoMO and Its Psychological Effects

FoMO is defined as the pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent (Przybylski et al., 2013). Originally observed in young users, FoMO is increasingly relevant among older adults who engage with social media to remain socially and culturally connected. Blackwell et al. (2017) emphasized that FoMO is positively associated with neuroticism and insecure attachment styles, predicting both increased social media use and symptoms of addiction. These psychological dependencies can interfere with emotional regulation, self-worth, and even decision-making processes.

While younger users may use social media to form identity and peer networks, middle-aged and older adults often engage to maintain familial and professional ties or to feel socially included. As a result, FoMO in older populations may manifest differently-through anxiety when not receiving updates from children or peers, or through social comparison with the curated lives of others. However, studies exploring this age-specific dynamic are still limited.

Cognitive Strain and Digital Fatigue

Several studies have noted the cognitive costs of sustained digital engagement. Turel and Qahri-Saremi (2016) found that prolonged use of social networking sites is associated with attentional deficits and reduced impulse control, particularly among individuals who struggle with self-regulation. For adults over 50, who may already experience natural age-related changes in cognitive functioning, such effects can be more detrimental.

Verduyn et al. (2017) conducted a critical review and concluded that passive consumption of social media content-such as scrolling without interaction-can lead to reduced well-being, especially when users engage in upward social comparison. For older adults, who may be reflecting on past achievements or preparing for retirement, such comparisons may heighten emotional strain and exacerbate feelings of inadequacy or exclusion.

Emotional Disconnection in a Connected World

Ironically, the same platforms designed to enhance connection can also contribute to emotional detachment in offline relationships. Dhir et al. (2021), in their study on digital overload, pointed out that excessive social media use often leads to emotional exhaustion, reduced quality of personal interactions, and a preference for online communication over face-to-face exchanges. This digital fatigue can result in a growing emotional distance within families or social groups, which is particularly concerning for older adults who already face social role transitions.

In the Indian context, Bansal and Kaushik (2019) noted that while digital inclusion among older populations has improved due to mobile penetration and government-led digital literacy programs, there is insufficient attention to the mental health implications of this shift. Cultural expectations, intergenerational technology gaps, and the stigma around emotional vulnerability further complicate the picture.

Research Gaps and Emerging Needs

Despite growing interest in digital well-being, most existing studies are Western-centric and youth-focused. There is a notable scarcity of research specifically targeting Indian adults aged 51–60, who occupy a transitional life stage and are significantly underrepresented in digital behavior research. Additionally, current studies often focus on emotional or behavioral outcomes but overlook cognitive markers such as attention span, memory disturbances, or mental fatigue.

Furthermore, few studies have explored the role of urban-rural digital divide and how access, content preferences, or cultural values might mediate the relationship between social media use and mental health in Indian adults. There is also limited research that investigates preventive or restorative digital wellness strategies tailored to older populations, such as digital detox, mindful tech use, or offline community engagement.

Several studies have explored the complex interplay between social media use, psychological well-being, and cognitive-emotional health. Sommantico et al. (2023) found that depression is positively associated with Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and social media addiction, with self-esteem acting as a significant mediator in this relationship-lower self-esteem contributes to higher addiction levels. Similarly, Varchetta et al. (2020) highlighted that FoMO is the strongest predictor of social media addiction and online vulnerability among university students, with women showing higher levels of both addiction and the need for social connection.

Hamutoglu et al. (2020) emphasized that FoMO is significantly predicted by social media addiction, and among the Big Five personality traits, agreeableness was the only one with a notable positive influence on FoMO levels. In the Indian context, Arora, Kumar, and Piplani (2022) reported that 18% of their respondents were at high risk of social media addiction. Their study validated the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), identifying three core factors of addiction: salience, mood modification/tolerance, and relapse.

A regional study by Menon et al. (2023) among older adults in Kerala found high levels of Facebook intensity and social media dependency, particularly in urban areas and among males. Meanwhile, Verma and Kumari (2016) discovered a negative correlation between social networking site addiction and psychological well-being in working adults, with no significant differences based on gender or sector of employment.

Fraschetti et al. (2020) also reinforced the centrality of FoMO, identifying it as the most significant predictor of both social media addiction and online vulnerability in university students. A duplicate analysis by Hamutoglu et al. (2020) supported earlier findings, stating that prospective teachers with higher agreeableness scores were more likely to experience FoMO and exhibit addictive behaviors toward social media.

Another observation by Achutha Menon et al. (2023) confirmed that older adults who engaged heavily on Facebook demonstrated increased social media dependency, with notable regional and gender variations. Lastly, Sommantico et al. (2023) reiterated the critical role of self-esteem, emphasizing that it mediates the link between depression and social media addiction among young adults.

3. Research Methods

1. Research Design

This study adopted an empirical and exploratory research design, aiming to investigate the emotional and cognitive impact of social media use among Indian adults aged 51 to 60. Given the limited literature focused on this age group, an exploratory approach was essential to uncover underlying patterns, behaviors, and perceptions.

2. Data Collection Method

Primary data was collected using a structured online questionnaire comprising 22 closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was designed to capture data on:

- Demographics (age, gender, location, education, occupation)
- Social media usage patterns (platforms, frequency, duration, purpose)
- Cognitive and emotional impacts (attention span, fatigue, FoMO symptoms, sleep, emotional state)
- Perceptions of connection/disconnection

- Attitudes toward digital balance and wellness interventions

The questionnaire was self-administered through Google Forms and distributed Social Media posts, WhatsApp status and community networks.

3. Sampling Technique

The study employed a non-probability purposive sampling method. Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Aged between 51 and 60 years
- Active users of one or more social media platforms
- Residing in India (urban, semi-urban, or rural regions)

A total of 75 valid responses were received during the period March to May 2025.

4. Data Analysis

The collected data was subjected to quantitative analysis using basic statistical tools:

- Frequency distribution to understand the prevalence of specific responses
- Cross-tabulations to identify relationships between variables such as gender, age subgroup, and digital behavior
- Visual data representation (charts, tables) to highlight key patterns

This analysis enabled the identification of trends in digital engagement, emotional responses, cognitive symptoms, and openness to behavioral change.

5. Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, with informed consent obtained at the beginning of the survey. No personal identifiers were collected to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage of the survey.

4. Major Findings and Discussions

The analysis of 75 responses from Indian adults aged 51–60 reveals several key insights into the emotional and cognitive implications of social media usage in this age group. The findings are outlined below, with selected visuals to highlight significant trends.

1. High Frequency and Duration of Social Media Usage

A majority of respondents use social media daily or several times a day, with nearly 47% spending more than four hours per day online. Popular platforms include WhatsApp (92%), YouTube (62.7%), and Facebook (30.7%). This suggests a high level of digital engagement among middle-aged adults.

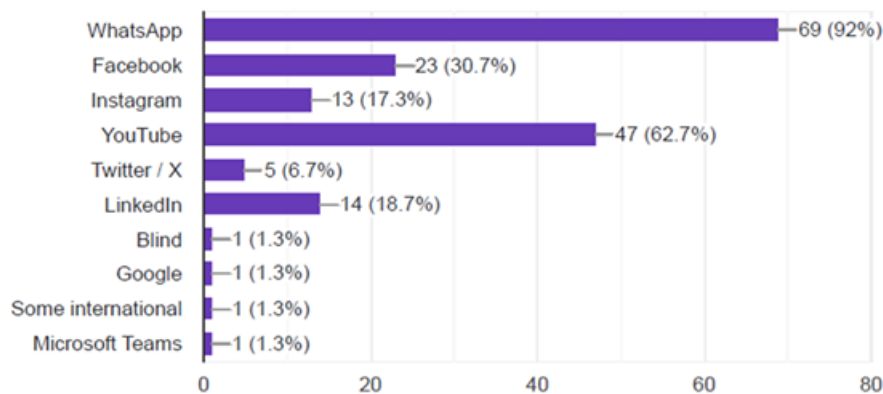


Figure 1: Various Social Media Usage Pattern



Figure 2: Time spent on social media Per Day

2. Emotional and Cognitive Strain

Respondents reported experiencing various forms of digital fatigue and emotional discomfort:

- 32.9% experienced disturbed sleep or appetite

- 27.4% reported reduced attention span
- 21.9% felt physically or mentally tired

These symptoms indicate that sustained digital engagement is taking a toll on their cognitive and emotional health.

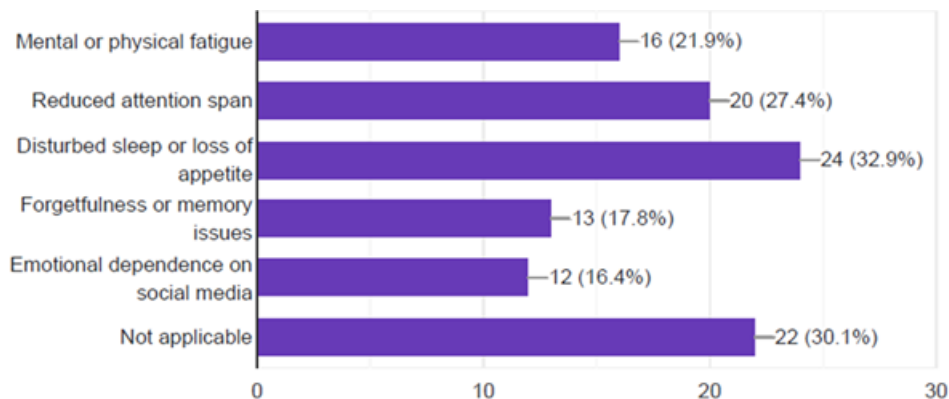


Figure 3: Self-Reported Cognitive and Emotional Effects

3. Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and Social Comparison

- 60% admitted they “always” or “often” feel that others are living more fulfilling lives based on social media content.

- 33.3% reported feeling left out when they do not post updates.

This underscores the presence of FoMO and social comparison pressures even among older users, often assumed to be more emotionally resilient.

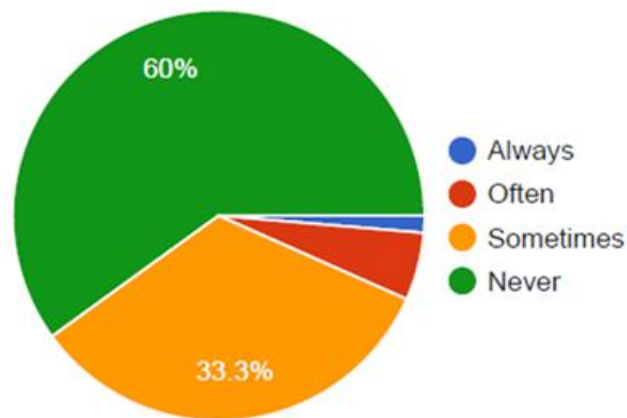


Figure 4: Feeling left out if not updated on social media

4. Real-World Disconnection

While respondents are active online, 40.5% said they felt more socially disconnected after using social media. This suggests that digital interaction may be replacing rather than enhancing meaningful real-life relationships

5. Positive Attitude Toward Digital Wellness

Despite the emotional strain, the findings show optimism:

- 72% are open to reducing screen time if it improves their focus and peace of mind.
- Respondents expressed interest in alternative engagements like outdoor activities (69.3%), community or spiritual gatherings (54.7%), and creative hobbies (42.7%).

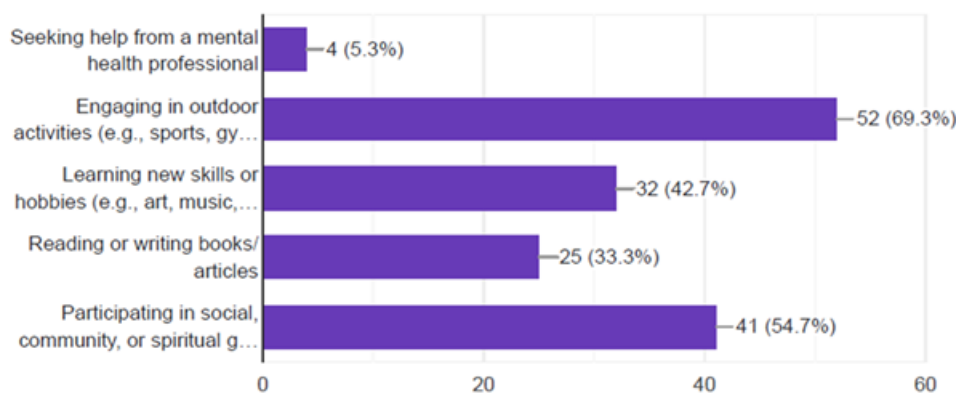


Figure 5: Openness to Screen-Time Reduction Activities

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study reveals a clear psychological paradox among Indian adults aged 51–60: while they are highly engaged with digital platforms, this connection often coincides with emotional strain and cognitive fatigue. Social media, originally designed to foster connection and convenience, is contributing to disturbances in attention, sleep, and emotional stability in this age group. A substantial portion of respondents reported symptoms such as disturbed sleep, reduced concentration, and a sense of disconnection from their immediate social environment—despite being virtually active.

The presence of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) among these users is particularly noteworthy, as it demonstrates that middle-aged adults are not immune to the anxiety and social comparison previously thought to be more common among younger users. Feelings of exclusion, compulsive checking behaviors, and a reliance on digital validation indicate an emotional dependency on online interactions.

Despite these challenges, the study finds encouraging signs of awareness and a readiness for change. Many participants expressed a willingness to reduce screen time and explore alternative, healthier offline engagements. This indicates both a recognition of the problem and an openness to solutions, creating a strong foundation for future digital wellness programs.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to address the cognitive and emotional challenges posed by excessive social media use in adults aged 51–60:

1. Promote Digital Literacy and Mindful Usage

- Launch targeted awareness campaigns that educate older adults about FoMO, digital fatigue, and the cognitive impacts of prolonged screen time.
- Encourage time-restricted usage, screen-free routines, and purposeful engagement over passive scrolling.

2. Encourage Structured Digital Detox Initiatives

- Community groups, workplaces, and wellness centers should offer structured digital detox programs (e.g., weekend screen-free retreats or evening device curfews).
- Incorporate digital wellness challenges or gamified reduction targets for personal motivation.

3. Facilitate Offline Engagement Alternatives

- Promote social, creative, and spiritual alternatives—such as community gatherings, hobby clubs, and outdoor activities—to replace excessive screen time with fulfilling real-world interactions.
- Support programs that reconnect older adults with nature, family, or community service.

4. Integrate Digital Wellness into Mental Health Services

- Mental health professionals should be trained to screen for digital overuse and FoMO-related symptoms among mid-life clients.
- Include digital behavior assessments in routine checkups or counseling services.

5. Support Further Research and Policy Development

- Encourage longitudinal studies to track the long-term cognitive and emotional impacts of digital habits in this age group.
- Advocate for age-specific guidelines in digital well-being policies by health ministries or NGOs working with the aging population.

By recognizing and addressing the emerging challenges of digital overexposure among adults nearing retirement, stakeholders—from families to policymakers—can help ensure that India's increasingly connected older population enjoys not only access to technology but also a balanced and emotionally healthy digital life.

6. Future Research Directions

To build on the insights of this study, future research should explore the long-term cognitive effects of social media use through longitudinal studies, and compare digital behavior across different age groups. Investigating rural–urban and socio-cultural variations will help uncover unique patterns in digital stress and coping mechanisms. Studies testing interventions like digital detox or mindfulness can assess ways to mitigate FoMO and emotional fatigue. Additionally, examining the role of family support, exploring other psychological factors beyond FoMO, and conducting cross-cultural comparisons can deepen our understanding and guide more effective digital wellness strategies for mid-life and older adults.

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