UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

Social media is triggering 'Fear of Missing Out' amongst the youth, precipitating depression and loneliness.

सोशल मीडिया युवाओं में 'छूटने
का डर ' पैदा कर रहा है जिसके कारण उनमें अवसाद और अकेलापन बढ़ रहा है।

EXAM YEAR

2024

PAPER

Essay

SUBJECT

Essay

MARKS

125

WORD LIMIT

~1200 words

Answer Hint

Examine how curated online lives create comparison, anxiety and fear of exclusion; connect excessive digital engagement with loneliness, mental well-being and weakened real-world relationships; discuss both individual and societal dimensions; distinguish technology itself from its unhealthy use; suggest digital literacy, responsible platform design, family and community support, and balanced technology

use.

Model Answer

Introduction

The rise of social media has fundamentally transformed how young people communicate, construct identities and perceive the world around them. Platforms that were designed to connect people can paradoxically create feelings of exclusion and inadequacy. The phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) refers to the persistent anxiety that others are experiencing rewarding events, opportunities or relationships without oneself. Among youth,

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constant exposure to carefully curated digital lives can turn this fear into a cycle of comparison, validation-seeking, loneliness and, in vulnerable individuals, depression.

Body

Social Media and the Creation of FOMO

Social media provides a continuous stream of other people's achievements, celebrations, friendships, travels and lifestyles. However, what is presented online is rarely the complete reality. Individuals generally display their successes and happiest moments rather than their failures, struggles and ordinary experiences.

A young person comparing his or her entire life with these selective representations may begin to feel inadequate. Notifications, likes, comments, stories and trending content further create a sense that something important is constantly happening elsewhere.

Thus, the digital environment can produce a psychological cycle:

Exposure → Comparison → Fear of exclusion → Constant checking → Temporary validation → Greater dependence.

The problem becomes particularly severe when online visibility starts determining one's sense of self-worth.

From FOMO to Loneliness

Ironically, the pursuit of greater online connection can sometimes reduce meaningful offline interaction. A person may remain digitally connected with hundreds of people while lacking a few relationships characterised by trust, empathy and emotional intimacy.

Constant checking of social media can also reduce attention during real-world interactions. Young people may be physically present with family or friends but psychologically engaged with their digital networks.

Therefore, **connectivity does not automatically produce companionship**. Human beings need meaningful relationships, belonging and emotional support, which cannot always be substituted by virtual interaction.

Mental Health Consequences

Persistent comparison and the pressure to remain socially relevant can contribute to anxiety and emotional exhaustion. Fear of being excluded may encourage compulsive social-media use, disturbed sleep and reduced concentration.

The pressure to maintain an attractive digital identity can also produce:

- low self-esteem;
- dissatisfaction with one's appearance and achievements;
- anxiety about social acceptance;
- cyberbullying and online humiliation;
- dependence on external validation;
- withdrawal from real-world activities.

For individuals already vulnerable to mental-health difficulties, these pressures may aggravate loneliness and depressive symptoms.

However, social media should not be treated as the sole cause of depression. Mental health is influenced by family circumstances, economic insecurity, academic pressure, relationships, biological factors and wider social conditions. Social media can act as a **trigger, amplifier or reinforcing factor** rather than being universally causal.

The Social and Cultural Dimension

FOMO is not merely an individual psychological problem. It reflects wider transformations in contemporary society.

Influencer culture can associate happiness with consumption, travel, physical appearance and material success. Algorithms may repeatedly show users content that generates strong emotional engagement, encouraging continuous consumption.

Consequently, young people may begin measuring their lives through externally visible indicators of success rather than through intrinsic values such as learning, relationships, service and personal growth.

This creates a paradox: **technology intended to expand social participation may deepen the fear of social inadequacy.**

Social Media Can Also Be a Solution

A balanced analysis must recognise that social media is not inherently harmful. It has enabled young people to:

- maintain relationships across geographical boundaries;

- find communities based on shared interests;
- access educational resources;
- seek peer support;
- raise awareness about mental health;
- express themselves creatively;
- mobilise for social causes.

For isolated individuals, online communities can sometimes provide the first meaningful source of belonging. Therefore, the objective should not be withdrawal from technology but **healthy and conscious engagement with it**.

Way Forward

Digital literacy: Schools and colleges should teach young people how algorithms work, how online identities are curated and how to distinguish digital popularity from genuine social worth.

Digital well-being: Individuals should establish healthy boundaries through screen-free periods, notification control, adequate sleep and conscious rather than compulsive usage.

Strengthening offline relationships: Sports, cultural activities, volunteering, clubs and community participation can create deeper forms of belonging.

Mental-health support: Educational institutions should provide accessible counselling and early support for students experiencing persistent loneliness, anxiety or depressive symptoms.

Family involvement: Parents should focus on communication and emotional support rather than merely imposing restrictions. Young people need safe spaces where they can discuss their digital experiences without fear of judgement.

Platform responsibility: Social-media companies should strengthen privacy protections, anti-bullying mechanisms, age-appropriate safeguards and features that promote healthier patterns of engagement.

Conclusion

The real challenge posed by social media is not connectivity itself but **the transformation of connectivity into comparison and validation-seeking**. FOMO reminds us that being constantly informed about what others are doing does not necessarily make life richer. A healthy digital

society must ensure that technology strengthens rather than substitutes human relationships.

The ultimate solution lies in creating a culture where young people do not measure their worth by likes, followers or invitations, but by **meaningful relationships, personal growth, contribution and inner well-being**. Social media should help young people participate more fully in life—not make them afraid that life is happening somewhere else.

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