INTERPRETIVIST STUDY ON FEAR OF MISSING OUT AMONG MUSLIM FEMALE GEN-Z STUDENTS

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(Received 08th September 2026; revised 28th October 2026; accepted 02nd November 2026)

Abstract. The study highlights the lived experiences of fear of missing out (FOMO) in Muslim female Generation Z students of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Permatang Pauh, focusing particularly on the aspect of Islamic values and halal awareness. Following the interpretivist phenomenological methodology, data was collected using semi-structured interviews from eight participants and then analyzed thematically. Six themes arose in the process, including the experience of FOMO, social media influence, belongingness and social relationships, Islamic values and religious awareness, halal awareness and responsible consumption, and the balance of religion and FOMO. Social media increased social comparisons and social belongingness needs among participants. However, religion-based values and halal awareness of participants helped them control themselves and make appropriate decisions according to their religious values. In this study, the "Halal-FOMO Paradox" is introduced, which represents the conflict between digital social influences and faith-based self-control. The study contributes to the existing literature on digital well-being and the impact of Islamic values on FOMO.

Keywords: *Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), Generation Z, social media, Islamic values, halal awareness, Muslim female students*

Introduction

Today, digital platforms do more than simply connect people. They also shape how young people explore cultural experiences, develop their identities, and engage with lifestyle trends. Through social media, users are constantly exposed to multicultural experiences that influence both their perceptions and everyday behaviours. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X have changed how members of Generation Z communicate and construct their identities. Heavy users of social media find themselves bombarded with highly curated pictures and posts by their peers, leading to FOMO – the constant fear of missing out on something positive happening while they are not there (Przybylski et al., 2013). Although prior research extensively covers the psychology of FOMO (Gupta et al., 2021; Dhir et al., 2018), there are three major limitations to current research: religion is understudied as a factor that actively regulates digital conduct cognitively (Moberg and Sjö, 2020; Campbell, 2010); there is no sufficient context provided on how Muslim women in Malaysia reconcile their desire for online connection with personal value and halal criteria (Razali and Samori, 2025).

Research Questions (RQs) and Research Objectives (ROs)

(RQ1 / RO1): What is the nature of FOMO among Muslim Generation Z females through their experiences in visual social media? (RQ2 / RO2): What role do Islamic principles and knowledge of halal play in influencing and filtering the presence of

FOMO? (RQ3 / RO3): How do these students balance between digital fads and religious duties to ensure digital well-being?

Significance of the study

The importance of this study is of theoretical, professional, and societal nature. In terms of theoretical significance, this study identifies and operationalizes the Halal-FOMO paradox through the lens of digital sociology and Islamic consumerism. In terms of professional significance, this research offers practical guidance to campus counselors and student affairs officers as well as developers of digital well-being applications for the design of faith-based mental health programs.

Literature review

FOMO, social comparison, and gender dynamics

The notion of FOMO, based on Self-Determination Theory, is associated with the dissatisfaction of psychological needs for autonomy and relatedness (Przybylski et al., 2013). Algorithmic curation on image-based social media (TikTok, Instagram) contributes to the problem of social comparison (Verduyn et al., 2017; Kross et al., 2013). Females are more likely to be concerned about their relationships and to be prone to exclusion anxiety (Alabri, 2022; Dhir et al., 2018). Yet, psychological approaches cannot clarify how religious morality impacts the phenomenon.

Islamic morals and halal awareness in digital environments

Halal in Islam includes ethical actions, proper nutrition, and modesty (Haya') (Alam et al., 2025). In case there are some viral trends in the online environment that involve places which have not been confirmed as halal, Muslim young people face a conflict of two interests – participating in the trend and observing religious laws (Siregar et al., 2025; Ginting et al., 2023). The studies of digital media suggest that the religious identity of youth is actively negotiated through media consumption.

Theoretical framework: The halal-FOMO paradox

The Halal-FOMO paradox is revealed by the integration of Hermeneutic Phenomenology (van Manen, 2016) and Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957). The Halal-FOMO paradox refers to the dilemma experienced by Muslims due to being digital natives where social media pressure dictates that one must adopt trending topics; however, at the same time, one is also motivated by ethical issues to adhere to Islamic laws. This is because of two factors, one being the external factor of being socially visible due to the social algorithms causing a fear of missing out and the other being the internal factor of belief based self-control to stay halal.

Materials and Methods

Research design

For this study, a Hermeneutic (Interpretive) Phenomenological Approach was employed (Smith et al., 2022; van Manen, 2016). The approach was chosen for its

ability to analyze the subjectivity that people bring to FOMO, digital media, and their religion.

Participant sampling and profile

The sample for this study consisted of 8 Muslim females from Gen Z at UiTM Permatang Pauh through purposive sampling. The criteria for selecting the participants were: (a) between 18-24 years of age, (b) active usage of TikTok/Instagram, and (c) proven smartphone screen time > 5.0 hours/day. Saturation was achieved at participant 8 (*Table 1*).

Table 1. *Participant profile.*

Participant Code	Age	Daily Screen Time	Primary Social Media Platforms
Participant 1 (P1)	23	6.0+ hours	TikTok
Participant 2 (P2)	23	5.0-6.0 hours	TikTok, Instagram
Participant 3 (P3)	23	5.0 hours	TikTok, Instagram, X
Participant 4 (P4)	21	6.0 -7.0 hours	TikTok, Instagram
Participant 5 (P5)	24	7.0 -8.0 hours	TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, Threads
Participant 6 (P6)	22	6.0-7.0 hours	TikTok, Instagram
Participant 7 (P7)	19	5.0 hours	TikTok, Instagram, Lemon8
Participant 8 (P8)	25	5.0 hours	TikTok, Instagram

Data collections and ethics

The data collection process comprised face-to-face semi-structured interviews which lasted for 10-15 minutes and were done through code-switching (Malay-English) at an individual level within the campus. The subjects discussed include social media behaviors, FOMO experiences, friendships, halal evaluation, and coping methods. The recordings were made with the consent of the interviewees.

Data analysis transparency

The analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke (2006) six-stage approach to thematic analysis in ATLAS.ti version 23: (1): Familiarisation with the data: Verbatim transcription and multiple listenings; (2): Generating initial coding: Produced 64 inductive codes according to emotional and religious responses; (3): Searching for themes: Created 14 categories from the 64 codes; (4): Reviewing themes: Checked if the categories align with the transcripts; (5): Defining and naming themes: Produced 6 themes at the phenomenological level; (6): Producing the report: Integrated findings with verbatim participant responses.

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Trustworthiness relied on the criteria set by Lincoln and Guba (1985); member checking ensured accurate transcripts; peer debriefing was used to enhance the structure of codes; while memoing and audit trails captured the analytical process in ATLAS.ti. Reflexivity was achieved through journaling of researchers due to similar backgrounds to the participants.

Results and Discussion

The chapter discusses the results of semi-structured interviews held with eight female Gen Z college students. The interviews were carried out to find out how FOMO

influences the life of the participants, how important role is played by social media, Islamism and halalness, and what methods do the participants use to cope with FOMO.

Theme 1: Experiencing FOMO

They felt FOMO as a form of psychological discomfort, isolation, and anxiety because of the observation of their friends engaging in online activities without them.

> *"When I saw their posts, I felt left out because everyone seemed to be sharing the same experience and creating memories together."* Participant 7

> *"Watching their stories while I was just hanging out in the campus dorm felt really isolating. I felt this intense wave of FOMO because… like they were out networking and living this glamorous life while my world felt very small."* Participant 8

Theme 2: Social media and social influence

Seeing feeds and getting media notifications increase exposure, changing normal scrolling behavior to social participation requirements.

> *"If I don't open them for even a day, I feel like I've completely missed the boat."* Participant 2

> *"Sitting in my dorm watching their stories felt terrible."* Participant 6

> *"I wanted to hang out and see the nice restaurant design, and I didn't want to look like a party pooper."* Participant 6

Theme 3: Belonging and social connection

Peer integration demands and social obsolescence fears amongst university peers were the causes of FOMO.

> *"When everyone in class says, 'Hey, have you tried that thing? It's so good!' and I'm the only one who hasn't, I automatically feel 'outdated' and like I don't fit into the college kids' vibe."* Participant 2

Theme 4: Islamic values and religious awareness

Both religion-based teachings and values were used by students as filters to assess themselves before engaging in any web trend.

> *"Sitting at a table where alcohol is flowing and the vibe is very much a bar scene made me feel so conflicted inside."* Participant 8

> *"It's always a quick jump from being excited to wondering if it's actually halal."* Participant 6

> *"I prefer following food influencers who share halal food recommendations and promote positive content."* Participant 3

Theme 5: Halal awareness and responsible consumption

Halal assessment overrode viral popularity. Where there was uncertainty over certification or food purity (Syubhah), participants declined trend participation.

> *"A popular dining venue was widely promoted online, and many students were posting about it. However, I was unable to confirm its halal status, so I chose not to visit."* Participant 7

> *"I felt relieved because I knew I was protecting myself from consuming something syubhah."* Participant 2

Theme 6: Balancing religion and FOMO

The participants handled peer pressure using faith-based coping strategies, regarding the act of non-conformity not as a failure socially, but rather an affirmation of their identity.

> *"Social media often creates the feeling that we are missing something, but maintaining halal practices and staying true to our values is more important."* Participant 5

> *"Choosing my faith over a temporary social media check-in gave me a much deeper sense of self-respect."* Participant 8

Theoretical integration of the Halal-FOMO paradox

The empirical evidence validates the suggested Halal-FOMO Paradox framework. Contrary to the traditional psychological theories that FOMO causes compulsive actions directly (Dhir et al., 2018; Przybylski et al., 2013), religion is a dynamic cognitive moderating factor. In the face of viral phenomena without verification, the sense of Halal becomes the motivation for an active reflection on the phenomenon (van Manen, 2016; Campbell, 2010). The moral responsibility (Taqwa) takes over fear of being ostracized socially, thus turning possible FOMO into a conscious decision (*Figure 1*).

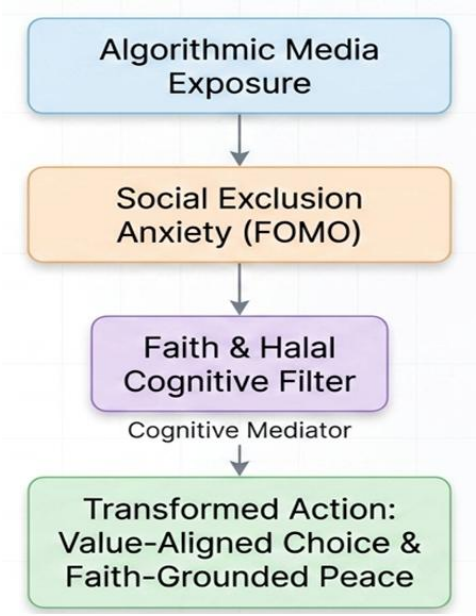


Figure 1. *Proposed model of the halal-FOMO paradox.*

Comparative analysis

Our results support those indicating that females are more vulnerable to digital social comparisons (Alabri, 2022; Verduyn et al., 2017). But our results contradict the secular understanding of digital abstinence being the only solution to online stress (Vanden Abeele, 2021). On the contrary, just like Campbell (2010) and Razali and Samori (2025), young Muslim females utilize religious values in creating digital boundaries.

Implications

Findings from the empirical analysis of this study hold several levels of implications in terms of academia, institutions, and industry. Theoretically, this study contributes to the existing framework of FOMO by demonstrating that religion does not only act as a backdrop variable but as a cognitive filter through which digital social anxiety is filtered. In terms of institutions, counseling and student services at universities can take advantage of this information to develop faith-based digital well-being modules aimed at young Muslim adults. Importantly, the study results also indicate the necessity of developing digital literacy programs that would allow young people to critically analyze the manipulative impact of algorithms and images. Lastly, in terms of industry, this study shows that halal certification is crucial in maintaining the loyalty of Gen Z Muslim consumers who value their ethical and religious values over virality.

Limitations and future directions

While this research has provided some detailed qualitative information, there are some limitations that have to be considered. This research was conducted using a small sample group of eight female undergraduate students at one particular university (UiTM Permatang Pauh); hence, the results are context-based and theoretically transferable but not statistically generalizable. In order to add to these results, further research should consider developing and validating a Halal-FOMO scale in quantitative form for future

studies. Furthermore, future research could consider conducting gender comparison and regional cross-analysis studies.

Conclusion

The following study proves that despite the constant occurrence of FOMO on hyper-visual social media, the internalized Islamic values and halal knowledge act as an efficient cognitive filter. By applying the concept of the Halal-FOMO Paradox, the following research shows that young Muslim women successfully cope with the challenges of the complicated digital world turning their social exclusion anxiety into religious self-reaffirmation.

Acknowledgement

This research is self-funded. The authors would like to extend their heartfelt thanks to the participants who helped in making this research a success by sharing their experiences. The authors would also like to thank those who guided them during this research.

Conflict of interest

The authors hereby state that there is no conflict of interest in this research study at all. These statements are acceptable for a journal submission and reflect the suggested language of the template to an extent while adding some completeness to the acknowledgements section.

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