
FEAR OF BETTER OPTIONS AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION AMONG EMERGING ADULTS: A QUALITATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Digital technologies have transformed romantic relationships by increasing exposure to alternative partners through social media and dating applications, giving rise to the Fear of Better Options (FOBO). Despite growing interest in related concepts such as social comparison and fear of missing out, limited qualitative research has examined FOBO and its influence on relationship satisfaction. This study explored the lived experiences of 16 emerging adults (18–26 years) using semi-structured interviews, with data analysed through Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Three major themes emerged: the emergence and experience of FOBO, factors influencing FOBO, and its impact on relationship satisfaction and well-being. Participants identified social comparison, social media exposure, unmet emotional needs, and perceived alternatives as key contributors to FOBO. Although FOBO often reduced relationship satisfaction and caused emotional distress, adaptive coping strategies, including open communication, realistic expectations, and cognitive reframing, helped maintain healthy relationships. The findings highlight FOBO as a significant psychological phenomenon in contemporary romantic relationships.

Keywords: Fear of Better Options, Relationship Satisfaction, Emerging Adulthood

INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood represents a unique developmental period characterized by exploration in identity, intimacy, and life direction, during which individuals establish intimate relationships while simultaneously negotiating autonomy and long-term commitment (Arnett, 2000, 2004). Technological advances have dramatically altered this developmental process by increasing opportunities to interact with potential romantic partners through social networking platforms and online dating applications (Finkel et al., 2012). While these technologies facilitate relationship formation and expand opportunities for social connection, they also expose individuals to a vast number of perceived alternative partners, which may increase uncertainty, comparison processes, and difficulty in making relationship decisions (D'Angelo & Toma, 2017; Finkel et al., 2012).

Fear of Better Options (FOBO) refers to persistent uncertainty regarding one's current romantic choice due to the belief that a superior partner may exist. Unlike ordinary relationship doubts, FOBO involves continuous evaluation of alternatives and difficulty committing to present relationships. The phenomenon can be understood through Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), the Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980), and Schwartz's (2004) Paradox of Choice. Collectively, these theories explain how exposure to alternatives, social comparison, and decision overload influence relationship commitment and satisfaction.

Although previous research has examined social comparison, fear of missing out, perceived alternatives, and maximizing tendencies, FOBO remains underexplored, particularly within the Indian cultural context. Moreover, most studies have adopted quantitative approaches, leaving limited understanding of individuals' lived experiences. The present study therefore explored how emerging adults experience FOBO and how it shapes relationship satisfaction through qualitative thematic analysis.

METHOD

A qualitative exploratory research design was employed to understand participants' lived experiences of FOBO. Sixteen emerging adults aged 18–26 years who were currently involved in or had previous romantic relationship experience were recruited through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30–45 minutes were conducted individually after obtaining informed consent. Interviews explored participants' perceptions of FOBO, social comparison, emotional experiences, awareness of alternatives, relationship satisfaction, and coping strategies. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw were maintained throughout the study.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis generated 112 initial codes, which were organised into three overarching themes representing participants' experiences of FOBO and its influence on relationship satisfaction.

Theme 1: Emergence and Experience of FOBO

Participants described FOBO as a fluctuating psychological state that emerged particularly during periods of conflict, dissatisfaction, emotional vulnerability, or unmet expectations. Doubts regarding whether a more compatible partner existed often coexisted with affection and commitment toward their current partner. Participants acknowledged that occasional comparison with other relationships prompted uncertainty, although these doubts did not necessarily indicate dissatisfaction or intentions to end the relationship. The findings suggest that FOBO is dynamic and context-dependent rather than a stable personality characteristic.

Theme 2: Factors Influencing FOBO

Several factors contributed to the development of FOBO. Social comparison emerged as the strongest influence, with participants frequently comparing their relationships with those of peers and couples portrayed on social media. Continuous exposure to idealized online relationships encouraged unrealistic expectations and greater awareness of perceived alternatives. Participants also identified unmet emotional needs, communication difficulties, peer influence, and discrepancies between expectations and reality as significant contributors to relationship uncertainty. These findings demonstrate that FOBO develops through the interaction of external social influences and internal relationship experiences.

Theme 3: Impact of FOBO on Relationship Satisfaction

FOBO influenced relationship satisfaction in multiple ways. Participants reported emotional distress, insecurity, confusion, reduced satisfaction, and communication difficulties when persistent comparison dominated their thinking. However, the findings also revealed the constructive potential of FOBO. Several participants indicated that reflecting on relationship quality encouraged open communication, realistic expectations, and greater appreciation of their partners. Adaptive coping strategies such as reassurance-seeking, cognitive reframing, and focusing on relationship strengths helped reduce uncertainty and strengthen commitment. Thus, FOBO was found to have both maladaptive and adaptive consequences depending on how individuals interpreted and managed their experiences.

DISCUSSION

The present study contributes to the growing literature on contemporary romantic relationships by demonstrating that Fear of Better Options (FOBO) is a meaningful psychological experience among emerging adults. The findings suggest that FOBO is not simply an indication of relationship dissatisfaction but rather a dynamic and context-dependent cognitive process influenced by social comparison, perceived alternatives, emotional needs, and digital media exposure.

The first theme supports Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which proposes that individuals evaluate themselves through comparisons with others. Participants frequently compared their relationships with those of peers and couples portrayed on social media, leading to doubts about whether a more compatible partner might exist. Similar findings have been reported by Chou and Edge (2012) and Vogel et al. (2014), who found that social networking platforms promote upward social comparisons by presenting idealized images of others' lives and relationships. However, the present study suggests that such comparisons do not invariably reduce relationship satisfaction. Instead, FOBO emerged primarily during periods of conflict, emotional vulnerability, or unmet expectations, indicating that relationship uncertainty is often situational rather than a stable personal characteristic.

The second theme highlights the role of digital technology in shaping relationship evaluations. Participants reported that exposure to idealized online relationships and awareness of potential alternatives increased uncertainty about their own relationships. These findings are consistent with Rusbult's Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult et al., 1998), which proposes that commitment is influenced by satisfaction, investment, and the perceived quality of alternatives. Although participants remained emotionally attached to their partners, the constant visibility of alternative partners through social media and dating applications made comparisons more frequent. This finding also supports Finkel et al. (2012), who argued that online environments expand opportunities for partner comparison, thereby influencing relationship decisions and commitment.

Another important finding is that FOBO was associated with unmet emotional needs, communication difficulties, and discrepancies between expectations and reality. These findings are consistent with

cognitive perspectives on relationships, which emphasize that unrealistic expectations contribute to dissatisfaction (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Continuous exposure to highly curated online portrayals of romance may elevate expectations, making ordinary relationship challenges appear as signs of incompatibility. Thus, FOBO appears to emerge through the interaction of external social influences and internal relationship experiences.

A notable contribution of this study is the identification of both maladaptive and adaptive consequences of FOBO. Consistent with previous research on fear of missing out (Przybylski et al., 2013), persistent comparison was associated with insecurity, emotional distress, reduced relationship satisfaction, and communication problems. However, the findings also indicate that moderate reflection on relationship quality can have positive outcomes. Participants who engaged in open communication, reassurance seeking, and cognitive reframing reported greater appreciation for their partners and stronger commitment. This finding aligns with Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), suggesting that the effects of relationship uncertainty depend largely on how individuals interpret and manage it.

Finally, the findings are particularly relevant within the Indian context, where traditional expectations of long-term commitment increasingly coexist with greater individual choice and digital connectivity. Emerging adults must negotiate cultural expectations while navigating technologically driven opportunities for comparison and partner selection. Overall, the study extends the literature by conceptualizing FOBO as a multidimensional relational phenomenon rather than merely a decision-making bias. Future research should employ longitudinal and quantitative designs to examine the mechanisms through which FOBO influences relationship satisfaction and identify protective factors such as attachment security, psychological flexibility, and digital literacy. Such efforts will enhance understanding of romantic relationships in an increasingly digital society.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that Fear of Better Options is a significant psychological experience influencing relationship satisfaction among emerging adults. FOBO emerges through the interaction of social comparison, digital media exposure, perceived alternatives, unmet emotional needs, and discrepancies between expectations and reality. Although excessive comparison often undermines relationship satisfaction, adaptive coping strategies such as effective communication, realistic expectations, and cognitive reframing can reduce its negative consequences. Rather than representing a purely maladaptive phenomenon, FOBO may also encourage self-reflection and relationship growth when managed constructively. The findings provide an important qualitative contribution to relationship psychology by introducing FOBO as a culturally relevant construct within the rapidly changing landscape of contemporary romantic relationships.

Practical Implications

The findings have implications for counseling psychologists, relationship therapists, educators, and mental health professionals. Interventions should focus on strengthening communication, promoting realistic relationship expectations, reducing maladaptive social comparison, and improving digital well-being. Psychoeducational programmes for emerging adults may help individuals recognise the influence of social media and perceived alternatives on relationship decisions. Relationship counselling should also encourage cognitive reframing and commitment-building strategies to reduce unnecessary uncertainty.

Limitations

The study was conducted with a relatively small purposive sample of emerging adults, limiting the transferability of findings. Participants were drawn from a specific cultural context, and therefore the

findings may not generalise to other populations. Future research should employ larger qualitative and mixed-method designs across diverse cultural settings to further validate the concept of FOBO and examine its relationship with attachment styles, personality traits, and digital behaviour.

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