

Experiencing fear of missing out: Instagram interdependency among Gen Z users

Nadya Faradisi¹, Febri Nurrahmi^{1*}

¹Department of Communication, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Syiah Kuala, Jl. Teuku Nyak Arief No.441, Kopelma Darussalam, Syiah Kuala, Aceh, Indonesia

*Email: febri.nurrahmi@usk.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Instagram has become an integral part of Generation Z's daily lives, functioning not only as a communication platform but also as a key reference for social interaction and self-evaluation. Continuous exposure to others' curated lives may increase Instagram dependency and intensify Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). This study explores the relationship between Instagram dependency and FoMO among Generation Z in Banda Aceh. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to examine participants' lived experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five Generation Z participants in Banda Aceh who showed signs of Instagram dependency and FoMO. The findings reveal a close relationship between Instagram dependency and FoMO in participants' everyday lives. Intensive Instagram use heightened anxiety and encouraged participants to constantly monitor updates, trends, and others' activities. Continuous exposure to Instagram content reinforced concerns about missing information, strengthening both dependency and FoMO. The study further suggests that Instagram functions as a central social reference through which participants evaluate themselves, compare their experiences with others, and maintain social connectedness. FoMO emerges as a lived emotional experience shaped by media exposure, social comparison, and the desire to remain socially relevant.

Keywords: *Instagram; Fear of Missing Out (FoMO); Generation Z; Media System Dependency; Geo-ethnic Media*

INTRODUCTION

Instagram has become the second most popular social media platform used worldwide. Instagram possesses distinctive features that enhance user engagement and differentiate it from other social media platforms. Instagram's appeal lies in its interactive facilities, such as stories, likes, shares, followers, and comment systems, which foster a sense of social recognition (Aryati & Halimah, 2021). As a visual-based platform, Instagram functions not only as a medium for communication but also as a space where users construct identities, negotiate social meanings, and express themselves through visual content (Augusta et al., 2025). Instagram enables users to monitor others' lives and maintain social relationships, making it an increasingly important source of social orientation, particularly among Generation Z (Komsiah et al.,

2026). According to data from GoodStats, Instagram users in Indonesia spend an average of 16 hours and 10 minutes per month on the platform (Mufrida, 2024). Andreassen and Pallesen (2014) classify social media users into three categories: recreational users, who use social media for 1–3 hours per day; at-risk users, who spend 4–6 hours per day; and addicted users, who engage with social media for more than six hours daily.

Moreover, demographic data from GoodStats (2023) show that the majority of Instagram users are adolescents and young adults, approximately 30.8% of users are aged 18–24, followed by those aged 25–34 (30.3%), and 35–44 (15.7%) (Yonatan, 2023). Individuals aged 18–25 are more vulnerable to internet addiction than other age groups due to their transitional phase from late adolescence to early adulthood, a period characterized by identity exploration and behavioral experimentation (Azka et al., 2018). Surveys conducted by Alvara Research Center reveal that Generation Z has the highest level of media exposure compared to other generations. Generation Z, defined as individuals born between 1996 and 2012, is categorized as addicted users, with average internet usage exceeding seven hours per day (Perdana et al., 2024). University students currently represent a dominant segment of this generation.

From a communication perspective, the influence of Instagram can be explained through Media System Dependency Theory, developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976). This theory posits that media effects are contingent upon the degree to which individuals and groups depend on media to achieve everyday goals such as understanding their social environment, maintaining social relationships, and guiding behavior. Media dependency is not determined solely by media content or technology, but emerges from the interaction between the media system, the social system, and the audience system.

Media System Dependency Theory further argues that dependency increases when media become indispensable for achieving everyday goals, including surveillance, social understanding, and orientation toward others (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Under these conditions, media are no longer passive channels for information dissemination but active social institutions that shape individuals' perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. Consequently, dependency is reflected not only in the frequency of media use but also in the extent to which individuals rely on media to interpret their social world and maintain social participation.

Although Instagram is a global platform, its social meanings and patterns of use are locally negotiated rather than universally experienced. The concept of geo-ethnic media suggests that global media platforms become embedded within specific cultural and geographical contexts, where users interpret, adapt, and reproduce media practices according to local norms, values, and social expectations. Consequently, Instagram should not be understood merely as a technological platform but as a communication space in which global digital affordances intersect with localized social realities. This perspective is particularly relevant for Generation Z because their everyday interactions, identity construction, and peer relationships are increasingly mediated by platforms whose meanings are culturally situated rather than technologically determined.

Banda Aceh represents one such localized context where the interaction between global digital platforms and local social realities can be meaningfully examined. Everyday social life in Banda Aceh is characterized by strong communal relationships, religious values, and collective cultural expectations (Shiddiqah et al., 2025), where social participation and peer connectedness remain highly valued. Within the perspective of Media System Dependency Theory, Instagram can be understood as a geo-ethnic media environment, where a globally accessible platform becomes locally embedded within cultural norms, social values, and community expectations.

For Generation Z in Banda Aceh, Instagram functions not merely as a digital platform, but as a socially situated medium through which users monitor peer activities, negotiate identity, and maintain social visibility within their immediate cultural

environment. This localized dependency increases the potential impact of Instagram on users' cognitive and emotional states. Examining Generation Z in Banda Aceh therefore provides an opportunity to understand how a global platform generates localized media effects through the interaction between media dependency and culturally embedded social dynamics.

Consequently, Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) socially significant events or interactions may be intensified as online participation becomes closely intertwined with local cultural expectations. Przybylski et al. (2013) defines FoMO as the anxiety experienced when individuals believe they are missing rewarding experiences that others are having. Within the Media System Dependency framework, FoMO can be understood as a communication-based affective response resulting from heightened reliance on media for social orientation and belonging. When Instagram becomes a primary source for tracking social interactions and trends, disruptions in access or participation may intensify feelings of exclusion and social anxiety.

FoMO is rooted in three fundamental psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. It is characterized by obsessive concerns about others' activities, persistent monitoring of social media, and difficulty being fully present in offline experiences (Komariah et al., 2022). Akbar et al. (2019) identify FoMO indicators such as difficulty separating from smartphones, anxiety when unable to check social media, excessive online interaction, obsession with others' posts, and a desire for popularity through constant content sharing—particularly on Instagram. Individuals often experience satisfaction from receiving likes and comments, reinforcing continuous engagement. Gupta and Sharma (2021) review synthesizes existing literature and demonstrates that FoMO poses significant risks across multiple domains, including mental health, social functioning, sleep quality, academic performance and productivity, neurodevelopmental processes, and overall physical well-being.

In Indonesia, FoMO has become increasingly prevalent, particularly among young people and Generation Z. Social media usage is identified as a primary trigger of FoMO. Dewi et al. (2022) found that higher social media usage intensity significantly increases the likelihood of FoMO-related behaviors. FoMO encourages individuals to continuously engage with social media and discourages them from disconnecting or deleting their accounts, driven by a persistent desire to stay informed (Singleton et al., 2016).

Previous studies demonstrate a positive relationship between Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and social media usage intensity (Roberts & David, 2020). Marlina (2017), in a quantitative study involving 140 emerging adults aged 18–25 in Yogyakarta, also found a highly significant positive correlation between FoMO and internet addiction tendencies, with FoMO contributing 46.4% to internet addiction levels. These findings indicate that higher levels of FoMO are associated with greater tendencies toward problematic media use. Other qualitative studies have examined FoMO among Instagram users using perspectives such as new media theory (Manu, 2022) and conformity theory (Putri, 2023), while correlational research has explored FoMO in relation to social media addiction among adolescents (Hariadi, 2018).

Although these studies have substantially advanced the understanding of FoMO, they predominantly explain the phenomenon from psychological or interpersonal perspectives by emphasizing individual emotions, personality traits, or peer conformity. Consequently, they provide limited explanation of the communication processes through which Instagram becomes a dominant source of social orientation that intensifies FoMO. In particular, previous studies rarely conceptualize Instagram as a media system embedded within broader social structures, where dependency

emerges through the interaction between media affordances, local cultural norms, and audience practices. As a result, the structural mechanisms through which media dependency shapes FoMO remain insufficiently understood.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how Instagram dependency shapes the lived experiences of Fear of Missing Out among Generation Z in Banda Aceh through the perspective of Media System Dependency Theory. By conceptualizing Instagram as a geo-ethnic media system, this study extends previous FoMO scholarship beyond psychological and conformity-based explanations toward a communication perspective that explains FoMO as an affective outcome emerging from the dynamic relationship between media systems, audiences, and localized social environments. The findings are expected to contribute to the refinement of Media System Dependency Theory in explaining media effects within contemporary platform-based communication.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological method. Sugiyono (2020) defines qualitative research as a philosophically grounded approach conducted in a natural setting, in which the researcher acts as the primary research instrument and the findings focus on the search for meaning. Moreover, phenomenology is concerned with individuals' perceptions of objects, events, or situations. Phenomenological research seeks to understand human life experiences within the framework of social thought and behavior as perceived and interpreted by the individuals themselves (Qutoshi, 2018). Thus, phenomenological inquiry addresses ontological questions related to lived experience.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five participants. Sugiyono (2020) explains that semi-structured interviews are conducted using a set of open-ended questions, allowing new questions to emerge based on participants' responses. This approach enabled the researcher to probe participants' experiences in greater depth while maintaining consistency across interviews. Consistent with Creswell and Poth (2017), phenomenological research typically involves a small number of participants who have directly experienced the phenomenon under investigation, emphasizing the depth rather than the breadth of participants' lived experiences. The inclusion of five participants was therefore considered appropriate. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantially new meanings or themes emerged from subsequent interviews, indicating that the sample was adequate to capture the essence of the phenomenon.

The participants were Generation Z individuals who experienced Instagram dependency. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those recruited possessed direct experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Sugiyono, 2020). Participants were required to reside in Banda Aceh, belong to Generation Z, actively use Instagram, spend more than six hours per day on the platform, and demonstrate indications of Instagram dependency and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), as identified through screening questions.

Potential participants were recruited through a Google Forms screening questionnaire distributed to Generation Z residing in Banda Aceh. The questionnaire collected demographic information and assessed eligibility based on the predetermined inclusion criteria, including daily Instagram use, duration of use, and indications of Instagram dependency and FoMO. Individuals who met all inclusion criteria and expressed willingness to participate were then purposively selected for in-depth

interviews. Five information-rich participants were ultimately included because they were considered capable of providing rich descriptions of their lived experiences with Instagram dependency and FoMO (Patton, 2002). Participant recruitment ceased when thematic saturation was achieved, as no substantially new themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

All participants voluntarily agreed to participate after receiving information regarding the study objectives and interview procedures. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and pseudonyms in the form of participant initials were used throughout the study to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed to identify recurring meanings and emerging themes. The analysis was conducted inductively by identifying meaningful statements, generating initial codes, and grouping similar codes into broader themes that emerged from participants' narratives.

The analysis focused on moving from participants' first-order accounts to second-order interpretations that captured the shared meanings underlying their lived experiences. These themes were subsequently interpreted in relation to Media System Dependency Theory, the dimensions of Instagram dependency proposed by Kuss and Griffiths (2017), and the psychological needs underlying Fear of Missing Out proposed by Przybylski et al. (2013). Accordingly, these theoretical frameworks were used as interpretive lenses rather than as predetermined coding categories.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study adopted the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the interview data and source triangulation by comparing information across participants. Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of the participants, research context, and data collection procedures. Dependability was maintained through a transparent documentation of the research process, including interview protocols, coding procedures, and analytical decisions. Confirmability was established by ensuring that interpretations were grounded in participants' narratives and supported by verbatim quotations rather than the researcher's personal assumptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lived Experiences of Instagram Dependency

The findings indicate that Instagram occupies a central position in the everyday lives of Generation Z in Banda Aceh. Participants described Instagram not merely as a social media platform but as a source of information, entertainment, social interaction, and personal expression. Through iterative analysis of participants' narratives, four recurring experiential patterns emerged regarding how Instagram dependency was experienced in their daily lives, including Instagram as a daily social reference, Instagram as emotional regulation, losing control of Instagram use, and negotiating online and offline relationships.

One of the strongest experiences shared by participants was the tendency to regard Instagram as an indispensable part of everyday life. Participants consistently described Instagram as their primary source of information and social connection, allowing them to monitor friends' activities, keep up with current events, and remain involved in topics they considered socially relevant.

TKR explained:

"I feel like I always have to know what my friends are posting on their stories. Maybe they're trying something new or visiting a viral place. I want to join too, so I'm just curious about them. That's why I always feel like opening Instagram."
(Interview with TKR, 5 September 2025)

Similarly, NK described Instagram as an important platform for preserving memories with friends, while SM, RMA, and A emphasized its role in obtaining up-to-date information, entertainment, and ideas for online content.

Across participants, Instagram was perceived as more than a communication platform. It functioned as a primary point of reference for understanding everyday social life and maintaining awareness of activities occurring within their social environment.

Participants also described Instagram as a means of regulating their emotions, particularly during periods of stress or boredom. Browsing Instagram was perceived as providing temporary relief from everyday pressures and improving emotional well-being.

NK stated:

"I feel the need to keep updating my stories. Especially during my thesis period, I often procrastinate, and when I see Mingyu's posts, I can forget time for hours—it makes my mood better." (Interview with NK, 7 September 2025)

Likewise, RMA explained that Instagram served as a temporary escape from the pressures of everyday life by providing entertaining content.

These narratives suggest that Instagram was experienced not only as an information platform but also as a space where participants managed emotional well-being and temporarily disengaged from everyday stressors.

Another recurring experience concerned participants' increasing difficulty in regulating their Instagram use. Participants frequently reported spending considerably more time on Instagram than originally intended, often without realizing how much time had passed.

TKR described unintentionally extending browsing sessions after finding interesting content, while NK and A similarly explained that scrolling through Instagram frequently continued far beyond their original intentions.

Participants also reported feelings of frustration and anxiety whenever Instagram became inaccessible because of internet problems or platform disruptions.

SM explained:

"I get really annoyed and immediately buy data or look for WiFi. If Instagram is down, I check Twitter to find out why." (Interview with SM, 31 August 2025)

Similarly, NK and A reported feeling uncomfortable whenever they lost access to Instagram. Although one participant reported attempting to stop using Instagram temporarily, most participants acknowledged that reducing Instagram use was difficult because Instagram had become integrated into their everyday routines.

These experiences indicate that participants perceived Instagram use as increasingly difficult to regulate, particularly because the platform had become

embedded in their habitual daily activities.

Participants also reflected on how intensive Instagram use influenced their offline relationships. Several acknowledged becoming less attentive during face-to-face interactions because they remained occupied with browsing Instagram, uploading stories, or checking updates.

TKR reflected:

“Because of Instagram, we end up neglecting real life. Even when hanging out, we’re busy with our phones—posting stories or going live instead of talking.” (Interview with TKR, 5 September 2025)

Similar experiences were reported by SM and RMA, who acknowledged that Instagram often distracted them from direct social interaction with friends.

These accounts suggest that participants continuously negotiated the balance between online engagement and offline social interaction, often prioritizing digital participation over face-to-face communication.

Lived Experiences of Fear of Missing Out

Participants described Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) through a variety of everyday experiences associated with following trends, responding to social expectations, and maintaining social connectedness. Although the situations differed according to individual interests, three recurring experiential patterns emerged from the interviews, including following trends to avoid being left behind, responding to social expectations, and maintaining social connectedness.

Participants consistently expressed concerns about missing popular trends, activities, or information circulating among their peers. For some, this involved visiting viral places or attending popular events, while others described purchasing products recommended by influencers simply to satisfy their curiosity.

TKR explained:

“Whenever I see something that’s trending, I just want to join in. Back in elementary school, when my friends were playing with toy snails, I bought one too. In high school, when people started going to viral places, I also wanted to go. Now it’s the same—when there are viral events, I usually join. For example, when my friends went to Gacoan, I went too. When many of them watched the PON games or football matches, I joined as well, even though I wasn’t really into sports before.” (Interview with TKR, 5 September 2025)

Similar experiences were expressed by NK, SM, RMA, and A, although the specific interests varied from beauty products to sports, religious events, and campus activities.

Participants consistently associated FoMO with a perceived need to remain informed about activities, products, and events that were considered socially significant within their peer networks.

Participants also described making decisions that were strongly influenced by social expectations. Rather than acting solely on personal interests, they often felt encouraged to participate in activities or consume products that were popular among peers.

NK explained purchasing influencer-endorsed products despite later finding them

unsuitable.

“Whenever I see content on Instagram, I’m definitely influenced. For example, if an influencer recommends a certain skincare product, I end up buying it. In the end, it doesn’t even suit me and goes unused, but I buy it just to satisfy my curiosity—it feels more satisfying that way.” (Interview with NK, 7 September 2025)

Meanwhile, SM described feeling insecure when comparing her achievements with those of others on Instagram.

These narratives illustrate how participants experienced pressure to remain socially relevant within their peer environment. Rather than acting solely on personal preferences, participants frequently described adjusting their behaviour in response to perceived expectations circulating within their online social environment.

Participants further described feelings of disappointment, anxiety, or exclusion when they were unable to participate in activities attended by their friends.

RMA stated:

“It feels sad when I can’t join, especially when it’s something I really want to attend.” (Interview with RMA, 2 September 2025)

Similarly, TKR, SM, and A explained that being excluded from social events or not receiving invitations created feelings of disconnection from their social groups.

Collectively, these experiences demonstrate that maintaining social connectedness represented an important aspect of participants’ everyday use of Instagram. For participants, maintaining social connectedness was not simply about participating in activities but also about preserving a sense of belonging within their peer community.

The Interrelationship between Instagram Dependency and Fear of Missing Out

Participants consistently perceived Instagram dependency and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) as mutually reinforcing experiences embedded in their everyday lives. Rather than describing Instagram merely as a communication platform, participants viewed it as a primary social reference through which they monitored peers’ activities, evaluated their own lives, and maintained social connectedness. Continuous exposure to curated content, viral trends, and others’ achievements contributed to stronger feelings of social comparison and concerns about being left behind.

Two distinct experiential patterns emerged from the participants’ narratives. The first pattern reflects the emergence of FoMO following intensive Instagram use. Four participants (NK, SM, RMA, and A) reported that they had not experienced persistent concerns about missing out prior to their intensive engagement with Instagram. As Instagram became integrated into their daily routines, they gradually developed anxiety about missing information, campus activities, social events, and trending topics shared by their peers.

NK explained:

“I think it started after I graduated from high school. During online classes, people were already joining campus activities, becoming committee members and so on, while I stayed at home for four semesters and didn’t even go to Banda Aceh. I couldn’t meet new people, and social circles were already formed. That’s when I

started feeling FoMO. I wanted to join activities too, but when I finally did, it felt ordinary and even more stressful. Before Instagram, my life felt lighter—nothing made me anxious or uneasy.” (Interview with NK, 7 September 2025)

Similarly, SM, RMA, and A described experiencing FoMO only after entering university, when Instagram became one of their primary sources of social information and interaction.

The second pattern reflects the intensification of pre-existing FoMO through Instagram dependency. TKR described already having a tendency to follow popular activities during childhood. However, continuous exposure to Instagram substantially strengthened these feelings by providing constant access to other people’s activities and achievements.

TKR stated:

“It definitely increased, because media exposure has a very significant influence on my life.” (Interview with TKR, 5 September 2025)

Although the developmental trajectories differed, participants consistently perceived Instagram as amplifying FoMO through continuous exposure to others’ daily lives. Many participants reported feeling compelled to monitor updates, participate in trending activities, or share their own experiences in order to remain socially connected and relevant within their peer networks.

For some participants, this relationship also generated positive consequences. NK explained that observing healthy lifestyles and personal achievements on Instagram encouraged greater self-improvement, although these feelings were accompanied by increased pressure to keep up with others. Conversely, RMA and A described how broader social networks on Instagram increased opportunities for social comparison, often reducing self-confidence and reinforcing feelings of inadequacy.

Overall, the participants’ narratives suggest that Instagram dependency did not merely coincide with FoMO but actively shaped how FoMO was experienced in everyday life. Whether FoMO emerged after intensive Instagram use or intensified through prolonged exposure to Instagram content, participants consistently perceived the platform as strengthening their awareness of others’ activities and increasing their desire to remain socially informed, connected, and relevant.

To provide a clearer overview of the participants’ experiences, Table 1 summarizes the recurring patterns identified across the interviews. Rather than presenting isolated individual experiences, the table illustrates how Instagram dependency was manifested, how FoMO was experienced, and how the relationship between the two phenomena varied among participants. Two experiential patterns emerged: FoMO developed following intensive Instagram use, or pre-existing FoMO became increasingly intensified through continued dependency on Instagram.

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings

Participant	Lived Experiences of Instagram Dependency	Lived Experiences of FoMO	Relationship Between Instagram Dependency and FoMO
TKR	Instagram became a primary source of social updates and prolonged daily engagement.	FoMO was experienced through following trends, responding to social expectations, and maintaining social connectedness.	Pre-existing FoMO intensified through Instagram dependency.
NK	Instagram functioned as a source of emotional regulation and became difficult to disengage from.	FoMO emerged through concern about missing campus activities and peers' experiences.	FoMO emerged following intensive Instagram use.
SM	Instagram became integrated into daily routines and was repeatedly accessed throughout the day.	FoMO emerged through concerns about missing trends and social participation.	FoMO emerged following intensive Instagram use.
RMA	Instagram served as entertainment, information seeking, and a habitual communication platform.	FoMO emerged through social comparison and the desire to participate in meaningful events.	FoMO emerged following intensive Instagram use.
A	Instagram became embedded in everyday activities and difficult to regulate.	FoMO emerged through concerns about missing sports, social events, and peer activities.	FoMO emerged following intensive Instagram use.

Based on the research findings, a meaningful relationship was identified between Instagram dependency and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). Two experiential patterns emerged from the participants' narratives. Most participants reported that FoMO developed after Instagram became integrated into their everyday lives, whereas one participant described FoMO as a pre-existing tendency that became substantially intensified following prolonged Instagram use. Despite these different developmental trajectories, all participants consistently perceived Instagram as strengthening social comparison, increasing awareness of others' activities, and reinforcing the desire to remain socially connected. These findings are consistent with the study by Putri (2023), which explains that external factors triggering FoMO behavior include Instagram use and strong peer influence. Exposure to content displaying others' lives on Instagram reinforces feelings of being left behind and social pressure. Instagram users feel encouraged to follow trends, participate in various activities, or display certain achievements on the platform. This aligns with the findings of Dewi et al. (2022), who reported that Instagram increases social connectivity, leading to heightened awareness of others' activities and consequently intensifying feelings of Fear of Missing Out. However, the present findings differ from Hariadi (2018), who argued that FoMO primarily influences individuals to become dependent on social media. Rather than positioning FoMO solely as an antecedent of media dependency, the present study suggests that Instagram dependency may also facilitate the emergence of FoMO or strengthen pre-existing FoMO, indicating a reciprocal relationship between the two phenomena.

Furthermore, although FoMO often increases anxiety and lowers self-confidence, several participants acknowledged that these feelings also served as motivation to achieve personal goals. This finding is consistent with Putri et al. (2019), who found that

FoMO may produce positive effects, such as increased productivity, while also generating negative consequences, including a consumptive lifestyle and a tendency to procrastinate on important tasks. These findings indicate that FoMO should not be understood solely as a negative psychological condition but rather as a complex emotional experience that may simultaneously motivate self-improvement while increasing social comparison and psychological pressure.

From the perspective of Media System Dependency Theory (MDT) proposed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), the findings indicate that Instagram functions as a central media system upon which participants increasingly depend to fulfil social, informational, and emotional needs. MDT posits that media effects become stronger when individuals rely on media to achieve their everyday goals, particularly in understanding their social environment, maintaining interpersonal relationships, and guiding everyday behaviour. In this study, the dependency relationship is reflected in the interaction between three core systems: the media system (Instagram), the social system (peer groups, trends, and social expectations), and the audience system (Generation Z in Banda Aceh). Instagram served as a primary medium for monitoring social activities, maintaining social visibility, and accessing information, thereby intensifying its influence on participants' cognitive and emotional experiences.

Beyond supporting the assumptions of Media System Dependency Theory, the findings also demonstrate that Instagram dependency cannot be separated from the local socio-cultural context in which participants interact with the platform. Although Instagram is a global social media platform, participants primarily used it to monitor activities that were meaningful within their immediate social environment, including campus organisations, religious gatherings, local sporting events, and the everyday activities of friends in Banda Aceh. Rather than responding primarily to global trends, participants evaluated their own social participation through locally shared experiences and community expectations. This finding supports the concept of geo-ethnic media, which argues that global media platforms acquire localized meanings as they become embedded within particular cultural and geographical contexts. For Generation Z in Banda Aceh, Instagram functioned not merely as a digital communication platform but as a localized social space where identity, belonging, and social participation were continuously negotiated according to local cultural values and peer expectations. Consequently, dependency on Instagram was shaped not only by the technological affordances of the platform but also by the socio-cultural environment that determined which information, events, and activities were considered socially important. This finding extends Media System Dependency Theory by demonstrating that media dependency is influenced not only by interactions between media systems, audiences, and social systems, but also by localized cultural contexts that shape how media are interpreted and experienced.

The lived experiences identified in this study can be further interpreted through the six dimensions of Instagram dependency proposed by Kuss and Griffiths (2017). Among these dimensions, salience was found to be the most dominant experience among participants. Participants consistently described Instagram as occupying their thoughts and becoming an indispensable part of their daily routines because it enabled them to obtain up-to-date information and remain socially connected. According to Young (2011), individuals experiencing social media dependency tend to engage intensively with social media while limiting real-life social interactions (Azka et al., 2018). This finding is also consistent with Hartinah et al. (2019), who reported that salience was the highest dimension of social media dependency among nursing students

at Universitas Padjadjaran, indicating that social media had become a necessity that dominated users' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours.

Participants' experiences also reflected the remaining dimensions of Instagram dependency. Mood modification was evident as participants described Instagram as a means of escaping academic pressure, relieving stress, and improving emotional well-being. Similarly, Wirman et al. (2023) reported that TikTok users experiencing FoMO also attached emotional meanings to social media, describing it as a medium for improving mood, reducing boredom, and fulfilling personal and social needs. This suggests that emotional regulation represents an important function of contemporary social media platforms across different contexts.

Tolerance appeared through participants' increasing frequency and duration of Instagram use, often extending beyond their original intentions in order to achieve similar levels of satisfaction. Withdrawal symptoms emerged when participants experienced anxiety, discomfort, or frustration whenever they were unable to access Instagram because of internet problems or platform disruptions. Conflict was reflected in participants' recognition that intensive Instagram use frequently interfered with face-to-face interaction, reducing the quality of their offline relationships. In contrast, relapse was the least dominant dimension because only one participant reported attempting to stop using Instagram, and the attempt lasted only a short period. Similar findings were reported by Hartinah et al. (2019), who found relapse to be the lowest dimension of social media dependency among university students. Rather than indicating weak dependency, the present findings suggest that intensive Instagram use has become normalized within participants' everyday lives, making attempts to disengage relatively uncommon.

Social media dependency subsequently gives rise to Fear of Missing Out. According to Przybylski et al. (2013), FoMO develops through three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Among these three needs, autonomy emerged as the most dominant experience among participants. Current trends and influencer recommendations encouraged participants to follow viral content to avoid feelings of being left behind, even when such activities did not necessarily align with their personal preferences. Although autonomy fundamentally refers to an individual's capacity to regulate personal choices, participants frequently described making decisions based on perceived social expectations rather than intrinsic motivation. One participant explained that following trends was driven primarily by peer influence, while others admitted purchasing influencer-endorsed products despite the products being unsuitable for them. This finding is consistent with Maulidya (2023), who argued that individuals experiencing FoMO often act in response to external influences, particularly peers and significant others, reinforced through intensive social media exposure.

The findings also support the importance of competence and relatedness in explaining FoMO. Competence was reflected in participants' feelings of disappointment, frustration, and sadness when they were unable to keep up with trending information or current social events, indicating that remaining informed contributed to their sense of social competence. This finding is consistent with Maulidya (2023), who reported that media use influences individuals' emotional responses and encourages regular engagement with social media. Meanwhile, relatedness emerged through participants' desire to remain connected with their friends and peer groups. Participants frequently expressed sadness or disappointment when they were unable to participate in activities attended by others because they perceived such exclusion as weakening their social connectedness. This finding supports Akbar et al. (2019), who argued that FoMO arises

when individuals experience unmet relational needs, encouraging them to maintain continuous engagement with social media.

Overall, the findings confirm the central proposition of Media System Dependency Theory that stronger dependency relationships intensify media effects on users' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural experiences. Instagram dependency strengthened Fear of Missing Out by positioning the platform as the primary reference for social participation, social comparison, and interpersonal connectedness. More importantly, the present study extends previous FoMO scholarship by demonstrating that these media effects are negotiated within the localized socio-cultural environment of Banda Aceh. Rather than representing merely an individual psychological condition, FoMO emerged as a communication outcome produced through the dynamic interaction between media dependency, local social norms, and the everyday digital practices of Generation Z.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Instagram dependency and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) are closely intertwined in the everyday experiences of Generation Z in Banda Aceh. Participants described Instagram not merely as a social networking platform but as a primary social reference through which they monitored peers, interpreted social participation, and evaluated their own lives. Instagram dependency was reflected across the six dimensions proposed by Kuss and Griffiths (2017), with salience emerging as the most prominent dimension. Meanwhile, FoMO was predominantly shaped by the psychological need for autonomy, as participants frequently felt compelled to follow trends and social activities due to external social expectations rather than purely personal interests.

Theoretically, this study extends Media System Dependency Theory by demonstrating that dependency on Instagram is not limited to intensive media use but also represents a socially situated process through which users negotiate belonging, identity, and social relevance. By conceptualizing Instagram as a geo-ethnic media system, the findings show that FoMO can be understood as an affective media effect emerging from the interaction between media dependency, platform affordances, and localized social dynamics. This perspective broadens previous FoMO research, which has predominantly interpreted the phenomenon through psychological or conformity-based explanations.

Practically, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening digital literacy initiatives for Generation Z that extend beyond promoting balanced screen time. Educational institutions, families, and policymakers should encourage critical engagement with social media by helping young people recognize social comparison processes, algorithmically amplified content, and the emotional consequences of continuous online connectedness. Such efforts may contribute to healthier patterns of social media use while reducing vulnerability to FoMO.

This study has several limitations. The findings are based on a relatively small number of participants recruited from Banda Aceh and therefore represent context-specific lived experiences rather than statistically generalizable patterns. In addition, the study relied on one-time interviews, which may not fully capture changes in Instagram dependency and FoMO over time. Future studies could employ longitudinal qualitative designs, include participants from different sociocultural settings, or

integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches to further examine how media dependency shapes FoMO across diverse populations and digital platforms.

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