Online Self-Presentation and Fear of Missing Out as a Predictor of Belongingness among College Students

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Abstract *- Social networking sites (SNSs) are essential platforms for college students to interact, communicate, and build social networks in the current digital era. However, students' exposure to SNSs may also be detrimental to some aspects of their mental health. This study aimed to investigate the influence of online self-presentation and fear of missing out on the sense of belongingness, and the moderating role of sex and age among college students aged 18 – 24 years old in a faith-based university. A total of 350 respondents comprised the sample which were selected through a stratified random sampling technique. The study used widely used measures of the variables such as the Presentation of Online Self Scale for Adults (POSSA), the Fear of Missing Out Scale, and the Need to Belong Scale, which were administered via both paper-based questionnaires and online forms. The results suggest that students' levels of online self-presentation (adaptable self, authentic self, and freedom of self online) were average. Similarly, students' level of FoMO and sense of belongingness were also found as average. Further, FoMO were identified as the strongest predictors of sense of belongingness, followed by the freedom of self online.*

Keywords: Online Self-Presentation, Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), Sense of Belongingness.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites (SNSs) are essential platforms for college students to interact, communicate, and build social networks in the current digital era. The concept of a sense of belongingness is an essential motivator of students' well-being and social integration on social networking sites (Shepherd & Lane, 2019; Steers, 2016). A sense of belongingness is the individuals' perception of acceptance, inclusion, and connection within a social group or community (Albaram & Lim, 2023; Scoulas, 2021). For college students, the sense of belongingness inside their academic institution and social network significantly influences their academic success, mental health, and overall contentment with the college experience (Arumugam, 2015; Karaman, 2018; Sangoleye et al., 2023).

Fear of Missing Out is a worry or anxiety of being left out or missing out on fascinating or exciting events of others, which contributes to the constant exposure to other people's lives that seem perfect on social networking sites (SNS) (Abel, 2016; Gupta & Sharma, 2021). In this current era, FoMO has become one major factor affecting people's well-being. According to the Digital 2023 Global Overview Report, people aged 18-24 make up the largest group of social media users, accounting for 30.6% of the entire population using the platform. Among young adults in the Philippines, studies have shown that FoMO emerges as one of the cause behind their engagement with SNS (Hernandez et al., 2022; Reyes et al., 2018).

Additionally, due to the frequency of social media usage, Filipino who experiences FoMO shows a lower levels of self-worth, emotional well-being, and weakened their sense of belonging (Villegas et al., 2025).

According to Tufekci (2008), self-presentation is always influenced by external factors and may involve delineations between personal and public domains. A study discovered that individuals typically present a carefully curated version of themselves when utilizing social networking sites to express their identities (Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2010). To establish social integration and develop their identity, people tend to be motivated by their internal needs to project their best self-image (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2017; Pang, 2020). As a result, people generally portray themselves as hardworking, positive, compassionate, and competent when using social networking sites. According to a study by Annafiah & Mardianto (2025), people are more likely to shape and adjust their self-image online if they have a stronger urge to feel accepted. In contrast, research also shows that people who frequently express themselves authentically online are more likely to have a strong sense of belonging (Wang et al., 2018).

Amid growing global concerns about the psychological impacts of social media usage among college students, there is a scarcity of empirical research on how online self-presentation and FoMO jointly predict sense of belongingness in the Philippines. While some studies have explored the relationship between FoMO and belongingness among Filipino college students (Paccarangan et al., 2025 & Villegas et al., 2025), no study has examined the relationship between online self-presentation and belongingness, nor explored these three factors together within a faith-based university setting. Therefore, this study aimed to fill the gap and limits the understanding on how digital behaviors such as online self-presentation and FoMO affect sense of belongingness in culturally unique context, and provide suitable interventions.

This study aimed to respond to the following research questions:

1. What is the respondents' level of self-presentation in terms of:
   a. Adaptable Self
   b. Authentic Self
   c. Freedom of Self Online
2. What is the respondents' level of fear of missing out (FoMO)?
3. What is the respondents' level of sense of belongingness?
4. Which of the online self-presentations and FoMO significantly predicts the sense of belongingness among college students in a Faith-Based University?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sense of Belongingness

Sense of belongingness refers to the innate, universal, and fundamental human need to develop an enduring, positive, and meaningful connection with other people (Leary, 2022). According to Schutz (1966), people join social groups to meet three needs: inclusion, the desire to belong; control, the wish to influence or be guided by others; and affection, the need to give and received love.

According to Renn et al. (2025), sense of belongingness refers to the extent to which students feels accepted, valued, and supported within the campus community. Social networking sites offer a space for them to fulfill this need by enabling communications, information sharing, and opportunities for social approval, self-expression, and influencing others (Gangadharbatla, 2008). Students belongingness on SNS

is expressed through online friendships, participation in group chats, to maintain peer connections, reconnecting with old friends, and engaging in communities of shared interests and identities (Manjunatha, 2013). These online interactions strengthen students' sense of connectedness within their community.

Online Self-Presentation

Self-presentation theory originates from Goffman's The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), which portray social interactions as a performance shaped by context and audience, aimed at creating desired impression. Self-presentation especially important during the transitional period of college life (Yang & Brown, 2016; Yang et al., 2017). College students often engage in strategic self-presentation to create desired impressions within their peer groups, classrooms, and broader social networks. This involves balancing authenticity, social validation, and image management across both online and offline contexts (Hernández-Serrano et al., 2022).

On SNS, students also tend to present themselves positively, yet this polished portrayal may foster social comparison and feelings of inadequacy in others, leading to unfavorable reactions (Bai et al., 2024). On the other hand, authentic self-presentation provides an insight into individuals' lives, promoting a sense of connectedness and understanding among peers.

Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

A study by Altuwairiqi et al. (2019) found out that individuals experiencing FoMO often seek intimate connection as a way to cope with feelings of social exclusion and strengthen their sense of belonging and self-worth. These connections provide validations, acceptance, and emotional support, offering reassurance against social anxiety and insecurity.

At the same time, FoMO drives individuals to remain constantly engaged online through social media, search platforms, and messaging apps to avoid missing important updates (Anastasya et al., 2022). This behavior can increase the risk of problematic internet use (Ruyandy & Kartasasmita, 2021). Supporting this, a survey by MyLife.com (2013) revealed that more than half of people report experiencing FoMO if they are not able to stay updated on SNS.

Although the influence of social networking sites (SNSs) on social relationships and mental health is increasingly recognized, there is still a lack of information regarding how college students' online self-presentation and fear of missing out (FoMO) influence their sense of belongingness within the framework of a faith-based institution. Therefore, this study aims to explore the predictive roles of online self-presentation as well as fear of missing out on the sense of belongingness among college students in a faith-based university in the Philippines.

III.   METHODS

Research Design

This study used a quantitative design in order to gain insight into the possibility of a connection between online self-presentation, fear of missing out, and sense of belongingness. Specifically, a descriptive regression method is used in this study. The extent of the participants' level of online self-presentation, fear of missing out, and sense of belongingness are determined using this method, as well as the predictive value of the online self-presentation and FoMO on the sense of belongingness.

Population and Sampling Techniques

A total of 350 undergraduate students in a faith-based university were selected to participate in this study using stratified random sampling. The participants included in the study are undergraduate students within the age range of 18-24 years old who are enrolled in a faith-based university in the Philippines, and are active users of three or more social networking sites. The students complete a set of questionnaires to collect data regarding the online self-presentation, fear of missing out, and sense of belongingness.

Research Instrumentations

Three instruments were used in this study to gather necessary data. The first is the Presentation of Online Self Scale for Adults (POSSA), developed by Strimbu et al. (2021). This test is used to assess individuals' online self-presentation behavior. Initially applied to adult participants, this test is used to measure aspects like online self-presentation strategies, personal information disclosure, and communication style. The second instrument is the Fear of Missing Out Scale, developed by Przybylski, et al. (2013). This scale is utilized to gauge an individual's level of concern regarding the potential absence from social events, experiences, or opportunities when disconnected from social media and digital communication platforms. Lastly, the Need to Belong Scale, developed by Leary et al. (2013) is utilized as a valuable tool to assess participants' need for social connection and belongingness. The three instruments were using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data Gathering

This study used a quantitative design, specifically the descriptive regression method to gain insight into the possibility of a connection between online self-presentation, fear of missing out, and a sense of belongingness, each of the variables levels. All of the procedures and instruments were approved by the Ethical Research Board prior to data gathering. Convenience sampling was used to select 40 participants for the pilot study that was conducted online, and was validated by experts. Once the pilot study and all required modifications were completed, the final data gathering began immediately. Stratified random sampling was used to select 350 participants from a faith-based university. Informed consent and Data Privacy Act were distributed along with the questionnaires, and were distributed both online and offline. Prior to administering the questionnaires, each participant received a briefing on informed consent and Data Privacy Act to inform the ethical rights of the participants and to ensure that their data remains anonymous and confidential.

Data Analysis

A multi-faceted approach was undertaken to comprehensively study the influence of online self-presentation, fear of missing out on the sense of belongingness among college students in a Faith-based university. Firstly, descriptive statistics are employed to ascertain the level of online self-presentation, fear of missing out, and sense of belongingness among participants. Lastly, ANOVA or regression analysis is used to identify the predictive value of online self-presentation and fear of missing out on the sense of belongingness.

Ethical Consideration

The researcher ensured that the ethical considerations were properly addressed in the study. The study asked for approval of the Ethical Research Board prior to the data gathering. Prior to administering the questionnaire, each participant received a briefing on informed consent and the Data Privacy Act. This is done to inform the ethical rights of the participants and to ensure that their data remains anonymous and confidential.

IV.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

University students' level of online self-presentation

The findings revealed that faith-based university students' level of online self-presentation in terms of adaptable self was average ($M = 2.58; SD = 0.97$), it indicates that students in a faith-based university sometimes like to use different personas on their social networking sites as for them to escape from their real self. This is aligned with previous study by Perdini & Hutahaean (2021), that students frequently show an idealized image of themselves on social networking sites. Being online offers students a space to temporarily escape their real-life identities, insecurities, and worries. However, students may experience negative feelings when engaging in positive self-presentation on SNS, since hiding their real identities or their weaknesses, fears, and perceived shortcomings can affect their self-esteem (Yu et al., 2022).

Similarly, in terms of students' level of authentic self, the results were also found to be average ($M = 3.48; SD = 0.73$), which indicate that the students' express or present their true identity, personality, and experiences on social networking sites from time to time. This is also in line with previous studies which highlight that students who frequently use SNS tend to show more of their real self and have different levels on how they show it online (Hernández-Serrano et al., 2022; Geary et al., 2021).

Lastly, students reported an average level of freedom of self online ($M = 2.78, SD = 0.71$), which suggests that students in some way believe that they can express themselves more freely on the internet. This implies that students often struggle with offline communication and therefore prefer SNS, where they can share thoughts they cannot say in person and be able to expand their social connection. This result matches with a study by Ryan et al. (2017), which stated that SNS could increase social capital and reduce loneliness by building connection and groups.

Table 1. University Student's Level of Self-Presentation

Online Self-Presentation	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Adaptable Self	2.58	0.97	Average
Authentic Self	3.48	0.73	Average
Freedom of Self Online	2.78	0.71	Average

N = 350 1-1.49 – Very Low 1.50-2.49 – Low 2.50-3.49 – Average 3.50-4.49 – High 4.50-5 – Very High

The findings underscore a need to maintain the students' level of online self-presentation, as the results shows an overall online self-presentation as average. This indicates that the students generally balance their online self-image and disclose personal aspects when appropriate. They do so in a balanced manner, that neither overemphasized their online impression management nor complete openness. Thus, suitable intervention such as psychoeducational program aims to maintain a balanced online self-presentation and to maximize the advantages of online interaction is discussed (Hjetland et al., 2024).

University student's level of fear of missing out

Table 2 below revealed that students in a faith-based university reported an average level of fear of missing out ($M = 2.74, SD = 0.74$), which suggest that while students occasionally feel concern about missing out on social events and experience an urge to stay connected, these feelings are not pervasive and do not significantly disrupt their well-being. Students may check their phones or SNS regularly to keep updated, yet still maintain control over time and their emotions. This supports prior studies suggesting that people with FoMO worry about missing anything if they don't follow what is going on in SNS and using SNS to obtain information (Anastasya et al., 2022; MyLife.com, 2013; Rozgonjuk et al., 2020).

Table 2. University Student's Level of Fear of Missing Out

	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Fear of Missing Out	2.74	0.74	Average

N = 350 1-1.49 – Very Low 1.50-2.49 – Low 2.50-3.49 – Average 3.50-4.49 – High 4.50-5.00 – Very High

University student's level of sense of belongingness

Based on the result below, the overall level of sense of belongingness of the students in a faith-based university is average ($M=2.96; SD=0.55$). This indicates that the students feel occasionally the need to be connected, accepted, and valued within the community, and need someone whom they can rely on during difficult time. This finding aligns with prior research that in communities or social groups, it is important for people to feel connected, accepted and appreciated (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Walton & Wilson, 2018). Additionally, a study by Gable & Bedrov (2021) further stated that people need support from others, as social connection and emotional involvement provide the strength, understanding, and encouragement which are essential for overcoming life's challenges. The implication on how to maintain and improving students' belongingness are discussed.

Table 3. University Student's Level of Sense of Belongingness

	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Sense of Belongingness	2.96	0.55	Average

N = 350 1-1.49 – Very Low 1.50-2.49 – Low 2.50-3.49 – Average 3.50-4.49 – High 4.50-5.00 – Very High

Predictors of sense of belongingness

The results revealed that fear of missing out (FoMO) and freedom of self online together accounted for 35.7% of the variance in students' sense of belongingness, with FoMO emerging as the strongest predictors with a variance of 33.6% ($r^2=0.336$; $\beta=0.581$; $F=96.302$), while freedom of self online also contributed significantly, though to a lesser extent with a variance of 2.1% ($r^2=0.357$; $\beta=0.148$; $F=96.302$).

Table 4. Predictors of Sense of Belongingness

	r^2	Adjusted r^2 (%)	B	F	Sig.
Fear of Missing Out	0.336	33.6	0.581		
Freedom of Self Online	0.357	2.1	0.148	96.302	0.000

*sig at p<0.05 level of confidence

Looking at the beta coefficient results shown in table 4, both predictors showed positive coefficients, which indicates that higher levels of FoMO and freedom of self online are associated with stronger sense of belongingness. Several studies support that a greater need for belonging is positively associated with FoMO (Ng & Fam, 2024; Alabri, 2022). This is because people who highly value belonging tend to be more sensitive to social cues and more prone to anxiety when they feel socially excluded.

Additionally, the result also in accordance with the Self-Determination Theory by Ryan & Deci (1985) which explain relatedness; the need to feel connected and to belong, as one of the fundamental psychological needs that is crucial for continual development, integrity, and well-being. FoMO arises when this need for belonging and social participation feels threatened, such as when others appear to be enjoying events without one's involvement (Lai et al., 2016; Rifkin et al., 2025). To reduce the anxiety of potential exclusion, students experiencing FoMO frequently seek validation and interaction on SNS, which in turn increases their SNS usage (Anwar et al., 2020; Blackwell et al., 2017; Servidio, 2021). In this sense, FoMO can act as a motivational force for students to remain socially connected via online. However, if it not used with caution, behaviors that promote perceived belonging, such as frequent checking and posting, can lead to excessive social media use, creating a cycle where FoMO drives students to stay online to feel included and remain connected (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Therefore, an intervention to avoid the excessive usage of SNS and overreliance on SNS for validation and inclusion are discussed, highlighting the importance of maintaining a good balance between online and offline lifestyle (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The main purpose of this study was to gain information about the predictive role of online self-presentation and the fear of missing out on students' sense of belongingness in a faith-based university in the Philippines. The researchers found that the strongest predictor of college students' sense of belongingness is the fear of missing out, and it shows a positive correlation, indicating that higher FoMO is associated with stronger need to belong. Given that high FoMO motivates students to seek inclusion, it is recommended for the students to focus on meaningful connections and do activities that are aligned with their genuine interest, rather than participating solely to avoid feeling left out. Additionally, to promote a balanced lifestyle, students are encouraged to engage more in offline social activities, which can help to reduce FoMO, strengthen their sense of belonging, and help prevent excessive and overreliance of SNS.

Given that students' online self-presentation levels were found to be average, it is recommended for the university to implement psychoeducation programs aimed to maintain the balanced online self-presentation by encouraging students to reflect their online behaviors and how these align with their personal goals, values, and sense of self, thus help them to improve their social media literacy, be more resilient, and be able to maximized the positive aspects of SNS rather than its negative aspects.

And to maintain and strengthen students' sense of belongingness, students need to feel that they belong in their social context. Thus, the researcher encouraged students to join small groups, communities, or social work activities within the university. Faculty members may also organize social gatherings, team-building activities, and retreats for students. By participating in these activities, students may develop deeper connections with peers and faculty members, leading to an increased sense of belongingness.

Our study is affected by certain limitations. The respondents were limited only to undergraduate students in one faith-based university in the Philippines with the range of age of 18-24 years old, and an active user of 3 and above social networking sites. This might question the generalizability of findings across different age, regions or educational context, potentially limiting the broader applicability.

Lastly, the researchers also suggested the future researchers to seek out other constructs or variables that may predict a sense of belongingness, besides fear of missing out and freedom of self online. Since belongingness is a complex psychological need shaped by multiple personal, social, and environmental factors, it is important to examine other influences that might contribute or hinder these experiences. This could help institutions to develop more targeted interventions that promote student engagement and community connectedness.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All three authors, namely, Ribka Cassy U. Marbun, Miracle Jade. E. Karundeng, and Angel Vania Syenell, collaboratively contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, data gathering, data analysis, and writing of this research. Levy M. Fajanilan as the adviser, contributed in supervising the study, offered feedback during data collection and analysis, and guided the manuscript's refinement and development. Each author played an active role throughout the research process and collectively approved the final version of the manuscript.

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