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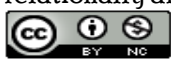
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-WORTH AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION: MODERATING ROLE OF FOMO AND ANXIOUS OR PREOCCUPIED ATTACHMENT

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
preoccupied attachment or anxious attachment, fear of missing out, social exclusion, self-worth.	Social exclusion is one of the sturdiest known predictors of low self-worth, but people do not all respond to exclusion in the same way. The present study tested a moderation model in which Fear of Missing Out and preoccupied attachment work as parallel moderators of the association between social exclusion and self-worth. Using a convenience sampling technique, a sample of 380 university and college students was selected from Haripur, Mansehra, and Abbottabad. Data were collected using the preoccupied-attachment subscale of the Fear of Missing Out Scale Attachment Style Questionnaire–Short Form, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem, and the Social Exclusion Scales. Preoccupied attachment and Fear of Missing Out were positively associated with social exclusion and were negatively linked with self-worth. Hierarchical regression showed social exclusion and preoccupied attachment significantly and negatively predicted self-worth, and adding the Social Exclusion, Preoccupied Attachment, and FoMO interaction terms significantly improved the model, indicating that preoccupied attachment and FoMO each moderate the social exclusion and self-worth relationship. Self-worth also differed by age, gender, peer support, and social media use. The design was cross-sectional; moderation effects were interpreted as concurrent associations, and the findings carry implications for counseling students who are relationally anxious or digitally overexposed.
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Introduction

Self-worth (a person's basic sense of their own value) is shaped heavily by how included or excluded a person feels. Social exclusion, the experience of being ignored, rejected, or left out of valued relationships, is one of the most consistent predictors of low self-worth documented in psychology (Lei et al., 2024). Exclusion does not affect everyone equally, however: some people shrug off being left out of a plan, while others are devastated by it. The present study proposes that two psychological characteristics help explain this variability: an insecure attachment style called preoccupied attachment, and an anxious need to stay constantly connected called Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). Both are treated as moderator characteristics that may change how strongly social exclusion is linked with self-worth among Pakistani university and college students to explore whether students high in preoccupied attachment or FoMO experience a steeper drop in self-worth when excluded than students low in these traits. The broader theoretical literature on attachment, FoMO, and exclusion, reviewed below, offers two independent rationales for why these characteristics should each buffer or intensify the exclusion and self-worth link, motivating this focus on preoccupied attachment and FoMO as parallel moderators.

Preoccupied Attachment

Attachment theory explains why some people are more emotionally dependent on relationships than others. Bowlby (1969/1982) proposed that formative experiences with primary caregivers develop inner mechanisms (cognitive schemas of the self and others) that guide the extent a person manages closeness and emotional security throughout life. Ainsworth et al. (1978) explained that inconsistent caregiving (sometimes warm, sometimes distant) produces an anxious-ambivalent pattern in children, who want closeness but fear it will disappear. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) extended this into adulthood with a four-category model, describing preoccupied attachment as a combination of a negative view of yourself and a positive view of others. The person doubts their own worth but sees other people as the main source of comfort and validation, becoming highly dependent on others for reassurance. This dependency has clear psychological consequences. People with preoccupied attachment or anxious attachment show poor emotion regulation, ruminating and escalating emotionally under interpersonal stress (Guadalupe & Jessica, 2024). They show high rejection sensitivity, reading ambiguous behavior from others (an unanswered message, a short reply) as a sign of disapproval or abandonment (Çarıkçı-Özgül & Işık, 2024). They have low self-esteem because their negative self-model makes external approval, rather than their own judgment, the main basis for feeling worthwhile (Zhang et al., 2024). And they fear losing closeness more than they fear closeness itself, which drives clingy, reassurance-seeking behavior even though it can strain the relationships they are trying to protect. Among university students, still forming their identity and heavily reliant on peers, this attachment style shows up as jealousy, overthinking, and heightened emotional pain over ordinary relational friction (Overall & Simpson, 2022).

Preoccupied Attachment and FoMO: Two Correlated but Distinct Moderators

Preoccupied attachment and FoMO are proposed here as two separate moderators of the exclusion–self-worth link rather than as sequential steps in a single pathway, but the literature also indicates that the two constructs tend to co-occur, which is relevant to interpreting their overlapping moderating roles. Preoccupied attachment leaves a person emotionally dependent on staying close to others and afraid of being left behind, and is consistently associated with greater Fear of Missing Out, the anxious belief that everybody is having rewarding experiences one is missing out on, combined with a compulsive urge to stay constantly connected and updated (Przybylski et al., 2013). While in the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) offers a plausible account of why the two constructs co-occur: FoMO is theorized to arise when a person's basic need for relatedness (feeling connected to others) is threatened, and preoccupied individuals, whose sense of security depends heavily on staying connected to others, may experience this threat more often and more intensely than securely attached individuals, compensating by monitoring others' lives online as a way of managing their underlying insecurity (Adams et al., 2021).

Empirical evidence is consistent with this proposed co-occurrence. Gori et al. (2023) found that anxious or preoccupied (and fearful) attachment was linked with higher Fear of missing out, which then led to lower self-esteem and heavier use of social media. Perazzini et al. (2023) similarly found that people higher in anxious or preoccupied attachment reported stronger FoMO, and Holte et al. (2024) found this association especially strong among people who also could not tolerate uncertainty, precisely the condition created when a preoccupied person does not know what others are doing. In a Pakistani sample of young adults, Abbasi and Tabassum (2025) found a similar pattern, suggesting that this attachment and FoMO association is not confined to Western contexts. Together, these findings suggest that preoccupied attachment and FoMO are closely and consistently linked, and that FoMO can plausibly be understood as a digital-age expression of the same underlying insecurity that defines preoccupied attachment. This correlation is noted here as background, not as a tested pathway: the present study does not model FoMO as an outcome of attachment or as a step leading toward exclusion, but instead treats preoccupied attachment and FoMO as two parallel moderators of the exclusion–self-worth relationship, each with its own independent theoretical rationale.

Fear of Missing Out as a Moderator of Exclusion's Impact

FoMO is theoretically expected to moderate rather than sequentially precede the link between social exclusion and self-worth: it is proposed to heighten a person's vulnerability to felt social exclusion's impact, both because it may make a person more likely to interpret ambiguous situations as exclusionary, and because the constant social comparison it produces can make any real instance of being left out feel more painful. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) offers one account of the underlying mechanism: people evaluate themselves by comparing their own lives to others', and social media constantly supplies upward comparisons curated depictions of peers who appear to be having more fun, more success, and more social inclusion. These upward

comparisons are associated with the felt sense of missing out (Piko et al., 2025; Przybylski et al., 2013) and may simultaneously prime a person to interpret their own social situation as exclusion. Servidio et al. (2024) explain that social comparison helps explain the relationship between Fear of missing out and everyday social media use, and Piko et al. (2025) showed social comparison to be among the positive correlates with FoMO in university-going students.

Notably, the empirical literature on the direction of this relationship is mixed rather than one-directional. Alabri (2022) found that fear of social exclusion and a strong need to belong were closely associated with FoMO, and Abbasi and Tabassum (2025) found that perceived social exclusion positively predicted FoMO among Pakistani youth, in a direction opposite to the one proposed here, suggesting the relationship may be reciprocal rather than strictly FoMO-to-exclusion. Gao et al. (2023) and Jiang and Wang (2023) similarly treated social exclusion as a variable that interacts with FoMO to worsen outcomes such as depression, rather than as its downstream consequence. The present study adopts heightened vulnerability to felt exclusion as its working theoretical account of how FoMO relates to exclusion. A person high in FoMO may be primed to notice exclusion cues that a less preoccupied person would overlook, but acknowledges that the correlational evidence available cannot rule out a reverse or bidirectional pattern, and does not treat FoMO as a demonstrated cause of exclusion.

Social Exclusion and Self-Worth

Once exclusion occurs, whether real or strongly perceived, it is expected to damage self-worth. Sociometer theory (Leary et al., 1995) explains why: self-worth works as an internal feeling that tells how accepted or rejected a person is by others. It is not a fixed trait but a standard that moves with relational feedback. When a person is excluded, the sociometer registers a drop in relational value, felt as lowered self-worth. Williams's (2009) temporal need-threat model of ostracism adds that exclusion jeopardizes four basic needs at once: belonging, meaningful existence, self-esteem, and control, producing an immediate pain response and, if exclusion continues, a longer decline into helplessness and low well-being. The Contingencies of Self-Worth Theory (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) adds that this damage is greatest for people whose sense of value is most tied to social approval, which describes preoccupied individuals almost exactly. Unlike the background literature on preoccupied attachment and FoMO described above, this particular association has been supported not only correlatively but also experimentally: laboratory paradigms such as Cyberball, in which participants are randomly assigned to be included or excluded from a ball-tossing game, have repeatedly shown that exclusion causes measurable drops in state self-esteem (Lei et al., 2024). This gives the exclusion-to-self-worth relationship, which the present study tests as the moderated relationship of central interest, a stronger causal basis than the correlational literature on preoccupied attachment and FoMO summarized above, even though the present study itself tests exclusion and self-worth correlationally as well.

Preoccupied Attachment and FoMO as Moderators

Put together, the theoretical background reviewed above provides two independent reasons to expect that social exclusion will not affect all students' self-worth equally: preoccupied attachment makes a person chronically dependent on others' approval for a sense of worth, and FoMO makes a person chronically primed to notice and be wounded by signs of exclusion. Each characteristic, on its own theoretical grounds, was supposed to sharpen the association between self-worth and social exclusion. Preoccupied attachment and FoMO are not proposed as sequential steps on the way to exclusion, but as parallel individual differences that determine how strongly exclusion translates into diminished self-worth once it is experienced. This theoretical background explains why preoccupied attachment and FoMO are included in the present model at all; they represent plausible psychological reasons that some students may be more vulnerable to exclusion, and more affected by it, than others. To identify who is most vulnerable to exclusion's effects, the study tests preoccupied attachment and FoMO as moderators: social exclusion is treated as the independent variable and self-worth as the dependent variable, and preoccupied attachment and FoMO work as variables that may change how strongly exclusion is linked with self-worth. In other words, the theoretical background above supplies the rationale for why preoccupied attachment and FoMO should matter, while the statistical model tests whether and how much they change the strength of the exclusion and self-worth relationship. The prediction, based on this reasoning, is that students higher in preoccupied attachment or FoMO will show a stronger negative relationship between social exclusion and self-worth than students lower in these traits, because their underlying insecurity may leave them with fewer psychological resources to buffer exclusion's impact once it occurs.

Literature Review

The individual associations underlying this moderation model are each reasonably well supported by correlational evidence. Preoccupied attachment is consistently associated with lower self-esteem and greater FoMO (Gori et al., 2023; Perazzini et al., 2023). FoMO is consistently associated with social comparison and with lower self-worth (Ma'rof & Abdullah, 2024; Servidio et al., 2024; Sommantico et al., 2023). Social exclusion is consistently associated with a decrease in self-esteem across cultural contexts, with experimental support for a causal effect (Gori et al., 2025; Lei et al., 2024). Attachment has also been shown to moderate exclusion's effects directly: Sezer and Gürtepe (2025) found that insecurely attached adolescents, including those with preoccupied attachment, were more vulnerable to social exclusion than securely attached peers, and Taha and Luyten (2025) found that attachment anxiety amplified exclusion's emotional impact on self-esteem.

What is missing is a single study that puts these associations together within a moderation model. Most existing research tests these associations two at a time: attachment with FoMO, or FoMO with self-esteem rather than testing preoccupied attachment and FoMO together as moderators of the exclusion and self-worth relationship. Most studies also rely on cross-sectional, self-report data from convenience samples, which restricts causal claims and is a limitation shared by the

present study. And almost none of this research has been conducted in Pakistan. Pakistani studies on attachment have focused on marital satisfaction and parenting rather than preoccupied attachment and FoMO specifically (Riaz et al., 2020); Pakistani studies on social media have examined anxiety, depression, and academic performance without treating FoMO as a mechanism linking attachment to self-worth (Khan et al., 2021; Tariq et al., 2022); and Pakistani researches on self-worth have looked at academic stress and family functioning in isolation from attachment or exclusion (Ali et al., 2018; Mahmood & Saleem, 2019). Social exclusion itself has received little direct attention in Pakistani psychology outside of bullying research (Khan & Masood, 2020), despite Pakistan's strongly collectivistic social structure, in which being accepted by one's social group is central to identity and emotional well-being—arguably making this population especially relevant for testing the proposed moderation model.

Rationale and Statement of the Problem

Social exclusion is known to reduce self-worth, but it is not yet clear why this effect is stronger for some people than others, especially outside Western and East Asian samples. The theoretical background developed above that preoccupied attachment and FoMO each reflect a heightened sensitivity to exclusion offers a clear answer: preoccupied attachment and FoMO should moderate how strongly exclusion damages self-worth. No study, to the researcher's knowledge, has tested this specific moderation model among Pakistani university students, despite Pakistan's rapidly increasing social media use and collectivistic social norms, both of which make this population well suited to testing it. This study addresses this gap directly.

Objectives

- i. Examine the association between preoccupied attachment, FoMO, self-worth, and social exclusion among university and college learners.
- ii. To investigate the moderating role of preoccupied attachment and FoMO in the association between self-worth and social exclusion.
- iii. To explore demographic differences (gender, age, peer relationships, and use of social media) on self-worth.

Hypothesis

- i. Anxious or preoccupied attachment, FoMO, and social isolation have positive and negative relationships with self-worth.
- ii. Preoccupied attachment and FoMO will influence the strength of the relationship between self-worth and social exclusion among college and university students.
- iii. Older students will show greater levels of self-worth than younger students.
- iv. Differences based on social media use will be present according to students' level of social media use.
- v. Female students will show lower self-worth than male students.

- vi. Students with less support from peers will report lower self-worth compared to those with stronger peer support.

Methodology

Participants, Procedure, and Ethics

The sample comprised 380 college and university students from Mansehra, Abbottabad, and Haripur, Pakistan. Participants were aged 18 years and above and were active users of social media. As described in Table 1, most participants were female (39.9%), belonged to the late adolescence age group of 18–21 years (54.5%), reported high social media use (43.9%), and had good peer support (38.7%). All participants were recruited in person from different colleges and universities using a convenience sampling technique. Before collecting the data, the participants were provided with details regarding the main objective of the study and that of voluntary participation. Written informed consent was secured from all participants before completing the questionnaires. Data were collected confidentially, and participants' confidentiality and privacy were assured. The questionnaires required approximately 15–20 minutes to complete. Appropriate ethical standards were maintained throughout the data collection process, and permission was obtained from the relevant authorities of the participating colleges and universities.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis for demographic factors (N = 380)

Factors	Group	F	%	M (SD)
Gender	Male	225	60.2	1.60 (0.49)
	Female	155	39.7	
Age	Late Adolescence (18–21)	207	54.5	1.60 (0.73)
	Young Adults (22–25)	117	30.8	
	Adults (26+)	56	14.7	
Social Media Use	High	163	43.9	1.83(0.82)
	Medium	116	26.5	
	Low	101	26.6	
Peer Support	Good	147	38.7	1.86 (0.78)
	Normal	140	36.7%	
	Bad	93	24.5%	

Note. % = Valid Percent, F = Frequencies, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

Instruments

Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOS)

A scale consisting of 10 items measures the Fear of Missing Out Scale (FoMOS; Przybylski et al., 2013). Items are reported on a five-point Likert scale with higher scores reflecting greater fear of

missing out. The scale showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.87$). In the present study, the FoMOS showed very good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.87$).

Attachment Style Questionnaire–Short Form (ASQ–SF)

The Attachment Style Questionnaire–Short Form is a 29-item self-report instrument designed to evaluate adult attachment styles. Items are rated on a six-point Likert scale. In the present study, nine items (Items 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, and 26) measuring the preoccupied or anxious attachment dimension were used, as the study specifically focused on preoccupied attachment (ASQ–SF; Alexander et al., 2001). Higher scores indicate greater preoccupied attachment. The preoccupied attachment subscale showed good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Social Exclusion Scale (SES)

Social Exclusion was measured using the 19-item Social Exclusion scale. The instrument evaluates individuals’ perceptions of social exclusion across different social contexts (SES; Gilman et al., 2013). Participants respond to each item using a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores represent greater social exclusion. Gilman et al. (2013) reported satisfactory internal consistency for the scale (0.85). In the current study, the Social Exclusion Scale established excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.79$).

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

The self-esteem scale developed by Rosenberg (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) contains ten items. Each item receives a score on a 4-point Likert scale. The scale comprises five positive and five negative statements, with the latter receiving reversed scores. The total score ranges from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. The RSES shows good internal consistency in different populations. In the current research, the scale was internally consistent ($\alpha = 0.80$).

Results

Table 2: Internal Consistency and Descriptive Statistics of FOMO, PAS, SWS and SES (N=380)

Contracts	Items	Alpha	<i>M(SD)</i>	Range	
				Min	Max
FOMOS	10	.873	29.40 (11.28)	10	50
PAS	9	.832	31.57(10.43)	9	54
SES	19	.791	51.73 (24.64)	19	95
SWS	10	.801	24.61 (5.51)	10	37

Note. α = Cronbach’s alpha, k = number of items, SD = standard Deviation, M = mean

Results from the reliability analysis revealed satisfactory to good internal consistency as evidenced by Cronbach's alpha scores ranging from .79 to .87. The findings revealed different levels of preoccupied attachment or anxious attachment, fear of missing out, social exclusion and self-worth among the participants, as described. The skewness values of all the study variables were within the acceptable range of ± 2 . Specifically, skewness coefficients -0.008 for PAS, 0.254 , for FOMO, -0.370 , for SES, -0.62 and for SWS and kurtosis values were -1.138 , -0.790 , -1.044 , and 0.602 for PAS, FOMO, SES, SWS. The values were within an acceptable range, indicating that the data were close to a normal distribution.

Table 3: Pearson Correlations among PAS and FOMO, and PAS and SES (N=380)

	Contracts	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1.	AAS	31.56	10.43	~			
2.	FOMO	29.42	11.31	.489**	~		
3.	SES	51.73	24.57	.388**	.798**	~	
4.	SWS	24.61	5.51	-.484**	-.487**	-.558**	~

Note. FOMO = Fear of Missing Out Scale, AAS = *Anxious or Preoccupied attachment scale*, SES = Social Exclusion Scale, SWS = Self-Worth Scale, ** = $P < .01$ (2-tailed).

The association was tested with Preoccupied attachment (PAS), fear of missing out (FOMO), social exclusion (SES), and self-worth (SWS) using Pearson correlation analysis. The findings showed that there was a significant and positive relationship between preoccupied attachment and FOMO, $r = .489$, $p < .01$. However, preoccupied attachment was found to have a positive correlation with social exclusion SES, $r = .388$, $p < .01$; with self-worth, however, a significant negative correlation was found with SWS, $r = -.484$, $p < .01$.

The correlation of social exclusion with fear of missing out was found to be strongly positive, $r = .799$, $p < .01$, and social exclusion with self-worth was found to be strongly negative $r = -.558$, $p < .01$. Fear of missing out with self-worth was found to be strongly negative $r = -.487$, $p < .01$. Overall results support the hypothesis that higher preoccupied attachment is linked with higher FoMO and social exclusion, and with lower self-worth.

Table 4: Anxious and preoccupied attachment and fear of missing out in the association between social exclusion and self-worth were tested for in the current study (N = 380).

Measures	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>
Constant	24.92**		.21	26.41**		.25
Social exclusion	-.105**	-.469	.015	-.081**	-.362**	.012
Preoccupied attachment	-.172**	-.325	.024	-.137**	-.259**	.021
Fear of Missing out	.023**	.046	.034	.005**	.011**	.030
SE _x PAS				.003*	.133*	.001

SE×FOMO		-.008	-.444	.001
R ²	.397 ^{**}	.513 ^{**}		
ΔR ²		.115		

Note. β = Standardized Beta, B = Unstandardized Beta, SE = Standard Error, ΔR^2 =Delta R square.

Hierarchical multiple moderation analysis with moderation was conducted to examine whether preoccupied attachment and fear of missing out moderated the association between social exclusion, and self-worth (SWS). Table 4 shows these results.

Social exclusion, preoccupied attachment, and fear of missing out (FOMO) were included in the same block as predictors of self-worth in Model 1. This model was statistically significant, $R^2 = .397$, $F = 81.95$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 39.7% of the variance in self-worth. The perceived social exclusion was a significant negative predictor of self-worth, $\beta = -.105$, $p < .001$, with higher perceived social exclusion being related to lower self-worth. Likewise, preoccupied attachment was negatively and significantly associated with self-worth, $\beta = -.172$, $p < .001$; those who reported higher attachment levels to preoccupied attachment were more likely to report lower self-worth. Although the fear of missing out showed a positive regression coefficient, this result was not significant $\beta = .023$, $p > .05$ and did not significantly affect self-worth.

Both the interaction term between Social Exclusion and Preoccupied Attachment (SE × Preoccupied Attachment) and that between Social Exclusion and Fear of Missing Out (SE × FoMO) were added in Model 2 to explore moderating effects. The addition of these interaction terms increased explained variance in self-worth from 39.7% to 51.3% representing a change in explained variance $R^2 = .513$, representing an 11.6% increase in explained variance $\Delta R^2 = .115$, F change = 43.99, $p < .001$. Social exclusion ($\beta = -.081$, $p < .001$) and preoccupied attachment or anxious attachment ($\beta = -.137$, $p < .001$) were also significant negative predictors of self-worth, and the direct effect of FoMO remained non-significant ($\beta = .005$, $p > .05$).

As regards the moderation effects, the association between social exclusion and preoccupied attachment (SE × PAS) was significant ($B = .003$, $p < .05$), suggesting PREO preoccupied attachment moderated the association between social exclusion and self-worth. In the same way, the social exclusion × fear of missing out (SE × FoMO) interaction was also significant ($B = -.008$, $p < .001$), meaning the relationship between social exclusion and self-worth was moderated by FoMO. The results reveal that different individuals' preoccupied attachment and FoMO levels were related to the strength of the link between social exclusion and self-worth. Thus, the moderation hypotheses of this study were confirmed.

Table 5: One-way ANOVA table for age and self-worth scale (N = 380)

Variables	Early Adolescence (n= 207)		Young adult (n=117)		Adult (n=56)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	

η²

					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (2,378)	
SW	23.86	5.84	25.04	4.91	28.81	3.23	19.38	<.001

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard deviation, SWS = Self-Worth Scale

A one-way ANOVA was employed to compare the self-worth scale scores in three groups of ages; early adolescents, young adults, and adults. It was discovered that there is a statistically significant difference in self-worth among the three age groups; $F(2, 378)=19.38$, $p < .001$. The adult group scored the highest on self-worth compared to the other two groups. These differences were found to be statistically significant in all groups as determined by post hoc analyses with Tukey's HSD. These findings imply that age is one of the key determinant factors affecting self-worth since older people have higher self-worth than younger people.

Table 6: One-way ANOVA analysis for use of social media and self-worth scale (N = 380)

Variables	High (n=167)		Medium (n=116)		Low (n=101)		<i>F</i> (2,378)	η^2
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
SW	21.71	5.98	27.50	3.38	27.15	3.78	22.73	<.001

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard deviation,

A one-way ANOVA revealed that there were significant differences between the three social media use groups (high, medium, and low) in self-worth (SWS). The results showed that there was a significant difference between the groups in self-worth score, $F(2, 376) = 22.73$, $p < .001$. Students who used social media a lot ($M = 21.71$, $SD = 5.98$) reported significantly lower self-worth than students who used social media a medium amount of time ($M = 27.15$, $SD = 3.38$) and those who used social media a little time ($M = 27.15$, $SD = 3.78$). Results from post-hoc analysis showed significant differences in high and medium use, as well as high and low use, but not for medium and low use. The results indicated that there is a relationship between self-worth and the use of social media.

Table 7: One-way ANOVA analysis for support of peer and self-worth scale (N = 380)

Variables	Good (N=147)		Normal (N=139)		Bad (N=94)		<i>F</i> (2,378)	η^2
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
SW	27.38	3.50	24.76	5.95	21.31	5.40	42.20	<.001

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard deviation,

There were differences in self-worth between peer support (good, normal, and bad) found using one-way ANOVA. The findings showed that a statistically significant difference in Self-worth existed between the groups, $F(2, 376) = 42.20, p < .001$. Students shows good peer support indicated significantly higher self-worth compared to those with normal peer support and bad peer support. The results indicate that peer support is an important factor in self-worth, and that the more peer support a student receives, the higher his or her self-worth.

Table 8: Independent t-test analysis for Gender differences on self-worth (N = 380)

Gender	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (378)	<i>P</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Males	225	26.66	4.62	8.16	.000	0.85
Females	155	22.31	5.71			

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation, SWS = Self Worth Scale

Self-worth (SWS) was different by gender using an independent-samples t-test. There were 155 female and 225 male participants. The mean self-worth score among females was lower than that among males, and the difference was significant. The results presented here indicate that gender also plays a significant role in self-worth, as evidenced by higher self-worth among male participants compared with female participants in the study.

Discussion

The present study investigates whether anxious or preoccupied attachment and FoMO influence the association between self-worth and social exclusion among Pakistani university and college students, and the study also examined differences across age, peer support, gender, and social media usage. Overall, the findings provided the proposed moderation framework and extended attachment- and exclusion-based theories of self-worth within a South Asian and digitally engaged student population.

In line with Hypothesis 1, preoccupied attachment, FoMO, and social exclusion were positively associated with one another whereas each of the three variables was negatively associated with self-worth. This is consistent with previous research that preoccupied attachment is linked with lower self-worth (Marengo et al., 2023) and greater FoMO (Chaudhary et al., 2022; Holte et al., 2024), and individuals characterized by preoccupied attachment may experience social exclusion because their attachment anxiety increased the psychological impact of being rejected or ignored (Rom & Mikulincer, 2023). Because preoccupied attachment and fear of missing out were included as parallel moderators rather than as sequential steps, this study did not test whether one predicts the other, but the very strong association observed between fear of missing out and social exclusion ($r = .80$) is consistent with prior work suggesting these constructs are closely intertwined: people high in Fear of missing out tend to be oriented toward monitoring their inclusion status, such that ambiguous social situations may be more readily processed as exclusion

(Abbasi & Tabassum, 2025; Alabri, 2022).

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the hierarchical regression analysis showed that adding the interaction terms for preoccupied attachment and fear of missing out significantly improved prediction of self-worth beyond the main effects of social exclusion and preoccupied attachment alone, and both the social exclusion and anxious or preoccupied attachment and social exclusion and FoMO interactions were statistically significant. Hypothesis 2 was therefore supported preoccupied attachment or anxious attachment and FoMO each moderate the relationship between self-worth and social exclusion. This is consistent with work suggesting that attachment orientation moderates how strongly social exclusion affects psychological outcomes: Sezer and Gürtepe (2025) found that adolescents with insecure, including preoccupied, attachment styles were more vulnerable to the negative effects of social exclusion than securely attached peers, and Taha and Luyten (2025) similarly reported that attachment anxiety amplified the emotional impact of exclusion on self-esteem. The Social Exclusion and fear of missing out interaction was consistent with the hypothesized direction, with higher FoMO associated with a steeper negative relationship between exclusion and self-worth, paralleling findings that social exclusion and FoMO interact to worsen related outcomes such as depression (Gao et al., 2023; Jiang & Wang, 2023). The precise direction of the Social Exclusion and Preoccupied Attachment interaction, and the non-significant main effect of fear of missing out, are discussed further under Limitations, where the relevant statistical diagnostics are reported; neither issue affects the overall conclusion that Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, self-worth increased with age, mirroring longitudinal evidence that self-worth increases from adolescence into adulthood as identity consolidates, emotional regulation improves, and social roles stabilize (Orth & Robins, 2014). Late adolescents in this sample, who are still navigating identity formation and are comparatively more reliant on peer approval, reported the lowest self-worth, consistent with developmental accounts that sensitivity to peer evaluation is heightened earlier in the transition to adulthood and gradually recedes with maturity (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Consistent with Hypothesis 4, students with high social media use reported markedly lower self-worth than those with medium or low use, aligning with evidence that heavy social media engagement is associated with increased social comparison and reduced self-esteem (Twenge & Campbell, 2023) and that continuous exposure to idealized, curated content on social media fosters comparison-driven dissatisfaction (Verduyn et al., 2022). Consistent with Hypothesis 5, stronger peer support was associated with higher self-worth, consistent with the broader literature on the protective role of peer relationships during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Wentzel et al., 2020) and with evidence that perceived social support buffers individuals against negative self-evaluation following stress (Rueger et al., 2016). Finally, consistent with Hypothesis 6, male students reported significantly higher self-worth than female students, with a greater effect size. This differences of gender is consistent with prior evidence that women are more exposed to sociocultural pressures around appearance, relational expectations, and social comparison, all of which can adversely affect self-esteem (Harter, 2012), and that these pressures may be intensified by social-media-driven appearance

comparison specifically among young women (Al Riyami et al., 2024; Taylor & Armes, 2024). In the Pakistani context, where gendered social expectations remain pronounced, these pressures may interact with the collectivistic emphasis on social acceptance to make young women particularly susceptible to exclusion-related declines in self-worth, an important direction for future research.

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that the psychological effects of social exclusion for self-worth depend on relatively stable individual attachment orientation differences and on the more state-like, digitally mediated disposition of FoMO. The temporal need threat model of ostracism (Williams, 2009) and sociometer theory (Leary et al., 1995) show that the “sociometer” is not calibrated identically across individuals; those with preoccupied attachment or anxious attachment and elevated fear of missing out appear to register relational threat more acutely, consistent with the models’ acknowledgment that individual differences shape the severity of need threat following exclusion (Yaakobi & Williams, 2022).

Limitations

- The data were collected from three cities of the Hazara division of Pakistan through the convenience sampling technique, which means the results of this study might not apply to other areas, age groups, and sampling frames.
- Second limitation: due to the cross-sectional design used, there is no ability to make causal statements; the theoretical underpinning for the selection of moderators (preoccupied attachment, FoMO, and their hypothesized relationships with perceived exclusion and lowered self-worth) is therefore a proposed explanation, and longitudinal or experimental designs are warranted to determine the direction and stability of these relationships over time. Thirdly, all variables were assessed via self-report, which could be subject to social desirability and common-method bias; multi-method or informant-based assessment would be beneficial for future work. Fourth, only a few demographic factors were explored (age, gender, peer support, and use of social media); other factors that may be relevant (socioeconomic status and urban or rural residence) were not examined. Finally, the sample size was adequate for statistical analyses, but the sample was limited to the geographic area of Pakistan and replication in other parts of Pakistan and other South Asian contexts would help substantiate these findings.

Implications

Mental health professionals and university counselors may benefit from screening for preoccupied attachment and elevated fear of missing out when working with students who present with lower self-worth following experiences of social exclusion, as these dispositions appear to intensify the psychological impact of exclusion. Universities may consider structured peer-support programs, given the strong association observed between peer support and self-worth, as well as digital-wellness initiatives that help students, particularly heavy social media users, manage upward social comparison and compulsive connectivity. Given the pronounced gender difference

observed, interventions may also benefit from being sensitive to the distinct sociocultural pressures experienced by young women in the Pakistani context. Finally, because this is among the first studies to examine preoccupied attachment, FoMO, social exclusion, and self-worth within a single study in Pakistan, the findings provide a foundation for culturally grounded assessment and intervention strategies addressing attachment-related anxiety and digital-era relational stress among Pakistani youth.

Conclusion

Study results revealed that anxious or preoccupied attachment and FoMO were positively correlated with social exclusion and negatively correlated with self-worth among the students of colleges and universities of Pakistan, and that both anxious or preoccupied attachment and FoMO moderated the relationship between social exclusion and self-worth, which shows that students with higher scores on attachment anxiety and FoMO were more vulnerable to the negative effects of social isolation. Self-worth also differed significantly with age, gender, peer support, and social media usage, with older students reporting higher self-worth and students with stronger peer support reporting higher self-worth, while female students reported lower self-worth than male students. The results indicate that the link between social exclusion and reduced self-worth is stronger for every attachment type than the average, indicating that each type is independently linked to the effects of social exclusion and its associations with reduced self-worth. The relationships should be interpreted as causal until supported by longitudinal and experimental studies.

Recommendations

Future studies should (a) examine the combined contribution of anxious or preoccupied attachment, FoMO, and social exclusion on self-worth across a wider age range and cultural contexts. Second, researchers could incorporate additional contextual variables such as family structure, academic performance, and urban–rural residence. Third, employ longitudinal designs to clarify the direction and developmental course of these relationships. Fourth, use experimental paradigms (e.g., Cyberball-based exclusion tasks) to test causal pathways more directly; and fifth, conduct simple-slope and conditional-effects analyses to clarify the precise form of the preoccupied-attachment moderation identified here.

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