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A Morphological Analysis: Acronymization in Modern English Slang 'FOMO'

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Abstract

The rapid development of digital communication has significantly influenced language use, particularly in the emergence of new lexical forms in informal contexts. One prominent example is FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), a term widely used on social media platforms to describe anxiety arising from perceived exclusion from rewarding experiences. This study aims to examine FOMO from a linguistic perspective, focusing on its formation as an acronym and its development as a new lexical item in contemporary English slang. Employing a qualitative descriptive research approach, the data were collected from Instagram captions and comments used by the millennial generation. The data collection techniques involved observation and note-taking, while data analysis was conducted by classifying the acronyms based on their morphological characteristics and interpreting their meanings within context. The findings indicate that FOMO is formed through the process of acronymization, functioning as a unified lexical item rather than a mere abbreviation or initialism. Phonologically and semantically, FOMO operates as an independent word and reflects linguistic economy in digital communication. This study highlights how acronymization contributes to slang formation and demonstrates the dynamic relationship between language, social interaction, and technological advancement.

Keywords: *FOMO; acronymization; morphology; slang; digital communication; social media*

Introduction

FOMO, short for "Fear of Missing Out", which was coined by Patrick J. McGinnis in 2004 in an article published in The Harbus, a Harvard Business School student publication, in which the aforementioned definition was quoted, and he went further in his book Social Theory at HBS: McGinnis' Two FOs to elaborate on FOMO, stating this feeling has two underlying motivators. The first one is biological; it refers to the human need to belong to a group and be socially included. These needs, understood as such, will provide a better understanding of where FOMO comes from and why it is relevant to individuals' emotional lives. The other factor is cultural. In this regard, FOMO is related to theater performances, artworks, and films where something unique or peculiar is constructed as "cool" and popular. Thus, FOMO then becomes overtly visible in society and invites individuals to become curious and motivated to experience what others experience. These factors, combined with rapid advances in technology and the internet, have finally caused widespread exposure to FOMO.

The pervasive presence of social media in everyday life has further intensified the impact of FOMO. As online sharing becomes increasingly common, individuals are frequently exposed to curated portrayals of other people's experiences. This exposure often triggers anxiety about missing out on social interactions and meaningful events.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2020), FOMO is a condition in which “people feel anxious because they think others might be having a more enjoyable or exciting life than they are**,** based on what those others post on social networking sites.” This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among Millennials and Generation Z, who constitute the most active users of social media platforms. FOMO has also been linked to unhealthy patterns of social media use. J. Walter Thompson (JWT) Worldwide (2012) estimated that nearly 40% of internet users worldwide experience FOMO, characterized by feelings of fear and anxiety when others appear to be having more rewarding experiences. In addition, Sapadin (2015) noted that FOMO commonly appears among individuals who frequently engage with social networking sites due to a compulsive need to constantly monitor others’ activities. Similarly, Erciş et al. (2021) defined FOMO as a form of anxiety arising from awareness of meaningful experiences in which one is not participating.

Apart from its psychosocial aspect, FOMO has recently been discovered to have also manifested itself in a linguistic form. In linguistics, having “FOMO” in social networking sites signifies English language diversity, particularly in informal usage. English language diversity can be explained by variations of English language use, which depend on context and communicative situations. Formal English, for instance, is used in formal situations and relies on specific grammatical rules. However, non-standard English is not bound by such grammatical principles. Non-standard English is usually used in informal situations such as in music, movies, or social networking sites. The common type of non-standard English is slang.

Slang is informal variation in language use by particular social groups in particular social settings. The definition of slang proves to be difficult since its deployment is dependent on several factors like geographical area, generation, religion, and cultural orientation. According to Partridge (1984), the widespread use of slang in daily conversation and movie dialogues makes it difficult to differentiate it from mainstream speech. Slang words generally act as social markers of group identity and are avoided in formal settings and by persons who do not share the same social group identity. Because it is used informally, has strong generational specificity, and is closely tied to social experiences in particular social groups, it is safe to label FOMO as a slang word strongly tied to communication patterns in contemporary youthful society.

Slang expressions are closely connected with morphological procedures. Morphology is the study of word formation and structure, which is essential in understanding the way newly formed slang expressions come into being. Slang expressions are created as a linguistic answer to some social need, using different procedures for forming words. According to Yule (2010), there are ten major procedures for forming words in English. They are coinage, borrowing, compounding, blending, and clipping. Other procedures include back formation, conversion, formation of acronyms, derivation, and multiple procedures, which include more than one procedure for forming words. Morphology is thus an essential component for the development of the vocabulary of slang expressions.

From a morphological point of view, FOMO represents the process of acronymy and reveals how language often meets social and communicational demands. Acronymy covers the process of creating a word from a multi-word expression by pronunciation of its initial letters as one lexical item. According to Yule (2010), acronyms serve communicative economy because longer expressions are replaced by shorter ones, which are more memorable. Supporting this statement, Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2011) define acronymization as "the creation of words independent of the spell-out of separate letters of that word". Both views suggest that the process of acronymization represents linguistic economy and users' tendency to adapt language to their communicative

environment. Thus, these types of acronyms, like FOMO, are widely spread in informal communication, print, and digital media, which evidences a close connection between morphological processes and social use of language.

While many studies have addressed slang and the processes of word formation within morphological studies, few have made specific attention to the role played by acronyms as a dominant form of slang communication. Most of the earlier studies address general word formation without going into crucial details regarding how acronyms function as autonomous lexical items in informal discourses. Secondly, few studies have specifically addressed FOMO from a morphological perspective, despite its prevalence as an acronym of choice in everyday communication. It is an indication that further study is warranted in terms of how acronymization contributes to modern slang development and shapes communicational approach in the digital era.

Although the phenomenon of FOMO has been widely studied from psychological and behavioral research perspectives, there is still very little information available on the linguistic embodiment of FOMO, especially from the perspective of morphology. Although there have been studies on various topics concerning slang and word formation, the phenomenon of acronyms still remains largely explored on a general basis and lacks precise study regarding how one and the same acronym can independently become an integral part of everyday digital speech as a fully-fledged new lexicon unit with all possible grammar forms involved. This research shall make an important and fresh contribution by investigating FOMO from the perspective of acronymization and having passed the stages of lexicalization, phonologization, and grammar extension as an example of the development of modern English slang.

Method

This research uses a qualitative descriptive research method, because it can be viewed as appropriate for researching linguistic phenomena occurring naturally, including social media. This type of research aims to describe linguistic data without influencing or manipulating any variables. Andi Prastowo et al. state, citing Nazir, "Descriptive research aims to explore understanding of ideas, meanings, and expressions produced by individual or social groups. Qualitative research uses data presented in a visual or verbal form, images, and observations of physical behaviors."

This research aims to identify meaning and types of acronyms used by the millennial generation in their posts on Instagram. The object of this research concentrates on the use of acronyms in the posts or comments on Instagram. The acronyms used in posts or comments serve as the primary data for this research. Data for the research is generated from identifying a linguistic unit in the form of acronyms that exist in communication among the users of Instagram.

The data are then categorized, after collection, into types of acronyms using relevant morphological theories. Once the classification of the acronym is made, the meaning and function of each acronym in its specific context of communication is analyzed. This is, in fact, a significant step in qualitative descriptive analysis, where meaning is interpreted based on language use, social context, and user intention rather than statistical frequency.

This research embraces the listening and note-taking technique for collecting data. The researcher will observe Instagram captions and comments carefully, record the acronyms which show changes in meaning or shortened expressions commonly used by millennials. This method offers the researcher an opportunity to capture authentic language as it really occurs in naturally occurring digital interactions. This type of qualitative data analysis method, according to Supriyani (2019), relies on the language element itself as

the main determining tool, which means that linguistic forms and structures become the main basis for interpretation and analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Identification of FOMO as an Acronym

The term FOMO originates from the multi-word expression *Fear of Missing Out*, which refers to a socio-emotional condition characterized by anxiety arising from the perception that others are engaging in rewarding experiences while one is not. This concept was initially introduced by McGinnis (2004) and later elaborated in psychological research, notably by Przybylski et al. (2013). The source phrase consists of three content words that collectively convey the core meaning of the concept.

2. Morphological Process of Acronymization

FOMO is created by the morphological process of acronymization, where the first letter of the key lexical items of the original phrase is chosen. Specifically, the letter F is chosen from the word Fear, the letter M from the word Missing, and the letter O from the word Out. These letters are then combined to form a single orthographic symbol, FOMO, which stands for the original phrase in a shortened and economical way. This is in line with the principle of linguistic economy, where a longer expression is shortened without losing much meaning.

In academic and layman circles, the term is usually represented in its capitalized form FOMO because it is originally an acronym of the full phrase fear of missing out. For instance, in the article "The Fear of Missing Out" by Patrick J. McGinnis, the term is represented in its capitalized form FOMO, which highlights its acronymic status and its recognition as a cultural and psychological phenomenon.3. Phonological Integration

From a phonological perspective, FOMO is pronounced as a single lexical unit, typically /'foʊmoʊ/, rather than as separate letters (F–M–O). This unified pronunciation distinguishes FOMO from initialisms and confirms its classification as an acronym. The ability of FOMO to be articulated as a word contributes to its ease of use in both spoken and written communication, facilitating its widespread adoption in informal discourse.

Likewise, in the entries of Cambridge University Press (for example, the Cambridge Dictionary), the word is usually spelled as FOMO, following the conventional spelling rules of English for acronyms that have already been lexicalized. Nevertheless, over time, it may also be spelled in lowercase letters (fomo), showing its assimilation into the vocabulary of everyday language. Therefore, the variation between FoMO, FOMO, and fomo shows the orthographic development of acronyms as they transition from being newly coined to being fully lexicalized.

3. Lexical Status of FOMO in Contemporary English

FOMO in modern English-speaking communicative culture is the independent lexical word itself, and it need no longer invoke the full phrase of FOMO itself. Many people use FOMO as if it were common knowledge and need no longer explain the FOMO concept itself. Various corpus-based researches indicate that the word FOMO is very common as the stand-alone word in the digital text.

Despite the fact that it is shortened, FOMO retains semantic stability because it continues to have the meaning that the expanded form originally had. This indicates that FOMO is a deeply established word in modern English.

4. Grammatical Function of FOMO in Usage

Grammatically, FOMO exhibits functional flexibility, which is a characteristic often ascribed to slang. In most contexts, FOMO is an adjective, such as in phrases like FOMO culture or FOMO-driven behavior. FOMO is a noun, in which the term directly refers to the psychological or social condition itself, such as FOMO affects social media users.

- **FOMO as a Noun**

"I have serious FOMO after seeing everyone at the concert on Instagram."

"My FOMO gets worse when I scroll through TikTok at night."

- **FOMO as an Adjective**

"His FOMO behavior makes him check Instagram every five minutes."

"She made a FOMO decision to buy the product because it was trending on TikTok."

This ability to shift between grammatical categories is characteristic of slang and acronym-based expressions in digital discourse, where rigid word-class boundaries are often relaxed.

5. FOMO as Slang in Informal Registers

FOMO can also be viewed as a slang since it is primarily used in non-formal communication. Slang is generally a form of language used by a specific social grouping and is mostly practiced by young people. FOMO is mostly linked to young people since they actively engage in online communication.

The fact that FOMO has appeared so often in social communications, blogging, and article writing reflects its relevance and shows how slang language can become commonplace through its frequent usage.

Below is an image that highlights the deployment of FOMO as a slang in online, informal communication. The examples highlighted in the image, taken from various social platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, highlight the deployment of FOMO in informal language to convey individual emotions of FOMO in online social interactions. In the two examples, FOMO is used on its own, without an elaboration of what FOMO stands for, to mean that the term is quite familiar to the online community.

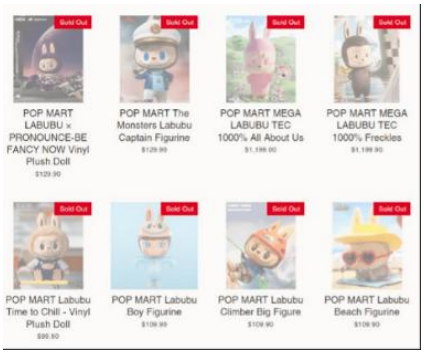


The visual and linguistic features in the image, including conversational sentence structures, emotional emphasis, and the use of emojis, further reinforce the informal nature of FOMO. These characteristics are typical of slang usage, where brevity, shared cultural knowledge, and emotional immediacy are prioritized. Consequently, the image provides clear evidence that FOMO functions as a slang term that has been normalized within digital discourse, particularly among younger generations.

6. Social and Digital Influences on Morphological Innovation

This image illustrates how FOMO influences Gen Z's lifestyle and consumer behavior through social media. Constant digital exposure creates social pressure to follow trends, showing how social and digital environments shape behavior and communication.





The widespread popularity of Labubu goods can be as closely associated with the impact of Lisa as it is inseparable from the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), which was created as a result of Lisa being publicly connected with Labubu characters, making everyone feel left out if they did not have any Labubu goods in their collection. As a global idol with profound impact in terms of both fan following and earnings, Lisa's display of Labubu, in terms of concerts, photo shoots, and other 'likes' on social media, brought about an overnight sensation in Labubu characters being transformed from being something unique and special in everyone's collection to being something everyone aspired to own in large numbers as sooning as possible, making all Labubu goods sell out in a matter of time due to this fear of being left out in this pop-culture phenomenon created and promoted by celebrities like Lisa.

The idea of FOMO, as demonstrated in the explanation of 'FOMO: Lifestyle vs Hedonic Lifestyle Gen Z', signifies the influence of social media on the lifestyle and consumer behavior of the members of the Gen Z generation. This is because the members of the Gen Z generation engage with the lifestyles, trends, and hedonisms of others online, which further encourages the FOMO experienced by the members of the group. This suggests the relationship between FOMO and the social media platform, which is the driving force behind the members of the Gen Z generation and their FOMO, further demonstrating the role of technological development in determining the behavior of social groups, as well as the influence of technological development and social media on the development of the vocabulary used by the members of social groups, as explained by research into digital discourse, which supports the idea that social environments facilitate the fixation of the use of vocabulary related to technology and the internet, particularly the use of the acronym of related terms (Khassanova et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This paper concludes that FOMO is a modern slang term that originated from the acronymization process of morphological formation. The FOMO term derives from the phrase Fear of Missing Out and involves the combination of the first letter of each part of the phrase into a new single-word term where the pronunciation of the single-word term indicates that it is actually an acronym.

The analysis further reveals that FOMO is a novel word that is independent and stable in modern English with a wide usage in online communication without having to reference the complementery form to be alone. FOMO is grammatically versatile in that it is mainly a noun but can be employed as an adjective in forms like FOMO behavioral patterns or FOMO-driven culture. This is true for slang terminology in modern English language.

In addition, the prevalence of FOMO reveals the significant role that digital culture has played in shaping language. This is attributed to the fact that the online environment fosters interactions that create new experiences that, in turn, demand the use of new language. FOMO exists because it answers these social and communicative needs. Therefore, this study confirms that morphological processes, especially acronymization, play an important role in the development of modern English slang and show how language adapts to changes in society and technology.

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