



# FOMO™

## The Surprising History of the Meme that Started it All

Presented by: FOMO by Patrick J. McGinnis™

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## CHAPTER 1

# A Brief History of FOMO

"FOMO (fear of missing out) is the enemy of valuing your own time."

—ANDREW YANG

The year was 2002, and I was a first-year student at Harvard Business School. Looking back, when I arrived in Boston to start classes, I considered myself to be a relatively high-functioning *Homo sapiens*. I had spent the last few years making decisions, important grown-up decisions, of the kind that had never been expected of me back in college. I had moved three times, worked at two companies, and invested in more than ten companies in my role as a venture capitalist. I'd learned to make some consequential decisions, both personally and professionally, and I'd managed to do so with surprisingly little drama. If you'd asked me at the time, I would have told you that I was getting pretty good at the whole *adulting* thing.

Admittedly, that was a simpler time, before anyone had ever heard of things like sexting or selfies. When I started business school, I had no

social media. Nobody did. Social networking was in its infancy, although that was just about to change: little did I know it, but Mark Zuckerberg was working on the first version of Facebook less than a mile from my student apartment. Still, even in the absence of Facebook, Twitter, and all of the social networks that help to power the FOMO phenomenon today, something happened to me the minute I stepped on campus: all of the sudden and without warning, I was consumed by a persistent anxiety that no matter where I was or what I was doing, something better was happening elsewhere. This was a clear product of my new habitat. For the first time in my life, I was immersed in an intensely choice-rich environment where almost anything seemed possible. At the same time, I could never even hope to scratch the surface of what was on offer. All I had to do was compare myself to my peers—most of whom were happy to tell me how much they had on their plates—to know that I could never keep up.

Let me explain. Life at HBS was what I imagine it would be like to live life *inside* of a social network. Every overstuffed day was like a real-world mashup of LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat, even though none of those companies existed at the time. You lived in a self-obsessed bubble where news traveled at the speed of lightning, so your conversations and your brags (humble or otherwise) served as a proxy social network, performing many of the same functions as a news feed, a witty Instagram story, or a snarky tweet. This environment cultivated a pervasive fear of being left out of the action going on around you, especially if it could end up being *bigger, better, and brighter* than what you were doing at the moment. Even if you didn't have a name for such feelings, and my classmates and I didn't yet have one, you constantly struggled with them.

I, perhaps, suffered more than my peers. In retrospect, I was a

natural candidate to become the world's first *FOMO sapiens*. I grew up in a small town in Maine, not unlike the kind of place you would find in a Stephen King novel. If you've never been to Maine, let me tell you a little about what people do there. They eat lobster. They take walks on the beach. They shovel snow. They go to L.L. Bean. It's a great place to grow up and to live, but it's not a particularly choice-rich environment. Life is relatively predictable—even comfortably so—and I was used to selecting from a sensible number of alternatives for most anything I could ever want or need.

All of that changed when I started life as an MBA candidate. Not only was I bombarded with choices, but I also felt quite sincerely that I shouldn't let this once-in-a-lifetime set of experiences pass me by. The way I saw it, if you weren't afraid of missing out, then you probably *were* missing out. To make sure I did not, I tried to do *everything*. On campus, I was ubiquitous. The only thing I didn't have a *fear of missing out* on was sleep. I participated in scores of clubs and attended an unending stream of social events, recruiting presentations, conferences, weekend trips, lectures, and, of course, classes. On weekdays, I dragged myself out of bed before 7:00 a.m. and collapsed well after midnight. Weekends were just as hectic. If you threw a rock at any event on campus, chances are that you would have hit me.

Given my desire to take part in essentially *everything*, my friends started to tease me that I'd probably show up at the opening of an envelope. They were right. I clearly suffered from a persistent anxiety that I would fail to take full advantage of anything happening around me, whether it was social, academic, or otherwise. In response, I told them to look in the mirror—they were no better. We were all so busy making sure that we wouldn't be left behind that we were spending a lot of time and energy on things that didn't actually reflect our true priorities.

Rather than doing things because they were going to make us happier or smarter, we instead did them because everybody else was doing them too. There was very little thought behind this behavior: when you say yes to everything, no deliberation is required.

Although my friends and I joked about it, the fear was very real. It was also so common in my life and in the lives of my peers that I decided to give it a name. As the frequent creator of my own slang and shorthand, I decided that this concept, this fear, deserved an acronym. I shortened “fear of missing out” to FOMO, introduced it into my vocabulary, and worked it into the shared lingo of my friend group. Just before graduation in May 2004, I wrote about my favorite new word in that now-fated article in the school newspaper. In a little over one thousand words, I skewered a campus culture that was permeated by FOMO.

While the piece became a hit on campus, my expectations for the acronym’s long-term prospects were limited. In fact, I had much higher hopes for another word I’d recently created—McGincident—that I wanted to become the default description of anything someone in my family did that was funny, clever, or memorable. Then, slowly and entirely unbeknownst to me, FOMO took on a life of its own. Over the next decade, the story of FOMO and its quest for global domination actually became a full-fledged McGincident!

## **How FOMO Took over the World**

Although I was completely unaware of what was happening at the time, I’ve now been able to piece together FOMO’s trajectory as it spread slowly but steadily beyond the confines of my friends and classmates to all corners of the earth. The term first became popular

with MBAs across the United States, who could easily relate to the concept and quickly adopted it into the common lingo that travels between schools. As *Businessweek* (now *Bloomberg Businessweek*) satirically reported in 2007:

An epidemic has hit America's top MBA programs. At Harvard Business School, it's called FOMO: fear of missing out. Symptoms include a chronic inability to turn down invitations to any party, dinner, or junket attended by anyone who might be a valuable addition to one's network—no matter the cost.<sup>1</sup>

The next year, in the *New York Times* bestseller *Ahead of the Curve: Two Years at Harvard Business School*, author Philip Delves Broughton, who graduated two years after me, wrote that:

The trick to HBS, the administration kept telling us, was not succumbing to FOMO. You had to choose exactly what you wanted to do and do it without fretting about what else was going on. I quelled my own FOMO by going to the library each day and reading the newspapers, trying to get my head as far away from the bubble as possible. But FOMO was a persistent stalker on campus, sowing poison in every mind.<sup>2</sup>

FOMO continued to gain traction on a growing number of campuses, and the newly graduated *FOMO sapiens* who spilled out into the world each May got jobs in industries like technology, consulting, and finance. When they arrived at their offices all over the country and the world, they brought FOMO with them and introduced it to a broader professional audience. At the same time, the proliferation of

social media, mobile internet penetration, and digital marketing helped to introduce FOMO into general popular culture.

But while technological advancements have been indispensable to spreading FOMO far and wide, I'm also reminded of an old saying that's a favorite of finance types: correlation does not imply causation. As you will see in the next chapter, FOMO existed long before smartphones were invented, and it would persist even if you restricted your collection of gadgets to a first-generation PalmPilot. Technology has now weaponized a set of emotions that have been part of humanity since the days of *Homo habilis*. The electronic devices that you carry around with you have added fuel to a fire that has been burning for millennia and then set it ablaze as never before.

In fact, in many ways, FOMO is a postmodern version of a classic idiom that has long been part of American culture. Way back in 1913, the comic strip *Keeping Up with the Joneses* made its debut in the pages of the *New York Globe*. The strip, which ran for decades, satirized the misadventures of a social climber named Aloysius and his family in their struggles to keep pace with the exploits of their neighbors the Joneses. If you read it, you'll find that it's a chronicle of analog FOMO at its finest, with the typical plotline centering on Aloysius's wife's efforts to get him to wear pink socks, a red necktie, and green spats, just like his frenemy Mr. Jones. While I too have been known to sport a red necktie from time to time, there's a far more remarkable coincidence that binds Aloysius and me. His full name was Aloysius P. McGinis. So, while we're separated by one "n," it's clear that Aloysius and I have a lot in common. He was the first McGin(n)is to have FOMO, but he certainly wasn't the last.

## FOMO, International Word Celebrity

Today, FOMO has permeated all strata of society. It's no longer a niche problem, but rather a mass-market affliction that can strike anyone. In recognition of this status, it was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2013 and then included in the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* three years later. As it's gone mass market, it's also gone global. By making headlines all over the world, it's become clear that FOMO is far from an American phenomenon. Over the past few years, Spain's *El País* ran a column chronicling the rise of "Generación 'fomo,'" <sup>3</sup> and *The Times of India* asked, "Is FOMO Making You Paranoid?" <sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, France's *Le Figaro* wondered if FOMO might just be the illness of the new century in "Le fomo, nouvelle maladie du siècle?" <sup>5</sup> while the Turkish newspaper *Daily Sabah* warned, "Hastalığın adı 'FOMO'! Siz de yakalanmış olabilirsiniz..." or "The name of the disease is 'FOMO'! You might get it..." <sup>6</sup> Yikes.

Today, a search for the term on Google yields over ten million results and #FOMO pops up hundreds of thousands of times on sites like Twitter and Instagram. It's also used widely across media, in advertisements, in bitmojis, and in countless daily conversations across the globe.



**Barack Obama** ✓

@BarackObama

No need for #FOMO. Enter now, for free, to meet the President:

<http://t.co/nTpkVz1oV>.

Jun 29, 2013 12:53 PM

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**Khloé** ✓

@khloekardashian

I'm having major FOMO! My entire family is in NYC but I couldn't go due to shooting Kocktails. I might have to hop on a flight after taping

Feb 11, 2016 3:49 AM

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**Backstreet Boys** ✓

@backstreetboys

How many days until we're cruising? #FOMO #BSBCRUISE2016

Oct 8, 2015 5:33 PM

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**Trevor Noah** ✓

@Trevornoah

Everyone is saying Fomo. What is Fomo? I need to know so I can join in. Please help me.

Nov 13, 2012 6:05 AM

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**Harley-Davidson** ✓

@harleydavidson

#SturgisOrBust! The 78th @SturgisRally has been nothing but rolling thunder in the #BlackHills. If you aren't here, get here. The #FOMO is real. #HarleyDavidson #FindYourFreedom

Aug 5, 2018

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**Tyra Banks** ✓

@tyrabanks

Today is the day! Register for #FierceUp now, or forever hold your #FOMO. @nyledimarco <http://bit.ly/29ZeOKx>

Jul 28, 2016

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Simply put, FOMO is now an international word celebrity, used by paupers, presidents, and Kardashians alike. Given its power, it now lies at the center of a global conspiracy to influence your decisions that is driven by influencers, brands, and even your fellow *FOMO sapiens*. Ironically, although the Kardashians of the world are very much part of this machine, they are also beholden to it, just like you and me. As you'll see in the next chapter, almost no one, except for a few resolute and impenetrable souls, can truly escape its grasp.