



The Use of FoMO in Social Media Marketing and Its Influence on Female Consumers

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) is used as a psychological lever in social media marketing and how it shapes the purchasing behavior of female consumers. As platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have grown more central to everyday life, marketers increasingly rely on urgency- and scarcity-based tactics—limited-time offers, countdown timers, influencer endorsements, and visible peer participation—to prompt rapid purchasing decisions. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 302 female respondents aged 18–35 through an online questionnaire distributed via WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability testing, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis in SPSS. Results show that exposure to FoMO-based marketing strategies is significantly and positively associated with feelings of FoMO ($r = 0.56, p < .001$), which in turn is strongly associated with impulsive consumer behavior ($r = 0.61, p < .001$). Regression analysis confirmed that FoMO fully mediates the relationship between marketing exposure and purchase behavior, meaning marketing exposure influences buying decisions primarily by activating emotional discomfort rather than through direct persuasion. All three hypotheses were supported. The findings extend Self-Determination Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model into the domain of digital consumer psychology and suggest that FoMO functions as a situationally induced emotional state rather than a fixed personality trait. The study concludes with implications for ethical marketing practice, consumer media literacy, and directions for future longitudinal and experimental research.

1. Introduction

Social media has evolved from a communication channel into a central space where identity construction, social interaction, and consumer activity intersect. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Snapchat are interactive, personalized, and socially visible, allowing users to continuously compare their lives with those of others (Ellison et al., 2007). This constant exposure to curated content has reshaped the psychological context in which consumer decisions are made.

One phenomenon central to this shift is the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)—a pervasive apprehension that others are having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, coupled with a desire to stay continuously connected (Przybylski et al., 2013). Although FoMO originated as a construct linked to social media use and well-being, it has become increasingly relevant to

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marketing and consumer behavior. The design of social media—real-time updates, visible engagement metrics, and algorithmically prioritized content—creates fertile ground for FoMO to flourish, and brands have strategically embedded it into campaigns through limited-time offers, flash sales, countdown timers, influencer endorsements, and scarcity cues (Mandas & Silfiyah, 2022). Unlike traditional advertising, which emphasizes product attributes, FoMO-based marketing appeals directly to emotion, often bypassing rational deliberation.

Female consumers are a particularly important group in this context. Women tend to engage more frequently with visually driven, interaction-heavy platforms and report higher levels of FoMO and social-media-related anxiety than men (Gul et al., 2022; Przybylski et al., 2013), which may heighten their emotional responsiveness to FoMO-inducing content. Despite growing interest in FoMO, its role as a mediating mechanism between marketing exposure and consumer behavior—specifically among female consumers—remains underexplored. Most existing work treats FoMO either as an outcome of social media use or a predictor of problematic behavior (Servidio et al., 2025), rather than as the psychological bridge connecting marketing stimuli to purchasing action. This gap motivates the present study.

1.1. Problem Statement

As FoMO-based strategies intensify, their psychological consequences—heightened anxiety, impulsive consumption, and post-purchase dissatisfaction—raise concern, particularly among young female consumers who are highly active on social media. Existing research often assumes a direct link between marketing exposure and purchasing, overlooking the emotional processes that intervene between stimulus and response, and rarely isolates how FoMO-driven marketing uniquely affects women.

1.2. Objectives and Research Questions

The study pursues three objectives: (1) to examine the impact of exposure to FoMO-based social media marketing on female consumers; (2) to investigate the relationship between FoMO and impulsive buying behavior among female consumers; and (3) to analyze the mediating role of FoMO between marketing exposure and purchase behavior. These translate into three research questions: RQ1 asks to what extent exposure to FoMO-based marketing influences feelings of FoMO; RQ2 asks how varying levels of FoMO affect impulsive buying; and RQ3 asks whether FoMO mediates the relationship between marketing exposure and purchase behavior.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Academically, the study contributes to digital consumer behavior literature by empirically validating FoMO as a mediating mechanism and by foregrounding gender as an analytic lens. Practically, it offers marketers and brand managers insight into the psychological pathways through which FoMO-based strategies operate, informing more ethical and sustainable practice. Societally, it speaks to growing concern about the psychological costs of digital marketing and the need for media literacy.

2. Literature Review

FoMO is broadly defined as the anxiety that others are living more rewarding lives than oneself (Przybylski et al., 2013); the term entered popular use through a 2014 Forbes article invoking the idea that "the grass is greener" elsewhere (Hedges, 2014). Since its establishment as a psychometric construct in the early 2010s, researchers have repeatedly linked FoMO to heightened social media engagement, emotional strain, and behaviors ranging from excessive use to impulsive buying (Servidio et al., 2025). Brands exploit this by framing delayed purchase as a lost opportunity, using influencer endorsements, limited-time discounts, and "selling out soon" messaging (Mandas & Silfiyah, 2022).

Przybylski et al.'s (2013) foundational work linked FoMO to Self-Determination Theory, arguing that FoMO emerges when basic psychological needs for connection, competence, and autonomy go unmet; social media offers a partial, ultimately unsatisfying, fix. Their study also produced the widely used FoMO scale and found that higher FoMO scores correlate with heavier social media use and lower life satisfaction, and that FoMO is somewhat more prevalent among younger users and women. Related work situates FoMO within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, showing that social media both creates and worsens FoMO by distorting perceptions of need fulfillment and encouraging upward comparison (Nesbit & Lole, 2025).

A separate strand of research debates whether FoMO is a stable trait or a fluctuating state. Maxwell et al. (2021), studying reactions to a major television event, found trait and state FoMO to be distinct constructs, with trait FoMO predicting behaviors such as staying current with a show. Rozgonjuk et al. (2020), surveying over 3,000 German respondents, found FoMO more common among younger people and strongly linked to Neuroticism, but reported no significant gender difference—an outcome that complicates, without negating, other findings of gendered susceptibility. Alfina et al. (2023) connect FoMO to bandwagon consumption, in which individuals feel compelled to participate in every emerging trend to "keep pace" with peers (Kang & Ma, 2019), while other work links FoMO to anxiety, loneliness, and problematic smartphone use, generally more pronounced among younger and, in several studies, female populations (Fitzgerald et al., 2022; Gul et al., 2022; Sultan Ibrahim et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2019).

FoMO is also closely tied to social envy. Lin et al. (2018) found that experiential purchases (e.g., travel) generate more envy on social media than material goods, because they feel more self-relevant to viewers. Applied research shows FoMO shaping consumer decisions directly: it drives Generation Z's masstige-apparel purchase motivation (Miguel & Bautista, 2020), strengthens future brand-engagement intentions after exposure to brand content (Rifkin et al., 2023), and mediates the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention among Indian consumers (Habib & Almamy, 2025). At the same time, FoMO is not uniformly harmful: Roberts and David (2019) found that social media use can strengthen relationship ties and trend awareness, with negative outcomes emerging mainly among users who are over-engaged. Mediating and moderating factors—brand credibility, boredom proneness, and anxious attachment—further shape how strongly FoMO translates into behavior (Holte & Ferraro, 2020).

Taken together, the literature establishes FoMO as a robust construct linking social media exposure to engagement, mental-health outcomes, and consumption—but it largely treats consumers as a homogenous group and rarely isolates the mediating pathway from marketing exposure to purchase behavior among female consumers specifically. This is the gap the present study addresses.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The study draws on four complementary theories to explain how FoMO-based marketing operates: Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), Social Comparison Theory (SCT), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

2.2. Self-Determination Theory

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) holds that humans are intrinsically motivated by three needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Marketers exploit these needs by manufacturing artificial urgency (undermining genuine autonomy), framing time-limited deals as rewarding "smart shopper" competence, and using belonging-based appeals that pressure consumers to keep pace with trends to preserve relatedness.

2.3. Uses and Gratifications Theory

UGT (Katz et al., 1973) reframes media users as active agents seeking to gratify needs for knowledge, entertainment, social interaction, identity, and escapism. Social media gratifies these needs but simultaneously exposes users to curated portrayals of others' lives, producing FoMO as a byproduct of otherwise voluntary, need-driven engagement—useful to marketers seeking to frame campaigns around trending hashtags and influencer content.

2.4. Social Comparison Theory

Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory proposes that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their circumstances to others, particularly through upward comparison with those perceived as more successful. Social media intensifies this process by continuously surfacing idealized, curated content, deepening feelings of inadequacy and exclusion. Because women tend to be more relationally oriented, this theory helps explain heightened female susceptibility to comparison-driven FoMO and subsequent impulsive buying.

2.5. Elaboration Likelihood Model

The ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) distinguishes a central, deliberative persuasion route from a peripheral route driven by superficial cues. FoMO-based marketing predominantly targets the peripheral route—leveraging urgency, scarcity, and social proof—bypassing careful evaluation and prompting immediate, emotionally driven purchase decisions.

Together, these four theories provide a layered explanation of FoMO's cognitive, emotional, motivational, and social dimensions, forming the conceptual basis for the hypotheses tested below.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, appropriate for drawing statistical inferences about measurable relationships among variables while maintaining objectivity (Creswell, 2014). A deductive approach was adopted: established frameworks (SDT, UGT, SCT, ELM) and prior findings were used to derive specific, testable hypotheses rather than to generate new theory.

3.2. Variables and Hypotheses

Three constructs were operationalized: Exposure to FoMO Marketing Strategies (independent variable) as encountering campaigns using scarcity cues and urgency framing; Fear of Missing Out (mediator) as anxiety or stress triggered by seeing

others acquire trending products; and Female Consumer Behavior (dependent variable) as FoMO-influenced purchasing decisions. Based on these constructs, three hypotheses were tested:

H₁: Exposure to FoMO-based social media marketing strategies significantly increases feelings of FoMO among female consumers.

H₂: Higher levels of FoMO are positively associated with impulsive buying behavior among female consumers.

H₃: FoMO mediates the relationship between exposure to social media marketing and female consumers' purchase behavior.

3.3. Population, Sampling, and Data Collection

The target population comprised women aged 18–35, selected because younger women are more active social media users and more susceptible to FoMO (Przybylski et al., 2013). A non-probability purposive sample of active female social media users was recruited via an online, self-administered questionnaire built on a five-point Likert scale, distributed through WhatsApp groups, Facebook communities, and Instagram to maximize reach among the target demographic. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with no incentives offered to minimize response bias; 302 valid responses were collected.

3.4. Data Analysis

Responses were coded numerically (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) and analyzed in SPSS using a three-stage approach: (1) descriptive analysis of general trends; (2) reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha) and Pearson correlation to confirm internal consistency and initial relationships; and (3) regression analysis to test the three hypotheses, including a mediation test for H₃.

4. Results

4.1. Sample Characteristics and Descriptive Findings

The sample was predominantly young and highly educated: most respondents fell in the 28–32 age range (with 10% aged 33–35), and 84% held undergraduate-level education. Social media immersion was high—45% reported 4–6 hours of daily use and 16% reported more than six hours—with Instagram (58%) and TikTok (21%) as the dominant platforms. Table 1 summarizes the key descriptive results.

Survey Item	Key Result	Interpretation
Age distribution	Majority 28–32 yrs; 10% aged 33–35	Sample skews toward young adult women
Education	84% undergraduate	Digitally literate, socially active population
Daily social media use	45% use 4–6 hrs/day; 16% use 6+ hrs/day	High social media immersion
Most-used platform	Instagram 58%; TikTok 21%	Visual platforms dominate exposure
Countdown timers	34% agree, 24% strongly agree	Over half regularly see urgency cues
Influencer posts urging quick buying	69% agree/strongly agree	Influencers are a major FoMO trigger
Anxiety over missing trends	69% moderate–high agreement	Strong emotional/psychological involvement
Unplanned purchases after ads	27% agree/strongly agree; 36% neutral	Moderate impulsive-buying tendency
Post-purchase regret	27% agree; 41% neutral	Regret present but less consciously noted

Across the questionnaire, respondents reported substantial exposure to FoMO-marketing cues: over half encountered countdown timers regularly, and 69% agreed or strongly agreed that influencer posts encourage impulsive purchases. On the FoMO (mediator) items, 69% reported moderate-to-high anxiety about missing trending products, and a majority expressed worry about missing promotions used by others. On the consumer-behavior items, results were more moderate: roughly a quarter to a third of respondents reported unplanned purchases, buying to avoid feeling left out, or post-purchase regret, with

substantial proportions remaining neutral—indicating that FoMO exposure translates into impulsive behavior for a meaningful but not universal share of respondents.

4.2. Reliability, Correlation, and Regression Analysis

The Exposure to FoMO Marketing scale showed excellent internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$), and the FoMO scale showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.70$). Pearson correlations confirmed the hypothesized pattern: Exposure to FoMO Marketing correlated moderately with FoMO ($r = 0.56$, $p < .001$) and with Consumer Behavior ($r = 0.39$, $p < .001$), while FoMO correlated strongly with Consumer Behavior ($r = 0.61$, $p < .001$).

Regression analysis testing H1 showed that exposure to FoMO-based marketing significantly predicted FoMO ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$), explaining approximately 31% of variance. Testing H2, FoMO significantly predicted consumer behavior, explaining approximately 37% of variance. When both exposure and FoMO were entered into a single regression model predicting consumer behavior, the direct effect of marketing exposure became statistically insignificant while FoMO remained a strong, significant predictor—indicating full mediation and supporting H3.

Table 2 summarizes the statistical results

Relationship	Statistic	Result
FoMO Marketing Exposure →FoMO	Pearson r	$r = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$ (moderate positive)
FoMO →Female Consumer Behavior	Pearson r	$r = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$ (strong positive)
FoMO Marketing Exposure →Consumer Behavior	Pearson r	$r = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$ (moderate positive)
Exposure to FoMO Marketing scale	Cronbach's α	0.81 (excellent reliability)
FoMO scale	Cronbach's α	0.70 (acceptable reliability)
H1: Exposure →FoMO	Regression β / R^2	$\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 \approx 0.31$ — supported
H2: FoMO →Consumer Behavior	Regression β / R^2	$R^2 \approx 0.37$ — supported
H3: FoMO as mediator	Mediation test	Full mediation confirmed — supported

In sum, all three hypotheses were supported: exposure to FoMO-based marketing significantly increases FoMO, FoMO significantly predicts impulsive buying behavior, and FoMO fully mediates the relationship between marketing exposure and female consumer behavior.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that FoMO-based marketing strategies do not influence female consumers' purchasing decisions directly; rather, their effect operates almost entirely through the emotional mechanism of FoMO. This pattern is consistent with Self-Determination Theory: marketing content implying that others are enjoying an exclusive experience appears to threaten consumers' sense of social belonging, triggering the anxiety captured by the FoMO measure. It is likewise consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model—female consumers in this sample appear to process FoMO cues through the peripheral route, responding to urgency and social proof rather than deliberative evaluation of product information, and with Uses and Gratifications Theory, insofar as purchasing appears partly aimed at resolving the emotional discomfort FoMO produces.

The strong correlation between FoMO and consumer behavior ($r = 0.61$) reinforces the view that FoMO functions as an active motivational force rather than a passive emotional state, echoing prior work linking emotional vulnerability to impulsive purchasing (Kang & Ma, 2019). The full-mediation result adds precision to this literature: it suggests that marketing exposure alone is a comparatively weak direct predictor of purchase behavior once FoMO is accounted for, meaning that campaigns succeed largely to the extent that they successfully induce the feeling of missing out, not merely by increasing message exposure. This reframes FoMO from an incidental byproduct of heavy social media use into a deliberately activated psychological lever within marketing communication.

The demographic profile of the sample—young, highly educated, heavy Instagram and TikTok users—also situates these findings within platforms whose visual, comparison-heavy formats are theorized to amplify Social Comparison Theory dynamics. That a meaningful minority, rather than a majority, reported unplanned purchases and regret suggests individual variation in

resistance to FoMO cues, consistent with prior work on moderating factors such as brand credibility, boredom proneness, and anxious attachment (Holte & Ferraro, 2020).

6. Practical and Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, the study strengthens the case for treating FoMO as a situationally induced state that can be externally triggered by marketing cues, rather than solely a stable personality trait, and demonstrates the value of integrating SDT, UGT, SCT, and ELM within a single explanatory model of digital consumer behavior. Practically, the results carry ethical implications: because FoMO-based tactics work by exploiting unmet psychological needs and comparison anxiety rather than by informing consumers, heavy reliance on them raises questions about long-term consumer trust and well-being. Marketers are encouraged to balance urgency-based persuasion with transparency, while policymakers and platform designers may consider limiting deceptive scarcity messaging, particularly where vulnerable audiences are concerned. Media literacy initiatives that help consumers recognize FoMO-inducing cues could mitigate downstream anxiety and impulsive spending.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that FoMO is not a peripheral or incidental outcome of social media use but a central psychological mechanism through which marketing strategies are translated into behavioral responses among female consumers. Exposure to FoMO-based marketing strategies—limited-time offers, scarcity cues, countdowns, and peer-comparison signals—significantly increases feelings of anxiety related to exclusion, and this emotional activation, rather than exposure itself, is what drives impulsive purchasing, heightened purchase intention, and reduced post-decision deliberation. All three hypotheses were supported, and FoMO was confirmed as a full mediator between marketing exposure and consumer behavior, challenging models of consumer decision-making that assume predominantly rational evaluation.

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