

Social Media Sharing, Fear of Missing Out, and Impulse Purchase: A Conceptual Study

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ABSTRACT

Given the popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok among consumers, FOMO (fear of missing out) is receiving increasing attention in academia. While research has extensively examined the relationship between FOMO and impulse purchase, how social media sharing can heighten FOMO and further lead to consumers' impulse purchase is still underexplored in marketing. In this research, we propose a conceptual framework to provide insights into what kind of content shared on social media drives FOMO, leading to increased impulse purchase among consumers. We also examine the type of product, the category of platform, the source, and the cultural background to which social media sharing is targeted. This research not only contributes to a growing body of research on the role of FOMO in digital marketing practice, but also offers several actionable recommendations to social media marketers on what to share, for what products, with whom, and on which platform to elicit FOMO and, in turn, drive impulse purchase among consumers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Given the popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok among consumers, FOMO (fear of missing out) is receiving increasing attention in academia (e.g., Japutra et al., 2025; Reer et al., 2019). FOMO refers to the fear or anxiety of being left out or missing out on exciting experiences or opportunities (Przybylski et al., 2013). Nowadays, social media sharing such as posting frequent updates about a vacation trip or sharing photos of a stylish handbag purchase can even exacerbate FOMO. This is because the information shared on social media increases the visibility of missed activities, and viewing such information can increase the likelihood of social comparisons, making people feel that others' experiences are better than their own and leading to FOMO (Bloemen & De Coninck, 2020; Burnell et al., 2019). The emergence of FOMO may in turn drive impulse purchase. Research shows that impulse purchases, or unplanned purchases without prior intention, are particularly prevalent in the context of social media, in which consumers are constantly exposed to various stimuli that can trigger impulsive purchasing decisions (Madhavaram & Laverie, 2004).

While research has extensively examined the relationship between FOMO and impulse purchase, showing that consumers who suffer from FOMO seek ways to mitigate the compulsive anxiety they are feeling and thus take prompt actions to participate in the same rewarding activities as others are experiencing (e.g., Doan & Lee, 2023; Good & Hyman, 2020; Hodgkinson 2019), how social media sharing can heighten FOMO and further lead to impulse purchase is still underexplored in marketing. In this research, we aim to provide insights into what kind of content shared on social media (scarcity cues of limited time or limited quantity, content cues of social proof) drives FOMO, leading to increased impulse purchase. We also examine the type of product (luxury vs. necessity, public vs. private), the category of platform (video-image-centric vs. text-centric social media platforms), the source (friends vs. strangers, advertisers vs. influencers), and the cultural background (collectivist vs. individualist) to which social media sharing is targeted. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this research.

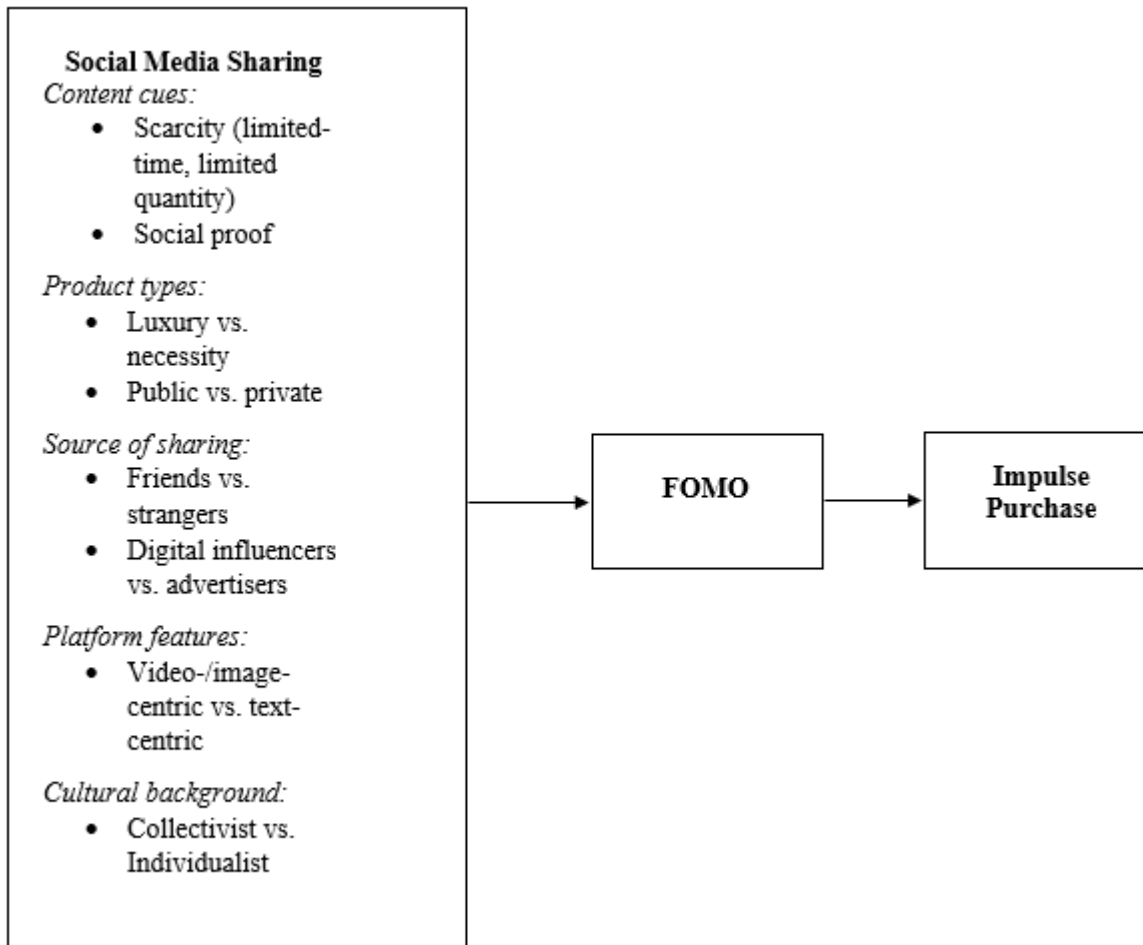


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

This research contributes to theory and practice in two ways. First, we contribute to a growing body of research on the role of FOMO in marketing practice. Although recent research has linked FOMO to impulse purchase (e.g., Doan & Lee, 2023; Good & Hyman, 2020; Hodgkinson 2019), to our knowledge, our study is the first to investigate how social media sharing drives consumers' impulse purchase through FOMO under various contextual factors. A better understanding of the antecedents of FOMO can help marketers enhance the effectiveness of FOMO as a purchase trigger. Second, we contribute to digital marketing literature by offering several actional recommendations to social media marketers on what to share, for what products, with whom, and on which platform to elicit FOMO and, in turn, increase impulse purchase among consumers. When designing social media content, marketers should tailor their content to their target consumers, exposing them to what they are most worried about missing. Moreover, social media marketers should carefully consider contextual factors such as content cues, product type, source of sharing, social media platform feature, and cultural background of the target market while adopting anxiety marketing strategies through FOMO to drive consumer purchases.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Content cues

According to commodity theory (Brock 1971; Lynn 1991), the value of a product or service depends on how accessible it is or how easily it is obtained. If a product is perceived as scarce, consumers may develop FOMO on the opportunity to acquire it (Cengiz & Şenel, 2024). Perceived scarcity can trigger FOMO among consumers by emphasizing the potential valuable opportunities that will be missed if they fail to act promptly (Doan & Lee, 2023).

We argue that social media content sharing with scarcity cues can create urgency and enhance consumer engagement by emphasizing limited product availability or time-sensitive offers. Literature shows that when consumers are exposed to scarcity cues such as messages indicating limited quantity or limited time of a product, they perceive the product as more superior or desirable, which can evoke a sense of diminished control and prompt a more anxious, urgency-driven response to acquire it (Aggarwal et al., 2011; Gupta & Gentry, 2019; Henkel et al., 2022). In other words, product scarcity cues compel consumers to make an immediate purchasing decision or risk missing out on a purchase opportunity (Shi et al., 2020). In

particular, when such messages are shared on social media, they heighten consumers' perception of scarcity. Research has also shown that impulse purchase can be induced by external stimuli and personal emotions (Huang & Cai, 2021), and because consumers' perceived scarcity of products leads to FOMO, their immediate purchase decision will be influenced (Cengiz & Şenel, 2024; Hodgkinson, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 1a: Social media sharing with content cues of limited time or limited quantity is more likely to drive FOMO than social media sharing without such content cues, in turn increasing impulse purchase.

Social influence refers to the process by which an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are shaped by interactions with others (Rashotte, 2007). Conformity behavior occurs as a result of social influence (Orak & Saritepeci, 2024). We argue that social media sharing with social proof content cues (e.g., "Join 50,000 others who've already registered for our yoga class!") is more likely to generate FOMO. Social proof means adopting the behaviors of others as a way to exhibit the correct or appropriate behavior in a specific situation, especially when people are uncertain about what decision to make (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

Social media sharing with social proof content cues such as other consumers' purchase transactions or positive product reviews creates a sense of social validation and urgency (Patwa et al., 2024), which leads people to feel that they should act quickly to avoid missing out on the valuable experience others have. For example, a friend's sharing of her recent purchase of a pair of fancy shoes on Facebook might make a person feel that the product is popular and valued by others, thereby increasing the chance the person will act quickly to purchase the product as well. Social media sharing with a social proof post can even trigger viral cycles. When a product gains popularity through social proof on social media, individuals feel compelled to quickly join in and mimic the actions of the growing majority, amplifying FOMO (Orak & Saritepeci, 2024). In addition, desiring to be part of communities or social groups is human nature (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Social proof reinforces the sense of belonging (Begho & Liu, 2024), thereby enhancing the appeal of products purchased by others and shared on social media. Consequently, if consumers do not engage in and follow the purchasing behaviors of others, they may feel excluded or left behind. Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 1b: Social media sharing with content cues of social proof is more likely to drive FOMO than social media sharing without such content cues, in turn increasing impulse purchase.

2.2 Product types

Products can be differentiated by their luxury and necessity status and by their degree of symbolism and functionality (Kang & Ma, 2020). Luxury products serve as status symbols, offering emotional or symbolic value beyond function, and research indicates that luxury products can enhance self-esteem and pleasure, convey identity, and signal wealth or social status to others (Han et al., 2010; Richins, 1994). Examples of luxury products are designer handbags, high-end watches, and luxury cars. In contrast, necessity products such as clothing and toothpaste, meet essential, functional needs and are usually low to moderately priced (Braun et al., 2016; Shukla & Purani, 2012). In general, consumers are driven to buy luxury items for psychological or social purposes, while necessity purchases are driven by practicality and affordability reasons.

We expect that luxury products are more likely to trigger FOMO than necessity products because of their association with exclusivity, social status, and emotional appeal. Unlike necessities, which are generally utilitarian and widely accessible, luxury products are often signaled as exclusive or high-status to consumers through marketing programs, leading them to regard these products as scarce and desirable (Dinh & Lee, 2024). This perceived scarcity and aspirational value can intensify the fear of being left out, thereby motivating consumers to perform actions to maintain or enhance their financial success and social status, which drives impulse purchase (Zhang et al., 2020). Moreover, luxury products are often purchased for their emotional and symbolic value rather than for merely meeting functional and practical needs (Tynan et al., 2010). This emotional attachment can make consumers more susceptible to FOMO and further stimulate them to consume products that represent their personal aspirations. Conversely, necessity products typically satisfy consumers' functional needs and do not possess the emotional or aspirational value that would evoke strong fear of exclusion or FOMO. Thus, luxury products are more effective at eliciting FOMO among consumers, leading to impulse purchases. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 2a: Social media sharing for luxury products is more likely to drive FOMO than social media sharing for necessity products, in turn increasing impulse purchase.

Observability of product consumption refers to the degree to which a product is publicly visible to others when it is consumed (Lascu & Zinkhan, 1999). Public products such as consumer electronics and cars are used or consumed in a public setting, where they are easily seen by others, while private products such as home appliances or personal care items are not. We argue that FOMO is more likely to be triggered by publicly than privately consumed products. This is because social comparison is enhanced when consumers see that others own something important or rewarding, especially when public products are shared on social media and thus are visible to others (Buunk & Gibbons, 2000; Orak & Saritepeci, 2024), which in turn promotes a stronger sense of urgency to acquire them. In contrast, private products are consumed in a less visible setting, so there is less social pressure or awareness to elicit FOMO. Moreover, compared with private products, public products such as fashion, travel, and entertainment often have a hedonic or experiential nature, which makes them more

emotionally engaging (Alba & Williams, 2013) and thus susceptible to FOMO, leading to impulsive purchase decisions. Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 2b: Social media sharing for public products is more likely to drive FOMO than social media sharing for private products, in turn increasing impulse purchase.

2.3 Source characteristics

Interpersonal closeness theory (Aron et al., 1991) proposes that individuals are more likely to be influenced by the opinions, experiences, and recommendations of those they perceive as close to them. This implies that close sources can influence consumers' decisions to purchase a product or service through FOMO (Dubois et al., 2016).

In particular, interpersonal closeness affects FOMO in two ways. First, people are more likely to compare themselves with friends or acquaintances in their social network than strangers (Good & Hyman, 2020). For example, when a friend shares photos of a vacation, party, or purchase, one may find them more personally relevant, which makes the shared posts more consequential to one's opinions and behaviors by amplifying the feeling of missing out. Furthermore, close sources can ultimately affect one's purchase decisions because consumers are more satisfied with product information provided by product adopters they know well (Aral, 2011). Second, interpersonal closeness theory also suggests that the closer people feel to others, the more they integrate their identities, goals, and experiences into their own sense of self (Aron et al., 1991). In other words, shared information from close sources elicits a shared identity, which promotes a strong desire to belong and maintain social connections in a social network; this, in turn, is likely to trigger a fear of being left out and subsequently prompt purchase behaviors (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Overall, compared with strangers, when friends are sharing their rewarding experiences, both social comparison with others and the desire for social belonging to a social group can be enhanced, which leads consumers to feel FOMO and the urge to participate in those experiences to avoid it. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 3a: Social media sharing from friends is more likely to drive FOMO than social media sharing from strangers, in turn increasing impulse purchase.

On social networking sites, consumers may receive endorsement posts to promote a brand's product or service from advertisers and digital influencers. Digital influencers are people who have a large following on their social media accounts (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Facebook) and thereby exert a significant influence on consumer purchasing decisions (Ki & Kim, 2019; Kostygina et al., 2020). We propose that digital influencers are more likely to trigger FOMO and further drive impulse purchases than advertisers. This is because digital influencers are usually perceived as more authentic, trustworthy, personal, and warmer than advertisers (Chang et al., 2020), and thus they are able to build close relationships with their followers, making them feel like they are part of a community. Influencers frequently endorse products they genuinely use and appreciate, fostering a sense of aspiration and belonging among their followers (Lee et al., 2022), who are motivated by a desire to emulate the influencer's lifestyle and avoid feeling excluded. That is, influencers can induce FOMO among consumers, triggering their immediate purchase actions.

Moreover, compared with advertisers, digital influencers are generally more knowledgeable and have a greater level of expertise in specific areas, such as travel, food, beauty, or fashion (Lou & Yuan, 2019). They are capable of showcasing products in a more natural and relatable way on social media than more formal advertisements. For example, a digital influencer may casually show a skincare product during their morning routine on a vlog. This subtle, relatable approach appears more genuine to consumers and makes them imagine that the product fits into their own lives without deliberation. It creates a sense of urgency and social validation that triggers FOMO among consumers, resulting in impulse purchase. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 3b: Social media sharing from digital influencers is more likely to drive FOMO than social media sharing from advertisers, in turn increasing impulse purchase.

2.4 Platform features

The features of social media platforms may have an impact on how social media sharing affects FOMO and, in turn, impulse purchase. Media richness theory suggests differences in the richness of information presented by different media (e.g., face-to-face, text, audio, video) and in the effects on individuals when being used (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Video- or image-centric social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat) reflect more colorful, intuitive, and visual/sound information and focus more on storytelling, creating highly emotional and engaging experiences for users than text-centric social media platforms (e.g., X, Tumblr, Reddit), which highlight ideas, opinions, and information exchange through words (Burnell et al., 2019; Marengo et al., 2018).

We argue that social media sharing on video- or image-centric social media platforms is more likely to trigger FOMO than that on text-centric social media platforms, which can lead to impulsive purchases. This is probably because the shared visual content on social media presents a more vividly engaging and often idealized portrayal of others' lives, which amplifies social comparison among consumers and creates a stronger, more immediate emotional reaction (Fox & Vendemia, 2016; Gorea, 2021; Meier et al., 2020). For example, seeing appealing videos of people enjoying trendy products or luxurious trips or eye-catching images of limited-time deals makes one feel more urgent to keep up with the trends than simply reading

about them on social media. As a result, compared with relatively slower and more rational information processing of words shared on text-centric social media platforms, the combination of emotional visuals and social proof shared on video-/image-centric social media platforms may lead to higher impulse purchases (Huang & Benyoucef, 2017; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 4: Social media sharing on video-/image-centric platforms is more likely to drive FOMO than social media sharing on text-centric platforms, in turn increasing impulse purchase.

2.5 Cultural background

Cultural background may also influence the relationship between social media sharing and FOMO. Collectivist cultures emphasize interdependence, with individuals being more affected by their social environment, which makes them more aware of what others are doing on social media. In contrast, individualist cultures value independence and autonomy, with individuals being less affected by their social surroundings especially when they are exposed to social media sharing by others (Kim & Markus, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Yin et al., 2019).

We propose that social media sharing is more likely to drive FOMO and, consequently, impulse purchases in collectivist than individualist cultures because of a stronger emphasis on social belonging. For example, when someone from a collectivist culture sees a friend engaging in an activity that they are not part of, they are more likely to feel excluded, nervous, uneasy, and fearful of missing out on some important information or meaningful experience, due to their greater sensitivity to social influence (Huguenel, 2017). Individuals in collectivist cultures such as Japan and China are more likely to be influenced by group norms and conformity (Hamamura, 2012), leading them to have a stronger sense of belonging to a social group and be more susceptible to FOMO, which is triggered by social media posts and endorsements. Conversely, in individualist cultures such as the United States and Canada, where personal autonomy and uniqueness are valued (Chirkov et al., 2003), social media sharing may have less of an impact on FOMO and impulse purchases among consumers. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 5: Social media sharing among consumers in collectivist cultures is more likely to drive FOMO than social media sharing among consumers in individualist cultures, in turn increasing impulse purchase.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research proposes a framework of important contextual factors such as content cues, product types, source characteristics, platform features, and cultural background that amplify the effect of social media sharing on the awareness of missing out on experiences (i.e., FOMO), which in turn fuels subsequent impulse purchase. Although previous research suggests that FOMO is likely to be strengthened by the proliferation of social media and the effect of FOMO on impulse purchase has been examined substantially (Doan & Lee, 2023; Good & Hyman, 2020; Hodgkinson, 2019), research that investigates when and how social media sharing may trigger FOMO to a greater extent, promoting impulse purchase among consumers, is lacking. As such, our research contributes to the literature on FOMO, social media, impulse purchase, and influencer marketing.

This study also provides several practical implications for digital marketing managers. First, marketers should concentrate on designing their campaign messages to include social proof (e.g., showcasing their purchases and sharing positive feedback) and scarcity cues (e.g., limited time offers) to create urgency linked to the fear of losing the trending products to influence consumers' unplanned purchase behaviors. Second, when developing social media marketing campaigns to leverage FOMO to promote impulse purchase, marketers should tailor their strategies to specific product types, certain platform features, and distinct cultural backgrounds of target consumers. For example, luxury brand managers should help their products stand out by highlighting the trendiness or prestige that customers can obtain when they own a particular product, which motivates customers to act quickly, reinforcing their FOMO on unique opportunities. Third, managers should ensure that their marketing and promotional efforts are effective by collaborating with digital influencers and taking advantage of social media users' friend-dominated social networks to drive impulse purchases through FOMO. Finally, understanding the triggers of impulse purchase is crucial for marketers to design effective strategies to potential consumers. By identifying conditions that drive spontaneous purchases and uncovering the underlying motivations, brands can create campaigns that successfully increase sales.

While this study provides an initial conceptual exploration into the relationships among social media sharing, FOMO, and impulse purchase, future research could substantively enrich the marketing literature. For example, we call for empirical research such as experimental studies or e-commerce live-streaming data to test our propositions to provide generalization on this topic. In addition, future research could investigate synergistic effects of contextual factors such as content cues on certain platforms for specific types of products on FOMO and impulse purchase. Moreover, while our study focuses mainly on the relationship between social media sharing and FOMO, some consumers may be more affected by FOMO than others and, thus, more likely to purchase impulsively. Thus, future research might examine individual characteristics (e.g., age, gender) that may moderate the relationship between FOMO and impulse purchase. We hope our study inspires more work on this topic.

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