



ENHANCING PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE ERA OF GLOBAL TRANSFORMATION

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The Influence of Social Comparison in Social Media on Impulsive Purchasing Decisions: The Role of FOMO and Self-Image

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Abstract: Social media, particularly visual platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, has become a primary arena for social interaction and consumption for Generation Z, fundamentally altering consumer behavior. Purchasing decisions are increasingly driven by digital stimuli. This research aims to analyze the underlying psychological mechanisms. This systematic literature review analyzes and synthesizes 9 journal articles to examine the central role of social comparison as a primary mediator between social media usage and purchasing decisions. The method employed is a descriptive narrative review. The findings indicate that the influence of social media on purchases operates through distinct psychological pathways. The first pathway is through Fear of Missing Out (FOMO); studies indicate that social comparison significantly and positively triggers FOMO, which subsequently drives impulsive purchasing behavior aimed at following trends. The second pathway is through self-image; Exposure to comparatively-heavy social media has been shown to negatively impact self-image, triggering impulsive buying (particularly fashion products) in an effort to achieve an ideal self-image. However, this review also identifies a critical gap: the influence of social comparison is often difficult to disentangle from economic variables. One study found that discounts are a stronger purchasing driver than social media exposure. Furthermore, the influence varies across platforms; Facebook demonstrates minimal impact, while Instagram is influenced by influencer appeal and TikTok by price factors. It is concluded that social comparison is a crucial mediator; however, future research must methodologically separate psychological drivers (social comparison) from economic drivers (discounts).

Keywords: Social Comparison, Purchase Decision, Social Media, Impulsive Buying.

Introduction

Technological advancements have fundamentally transformed the landscape of human interaction and economic activity. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube no longer function solely as communication tools but have evolved into dynamic and influential commercial ecosystems (Larasati & Siregar, 2025). For Generation Z, who coexist

with digital technology, these platforms have become an integral part of daily life, shaping how they perceive the world, themselves, and the products they consume. Business activities have adapted to this reality, establishing Social Media Marketing (SMM) as a primary strategy for reaching audiences.

Recent studies consistently demonstrate that Social Media Marketing (SMM) exerts a positive and significant influence on consumer purchasing decisions (Daeli et al., 2024). Influencer marketing, visually appealing content, and interactive advertisements have proven effective in guiding consumers through various decision-making stages—from attracting attention, fostering interest, encouraging search, triggering action, to facilitating sharing—known as the AISAS model. One of the most prominent outcomes of this influence is the rise of impulsive buying, defined as unplanned, spontaneous purchasing actions driven heavily by momentary emotional impulses.

Therefore, this literature review has several objectives. First, to synthesize existing evidence regarding the influence of social comparison on social media on purchasing decisions. Second, to analyze the role of psychological mediators, namely FOMO and self-image, in explaining this relationship. Third, to critically evaluate contradictions and gaps in the literature, particularly those related to confounding variables (such as discounts) and differences between platforms.

Literature Review

his review posits that the psychological mechanism underlying the phenomenon of impulsive buying is Social Comparison Theory. Social media, with its endless stream of curated lives, serves as a constant trigger for social comparison. Individuals spontaneously, and often unconsciously, evaluate their appearance, lifestyle, and achievements against the standards displayed online. This comparison process is hypothesized to trigger negative psychological states that are subsequently "resolved" through consumption .

Existing literature identifies two main mediating pathways. The first pathway is through Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), a form of social anxiety where individuals fear being left behind from trends or valuable experiences enjoyed by others (Hayu Ananta et al., 2025). Social comparison triggers FOMO, and FOMO drives individual purchasing to maintain relevance. The second pathway is through Self-Image. Constant comparison with often unrealistic standards on social media can damage self-image, thereby driving compensatory purchasing (e.g., fashion products) as an effort to repair self-perception.

However, this relationship is not straightforward. Some studies indicate that the influence of social media on impulsive buying may be insignificant, pointing to other factors such as price promotions or discounts as potentially stronger drivers (Adistia et al., 2025). This raises a critical question: do consumers purchase products because they are comparing themselves (psychological factor) or because they are offered discounts (economic factor).

Research Methods

The method employed in this research is a Descriptive Narrative Review. This approach focuses on the analysis and synthesis of data derived from nine selected scientific journal articles. This method does not merely summarize but also analyzes existing findings to construct arguments and identify research gaps. The analysis process was conducted through thematic content analysis of the extracted journals, which were classified and grouped based on key research variables and themes. These themes include the direct influence of social media on purchasing decisions, the role of psychological mediators such as FOMO and self-

image, and the role of contextual variables such as discounts and platform differences. Subsequently, a narrative synthesis was performed to build a coherent explanatory model by connecting partial findings from various studies.

Result and Discussion

The findings of this systematic literature review, based on nine journal articles, reveal that social media significantly shapes the purchasing behavior of Generation Z through two dominant psychological pathways. First, the review shows that exposure to curated digital content intensifies upward social comparison, which then activates Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). This mechanism consistently leads to impulsive buying, particularly when users attempt to stay aligned with fast-moving online trends. Second, heavy comparison-based content negatively affects users' self-image, motivating them to purchase fashion and lifestyle products as a self-improvement strategy. Platform-specific variations were also identified: Instagram's impact is driven mainly by influencer attractiveness, TikTok is influenced more strongly by price-related factors, and Facebook demonstrates minimal effect on purchasing decisions. A crucial gap across the studies is the difficulty in separating psychological influences from economic drivers. One study even found that discounts exert a stronger influence on purchasing decisions than social media exposure itself. These findings collectively suggest that while social comparison is a central mediator, its effect is not isolated and often overlaps with financial incentives, highlighting the need for clearer methodological distinctions in future research.

The results of this review illustrate that social media serves not merely as a communication tool but as a psychological environment that reshapes identity formation and consumption patterns among Generation Z. The prominence of FOMO demonstrates how social comparison on visual platforms can heighten social anxiety and create pressure to participate in trends, reinforcing the role of emotional urgency in impulsive buying. Simultaneously, the pathway through self-image suggests that purchasing behaviors often function as a form of self-regulation, where individuals seek to compensate for diminished self-perceptions triggered by idealized digital content. These mechanisms support classical social comparison theory while extending its relevance to algorithm-driven media environments. Nevertheless, the discovery that economic incentives such as discounts may overpower psychological triggers challenges the assumption that emotional drivers are always dominant. This indicates that consumer behavior in digital ecosystems results from the interaction between psychological and economic motivators rather than from a single causal factor. Furthermore, variations across platforms highlight that user experience and algorithmic design shape how strongly comparison processes influence consumers. Taken together, these insights point to the need for future studies to employ experimental or longitudinal methods to disentangle intertwined drivers, enabling a more precise understanding of how social comparison truly mediates digital purchasing behavior.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review concludes that social comparison serves as a pivotal psychological mechanism mediating the relationship between social media usage and impulsive purchasing decisions. The synthesis of existing studies confirms that this influence operates primarily through two distinct pathways: Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), where social comparison fosters anxiety regarding trending experiences, and Self-Image, where exposure to idealized online standards prompts compensatory consumption to repair negative self-

perception. Despite these findings, the review identifies a critical conflation in current scholarship between psychological drivers and economic incentives, particularly discounts, which often obscure the true impact of social comparison. Furthermore, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is not uniform but varies significantly across platforms, with Instagram driven by visual appeal and influencers, whereas TikTok is more sensitive to price and entertainment value. Consequently, future research must prioritize methodologically distinguishing between social comparison and economic variables to accurately determine the dominant drivers of Generation Z's consumer behavior .

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