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The Psychology of FOMO in Digital Marketing:

A Case Study of Shein

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the psychology of fear of missing out (FOMO) in digital marketing, focusing on the case of Shein and its influence on Generation Z women in Cyprus.

Drawing on Social Comparison Theory, the research examines how FOMO is experienced, the psychological processes that shape it, and the marketing strategies that trigger it. A qualitative approach was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with 13 participants aged 22 to 29. Data were analysed through thematic analysis, resulting in three key themes: FOMO as a socially constructed emotional experience, digital marketing as a trigger of FOMO, and consumer resistance to FoMO-inducing strategies.

The findings reveal that FOMO is shaped by social comparison, particularly through exposure to social media trends and influencers, leading to feelings of urgency, pressure, and, at times, inadequacy. Digital marketing tactics such as scarcity cues, countdown timers, and personalised notifications were found to intensify these responses and accelerate purchasing decisions. However, the study also identifies a significant level of consumer awareness and resistance, with participants critically evaluating and, in some cases, rejecting these strategies. The study contributes to existing literature by highlighting the dynamic interplay between emotional influence and consumer agency in FOMO-driven environments.

Keywords: FOMO, Digital Marketing, Social Comparison, Consumer Behaviour, Generation Z

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FOMO: Fear of Missing Out

SCT: Social Comparison Theory

SDT: Self-Determination Theory

PKM: Persuasion Knowledge Model

PRT: Psychological Reactance Theory

SM: Social Media

E-commerce: Electronic Commerce

Gen Z: Generation Z

1 Introduction

In today's digital age, online shopping has evolved from being a simple transaction into an emotional and immersive experience that is closely connected to the ways individuals interact within digital environments (Rose et al., 2012; Pantano & Gandini, 2017). The use of psychological triggers has become central in influencing consumer decision-making (Ladhari et al., 2019). One such trigger is the *Fear of Missing Out* (FOMO), which has emerged as a key psychological driver among young adults, influencing shopping motivation and impulsive purchasing decisions (Bläse et al., 2023; Tandon et al., 2021). FOMO is characterized as a form of worry or anxiety, which is often associated with negative outcomes (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013). Heavy use of social media has changed how people get information and do business. Consumers increasingly feel that they must stay connected all the time so they don't miss important updates, trends, or opportunities. (Rahmatullah, 2021).

The acronym FOMO, signifying fear of missing out, was first incorporated into the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013. In 2014, the esteemed magazine Forbes released an article titled "Do You Have FOMO: Fear of Missing Out?". The article portrayed FOMO as a contemporary interpretation of the adage "the grass is always greener on the other side," linking it to feelings of separation and unhappiness in individuals, exacerbated by social media, which serves as a catalyst for these emotions. (Hedges, 2014).

Despite significant advancements in research on the fear of missing out over the last decade, the majority of existing studies have primarily focused on FOMO in relation to social media usage and overall psychological well-being, rather than in commercial or e-commerce settings (Przybylski et al., 2013; Alt, 2015; Dhir et al., 2018). The literature connecting FOMO to consumer behavior mainly employs quantitative methodologies that identify correlations among FOMO, impulse purchasing, and purchase intention, often using survey-based designs and self-reported metrics (Kang et al., 2020; Harahap et al., 2023; Samsura & Rufaidah, 2025). Despite these studies confirm that FOMO affects purchase behavior, they provide limited understanding of how consumers personally perceive and interpret FOMO in relation to particular digital marketing strategies. Furthermore, previous studies often treat customers as a uniform entity, ignoring gendered experiences, generational gaps, or niche cultural marketplaces.

Despite the industry's strong dependence on urgency, scarcity, and social proof tactics, there is still a noticeable lack of study that targets at FOMO in fast-fashion e-commerce settings (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Time-limited promotions, real-time social proof indicators, daily flash deals, and algorithmically personalized notifications are some of the strategies used by ultra-fast-fashion brands like Shein. However, little empirical research has examined how consumers process these cues emotionally or how they influence decision-making beyond impulse purchases. Studies that already exist rarely focus on Generation Z women, a group that uses digital fashion platforms extensively and is especially vulnerable to issues of belonging and social comparison (Chetioui & Bouzidi, 2023; Hilton & Hatami, 2023). Furthermore, smaller environments like Cyprus are underrepresented in the literature due to the predominance of large-market samples.

By using a qualitative, consumer-centered methodology to investigate how Generation Z women in Cyprus experience and understand FOMO when exposed to Shein's digital marketing methods, this study fills in these theoretical, methodological, and population-level gaps. The study goes beyond correlational results by emphasizing participants' emotional reactions and perceptions of particular marketing cues, offering a better understanding of how FOMO functions in ultra-fast-fashion e-commerce environments. This study examines the experiences, interpretations, and emotional responses of Generation Z women in Cyprus regarding FOMO in relation to Shein's digital marketing strategies, focusing on the psychological mechanisms and marketing signals that influence their purchasing decisions.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Definition and conceptualizations of FOMO

The growing integration of social media into everyday life, combined with the overwhelming volume of information encountered online, has intensified users' exposure to social comparison (Appel et al., 2020; Verduyn et al., 2020). As individuals continuously engage with curated images and updates, they experience increased pressure

to remain connected and informed. This environment contributes to heightened concerns about missing important or socially relevant content, reinforcing FOMO-driven behaviors (Przybylski et al., 2013). FOMO has developed as a result of this circumstance, particularly among users of the post-1990s age (Wang et al. 2021). According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2020), FOMO is a type of worry that arises when people are unaware of enjoyable and thrilling experiences that their peers have shared on social media.

FOMO describes consumers' worry about missing opportunities or experiences enjoyed by others (Zhang et al., 2022). It can encourage purchasing behavior by heightening attention to what others are doing (Kang & Ma, 2020). In this way, FOMO shapes how consumers perceive social expectations, showing its role in strengthening subjective norms (Wirasukessa & Sanica, 2023). Individuals experiencing FOMO are often highly inclined to change their behavior in order to align with groups or social trends, reflecting a strong desire to stay within the mainstream and avoid standing out (Kang et al., 2019).

Consistent with this, Harahap et al. (2023) found that FOMO drives impulse buying, while Good and Hyman (2020) note that consumers with high levels of FOMO are eager to follow the latest trends and avoid being left behind. This fear often leads them to make spontaneous purchases in order to keep up with current trends.

2.2 Psychological & Theoretical background of FOMO

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which describes FOMO as a psychological reaction to unfulfilled basic demands for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, has served as the main foundation for research on FOMO (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Przybylski et al. (2013) expanded on this framework by conceptualizing FOMO as a motivational condition associated with greater digital involvement and decreased need fulfillment. This model has since been widely used in research on online behavior and social media use (Alt, 2015; Dhir et al., 2018). Although SDT does a good job of capturing the emotional roots of FOMO, its use has mostly stayed in non-commercial settings, providing little understanding of how intentional marketing tactics can trigger FOMO.

Social Comparison Theory, another prevalent viewpoint, contends that people assess themselves by comparing themselves to others, a process that is exacerbated in digital settings (Festinger, 1954). According to empirical research, exposure to idealized online

content raises feelings of jealousy, upward social comparison, and FOMO, all of which have an impact on attitudes and behaviors related to consumption (Appel et al., 2020; Verduyn et al., 2020).

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and other behavioral models have also been used to study FOMO, especially in studies that connect it to impulse buying and purchase intention. According to research using TPB, FOMO influences purchasing decisions, particularly for younger consumers, by reinforcing subjective norms and attitudes (Kang & Ma, 2020; Saavedra & Bautista, 2020). Nevertheless, TPB-based methods offer little interaction with the emotional and experiential aspects that are essential to FOMO, instead concentrating mostly on behavioral intention and logical assessment.

From the standpoint of marketing, Cialdini's concepts of influence and Scarcity Theory have been utilized to explain how exclusivity, limited availability, and urgency cause FOMO and hasten decision-making (Brock, 1968; Cialdini, 2008). Scarcity cues raise perceived value and encourage quicker purchases, according to empirical data (Lynn, 1987; Lim, 2016).

2.3 Consumer Behavior in e-commerce

Consumer behavior was previously analyzed within the framework of purchasing decision processes, emphasizing how people and groups select, purchase, and use products to fulfill needs and preferences (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016; Pakpahan, 2016). Initial models of consumer behavior highlighted rational decision-making shaped by individual attributes such as age, occupation, income, and lifestyle. These frameworks, however, were predominantly established before the extensive integration of digital technology and hence offer restricted understanding of emotionally motivated or socially impacted online consumption.

The rise of the Internet redirected study focus to online consumer behavior, investigating how digital environments transform purchasing processes. Using survey-based methods, Kim and Lennon (2008) carried out one of the first empirical research on online shopping behavior and discovered that the Internet significantly changed information search, product appraisal, and purchasing ease. According to their findings, e-commerce was the fastest-growing retail channel at the time, and online advertising was the main source of customer information. Although significant, this study only looked at early e-commerce

and ignored more recent advancements like social commerce, mobile purchasing, and algorithm-driven individualization.

By examining how customers are using online promotional tools more frequently, later research broadened this viewpoint. Using quantitative analysis, Kang et al. (2006) showed that customers actively gather digital discounts and promotional offers across several product categories, indicating an increasing reliance on online incentives. While this work helped to understand price sensitivity and deal-seeking behavior, it ignored the emotional and psychological motivators that later studies would emphasize and instead viewed customers as primarily rational actors responding to economic rewards.

Scholars started looking at social media platforms' impact throughout the whole consumer journey as they become more and more ingrained in daily life. According to Mangold and Faulds (2009), social media is a hybrid component of the promotion mix that influences consumer behavior from information searching to post-purchase assessment. Social media participation improves brand relationships, trust, and purchase intentions, according to empirical research by Ross et al. (2009) and Laroche et al. (2012), which mostly used surveys and structural equation modeling. These results imply that consumption is becoming less rational on an individual basis and more socially mediated.

By characterizing social media as Web 2.0-based platforms that enable user-generated content and interactive communication, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) further formalized this change. Their creative work demonstrated how social media may facilitate quick and economical connections between customers and brands. However, a large portion of this study concentrates on relational advantages and engagement outcomes, giving little consideration to the psychological strains that come with continuous connectedness, such as worry, comparison anxiety, and fear of exclusion.

Overall, everything that is currently known shows that consumer behavior has clearly evolved from rational, individualistic models to ones that are socially and digitally embedded. However, the majority of this corpus of study portrays online shoppers as information processors or relationship builders, with little attention paid to how emotional factors like FOMO affect decision-making.

2.4 FOMO and e-commerce

FOMO is becoming more widely acknowledged in research as a psychologically based phenomenon influenced by perceived social norms, social comparison, and the need to preserve social connections. According to Przybylski et al. (2013), who built on Self-Determination Theory, FOMO develops when basic psychological demands like autonomy, competence, and belonging are not adequately met. Their research, which used a cross-sectional survey design among young adults, showed that people who had unfulfilled needs were more likely to use digital platforms obsessively. Despite being fundamental, this study did not expand its theoretical framework to commercial or transactional situations and remained primarily placed within social media contexts.

Since online retail platforms increasingly resemble social media dynamics, more recent research has started to apply this psychological perspective to e-commerce. Using survey data from Generation Z consumers, Djafarova and Bowes (2021) discovered that digitally native users react strongly to peer-influenced purchasing settings and trend-based cues. Their findings imply that by incorporating social evaluation mechanisms into the shopping process, e-commerce platforms exacerbate FOMO. The temptation to follow trends and the urge to remain relevant in digital social groups are what drive Generation Z's impulse buying inclinations when they shop online, strengthening their emotional bond with these virtual social spaces (Chetioui & Bouzidi, 2023).

The connection between FOMO and impulsive internet shopping is further supported by empirical data. Using quantitative survey methodologies, Ghaniyah (2024) investigated consumer behavior during the Shopee Twin Date Event and discovered that FOMO greatly enhanced impulse purchase intentions. According to the study, societal expectations, perceived exclusivity, and time constraints are the main factors hastening purchasing decisions. Although these results demonstrate the efficacy of FOMO-based advertising, the study was restricted to a single campaign and used self-reported metrics, which raises questions regarding behavioral accuracy and generalizability.

2.5 FOMO in the Context of Consumer Behavior

Consumers affected by FOMO are more likely to engage with time-sensitive promotions, exclusive discounts, and limited-edition product launches due to their fear of missing out

on big opportunities (Kang et al., 2020). This signifies that FOMO substantially affects consumer behavior in the digital era, driving individuals to make purchases driven by FOMO over trends or experiences considered desired. Thus, the concept of FOMO has become crucial in marketing, as companies utilize strategies that emphasize urgency and exclusivity to apply psychological pressure on consumers to make immediate purchases (Joseph Cialdini, 2008).

FOMO significantly drives impulsive buying, compulsive spending, and hedonistic behavior, shaping the dynamics of modern consumerism. FOMO relates to an individual's tendency to engage, buy, and consume, influenced by social media interactions such as likes, comments, envy, or social competition. (Samsura, A. D. F., & Rufaidah, P., 2025). Due to the increasing use of social media, which fosters a consumptive and hedonistic lifestyle among individuals, the term FOMO in marketing is becoming more common (Alt, 2015).

According to research conducted by Emi Ulfi Yani and Rojuaniah (2023), marketing strategies that leverage FOMO can incite impulsive behavior, particularly among users who are active on platforms like Instagram and Facebook. This discovery is bolstered by earlier studies (Rizky et al., 2024), which revealed that product marketing on social media not only enhances product visibility but also fortifies brand engagement, thereby influencing the enhancement of consumer behavior.

Overall, the literature consistently identifies FOMO as a potent motivator of impulsive consumer behavior, especially in digitally mediated settings. There are still a number of obvious restrictions, though. The majority of research focuses on large consumer samples and uses cross-sectional, quantitative methods, which limits understanding of long-term behavioral outcomes and subjective consumer experiences. Furthermore, rather than being viewed as a well planned marketing tactic integrated into certain platforms or sectors, FOMO is frequently treated as a general psychological tendency.

2.6 Digital Marketing Strategies That Leverage FOMO

FOMO is a fundamental component of digital marketing, where organizations cultivate a sense of urgency and exclusivity to prompt quick consumer action, exemplified by limited specials or exclusive events. A component of the marketing strategy is promotion, which seeks to enhance the sales of goods or services (Zahara & Rombe, 2017). Companies can