

Viral Content: To Engage or Not to Engage? Understanding Why Consumers Experience FOMO

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Abstract: *Recently, the fear of missing out (FOMO) has emerged as one of the most prominent phenomena in consumer behaviour. FOMO has become pervasive today, especially about viral content in the food and beverage industry. Previous studies have identified various factors influencing FOMO across both marketing and non-marketing fields. Therefore, the objective of this conceptual paper is to explore the FOMO phenomenon and uncover the key factors influencing FOMO trends. This conceptual paper proposes five main factors that contribute to FOMO: the influence of social media, provoked feelings due to social media content, personality traits, purchasing behaviour, and the desire to gain experiences similar to others. Additionally, this paper presents a compatible theory and methodology to establish a robust foundation for studying these issues, namely, the Theory of Buyer Behaviour and Behavioural Decision Theory (BDT). Ultimately, this comprehensive discussion of FOMO from the antecedents that influence the consumers is anticipated to contribute valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge.*

Keywords: FOMO, Fear of Missing Out, Muslim Consumer, Viral Content

1. Introduction

Recent studies have thoroughly explored the influence of fear of missing out (FOMO) on both sellers and consumers in the consumption and marketing fields. Sellers strategically leverage FOMO to stimulate consumer buying behavior. This action prompts individuals susceptible to the anxiety of missing out to join the crowd. Recognizing the significance of FOMO is crucial for marketers, as it can be utilized in their tactics to establish a feeling of scarcity or exclusivity, ultimately shaping consumer behavior and influencing purchasing choices.

Back then, researchers revealed that FOMO substantially impacts purchasing decisions by acting as a powerful motivator that encourages consumers into impulsive buying behavior. The fear of being left out of a trend and the feeling of having an experience or exclusive opportunity stimulated individuals to make immediate and sometimes irrational decisions in the marketplace. Research classifies FOMO into two scopes: non-marketing and marketing (Good and Hyman, 2020). Most non-marketing studies treat FOMO as a personal trait, focusing on the negative psychological effects of social media. However, emerging marketing studies suggest that FOMO may also be context-specific or dispositional in consumers (Hayran, Anik, & Guerhan-Canli, 2020; Rifkin et al., 2019).

Within the marketing landscape, one of the most effective techniques that can trigger FOMO is hype or viral campaigns. These campaigns utilize exaggerated or sensational advertising to generate public interest and enthusiasm, particularly relevant within social media platforms. Companies in the food and beverage industry often create hype around new products, scarcity offers, or unique dining experiences, significantly influenced by platforms such as TikTok. The concise videos and images on these platforms enhance the creation of viral content that amplifies marketing hype.

This urgency and exclusivity, fostered by hype marketing, can trigger FOMO among consumers, who may fear missing out on exclusive experiences or trends. FOMO can trigger impulse buying, which can subsequently increase post-purchase regret (Celik, Eru, & Cop, 2019; Saleh, 2012). As a result, these consumers actively seek the bustling atmosphere surrounding their purchases. Understanding FOMO is crucial for consumers; it significantly affects their buying decisions by inducing a sense of urgency that leads to impulsive purchases (Musadik & Azmi, 2020). Consequently, when they recognize the influence of FOMO, consumers can strive to make more informed choices, avoiding decisions driven solely by fear of missing out. Therefore, this conceptual paper aims to explore the potential factors influencing why consumers experience FOMO in response to viral content in hype marketing, with a specific focus on the food and beverage industry.

2. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

The rise of communication through social media has led to significant emotional distress among the public. This trend has triggered spontaneous and scarcity buying and negative emotional well-being, as well as fear of missing out (Gupta and Sharma, 2021). In this context, the phenomenon of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) has become more prevalent in modern society. This is because of heightened consumption activities driven by greater exposure to media, especially social media platforms (Lu and Sinha, 2024) and consequences of panic buying (Anisimova et al., 2024). Being addicted to social media also leads to phubbing behaviour among mobile phone users. A previous study by Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas (2016) found that internet addiction and fear of missing out (FOMO) were significantly influenced by smartphone addiction, which leads to phubbing behaviour. Meanwhile, women have been shown to practice this phubbing behaviour more than men. Technically, women engaged in phubbing their companions more frequently than men. Therefore, it is possible to state that FOMO is more likely to occur among women than men. But this statement needs to be verified empirically.

Fundamentally, FOMO can be studied in two ways: in marketing and non-marketing fields. Usually, previous research focuses more on non-marketing areas like psychology (Przybylski et al., 2013), as stated in Table 1 below. In those particular studies, FOMO is seen as a personality trait that can have negative effects on a person's mental well-being (Dogan, 2019). On the other hand, when we look at FOMO in marketing, it seems to influence consumers to spend a lot of money on different things. This includes the following trends (Kang & Ma, 2020), showing off (Argan et al., 2022), and doing what everyone else is doing (Kang et al., 2019). From another marketing perspective, FOMO plays a main role to assist the marketer gain profit by capturing the potential consumer's attention through the FOMO marketing technique. Undeniably, FOMO happened by incorporating elements of psychology and external cues such as marketing techniques. Therefore, what exactly does FOMO refer to?

Table 1: Subject Area of the FOMO Study (2020–2025)

Subject Area	Numbers
Business, Management and Accounting	11 (26.2%)
Social Sciences	6 (14.3%)
Environmental Science	4 (9.5%)
Medicine	4 (9.5%)
Computer Science	3 (7.1%)
Economics, Econometrics and Finance	3 (7.1%)
Psychology	3 (7.1%)
Energy	2 (4.8%)
Multidisciplinary	2 (4.8%)
Decision Sciences	1 (2.4%)
Engineering	1 (2.4%)
Materials Science	1 (2.4%)
Nursing	1 (2.4%)

Sources: Scopus Elsevier 2025

Imagine that you have friends who share updates and photos from their exciting activities, such as parties, trips, and interesting events on social media. You may begin to believe that your own life fails to be as engaging or thrilling after seeing these posts. You fear that you are losing out on the enjoyment because everyone else seems to be having a fantastic time. The term FOMO, or fear of missing out, refers to this emotion. On social media, where people typically only post the best aspects of their lives, it occurs frequently. They may not depict the tedious or difficult moments. You may, therefore, assume that everyone else is constantly having a great time when you see these cheerful posts. Social media engagement was significantly related to FOMO, and the study by Barry and Wong (2020), found that the connections of loneliness and low self-esteem with FOMO were stronger for individuals who were more engaged with social media during daily activities.

FOMO is, to put it simply, the feeling that you are missing out on the excitement when you observe others appearing to be having a great time. On the other hand, there is a worry about missing information and online interactions. This frequently occurs as a result of how individuals portray their lives on social media, and it can generate stress as you attempt to stay up to date with what other people appear to be doing (Przybylski et al., 2013).

In addition, people with high levels of fear of missing out (FOMO) consistently feel a strong urge to sustain their social connections and stay informed about the activities of others (Beyens, Frison, & Eggemont, 2016). FOMO is linked to higher social media usage but is inversely related to social connection. Despite this, experiencing FOMO can be beneficial and unbeneficial, ultimately contributing to improved social connections (Roberts & David, 2019) and damage mental health. Moreover, FOMO also has the potential to trigger depression, lower psychological well-being, heighten anxiety symptoms, increase stress levels, impair quality of life, elevate the likelihood of developing psychopathological conditions, and foster technology dependency (O’Connell 2020).

Research in non-marketing areas has shown that FOMO has both a negative and positive impact on people's behaviour. For instance, a recent academic investigation into heightened mobile phone usage found that the anxiety associated with missing social activities or social media updates contributes to increased mobile phone usage among lonely college students. The higher the fear of missing out (FOMO), the greater the worry regarding losing control over

their mobile phones (Zheng et al., 2023). Subsequently, studies on how social media influences the study abroad experience and whether students studying abroad experience FOMO demonstrate a slight difference in findings. It was found that only a few students felt like they were missing out on events back home during their time abroad. These students admitted to using social media to showcase and provoke feelings of FOMO in their friends back home. The participants mentioned that they intentionally posted on social media to create a sense of FOMO in their friends (Hetz et al., 2015). Logically, this finding appears reliable, as it is known that individuals in privileged circumstances are less likely to experience FOMO.

On the other hand, FOMO was also examined in the context of workplace performance. A recent study found that nurses with higher levels of FOMO also felt they had more work to do (Hosgor et al., 2021) and FOMO can make employees spend more time on social media, which might lower their job performance and lead to burnout, ultimately affecting overall performance (Fridchay & Reizer, 2022). In contrast, when examining FOMO in the marketing arena, FOMO arguably has more influence on consumer spending behaviors as people do not want to miss out on experiences (Van Solt, 2019). Many consumers worry they will regret not participating in events, especially when these events involve close friends. For example, they might feel frustrated and regretful if they cannot join their friends at a party or go shopping. Consequently, they often make impulsive purchases due to FOMO. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that exposure to numerous captivating social media posts can intensify an individual's fear of missing out. The more one observes exciting opportunities and intriguing content on social platforms, the greater the likelihood of heightened concern about potentially missing out on such experiences (Roberts & David, 2019).

However, previous scholars highlight the limited number of studies that comprehensively analyze this FOMO phenomenon within the realm of marketing. FOMO is commonly associated with adverse psychological circumstances; however, upon examining FOMO within the marketing context, it becomes evident that it elicits a response that positively influences consumer behaviour. Thus, this conceptual study builds upon previous research by proposing several variables that may influence consumers' FOMO regarding viral content, particularly about food and beverage.

Table 2: Key Findings of Factors Influencing FOMO for Viral Content

Factors	Key Findings	Authors
Provoke Feelings	FOMO can create strong feelings of both good and bad envy. Good envy is when you admire what someone has and want to achieve something similar, while bad envy is when you feel angry or resentful. People may also expect to feel envious if they think they will miss out on fun experiences.	(Tandon et al., 2024)
Personality Traits	Tendency to imitation and coping others positively related to FOMO.	(Dinh & Lee, 2021)
	Individual often worries about being abandoned and who may struggle with personality traits tends to experience FOMO.	(Blackwell et al., 2017)
Buying Personality	Consumer who tends to experience FOMO more likely have impulsive buying behaviour	(Cengiz and Şenel, 2024)
Gain Experience	Hype situations lead to curiosity and excitement about joining the crowd or buying new things	(Saaksjaarvi & Hultink, 2017).

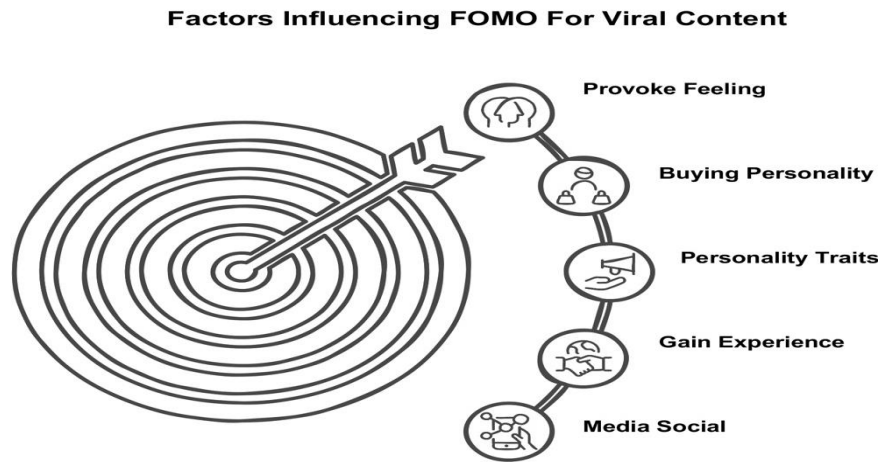


Figure 1: Factors Influencing FOMO for Viral Content
Sources: Author's creation

3. Viral Content

Viral marketing has emerged as a key strategy for marketers aiming to increase brand awareness and engagement, ultimately influencing consumers' purchasing decisions. Unlike traditional word-of-mouth marketing, which relies on slower personal interactions, viral marketing can rapidly spread information through the internet and mobile devices. Potential consumers are often influenced by viral content, relying heavily on testimonials and comments from other consumers. The current study indicates that a viral content strategy with credibility, informativeness, and usefulness attributes will help sellers connect with their potential audience, create brand awareness, enhance credibility, and foster customer loyalty (Singh et al., 2025).

One notable impact of viral content is its ability to shape brand preferences, particularly among younger audiences. Research indicates that viral marketing campaigns more effectively influence the brand choices of younger consumers compared to older participants (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). This demographic is typically more comfortable and engaged with social media platforms, making them more likely to encounter, share, and be persuaded by viral content. These campaigns often utilize eye-catching images, humor, and emotional appeals, which resonate strongly with younger audiences. Additionally, younger consumers are generally more open to trying new products and exploring different brands, contributing to their receptiveness to viral marketing messages (Ayuni & Purwanto, 2023).

Furthermore, the characteristics of viral content itself can influence consumer buying decisions based on individual personality traits. Marketers often design viral content rich in emotional appeals to capture consumer attention. For instance, a humorous commercial might evoke laughter, while an irresistible image of a delicious dish could attract viewers to try the product, ultimately leading to a positive association with the brand. Conversely, consumers with a heuristic and intuitive thinking trait are more easily influenced by viral content marketing. A study in investment behavior by Ahmad et al. (2024) reported that investors behave

unreasonably and make mistakes due to heuristic decision-making. This demonstrated that an individual with a heuristic personality can be easily influenced and make impulsive decisions. Hence, how does viral content influence the consumer and lead to FOMO?

The way consumers respond to viral content is closely tied to their personality traits. For instance, high self-monitors person who tend to manage their public image and adapt their behaviors to be well-received by others more susceptible to FOMO when engaging with viral content. In contrast, low self-monitors may not exhibit the same level of concern regarding social recognition (Lee & Hwang, 2020). Research shows that individuals with high levels of extraversion and openness to experience are more inclined to share viral advertisements (Kulkarni et al., 2019). These personality traits reflect a strong curiosity and a desire to explore new ideas, which drive them to share their discoveries and perspectives with others. Conversely, traits such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism do not exhibit the same positive correlation with sharing behaviors. Consequently, consumers with high levels of openness and extraversion may be more likely to experience FOMO concerning viral content. To deepen our understanding of this phenomenon, several key questions arise:

- Will consumers wait in long lines because of FOMO?
- How does viral content amplify the fear of missing out (FOMO)?
- What specific factors contribute to FOMO concerning viral content?

Addressing these questions in future research can shed more light on the dynamics of consumer behavior in the context of viral marketing and FOMO. Furthermore, another factor that traps the consumer within viral content is consumer personality and buying traits. Generation Z tends to be attracted to something more engaging. They are selective about the content they consume and prefer content that is more engaging and able to capture their attention (Singh et al., 2025). This is why viral marketing or content is easily influenced by this generation, which ultimately contributes to the FOMO feeling and behaviour.

4. Underpinning Theory and Model

The Theory of Buyer Behavior and Behavioral Decision Theory (BDT) are compatible for examining the factors that influence an individual's decision-making during purchase activities. The theory of buyer behavior, as proposed by Howard and Sheth (1969), explores diverse elements impacting consumer choices, including environmental, psychological, and social factors. Similarly, the psychological model of consumer behavior concern on internal factors such as motivation, perception, learning, and beliefs, which significantly influence purchasing decisions (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Meanwhile, the application of behavioural decision theory (BDT) by Edwards (1954), and Tversky and Kahneman (1974) is suitable to comprehend how consumers make a decision. This BDT explains that consumers will not always make rational decisions. Factors such as emotions, heuristic thinking, personality, the framing effect, and cognitive biases are among those that influence decision-making.

These frameworks provide valuable insights into the emotional and psychological dimensions of consumer decision-making. For instance, the emotional triggers associated with FOMO, such as anxiety about missing out on experiences others are having, can lead individuals to make impulsive purchases driven by a desire for social validation. When consumers perceive that a product or experience is exclusive or time-sensitive, their motivation to acquire it increases, demonstrating how these theories can help explain the urgency that FOMO instills in buyers. By employing these theoretical frameworks with these underpinning theories,

researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how FOMO influences purchasing behaviour and the complicated interplay of internal motivations and external pressures that consumers face.

5. Methodology

This study focuses on fear of missing out (FOMO), primarily observed among young adult millennials and the Z generation. The obtaining of the data is suitable for both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. To gain deeper and more comprehensive insights, qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups are recommended. These methods will allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' personal experiences and perceptions of FOMO about viral content. Interviews will be conducted with a sample size of approximately 15-20 participants, selected through non-probability sampling methods, specifically purposive sampling, to ensure participants have relevant experiences with FOMO and viral marketing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Focus groups will include 6-8 participants each, aiming for a diverse representation of the respondents' demographic to facilitate dynamic discussions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Alongside qualitative research, quantitative methods such as online surveys will be utilized to gather broader data on FOMO prevalence and its effects on consumer behaviour. The survey will target a larger sample of millennials and the Z generation, employing probability sampling to ensure more generalizable results (Babbie, 2020). Data analysis will involve thematic analysis for qualitative data to identify recurring patterns and themes, while survey data will be analysed using statistical methods such as SPSS and PLS to quantify the relationship between FOMO and consumer purchasing behavior.

Ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent and ensuring participant confidentiality, will be strictly adhered to throughout the research process. This comprehensive approach ensures a robust understanding of FOMO's impact on millennials, contributing valuable insights to the field of marketing.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this concept paper is to review the potential factors influencing FOMO related to viral content. Experiencing crowded situations, particularly when obtaining viral food or beverages, may stimulate FOMO among consumers, especially young individuals willing to endure long queues. According to previous studies' findings, this concept paper proposes five elements that have the potential to influence and stimulate FOMO on viral content. Those five elements include: provoke feelings, personality traits, buying personality, gain experience, and social media. Hence, these internal and external variables have an opportunity to be tested in the FOMO study in the future.

Conversely, social media is the primary platform that encourages feelings of FOMO, especially concerning viral content related to food and beverages, or vice versa. Those who see others participating in new experiences may feel provoked and unwilling to be left behind, leading them to crave similar recognition through their posts. Additionally, consumer personality traits can influence their tendency to experience FOMO, especially regarding items or experiences that attract their interest. The fear of missing out on such opportunities can create feelings of unease and anxiety. Typically, individuals may experience the feeling of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) when confronted with situations related to their desires or interests. While not

everyone is influenced by viral content-induced FOMO, the underlying sensation of FOMO remains present within them. Experiencing and feeling FOMO does not necessarily indicate negative behaviors. However, losing control in managing these FOMO feelings is a matter that requires careful attention. This is parallel to the concept of heuristic thinking in the behavioural decision theory (BDT) by Edwards (1954), and Tversky and Kahneman (1974). Heuristic thinking and personality often operate in the absence of thorough consideration. These thoughts are influenced by previous experiences, social cues, and contextual factors, significantly impacting consumer choices across various purchasing contexts. The internal stimulating factors of FOMO identified in this study, namely, provocative feelings, personality traits, purchasing tendencies, and prior experiences, clearly demonstrate that the human brain is highly susceptible to influence and can be significantly affected when not properly regulated. This suggests that FOMO is more likely to occur as a result of uncontrolled human desires. The main question that needs to be explored is, if we experience FOMO towards something we can afford or also towards something beyond our means, should we indulge in that FOMO? This is something we need to explore in-depth to understand the situations in which FOMO can be indulged, particularly from a religious perspective.

On the other hand, FOMO not only occurs in the context of viral content in marketing, but it also exists in the spread of viral gossip. Viral gossip, such as scandals and marriage relationships, can also create FOMO among the public. How many social media users wake up during the night to get updates about gossip and feel distressed when the new updates do not match their expectations? How does this kind of FOMO affect their personal life? This is something new that should be explored in the FOMO study.

Ultimately, the fear of missing out (FOMO) indirectly influences everyone with different means of interests. However, the intensity of this feeling varies significantly among them. Several factors are expected to drive this behavior, highlighting the need for further study to validate these expectations. Hence, being affected by FOMO is not inherently negative. This feeling is normal and can happen to anyone. However, as consumers, we need to know how to control it. If FOMO brings detrimental effects to our health, particularly physical and mental, then it is not appropriate. Consumers must be aware of the adverse consequences of experiencing excessive FOMO.

Therefore, future research could explore the relationship between FOMO and various consumer topics in both marketing and non-marketing contexts. Consequently, these assertions require verification through diverse research methodologies across various settings.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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