

Factors Influencing Self-Expressive Consumption Behavior on Social Media among Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies the factors influencing self-expressive consumption behavior on social media among Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City and clarifies the mediating roles of fear of missing out and status anxiety. A mixed-method design was employed. The qualitative phase comprised interviews with five experts and a focus-group discussion with ten Generation Z social media users to refine the model, item wording, and content validity of the scales. In the quantitative phase, 333 responses were collected; after screening, 282 valid questionnaires from respondents aged 18-25 who lived, studied, or worked in Ho Chi Minh City were analyzed using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 3 with 10000 bootstrap subsamples. Seven of the ten direct hypotheses were supported. Social comparison and materialism increased both fear of missing out and status anxiety. Self-esteem reduced status anxiety but had no significant effect on fear of missing out. Interaction with social media influencers did not significantly affect either mediator. Fear of missing out and status anxiety both increased self-expressive consumption behavior, with fear of missing out producing the stronger effect. Five of the eight specific indirect effects were significant, indicating partial support for the proposed mediating roles. The study provides empirical evidence on the psychological and social mechanisms underlying self-expressive consumption and recommends that firms employ authentic and transparent communication while avoiding excessive exploitation of social-comparison pressure and perceived deficiency among young consumers.

Keywords: *Fear of missing out, Generation Z, Materialism, Self-expressive consumption behavior, Social comparison, Social media, Status anxiety.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has evolved from a communication channel into a space in which individuals observe others, present their identities, and seek social recognition. On TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, products, brands, and experiences frequently operate as signals of lifestyle, taste, and social position. Consumption in digital environments may therefore serve not only functional needs but also the construction of a story about the self. In this study, self-expressive consumption behavior on social media refers to selecting, owning, using, or sharing products and services to convey a desired identity to an online audience. This view is consistent with possessions as extensions of the self (Belk, 1988) and with the role of self-expressive brands in social media settings (Wallace, Torres, Augusto, & Stefurn, 2021).

Generation Z is particularly relevant to this mechanism because social media is deeply embedded in its information acquisition, reference-group formation, and social relationships. Content produced by peers, communities, and social media influencers continuously demonstrates what is desirable, fashionable, or associated with success. Nevertheless, high exposure does not produce identical responses. The same post may be entertainment to one user but may cause another to feel excluded, lower in status, or motivated to acquire a product that narrows a

perceived gap. A complete explanation must therefore examine social stimuli, personal orientations, internal psychological states, and behavioral responses together.

Prior research has established separate relationships between influencers and purchasing behavior (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Saima & Khan, 2020) social comparison and self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954; Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014) materialism and status-oriented consumption (Nguyen, Truong, Tan, Dang, & Ngoc, 2025; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Souiden, Ladhari, & Amri, 2021) and fear of missing out (FoMO) and purchase likelihood or conspicuous consumption (Good & Hyman, 2020; Yilmazdoğan, Özhasar, & Kılıç, 2021). Recent evidence further suggests that FoMO can transmit the effects of social media and materialism to consumption (Akram, Fülöp, Täng, & Raza, 2023; Dinh & Lee, 2024). However, research has rarely tested two distinct psychological mechanisms in the same model: fear of missing experiences or trends and anxiety about relative social standing.

Although previous studies have examined the effects of social media influencers, social comparison, materialism, and fear of missing out on consumer behavior, three important theoretical gaps remain. First, prior research has predominantly examined these factors in relation to purchase intention or conspicuous consumption, whereas considerably less attention has been devoted to self-expressive consumption behavior, which represents a more identity-oriented form of consumption in digital environments. Second, existing studies have typically investigated fear of missing out or status anxiety independently, despite growing evidence suggesting that these constructs capture two conceptually distinct psychological responses to social media exposure. Fear of missing out reflects concerns about missing rewarding experiences, whereas status anxiety reflects concerns regarding one's relative social standing. Examining these two mechanisms simultaneously may therefore provide a more comprehensive explanation of self-expressive consumption. Third, although the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework proposes that external stimuli influence behavior through internal psychological processes, limited empirical research has examined how multiple psychological mechanisms jointly transmit the effects of social media environments to identity-related consumption behavior.

Accordingly, this study develops an integrated SOR model that investigates how interaction with social media influencers, social comparison, self-esteem, and materialism shape self-expressive consumption behavior through the parallel mediating roles of fear of missing out and status anxiety.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Interaction with Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers create content, maintain follower communities, and shape perceptions of products and lifestyles. Interaction extends beyond likes, comments, and shares to include attention, active information seeking, and time spent following content. Repeated engagement may create perceived intimacy and parasocial relationships, making creators salient reference sources (Lou, 2022; Zheng, Men, Yang, & Gong, 2020). When influencers repeatedly present new experiences or trending products, followers may believe that they are missing opportunities to participate. Influencer-marketing research also suggests that FoMO can connect influencer content with purchasing decisions (Dinh & Lee, 2022; Mahmud, Heryanto, Muzaki, & Mustikasari, 2023).

Influencers' depictions of success, lifestyle, and purchasing power can also function as status signals. A perceived discrepancy between the follower and an online role model may increase concern about social evaluation. Kim, Park, and Kim (2023) demonstrated the relevance of influencer status to follower responses, while Wright, Rick, and Kotabe (2021) showed that social media may trigger status anxiety and compensatory spending.

H_{1a}: Proposes that interaction with social media influencers positively affects FoMO

H_{1b}: proposes that interaction with social media influencers positively affects status anxiety.

2.2. Social Comparison

Social comparison theory states that individuals evaluate their abilities and positions by comparing themselves with others, particularly when objective standards are unavailable (Festinger, 1954). Social media intensifies this process by exposing users to curated portrayals of achievement, appearance, relationships, and consumption. Upward comparison may be motivating, but it also makes the discrepancy between the current and desired self more salient.

Ozimek and Bierhoff (2020) linked Facebook-based comparison to self-evaluation, while Ling, Gao, Jiang, Fu, and Zhang (2023) connected upward comparison with materialism and compulsive online buying.

When users perceive that others enjoy desirable experiences or adopt trends sooner, they may feel excluded from the shared stream of events, thereby increasing FoMO. Repeated comparison of achievements and possessions can simultaneously create concern about failing to meet standards of success or occupying a lower position. From the SOR perspective, social comparison functions as an external social stimulus because it provides continuous information regarding other individuals' achievements, lifestyles, and possessions. These comparisons do not directly trigger consumption behavior; rather, they are cognitively and emotionally interpreted through internal psychological states such as fear of missing out and status anxiety before influencing behavioral responses.

H_{2a}: Proposes that social comparison positively affects FoMO.

H_{2b}: Proposes that social comparison positively affects status anxiety.

2.3. Self-Esteem

Self-esteem reflects an individual's overall evaluation of personal worth and qualities (Rosenberg, 1965). The sociometer hypothesis describes self-esteem as an internal monitor of social inclusion (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Individuals with stable self-esteem tend to rely less on external evaluation and are better able to maintain a positive self-view when exposed to unfavorable standards. The meta-analysis by Saiphoo, Halevi, and Vahedi (2020) indicates that the relationship between social networking use and self-esteem must be understood in light of usage patterns and individual differences.

Higher self-esteem may reduce the need to monitor others continuously and lessen the threat associated with failing to match symbolic standards online. Servidio (2023) further indicates that self-esteem can participate in mechanisms involving FoMO. Its protective role may be especially relevant to status anxiety because people with positive self-evaluations have less need to use relative rank or possessions as confirmation of worth.

H_{3a}: Proposes that self-esteem negatively affects FoMO.

H_{3b}: Proposes that self-esteem negatively affects status anxiety.

2.4. Materialism

Materialism is a value orientation in which acquisition and possessions are treated as central goals, indicators of success, and sources of happiness (Richins & Dawson, 1992). When personal worth becomes associated with products or brands, others' consumption is more likely to be interpreted as evidence of what one lacks. Compensatory-consumption theory similarly suggests that discrepancies between the actual and desired self can motivate consumption intended to restore control or status (Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2017).

Social media presents a continually changing display of products, experiences, and trends. Highly materialistic users may fear missing the opportunity to possess an object receiving collective attention and may also become more sensitive to how others evaluate their status. Akram et al. (2023) identified FoMO as relevant to conspicuous consumption among Generation Z, while Gasiorowska, Folwarczny, and Otterbring (2022) linked materialistic values to status signaling.

H_{4a}: Proposes that materialism positively affects FoMO

H_{4b}: Proposes that materialism positively affects status anxiety.

2.5. FoMO and Self-Expressive Consumption Behavior

FoMO is the apprehension that others may be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, accompanied by a desire to remain connected with ongoing events (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013). In consumption settings, FoMO increases attention to trending products, limited editions, and widely shared content. Good and Hyman (2020) reported that FoMO can increase purchase likelihood, and Yilmazdoğan et al. (2021) connected it with conspicuous consumption among Generation Z. When buying or sharing a product demonstrates participation in a trend, FoMO may become self-expressive behavior.

H₅: Proposes that FoMO positively affects self-expressive consumption behavior.

2.6. Status Anxiety and Self-Expressive Consumption Behavior

Status anxiety is insecurity about one's relative social position and the possibility of being evaluated as inferior. Products and brands can be used as signals of success, access, and belonging. Talwar, Kaur, Fosso Wamba, and Dhir (2022) linked status anxiety to willingness to use social commerce, whereas Wright et al. (2021) described compensatory spending as a response to status pressure on social media. Because self-expression enables people to manage their online image deliberately.

H₆: Proposes that status anxiety positively affects self-expressive consumption behavior.

2.7. Mediating Roles of FoMO and Status Anxiety

The research model follows a Stimulus-Organism-Response logic: Social factors and personal orientations constitute antecedents, FoMO and status anxiety represent internal states, and self-expressive consumption is the response. This logic explains why similar exposure can lead to different behaviors: A stimulus produces a response only when it is interpreted as exclusion, deficiency, or a threat to social standing. Studies of influencers, FoMO, and materialism likewise suggest mediated rather than exclusively direct mechanisms (Dinh & Lee, 2024; Tsering, Chandran, & Nair, 2024). FoMO is expected to transmit the effects of influencer interaction, social comparison, self-esteem, and materialism to self-expressive consumption. Similarly, status anxiety may transform signals of achievement, possessions, and social judgment into a motivation to present the self through consumption.

H_{7a}: Proposes that FoMO mediates the relationships between the antecedents and self-expressive consumption behavior.

H_{7b}: Proposes that status anxiety mediates the relationships between the antecedents and self-expressive consumption behavior.

The proposed Research Model is presented in Figure 1.

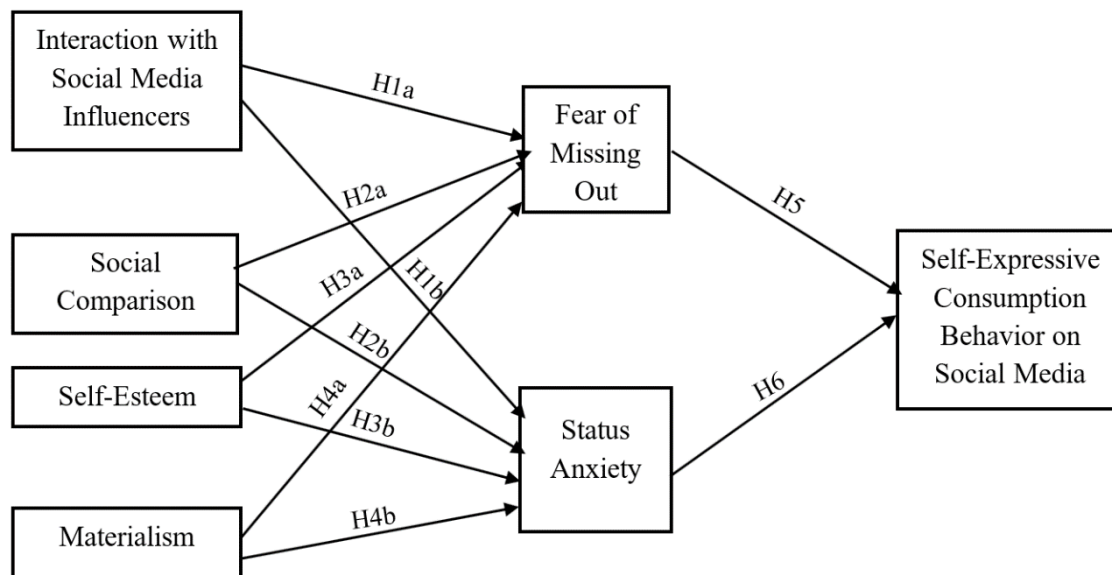


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Measurement Scales

The scales were adapted from prior studies and contextualized for Generation Z social media users in Ho Chi Minh City. INT was adapted from Vivek, Beatty, Dalela, and Morgan (2014) SCO from Ozimek and Bierhoff (2020) EST from Rosenberg (1965) MAT from Richins and Dawson (1992) FOM from Przybylski et al. (2013) SAN from Talwar et al. (2022) and SEC from Chaudhuri, Mazumdar, and Ghoshal (2011). All items used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree.

Before the main survey, the researchers reviewed relevant literature, interviewed five experts in marketing, communication, psychology, and consumer behavior, and conducted a focus-group discussion with ten Generation Z social media users. The qualitative phase assessed model relevance, clarified terminology, removed redundancy, and adjusted wording to actual user experiences. Its results refined the questionnaire and informed the interpretation of the quantitative results; they did not substitute for statistical hypothesis testing. The measurement items and their original sources are summarized in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Measurement scales.

Construct	Code	Original Scale Item	Source
Interaction with Social Media Influencers (INT)	INT1	I actively seek information about new activities and content from the social media influencers I follow.	Vivek et al. (2014)
	INT2	I pay close attention to the messages and products shared by the social media influencers I follow.	
	INT3	I regularly spend time viewing posts or videos by the social media influencers I am interested in.	
	INT4	Keeping up with information about social media influencers is part of my daily information-consumption routine.	
Social Comparison (SCO)	SCO1	I often compare my achievements with those shared by others on social media.	Ozimek and Bierhoff (2020)
	SCO2	I often compare my life with the lives of people on social media whom I consider more successful or better off than I am.	
	SCO3	When viewing online posts, I tend to evaluate my abilities by comparing them with those of others.	
	SCO4	I often pay attention to how others portray their success on social media in order to compare myself with them.	
Self-Esteem (EST)	EST1	Overall, I am satisfied with myself.	Rosenberg (1965)
	EST2	I feel that I possess many good qualities and am worthy of respect, just like other people.	
	EST3	I consistently maintain a positive attitude toward myself.	
	EST4	I feel that I am a useful person.	
Materialism (MAT)	MAT1	I enjoy owning things that help me impress others.	Richins and Dawson (1992)
	MAT2	I feel that my life would be more fulfilling and happier if I owned more possessions or the things I desire.	
	MAT3	The acquisition and ownership of material possessions hold a very important place among my life goals.	
	MAT4	I tend to evaluate other people's level of success based on the possessions they own.	
Fear of Missing Out (FOM)	FOM1	I feel anxious when I learn that my friends or other people around me are having enjoyable experiences without me.	Przybylski et al. (2013)
	FOM2	I feel upset or restless when I miss an opportunity to participate in group activities with those around me.	
	FOM3	I feel anxious when I do not understand the conversations, topics, or shared experiences that people around me are discussing.	
	FOM4	I fear that the people around me have more exciting and fulfilling lives than I do.	
Status Anxiety (SAN)	SAN1	I feel pressured to maintain a lifestyle or personal image comparable to those of the people around me.	Talwar et al. (2022)
	SAN2	I worry that others will judge my abilities or lifestyle negatively.	

	SAN3	I fear that I will feel inadequate if I fail to meet society's standards of success.	
	SAN4	I often feel insecure when I think about falling behind or having a lower social status than my friends.	
Self-Expressive Consumption Behavior on Social Media (SEC)	SEC1	I tend to choose products or brands that help me clearly express my personal style and individuality on social media.	Chaudhuri et al. (2011)
	SEC2	It is very important to me to own items that help me create and affirm a distinctive personal image on social media.	
	SEC3	I enjoy sharing the products or services I use on social media to communicate a message about myself to those around me.	
	SEC4	When posting consumption-related content on social media, I consider whether the item genuinely reflects the identity I want to project online.	

3.2. Data Collection

Eligible respondents were Generation Z members aged 18-25 who lived, studied, or worked in Ho Chi Minh City, used social media regularly, and had experience selecting, purchasing, using, or sharing products for self-expression. Non-probability sampling combined convenience and snowball approaches. The online questionnaire was distributed through student groups, personal networks, and online communities between March and July 2026. Of 333 initial responses, 51 were excluded because they failed age or location criteria, were incomplete, duplicated, completed implausibly quickly, internally inconsistent, or exhibited insufficient response variation. The final sample contained 282 valid responses, an 84.7% retention rate. Women represented 70.2% of the sample, respondents aged 20-22 accounted for 68.1%, and students accounted for 80.5%. In addition, 86.2% reported monthly income below VND 10 million and 74.1% reported monthly expenditure below VND 5 million. TikTok was the most frequently selected platform for lifestyle, fashion, or brand content (88.3%), followed by Facebook (73.0%) and Instagram (70.6%). Multiple selections were permitted, so percentages exceeded 100%.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 3. Measurement-model assessment included outer loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT). Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2022) recommend loadings of at least 0.708; indicators between 0.400 and 0.708 should be judged with reference to CR, AVE, and content validity. CR values of at least 0.700 and AVE values of at least 0.500 indicate adequate reliability and convergent validity. Discriminant validity was examined using the square root of AVE and the conservative HTMT threshold of 0.850 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015).

Structural-model assessment employed VIF, R^2 , adjusted R^2 , f^2 , Q^2 predict, and descriptive model-fit indices. Approximate f^2 values of 0.020, 0.150, and 0.350 represent small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988). Q^2 predict values above zero indicate out-of-sample predictive relevance (Shmueli et al., 2019). Path coefficients and specific indirect effects were tested using 10000 bootstrap subsamples and two-tailed tests at the 5% level. A relationship was considered significant when $|T|$ exceeded 1.96 and P was below 0.05. To minimize common method bias, respondents were assured of anonymity, question order was randomized where appropriate, and no right or wrong answers were indicated. In addition, Harman's single-factor test showed that the first factor explained less than 50% of the total variance, suggesting that common method bias was unlikely to be a serious concern.

Table 2. Construct reliability and validity.

Construct	Code	Outer Loadings	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	VIF
INT	INT1	0.548	0.797	0.499	1.288
	INT2	0.717			1.415
	INT3	0.763			1.315
	INT4	0.774			1.275
SCO	SCO1	0.867	0.920	0.741	2.317
	SCO2	0.863			2.307
	SCO3	0.845			2.170
	SCO4	0.869			2.386
EST	EST1	0.791	0.892	0.673	1.873
	EST2	0.779			1.632
	EST3	0.885			2.126
	EST4	0.823			1.887
MAT	MAT1	0.796	0.835	0.561	1.542
	MAT2	0.662			1.726
	MAT3	0.691			1.788
	MAT4	0.835			1.593
FOM	FOM1	0.865	0.930	0.768	2.389
	FOM2	0.873			2.525
	FOM3	0.882			2.616
	FOM4	0.885			2.542
SAN	SAN1	0.810	0.909	0.713	1.791
	SAN2	0.848			2.139
	SAN3	0.875			2.491
	SAN4	0.844			2.178
SEC	SEC1	0.770	0.856	0.598	1.543
	SEC2	0.778			1.623
	SEC3	0.743			1.436
	SEC4	0.803			1.579

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Research Findings

Table 2 shows that the CR values of the seven constructs ranged from 0.797 to 0.930, exceeding 0.700 and remaining below 0.950. SCO, EST, MAT, FOM, SAN, and SEC produced AVE values from 0.561 to 0.768 and therefore demonstrated convergent validity. INT produced AVE = 0.499, only marginally below 0.500. INT2-INT4 loaded from 0.717 to 0.774, whereas INT1 loaded at 0.548. Because INT achieved CR = 0.797 and retained content relevance, the construct was kept as borderline and all related findings were interpreted cautiously rather than rounding AVE to 0.500. MAT2 and MAT3, with loadings of 0.662 and 0.691, were also retained because the CR and AVE of MAT remained acceptable.

Table 3. Fornell–Larcker Criterion.

Construct	EST	FOM	INT	MAT	SAN	SCO	SEC
EST	0.820						
FOM	-0.089	0.876					
INT	0.069	0.293	0.706				
MAT	-0.030	0.640	0.357	0.749			
SAN	-0.206	0.714	0.317	0.601	0.844		
SCO	-0.188	0.592	0.320	0.521	0.649	0.861	
SEC	-0.004	0.609	0.395	0.553	0.569	0.409	0.774

Table 4. Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT).

Construct	EST	FOM	INT	MAT	SAN	SCO	SEC
EST							
FOM	0.105						
INT	0.163	0.344					
MAT	0.110	0.722	0.474				
SAN	0.228	0.807	0.397	0.708			
SCO	0.210	0.663	0.391	0.583	0.740		
SEC	0.069	0.724	0.526	0.697	0.690	0.491	

In Table 3, every diagonal square root of AVE exceeded the corresponding interconstruct correlations. Table 4 reports HTMT values from 0.069 to 0.807; the FOM-SAN pair was highest but remained below 0.850. Both assessments supported discriminant validity. Indicator VIF values ranged from 1.275 to 2.616 and did not indicate material multicollinearity.

The explanatory and predictive performance is reported in Tables 5 and 6. The four antecedents explained 50.2% of the variance in FOM and 53.2% in SAN; FOM and SAN explained 40.8% in SEC. Adjusted R^2 values were only 0.005–0.007 lower than R^2 , indicating little inflation from the number of predictors. All Q^2 predict values were positive. SAN produced the highest value (0.510), whereas SEC produced the lowest (0.299) together with higher RMSE and MAE. The model therefore predicted the two psychological states better than self-expressive behavior.

Table 5. R square.

Latent variable	R^2	R^2 adjusted
FOM	0.502	0.495
SAN	0.532	0.525
SEC	0.408	0.403

Table 6. Q^2 predict Values.

Latent variable	Q^2 predict	RMSE	MAE
FOM	0.482	0.725	0.543
SAN	0.510	0.707	0.500
SEC	0.299	0.845	0.650

Table 7. Model Fit.

Construct	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.068	0.079
d_ ULS	1.854	2.540
d_ G	0.592	0.655
Chi-Square	986.980	1041.977
NFI	0.774	0.761

The estimated model produced SRMR = 0.079, below 0.080 but close to the threshold. NFI = 0.761 remained below the frequently cited 0.900 reference value. d_ULS and d_G are reported descriptively because bootstrap HI95 or HI99 values were unavailable. These model-fit indices were treated as supplementary evidence and not as substitutes for path coefficients, R^2 , f^2 , and predictive assessment.

Table 8 indicates that seven of the ten direct hypotheses were supported. INT did not significantly affect FOM ($\beta = 0.022$, $P = 0.669$) or SAN ($\beta = 0.064$, $P = 0.194$); H1a and H1b were rejected. SCO increased FOM ($\beta = 0.348$, $P < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.164$) and SAN ($\beta = 0.420$, $P < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.254$), supporting H2a and H2b. EST did not affect FOM ($\beta = -0.012$, $P = 0.817$) but reduced SAN ($\beta = -0.120$, $P = 0.007$); H3a was rejected and H3b was supported.

MAT had the strongest effect on FOM ($\beta = 0.451$, $P < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.280$) and also increased SAN ($\beta = 0.356$, $P < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.186$), supporting H4a and H4b. FOM increased SEC ($\beta = 0.414$, $P < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.142$), and SAN also had a positive effect ($\beta = 0.273$, $P = 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.062$); H5 and H6 were supported. Numerically, FOM was the more prominent predictor of SEC.

Table 8. Results of direct relationship testing.

Causal relationship	Hypothesis	Path Coefficients (β)	T Statistics ($ O/STDEV $)	f^2	P Values	Result
INT→FOM	H1a	0.022	0.427	0.001	0.669	Rejected
INT→SAN	H1b	0.064	1.299	0.007	0.194	Rejected
SCO→FOM	H2a	0.348	5.246	0.164	0.000	Accepted
SCO→SAN	H2b	0.420	6.781	0.254	0.000	Accepted
EST→FOM	H3a	-0.012	0.231	0.000	0.817	Rejected
EST→SAN	H3b	-0.120	2.717	0.029	0.007	Accepted
MAT→FOM	H4a	0.451	7.816	0.280	0.000	Accepted
MAT→SAN	H4b	0.356	6.581	0.186	0.000	Accepted
FOM→SEC	H5	0.414	5.491	0.142	0.000	Accepted
SAN→SEC	H6	0.273	3.391	0.062	0.001	Accepted

The estimated structural model obtained from the PLS-SEM analysis is illustrated in Figure 2.

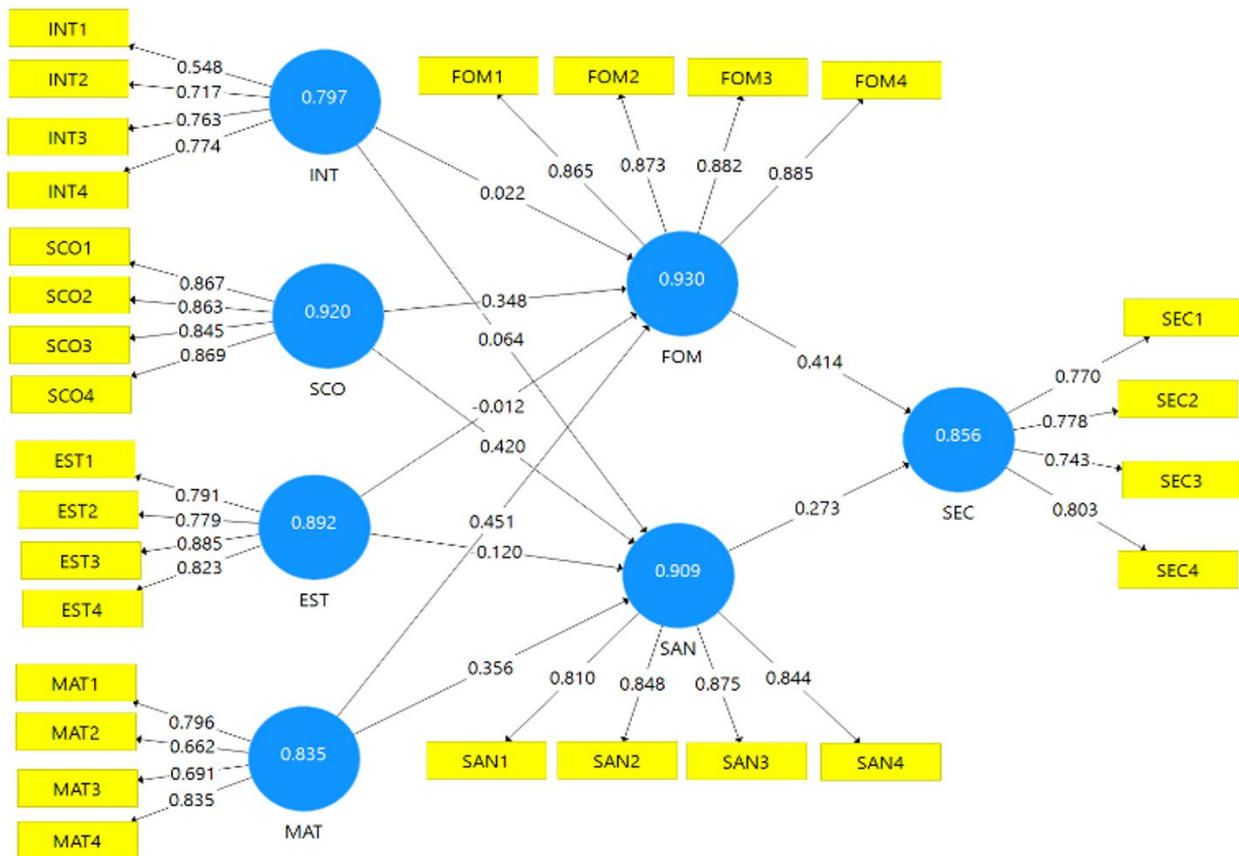


Figure 2. PLS-SEM model estimation results.

The specific indirect effects in Table 9 show that FOM transmitted the effects of SCO on SEC ($\beta = 0.144$, $P < 0.001$) and MAT on SEC ($\beta = 0.187$, $P < 0.001$), but not those of INT or EST. H7a was therefore partially supported. SAN transmitted the effects of SCO ($\beta = 0.115$, $P = 0.001$), MAT ($\beta = 0.097$, $P = 0.003$), and EST ($\beta = -0.033$, $P = 0.036$) on SEC, but not the effect of INT; H7b was also partially supported. Five of the eight specific indirect effects were significant. MAT-FOM-SEC was the largest indirect path, whereas EST-SAN-SEC was negative, indicating a protective role of self-esteem through reduced status anxiety.

Table 9. Results of Indirect Effect Testing.

Indirect Relationship	Hypothesis	Indirect Effect (β)	T Statistics ($ O/STDEV $)	P Values	Result
INT→FOM→SEC	H7a	0.009	0.408	0.683	Rejected
SCO→FOM→SEC	H7a	0.144	3.939	0.000	Accepted
EST→FOM→SEC	H7a	-0.005	0.227	0.821	Rejected
MAT→FOM→SEC	H7a	0.187	4.290	0.000	Accepted
INT→SAN→SEC	H7b	0.017	1.089	0.276	Rejected
SCO→SAN→SEC	H7b	0.115	3.182	0.001	Accepted
EST→SAN→SEC	H7b	-0.033	2.092	0.036	Accepted
MAT→SAN→SEC	H7b	0.097	2.978	0.003	Accepted

4.2. Discussion

The findings indicate that self-expressive consumption in this sample was shaped primarily by how Generation Z interpreted its social environment rather than by interaction with influencers alone. Rejecting H1a and H1b does not

imply that influencers are irrelevant to marketing. Instead, after SCO, EST, and MAT were controlled, INT added no significant explanatory power to FOM or SAN. Young users may follow influencers for entertainment, information, or learning without adopting every post as a status standard. Authenticity, similarity, credibility, and sponsorship recognition may be more consequential than exposure frequency (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Lou, 2022).

SCO had medium effects on both FOM and SAN, with a larger path to SAN. This result is consistent with social comparison theory: curated images make upward reference points readily available, causing users both to fear exclusion and to evaluate their own standing less favorably. Significant indirect effects through both mediators show that comparison does not stop at an emotional response; it can become a tendency to use products or consumption-related posts for image presentation. The finding accords with evidence on online comparison, self-evaluation, and consumption (Ling et al., 2023; Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2020).

The two EST hypotheses produced different results. EST did not reduce FOM, but it reduced SAN and indirectly reduced SEC through SAN. A person with high self-esteem may still wish to keep up with information, peers, and trends; thus, FoMO does not necessarily reflect low self-worth. Stable self-esteem may nevertheless reduce dependence on hierarchy and external recognition, thereby lowering status anxiety. This difference confirms that FoMO and SAN are related but distinct mechanisms and should not be collapsed into one generalized anxiety construct.

The finding that materialism emerged as the strongest antecedent of fear of missing out suggests that self-expressive consumption among Generation Z is driven less by product ownership itself than by the symbolic meanings attached to possessions within digitally mediated social interactions. Individuals with stronger materialistic values appear to interpret possessions as indicators of identity and social recognition, making them particularly vulnerable to feelings of exclusion when desirable products or experiences become highly visible online. This finding reinforces compensatory consumption theory by demonstrating that psychological concerns regarding symbolic self-completion precede self-expressive consumption behavior rather than resulting directly from social media exposure. Both indirect effects of MAT were significant, with the FOM route being the largest indirect path in the model. This extends prior evidence on materialism, FoMO, and conspicuous consumption (Akram et al., 2023; Dinh & Lee, 2024) to self-expressive behavior on social media.

FOM and SAN both increased SEC, but FOM had the larger coefficient and f^2 . In a sample dominated by young students, keeping up with trends and maintaining participation in a community may be closer to daily online experience than pursuing long-term status. Nevertheless, the effects on SEC were only small or near medium, and SEC achieved $R^2 = 0.408$. Self-expressive consumption is therefore likely to depend additionally on affordability, product category, group norms, need for uniqueness, perceived authenticity, and self-control.

Overall, the model supports a multistage mechanism: social comparison and materialism intensify both psychological states; self-esteem provides a clear protective effect only for status anxiety; and FOM and SAN subsequently increase SEC. The findings also expose the limitation of a simple assumption that influencer exposure automatically generates self-expressive consumption. How users interpret possessions, comparison standards, and their own worth determines whether social media signals become behavioral responses.

Taken together, the findings suggest that self-expressive consumption on social media should not be interpreted as a direct consequence of exposure to influencers or online content. Instead, the results support the SOR perspective by demonstrating that external social stimuli influence behavior only after being transformed into internal psychological processes. More importantly, the study reveals that fear of missing out and status anxiety represent two complementary rather than interchangeable mechanisms. Whereas fear of missing out reflects concerns about social participation, status anxiety reflects concerns regarding relative social position. Distinguishing these two psychological pathways provides a more nuanced explanation of how social media shapes identity-related consumption among Generation Z.

5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Implications for Firms

First, firms should manage social-comparison cues to inspire rather than make customers feel inferior. Because SCO increased both FOM and SAN, communication built exclusively around perfection, expensive possessions, or social

rank may attract attention while intensifying psychological pressure. Brands should use everyday settings, diverse users, balanced reviews, and personal-progress narratives. Performance metrics should extend beyond views to include discussion sentiment, comment quality, trust, repeat engagement, and post-purchase feedback.

Second, positioning should shift from ownership as proof of status toward choices that fit personal values and identity. Because MAT was the strongest antecedent of FOM, firms should clearly explain function, durability, total cost of use, and return conditions while offering price points, formats, or sizes compatible with differing financial resources. Personalization should assist customers in finding a suitable option rather than equating personal worth with ownership.

Third, deadlines or membership benefits may be used to organize attention and decision making, but artificial scarcity should be avoided. The beginning and end of offers, available quantities, and prices before and after discounts must be verifiable. Customers should have reasonable time to consider purchases and access transparent return policies. This approach can capture attention associated with FOM without excessively exploiting urgency.

Fourth, the nonsignificant INT findings show that adding more influencers or increasing posting frequency does not guarantee psychological impact. Creators should be selected for fit among person, brand, product, and community, with priority given to genuine experience, sponsorship disclosure, and two-way interaction. Evaluation should include message recall, meaningful engagement, product-page visits, conversion, and post-purchase satisfaction rather than follower counts and reach alone.

Moreover, firms should avoid intentionally amplifying consumers' psychological vulnerabilities through excessive scarcity cues or exaggerated lifestyle portrayals. Instead, responsible marketing should encourage authentic self-expression while minimizing unnecessary social pressure among young consumers.

5.2. Implications for Consumers

Consumers should distinguish decisions based on genuine need from those triggered by comparison, fear of exclusion, or concern about negative evaluation. Before responding to trending content, a brief pause can be used to assess need, budget, expected frequency of use, prices across sources, and alternatives. Checking sponsorship disclosure, creator-product fit, and critical reviews can further reduce reliance on popularity as a proxy for credibility. Users can also manage their information environments by disabling unnecessary sales notifications, diversifying followed accounts, and limiting content that repeatedly creates a sense of deficiency. Maintaining multiple sources of self-worth—including skills, relationships, learning, and community contribution—prevents products from becoming the sole evidence of status. Consumption-based self-expression can remain positive when choices reflect authentic preferences, fit available resources, and are not governed by pressure to resemble others.

5.3. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the literature on social media consumption, consumer behavior, and the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework.

First, the study extends the application of the SOR framework by demonstrating that self-expressive consumption behavior on social media is not a direct consequence of external social stimuli but rather emerges through internal psychological processes. While previous studies have commonly examined isolated relationships between social media use and consumer behavior, the present findings show that external stimuli—including social comparison, materialism, self-esteem, and interaction with social media influencers—affect behavioral responses only after being cognitively and emotionally interpreted through fear of missing out and status anxiety. This finding reinforces the central premise of the SOR framework and provides additional empirical evidence that psychological interpretation constitutes the primary mechanism linking social media environments to identity-related consumption behavior.

Second, this study contributes to the literature by simultaneously examining fear of missing out and status anxiety as two parallel psychological mechanisms underlying self-expressive consumption. Previous studies have generally focused on either FoMO or status anxiety independently, despite the conceptual differences between these constructs. The present findings demonstrate that FoMO and status anxiety represent complementary rather than interchangeable psychological responses to social media exposure. Whereas FoMO reflects concerns about missing rewarding experiences and remaining socially connected, status anxiety reflects concerns regarding one's relative

social position and social evaluation. Distinguishing these two mediating mechanisms provides a more nuanced explanation of how digital environments influence identity-oriented consumption among Generation Z.

Third, the study advances current understanding of self-expressive consumption by shifting the research focus beyond traditional outcomes such as purchase intention or conspicuous consumption. Rather than explaining whether consumers intend to purchase products, the proposed model explains why young consumers use products and brands as symbolic resources for constructing and communicating identity within social media environments. This perspective expands existing consumer behavior research by positioning self-expressive consumption as a psychologically mediated behavioral response shaped by social comparison processes and individual value orientations.

Finally, the findings offer an important theoretical implication regarding the role of social media influencers. Contrary to the common assumption that greater interaction with influencers necessarily increases psychological pressure and consumption behavior, the empirical results indicate that influencer interaction does not significantly predict either FoMO or status anxiety after accounting for social comparison, self-esteem, and materialism. This finding suggests that consumers' internal psychological characteristics and social interpretation processes are more influential than exposure to influencer content alone. Consequently, the study contributes to the growing literature by emphasizing that the psychological meaning consumers assign to social media experiences is more critical than the mere frequency of influencer interaction.

Overall, these contributions enrich the theoretical understanding of self-expressive consumption on social media and provide a more comprehensive explanation of how social media environments shape identity-related consumption behavior among Generation Z through multiple psychological pathways.

6. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study concludes that self-expressive consumption among the sampled Generation Z users was best explained by the combination of materialism, social comparison, FoMO, and status anxiety. Seven of ten direct effects and five of eight specific indirect effects were supported. Materialism had the strongest effect on FoMO, social comparison had the strongest effect on status anxiety, and FoMO was the more prominent predictor of SEC. Self-esteem was protective through SAN, while influencer interaction produced no significant direct or indirect effects in the specified model.

Three principal limitations should be recognized. Convenience sampling produced a sample concentrated among women, students, and respondents aged 20-22, limiting generalizability to the entire Generation Z population. Cross-sectional, self-reported data do not support strong causal claims. The INT scale produced AVE = 0.499 and an INT1 loading of 0.548, so INT-related findings require caution. The model also omitted direct paths from the four antecedents to SEC and did not capture all possible determinants of self-expressive behavior.

Overall, the study contributes to the growing literature on digital consumer behavior by demonstrating that self-expressive consumption is fundamentally a psychologically mediated response to social media environments rather than merely an outcome of influencer exposure. The findings therefore enrich current understanding of identity-oriented consumption among Generation Z and provide a more comprehensive explanation of the psychological mechanisms underlying digital consumption.

Future research should use stratified samples, extend beyond Ho Chi Minh City, and combine longitudinal, experimental, or behavioral data. The INT scale should be refined through qualitative interviews and pilot testing. Subsequent models could incorporate influencer authenticity, influencer identification, need for recognition, self-control, affordability, and product category and could conduct multigroup comparisons across platforms, gender, occupation, and income.

FUNDING: This research was funded by the Van Hien University, Vietnam under Research Project No. 1259/MYH26/VHU/QĐ.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT:

The study involved minimal risk and followed ethical guidelines for social science fieldwork. Formal approval from an Institutional Review Board was not required under the policies of the Institute for Research Ethics Committee of Van Hien University. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

TRANSPARENCY

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 3 July 2026/ Revised: 1 August 2026/ Accepted: 22 August 2026/ Published: 1 September 2026

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