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Viral Marketing, Fear of Missing Out and Impulsive Buying Behavior Among Gen Z in Jakarta

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ABSTRACT

Objectives*: This study is aimed at investigating the effects of viral marketing) on impulsive buying behavior mediated by fear of missing out (FoMO) among Gen Z customers in Indonesia.*
Methodology*: This study adopts a quantitative method with cross-sectional design, including 209 Gen Z students from universities in Jakarta which were gathered using Purposive snowball sampling. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) with Partial Least Squares method to evaluate the validity of theoretical framework and to examine the proposed hypotheses.*
Finding*: The findings demonstrate that viral marketing significantly affects the emergence of FoMO which mediates the relationship between viral marketing and impulsive buying behavior.*
Conclusion: *The results are beneficial for marketers who aim to reach Gen Z and deal with the social and economic effects of inappropriate customer behavior that can happen when viral marketing campaigns are used too much. Gen Z will also become more aware and conscious if they learn these facts. This will help them resist the desire to buy things on impulse that viral marketing campaigns use to get customers to buy things.*

Keywords*: Impulsive Buying Behavior; Marketing Strategy; Viral Marketing; Fear of Missing Out (FoMO); Gen Z; Social Media.*

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INTRODUCTION

The widespread accessibility of the internet through computers or smartphones, allowing users to connect from any location and at any time, has contributed to a rise in the global internet user population. The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology of the Republic of Indonesia noted that the number of internet users in Indonesia in 2022 reached 215.63 million, with an increase of 2.67% from the previous year (Kominfo, 2023).

The increasing prevalence of numerous social media platforms like WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, is growing more public interest to stay connected to the internet. No generation can escape the influence of the internet nowadays, and when compared to other generations, Gen Z, or those born between 1995 and 2010, has the strongest attachment to social media (Ahuja & Grover, 2023; Lyngdoh et al., 2023). They tend to be more responsive and technology addicted, continuously seek information, and share things through social media (Li & Hasnah Hassan, 2023).

This circumstance opens new opportunities for businesses and advertisers to reach a broader target audience in social media. In this recent "Internet of Things" era, traditional marketing is perceived as less relevant to market conditions due to its limited reach in the market landscape (Uyan & Hamidi, 2020). Various marketing strategies and methods that offer ease and convenience of shopping through social media are aimed at attracting Gen Z customers to shop online. Viral marketing (VM) emerged as one of the popular marketing strategies in the community.

Although it is seen as effective in reaching the target audience and creating brand awareness, VM can negatively affect consumers psychologically and financially. Along with the extensive use of VM through social media channels like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, etc., a contemporary societal issue known as 'Fear of Missing Out' or FoMO, has emerged in society. According to the earlier research, the more individuals suffer FoMO, the more they utilize social media (Kundu & Ayan, 2024). Due to this phenomenon, online businesses now have the chance to use VM campaigns on social media to convince and draw in as many potential customers as they can. They may also make use of this fear to stimulate consumers' IBB.

There is a growing concern about the adverse impacts of IBB on consumer well-being, as well as the resilience of our societal and environmental sustainability. (Wang et al., 2022). The topic of IBB has gained significant attention in academic circles. Prior studies have often focused on demographic characteristics that influence IBB (Ahn & Kwon, 2022; Miao et al., 2020; Yi & Jai, 2020). Several studies have discussed the effect of VM on IBB. However, the exploration of the mediating role of FoMO in the relationship between VM and IBB remains largely uncharted territory. Consequently, there is a pressing need for further research to untangle the complex interplay of these factors, particularly among Gen Z customers, to provide a more thorough comprehension about IBB

This research aims to figure out the complex interactions between VM, FoMO, and IBB. It will explore the mediating role of FoMO in the relationship between VM and IBB. This research is to provide empirical proof that VM has psychological and potential negative consequences, especially on Gen Z customers, which should be taken into account by businesses when conducting marketing campaigns.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

To explain how VM influences the IBB among Gen Z consumers, this study combines Social Influence Theory (SIT) and Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and Social Comparison Theory (SCT) into the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework. Stimulus (S) involves external factors which affect the consumers, Organism (O) refers to internal factors which process the stimulus into information, and Response (R) refers to the resulting behaviour. In the context of this study, SOR model acts as the grand theory, bridging the VM as external marketing stimuli (S), with FoMO as the internal psychological processes (O) and response (R) is IBB.

In such framework SIT, TPB and SCT act as supporting theories which provide more specific explanation on a certain stage within the SOR process. SIT shows how social influences and information from others create consumer perceptions and attitudes, while TPB explains how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceptions control behavior that drives consumers to make purchasing decisions. Thus, these three theories complement each other in explaining the process of impulse buying caused by VM.

1. Viral Marketing (VM) and Impulsive Buying Behavior (IBB)

Based on Social Influence Theory (SIT), people's perception and attitudes are likely affected by information they receive from others that they believe to be true (Hu et al., 2019). Similarly, consumer attitudes and perception about the products are much influenced by the amount of information they get through VM (Trivedi, 2017). The use of VM is likely to extensively disseminate information that may influence IBB (Kazi et al., 2019). Moreover, the TPB outlines that an individual's behavior is defined by their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 2020). In the context of VM, when the message is persuasive and the source is credible, it can direct a positive attitude toward the product and increase perception of behavioral control, which subsequently increases the possibility of IBB. Several studies have shown that VM has positive influences on IBB (Liyanapathirana, 2021; Rizqullah & Indrawati, 2022; Uyan & Hamidi, 2020).

Based on the theoretical explanation supported by previous empirical studies, it is predicted that VM influences the IBB of Generation Z customers. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1: VM has a significant effect on the IBB of Gen Z customers in Indonesia

2. Viral Marketing (VM) and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

The Social Comparison Theory (SCT) states that people frequently look to other people for guidance on appropriate behavior (Verduyn et al., 2020). According to that theory, people assess themselves by contrasting their qualities and skills with those of others. VM that showcase the goods, services, or experiences that others are enjoying might provide people with social comparisons. Because the commercial has gone viral and is being talked about widely, individuals will follow the trend and do not want to miss out (Holte, 2023; Holte & Ferraro, 2020; Jabeen et al., 2023). It is possible to deduce that social media VM could stimulate users' emotions to the point where they are constantly following viral trends and experiencing FOMO.

Although research examining the relationship between VM and the FoMO phenomena has not been located, it is likely that VM affects FoMO based on the description provided above. Hence, this hypothesis is put forth:

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H2: VM has a significant effect on FoMO among Gen Z customers in Indonesia

3. Fear of Missing Out and Impulsive Buying Behavior

The FoMO has emerged as a strategic tool utilized by businesses to sway consumer purchasing decisions. Various tactics have been employed to evoke FoMO tendencies, such as creating a sense of scarcity around advertised products or services and instilling a fear of missing out on the opportunity (Çelik et al., 2019). Such emotional response often influence how the customer behave (Good & Hyman, 2020) and at the same time, it also provides opportunities for companies to promote their offerings through consumers sharing on social media platforms (Xi et al., 2022).

The role of FoMO in consumer behavior cannot be separated from the way individuals experience and interpret information in their daily lives. When individuals begin to worry about missing out, their emotional reactions often translate into spontaneous purchasing decisions, which contribute to increased sales that benefit the companies. From a marketing perspective, FoMO is particularly relevant because it is closely linked to IBB and other psychological factors that shape the relationship between consumers and the products they encounter (Holte & Ferraro, 2020). Previous studies suggest that FoMO not only influences buying intentions (Cam et al., 2021) but can also directly trigger impulsive purchasing behavior (Lian et al., 2022).

Based on these insights, this study expects FoMO to significantly influence IBB among Generation Z. This expectation is grounded in the everyday digital experiences of Gen Z in Indonesia, where social media exposure and peer-driven content are deeply embedded in daily consumption patterns. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: FoMO has a significant effect on the IBB of Gen Z consumers in Indonesia.

4. Viral Marketing, Fear of Missing Out, and Impulsive Buying Behavior

The theory of Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR), originally introduced by Mehrabian and RusseI (1974), explains how individual responds to their environment. Instead of framing consumer behavior as an automatic reaction to external influences, this framework focuses on how internal psychological processes influence the way such cues are experienced and understood (Pereira et al., 2023). From such perspective, stimuli are not confined to external influences such as information exposure or social media content; they may also arise from internal conditions, including personal characteristics and psychological tendencies. As individuals process these stimuli internally, a range of emotional, cognitive, perceptual, and physiological reactions emerges, which is eventually expressed through observable behavior. (Lin et al., 2022).

In the context of the present study, VM is viewed as a key stimulus that initiates this process. The organism component is represented by FoMO, which reflects the emotional and cognitive reactions triggered by exposure to viral content. These internal responses are then expressed through IBB as the observable outcome. From this perspective, VM is expected to intensify feelings of FoMO, which subsequently shape consumers' purchasing decisions. This interpretation is consistent with earlier findings indicating that FoMO influences consumer attitudes and behavior, particularly in consumption settings characterized by strong social interaction and peer comparison (Good & Hyman, 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

H4: VM has a significant effect on the IBB mediated by FoMO among Gen Z consumers in Indonesia.

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The following figure illustrates the research framework:

Figure 1. Research Framework Model



State of the Art

Although several previous studies have examined the relationship between VM and IBB, this study explores the mediating role of FOMO in the relationship between VM and IBB among Gen Z which remains under-explored. By focusing on Gen Z consumers in Indonesia, this study responds to the specific context of social media use and digital consumption culture. In doing so, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how VM operates through internal psychological responses (FoMO), thereby contributing new empirical insight to the existing literature on IBB.

METHOD

This study applied a quantitative approach to understand how VM, and FoMO influence IBB through measurable data. A cross-sectional survey design was used to capture data at a single point in time. To ensure the participants matched the study criteria, this study employed 209 Gen Z students living in Jakarta, specifically individuals who were born between 1996 and 2010 and had experienced with online shopping, were chosen carefully using purposive snowball sampling.

Data were collected with a structured questionnaire, adapted from previous research. The measurement IBB was adapted from Wang et al. (2022), VM from Uyan and Hamidi (2020), and FoMO scale from Przybylski et al. (2013). Participants responded on a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The collected data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (SmartPLS 4.0), first to check the reliability and validity of the measurements, and then to explore the relationships among variables (Hair et al., 2019; Becker et al., 2022). This method allows the study to capture reliable, numerical results while reflecting the real perceptions and experiences of the respondents. Prior to data analysis, a descriptive overview of the respondents was provided (Table 1), including gender, birth year, time spent on social media usage, preferred social media platform, and favored online shopping sites.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristic of Respondents

Characteristics	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	*Male*	*87*	*41.6*
	Female	*122*	*58.4*
Birth year	*1996 - 1999*	*10*	*4.8*
	2000 - 2003	*174*	*83.3*
	2004 - 2007	*25*	*11.5*
	2008 – 2010	*0*	*0*

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Characteristics	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Time spent on social media usage	*1 ≤ 3 hours*	*30*	*14.4*
	4 ≤ 6 hours	*52*	*24.9*
	***7 ≤ 9** hours*	***69***	***33.0***
	10 ≤12 hours	*30*	*14.4*
	12 > ... hours	*28*	*13.4*
Favored social media	*Youtube*	*28*	*13.4*
	Instagram	*75*	*35.9*
	Tiktok	***84***	***40.2***
	Twitter	*16*	*7.7*
	Facebook	*6*	*2.9*
Favored online shopping sites.	*Tokopedia*	*29*	*13.9*
	Shopee	***164***	***78.5***
	Lazada	*6*	*2.9*
	Buka Lapak	*6*	*2.9*
	Bli-Bli	*4*	*1.9*

As shown in Table 1, the participants in this study were dominated by female students, aged 20 to 23 (born between 2000 and 2003). On average, they spend seven to nine hours a day on social media, with TikTok as their favorite platform. When it came to online shopping, Shopee was emerging as the top online marketplace.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

Firstly, this study evaluates the measurement model to ensure that all indicators of VM, FoMO, and IBB are both reliable and valid. Reliability is examined using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability, while convergent and discriminant validity are assessed through Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The results of reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity tests are shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2 *Measurement Model Assessment Results*

Constructs	CA	CR	AVE	HTMT Ratio		
				1	2	3
1. FoMO (Z)	0.884	0.913	0.639			
2. VM (X)	0.846	0.886	0.567	0.339		
3. IBB (Y)	0.899	0.918	0.553	0.555	0.302	

As shown in Table 2, all constructs have CA values above 0.70, indicating that all indicators are consistent in measuring each construct. All CR values exceed the recommended threshold, confirming good construct reliability. Each construct has an AVE above 0.50, indicating that the indicators adequately represent their respective constructs. Thus, convergent validity is established. The HTMT values are far below 0.90 which confirms good discriminant validity. Moreover, Fornell–Larcker criterion is included to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of discriminant validity (Gimeno-Arias & Santos-Jaén, 2022).

The outcome of the Fornell-Lacker criterion is displayed in Table 3 below:

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Table 3 Discriminant Validity Result Using Fornell-Lacker Criterion

Construct	FoMO	VM	IBB
1. FoMO	0.799		
2. VM	0.303	0.753	
3. IBB	0.505	0.271	0.744

As presented in Table 3, the diagonal values for FoMO (0.799), VM (0.753), and IBB (0.744) are all higher than their respective correlations with other constructs. For example, the correlation between FoMO and VM (0.303) and between FoMO and IBB (0.505) remains below the AVE square root of FoMO. A similar pattern is also observed for VM and IBB. These findings suggest that each construct is empirically distinct, indicating that discriminant validity has been sufficiently confirmed and that the constructs are suitable for further analysis.

Before examining structural relationships, it is necessary to evaluate the collinearity of the formative measurement model. When there is a significant connection between two or more indicators in a formative measurement paradigm, this is known as collinearity. The research reveals that the values of the collinearity statistics (VIF) are less than three which means that the model is not a problematic issue (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 4 below displays the collinearity test result:

Table 4 Collinearity statistics (VIF)

	FoMO	VM	IBB
FoMO			
VM	1.000		
IBB	1.101	1.101	

As presented in Table 4, the VIF value for VM in predicting FoMO is 1.000, while the VIF values for FoMO and VM in predicting IBB are both 1.101. Those values are below the critical threshold of 5, indicating there is no multicollinearity concerns.

After confirming that multicollinearity was not a concern, the analysis proceeded to evaluate the overall fit of the research model.

After confirming that there was no multicollinearity, the next analysis is to assess the overall fit of the model. The result shows the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value is 0.079 which is less than the widely accepted cutoff of 0.10. This indicates that the model fits the data for the model well.

The next stage of the analysis focused on the path coefficients to evaluate the proposed hypotheses about the direct effects. The structural model to test the hypotheses was analysed based on P-values and t-statistic values. A variable significantly influences another when the t-statistic exceeds 1.96 and the P-value is below 0.05(Hair et al., 2017). The structural model is presented in Figure 2 below:

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Figure 2. Structural Model

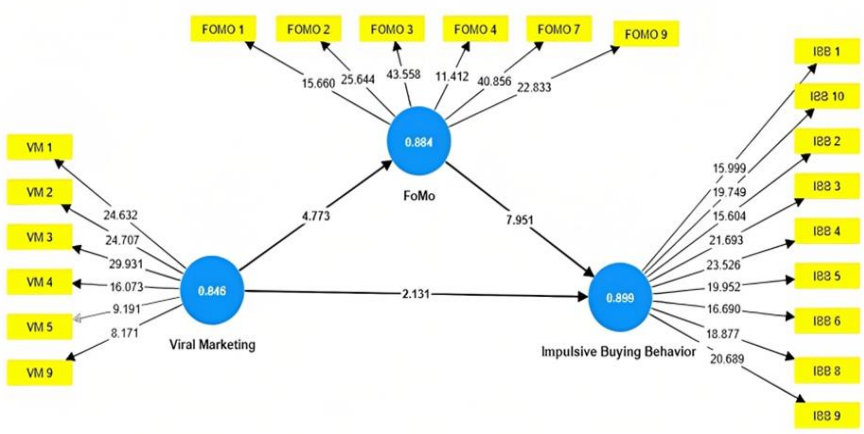


Table 5 displays the outcome of the route coefficient evaluation for structural models.

Table 5 The Result of Path Coefficient (Direct Effects)

Path	Original Sample (O)	Sample M	STDEV	t-statistic	P-value
FoMO → IBB	0.465	0.472	0.058	7.951	0.000
VM → FoMO	0.303	0.312	0.063	4.773	0.000
VM → IBB	0.130	0.133	0.061	2.131	0.033

The results indicate that VM has a positive and significant direct effect on IBB *w*ith a P-value of 0.033 and a t-statistic value of 2.131, which exceeds 1.96. Similarly, the study demonstrates that VM has significant direct effect on FoMO in a positive way, with a P-value of 0.000 and a t-statistic value of 4.773. Furthermore, the significant and positive direct effect of FoMO on IBB is shown by the t-statistic value of 7.951 with a P-value of 0.000. The findings emphasize the significance of VM and the impact of FoMO on IBB among Generation Z consumers in Indonesia. Overall, the findings show that VM considerably and favorably effects both FoMO and IBB, and that FoMO significantly influences IBB. H_1, H_2, and H_3 are therefore confirmed.

To understand how much variance can be explained by VM the coefficient of determination (R^2) was examined for both IBB and FoMO. Based on the results, it is indicated that only 30.3% of the variance in the data on impulsive buying can be explained by the statistical model that was used to investigate the relationship between VM and impulsive buying, with an R-squared value of 0.303; the remaining 69.7% may be attributed to factors other than VM. Conversely, the FoMO model's R-squared value is 0.465, which indicates that it can only account for 46.5% of the variation in the FoMO data; the remaining 53.5% must be explained by factors other than VM.

In the meanwhile, Table 6 displays the indirect effect of VM on IBB through FoMO.

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Table 6 Indirect Effect of Viral Marketing

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation	t- statistics	P-values
VM →FoMO→IBB	0.141	0.147	0.033	4.233	0.000

The P-value is 0.000 < 0.05 and the t-statistic value is 4.233 > 1.96 based on the indirect impact result. This demonstrates H3's acceptance. In this instance, it implies that FoMO's indirect effect is probably going to be statistically significant, meaning that FoMO is acting as a mediator in the interaction between VM and IBB.

Building on the indirect effect findings, the analysis then examined the total effects to reflect the combined influence of direct and mediated relationships. The detailed results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7 The Total Effect

Path	Original Sample (O)	Sample M	STDEV	t-statistic	P-value
FoMO → IBB	0.465	0.472	0.058	7.951	0.000
VM → FoMO	0.303	0.312	0.063	4.773	0.000
VM → IBB	0.271	0.280	0.066	4.112	0.000

The total effect results show that FoMO has the strongest overall influence on impulsive buying behavior ($\beta = 0.465$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that consumers with higher FoMO are more likely to make impulsive purchases. VM significantly increases FoMO ($\beta = 0.303$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that viral content effectively triggers feelings of urgency and social pressure. Moreover, VM also has a significant total effect on impulsive buying behavior ($\beta = 0.271$, $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that the impact of VM on IBB is strengthened when its indirect influence through FoMO is considered.

4.2 Discussion

The results of this study highlight four key findings. The first is that VM clearly influences IBB. In other words, people tend to make quick, unplanned purchases when exposed to VM campaigns. This seems to happen because such campaigns are designed to catch attention and excitement which create a sense of urgency around products or services. They frequently cause consumers to react emotionally, which causes them to act impulsively without having to consider their choices. These results align with earlier studies (Liyanapathirana, 2021; Rizqullah & Indrawati, 2022; Uyan & Hamidi, 2020) which clarify the psychological processes behind impulsive buying, showing just how effectively VM can trigger immediate consumer responses.

The second finding shows that VM has a clear positive effect on FoMO. In other words, being exposed to VM content seems to increase the feeling that one is missing out, making individuals more likely to follow trends and engage in behaviors highlighted by these campaigns. This is an important observation because it highlights how VM can affect users' mental and emotional well-being (Chu, 2011; Eckler & Bolls, 2011). Specifically, it suggests that frequent exposure to VM may amplify feelings of stress, anxiety, and social pressure to fit in with what others are doing.

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Furthermore, the third finding highlights the positive and significant effect of FoMO on IBB, suggesting that individuals with higher FoMO levels are more prone to impulsive buying tendencies. This empirical evidence corroborates previous research (Good & Hyman, 2020; Holte & Ferraro, 2020; Lian et al., 2022) emphasizing the significant relationship between FoMO and IBB, with implications for consumer behavior and marketing strategies. High FoMO individuals are inclined towards impulsive buying, leading to increased expenditure, debt, and financial strain. Marketers targeting this demographic should consider leveraging strategies that capitalize on urgency, scarcity, or trends to effectively stimulate IBB among these consumers.

The third finding reveals a clear and significant link between FoMO and IBB. Simply put, individuals who experience higher levels of FoMO are more likely to make spontaneous purchases. This observation supports earlier studies (Good & Hyman, 2020; Holte & Ferraro, 2020; Lian et al., 2022) that highlighted the strong connection between FoMO and IBB, offering important insights into consumer behavior. People with high FoMO tend to buy impulsively, which can lead to greater spending, debt, and financial pressure. For marketers, this suggests that strategies emphasizing urgency, scarcity, or trending products can effectively engage this group, but it also raises ethical considerations about the potential impact on consumers' financial well-being.

The fourth finding highlights that FoMO acts as a mediator in the association between VM and IBB. This implies that when individuals encounter VM campaigns, they may undergo an increased feeling of FoMO, subsequently prompting them to participate in IBB. This implies that people who are exposed to VM ads may feel more FoMO than usual, which might encourage them to participate in IBB. This result is noteworthy as it underscores the essential mechanisms linking VM and IBB. In this study, FoMO serves as a mediator in this connection, indicating that individuals exposed to VM initiatives are prone to experiencing heightened FoMO sensations, which consequently drive IBB. It indicates that employing VM campaigns to instill a feeling of urgency or scarcity can not only directly boost IBB but also indirectly enhance it by heightening consumers' FoMO.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that VM, FoMO and IBB are closely connected each others. The findings indicate that VM does not only function as a fast channel for information sharing, but also plays a role in shaping consumers' emotions. Particularly, FoMO appears to encourage consumers to make purchase decisions spontaneously, often without careful consideration. This suggests that emotional factors cannot be separated from digital marketing practices.

From a managerial point of view, the results imply that VM strategies need to be applied with greater awareness and responsibility. Practices such as highlighting limited availability or exclusivity may attract consumer attention and increase sales in the short term, but they also carry potential risks if not supported by real product value. Managers therefore need to ensure that promotional messages are consistent with product performance and customer experience, as unmet expectations may lead to dissatisfaction and reduced trust.

The findings also underline the importance of observing how consumers emotionally respond to online campaigns, especially on social media where marketing messages spread quickly. Rather than relying solely on emotional pressure, marketers are encouraged to combine persuasive content with clear and realistic information. Such an approach may help companies maintain consumer trust and support more sustainable brand relationships.

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Overall, this research helps clarify the role of FoMO as a mechanism through which VM influences IBB. At the same time, it highlights the importance of ethical considerations in marketing decisions. Consumers are also encouraged to become more aware of how marketing messages influence their emotions, so they can make purchasing decisions that better reflect their actual needs and priorities.

However, there are some limitations to this study. Firstly, it does not examine a specific e-commerce platform that utilizes VM. Future studies might concentrate on a specific e-commerce platform that uses VM techniques in Jakarta and other Asian nations to get over this restriction. This would enable a more focused examination of how VM affects customer behavior. Another disadvantage is that the study only includes current Gen-Z university students as representations. Researchers should broaden the sample to include more Gen-Z subgroups to remedy this. Participants may come from various geographic places, occupations, and socioeconomic backgrounds, for example. This would offer a more thorough comprehension of Gen-Z behavior and how VM relates to it.

Additionally, researchers could adopt a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. This would offer a more holistic understanding of the complexities of Gen-Z behavior and its connection to VM. Finally, researchers could also explore the potential moderating effects of factors such as culture, age, gender, and income on the relationship between VM and consumer behavior among Gen-Z customers. This would offer a more thorough comprehension of Gen-Z behavior and how VM relates to it.

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