

Social Comparison and The Purchase of Non-Essential Products Among Generation Z Consumers

Avnish Kumar¹, Amreen², Anjali Kumari³

¹Assistant Professor, Keshav Mahavidyalay DU

²Assistant Professor, Delhi University

³Research Scholar

Abstract—The rapid growth of social media has significantly influenced the consumption patterns of Generation Z consumers. Constant exposure to peers, influencers, and online communities has created new opportunities for social comparison, shaping individuals' perceptions, preferences, and purchasing decisions. While previous studies have established a relationship between social comparison and consumer behaviour, there remains growing interest in understanding why consumers often purchase non-essential products despite recognizing their limited functional utility. The present paper reviews existing literature on the relationship between social comparison and the purchase of non-essential products among Generation Z consumers. Drawing upon Social Comparison Theory and related consumer behaviour research, the paper examines the role of peer influence, social media engagement, influencer marketing, and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) in shaping purchasing behaviour. The review highlights that upward social comparison frequently encourages materialistic tendencies, impulse buying, and increased willingness to purchase products that serve symbolic or social purposes rather than functional needs. At the same time, the literature suggests that the impact of social comparison is not uniform across all consumers. Individual factors such as self-concept, personal values, sustainability orientation, and the desire for authenticity may influence the extent to which social comparison translates into actual purchase behaviour. Based on the reviewed studies, the paper identifies several avenues for future research, particularly in the context of emerging markets and changing digital consumption environments.

Index Terms—Social Comparison, Generation Z, Consumer Behaviour, social media, FOMO, Impulse Buying, Non-Essential Products.

I. INTRODUCTION

Consumer behaviour has changed considerably with the rise of social media and digital communication.

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Snapchat have become important spaces where consumers interact with brands, follow influencers, and observe the lifestyles of others. For Generation Z, which has grown up with digital technology, these platforms are not simply sources of entertainment but also environments in which identities are formed, expressed, and evaluated [4], [12].

One of the most important psychological processes operating within such environments is social comparison. According to Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, individuals naturally evaluate themselves by comparing their opinions, achievements, and possessions with those of others [1]. While social comparison has always existed, social media has increased both its frequency and visibility. Consumers are now exposed to a constant stream of carefully curated content that highlights desirable lifestyles, experiences, and products [3], [12].

Previous research suggests that social comparison can influence consumer attitudes, aspirations, and purchasing behaviour. Exposure to attractive lifestyles and desirable possessions may encourage consumers to place greater value on products that signal status, success, or social acceptance [2], [11]. As a result, purchasing decisions are often shaped by more than functional needs alone.

This issue appears particularly relevant among Generation Z consumers. Social media plays an important role in how younger consumers communicate identity, seek peer approval, and participate in trends. Products such as fashion items, premium beverages, cosmetics, electronic gadgets, and lifestyle experiences often gain popularity because of their social visibility rather than their practical usefulness [10], [13]. Consequently, consumption may become a means of expressing identity and maintaining social relevance.

An associated concept is Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), which refers to the concern that others may be enjoying rewarding experiences from which one is excluded [10]. Social media environments can intensify such concerns by making social activities, purchases, and experiences highly visible. Existing studies indicate that FOMO may increase consumers' willingness to participate in trends and make impulsive purchasing decisions [10], [13].

While substantial research has examined the relationship between social comparison, social media, and consumer behaviour, an important question remains insufficiently explored.

Consumers frequently purchase products that they themselves recognize as non-essential or of limited functional utility. A premium coffee, a branded accessory, or a trending lifestyle product may provide only marginal practical benefits compared with less expensive alternatives. Yet such products continue to attract significant consumer interest.

The present review argues that understanding these purchases requires looking beyond traditional explanations based on utility and rational decision-making. Instead, symbolic value, social meaning, and identity-related motivations may play an increasingly important role in shaping consumption choices. Accordingly, this paper reviews existing literature on social comparison and consumer behaviour with particular attention to the question of why Generation Z consumers may purchase non-essential products despite recognizing their limited practical utility.

By examining the roles of social comparison, social media, influencer culture, and FOMO, the review seeks to provide a clearer understanding of how symbolic and social considerations influence consumer decision-making in contemporary digital environments.

II. REVIEW METHOD

The present study adopts a narrative literature review approach to examine the relationship between social comparison and the purchase of non-essential products among Generation Z consumers. Relevant literature was identified through Google Scholar and academic databases using keywords such as "social comparison", "Generation Z", "social media consumption", "FOMO", "symbolic consumption", and "impulse buying". Preference was given to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2018 and 2023, along with foundational theoretical works relevant to the topic. The

selected studies were reviewed to identify recurring themes, theoretical perspectives, and research gaps related to comparison-driven consumption behaviour.

III. SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Social comparison is one of the most widely studied concepts in social psychology and provides an important foundation for understanding contemporary consumer behaviour. Festinger [1] proposed that individuals possess an inherent tendency to evaluate themselves by comparing their opinions, abilities, and achievements with those of others. Such comparisons help people understand their position within a social environment and form judgments about their own success, status, and identity.

Researchers generally distinguish between upward and downward social comparison. Upward comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves with people who are perceived to be more successful, attractive, or socially desirable, whereas downward comparison involves comparisons with individuals who are perceived to be worse off. Although both forms can influence behaviour, upward comparison is particularly relevant in consumer research because it often generates aspirations for self-improvement and social advancement [2].

Consumer behaviour researchers have increasingly recognized that purchasing decisions are not always driven by objective evaluations of product performance. Products frequently carry symbolic meanings that extend beyond their practical functions. Consumers may use products to communicate aspects of their identity, social position, and personal values [15].

Consequently, purchasing decisions often reflect social and psychological motivations in addition to functional considerations. Previous studies suggest that social comparison can strengthen materialistic tendencies and influence how consumers evaluate products [2]. When individuals are repeatedly exposed to people who appear more successful or socially admired, they may begin to associate certain products with desirable lifestyles and personal achievement. In such situations, products become symbols of status and social recognition rather than simply tools for satisfying practical needs.

An important concept related to this process is self-concept. Self-concept refers to an individual's perception of who they are and who they aspire to

become. Consumption frequently serves as a means of narrowing the gap between these two identities. Consumers may purchase products that reflect an idealized version of themselves or help project a desired image to others [15]. As a result, the perceived value of a product is often influenced by what it represents rather than what it objectively does. This observation helps explain the importance of symbolic consumption. Unlike utilitarian consumption, which focuses primarily on practical benefits, symbolic consumption emphasizes the social and psychological meanings associated with products. Fashion brands, premium accessories, lifestyle experiences, and certain food and beverage products often derive much of their value from symbolic associations. Consumers may therefore purchase such products because they communicate status, taste, or group membership rather than because they provide superior functional utility [15].

The literature also points to the role of compensatory consumption in comparison-driven purchasing behaviour. Compensatory consumption occurs when individuals use products to address perceived shortcomings related to self-esteem, achievement, or social standing [11].

When consumers perceive a gap between their current situation and the standards established through social comparison, purchasing desirable products may provide temporary psychological reassurance. In this sense, consumption can function as a coping mechanism as well as a means of self-expression.

However, the relationship between social comparison and consumption is not always straightforward. Not all consumers respond to comparison in the same way. Factors such as self-esteem, financial awareness, personal values, and confidence may influence whether social comparison translates into actual purchasing behaviour [8]. Similarly, increasing interest in sustainability and conscious consumption suggests that some consumers actively resist comparison-driven pressures and place greater emphasis on personal values when making purchasing decisions [9].

Taken together, the literature suggests that social comparison influences consumer behaviour by shaping aspirations, self-perceptions, and evaluations of product value. Importantly, these influences often extend beyond functional considerations and contribute to the growing importance of symbolic consumption. In contemporary digital environments, where opportunities for comparison are more frequent and visible than ever before,

understanding this process becomes particularly important. The following section examines how social media platforms, influencers, and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) intensify these comparison processes and shape purchasing behaviour among Generation Z consumers.

IV. SOCIAL MEDIA, INFLUENCERS, AND FEAR OF MISSING OUT (FOMO)

The growth of social media has significantly altered the context in which social comparison takes place. While individuals have always compared themselves with friends, colleagues, and family members, digital platforms have expanded both the scale and frequency of these comparisons. Social media allows users to observe the activities, lifestyles, and consumption choices of hundreds or even thousands of people on a daily basis [4], [12]. As a result, opportunities for comparison have become more immediate, continuous, and visible.

A defining characteristic of social media is the presentation of carefully curated content. Users typically share positive experiences, achievements, purchases, and memorable moments while omitting less desirable aspects of everyday life. Consequently, consumers are often exposed to idealized representations of reality rather than complete and balanced accounts of people's lives. Such exposure may encourage upward social comparison, leading individuals to perceive others as more successful, attractive, or socially fulfilled than themselves [3], [12].

Influencers have become particularly important within this environment. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers frequently build audiences by sharing aspects of their daily routines, personal preferences, and consumption habits. This perceived accessibility often makes them appear more relatable and trustworthy to followers [10]. As a result, products promoted by influencers may be viewed not simply as commercial offerings but as symbols associated with desirable lifestyles and identities.

Previous research suggests that interactions with influencer content can affect both consumer attitudes and purchasing intentions [10], [12]. Rather than evaluating products solely on the basis of functionality, consumers may begin to associate ownership with personal success, attractiveness, or social acceptance. In such situations, the perceived symbolic value of a product may

become more influential than its practical utility.

Another important concept within this context is Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). FOMO refers to the concern that others may be enjoying rewarding experiences from which one is excluded [10]. Social media platforms are particularly effective at generating such feelings because they provide continuous updates regarding social activities, purchases, and emerging trends.

Consumers are therefore constantly reminded of what others are doing, buying, or experiencing.

Research indicates that FOMO can increase consumers' willingness to participate in trends and make impulsive purchasing decisions [10], [13]. Products associated with viral trends, limited-time offers, or highly visible social experiences may become attractive not because they satisfy important needs, but because they reduce feelings of exclusion. In this sense, FOMO may influence how consumers evaluate product value by increasing the importance of social participation.

The relationship between social comparison and FOMO is especially relevant to the present study. Social comparison creates awareness of differences between oneself and others, while FOMO generates motivation to reduce those differences. Together, these processes may encourage consumers to prioritize symbolic and social rewards over functional considerations. For example, a consumer may recognize that a premium product offers only marginal practical advantages yet still perceive it as valuable because it contributes to social inclusion or self-presentation.

These effects appear particularly significant among Generation Z consumers, who spend considerable time engaging with digital platforms and often use social media as a means of identity expression and social interaction [4]. Products that receive high levels of visibility online may acquire social value that extends beyond their objective characteristics. Consequently, purchasing behaviour may increasingly reflect a desire for recognition, belonging, and identity expression rather than purely functional needs.

Overall, existing literature suggests that social media amplifies social comparison by increasing exposure to idealized lifestyles, strengthening influencer effects, and fostering FOMO. These mechanisms create conditions in which symbolic and social considerations may become more important than functional utility, thereby shaping the consumption decisions of Generation Z consumers.

V. SOCIAL COMPARISON AND THE PURCHASE OF NON-ESSENTIAL PRODUCTS

The existing literature suggests that consumer decisions cannot always be explained through traditional assumptions of rationality and utility maximization. While consumers often consider factors such as price, quality, and functionality, many purchasing decisions are also influenced by social and psychological motivations [15]. This observation is particularly relevant when examining the purchase of non-essential products.

Non-essential products refer to goods and services whose absence would not significantly affect an individual's ability to perform daily activities. Examples may include premium fashion products, luxury accessories, specialty beverages, cosmetics, collectibles, lifestyle subscriptions, and certain experience-based purchases. Although these products may provide some functional benefits, consumers frequently purchase them for reasons that extend beyond practical necessity [15].

A useful way of understanding this behaviour is by distinguishing between functional utility and symbolic value. Functional utility refers to the practical benefits derived from a product, such as performance, durability, convenience, or efficiency. Symbolic value, in contrast, refers to the meanings associated with a product, including status, identity, social belonging, and self-expression. While traditional economic models emphasize functional utility, consumer behaviour research suggests that symbolic value often plays an equally important role in purchase decisions [15].

Social comparison may influence this balance between utility and symbolism. When consumers compare themselves with individuals who possess desirable products or lifestyles, they may begin to associate certain products with social success, recognition, or personal achievement [2]. Consequently, products are evaluated not only in terms of what they do but also in terms of what they represent. Under such circumstances, symbolic value may become more influential than objective functionality. Previous studies have shown that upward social comparison can increase materialistic tendencies and encourage consumers to place greater importance on possessions as indicators of success [2]. Consumers may therefore pursue products that help communicate desirable identities or social positions. In such situations, purchasing decisions become closely linked to impression management and self-presentation rather than practical need.

The influence of symbolic value appears especially relevant in contemporary digital environments. Social media platforms provide opportunities for individuals to publicly display consumption choices and receive feedback from peers. Products that are visually appealing, trend-driven, or associated with influencers often acquire value because they contribute to online identity construction [12]. As a result, ownership itself may become a source of social meaning.

Consider, for example, the growing popularity of premium coffee chains and experience-oriented cafés in urban areas. From a purely functional perspective, consumers can obtain similar beverages at significantly lower prices elsewhere. Nevertheless, many consumers willingly pay a premium for products associated with particular brands, environments, or social experiences. The value of such purchases often extends beyond the product itself and includes symbolic benefits related to lifestyle, identity, and social participation.

Compensatory consumption provides another explanation for this behaviour. According to Reid-Partin and Chattaraman [11], consumers may engage in purchasing behaviour to compensate for perceived shortcomings related to self-esteem, achievement, or social status. When social comparison creates awareness of a gap between one's current self and an idealized self-image, purchasing desirable products may temporarily reduce psychological discomfort. The purchase therefore serves an emotional function in addition to any practical purpose it may provide.

Research also indicates that social comparison can influence purchasing behaviour indirectly through emotional responses. Liu et al. [3] found that upward comparisons on social networking sites may generate feelings such as dissatisfaction and rumination, which can subsequently increase impulse buying tendencies. Under these conditions, consumers may focus less on evaluating product utility and more on the anticipated emotional rewards associated with ownership.

The desire for social belonging further contributes to non-essential consumption. Individuals often seek acceptance within social groups and may use products to communicate membership in those groups [7], [14]. Ownership of certain products can signal shared interests, lifestyles, or values. Consequently, consumers may purchase products not because they are necessary but because they facilitate social inclusion and strengthen interpersonal connections. Taken together, the literature suggests that social comparison may alter the

criteria consumers use when evaluating products. Rather than relying exclusively on functional considerations, consumers increasingly consider symbolic, emotional, and social benefits. This shift helps explain why individuals may knowingly purchase products with limited practical utility. In many cases, the perceived value of social recognition, identity expression, or group belonging outweighs concerns regarding functionality. Although previous studies have examined materialism, impulse buying, and social media influence, comparatively little research has focused specifically on how social comparison affects consumers who consciously recognize the limited utility of the products they purchase. This issue represents an important gap in the literature and forms the basis for the future research directions discussed in the following section.

VI. RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The literature reviewed in this paper demonstrates that social comparison plays an important role in shaping consumer behaviour. Previous studies have established relationships between social comparison, social media engagement, influencer exposure, FOMO, and impulse buying [3], [10], [12], [13]. However, several important questions remain insufficiently explored.

First, much of the existing research focuses on whether social comparison increases purchase intentions or consumption behaviour. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding situations in which consumers consciously recognize that a product offers limited functional utility yet proceed with the purchase. Existing studies frequently examine impulse buying, materialism, or social media influence, but they rarely investigate how consumers evaluate and justify such purchases from their own perspective.

Second, the distinction between functional utility and symbolic value remains underdeveloped in the current literature. While researchers acknowledge that products often carry symbolic meanings, relatively few studies have examined how social comparison may alter the relative importance consumers assign to functional and symbolic product attributes. Understanding this process may provide deeper insights into why non-essential products continue to attract consumer interest despite offering limited practical benefits.

Third, much of the available evidence has been generated within Western contexts. As social media adoption continues to expand globally, there is a need for additional research examining whether similar patterns exist in emerging economies and culturally diverse environments.

Differences in social norms, economic conditions, and cultural values may influence the extent to which social comparison affects consumption decisions.

Based on these gaps, the present review proposes the following research question:

"How does social comparison influence Generation Z consumers' willingness to purchase non-essential products despite recognizing their limited functional utility?"

Addressing this question may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary consumer behaviour by moving beyond traditional explanations based solely on utility and rational choice. It may also help explain how symbolic value, identity-related motivations, and social influences shape purchasing decisions in increasingly digital and comparison-driven environments.

VII. CONCLUSION

The present review examined the relationship between social comparison and the purchase of non-essential products among Generation Z consumers. Drawing upon Social Comparison Theory and contemporary consumer behaviour literature, the review highlights how digital environments have increased opportunities for comparison and influenced the way consumers evaluate products. Social media platforms, influencer culture, and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) have collectively contributed to making consumption decisions increasingly visible and socially meaningful.

The literature suggests that consumer behaviour cannot always be explained through functional considerations alone. Products often carry symbolic meanings related to identity, status, self-expression, and social belonging. As a result, consumers may assign value to products not only because of what they do but also because of what they represent. Social comparison appears to play an important role in this process by encouraging individuals to evaluate themselves relative to others and by increasing the perceived desirability of certain products and lifestyles.

A central argument of this review is that many consumers knowingly purchase products with limited practical utility because the symbolic and social benefits associated with those products outweigh purely functional considerations. Whether through identity expression, social recognition, or participation in trends, consumption frequently serves purposes that extend beyond objective product performance.

Although previous studies have established links between social comparison, social media use, and purchasing behaviour, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how consumers justify purchases that they themselves recognize as non-essential. This represents an important area for future research, particularly as digital platforms continue to shape consumption patterns among younger generations.

Overall, the review suggests that understanding contemporary consumer behaviour requires moving beyond traditional notions of utility and considering the broader social and psychological meanings attached to consumption. Such an approach may provide deeper insights into the motivations underlying non-essential purchasing behaviour in increasingly comparison-driven digital environments.

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