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## Miscellaneous

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## Exploring the path from influencer exposure to purchase intention: the sequential mediation of FOMO and perceived self-enhancement

### Abstract

In the digital media era, influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful strategy that not only employs persuasive content but also triggers psychological responses, profoundly influencing consumer behavior. This study examines the relationship between exposure to social media influencer content and consumers' purchase intentions by employing a sequential mediation model including Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and perceived self-enhancement. The proposed model suggests that such exposure may be associated with FOMO, which in turn could be related to purchase intention via perceived self-enhancement. The data were collected through an online survey conducted among 441 social media users in Turkey who actively follow influencers and subsequently analyzed using regression techniques and the PROCESS Macro by Hayes (Models 4 and 6). The results indicate that exposure to influencers is significantly associated with both FOMO and

perceived self-enhancement, with both variables being related to purchase intention through direct and indirect pathways. Notably, FOMO functions as both a partial mediator and a precursor that activates perceived self-enhancement motives. These findings offer theoretical contributions to the emotional and motivational aspects of digital consumer behavior, while also providing practical insights for brands aiming to design psychologically resonant marketing messages.

### Keywords

**Influencer marketing, social media, influencer exposure, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), self-enhancement, purchase intention**

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### 1. Introduction

In today's digital landscape, marketing and advertising strategies are evolving rapidly alongside consumers' increasingly immersive engagement with social media platforms. With every passing day, the number of touchpoints between consumers and brands continues to grow (Akarsu & Sever, 2023). The number of global social media users is

projected to surpass 5.42 billion by 2025, with advertising revenues expected to exceed one trillion dollars (Scott-Dawkins, 2025). Amid this evolving ecosystem, influencer marketing has emerged as a strategic mechanism that shapes purchase decisions more effectively than traditional advertising, with the industry expected to reach \$32.55 billion by 2025 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025).

Recent surveys indicate that half of consumers report making purchases influenced by social media content, while most marketers regard influencer campaigns as highly effective (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025; Sprout Social, 2026). These statistics underscore the growing significance of influencer marketing in shaping consumer behavior. However, this influence extends beyond conventional forms of persuasion and operates through psychological processes that remain underexplored.

Prior research has examined factors such as perceived credibility, homophily, parasocial interactions, and emotional attachment in explaining influencer effectiveness (e.g., Jin & Ryu, 2020). Nevertheless, there has been limited empirical investigation into the underlying psychological mechanisms through which influencer content shapes consumer attitudes and decisions. In particular, the role of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and its sequential influence on consumption-related behaviors remains insufficiently theorized.

FOMO, defined as a pervasive anxiety that others are enjoying rewarding experiences in one's absence (Przybylski et al., 2013), is frequently triggered in social media environments that constantly expose users to curated content. By promoting aspirational lifestyles and specific consumption choices, influencers can create psychological pressure on their audiences. Studies show that such idealized portrayals can evoke envy and trigger compulsive buying (Chae, 2018; Jin & Ryu, 2020). More broadly, upward social comparisons on these platforms can harm individuals' well-being (Lee, 2014). Thus, influencers who display idealized lifestyles may foster harmful comparisons, leading to psychological strain (Vrontis et al., 2021). Such dynamics may not only encourage compulsive purchasing but also influence consumers' self-perceptions.

Self-enhancement theory posits that individuals are inherently motivated to maintain or elevate their perceived self-worth. According to Epstein (1973), people strive to construct a coherent and meaningful self-concept that fosters positive self-evaluation and a desire for social affirmation. Within this framework, FOMO may trigger compensatory self-enhancement mechanisms. However, the behavioral implications of this psychological process remain relatively understudied. Specifically, it is unclear whether the self-deficit induced by FOMO manifests in consumption as a means of restoring self-worth.

This study addresses this gap by empirically testing a sequential mediation model in which exposure to influencer content affects consumers' purchase intentions via FOMO and perceived self-enhancement. The proposed model follows the pathway: **influencer exposure** » **FOMO** » **self-enhancement** » **purchase intention**.<sup>1</sup> The empirical analysis relies on data collected from young Turkish social media users aged 18–35. This demographic focus provides valuable insights into a digitally active consumer group; however, it is important to recognize that the generalizability of the findings is limited beyond this specific age group.

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<sup>1</sup> This pathway is presented in simplified form for introductory clarity; the detailed proposed research model is elaborated in the method section (Figure 1).

## 2. Literature, conceptual framework, and hypotheses

This section integrates relevant literature and theoretical perspectives to construct the study's conceptual framework. While multiple hypotheses are developed to capture distinct theoretical pathways, they are all organized around a single overarching research question:

**RQ:** What roles do interconnected psychological mechanisms, such as FOMO and perceived self-enhancement, play in the relationship between influencers exposure and purchase intention?

### 2.1. *The influence of exposure to influencers on purchase intention*

The strategic use of opinion leaders to shape consumer decision-making has a long-standing history. In their seminal study on the 1940 U.S. presidential election, Lazarsfeld, et al. (1948) found that individuals were not primarily influenced by direct media messages but rather interpreted these messages through opinion leaders, especially among passive audience segments. This foundational insight laid the groundwork for the two-step flow of communication theory, which posits that mass media effects are mediated by trusted intermediaries (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2017). According to this theory, audiences rely more heavily on the interpretations and endorsements of credible figures rather than on direct media messages.

In today's digital media environment, the flow of information is no longer mediated solely by traditional opinion leaders. Algorithmically curated platforms and personalized content feeds have given rise to a complex, non-linear, and interactive communication structure (van Dijck et al., 2018). Within this evolving ecosystem, the role once held by traditional opinion leaders has gradually shifted to a new category of digital actors: influencers. Nevertheless, although influencers are often regarded as heirs to the tradition of opinion leadership, they are not conceptually identical. The classical opinion leaders described by Katz and Lazarsfeld (2017) were primarily defined by their positions within interpersonal networks and their role in mediating media messages within specific communities. In contrast, influencers, as digital actors, operate within platform ecosystems where visibility is shaped by algorithms, audiences are global in scope, and credibility is largely based on perceived authenticity, aesthetics, and lifestyle representation (Abidin, 2016; Kaur & Siddhey, 2024). While traditional opinion leaders produced more localized and relational forms of influence, influencers simultaneously occupy multiple roles, such as content creators and brand partners.

Influencers are individuals perceived as knowledgeable and credible within specific content domains who engage their audiences by producing personalized digital content (Glenister, 2024). Acting as intermediaries between brands and consumers, they mitigate the impersonal nature of traditional advertising. Their authenticity, transparency, and relatability have made them invaluable assets in contemporary marketing strategies (Kaur & Siddhey, 2024).

Influencers may shape consumer attitudes and behaviors through the content they share across various platforms. However, the effectiveness of their influence largely depends on repeated exposure to their content. According to Zajonc's (1968) mere exposure theory, familiarity generated through repeated exposure leads to increased affective preference. In the context of influencer marketing, algorithmic content recommendation systems and user behavior patterns jointly facilitate frequent and targeted exposure, thereby enhancing consumer receptivity to influencer messages and the brands they endorse.

Prior studies suggest that increased exposure to influencer content fosters deeper psychological engagement, including the formation of parasocial relationships, trust, and perceived similarity, which in turn shape consumer behavior (e.g., Islam et al., 2018; Ledbetter & Redd, 2016; Oyman & Akinci, 2019). These dynamics suggest that influencer effects extend beyond simple advertising to encompass complex psychological mechanisms. Moreover, research confirms both direct and indirect effects of influencer exposure on purchase intentions (e.g., Dinh et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2018). Building on this empirical and theoretical foundation, it is hypothesized that exposure to influencers is positively related to consumers' purchase intentions.

**Hypothesis 1 (H<sub>1</sub>):** Exposure to influencers is positively related to consumers' purchase intention.

## 2.2. *The role of FOMO*

While the concept of FOMO is not new, its psychological implications and scholarly attention have intensified with the rise of social media. Technological developments and greater access to digital tools have made information more readily available and increasingly addictive. Individuals can now access real-time updates about other people's lives, creating novel dynamics of visibility and comparison. Social media environments encourage users to share content constantly and compare their lives with the curated lives of others. Continuous connectivity and exposure to curated experiences can trigger dissatisfaction, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy, leaving individuals feeling less fulfilled with their lives (Abel et al., 2016). A primary cause of this dissatisfaction is FOMO, defined as a pervasive anxiety that rewarding experiences may occur elsewhere without one's participation. This emotional state is closely tied to the urge to stay connected to what others are doing (Przybylski et al., 2013).

The literature indicates that most studies on FOMO have focused on its psychological antecedents and outcomes beyond the marketing domain (e.g., Abel et al., 2016; Przybylski et al., 2013). These studies often associate FOMO with negative psychological and physical consequences as well as problematic social media use (e.g., Oberst et al., 2017; Tanhan et al., 2022). Individuals who report higher levels of FOMO have been found to exhibit more depressive symptoms, reduced mindful attention, and more frequent psychosomatic complaints (Baker et al., 2016).

Recent studies conceptualize FOMO not merely as a stable personal trait but as a situational construct, especially in consumer behavior research (Good & Hyman, 2020a). Based on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals tend to evaluate themselves by comparing their lives with those of others. Exposure to curated representations of others' experiences on social media can lead to fear of failure, fear of inadequacy, and FOMO on socially valued experiences (Azhari & Roosdhani, 2025). Social comparison theory thus serves as a key theoretical foundation for explaining how exposure to others' idealized experiences leads to the emergence and intensification of FOMO.

Influencers often present appealing lifestyles, high consumption, and seemingly unattainable experiences (Abidin, 2016). Exposure to influencers reinforces constant comparison and intensifies the desire for social approval, visibility, and inclusion, heightening FOMO (Casale & Banchi, 2020; Yang, 2016). On visual platforms such as Instagram, the constant display of idealized lifestyles can trigger upward social comparisons, causing individuals to experience heightened feelings of inadequacy and FOMO (Alfina et al., 2023). Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 2 (H<sub>2</sub>):** Exposure to influencers is positively related to FOMO.

FOMO is not only an emotional response but also a psychological effect that can be triggered by marketing tactics (Hodkinson, 2019). Consumers tend to pay more for products or experiences they perceive as scarce or time-limited (Zhang et al., 2020). Marketers often use FOMO-based appeals to reduce consumer hesitation and increase purchase intention. Studies also show that FOMO can contribute to post-purchase regret, dissatisfaction, and the desire to relive an experience (Çelik et al., 2019; Good & Hyman, 2020b).

FOMO elicits emotional responses that influence consumer behavior. While it can sometimes result in post-purchase dissatisfaction, it can also foster subconscious positive evaluations and brand preference, thereby encouraging repeat purchases (Alfina et al., 2023). Research supports a strong positive relationship between FOMO and purchase intention (Good & Hyman, 2020a; Good & Hyman, 2020b; Morsi et al., 2025). Some studies also demonstrate the mediating role of FOMO between scarcity perceptions and impulse buying tendencies (e.g., Zhang et al., 2021). These findings highlight that FOMO is not simply a form of social anxiety but rather a powerful underlying psychological driver of consumer decision-making (Flecha Ortiz et al., 2024). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 3 (H<sub>3</sub>):** FOMO is positively related to consumers' purchase intention.

FOMO triggers a fear of being left behind and heightens the desire for social status, often motivating individuals to consume prestigious or trendy products (Dinh & Lee, 2022). Observing others' brand preferences can increase conformity-related anxiety and drive purchases motivated by FOMO (Kang et al., 2019). Failing to obtain influencer-recommended products can intensify feelings of missed opportunities and social exclusion. In this context, FOMO may serve as a key mediating factor. Studies show that FOMO mediates the relationship between influencers' persuasive efforts and consumer outcomes. For instance, Flecha Ortiz et al. (2024) identified FOMO as a mediating mechanism between social media use and purchase intention.

Furthermore, influencer content often triggers FOMO by presenting idealized lifestyles, thereby prompting social comparison. This emotional response leads consumers to make faster, emotion-driven purchases to mitigate FOMO (Good & Hyman, 2020a). FOMO may therefore mediate the impact of influencer exposure on purchase intention. As a powerful affective antecedent of purchasing behavior, FOMO plays a central role in shaping consumer psychology within digital environments (Alfina et al., 2023; Hodkinson, 2019). Based on this perspective, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 4 (H<sub>4</sub>):** FOMO mediates the relationship between exposure to influencers and consumers' purchase intention.

### 2.3. *The role of perceived self-enhancement*

Alicke and Sedikides (2009) describe individuals' efforts to seek positive and avoid negative experiences as a fundamental psychological principle. Human behavior is driven by motives such as the desire for social approval or the need for achievement. Motives serve as mediating variables that activate behavior and are fueled by diverse sources to meet psychological needs (Reeve, 2009). Self-enhancement is defined as the tendency to maintain a positively biased self-view (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Individuals may enhance themselves by emphasizing positive traits (self-advancement) or downplaying negative ones (self-protection). People with high self-esteem are more likely to engage in self-advancement, whereas those with low self-esteem tend to focus on self-protection (Tice, 1991). Self-enhancement is often observed when individuals assess their abilities and attributes (White & Plous, 1995). These strategies can reduce anxiety, boost confidence, and enhance well-

being (Vanyperen, 1992). However, unrealistic self-perceptions may lead to conflict and maladaptive outcomes.

A significant portion of consumers use social media to enhance their self-image (Vargo et al., 2019). Social media is a primary space where individuals engage in social comparisons. Influencers often portray desirable lifestyles in their posts (Marwick, 2015). Continuous exposure to such content can trigger upward social comparisons, which may threaten individuals' sense of self (Chae, 2018). In response, individuals may adopt self-enhancement strategies to preserve or reconstruct a coherent sense of self. When influencers present idealized lifestyles, they activate a motivation in their audiences to be “like them,” which can manifest in consumption, appearance management, or the pursuit of social approval (de Veirman et al., 2017; Marwick, 2015).

Within social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), exposure to influencers may lead individuals to perceive a gap between their lives and the idealized lifestyles of influencers. This perceived gap may motivate individuals to reevaluate themselves positively and strive toward those ideals. Frequent exposure to influencer content may not only lead individuals to admire such lifestyles but also strengthen their self-enhancement motives driven by the desire to close this gap. Hence, exposure to influencer content may directly stimulate the desire to reconstruct one's self-concept more positively.

**Hypothesis 5 (H<sub>5</sub>):** Exposure to influencers is positively related to perceived self-enhancement.

The theoretical framework linking FOMO to self-enhancement is rooted in the psychological threat perceptions triggered by such emotions. The self-enhancement motive is typically activated by external cues such as upward comparisons, positive feedback, or threatening experiences (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). According to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), the greater the discrepancy between one's actual and ideal selves, the more likely one is to experience frustration, inadequacy, and threat. For individuals with high levels of FOMO, this discrepancy becomes more salient as they experience constant exposure to idealized lifestyles on social media, thereby intensifying upward comparisons. This process often leads to negative self-evaluations, heightening the tendency to engage in compensatory self-enhancement strategies.

FOMO generates feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and exclusion, which may disrupt self-concept clarity (Abel et al., 2016). In such cases, individuals may pursue self-enhancement as a means of restoring perceived social worth, gaining status, and reinforcing personal value (Riordan et al., 2015). The self-enhancement needs triggered by FOMO reflect the desire to be seen as worthy, capable, and socially accepted. Good and Hyman (2020b) found that individuals with higher FOMO levels show stronger self-enhancement tendencies. Thus, FOMO can be understood as a psychological deficit that triggers compensatory self-enhancement.

**Hypothesis 6 (H<sub>6</sub>):** FOMO is positively related to perceived self-enhancement.

Consumers often compare themselves with influencers and purchase luxury products to attain a similar social status (Lee & Watkins, 2016). These upward comparisons reflect an underlying motive to enhance social standing. The drive for self-enhancement represents the aspiration to feel more valuable, competent, and socially recognized. Consequently, consumers seek both functional and symbolic value in products (Kim & Johnson, 2016). On social media, users express their identities through consumption to enhance their social image (de Veirman et al., 2017; Lee & Watkins, 2016). Therefore, the desire for self-enhancement can serve as a strong predictor of purchase intention.

**Hypothesis 7 (H<sub>7</sub>):** Perceived self-enhancement is positively related to consumers' purchase intention.

Exposure to influencer content triggers psychological responses rooted in social comparison. When influencers portray idealized lifestyles, viewers may experience feelings of exclusion and social inferiority, which intensify FOMO (Przybylski et al., 2013). FOMO then deepens the perceived gap between the actual and ideal self, leading to the adoption of self-enhancement strategies aimed at closing that gap (Higgins, 1987; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). The self-enhancement needs triggered by FOMO reflect the desire to be seen as more capable, socially accepted, and validated. On social media, user-generated brand content may trigger both emotional and cognitive responses that influence consumption behavior (Kim & Johnson, 2016). Feelings of exclusion and the need for self-enhancement may jointly drive stronger purchase intentions. Such behavior satisfies not only the consumer's desire for social validation and relevance but also addresses the deeper need for self-enhancement. Therefore, the relationship between FOMO and purchase intention is not simply unidirectional or direct; it is mediated by perceived self-enhancement.

**Hypothesis 8 (H<sub>8</sub>):** Perceived self-enhancement mediates the relationship between FOMO and consumers' purchase intention.

In conclusion, self-enhancement serves as a key psychological mechanism through which individuals seek to preserve self-integrity and gain social affirmation. This motive influences various domains, from social media use and consumer behavior to interpersonal relationships and subjective well-being. Frequent exposure to influencers may amplify both FOMO and the perceived gap between one's actual and ideal self, thereby motivating consumers to act. In such cases, increased FOMO and activated self-enhancement needs may jointly strengthen purchase intentions. Consumers may, for instance, opt for higher-end products to avoid missing out or to affirm their status among peers (Abel et al., 2016). Consequently, the relationship between influencer exposure and purchase intention may operate not only through a direct pathway but also through a sequential psychological mechanism: first via heightened FOMO, followed by the activation of self-enhancement needs.

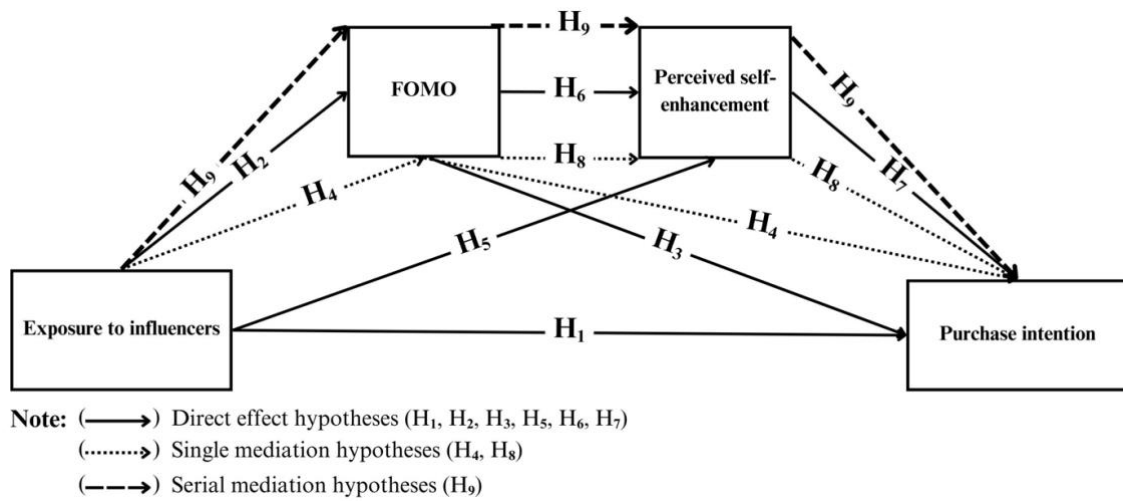
**Hypothesis 9 (H<sub>9</sub>):** FOMO and perceived self-enhancement sequentially mediate the relationship between exposure to influencers and consumers' purchase intention.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Study design and procedure

This study employs a quantitative research design to test a sequential mediation model that examines the psychological mechanisms relating exposure to influencers and consumers' purchase intention. The model is grounded in theoretical assumptions and supported by prior empirical evidence, incorporating the mediating roles of FOMO and perceived self-enhancement. Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual model.

**Figure 1.** Proposed research model and hypotheses



Source: author's own elaboration.

Data were collected through an online survey conducted between December 2023 and February 2024. The questionnaire included validated multi-item scales measuring four primary constructs: exposure to influencers, FOMO, perceived self-enhancement, and purchase intention. Additional items assessed participants' social media use, influencer interaction behaviors, and demographic characteristics. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. To ensure data quality, an attention-check question was embedded in the questionnaire. Participants were required to actively follow at least one social media influencer to ensure meaningful exposure to influencer content. The research received approval from the Ethics Committee of Anadolu University (Decision No. 2023/12, dated December 4, 2023).

The research was conducted in Turkey with participants aged between 18 and 35, who represent the country's most digitally active consumers. According to the We Are Social (2025) report, Turkey has 58.5 million social media users who spend over seven hours online daily, nearly three hours on social media.

Research indicates that Turkish youth are highly receptive to influencer marketing and perceive influencers as role models who shape their consumption preferences and purchasing decisions (e.g., Gülmez et al., 2025; Kalfa & Ergül, 2024). Moreover, cultural traits such as collectivist orientations and heightened sensitivity to social approval may intensify psychological mechanisms like FOMO and self-enhancement compared to more individualistic societies (Kang & Ma, 2020; Karimkhan & Chapa, 2021). These dynamics point to Turkey as a suitable context for research on consumer psychology in digital media.

### 3.2. Data analyses

All analyses were conducted using SPSS 28 and JASP. Mediation effects were tested using Hayes' PROCESS Macro, applying Model 4 for testing the single mediation hypotheses (H<sub>4</sub> and H<sub>8</sub>) and Model 6 for the sequential mediation hypothesis (H<sub>9</sub>). Indirect effects were estimated using 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

Measurement validity was assessed through confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). Convergent and discriminant validity were evaluated using composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), Fornell-Larcker criterion, and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios. To address common method variance (CMV), a single-factor CFA was performed. Additionally,



demographic covariates (age, gender, and income) were included in robustness checks to reduce potential confounding effects.

### 3.3. Participants

Following Hair et al. (2010), a serial mediation analysis was conducted with a minimum target of 20 participants per item to ensure statistical power. Accordingly, the required sample size was 400 participants. The online survey was distributed to 449 individuals, and after excluding invalid cases, 441 valid responses were retained for analysis.

Among the participants, the majority were women ( $n = 225$ ) aged 18–35 years. Most participants reported Instagram as their preferred social media platform ( $n = 343$ ). Demographics are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participants information ( $N = 441$ )

| Variable               |                     | <i>N</i> | %    |
|------------------------|---------------------|----------|------|
| Gender                 | Man                 | 216      | 49.0 |
|                        | Woman               | 225      | 51.0 |
| Age                    | 18-24               | 354      | 80.3 |
|                        | 25-35               | 87       | 19.7 |
| Education              | Associate degree    | 35       | 7.9  |
|                        | Bachelor's degree   | 351      | 79.6 |
|                        | Master's degree     | 32       | 7.3  |
|                        | Doctoral degree     | 23       | 5.2  |
| Average Monthly Income | 0 – 5000 TRY        | 193      | 43.8 |
|                        | 5001 – 10000 TRY    | 103      | 23.4 |
|                        | 10001 – 15000 TRY   | 40       | 9.1  |
|                        | 15001 – 20000 TRY   | 35       | 7.9  |
|                        | More than 20000 TRY | 70       | 15.9 |
| Preferred Platform     | Instagram           | 343      | 77.8 |
|                        | YouTube             | 59       | 13.4 |
|                        | TikTok              | 28       | 6.3  |
|                        | Other               | 11       | 2.5  |
| Followed Influencers   | 1 – 5               | 263      | 59.6 |
|                        | 6 – 10              | 85       | 19.3 |
|                        | 11 – 15             | 41       | 9.3  |
|                        | More than 15        | 52       | 11.8 |

Source: author's own elaboration.

### 3.4. Research variables and measurements

#### 3.4.1. Independent variable: Exposure to influencers

Exposure to influencers was measured using a six-item scale originally developed by Ellison et al. (2007) and later adapted to the social media context by Ross et al. (2009) and Dinh et al. (2023). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale.

The internal consistency of the scale was satisfactory (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ;  $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = .847$ ). EFA (Maximum Likelihood, Varimax rotation) revealed factor loadings ranging from .546 to .746. CFA indicated acceptable model fit: CFI = .962, TLI = .929, SRMR = .036, RMSEA = .095, 90% CI [.090, .144]. While the RMSEA value (.095) slightly exceeded the recommended threshold

of .08, it remained within the acceptable range according to Browne and Cudeck's (1993) criteria, which suggest that values up to .10 indicate an acceptable model fit in behavioral research contexts. Convergent validity and composite reliability were assessed, with AVE = .44 and CR = .825, respectively. Although the AVE value (.44) was slightly below the recommended .50 threshold, CR exceeded the .70 benchmark, supporting adequate construct reliability. As Fornell and Larcker (1981) note, AVE is a conservative criterion, and acceptable CR alone may indicate sufficient convergent validity. Malhotra and Dash (2016) further highlight that standardized parameter estimates should also be interpreted to ensure they are meaningful and theoretically consistent. In this study, all standardized loadings were significant, internal consistency was satisfactory, and overall model fit was acceptable, indicating that the construct demonstrates adequate reliability and convergent validity. Nevertheless, the relatively modest AVE value should be acknowledged as a study limitation.

#### **3.4.2. Dependent variable: Purchase intention**

Purchase intention was measured using a three-item scale developed by Dinh and Lee (2022) to assess individuals' tendency to purchase products recommended by influencers. The scale employed a seven-point Likert scale format.

The internal consistency of the scale was acceptable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ;  $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = .905$ ). EFA revealed factor loadings ranging from .560 to .852. The scale demonstrated satisfactory convergent validity and composite reliability (AVE = .554, CR = .783).

#### **3.4.3. Mediating variable: FOMO**

FOMO was measured using an eight-item scale developed by Good and Hyman (2020a). The items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale.

The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ;  $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = .617$ ). EFA revealed factor loadings ranging from .622 to .874. CFA indicated a strong model fit: CFI = .981, TLI = .965, SRMR = .021, and RMSEA = .087 (90% CI [.066, .109]). The construct also exhibited strong convergent validity and composite reliability (AVE = .617, CR = .927).

#### **3.4.4. Mediating variable: Perceived self-enhancement**

Perceived self-enhancement was measured using a three-item scale developed by Good and Hyman to assess individuals' tendencies to construct a positive self-image and enhance their self-worth. The scale employed a seven-point Likert format.

The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ;  $M = 1.52$ ,  $SD = .654$ ). Factor loadings ranged between .738 and .855. The scale also showed high levels of convergent validity and composite reliability, with AVE = .661 and CR = .854.

Furthermore, the assessment of discriminant validity using both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratios revealed that the square root of each construct's AVE exceeded its correlations with other constructs, and all HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of .85. These results confirm that the constructs in the model meet the established criteria and demonstrate adequate discriminant validity.

### **4. Findings**

#### **4.1. Hypothesis testing: Direct effects**

The results of the linear regression analyses testing the direct effects proposed in the model are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Summary of linear regression results for direct effects ( $N = 441$ )

| Hypothesis     | Independent Variable       | Dependent Variable         | $\beta$ | SE    | $t$    | $p$    | $R^2$ |
|----------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------|-------|--------|--------|-------|
| H <sub>1</sub> | Exposure to influencers    | Purchase intention         | 0.566   | 0.052 | 14.38  | < .001 | 0.320 |
| H <sub>2</sub> | Exposure to influencers    | FOMO                       | 0.678   | 0.031 | 19.331 | < .001 | 0.460 |
| H <sub>3</sub> | FOMO                       | Purchase intention         | 0.72    | 0.033 | 21.749 | < .001 | 0.518 |
| H <sub>5</sub> | Exposure to influencers    | Perceived self-enhancement | 0.552   | 0.037 | 13.874 | < .001 | 0.305 |
| H <sub>6</sub> | FOMO                       | Perceived self-enhancement | 0.709   | 0.034 | 21.037 | < .001 | 0.501 |
| H <sub>7</sub> | Perceived self-enhancement | Purchase intention         | 0.646   | 0.052 | 17.752 | < .001 | 0.418 |

Source: author's own elaboration.

*H<sub>1</sub>: Exposure to influencers is positively related to consumers' purchase intention.*

Exposure to influencers was significantly and positively associated with purchase intention ( $\beta = .566$ ,  $SE = .052$ ,  $t(439) = 14.380$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with the model explaining 32% of the variance ( $R^2 = .320$ ).

These results suggest that exposure to influencer content is positively related to consumers' willingness to purchase the promoted products or services. From a social influence perspective, influencer content may serve as a persuasive mechanism by blending authenticity, aspirational value, and trust, which could contribute to purchase intentions more effectively than traditional advertising. In this context, influencer exposure appears to represent a meaningful form of digital contact related to purchase intention. Therefore, H<sub>1</sub> is supported.

*H<sub>2</sub>: Exposure to influencers is positively related to FOMO.*

Exposure to influencers was found to have a strong positive relationship with FOMO ( $\beta = .678$ ,  $SE = .031$ ,  $t(439) = 19.331$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The model showed high explanatory power ( $R^2 = .460$ ).

This result suggests that individuals who are frequently exposed to influencer content are more likely to experience FOMO. Consistent with social comparison theory, exposure to idealized lifestyles and constant updates can be interpreted as an environmental cue associated with amplified FOMO-related emotional responses. This provides support for H<sub>2</sub>.

*H<sub>3</sub>: FOMO is positively related to purchase intention.*

FOMO showed a significant positive relationship with purchase intention ( $\beta = .720$ ,  $SE = .033$ ,  $t(439) = 21.749$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with the model explaining 51.8% of the variance ( $R^2 = .518$ ).

This finding suggests that higher levels of FOMO are linked to stronger intentions to purchase the products or services featured in influencer content. FOMO may increase perceptions of social exclusion, missed opportunities, or limited access. These perceptions may act as psychological drivers that accelerate consumers' decision-making. Therefore, H<sub>3</sub> is supported.

*H<sub>5</sub>: Exposure to influencers is positively related to perceived self-enhancement.*

Exposure to influencers was found to have a significant positive relationship with perceived self-enhancement ( $\beta = .552$ ,  $SE = .037$ ,  $t(439) = 13.874$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The model explained 30.5% of the variance ( $R^2 = .305$ ).

These findings suggest that frequent exposure to influencer content may encourage self-enhancement needs, such as feeling more valuable, socially accepted, and closer to one's ideal self. Such content may also trigger social comparison and self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987), activating self-enhancement mechanisms that restore self-worth. Therefore,  $H_5$  is supported.

*H<sub>6</sub>: FOMO is positively related to perceived self-enhancement.*

FOMO was positively associated with perceived self-enhancement ( $\beta = .709$ ,  $SE = .034$ ,  $t(439) = 21.037$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with a high explanatory power ( $R^2 = .501$ ).

This result indicates that individuals with higher FOMO levels may seek social validation and empowerment through influencer content. The emotional discomfort associated with FOMO, such as feelings of exclusion and inadequacy, may trigger coping mechanisms that restore self-worth, thereby enhancing perceived self-enhancement. Hence,  $H_6$  is supported.

*H<sub>7</sub>: Perceived self-enhancement is positively related to purchase intention.*

Perceived self-enhancement was found to be significantly and positively associated with purchase intention ( $\beta = .646$ ,  $SE = .052$ ,  $t(439) = 17.752$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The model explained 41.8% of the variance ( $R^2 = .418$ ).

This finding suggests that when individuals report stronger self-enhancement needs in relation to influencer content, they may also report higher intentions to purchase associated products or services. The motivation to satisfy self-enhancement needs can be linked to desires for social acceptance, valuation, and recognition, which may contribute to purchase decisions that extend beyond functional purposes and reflect psychological fulfillment and identity expression. This provides support for  $H_7$ .

## 4.2. Hypothesis testing: Mediation effects

### 4.2.1. Single mediation effects

This section examines the mediating role of FOMO in the relationship between exposure to influencers and purchase intention, as well as the mediating role of perceived self-enhancement in the relationship between FOMO and purchase intention. The statistical findings are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Results of single mediation analyses

|    | Pathway     | Direct Effect ( $\beta$ ) | Indirect Effect ( $\beta$ ) | Total Effect ( $\beta$ ) | SE    | z      | p     | 95% CI         | Mediation Type |
|----|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------|--------|-------|----------------|----------------|
| H4 | EI→FOMO→PI  | 0.169                     | 0.499                       | 0.668                    | 0.052 | 3.230  | <.001 | [0.423, 0.583] | Partial        |
| H8 | FOMO→PSE→PI | 0.693                     | 0.255                       | 0.948                    | 0.059 | 11.706 | <.001 | [0.173, 0.350] | Partial        |

Source: author's own elaboration.

*H<sub>4</sub>: FOMO mediates the relationship between exposure to influencers and purchase intention.*

The direct effect of exposure to influencers on purchase intention was significant ( $\beta = 0.169$ ,  $SE = 0.052$ ,  $z = 3.230$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The indirect effect through FOMO was also significant ( $\beta = 0.499$ ,  $SE = 0.044$ ,  $z = 11.358$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The total effect of the relationship was calculated as  $\beta = 0.668$ .

These findings suggest that exposure to influencer content is statistically associated with higher levels of FOMO, which in turn is related to stronger intentions to purchase. FOMO may serve as a psychological amplifier by heightening consumers' sensitivity to missed opportunities and social exclusion, thereby contributing to compensatory behavioral responses. As the direct effect remains significant alongside the indirect path, the results support a pattern of partial mediation, consistent with H<sub>4</sub>.

*H<sub>8</sub>: Perceived self-enhancement mediates the relationship between FOMO and purchase intention.*

The role of perceived self-enhancement in explaining the association between FOMO and individuals' purchase intention was found to be statistically significant. The direct effect of FOMO on purchase intention was significant ( $\beta = 0.693$ ,  $SE = 0.059$ ,  $z = 11.706$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Additionally, the indirect effect of FOMO on purchase intention through perceived self-enhancement was also significant ( $\beta = 0.255$ ,  $SE = 0.044$ ,  $z = 5.842$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The total effect was calculated as  $\beta = 0.948$ .

These findings indicate that FOMO is not only linked to heightened social anxiety but also related to a perceived threat to one's self-worth and personal coherence. In response, individuals may attempt to reconstruct their self-concept in a more positive direction. When this internal restructuring aligns with the desire for social validation through consumption, purchase intention tends to increase. Overall, perceived self-enhancement appears to function as a partial mediator in the relationship between FOMO and purchase intention. Taken together, the results are consistent with H<sub>8</sub>.

#### 4.2.2. Serial mediation effect

This section examines whether FOMO and perceived self-enhancement sequentially mediate the relationship between exposure to influencers and purchase intention. Specifically, the indirect effect of influencer exposure on purchase intention through FOMO and subsequently through perceived self-enhancement was examined. The statistical findings are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Results of serial mediation analyses

|    | Pathway        | Direct Effect ( $\beta$ ) | Indirect Effect ( $\beta$ ) | Total Effect ( $\beta$ ) | SE    | z     | p     | 95% CI         | Mediation Type    |
|----|----------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------|-------|-------|----------------|-------------------|
| H9 | EI→FOMO→PSE→PI | 0.169                     | 0.168                       | 0.337                    | 0.032 | 5.287 | <.001 | [0.110, 0.233] | Partial<br>Serial |

Source: author's own elaboration.

*H<sub>9</sub>: FOMO and perceived self-enhancement sequentially mediate the relationship between exposure to influencers and consumers' purchase intention.*

According to the results of the serial mediation analysis, the indirect effect of exposure to influencers on purchase intention through the sequential pathway of FOMO followed by perceived self-enhancement was found to be statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.168$ ,  $SE = 0.032$ ,  $z = 5.287$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [0.110, 0.233] did not include zero, confirming the robustness and statistical significance of the sequential mediation effect. This sequential mediation suggests that exposure to influencer content is statistically associated with levels of FOMO, which in turn may be linked to a perceived need for self-enhancement, and together these dynamics are related to enhancing their purchase intention.

In addition, the direct relationship between influencer exposure and purchase intention also remained statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.169$ ,  $p = .001$ ). This result suggests that the serial mediation should be interpreted as partial rather than full. In other words, the association between exposure to influencer content and purchase intention is observed not only indirectly through the psychological mechanisms of FOMO and self-enhancement, but also directly.

These findings highlight the potential operation of layered psychological mechanisms underlying digital consumer behavior, particularly those involving affective and motivational dynamics. Influencer content may contribute to heightened perceptions of being left behind or socially excluded, which in turn can be linked to experiences of FOMO. When such perceptions are connected to threats to one's sense of self-worth or personal coherence, individuals may engage in self-enhancement strategies. Such strategies, including consumption decisions, can be interpreted as ways of restoring or reinforcing a sense of social value, acceptance, or belonging.

Overall, these results suggest that individuals exposed to influencer content tend to experience higher levels of FOMO, which in turn appears to be related to their perceived self-enhancement. Together, these two interconnected psychological mechanisms are associated with purchase intention. Taken together, the findings appear to be consistent with  $H_9$ .

#### 4.2.3. Summary of findings and supported hypotheses

The results revealed that all nine hypotheses proposed within the conceptual model were statistically supported. Exposure to influencers was statistically associated with purchase intention ( $H_1$ ), FOMO ( $H_2$ ), and perceived self-enhancement ( $H_3$ ). FOMO, in turn, showed positive relations with both purchase intention ( $H_3$ ) and perceived self-enhancement ( $H_6$ ). Perceived self-enhancement was also observed in relation to purchase intention ( $H_7$ ). In addition, FOMO appeared to partially mediate the association between exposure to influencers and purchase intention ( $H_4$ ), while perceived self-enhancement partially mediated the pathway between FOMO and purchase intention ( $H_8$ ). Finally, the sequential mediation of FOMO and perceived self-enhancement in the relationship between exposure to influencers and purchase intention was consistent with partial mediation ( $H_9$ ).

Furthermore, robustness checks were conducted by re-estimating the mediation models with the inclusion of demographic covariates (gender, age group, and income). The sequential indirect association between exposure to influencers and purchase intention via FOMO and perceived self-enhancement remained statistically significant ( $ab = .019$ , 95% CI [.001, .044]), suggesting that the support for  $H_9$  was not substantially affected. The indirect pathway from exposure to influencers to purchase intention through FOMO alone also remained significant ( $ab = .078$ , 95% CI [.023, .145]), which appears consistent with  $H_4$ . Similarly, the mediating role of perceived self-enhancement in the association between FOMO and purchase intention ( $H_8$ ) showed comparable patterns after the inclusion of covariates. Overall, these additional analyses indicate that the psychological mechanisms examined may demonstrate some degree of robustness across demographic differences, although alternative explanations cannot be entirely excluded.

Overall, the findings suggest that exposure to influencer content is related to consumers' purchase intention not only directly but also indirectly through distinct psychological mechanisms. Both the simple and sequential mediation pathways proved to be statistically significant and aligned with the proposed theoretical framework.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated how exposure to social media influencers is associated with consumers' purchase intentions through two interconnected psychological mechanisms: FOMO and perceived self-enhancement. The findings support the proposed sequential mediation model and offer original theoretical contributions to the digital consumer behavior literature. The results demonstrate that influencer exposure has both direct and indirect associations with purchase intention. The finding that exposure shows a positive relationship with purchase intention aligns with prior studies emphasizing the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies (e.g., Dinh et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2018). This suggests that influencer content not only raises awareness but also appears to be related to individuals' decision-making processes. Therefore, influencers emerge not merely as product endorsers but as important social agents connected to individuals' self-perceptions, emotional responses, and comparative judgments.

Within the framework of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), repeated exposure to idealized content elicits upward social comparisons and may trigger FOMO. While prior research (e.g., Abel et al., 2016; Baker et al., 2016) has primarily focused on the negative psychological outcomes of FOMO, this study extends the literature by framing FOMO as a context-dependent motivational construct with behavioral consequences. Furthermore, the findings indicate that FOMO not only has a direct link to purchase intention but is also associated with self-enhancement motivation, representing the study's second major theoretical contribution.

Interpreted through the lens of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), FOMO may widen the gap between the actual and ideal self, which in turn can encourage self-enhancement strategies and make consumer behavior more identity-driven and emotionally charged. This finding is consistent with insights from Riordan et al. (2015) and Good and Hyman (2020b), while the proposed sequential mediation model advances the literature by positioning FOMO as a precursor to self-enhancement.

The positive relationship between self-enhancement and purchase intention suggests that consumers may be motivated not only by utilitarian needs but also by desires for status, social approval, and self-reconstruction. While the symbolic dimension of consumption has been highlighted in studies by Kim and Johnson (2016) and Lee and Watkins (2016), this research deepens understanding by framing influencer content through its emotional and identity-related effects. Beyond merely linking FOMO and self-enhancement, the proposed model interprets influencer impact as a dynamic, multilayered psychological process. It outlines an integrated structure operating across cognitive (exposure), emotional (feelings of lack and exclusion), motivational (need for self-enhancement), and behavioral (purchase intention) levels. Thus, the effectiveness of influencer marketing should be linked not only to content quality but also to the psychological mechanisms it activates.

### 5.1. Theoretical and practical contributions

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in its suggestion that purchase behavior, typically framed in the influencer marketing literature as a direct outcome, can also be explained through psychological mediation processes involving FOMO and self-enhancement. By addressing not only consumers' behavioral tendencies but also the cognitive and emotional processes that underline them, the research model provides a more holistic framework for the literature.

Furthermore, the study offers a novel theoretical extension by integrating self-enhancement theory with FOMO, a socially constructed, digitally amplified phenomenon. By

revealing FOMO not only as a form of anxiety but also as a construct that can be associated with self-restoration efforts, the study fills a notable gap in the literature.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that influencer content that induces FOMO through tactics such as limited-time offers or exclusive access can be a highly effective marketing strategy. Similarly, content that inspires aspirations of self-fulfillment and self-enhancement can appeal to consumers' psychological needs and increase their purchase intention. For brands, this suggests that effective marketing strategies should emphasize not only product attributes but also their potential to resonate with and enhance consumers' social and psychological identities. In sum, this research bridges theoretical perspectives on psychological motivation with practical imperatives in influencer marketing, advancing both academic understanding and applied strategy.

## 5.2. Limitations and future research

As with all empirical research, this study has several limitations. First, the study utilized a cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Future studies that employ experimental or longitudinal designs could provide stronger causal inferences.

Second, although Turkey provides a suitable context due to its high social media use and collectivist culture, the sample's demographic characteristics limit the generalizability of the findings. The study focused on Turkish users aged 18–35, who are highly active online but not representative of global consumers. Cultural orientations, such as individualism and collectivism, may influence the psychological effects of FOMO and self-enhancement. Future research is needed to validate and extend the model in cross-cultural settings. In addition, gender differences should also be examined as a potential moderating factor.

Third, although demographic variables (gender, age group, and income) were included in robustness analyses to reduce the likelihood of confounding effects, other dispositional traits such as materialism, social desirability, or the intensity of social media use were not measured, which limits the study's ability to fully eliminate alternative explanations. Future research could incorporate these factors.

Fourth, the study focused only on FOMO and self-enhancement as mediating variables, excluding other psychological constructs that may also be associated with digital consumer behavior. For example, the need for social approval, materialistic values, or digital narcissism could play an important role. These factors may also be closely linked to how consumers experience FOMO or engage in self-enhancement processes. Future research could incorporate these dimensions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying digital consumer behavior.

Fifth, since all data were collected simultaneously through self-reports, there was a potential risk of CMV. To assess this, a single-factor CFA was conducted. The results indicated a poor model fit (RMSEA = .164, 90% CI [.158, .171]; SRMR = .119; GFI = .816; Hoelter's  $N \approx 41$ ), suggesting that a single factor could not explain the covariance among items and that CMV was not a major threat in this study. Nevertheless, because the data are cross-sectional and self-reported, CMV cannot be fully ruled out. Future research should address this issue by employing multi-source data, time-lagged designs, or experimental approaches. In addition, although the exposure to influencer scale demonstrated CR and parameter estimates above the recommended thresholds, the AVE value was slightly below the conventional .50 cutoff. Future studies are encouraged to use more refined measures to strengthen construct validity.

In conclusion, while this study fills an important gap in the digital consumption literature, it also highlights the psychological complexity of digital consumer behavior and encourages



future studies to investigate how emotional, motivational, and identity-based mechanisms interact across diverse cultural and technological contexts.

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