

**FROM LIKES TO BUYS: THE ROLE OF
SOCIAL MEDIA UGC ON FASHION
IMPULSE BUYING AND COGNITIVE
DISSONANCE**

Dannah Cruz

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*Fashion Business School
London College of Fashion
University of the Arts London*

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No portion of the work referred to in this dissertation has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this institution or any other university or other institution of learning.

In the writing of this dissertation, I have received assistance from my tutor Shuyu Lin.

I, Dannah Cruz, certify that this is an original piece of work. I have acknowledged all sources and citations. No section of this MSc project has been plagiarised.

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Abstract

Research Context

With the rise of digital platforms and social media in reshaping fashion consumption behaviours, one notable outcome is increased impulse buying behaviour driven by influencer marketing and user-generated content (UGC). Despite growing academic attention to impulse buying, limited research has addressed such behaviour's cognitive and emotional consequences, especially regarding fashion and sustainability. This study focuses on consumer psychology, digital marketing, and sustainability, aiming to fill theoretical gaps by examining how social media engagement influences impulse buying and the resultant cognitive dissonance, particularly about sustainability concerns.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between social media engagement, fear of missing out (FoMO), social comparison, impulse buying behaviour, and post-purchase cognitive dissonance in a fashion context. It also explores whether sustainability concern moderates the effect of impulse buying on cognitive dissonance.

Design/methodology/approach

A deductive, quantitative research design was employed. The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model was the foundation for the conceptual framework created to direct hypothesis testing. Data was collected via a self-administered online survey, generating 243 valid responses from UK-based participants. Constructs such as social media engagement, FoMO, social comparison, impulse buying, cognitive dissonance, and sustainability concern were measured using validated Likert-scale items. Statistical analyses, including correlation, simple linear regression, and moderation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro, were conducted in IBM SPSS.

Findings

The findings confirm that social media engagement predicts both FoMO and social comparison, while FoMO significantly predicted impulse buying behaviour. However, social comparison was not a significant predictor of impulse buying, and impulse buying did not significantly predict cognitive dissonance. Moreover, sustainability concerns significantly moderate the relationship between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance. These results suggest that while social media stimuli can trigger psychological states linked to impulse buying, the anticipated emotional discomfort post-purchase is not uniformly experienced.

Originality and Value

This study contributes to a better understanding of impulsive fashion consumption in the digital age, integrating behavioural, emotional, and sustainability-related dimensions. It offers practical insights for fashion marketers and sustainability advocates seeking to understand post-purchase dissonance and digital engagement behaviours.

Keywords: Impulse Buying, Social Media Engagement, Fear of Missing Out, Social Comparison, Cognitive Dissonance, Sustainability Concern, Fashion, Consumer Behaviour

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

1. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context and Background

Social media has emerged as a central force in shaping consumer behaviours, preferences, and purchases consumers across many sectors, particularly within the fashion industry. This influence is particularly noticeable in the UK, where an expected 54.8 million people were active social media users by early 2025, accounting for 79% of the population. (DataReportal, We Are Social, Meltwater, 2025). The UK is also among the leading fashion e-commerce markets worldwide, with revenue forecasts suggesting an increase to over \$58 billion by 2029 (Statista, 2024a; 2024b). This projected growth indicates the expanding role of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok in how consumers discover, evaluate, and ultimately purchase fashion products, often outgrowing traditional advertising or retail touchpoints altogether. While China and the United States dominate global fashion e-commerce revenues (Statista, 2024b), the United Kingdom stands out for its exceptionally high social media penetration and engagement rates. Unlike larger markets where traditional retail still holds significant relevance, the UK's fashion landscape is increasingly shaped by digital adoption and interaction, making it a distinct and valuable context for studying impulse buying behaviour through social media platforms.

Fashion is a highly visual and tactile category, making it naturally suited to social platforms that prioritise image and video content (Shergill, 2025). Users frequently engage with product demonstrations, before-and-after visuals, and unboxing video content formats that entertain and simulate a tangible, first-hand experience of the item being showcased (Shergill, 2025). These visual cues encourage product discovery and impulse purchases by increasing perceived value and authenticity. For younger consumers, particularly those aged 16 to 34, these formats have become a regular part of the fashion shopping journey, with Instagram and TikTok now outperforming traditional media in terms of influence (Statista, 2025; McGrath, 2024). From an academic perspective, such formats may act as stimulus triggers in consumer decision-making, particularly impulse purchasing (Rook, 1987).

A growing reliance on influencers and user-generated content (UGC) also transforms how fashion brands communicate with their audiences. Recent surveys suggest that many UK internet users follow influencers or content creators online, with many Gen Z consumers viewing social media as an essential channel for discovering new fashion brands (Statista, 2023; Ceron, 2024). TikTok's algorithm-driven "For You" page and emphasis on trending creators have made it a powerful platform for UGC fashion

marketing (Shergill, 2025; McKinsey & Company, 2024). In contrast to conventional celebrity endorsements, this type of content shifts trust towards everyday creators who share relatable, entertaining, and often unfiltered fashion experiences. This aligns with research linking impulse buying to low cognitive deliberation and high emotional arousal (Verplanken & Herabadi, 2001).

Social commerce has further accelerated this shift. In the UK, many consumers report being more inclined to make impulse purchases online than in-store. This behaviour appears especially common among younger demographics, such as millennials and Gen Z, who are increasingly influenced by social media content (Profitiero, 2023; Oliver, 2024). The integration of browsing and purchasing within a single device has effectively streamlined the shopping process and enhanced the role of social media in driving unplanned fashion purchases. In an industry where excessive consumerism and environmental concerns are increasingly scrutinised, this convenience and immediacy also raise worries regarding emotional aftereffects, such as buyer's regret or post-purchase dissonance. Though sustainability knowledge is rising, especially among younger generations, behavioural change remains limited. For example, while online fashion shoppers often express concern about the environmental impact of their purchases, this does not always translate into guilt about impulse buying.

Additionally, relatively few consumers view themselves as primarily responsible for promoting sustainability in the fashion industry (Ceron, 2024; Oliver, 2024). This reveals a persistent gap between values and behaviour, challenging researchers and brands aiming to shift towards more ethical consumption models. There is, therefore, an urgent need to better understand the psychological mechanisms driving impulse buying in this context and whether constructs such as FoMO (Fear of Missing Out), social comparison, and ethical concern have measurable effects on post-purchase sentiment.

1.2 Rationale

The rise of social media has fundamentally altered how consumers interact with fashion content, creating new avenues for discovery, decision-making, and purchasing. UGC including outfit styling, unboxing, and influencer recommendations, has blurred the lines between personal expression and brand marketing (Good & Hyman, 2020). While existing studies have explored UGC's role in shaping brand perception and trust, comparatively less attention has been paid to its psychological impact on impulse buying, particularly among digitally native consumers in the UK. Given that impulse purchases are typically driven by emotional rather than rational processes (Rook & Fisher, 1995;

Verplanken & Herabadi, 2001), social media presents a compelling context in which fast-paced, emotionally charged content may bypass deliberate thinking and trigger spontaneous consumption.

Despite the growing popularity of impulse buying research (Amos et al., 2014; Redine et al., 2022), most studies have focused on general e-commerce environments rather than social commerce ecosystems where peer influence, influencer marketing, and FoMO are deeply embedded (Dinh & Lee, 2021; Shamim et al., 2024). The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework offers a strong theoretical foundation for examining these dynamics by linking digital stimuli (e.g., UGC) to internal psychological states (e.g., FoMO or social comparison) and subsequent behavioural outcomes like impulse buying (Jacoby, 2002; Safeer, 2024). However, while this model has been effectively used to explain pre-purchase behaviour, limited research has extended it to include post-purchase experiences such as cognitive dissonance, especially in the context of fast fashion, where environmental and ethical concerns are increasingly salient (Bläse et al., 2023; Fernandez-Lores et al., 2024).

This study addresses several key gaps in the existing literature. First, although FoMO and social comparison have been shown to influence consumption behaviour independently (Good & Hyman, 2020; Reer, Tang, & Quandt, 2019), there is little research exploring how both variables function simultaneously as organism-level mediators in response to social media UGC. Second, prior studies have yet to thoroughly examine how sustainability concern interacts with impulse-driven purchases in shaping post-purchase cognitive outcomes (Balderjahn et al., 2013; Bläse et al., 2023). As sustainability becomes a mainstream concern within fashion (Ceron, 2024; McKinsey & Company, 2024), understanding how value-driven dissonance may arise is essential for both academic insight and marketing strategy. Third, while research on social commerce and digital consumer psychology is growing, UK-based empirical studies focusing specifically on Gen Z and Millennials, who constitute the bulk of fashion consumers and are among the heaviest users of platforms like TikTok and Instagram, remain underexplored (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Shergill, 2025).

Theoretically, this study seeks to extend the S-O-R model by integrating post-purchase dissonance and ethical moderation variables, offering a more holistic understanding of the digital impulse buying cycle. From a managerial perspective, it provides insights into how brands can balance emotionally engaging content with strategies that promote more conscious consumption (Bläse et al., 2023; Fernandez-Lores et al., 2024).

Understanding the emotional and psychological mechanisms behind impulse buying triggered by UGC can help retailers design ethically informed, commercially effective campaigns.

This research offers timely and locally relevant insights by focusing on the UK context, where social media penetration is among the highest globally and fast fashion consumption remains robust (Ceron, 2024; Oliver, 2024). This research aims to enrich academic discussions on digital consumer behaviour while offering actionable insights for fashion marketers operating within an increasingly dynamic digital landscape.

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

1.3.1 Research Aim

To quantitatively examine how social media user-generated content (UGC) influences impulse buying behaviour and post-purchase cognitive dissonance among UK-based consumers, with FoMO and social comparison as mediating variables and sustainability concern as a moderating factor.

1.3.2 Research Objectives

1. To assess how social media engagement with fashion-related user-generated content (UGC) influences the psychological mechanisms of FoMO and social comparison.
2. To investigate the effect of FoMO and social comparison on impulse buying behaviour in fashion consumption.
3. To explore how impulse buying contributes to post-purchase cognitive dissonance among consumers.
4. To examine whether sustainability concern moderates the relationship between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance.
5. To propose actionable recommendations for social media platforms and fashion brands on aligning digital marketing strategies with consumer well-being and sustainability goals.

1.4 Overview of Research

1.4.1 Overview of Proposed Research Design

Adopting a deductive, quantitative methodology, the study tests theory-driven hypotheses under the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework. It uses a mono-method, survey-based design to gather primary data through an online questionnaire targeting UK consumers aged 18 to 35, a group known for both high levels of social media interaction and fashion interest. A convenience sampling technique will be used, leveraging digital channels such as social media platforms and online forums for distribution.

To ensure content validity and clarity, the questionnaire will be piloted with a minimum of 10 participants before the full launch (Fink, 2013). The final dataset will be analysed using SPSS, applying descriptive and inferential statistics. Specifically, multiple regression analysis and moderation testing using Hayes' PROCESS macro will examine the hypothesised relationships between UGC exposure, social media engagement, FoMO, social comparison, impulse buying, cognitive dissonance, and sustainability concerns. The results will be used to validate or refute the conceptual model and draw conclusions about the psychological drivers of impulse buying in fashion contexts.

1.4.2 Overview of Theoretical Concepts and Frameworks

The theoretical foundation is the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model, which is extensively used to analyse online consumer behaviour (Safeer, 2024). Within this model, UGC and social media engagement serve as stimuli that trigger internal psychological responses specifically FoMO and social comparison, which subsequently influence impulsive purchase actions. Although traditionally focused on pre-purchase dynamics, recent scholarship suggests the S-O-R framework can be extended to post-purchase effects such as cognitive dissonance and ethical concerns (Chen et al., 2020; Fernandez-Lores et al., 2024).

To further contextualise this response, the study integrates cognitive dissonance theory, focusing on how consumers may experience discomfort or regret after impulsive fashion purchases when sustainability is a concern (Chen et al., 2021; Chetioui & El Bouzidi, 2023). This is particularly relevant in fast fashion, where growing sustainability awareness is shown to clash with consumer behaviour (Bläse et al., 2023). Therefore,

sustainability concern is theorised to moderate the relationship between impulse buying and dissonance.

1.4.3 Overview of Dissertation Structure

The dissertation is structured into five main chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the research context, justification, aim, objectives, theoretical underpinnings, and intended contributions. Chapter 2 critically reviews relevant literature, addressing constructs like UGC, social media engagement, FoMO, social comparison, impulse buying, post-purchase dissonance, and sustainability concerns, while identifying gaps in current knowledge. Chapter 3 details the research design, including philosophical stance, sampling, scale development, pilot testing, ethics, and analytical approach. Chapter 4 presents and interprets the data, including descriptive, regression, and moderation analyses. Chapter 5 offers a discussion in relation to the existing literature, outlines theoretical and managerial implications, recognises limitations, and recommends future research directions. The conclusion synthesises the key contributions and practical implications.

1.4.4 Intended Theoretical and Managerial Contributions

On a theoretical level, this dissertation expands the S-O-R framework to include emotional responses following purchases and integrates ethical considerations, areas not commonly addressed in existing impulse buying models (Chen et al., 2020; Fernandez-Lores et al., 2024). It further explores the combined effects of FoMO and social comparison, two psychological drivers that are typically examined independently (Alfina & Mardhiyah, 2023; Kumar & Kumar, 2024).

From a managerial standpoint, this research provides insights for fashion brands and marketers seeking to balance high-impact digital content with ethical responsibility. As concerns around sustainability and overconsumption intensify, understanding the emotional aftermath of UGC-driven purchases is key to shaping brand communication strategies. This study offers practical recommendations for designing content that engages consumers while minimising post-purchase regret and enhancing brand trust in the long term (Bläse et al., 2023; Ceron, 2024).

Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

2. CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This literature review explores the psychological mechanisms that shape impulse buying and post-purchase dissonance within social media-driven fashion consumption. As platforms like Instagram and TikTok blur the boundaries between entertainment and commerce, consumers are increasingly exposed to user-generated content (UGC), influencer endorsements, and algorithmically tailored fashion trends. These digital environments heighten emotional engagement, often encouraging spontaneous purchases that may later conflict with consumers' self-perceptions or values. Two affective mechanisms are central to this process: Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and social comparison, which emerge as robust psychological responses to social media stimuli. While both are widely associated with impulsive behaviour, their role in driving post-purchase discomfort remains underexplored. In parallel, the rise of ethical and sustainability-focused consumption introduces further complexity, as consumers may experience tension between their environmental values and fast fashion buying habits. This review applies the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework to structure the discussion. Within this model, social media engagement (S) serves as the external trigger, FoMO and social comparison (O) reflect internal psychological states and impulse buying and cognitive dissonance (R) represent the resulting behaviours. Drawing on this framework, this review sets the foundation for a survey-based study examining impulse buying as an emotional and socially mediated phenomenon. One of the most influential sources of emotionally engaging and socially mediated content in the fashion space is influencer marketing, which now plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer attitudes and unplanned purchases across social platforms.

2.2 Influencer Marketing

Influencers are central figures in the social media landscape, serving as content creators and community leaders who shape aspirational lifestyles through their posts (Dinh & Lee, 2021; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Through parasocial relationships, followers develop perceived personal connections with influencers, enhancing trust and engagement (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). This trust extends to product endorsements, making influencers highly persuasive marketing agents, particularly among Generation Z, who view them as more relatable than traditional celebrities (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019). Influencers are central figures in the social media landscape, serving as content creators and community leaders who shape aspirational lifestyles through their posts (Dinh & Lee, 2021; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Through parasocial relationships, followers develop perceived personal connections with influencers, which enhances engagement

(Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). This trust extends to product endorsements, making influencers highly persuasive marketing agents, particularly among Generation Z, who view them as more relatable than traditional celebrities (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019). Unlike brand-generated content (BGC), influencer posts are perceived as more authentic and organic. Consumers actively interact with this content by liking, commenting, and sharing, extending its reach and emotional impact (Shamim et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024). Influencers demonstrating credibility, expertise, and relatability are particularly effective in shaping consumer decisions (Liu et al., 2023). Influencer content's visual and emotional appeal, especially on platforms like Instagram, has increased impulse emotionally driven purchases (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Muhammad, Adeshola, & Isiaku, 2023). While some consumers are becoming more aware of influencer sponsorship and branding tactics, this awareness does not necessarily weaken the persuasive power of influencer marketing (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Even when followers recognise paid partnerships, trust in influencers significantly predicts impulse buying behaviour (Shamim et al., 2024). Despite the growing literature on influencer credibility and endorsement effectiveness, few studies examine influencer UGC through a behavioural lens, such as the SOR model (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019; Muhammad et al., 2023). Much research also focuses on buying intentions rather than consumer behaviour (Dinh & Lee, 2021). This study addresses these gaps by positioning influencer-generated UGC as a key stimulus within the SOR framework and exploring its impact across platforms where visual fashion content dominates. Given the emotionally charged and immersive nature of such content, it becomes essential to understand the theoretical mechanisms that explain how digital stimuli translate into consumer behaviour.

2.3 Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model

To explore the behavioural effects of influencer marketing and social media engagement, this research applies the SOR model, a structured theoretical framework that outlines how external inputs lead to internal emotional or cognitive changes, which subsequently shape behavioural outcomes (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). As visualised in Figure 1, this model categorises environmental cues (S) as triggers that impact internal psychological states (O), eventually prompting specific behavioural reactions (R). It offers a robust foundation for analysing how consumers emotionally and cognitively respond to fashion-focused UGC.



Figure 1: The Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974)

Initially developed in environmental psychology, the SOR model has been widely adopted in consumer research for understanding decision-making in dynamic and emotionally charged environments (Jacoby, 2002). In digital consumer contexts, the SOR model is especially relevant. Social media engagement, including influencer-generated content, functions as the external stimulus (S), triggering internal psychological responses (O) such as Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and social comparison. These emotional and cognitive responses influence behavioural outcomes (R), particularly impulse buying. Empirical studies support this application. Research by Djafarova and Bowes (2021) highlighted how digital cues like branded messages, influencer endorsements, and UGC can heighten emotional stimulation, often resulting in impulsive purchases. In parallel, Xu et al. (2020) observed that social interactions, such as influencer suggestions and online reviews, amplify emotional responses, thus increasing unplanned buying. These findings align with more recent literature suggesting that Gen Z consumers are highly prone to FoMO and social comparison within digital contexts, making them more susceptible to impulse purchases (Muhammad et al., 2023).

However, existing research often limits the SOR model to pre-purchase dynamics (S → O → R), with limited exploration of post-purchase outcomes such as cognitive dissonance (Safeer, 2024). Moreover, while studies have examined influencer credibility and impulse buying separately, influencer-generated UGC remains understudied as a unified SOR stimulus in the digital fashion context. This research extends the SOR model in two key ways: first, by incorporating cognitive dissonance as a post-purchase behavioural response that captures emotional discomfort after impulsive consumption, and second, by introducing sustainability concern as a moderating factor influencing the intensity of this dissonance. In doing so, this research conceptualises social media engagement and UGC as key stimuli (S), activating psychological mechanisms (O) like FoMO and social comparison, which drive impulse buying (R) and elicit dissonance, particularly among consumers with heightened sustainability awareness. By extending the SOR model to encompass pre- and post-purchase processes, this study offers a

more holistic understanding of the emotional and cognitive trade-offs shaping fashion consumption in digital environments.

2.4 Social Media Engagement (S)

Social media engagement (SME) refers to the extent and nature of users' interactions with digital platforms, including browsing, liking, sharing, commenting, following, and co-creating content (Schivinski, Christodoulides & Dabrowski, 2016; Dolan et al., 2016). It encompasses passive and active behaviours, from content consumption to contribution and creation. Such behaviours are often shaped by a desire for entertainment, knowledge, social interaction, or personal identity expression, as proposed in Uses and Gratifications Theory (Dolan et al., 2016; Barger, Peltier & Schultz, 2016). With their immersive and highly visual formats, platforms like Instagram and TikTok intensify these behaviours by promoting continuous engagement and real-time feedback loops (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021, Dolan et al., 2021).

Interacting with influencers through activities like following, liking, commenting, or making purchases based on endorsements represents a key aspect of SME (Nikolinakou, Phua & Kwon, 2024). According to Tandon et al. (2021), individuals who actively and deliberately engage with content are more prone to impulsive shopping than those who engage passively. This distinction is reinforced by research indicating that passive browsing alone does not drive impulsive actions unless accompanied by a psychological urge to buy (Yang et al., 2024). Hence, mechanisms such as FoMO and social comparison play intermediary roles, bridging SME with impulsive purchase behaviour (Dinh & Lee, 2021; Reer, Tang & Quandt, 2019). Additionally, trust in influencer-generated content can shape consumer responses, as frequent exposure increases the likelihood of spontaneous purchases (Shamim et al., 2024; Nikolinakou, Phua & Kwon, 2024).

2.4.1 User-Generated Content (UGC)

A significant portion of SME is directed toward UGC, particularly in fashion. UGC, such as influencer hauls, unboxings, styling tips, and peer recommendations, is often more trusted and persuasive than traditional brand content, acting as a key driver of product discovery and social validation (Kim & Johnson, 2016; Cao et al., 2020). It has evolved beyond essential peer reviews into expressive, highly visual, and emotionally engaging formats (Zafar et al., 2020). UGC as defined by Barbosa dos Santos (2021), refers to any form of user-created text, imagery, or interaction disseminated through non-official channels that generates communicative or emotional responses. This broader

understanding reframes UGC as a social act, fluid, performative, and central to digital interaction. UGC is an incredibly potent digital stimulus due to its emotional resonance, media richness, and interactivity. Compared to static brand posts, UGC combines visuals, storytelling, and real-time feedback to enhance emotional arousal (Shahbaznezhad, Dolan et al., 2021). Authentic, entertaining content such as TikTok fashion hauls or Instagram Reels drives more profound engagement, mainly through commenting, sharing, and saving (Malthouse et al., 2016; Kim & Johnson, 2016). This aligns with Media Richness Theory, which argues that richer, more interactive formats reduce ambiguity and increase message effectiveness (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021; Astuti & Nindyaswari, 2022; Shao et al., 2024). UGC also builds trust. Kitsios et al. (2022) found that perceived enjoyment and informational value predict credibility, accelerating decision-making, especially in fast-paced, trend-driven environments like fashion. Since impulse buying is typically emotion-led rather than rational, UGC's informal tone, peer influence, and immediacy make it a powerful conversion tool. This study conceptualises UGC as a subcomponent of SME and the primary content format through which consumers engage with fast fashion. Exposure to emotionally rich, aspirational content heightens psychological responses such as FoMO and social comparison (Reer, Tang & Quandt, 2019), intensifying feelings of urgency, inadequacy, or exclusion (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

H1a: High social media engagement positively influences FoMO.

H1b: High social media engagement positively influences social comparison.

While the persuasive potential of UGC is well-documented (Chen et al., 2019; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021), its impact is not universally consistent. Some researchers argue that its influence depends on perceived authenticity (Astuti & Nindyaswari, 2022), while others warn that overexposure can lead to desensitisation and diminished trust (Redine et al., 2022). This raises important questions about the sustainability of UGC's impact over time. Although UGC is often more effective than brand-generated content, most existing studies focus on brand-led marketing (Safeer, 2024). Moreover, impulsive consumers may not engage with reviews, instead relying on emotionally charged visuals and cues (Chetioui & El Bouzidi, 2023; Muhammad, Adeshola & Isiaku, 2023). Despite its apparent link to purchase intention, UGC's role in post-purchase outcomes remains underexplored. Few studies have examined how UGC-driven impulse buying relates to cognitive dissonance or how sustainability concerns may moderate this relationship. By addressing these gaps, this study expands the current understanding of UGC not only

as a trigger for impulsive consumption but also as a factor in post-purchase emotional conflict, particularly among consumers who are more sustainability conscious.

2.5 Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) (O)

UGC's psychological effect is particularly noticeable in how it triggers affective mechanisms like Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), which serves as a key internal state in this study's framework. In the current context, FoMO captures consumers' anxiety over potentially missing exclusive trends or influencer-driven product releases on social media. More broadly, FoMO reflects an enduring sense of unease that others might be enjoying meaningful experiences or acquiring desired goods without one's involvement (Przybylski et al., 2013). This condition is rooted in unfulfilled needs for social belonging, autonomy, and self-efficacy, and is especially prevalent in digital spaces that promote aspirational lifestyles and continuous content access (Tandon et al., 2021). FoMO can be both a stable personality trait and a situational reaction to social media stimuli. Users with high levels of FoMO are often compelled to remain online, frequently refreshing platforms to avoid exclusion from emerging trends (Przybylski et al., 2013; Xu et al., 2020; Kumar & Kumar, 2024). Social media platforms intensify this effect through visually rich, algorithm-driven UGC prioritising novelty and social validation. This content often showcases early access to limited-edition items or trending aesthetics, driving urgency among fashion users. Frequent exposure to influencer or peer-generated fashion content reinforces the perception that others are accessing more rewarding or fashionable experiences, driving the urge to engage in similar behaviours (Good & Hyman, 2020; Dinh & Lee, 2021). This anxiety is further magnified by time-sensitive offers, limited-edition product drops, and the constant churn of micro-trends, prompting emotionally driven purchase decisions. Younger consumers are particularly vulnerable to FoMO due to their high social media use and heightened susceptibility to social comparison (Reer, Tang & Quandt, 2019; Tran, Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Beyond driving impulsive behaviour, FoMO has also been associated with heightened emotional distress and social fatigue, particularly when intensified by algorithmically curated content (Jabeen et al., 2023).

While FoMO and social comparison are distinct, they are often mutually reinforcing. Users experiencing FoMO may compare upwardly with influencers or peers, deepening feelings of inadequacy and triggering compensatory consumption (Tandon et al., 2021; Dinh & Lee, 2021). FoMO centres on the anxiety of missing out, while social comparison involves self-evaluation against others' perceived success or appearance. Within the SOR framework, FoMO represents a key affective organism, mediating the relationship

between social media engagement and impulse buying. It translates passive exposure to UGC into an emotionally charged state of urgency and exclusion, increasing the likelihood of spontaneous, unplanned purchases. However, exposure to aspirational UGC often activates both simultaneously. As a result, FoMO converts emotional discomfort into action, driving impulsive purchases.

H2a: FoMO positively influences impulse buying.

2.6 Social Comparison (O)

Closely intertwined with FoMO is the concept of social comparison, another key psychological mechanism in the digital consumption process. Social comparison refers to the process by which individuals evaluate their traits, behaviours, or possessions by comparing themselves to others, especially without objective benchmarks (Festinger, 1954). While social comparison can be upward or downward, this study focuses on upward comparisons with perceived superior others, as these are more prevalent and psychologically impactful in digital fashion contexts. This process is not purely cognitive; it often triggers emotions such as envy, dissatisfaction, or inadequacy (Wood, 1989). In consumer contexts, particularly fashion, upward social comparison plays a dual role: it can inspire aspirational behaviour or reinforce materialistic values and self-discrepancy. Repeated exposure to curated content on social media platforms heightens these comparisons, as users internalise idealised images and lifestyles as reference points (Dinh & Lee, 2021). This study conceptualises social comparison as a cognitive and affective mechanism that shapes fashion-related self-evaluation, driving consumers to align with perceived social norms through impulse buying. As such, it functions as a key 'Organism' variable in the SOR framework. This psychological process becomes significantly pronounced in digital fashion environments, where comparison is embedded within user-generated content (UGC).

In this context, social comparison becomes a routine response to fashion-related UGC, intensifying emotional engagement and influencing purchase behaviour. Social media platforms facilitate constant exposure to idealised fashion content, creating fertile ground for upward social comparison. Through hauls, styling reels, and peer posts, UGC makes fashion trends feel immediate and socially validated, operating within a social feedback loop where likes and comments serve as cues of popularity. This visibility reinforces upward comparison and encourages purchases as a form of self-validation (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Tran, Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Following influencers is a key driver of comparison, as users often aspire to emulate their style and perceived lifestyle success

(Dinh & Lee, 2021). Affective outcomes such as envy and self-discrepancy, though not directly measured, help explain how upward comparisons lead to compensatory impulse buying. For example, benign envy (Jin et al., 2019) can trigger a desire to acquire similar fashion items quickly, not out of resentment but aspiration, accelerating purchase decisions as consumers attempt to close the perceived gap. These emotional responses clarify how social comparison may translate into impulsive fashion consumption.

Despite the established link between social comparison and consumer behaviour, theoretical understanding remains limited in several key areas. While social comparison and FoMO are widely linked to impulse buying, not all upward comparisons result in irrational or emotional spending. Some may encourage planned, status-driven purchases (Tran, 2022). However, excessive comparison is consistently associated with adverse outcomes such as anxiety, dissatisfaction, and post-purchase regret (Przybylski et al., 2013; Mundel, Wan & Yang, 2023). Self-esteem has emerged as a key moderating factor, with lower self-worth increasing susceptibility to comparison and FoMO-driven buying (Reer, Tang & Quandt, 2019). These findings suggest that not all consumers respond to UGC similarly, yet most existing models overlook such individual differences. In addition, current research is mainly correlational, with limited causal insight into how these mechanisms lead to impulse buying. Studies often rely on the cosmetics or beauty sector, with little attention to fast fashion despite its trend-centric, time-sensitive nature. There is also an over-reliance on Facebook-focused data, while platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where UGC is more visually immersive and comparison-prone, remain underexplored (Tandon et al., 2021). Finally, although much research explores pre-purchase impulses, post-purchase outcomes such as regret or cognitive dissonance are less studied. This is particularly relevant for sustainability-conscious consumers, who may feel more significant post-purchase dissonance. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on fashion-related UGC, incorporating post-purchase dissonance, and proposing sustainability concerns as a moderating factor in impulse buying. Together, FoMO and social comparison intensify consumers' susceptibility to spontaneous behaviour, which we now examine through the lens of impulse buying.

H2b: Social comparison positively influences impulse buying.

2.7 Impulse Buying (R)

Building on these emotional and cognitive mechanisms, impulse buying emerges as the behavioural outcome of these internal responses. It is an emotionally driven purchase motivated by hedonic gratification and low cognitive control (Rook, 1987). Unlike planned

purchases, impulse purchases occur without prior deliberation and are often accompanied by intense affective responses, such as excitement, urgency, or loss of self-regulation (Rook & Fisher, 1995). Impulse buying functions as the Response (R) in the SOR framework, where exposure to social media stimuli elicits a reactive purchasing behaviour. Previous research suggests that impulse purchases responding to FoMO or social comparison often lack rational deliberation, leading to cognitive dissonance post-purchase (Chen et al., 2021). Since these decisions involve minimal cognitive effort, they are more likely to result in post-purchase regret and attempts to justify spending (Chen et al., 2021).

Impulse Buying Tendency (IBT) refers to an individual's predisposition toward spontaneous purchases with minimal cognitive control (Verplanken & Herabadi, 2001). Early research conceptualised impulse buying as a dispositional trait, where individuals with higher impulsivity were more prone to hedonic consumption and thrill-seeking behaviours (Rook, 1987; Beatty & Ferrell, 1998; Stern, 1962). Consequently, IBT has been widely regarded as one of the strongest predictors of impulse purchases (Verplanken and Herabadi, 2001; Amos et al., 2014). For instance, Amos et al. (2014) found that even individuals with low impulsivity could be influenced by external factors such as social validation and peer influence, emphasising the power of group belonging and environmental triggers (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Van Tran, Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022; Muhammad, Adeshola & Isiaku, 2023). Social commerce platforms intensify these tendencies, reducing cognitive resistance and reinforcing automatic purchase responses (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

FoMO is increasingly recognised as a key situational driver of online impulse buying, reinforcing impulsive decisions through urgency and social pressure. Recent research argues that such behaviours emerge from an interaction between dispositional traits (IBT) and situational triggers, with external stimuli sometimes overriding individual predispositions (Redine et al., 2022). Complementing these traits- and situational perspectives, researchers have also explored how impulse buying varies by context and trigger type.

Stern's (1962) typology categorised impulsive buying into four forms: pure, reminder, suggestion, and planned. Pure impulse buying occurs spontaneously with no prior intention, while reminder impulse buying is triggered by memory activation (Shao et al., 2024). External recommendations influence suggestion impulse buying, and planned impulse buying refers to intended purchases accelerated by promotions or discounts.

Social media endorsements influence all four types of impulse buying, extending Stern's (1962) classification to the digital context (Tran, Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022; Redine et al., 2022). For instance, personalised recommendations act as reminders, while influencer content often drives suggestion impulse buying (Xu et al., 2020; Redine et al., 2022; Shao et al., 2024). Scarcity tactics, such as flash sales, intensify urgency, reinforcing planned impulse tendencies (Muhammad, Adeshola & Isiaku, 2023). Social proof through peer reviews and influencer endorsements further amplifies suggestion-based buying behaviour (Xu et al., 2020). While these categories provide a helpful lens for understanding impulse buying, further research is needed to distinguish social media-driven impulse purchases from those driven by dispositional impulsivity (Rook, 1987). Given that trait-level (IBT) and situational factors contribute to impulse buying, future studies should explore how affective IBT may later conflict with consumers' self-concept or values, leading to post-purchase discomfort best understood through the lens of cognitive dissonance. Adopting a situational perspective, this study frames impulse buying as a spontaneous, emotionally driven response to fashion-related UGC.

H3: Impulse buying leads to cognitive dissonance.

2.8 Cognitive Dissonance

Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance describes the mental discomfort individuals experience when their beliefs, actions, or values are in conflict. In consumer behaviour, this discomfort occurs when a purchase decision contradicts pre-existing values, expectations, or rational consumption beliefs. Consumers attempt to mitigate this discomfort and reduce dissonance by adjusting their attitudes, justifying their choices, or modifying future behaviour (Festinger, 1957). Building on this foundation, researchers have identified two key components of cognitive dissonance (Elliot & Devine, 1994; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007). Elliot & Devine (1994) empirically demonstrated that cognitive dissonance is not merely a generalised psychological state but a distinct emotional discomfort, identifying feelings of unease, guilt, and regret as central affective components of dissonance. Their findings highlighted that individuals experiencing more substantial dissonance are more likely to alter their perceptions or behaviours to resolve the inconsistency. Dissonance is powerful when an action conflicts with an individual's self-concept and when there is minimal external justification for the decision (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007). This is particularly relevant in impulse buying, where unplanned purchases often lack rational deliberation, increasing the likelihood of post-purchase regret and justification attempts. Consumers who perceive a misalignment between their impulsive spending habits and self-image as rational decision-makers

often employ coping strategies such as product returns, justification, or selective information avoidance to reduce discomfort. Further refining this concept, Sweeney, Hausknecht, and Soutar (2000) proposed a multidimensional framework that distinguishes between mental and emotional dissonance. Their study identified three key dimensions of post-purchase discomfort: emotional discomfort, wisdom of purchase, and concern over the deal.

Emotional discomfort is the psychological distress experienced after regrettable purchases, the wisdom of purchase is doubts about whether the purchase was a sound decision, and concern over the deal is anxiety about the fairness of price and product value. Although this framework is widely used in consumer research, existing studies have not fully explored how sustainability concerns influence cognitive dissonance in fashion consumption. Consumers prioritising ethical consumption may experience heightened dissonance when their purchases conflict with sustainability values (Bläse et al., 2023). Therefore, this study examines whether sustainability concerns moderate post-purchase regret in impulse buying.

Research has established a strong link between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance, with impulsive purchases generating more significant post-purchase discomfort than planned purchases (Chen et al., 2021; Chetioui & El Bouzidi, 2023). Within the SOR model, the response (R) reflects cognitive dissonance, post-purchase regret, and rationalisation strategies (Sweeney et al., 2000). Research distinguishes two primary forms of dissonance after impulse buying (Chen et al., 2021). Product dissonance is where consumers perceive that an alternative product would have been a better choice, and emotional dissonance is psychological distress following an impulse purchase, particularly when consumers recognise that external influences play a significant role in their decision (Chen et al., 2021). Consumers feel discomfort when they perceive a mismatch between their expectations and product reality (Chetioui and El Bouzidi, 2023). Psychological discomfort results from unplanned purchases, increasing post-purchase regret and potential negative brand perceptions. Further refining this perspective, Yassin and Soares (2023) differentiate between cognitive impulse buying, driven by external incentives, and affective impulse buying, triggered by emotional states such as excitement or stress. Their findings suggest that while externally motivated impulse purchases often result in post-purchase regret, emotionally driven purchases may not generate the same level of dissonance. This supports Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones (2007), who suggest dissonance is most substantial when purchases lack external justification. Interestingly, research indicates that consumers who use impulse buying as an emotional regulation strategy (e.g., stress

relief) may experience less dissonance as their purchase parallels with their emotional needs at the time (Yassin & Soares, 2023). However, in fashion, lenient return policies allow consumers to resolve post-purchase regret by simply returning items, reinforcing impulsive buying cycles (Lee, 2014; Fernandez-Lores et al., 2024). In addition to emotional conflict, emerging research highlights external environmental factors that exacerbate post-purchase discomfort.

Beyond regret, information overload has emerged as a significant driver of cognitive dissonance in digital shopping environments. The sheer volume of product information on social media can overwhelm consumers, leading to decision fatigue and impulsive purchasing (Lv & Liu, 2022). Given Gen Z's high engagement with digital content, they are particularly susceptible to post-purchase regret when influencer-driven purchases fail to meet expectations (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Impulse purchases driven by social media often intensify cognitive dissonance as consumers become more aware of external influences on their decisions (Sweeney et al., 2000)

While impulse buying is widely linked to cognitive dissonance (Chen et al., 2021), existing research offers conflicting perspectives on its severity. Some studies argue that post-purchase regret is higher for price-sensitive consumers (Chetioui & El Bouzidi, 2023), while others suggest that hedonic shoppers rationalise purchases more efficiently, reducing dissonance (Yassin & Soares, 2023). This study hypothesises that cognitive dissonance following impulse purchases is moderated by sustainability concerns, as ethically conscious consumers may experience heightened regret due to conflicting values (Bläse et al., 2023). Beyond psychological discomfort, a growing strand of literature explores how dissonance intensifies when purchases contradict ethical values, particularly sustainability.

2.9 Sustainability Concern

An emerging dimension of cognitive dissonance in impulse buying relates to sustainability concerns. Bläse et al. (2023) found that while FoMO weakens the impact of brand credibility and ethical intentions on purchase behaviour, this effect is more potent in fast fashion than in slow fashion, where sustainability values are more salient. Consumers who value sustainability may act inconsistently under FoMO pressure, creating a gap between attitudes and actions. This finding aligns with studies indicating that impulse purchases are frequently driven by social comparison and the urgency to keep up with trends, often fast fashion (Dinh & Lee, 2021). While sustainable (slow) fashion is not immune to FoMO, its urgency-driven influence is lower than fast fashion

(Bläse et al., 2023). This raises concerns about the role of digital platforms in promoting excessive consumption, emphasising the need for responsible marketing strategies that balance urgency with ethical consumerism. Consumers with high sustainability consciousness may experience ethical dissonance when their impulsive purchases contradict their environmental values (Fernandez-Lores et al., 2024). Paradoxically, ethically conscious consumers may avoid returning impulse purchases to reduce environmental harm, prolonging their dissonance instead of resolving it. Some consumers also attempt to alleviate ethical dissonance through moral licensing and compensatory behaviours, such as purchasing from second-hand markets or supporting eco-friendly brands in subsequent purchases (Lee, 2014; Fernandez-Lores et al., 2024). This suggests that sustainability-conscious consumers do not necessarily avoid impulse buying but may attempt to balance their actions to mitigate cognitive dissonance. While self-control and price consciousness reduce impulse buying (Amos et al., 2014), sustainability concerns may not inhibit the purchase but intensify post-purchase dissonance when ethical values are violated (Fernandez-Lores et al., 2024). Yet, whether sustainability concerns actively reduce impulse buying remains underexplored (Chetioui & El Bouzidi, 2023).

H4: Sustainability concern moderates the relationship between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance, such that higher concern increases dissonance.

Conceptual Model and Research Gaps

This literature review has examined how social media engagement influences impulse buying and cognitive dissonance, focusing on FoMO, social comparison, and sustainability concerns. Existing research highlights that social media can, directly and indirectly, drive impulse buying, often through psychological mechanisms such as FoMO and upward comparison. These impulsive purchases frequently lead to cognitive dissonance, wildly when conflicting with rational decision-making or ethical consumption values. Consumers often employ coping strategies such as rationalisation, product returns, or seeking social validation to reduce post-purchase discomfort. Sustainability concerns moderate dissonance, as ethically conscious consumers may experience heightened regret when their purchases violate their values.

Despite these insights, several research gaps persist. For instance, Amos et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of 63 studies, yet most focused on offline impulse buying, overlooking the digital and social media context. While studies like Djafarova and Bowes (2021) have explored Gen Z's qualitative attitudes toward UGC and influencer content,

they do not quantify the comparative influence of stimuli such as ads, peer posts, and opinion leaders. Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu (2019) focused exclusively on luxury fashion, limiting generalisability to fast fashion consumers. Moreover, the role of digital trust and influencer credibility in reducing post-purchase regret remains underexplored, particularly in social commerce settings. Finally, although sustainability concern has been recognised as an important moderating variable, few studies have examined its influence across diverse consumer groups. This study addresses these gaps by examining the interplay of FoMO, social comparison, and sustainability concerns in shaping impulse buying and post-purchase dissonance in the fast fashion context. Doing so contributes to a more holistic understanding of digital consumption behaviour and supports the development of responsible marketing strategies that balance persuasion with consumer well-being.

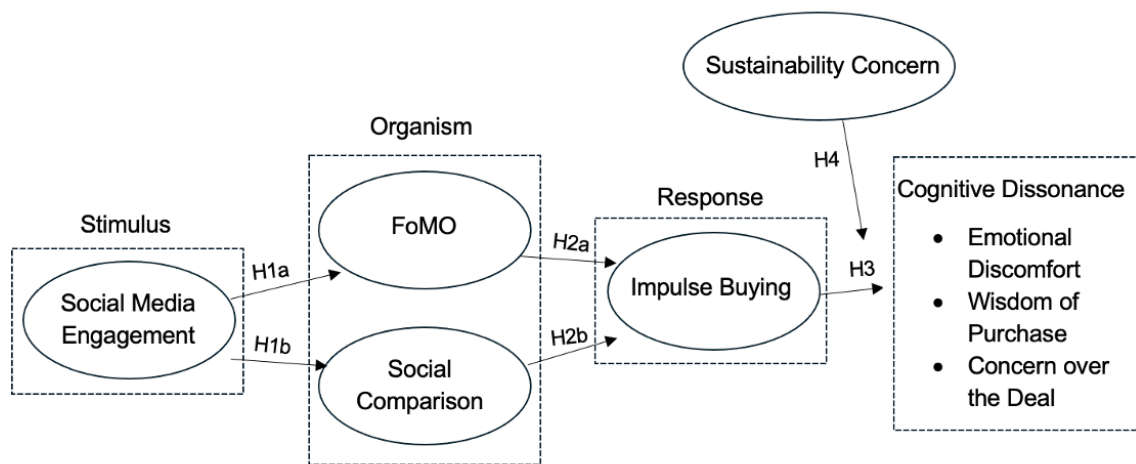


Figure 2: Proposed conceptual model (Author's own)

The hypotheses are reiterated in Table 1.

Table 1: Hypotheses of present study

Hypotheses	
H1a	High social media engagement positively influences FoMO.
H1b	High social media engagement positively influences social comparison.
H2a	FoMO positively influences impulse buying.
H2b	Social comparison positively influences impulse buying.
H3	Impulse buying leads to cognitive dissonance.
H4	Sustainability concern moderates the relationship between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance, such that higher concern increases dissonance.

Chapter Three

RESEARCH DESIGN

3. CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter outlines the research strategy and methodological approach adopted to examine the influence of social media engagement on impulse buying and cognitive dissonance in the context of fashion consumption. It builds on the literature and hypotheses discussed in Chapter 2 and supports the research aim in Chapter 1. The chapter outlines the study's research philosophy, approach, strategy, and data collection process. It also explains how the survey was designed, how participants were sampled, and how data was analysed. The overall research design is based on Saunders et al.'s (2023) research onion model, which helps guide decisions at each stage of the research process. Figure 3 below presents a summary of this study's research design.

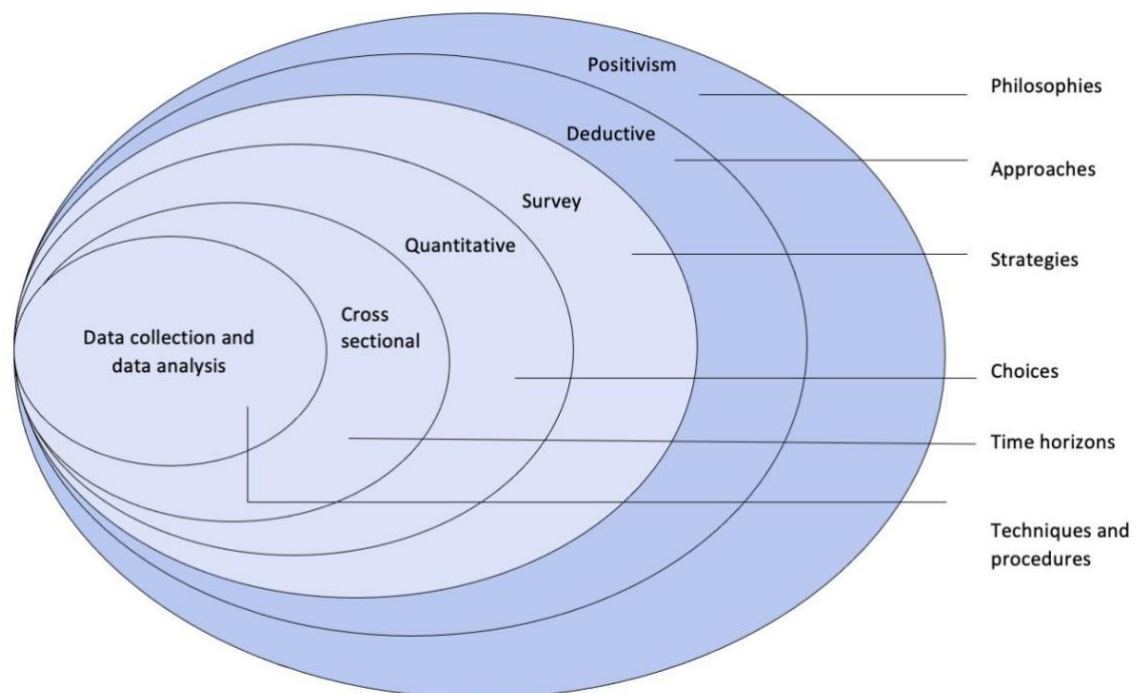


Figure 3: Research Onion adapted from (Saunders et al., 2023, pp.177, fig 5.1)

3.1 Research Design

3.1.1 Epistemological Position

Epistemology concerns the nature and scope of knowledge and reflects the researcher's assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge within a particular academic discipline (Matthews & Ross, 2010; Saunders et al., 2023). This study adopts a positivist epistemological position, which assumes an objective reality that can be measured independently of perception. Positivism is commonly linked to hypothesis testing and the use of quantifiable, observable data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A positivist stance is appropriate for this study because it uses a structured, survey-based method to examine

causal relationships between clearly defined variables, such as social media engagement, FoMO, social comparison, and impulse buying. These constructs are measured using established scales from previous research, allowing for replication and statistical analysis. Axiology, the branch of philosophy concerned with values, aligns with positivism by emphasising researcher neutrality and objectivity, thereby minimising personal bias (Saunders et al., 2023). This study also aligns with the functionalist paradigm, which seeks to explain and predict social behaviour through structured, generalisable findings (Burrell and Morgan, 1982). Given the study's aim to produce generalisable findings about consumer behaviour within a UK-based sample, positivism provides a suitable foundation, supporting the collection of quantifiable data and statistical testing of hypotheses. While interpretivism offers deeper insight into subjective experiences, it was considered less suitable for this study's emphasis on quantifiable, testable relationships.

3.1.2 Research Approach and Design

This study adopted a deductive research approach, which begins with theory and tests it through empirical observation (Saunders et al., 2023; Bell et al., 2019). A deductive approach develops hypotheses from a theoretical framework and evaluates them through data collection and analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2014). This study's hypotheses and conceptual model were informed by existing literature on social media engagement, FoMO, social comparison, impulse buying, and cognitive dissonance. As such, the research aimed to test causal relationships between these predefined constructs, making deduction the most appropriate approach. This study also adopted a mono-method quantitative design, using a structured online survey to collect data. Given the study's focus on quantifying attitudes, behaviours, and psychological responses across a large sample, an online survey was the most practical and scalable method. The data collected was later analysed using statistical methods to assess the strength and direction of hypothesised relationships (see Chapter 4 for data analysis procedures) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Due to time constraints and the aim of capturing consumer behaviour at a specific time, a cross-sectional time horizon was selected. This enabled the study to capture how UK-based fashion consumers respond to social media stimuli at a single point in time.

3.2 Research Methods

3.2.1 Questionnaire Design

The survey instrument was specifically constructed to investigate how user-generated content on social media influences impulsive purchase behaviour and subsequent cognitive dissonance, with particular attention to mediating psychological constructs such as FoMO, social comparison, and sustainability-related attitudes. The survey was developed using Qualtrics and self-administered online to ensure ease of participation, reduce potential researcher bias, and enable broader reach across a dispersed UK-based audience (Brace, 2013). The structure of the questionnaire followed the order of the conceptual model, beginning with a series of demographic screening questions to ensure participants resided in the UK and were aged 18 or above. These were followed by construct-based sections measuring engagement with UGC, FoMO, social comparison, impulse buying tendencies, cognitive dissonance, and sustainability concerns. To ensure clarity and consistency across responses, each conceptual construct was introduced briefly and measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” Likert-type scales were selected for their demonstrated effectiveness in capturing attitudes and behavioural patterns in a psychometrically reliable manner (Likert, 1932; Friedman & Amoo, 1999). A 7-point scale was preferred over shorter formats as it allows greater differentiation of opinion and reduces central tendency bias while still including a neutral midpoint for respondents (Brace, 2013; Joshi et al., 2015). To avoid confusion or response fatigue, all measurement items were presented using the same Likert scale format throughout. Constructs were grouped logically, each section containing 4 to 6 items adapted from validated scales in prior research (e.g., Schivinski et al., 2016; Sweeney et al., 2000; Balderjahn et al., 2013). The wording of items was lightly adapted for clarity and relevance to the fast fashion and social media context, ensuring face validity while maintaining construct integrity. For example, the cognitive dissonance items preceded a contextual prompt asking participants to reflect on a recent impulsive fashion purchase, anchoring responses in a relevant behavioural scenario. To check for participant attentiveness and data quality, a single attention check was embedded mid-way through the questionnaire, instructing respondents to select a specific answer. This approach was chosen to filter out careless responses without drawing undue attention to the check itself. Overall, the survey was designed to take 5–7 minutes, in line with best practices to minimise dropout and reduce satisficing behaviour (Brace, 2013). A data requirements table was also developed (see Table 2) to map the relationships between theoretical constructs, measurement items, and SPSS variable codes.

Table 2: Data Requirements table

Variable	Computed Variable Code	SPSS Code	Measurement Items	Adapted From	Coding Instructions
Residency	RESIDENCY	RES	Do you currently live in the United Kingdom?	N/A	Yes / No
Age	AGE	AGE	What is your age group?	N/A	18–21, 22–25, 26–29, 30–34, 35+
Gender	GENDER	GENDER	What is your gender?	N/A	Male, Female, Non-binary / Other, Prefer not to say
Social Media Usage	PLATFORM	PLATFORM	Which social media platform(s) do you use the most?	N/A	Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter/X, Other
Social Media Engagement	SME	SME1	I frequently like, comment on, or share/repost UGC.	Schivinski et al. (2016)	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		SME2	I follow creators/influencers that post UGC.	Schivinski et al. (2016)	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		SME3	I often save or bookmark UGC to refer to later.	Schivinski et al. (2016)	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		SME4	I rely on UGC before making a purchase.	Astuti & Nindyaswari (2022), Chetioui & El Bouzidi (2023)	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)	FOMO	FOMO1	I feel anxious when I see people talking about or wearing fashion items I don't own.	Good & Hyman (2020), Dinh & Lee (2021)	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		FOMO2	I fear others are enjoying more rewarding fashion experiences or purchases than me.	Przybylski et al. (2013), Good & Hyman (2020),	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree

				Dinh & Lee (2021)	
		FOMO3	I worry that I am missing out on new or trending fashion items.	Good & Hyman (2020), Dinh & Lee (2021)	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		FOMO4	I feel left out when others post about their new fashion purchases.	Dinh & Lee (2021)	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
Social Comparison	SC	SC1	I compare my fashion choices to others.	Tran, Nguyen and Nguyen (2022), Kumar and Kumar (2024)	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		SC2	I feel envious when I see people wearing fashion items I like.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		SC3	Seeing well-dressed people makes me feel like I should improve my style.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		SC4	I tend to judge my fashion choices based on what others wear.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
Impulse Buying Behaviour	IBB	IBB1	I often buy fashion items spontaneously.	Fernandez-Lores et al. (2024), Kumar and Kumar (2024)	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		IBB2	I often buy fashion items without thinking.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		IBB3	I buy fashion items according to how I feel at the moment.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		IBB4	"I see it, I buy it" describes me.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
Cognitive Dissonance	CD	CD1	I felt disappointed with myself.	Adapted from Sweeney,	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree

		CD2	I felt uneasy about whether I made the right choice.	Hausknecht and Soutar (2000)	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		CD3	I wondered if I needed the product I impulsively bought.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		CD4	I wonder whether I should have bought anything at all.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		CD5	After I bought this product, I wondered whether I had been fooled.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		CD6	After I bought this product, I questioned whether the deal I got was fair.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
Sustainability Concern	S	S1	It is important to me that a product is made from recycled materials.	Balderjahn et al. (2013)	1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		S2	I consider it important that products can be disposed of in an environmentally friendly manner.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		S3	I care about whether workers' human rights are adhered to when producing products I buy.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		S4	I find it important that no illegal child labour is involved in manufacturing products I purchase.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		S5	Even when I can afford more, I only buy what I need.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree
		S6	I try to avoid purchases that may cause long-term financial strain.		1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree

3.2.2 Piloting

A pilot study was conducted before the full launch of the survey to assess its clarity, usability, and overall face validity, by guidelines by Malhotra and Birks (2007) and Saunders et al. (2023). In line with Fink's (2016) recommendation of a minimum of ten participants, the questionnaire was piloted with a small sample of twelve UK-based Gen Z and young millennial respondents who matched the study's target demographic. Participants were asked to complete the online survey independently and provide feedback on the clarity of instructions, question-wording, and overall structure. Feedback indicated that the survey was intuitive, engaging, and generally completed in under five minutes. Based on this, the estimated completion time stated on the opening page was revised to better reflect participant experience. To ensure data quality, an attention check item was incorporated into the final version of the survey. This aimed to identify inattentive responses during full deployment. As no confusion or major concerns were reported, and all items were interpreted as intended, no revisions to question wording or structure were necessary. The pilot confirmed the instrument's strong face validity and alignment with the study's conceptual framework. Pilot responses were excluded from the final analysis to ensure the integrity of the primary dataset.

3.2.3 Sampling Strategy

A non-probability sampling strategy was adopted for this study, reflecting practical constraints such as time, budget, and the absence of an accessible sampling frame for UK consumers (Saunders et al., 2023). A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was employed to recruit UK-based social media users who engage with fashion content, aligning with the study's focus on impulse buying and post-purchase dissonance. Purposive sampling ensured participants met the inclusion criteria: UK residency, age 18 or over, and active use of platforms like TikTok or Instagram. These criteria were implemented through screening questions at the beginning of the survey. Responses from non-UK residents were excluded during data cleaning to maintain relevance to the UK fashion consumer context. In addition to purposive sampling, convenience sampling allowed for wider participation by distributing the survey link across personal networks and university channels. Although this method may reduce generalisability due to potential sampling bias (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), it was considered acceptable given the exploratory and time-bound nature of this research. Furthermore, to enhance representativeness, demographic data such as age and gender were collected to compare the sample profile against known UK fashion consumer demographics. A minimum sample size of 150 was targeted, following recommendations by Bryman and Bell (2014) for sufficient statistical power in exploratory survey research. By combining

convenience and purposive strategies, the study was able to reach participants who were both accessible and appropriate for the research scope. The final sample consisted of N = 243 participants. The majority (58.0%) were aged between 22–25, followed by 30.0% aged 18–21, 9.1% aged 26–29, with smaller proportions in the 30–34 (2.1%) and 35+ (0.8%) age brackets. In terms of gender, 66.3% identified as female, 31.3% as male, and 2.5% as non-binary or other. All participants reported current residency in the UK and active use of at least one social media platform. The most frequently used platforms were Instagram and TikTok, with many also reporting use of YouTube and Twitter/X.

3.2.4 Data Analysis

Data from the online questionnaire was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to test the hypotheses derived from the conceptual model. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS (Version 30), including the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2018) for moderation analysis. Descriptive statistics explored general trends across key variables, including social media engagement, FoMO, social comparison, impulse buying, cognitive dissonance, and sustainability concerns. This initial analysis provided insight into the central tendencies and variability of participants' responses, using measures such as mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution. Before conducting inferential tests, the dataset was screened for missing responses and evaluated against parametric assumptions, including normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity, to ensure suitability for regression analysis (Field, 2009). Results are discussed in Chapter 4 [see placeholder]. The main inferential analysis involved multiple linear regression to assess the predictive relationships between the constructs. To evaluate the research hypotheses, multiple regression analyses were employed to assess the influence of FoMO and social comparison on impulse buying, as well as the predictive relationship between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance. Furthermore, moderation analysis was conducted using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro for SPSS to examine whether sustainability concern altered the strength or direction of the impulse buying–dissonance relationship. To further explore the conceptual framework, moderation analysis using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018) was conducted to test whether sustainability concern moderated the relationship between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance. This analysis tested the hypothesis that individuals with higher sustainability concerns may experience stronger dissonance following impulsive purchases, reflecting greater post-purchase regret. This multi-stage analysis approach reflects the structure of the S-O-R model, where internal psychological states such as FoMO and social comparison mediate between external stimuli (UGC) and behavioural responses (Mehrabian and Russell,

1974). All hypotheses were tested at a 95% confidence ($\alpha = 0.05$). The analytical strategy reflects the study's deductive approach and was selected to identify statistically significant relationships between variables, providing a robust basis for interpreting consumer behaviour within social media-driven fashion consumption. By applying a combination of descriptive, regression, and moderation analysis, this strategy enabled a thorough evaluation of the conceptual model. It contributed empirical insight into how social media engagement shapes fashion purchasing behaviours.

3.2.5 Reliability

Reliability, in this context, refers to the consistency with which an instrument measures a construct over time (Andres, 2012). Multiple safeguards were put in place to strengthen the reliability of the data and reduce sources of error. Researcher bias was mitigated using an automated, self-administered online survey, ensuring minimal influence during data collection (Saunders et al., 2023). Similarly, participant-related bias was reduced by allowing respondents to complete the questionnaire at their own convenience and in familiar digital environments, increasing the likelihood of thoughtful, unpressured responses (Saunders et al., 2023). Cronbach's alpha, a standard index of internal consistency for multi-item scales (Fink, 2016), was calculated for each construct to ensure that the items within each scale were coherently measuring the same concept (Saunders et al., 2023). Following Tavakol and Dennick (2011), alpha values between 0.7 and 0.95 are typically considered acceptable; scores above 0.95 may suggest redundancy, while those below 0.7 can indicate inconsistency. In this study, Cronbach's alpha scores ranged from 0.78 to 0.86 across all six constructs, Social Media Engagement, FoMO, Social Comparison, Impulse Buying Behaviour, Cognitive Dissonance, and Sustainability Concern, all of which exceeded the recommended threshold. These results justified the creation of composite variables by averaging the item scores within each construct, which were subsequently used in the regression and moderation analyses (see Appendix 6).

3.2.6 Validity

Validity refers to the degree to which research accurately measures what it intends to measure and the extent to which findings are credible and generalisable (Saunders et al., 2023). Multiple forms of validity were considered to ensure the robustness of the research design. Construct validity was established using pre-validated measurement scales from established literature (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023), adapted for the fast fashion and social media context. These adaptations helped ensure that constructs such as FoMO, social comparison, and cognitive dissonance were

appropriately operationalised. Content validity was supported by the extensive literature review (see Chapter 2) and strengthened through the piloting process. The pilot allowed for refinement of wording and confirmed adequate coverage of each construct (Saunders et al., 2023). Face validity was informally assessed through peer feedback. Peers familiar with consumer behaviour and digital marketing reviewed the survey and confirmed the clarity and appropriateness of the items. While internal validity is more applicable to experimental research, steps were taken to reduce potential confounding variables. Screening questions ensured that participants were UK-based and active social media users, improving sample consistency and contextual relevance. External validity, the extent to which findings can be generalised, was enhanced by recruiting a diverse sample of UK fashion consumers through purposive and convenience sampling. However, as a non-probability sampling method was used, broader generalisability should be approached cautiously. These combined strategies ensured that the survey instrument accurately and appropriately measured the intended constructs. The next chapter presents and interprets the findings derived from this validated instrument.

3.3 Research Ethics

This study adhered to the University of the Arts London (UAL) Code of Practice on Research Ethics (UAL, 2025). Ethical approval was obtained before data collection, with risks, participant considerations, and data handling procedures clearly outlined. At the start of the survey, participants were shown an information and consent statement detailing the study's purpose, voluntary participation, estimated completion time, and data confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained via a tick-box. Participants could withdraw before submitting the survey by exiting their browser. Due to anonymised data, submitted responses could not be withdrawn. No identifiable information was collected. Demographic data used broad categories with a 'prefer not to say' option. The survey was self-administered online via Qualtrics to protect privacy and minimise researcher influence. A contact email was provided for participant queries. Only UK residents aged 18 and above were eligible, confirmed through screening questions. All data was handled in line with GDPR and used solely for academic purposes. The study maintained ethical integrity by ensuring transparency, confidentiality, and voluntary participation throughout the research process. Multiple regression for testing the relationship between multiple independent variables (Social Media Engagement, FoMO, Social Comparison) and Impulse Buying or Cognitive Dissonance.

Chapter Four

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

4. CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the key quantitative results addressing the research objective of exploring how social media engagement impacts impulse buying and subsequent cognitive dissonance within fashion consumption. The data, collected through an online self-completion survey, is analysed in line with the hypotheses and the theoretical model outlined in Chapter 2. IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 30) was used for descriptive and inferential analyses, with moderation tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 1). Section 4.1 outlines the general survey results, including data recoding and participant demographics. Section 4.2 presents descriptive statistics for each construct. Section 4.3 covers inferential analyses, including correlation, simple linear regressions (H1a–H3), and moderation testing (H4). All statistical tests were conducted at a 95% confidence level ($\alpha = .05$), with raw survey responses and computed variable data available in the Appendix for transparency.

4.1 General Survey Results

4.1.1 Data Recoding

To enable parametric analyses such as correlation, regression, and moderation, composite variables were treated as continuous. Although individual Likert-type items are ordinal, aggregating multiple items into a mean score is widely accepted as interval-level measurement in behavioural and social sciences (Jamieson, 2004; Norman, 2010). Each core construct, Social Media Engagement (SME), Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), Social Comparison (SC), Impulse Buying Behaviour (IBB), Cognitive Dissonance (CD), and Sustainability Concern (S), was measured using multiple items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). For each, item responses (e.g., SME_1 to SME_4) were averaged to compute a composite score (e.g., SME_AV). These composite variables were used in subsequent Pearson's correlation, simple linear regression, and moderation analyses using Hayes' PROCESS macro. Table 3 summarises the numerical coding applied in SPSS.

Table 3: Recoded scales computed on SPSS

Value	Label
1	Strongly disagree
2	Disagree
3	Somewhat disagree

4	Neither agree nor disagree
5	Somewhat agree
6	Agree
7	Strongly agree

4.1.2 Sample Size

Determining a suitable sample size was critical to ensuring the statistical power and trustworthiness of both the regression and moderation analyses. Green (1991) provides widely used guidelines, suggesting a minimum of $50 + 8k$ participants for overall model testing, where k is the number of predictors. With six predictors in this study, this equates to a minimum of 98 participants. For testing individual predictors, the guideline of $104 + k$ suggests a minimum of 110. In total, 284 responses were initially collected. After removing incomplete submissions and those failing the attention check, 243 valid responses remained. This final sample exceeds both recommended thresholds, indicating sufficient statistical power for all planned inferential procedures and enhancing confidence in the generalisability of the results.

4.1.3 Demographics

Participant demographic characteristics offer essential context for understanding the patterns observed in the data. A total of 243 valid responses were retained, all from participants residing in the United Kingdom, consistent with the study's geographic focus. In terms of gender, the sample was predominantly female, with 66.3% identifying as female ($n = 161$), 31.3% as male ($n = 76$), and 2.5% as non-binary or other ($n = 6$). This aligns with existing research noting female predominance in fashion consumption (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021).

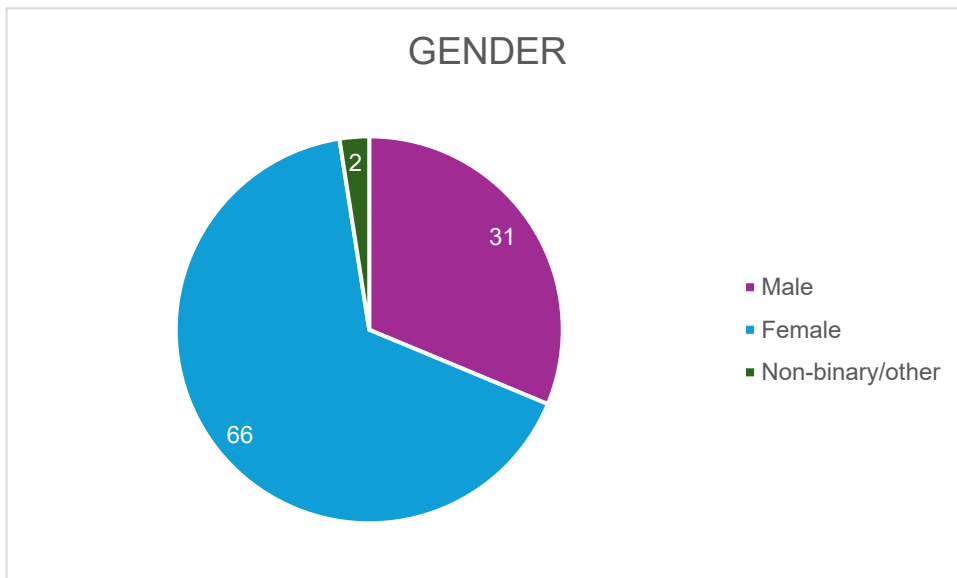


Figure 4: Percentage Distribution of Gender

The majority of participants were aged 22–25 (n = 141, 58%), followed by those aged 18–21 (n = 73, 30%) and 26–29 (n = 22, 9%). A small minority were aged 30–34 (n = 5, 2%) or 35 and older (n = 2, <1%), indicating a sample skewed toward Gen Z and young Millennials, the primary demographic for fast fashion consumers.

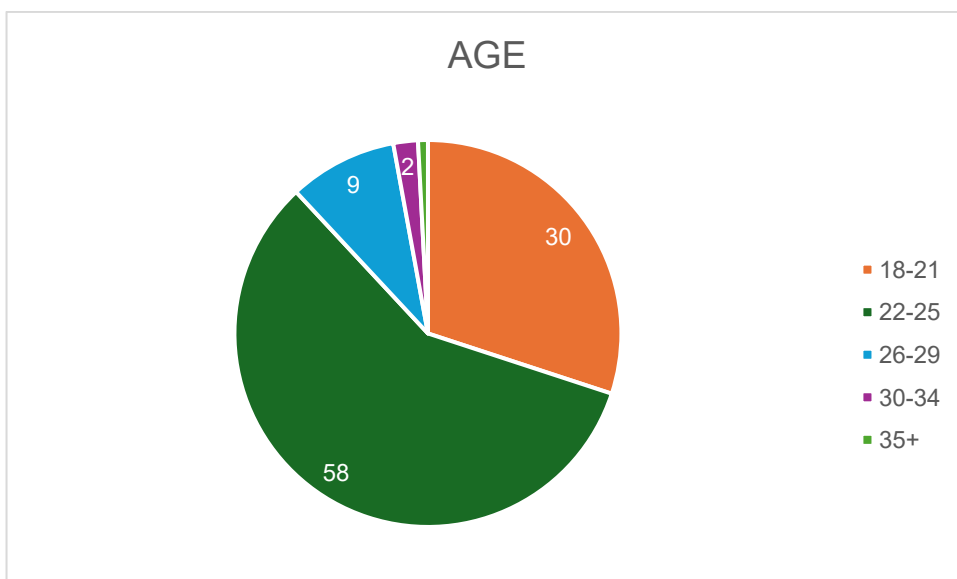


Figure 5: Percentage Distribution of Age

Respondents were asked to indicate all the social media platforms they actively use. Table 4 shows that Instagram was the most widely used platform, reported by 234 participants (41.3% of total responses; 96.3% of valid cases). TikTok was the second most used (n = 146, 25.8%; 60.1% of cases), followed by YouTube (n = 111, 19.6%; 45.7%). Twitter/X and Facebook were used by a smaller portion of the sample, reported

by 31 (5.5%) and 26 (4.6%) respondents, respectively, while 18 respondents (3.2%) indicated the use of other platforms, such as Rednote and Pinterest. Participants could select multiple platforms, which explains why the total percentage exceeds 100%. Instagram and TikTok were the most frequently chosen, indicating a preference for visually driven, fast-paced content, outperforming traditional platforms like Facebook and Twitter/X. The high percentage of cases associated with Instagram and TikTok indicates that most participants use more than one platform, consistent with broader cross-platform content consumption patterns in digital fashion marketing.

Table 4: Social Media Platforms Frequency of Use

		Responses		
		N	Per cent	Percent of Cases
Platforms Used	Instagram	234	41.3%	96.3%
	TikTok	146	25.8%	60.1%
	Facebook	26	4.6%	10.7%
	Twitter/X	31	5.5%	12.8%
	YouTube	111	19.6%	45.7%
	Other	18	3.2%	7.4%
Total		566	100.0%	232.9%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

4.2.1 Descriptive Statistics for Social Media Engagement (SME)

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Social Media Engagement (SME)

Variable and Statement	N	M	M	Mean	SD
SME_1: I frequently like, comment on, or share/repost UGC.	243	1	7	4.60	1.737
SME_2: I follow creators/influencers that post UGC.	243	1	7	4.96	1.675
SME_3: I often save or bookmark UGC to refer to later.	243	1	7	5.01	1.764
SME_4: I rely on UGC before making a purchase.	243	1	7	4.09	1.768
SME_AV	243	1.00	7.00	4.6667	1.37589
Valid N (listwise)	243				

The first independent variable measured was Social Media Engagement (SME), which was composed of four 7-point Likert scale statements. The mean values for the SME

items ranged from $M = 4.09$ ($SD = 1.768$) to $M = 5.01$ ($SD = 1.764$), indicating that respondents generally agreed that they engage with UGC on social media. The highest mean was observed for the item “*I often save or bookmark UGC to refer to later*” ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.764$), suggesting that participants frequently save content for future reference. Mode values across all items ranged from 5 to 6, indicating that most respondents selected *Agree* or *Somewhat Agree*. This reflects a relatively high level of overall engagement with UGC. The composite mean score for SME was $M = 4.67$ ($SD = 1.38$), slightly above the scale's midpoint, suggesting moderate but consistent agreement with engaging in social media activity. The percentage distribution for the combined construct is illustrated in Figure 6. As shown, the majority of respondents (43%) selected *Agree* (5), with a notable portion selecting *Somewhat Agree* (4). Over 60% of participants selected *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* (6 or 7), while fewer than 10% chose responses below *Neutral* (1 to 3). These results indicate a positive attitude toward engaging with UGC on social platforms.

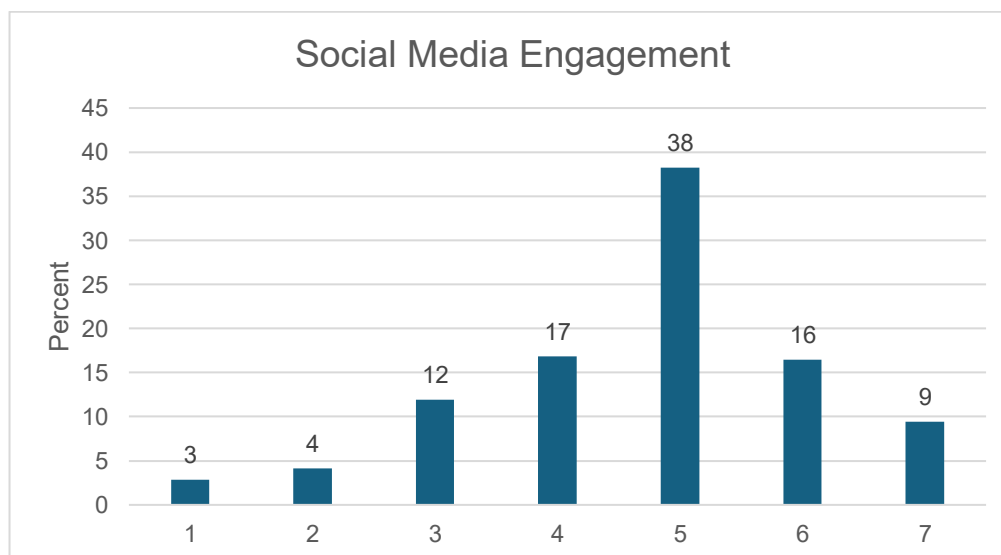


Figure 6: Percentage Distribution of Combined Social Media Engagement

4.2.2 Descriptive Statistics for Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics for Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

Variable and Statement	N	M	M	Mean	SD
FOMO_1: I feel anxious when I see people talking about or wearing fashion items I don't own.	243	1	7	2.62	1.468

FOMO_2: I fear others are enjoying more rewarding fashion experiences or purchases than me.	243	1	7	3.34	1.751
FOMO_3: I worry that I am missing out on new or trending fashion items.	243	1	7	3.31	1.696
FOMO_4: I feel left out when others post about their new fashion purchases.	243	1	7	2.81	1.527
FOMO_AV	243	1.00	7.00	3.0175	1.35182
Valid N (listwise)	243				

The second construct measured was Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), operationalised using four 7-point Likert scale statements. This construct aimed to capture participants' anxiety, exclusion, or apprehension in response to missed fashion-related experiences portrayed on social media. The mean values for individual items ranged from $M = 2.62$ ($SD = 1.468$) to $M = 3.34$ ($SD = 1.751$), reflecting generally low agreement with statements indicating high FoMO. The item *"I fear others are enjoying more rewarding fashion experiences or purchases than me"* had the highest mean ($M = 3.34$), followed closely by *"I worry that I am missing out on new or trending fashion items"* ($M = 3.31$). These responses suggest a mild awareness of missing out on fashion trends. In contrast, the item *"I feel anxious when I see people talking about or wearing fashion items I don't own"* had the lowest mean ($M = 2.62$), indicating limited anxiety over social comparison in fashion contexts.

The composite mean score for FoMO (FOMO_AV) was $M = 3.02$ ($SD = 1.35$), falling slightly below the scale's midpoint. This suggests that participants, on average, did not experience strong levels of FoMO about fast fashion. While some sensitivity to social cues may exist, the overall intensity of FoMO appears to be modest. The percentage distribution of responses for the composite variable is illustrated in Figure 7.

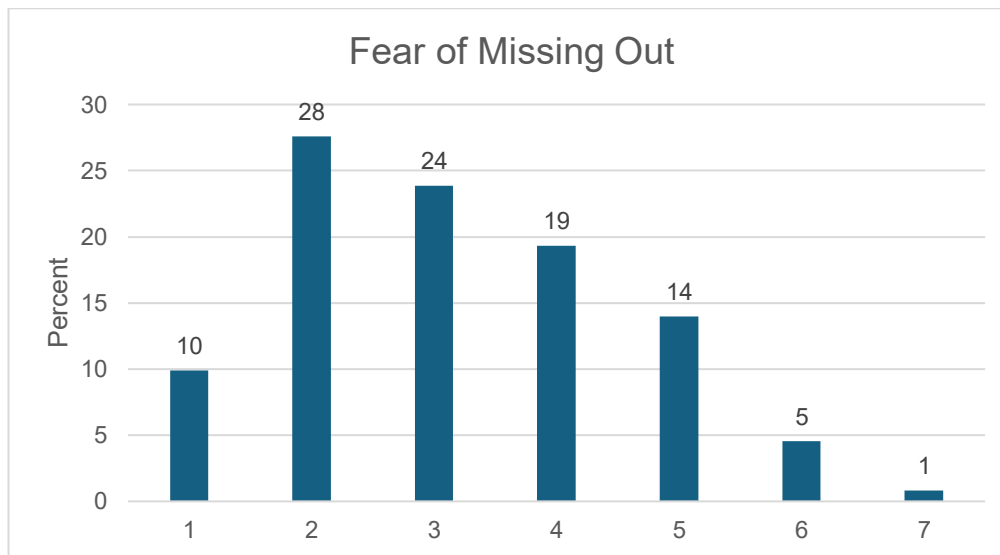


Figure 7: Percentage Distribution of Combined Fear of Missing Out

4.2.3 Descriptive Statistics for Social Comparison

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics for Social Comparison

Variable and Statement	N	M	M	Mean	SD
SC_1: I compare my fashion choices to others.	243	1	7	4.25	1.607
SC_2: I feel envious when I see people wearing fashion items I like.	243	1	7	4.18	1.778
SC_3: Seeing well-dressed people makes me feel like I should improve my style.	243	1	7	5.26	1.596
SC_4: I tend to judge my fashion choices based on what others wear.	243	1	7	3.69	1.621
SC_AV	243	1.00	7.00	4.3416	1.32701
Valid N (listwise)	243				

The third construct measured was Social Comparison (SC), assessed using four 7-point Likert scale statements. This construct aimed to explore how individuals compare their fashion choices with others, potentially leading to feelings of envy or pressure to improve their personal style. The mean values for the individual items varied, reflecting a mix of agreement and neutrality. The statement “*Seeing well-dressed people makes me feel like I should improve my style*” had the highest mean ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.60$), suggesting

that participants generally agreed with experiencing a desire to enhance their appearance when exposed to others' fashion. In contrast, the item “*I tend to judge my fashion choices based on what others wear*” had the lowest mean ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.62$), indicating a lower tendency to evaluate their fashion decisions against others directly. The overall composite mean score for Social Comparison (SC_AV) was 4.34 ($SD = 1.33$), indicating that participants, on average, somewhat agreed with the social comparison items. This suggests a moderate level of social comparison in the context of fashion consumption. The percentage distribution of responses for SC_AV is shown in Figure 8. As illustrated, the most frequent response was *Agree* (32%), followed by *Somewhat Agree* (23%). Less than 10% of participants selected responses below the midpoint, indicating a general tendency toward agreement. These results reinforce the conclusion that fashion-related social comparison exists among participants, though not highly intense.

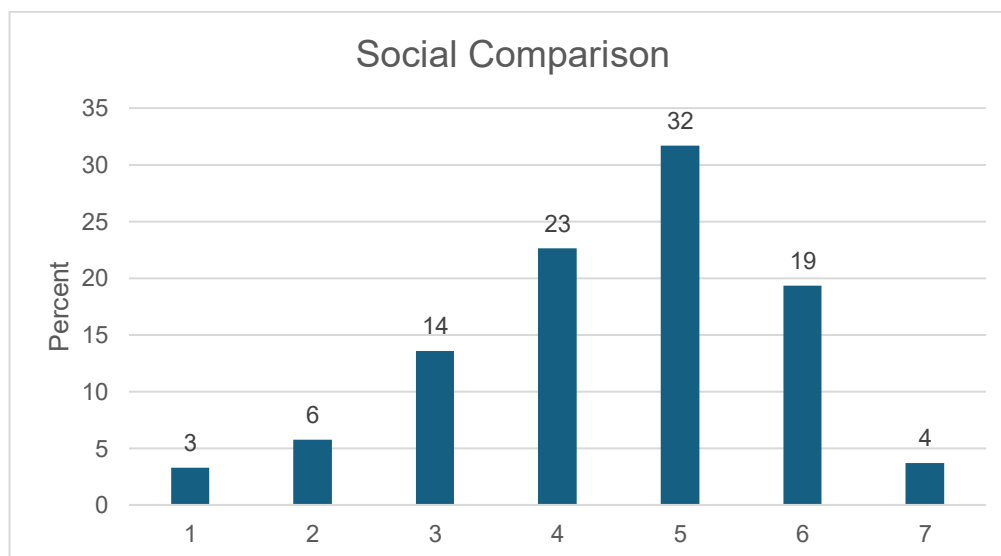


Figure 8: Percentage Distribution of Combined Social Comparison

4.2.4 Descriptive Statistics for Impulse Buying

Table 8: Descriptive Statistics for Impulse Buying

Variable and Statement	N	M	M	Mean	SD
IBB_1: I often buy fashion items spontaneously.	243	1	7	4.18	1.649
IBB_2: I often buy fashion items without thinking.	243	1	7	3.05	1.651
IBB_3: I buy fashion items according to how I feel at the moment.	243	1	7	4.56	1.598

IBB_4: "I see it, I buy it" describes me.	243	1	7	3.09	1.722
IBB_AV	243	1.00	7.00	3.7202	1.33236
Valid N (listwise)	243				

The fourth construct measured was impulse buying behaviour (IBB), which was assessed using four 7-point Likert scale statements. This construct aimed to capture the extent to which participants engage in spontaneous, emotional, or unplanned fashion purchases. The item-level mean scores varied, indicating different degrees of agreement with each aspect of impulse buying. The statement *"I buy fashion items according to how I feel at the moment"* had the highest mean ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.60$), suggesting that participants generally agreed that emotions or immediate feelings influence their purchases. In contrast, the item *"I often buy fashion items without thinking"* had the lowest mean ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.65$), indicating that completely unconsidered purchases were less common. The overall composite mean for IBB (IBB_AV) was 3.72 ($SD = 1.33$), falling just below the scale's midpoint. This suggests that while participants somewhat agreed with the impulse buying items, this behaviour is moderate rather than dominant in their fashion consumption habits. The percentage distribution of responses for the composite variable IBB_AV is shown in Figure 9. As shown, the most frequently selected values were 4 (26%) and 5 (24%), followed by 3 (21%). Less than 10% of respondents selected values above 6 or below 2, supporting the interpretation that participants exhibit moderate impulse buying behaviour overall.

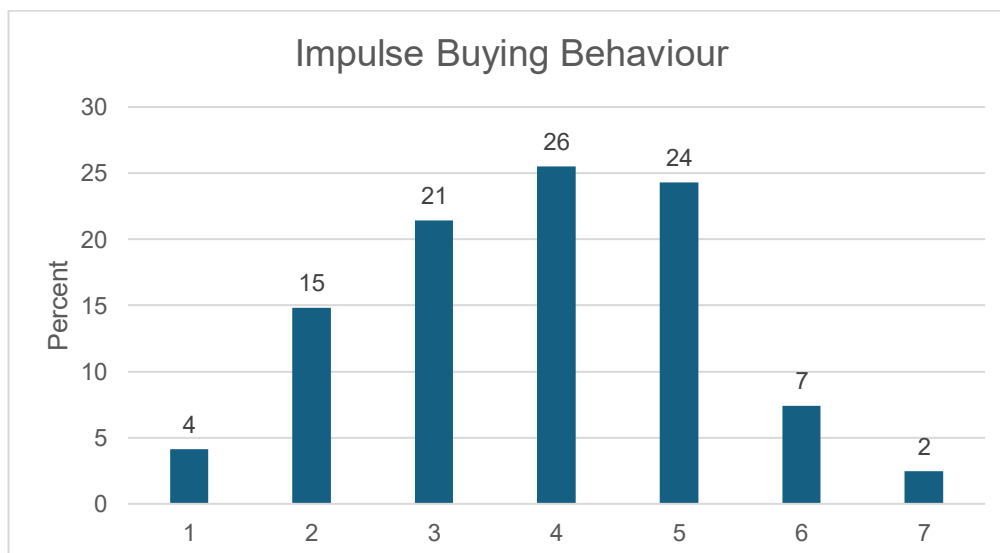


Figure 9: Percentage Distribution of Combined Impulse Buying Behaviour

4.2.5 Descriptive Statistics for Cognitive Dissonance

Table 9: Descriptive Statistics for Cognitive Dissonance

Variable and Statement	N	M	M	Mean	SD
CD_1: I felt disappointed with myself.	243	1	7	3.24	1.544
CD_2: I felt uneasy about whether I made the right choice.	243	1	7	4.00	1.643
CD_3: I wondered if I needed the product I impulsively bought.	243	1	7	4.78	1.619
CD_4: I wonder whether I should have bought anything at all.	243	1	7	4.25	1.653
CD_5: After I bought this product, I wondered whether I had been fooled.	243	1	7	3.35	1.581
CD_6: After I bought this product, I questioned whether the deal I got was fair.	243	1	7	4.05	1.612
CD_AV	243	1.00	6.33	3.9424	1.19673
Valid N (listwise)	243				

The fifth construct measured was Cognitive Dissonance (CD), assessed using six 7-point Likert scale statements. This construct aimed to capture participants' psychological discomfort or uncertainty after purchasing an impulsive fashion. The item "*I wondered if I needed the product I impulsively bought*" had the highest mean ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.62$), suggesting that respondents, on average, somewhat agreed that they experienced doubt about the necessity of the purchase. In contrast, "*I felt disappointed with myself*" had the lowest mean ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.54$), indicating that strong feelings of regret or self-blame were less commonly endorsed. The overall composite mean for CD (CD_AV) was 3.94 ($SD = 1.20$), just below the scale's midpoint. This indicates a mild to moderate level of cognitive dissonance across the sample. While participants reported discomfort following impulsive purchases, these feelings were not intense. The percentage distribution for CD_AV is visualised in Figure 10. The majority of responses clustered between 3 and 5, with 5 (32%) being the most frequently selected value. Very few respondents selected values at the extreme ends of the scale (e.g., 1 or 7), reinforcing the interpretation that respondents experienced moderate but not overwhelming dissonance following impulsive purchases.

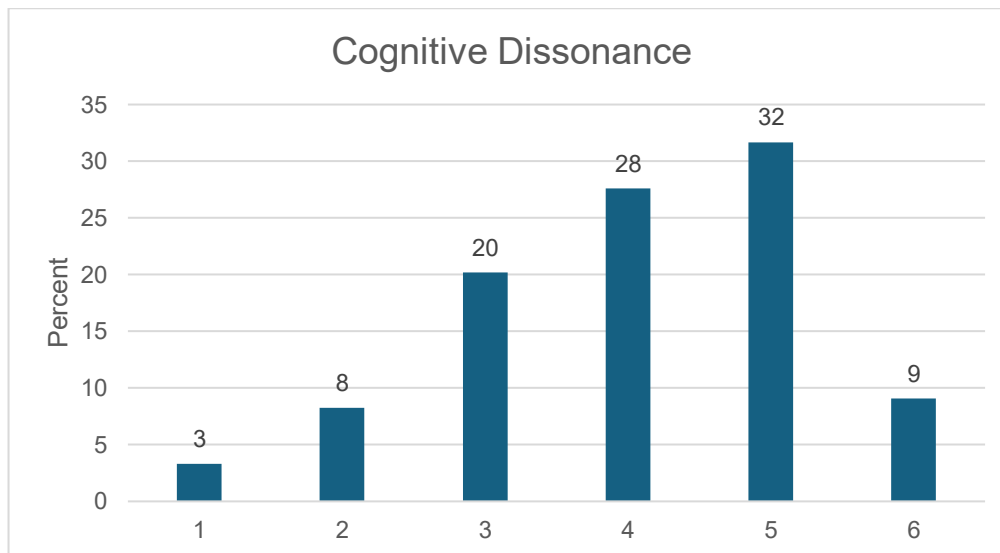


Figure 10: Percentage Distribution of Combined Cognitive Dissonance

4.2.6 Descriptive Statistics for Sustainability Concern

Table 10: Descriptive Statistics for Sustainability Concern

Variable and Statement	N	M	M	Mean	SD
S_1: It is important to me that a product is made from recycled materials.	243	1	7	3.84	1.441
S_2: I consider it important that products can be disposed of in an environmentally friendly manner.	243	1	7	4.67	1.595
S_3: I care about whether workers' human rights are adhered to when producing products I buy.	243	1	7	5.28	1.404
S_4: I find it important that no illegal child labour is involved in manufacturing products I purchase.	243	1	7	5.60	1.435
S_5: Even when I can afford more, I only buy what I need.	243	1	7	4.91	1.586
S_6: I try to avoid purchases that may cause long-term financial strain.	243	1	7	5.49	1.473
S_AV	243	1.17	7.00	4.9643	1.02979
Valid N (listwise)	243				

The final construct measured was Sustainability Concern (SUS), assessed using six 7-point Likert scale statements. This construct aimed to capture participants' attitudes toward sustainable practices in fashion consumption, including environmental, ethical, and financial considerations. The mean values for individual items ranged from $M = 3.84$ ($SD = 1.441$) to $M = 5.60$ ($SD = 1.435$), indicating generally high levels of agreement, though with variation across specific sustainability issues. The highest mean was observed for the item *"I find it important that no illegal child labour is involved in manufacturing products I purchase"* ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.435$), suggesting a strong endorsement of ethical production practices. Other highly rated items included *"I try to avoid purchases that may cause long-term financial strain"* ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.473$) and *"I care about whether workers' human rights are adhered to when producing products I buy"* ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.404$), reflecting concern for human rights and financial responsibility in fashion consumption.

In contrast, the item *"It is important to me that a product is made from recycled materials"* had the lowest mean ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.441$), suggesting a relatively lower prioritization of recycling than other sustainability issues. The overall composite mean score for Sustainability Concern (S_AV) was $M = 4.96$ ($SD = 1.03$), indicating that, on average, participants slightly agreed with the statements, reflecting a moderate level of concern for sustainability in their fashion-related decisions. Figure 11 shows that the percentage distribution of responses indicates that over two-thirds of participants selected 5 (Agree) or 6 (Somewhat Agree), while fewer than 10% chose values below Neutral. This reinforces the conclusion that sustainability considerations are present, though not uniform, among UK fashion consumers. Overall, constructs such as Social Comparison and Sustainability Concern showed higher mean scores. At the same time, FoMO and Cognitive Dissonance remained below the mid-point, suggesting a more reflective and ethically aware sample.

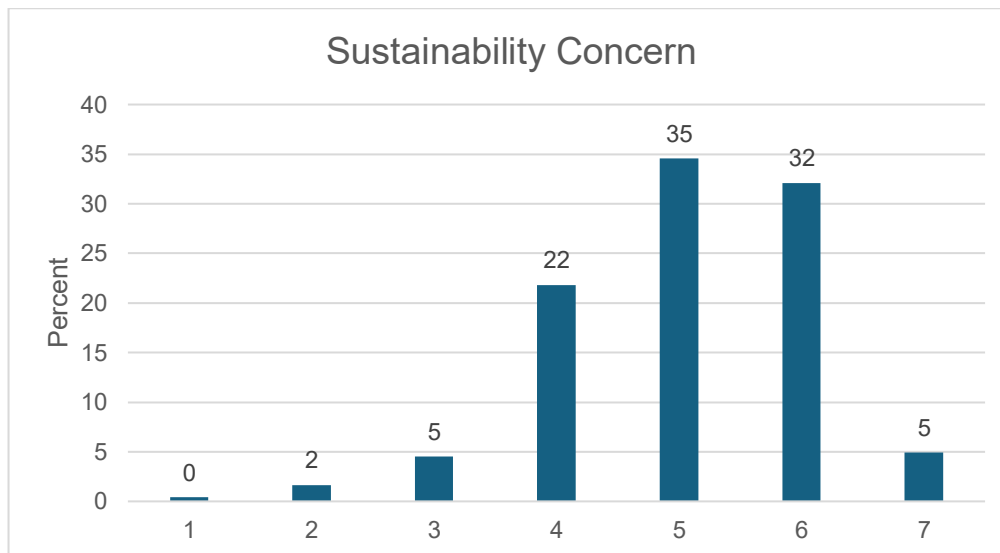


Figure 11: Percentage Distribution of Combined Sustainability Concern

4.3 Inferential Analysis

4.3.1 Gauss–Markov Assumptions

To ensure the validity of the regression results, the Gauss–Markov assumptions were assessed across all hypotheses, including the moderation model in H4. Visual diagnostics were generated from SPSS for each regression. The histograms of the standardized residuals approximated a normal distribution, and the P–P plots revealed that the residuals largely followed the diagonal, suggesting the normality of errors. The scatterplots of standardized predicted values against standardized residuals demonstrated no clear patterns or funnel shapes, indicating that homoscedasticity was satisfied. Additionally, all models' Durbin–Watson values were close to 2, supporting the assumption of independent residuals. No multicollinearity concerns were observed, with VIF values around 1. These results confirm that the linear regressions, including the moderation model in H4, met the key parametric assumptions required for the Gauss–Markov theorem, thereby supporting the reliability and interpretability of the estimated coefficients.

4.3.2 Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis examined the relationships among the study's core constructs. All correlations were two-tailed with a significance level set at $\alpha = .05$. As shown in Table 11, social media engagement (SME) was moderately and positively correlated with both fears of missing out (FoMO) ($r = .273, p < .001$) and social comparison (SC) ($r = .322, p < .001$), providing additional support for H1a and H1b.

These findings suggest that individuals who engage more frequently with social media content are also more likely to experience FoMO and compare themselves with others online. FoMO showed a significant moderate correlation with impulse buying behaviour (IBB) ($r = .286, p < .001$), supporting H2a and indicating that higher levels of FoMO are associated with more significant tendencies toward impulsive purchases. However, the correlation between social comparison and impulse buying was insignificant ($r = .083, p = .197$), providing no support for H2b. Similarly, the correlation between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance (CD) was small and non-significant ($r = .076, p = .240$), indicating that post-purchase dissonance is not strongly linked to impulse buying within this sample. The correlation between sustainability concern (SUS) and cognitive dissonance approached significance ($r = .116, p = .071$), suggesting a potential trend worth further exploration, though it does not reach conventional significance levels. No other significant correlations were found between sustainability concerns and the remaining variables. Notably, FoMO and Social Comparison strongly correlated ($r = .627$). In contrast, the correlation between Impulse Buying and Cognitive Dissonance ($r = .076$) was negligible, suggesting a disconnection between action and post-purchase regret.

Table 11: Pearson Correlation Matrix between Key Variables

Variable	SME_AV	FOMO_AV	SC_AV	IBB_AV	CD_AV	S_AV
SME_AV	1	.273**	.322**	.185**	.113	-.011
FOMO_AV		1	.627**	.286**	.421**	-.010
SC_AV			1	.083	.432**	-.009
IBB_AV				1	.076	-.090
CD_AV					1	.116
S_AV						1

Note: N = 243 for all variables.

SME = Social Media Engagement, FOMO = Fear of Missing Out, SC = Social Comparison, IBB = Impulse Buying Behaviour, CD = Cognitive Dissonance, S = Sustainability Concern.

$p < .01$ (2-tailed) indicated by **.

4.3.3 Simple Linear Regression for H1a

To test H1a, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether social media engagement (SME) significantly predicts fear of missing out (FoMO). The null hypothesis (H_0) stated that the unstandardised regression coefficient (B) equals zero, indicating no predictive relationship between SME and FoMO. The alternative hypothesis (H_1) proposed that B is not equal to zero, suggesting a significant association. The regression model was significant, $F(1, 241) = 19.42$, $p < .001$, accounting for 7.5% of the variance in FoMO ($R^2 = 0.075$). A one-unit increase in SME predicted a 0.27-unit increase in FoMO ($B = 0.268$, $\beta = 0.273$, 95% CI [0.148, 0.388]). Specifically, for every one-unit increase in SME, FoMO increased by approximately 0.27 units. Based on these results, the null hypothesis was rejected, providing empirical support for H1a and confirming that SME is a significant predictor of FoMO.

Table 12: Simple Linear Regression for SME predicting FoMO

Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	F (1, 241)	p-value	B (Unstd.)	SE B	β (Std.)	t	95% CI for B
SME → FoMO	0.273	0.075	0.071	19.42	< .001	0.268	0.061	0.273	4.41	[0.148, 0.388]

Note: Dependent variable = FoMO_AV

4.3.4 Simple Linear Regression for H1b

To test H1b, a simple linear regression was conducted to determine whether social media engagement (SME) significantly predicts social comparison (SC). The null hypothesis (H_0) posited that the unstandardised regression coefficient (B) equals zero, indicating no predictive relationship between SME and SC. The alternative hypothesis (H_1) proposed that B is not equal to zero, suggesting a statistically significant effect. SME significantly predicted social comparison, $F(1, 241) = 27.97$, $p < .001$, explaining 10.4% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.104$). The positive coefficient ($B = 0.311$, $\beta = 0.322$, 95% CI [0.195, 0.427]) indicates that greater SME is associated with higher social comparison; specifically, for each one-unit increase in SME, SC increased by approximately 0.31 units. Given these results, the null hypothesis was rejected, providing empirical support for H1b and reinforcing the conclusion that social media engagement significantly predicts upward social comparison.

Table 13: Simple Linear Regression for SME predicting SC

Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	F (1, 241)	p-value	B (Unstd.)	SE B	β (Std.)	t	95% CI for B
SME → SC	0.322	0.104	0.100	27.97	< .001	0.311	0.059	0.322	5.29	[0.195, 0.427]

Note: Dependent variable = SC_AV

4.3.5 Simple Linear Regression for H2a

To assess Hypothesis 2a, a simple linear regression was used to evaluate whether fear of missing out (FoMO) significantly predicted impulse buying behaviour (IBB). The null hypothesis assumed no relationship ($B = 0$), while the alternative posited a significant predictive effect. Results showed a statistically significant model, $F(1, 241) = 21.43$, $p < .001$, explaining 8.2% of the variance in IBB ($R^2 = 0.082$). This effect size is considered small to moderate. The regression coefficient for FoMO was $B = 0.282$ ($SE = 0.061$, $\beta = 0.286$), with a 95% confidence interval from 0.162 to 0.402 and $p < .001$, indicating a meaningful positive relationship. This suggests that a one-unit increase in FoMO is associated with a 0.28-unit rise in impulse buying tendency. Accordingly, the null hypothesis was rejected, and H2a was supported.

Table 14: Simple Linear Regression for FoMO predicting IBB

Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	F (1, 241)	p-value	B (Unstd.)	SE B	β (Std.)	t	95% CI for B
FoMO → IBB	0.286	0.082	0.078	21.43	< .001	0.282	0.061	0.286	4.63	[0.162, 0.402]

Note: Dependent variable = IBB_AV

4.3.6 Simple Linear Regression for H2b

To test H2b, a simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether social comparison (SC) significantly predicts impulse buying behaviour (IBB). The null hypothesis (H_0) stated that the unstandardised regression coefficient (B) equals zero, indicating no predictive relationship between SC and IBB. The alternative hypothesis (H_1) proposed that B is not equal to zero, suggesting a significant effect of SC on IBB. The regression analysis revealed that the model was not statistically significant, $F(1, 241) =$

1.67, $p = .197$, with an R^2 of 0.007, indicating that social comparison explained less than 1% of the variance in impulse buying—a tiny effect size. The regression coefficient was positive but non-significant ($B = 0.083$, $SE = 0.064$, $\beta = 0.083$, $p = .197$), and the 95% confidence interval for B ranged from -0.044 to 0.210, spanning zero. These findings suggest that although there is a slight positive association between social comparison and impulse buying behaviour, the relationship lacks statistical support. Consequently, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, and H2b is not supported.

Table 15: Simple Linear Regression for SC predicting IBB

Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	F (1, 241)	p-value	B (Unstd.)	SE B	β (Std.)	t	95% CI for B
SC → IBB	0.083	0.007	0.003	1.67	.197	0.083	0.064	0.083	1.29	[-0.044, 0.210]

Note: Dependent variable = IBB_AV

4.3.7 Simple Linear Regression for H3

To evaluate Hypothesis 3, a linear regression was conducted to test whether impulse buying behaviour predicted post-purchase cognitive dissonance. The analysis returned a non-significant result: $F(1, 241) = 1.39$, $p = .240$, with an R^2 of 0.006. The coefficient ($B = 0.068$, $SE = 0.058$, $\beta = 0.076$) was non-significant, and its confidence interval (-0.046 to 0.182) included zero. These findings suggest no clear statistical link between frequency or intensity of impulsive buying and the emergence of dissonance post-purchase. H3 was therefore not supported.

Table 16: Simple Linear Regression for IBB predicting CD

Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	F (1, 241)	p-value	B (Unstd.)	SE B	β (Std.)	t	95% CI for B
IBB → CD	0.076	0.006	0.002	1.39	.240	0.068	0.058	0.076	1.18	[-0.046, 0.182]

Note: Dependent variable = CD_AV

4.3.8 Moderation Analysis for H4

Hypothesis 4 was tested using a moderation analysis with Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 1), which examined whether sustainability concern altered the strength of the relationship between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance. All predictors were mean centred prior to analysis, and 5,000 bootstrapped samples were used for estimating confidence intervals. The overall model was marginally non-significant: $F(3, 239) = 2.32, p = .076$, with $R^2 = 0.032$.

Individually, the effects of impulse buying ($B = 0.063, SE = 0.065, p = .337$) and sustainability concern ($B = 0.149, SE = 0.083, p = .072$) were non-significant. The interaction term ($IBB \times SUS$) was also not statistically significant ($B = 0.093, SE = 0.063, p = .142$), with a 95% CI ranging from -0.032 to 0.218 . This suggests that the relationship between impulse buying, and cognitive dissonance does not significantly differ across levels of sustainability concern.

Possible reasons for the lack of a moderating effect include insufficient variance in sustainability concern, measurement sensitivity issues, or sample limitations. Future research could explore experimental or longitudinal designs or examine moderated mediation models to better understand how sustainability-related values shape post-purchase consumer experiences.

Table 17: Moderation Analysis Results for H4

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Constant	3.954	0.077	51.18	<.001	[3.802, 4.106]
IBB_AV	0.063	0.065	0.96	.337	[-0.066, 0.192]
S_AV	0.149	0.083	1.81	.072	[-0.013, 0.312]
IBB_AV \times S_AV	0.093	0.063	1.47	.142	[-0.032, 0.218]

Note: DV = CD_AV; all predictors were mean-centred.

4.3.9 Exploratory Group Comparison

A one-way MANOVA was conducted to examine whether sustainability concern (high vs. low) significantly influenced impulse buying and cognitive dissonance. The multivariate test showed no significant effect of sustainability concern on the combined dependent

variables, Wilks' Lambda = .992, $F(2, 240) = 1.005$, $p = .368$, partial $\eta^2 = .008$. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs revealed no significant differences between groups on impulse buying, $F(1, 241) = 0.634$, $p = .427$, or cognitive dissonance, $F(1, 241) = 1.230$, $p = .268$. Despite minor violations in variance homogeneity for impulse buying, the overall results suggest that sustainability concern alone does not differentiate individuals' post-purchase dissonance or impulsive buying tendencies.

Table 18: MANOVA results comparing High vs. Low Sustainability Concern Groups on IBB and CD

Dependent Variable	Sustainability Concern Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Impulse Buying (IBB_AV)	Low Sustainability Concern (0)	108	3.80	1.19
	High Sustainability Concern (1)	135	3.66	1.44
	Total	243	3.72	1.33
Cognitive Dissonance (CD_AV)	Low Sustainability Concern (0)	108	3.85	1.17
	High Sustainability Concern (1)	135	4.02	1.22
	Total	243	3.94	1.20

4.4 Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results

Objectives 1 through 4 were addressed via correlation, regression, moderation, and group comparison methods, as outlined in the hypotheses testing framework.

Table 19: Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypotheses		Result
H1a	High social media engagement positively influences FoMO.	Supported
H1b	High social media engagement positively influences social comparison.	Supported
H2a	FoMO positively influences impulse buying.	Supported

H2b	Social comparison positively influences impulse buying.	Not Supported
H3	Impulse buying leads to cognitive dissonance.	Not Supported
H4	Sustainability concern moderates the relationship between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance, such that higher concern increases dissonance.	Not Supported

4.4.1 Refitted Conceptual Model

This chapter reported the key findings from the quantitative analysis. Three hypotheses were supported (H1a, H1b, H2a), confirming that social media engagement influences both FoMO and social comparison and that FoMO predicts impulse buying. However, H2b, H3, and H4 were not supported, indicating no significant effects from social comparison, impulse buying, or sustainability concerns on cognitive dissonance. Figure 12 illustrates a revised version of the original conceptual model. The next chapter will discuss the implications of these findings.

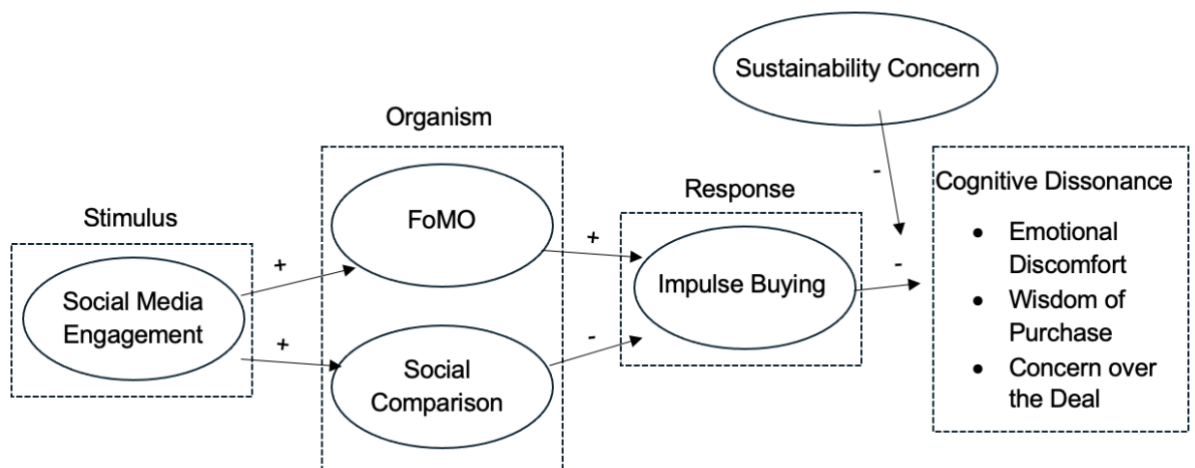


Figure 12: Refitted Conceptual Model

Chapter Five

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

5. CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Overview of Findings

The research investigated how user-generated content (UGC) on social media impacts impulse buying and post-purchase cognitive dissonance in fashion consumption, considering the mediating influence of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and social comparison, and the moderating role of sustainability concern. Quantitative data from 243 UK-based respondents was analysed through descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, moderation, and group comparison tests. The findings provide a nuanced view of the psychological mechanisms driving consumer behaviour in a digital fashion environment. Social media engagement significantly predicted both FoMO and social comparison, supporting the hypothesis that active interaction with fashion-related content heightens psychological triggers associated with social influence. FoMO, in turn, was a significant predictor of impulse buying, reinforcing its role as a key behavioural driver in fashion consumption. However, social comparison did not significantly predict impulse buying, suggesting that the tendency to compare oneself with others does not always translate into impulsive purchasing decisions in this context. Further, contrary to expectations, impulse buying did not significantly predict post-purchase cognitive dissonance and sustainability concerns did not moderate this relationship. These null results challenge the assumptions that impulsive purchases automatically lead to emotional discomfort or that individuals with higher sustainability values experience more significant dissonance. An exploratory MANOVA comparing high vs. low sustainability concern groups revealed no significant group differences in impulse buying or dissonance. Overall, three of the six hypotheses were supported. The final model refines the theoretical framework by highlighting FoMO as the key psychological link between social media engagement and impulse buying while questioning the assumed downstream effects on post-purchase dissonance.

5.2 Discussion of Findings of Literature

5.2.1 Social Media Engagement → FoMO & Social Comparison (H1a, H1b)

The first research objective focused on understanding how consumer interaction with fashion-oriented UGC affects FoMO and upward social comparison. The results offered strong statistical support for Hypotheses H1a and H1b, revealing that higher levels of SME were significantly associated with increased experiences of FoMO ($\beta = 0.273$, $p < .001$) and social comparison ($\beta = 0.322$, $p < .001$). These findings reinforce the SOR framework, positioning SME as a digital environmental stimulus that triggers emotional (FoMO) and cognitive (social comparison) reactions. The observed relationship between SME and FoMO supports the foundational theory by Przybylski et al. (2013), which

defines FoMO as anxiety driven by the fear of being excluded from desirable or rewarding experiences. In the fashion context, such anxieties often relate to limited-edition launches, viral styles, or influencer-endorsed products, frequently circulated through high-velocity, visually engaging UGC on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. These platforms amplify time sensitivity and desirability through short-form, algorithmically surfaced content, reinforcing users' perceptions of scarcity and social pressure (Tandon et al., 2021). Likewise, the significant link between SME and social comparison is aligned with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), which argues that individuals gauge their worth and status by comparing themselves to others in the absence of objective benchmarks. In digital fashion environments, where idealised images and curated lifestyles dominate, users are routinely exposed to aspirational content that fosters upward comparison, potentially influencing their consumption decisions. UGC, particularly fashion hauls, outfit inspiration, or lifestyle vlogs, frequently portrays idealised self-presentations, prompting viewers to engage in cognitive appraisal and emotional comparison (Wood, 1989; Reer et al., 2019). Visually immersive, high-interaction content enhances emotional salience (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021), while unmet psychosocial needs, such as identity validation or social belonging, intensify the impact of FoMO and comparison (Dolan et al., 2016). Exposure to a trending item can simultaneously trigger exclusionary anxiety and feelings of inferiority, thereby reinforcing engagement loops. By empirically linking SME to both FoMO and social comparison, this study expands the literature beyond transactional outcomes such as purchase intention. It underscores the psychological consequences of digital fashion engagement and raises important ethical considerations for brands utilising emotionally evocative content as part of their marketing strategy.

5.2.2 FoMO → Impulse Buying (H2a)

The findings provide strong empirical support for Research Objective 2, confirming that Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) significantly predicts impulse buying behaviour (IBB). The regression analysis yielded a significant positive relationship ($B = 0.282$, $\beta = 0.286$, $p < .001$), with FoMO accounting for 8.2% of the variance in IBB, representing a small to moderate effect size. This result reinforces prior literature positioning FoMO as a potent affective driver within the SOR framework, particularly in digitally mediated, time-sensitive consumption contexts such as fashion. FoMO, conceptualised as a state of anxiety stemming from perceived social or experiential exclusion (Przybylski et al., 2013), appears to be triggered by user-generated fashion content that highlights exclusivity and trend participation. Influencer hauls, limited-time product drops, and algorithmically promoted content intensify urgency and emotional discomfort, pushing consumers

toward unplanned purchases. This finding is consistent with Dinh and Lee (2021), who identified FoMO as a mechanism that transforms social media stimuli into impulsive actions under perceived peer pressure. The emotional dimension of FoMO, characterised by urgency, anxiety, and fear of social disadvantage, may compromise deliberative reasoning, facilitating reactive, hedonic buying behaviour. This aligns with Rook's (1987) foundational work, which described impulse buying as largely affective and compensatory. More recently, Tandon et al. (2021) and Good and Hyman (2020) have shown that FoMO reframes consumption decisions as socially strategic rather than need-based, bypassing rational evaluation. Even individuals with low dispositional impulsivity may succumb to impulsive behaviour when exposed to situational triggers such as influencer content or flash sales (Redine et al., 2022). By confirming FoMO's predictive role as an organism-level variable, this study deepens the theoretical application of the SOR model in digital fashion contexts. It also highlights that FoMO exerts a more substantial behavioural influence than social media engagement alone, positioning it as a critical psychological mechanism linking digital exposure to consumer action. These findings have important implications for marketing strategy and consumer well-being, especially in an era where urgent content is a dominant feature of social commerce.

5.2.3 Social Comparison → Impulse Buying (H2b)

Contrary to expectations, the hypothesis that social comparison predicts impulse buying (H2b) was not supported. The regression model was not statistically significant ($B = 0.083$, $\beta = 0.083$, $p = .197$), with an R^2 of just 0.007, indicating that social comparison explained less than 1% of the variance in impulse buying. This suggests that, although upward comparison was prevalent in the sample, it did not directly translate into spontaneous purchasing behaviour. This finding contrasts with studies that have framed social comparison as a core behavioural trigger in digital contexts (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Dinh & Lee, 2021), where envy or self-discrepancy often spur reactive consumption. However, it aligns with Reer, Tang and Quandt (2019), who argue that the effect of social comparison may depend on mediators such as self-esteem or materialism. In this sample, which is predominantly composed of Gen Z and young Millennials, the comparison may increase awareness without necessarily prompting impulsivity. As Wood (1989) suggests, social comparison is often reflective rather than reactive, which may result in deferred rather than immediate purchasing. These findings highlight the need to re-examine assumptions about comparison within the SOR model and explore more nuanced pathways such as mediated or moderated effects through which it may influence behaviour.

5.2.4 Impulse Buying → Cognitive Dissonance (H3)

Contrary to expectations, the hypothesis that impulse buying predicts cognitive dissonance (H3) was also unsupported. The regression model was not statistically significant ($B = 0.068$, $\beta = 0.076$, $p = .240$), with a negligible R^2 of 0.006, indicating that impulse buying behaviour explained less than 1% of the variance in post-purchase dissonance. This challenges the dominant view in consumer psychology that impulsive purchases lead to emotional discomfort, regret, or self-recrimination (Rook & Fisher, 1995; Chen et al., 2021). While participants in this study acknowledged mild uncertainty following impulsive purchases (e.g., "I wondered if I needed the product"), stronger regret responses (e.g., "I felt disappointed with myself") were infrequent. This may reflect the normalisation of impulsive buying within fast fashion culture, especially among Gen Z consumers who perceive such purchases as low-risk and easily reversible due to flexible return policies (Lee, 2014; Fernandez-Lores et al., 2024). These behaviours may also be post-rationalised, reducing dissonance (Yassin & Soares, 2023). Ultimately, this finding raises important questions about the uniformity of the SOR model's response dimension, suggesting that not all spontaneous purchases result in emotional discomfort. These results call into question the assumption that impulse purchases inevitably lead to dissonance, highlighting the importance of contextual moderators such as return policies or cultural norms.

5.2.5 Moderation by Sustainability Concern (H4)

H4 proposed that sustainability concern would moderate the relationship between impulse buying behaviour (IBB) and cognitive dissonance (CD), such that individuals with stronger ethical or environmental values would experience heightened post-purchase discomfort following impulsive purchases. Although grounded in the literature linking value-incongruent behaviour to psychological tension (Bläse et al., 2023; Fernandez-Lores et al., 2024), this hypothesis was not supported. The moderation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro revealed a non-significant interaction effect ($B = 0.093$, $p = .142$), and the overall model accounted for just 3.2% of the variance in cognitive dissonance ($R^2 = 0.032$). While the primary effect of sustainability concern on dissonance approached significance ($B = 0.149$, $p = .072$), an exploratory MANOVA likewise showed no meaningful differences between high and low sustainability concern groups. Several plausible explanations may account for these null results. Consumers with ethical leanings may engage in moral licensing, offsetting unsustainable purchases by later supporting eco-conscious initiatives (Fernandez-Lores et al., 202

). Additionally, the sustainability scale may have captured general concern rather than momentary salience during purchasing decisions. Without an acute awareness of ethical conflict at the point of action, the moderating role of sustainability concern may be diminished. Moreover, for many fast fashion consumers, sustainability may function more as an aspirational identity marker than a behavioural imperative. Thus, while the theoretical logic behind H4 remains compelling, the findings challenge assumptions that ethical values consistently intensify post-purchase regret. Future research should refine how sustainability is operationalised, possibly distinguishing between cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions, and explore alternative models, such as mediated moderation or value-based consumer segmentation. While sustainability remains a vital theme in ethical fashion discourse, its direct behavioural impact may be overstated without more precise conceptual and situational distinctions.

5.3 Managerial Implications

This study provides actionable insights for fashion brands and platforms aiming to balance consumer engagement with psychological well-being. Theoretically, the study reinforces the relevance of the SOR framework in digital consumer research while highlighting how UGC and platform mechanics shape purchasing behaviour within the fast fashion domain. From a managerial standpoint, the significant associations between social media engagement, FoMO, and social comparison underscore the powerful psychological impact of algorithmically amplified content. Influencer-driven posts, especially on TikTok and Instagram, often emphasise exclusivity, urgency, or curated aesthetics, which act as potent emotional triggers. Research shows that TikTok's short-form, highly immersive format drives more spontaneous and emotionally reactive shopping behaviour than Instagram's comparatively curated and static environment (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2022; Good and Hyman, 2020). These effects are especially salient for Gen Z, who are highly attuned to authenticity and mental well-being in digital spaces (Dinh and Lee, 2021).

Brands leveraging such content should adopt ethical caution. While scarcity-based tactics can yield short-term conversions, they risk reinforcing compulsive consumption patterns and post-purchase dissatisfaction. To mitigate this, fashion marketers might transition towards inclusive strategies that promote self-expression, reflective consumption, and long-term brand loyalty. For instance, incorporating "cooling-off" prompts, "save for later buttons, or time checkout delays can enhance consumer agency without undermining engagement. Additionally, campaigns centred on slow fashion,

upcycling, or digital storytelling around garment longevity may better resonate with a values-driven, environmentally conscious audience.

Interestingly, although constructs like social comparison and sustainability concern are psychologically salient, they did not significantly influence impulse buying or cognitive dissonance in this study. This indicates that merely showcasing aspirational lifestyles or ethical concepts cannot shift behaviour without emotionally resonating, authentic messaging. Brands seeking to reach ethically engaged consumers should pursue deeper storytelling approaches, co-creating content with sustainability influencers, inviting consumer narratives around mindful fashion, or anchoring campaigns in identity-affirming values. Finally, for social media platforms, these findings underscore a growing responsibility to embed digital well-being tools. Features enabling users to monitor screen time, set in-app spending limits, or filter urgency-inducing content may boost platform trust and encourage more intentional consumption. As social commerce accelerates, aligning platform design with behavioural insight will be critical for fostering ethical, psychologically healthy brand-consumer relationships, anchored in engagement metrics and sustained satisfaction, trust, and shared value.

5.4 Review of Research Aim and Objectives

5.4.1 Research Aim

To quantitatively examine how social media user-generated content (UGC) influences impulse buying behaviour and post-purchase cognitive dissonance among UK-based consumers, with FoMO and social comparison as mediating variables and sustainability concern as a moderating factor.

5.4.2 Research Objectives

1. To assess how social media engagement with fashion-related user-generated content (UGC) influences the psychological mechanisms of FoMO and social comparison.
2. To investigate the effect of FoMO and social comparison on impulse buying behaviour in fashion consumption.
3. To explore how impulse buying contributes to post-purchase cognitive dissonance among consumers.
4. To examine whether sustainability concern moderates the relationship between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance.

5. To propose actionable recommendations for social media platforms and fashion brands on aligning digital marketing strategies with consumer well-being and sustainability goals.

Objective 1 was addressed through regression analysis, revealing that social media engagement predicted both FoMO and social comparison. The meaningful findings were grounded in the SOR framework and supported by psychological theories of social influence, demonstrating how digital content intensifies affective and cognitive responses. Objective 2 was explored by testing the pathways from FoMO and social comparison to impulse buying. The analysis illustrated distinct behavioural outcomes from each construct, with emotional triggers proving more influential in driving unplanned purchases. This helped delineate the differential roles of affective and evaluative mechanisms in fast fashion consumption. Objective 3 was examined through the link between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance. Although only moderate dissonance levels were reported, the analysis captured the nuances of post-purchase emotions. It contextualised them within demographic and behavioural patterns typical of Gen Z and young Millennials. Objective 4 was approached using moderation analysis and group comparisons, which examined the influence of sustainability concerns on post-purchase evaluations. This allowed for exploring ethical dissonance while highlighting the complexity of integrating sustainability values into impulsive consumption contexts. Finally, Objective 5 was achieved through the development of managerial recommendations. These were informed by empirical patterns and grounded in marketing ethics, offering strategies to support more responsible consumer engagement across digital and fashion platforms.

5.5 Originality and Contribution to Knowledge

This research makes several meaningful contributions to the evolving discourse on digital consumer behaviour in the fast fashion sector. Firstly, it extends the established SOR model by incorporating post-purchase emotional consequences, specifically, cognitive dissonance into a framework traditionally focused on pre-purchase stimuli and behavioural responses. This extension offers a more holistic understanding of how digital stimuli shape impulsive consumption and influence emotional reflection after the transaction. Secondly, the study adopts an integrative approach by positioning fashion-related UGC as a central stimulus and concurrently investigating its dual psychological effects: FoMO and social comparison. While these constructs have been examined independently in prior literature, this research demonstrates how they operate in tandem under sustained exposure to social media content, highlighting the layered emotional

dynamics triggered by algorithmically curated, visually rich content in the fashion domain. Thirdly, introducing sustainability concern as a moderating variable represents a novel attempt to bridge ethical consumerism with impulse buying psychology. Although the moderation effect was not statistically significant, the inclusion of this construct underscores the importance of exploring value-behaviour discrepancies and ethical tensions in fashion consumption. It sets the groundwork for future studies examining how moral identity, environmental awareness, or perceived responsibility influence emotional dissonance post-purchase. A further contribution lies in the study's contextual focus on UK-based Gen Z and Millennials, who represent a digitally fluent yet ethically aware consumer base. This focus enhances the relevance of the findings for industry stakeholders, offering insights into how digitally native consumers negotiate the tension between fast fashion's immediacy and their evolving sustainability values. These contributions expand the theoretical, psychological, and ethical dimensions of fast fashion research, positioning this study as a timely addition to literature at the intersection of digital marketing, consumer psychology, and sustainable fashion.

5.6 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides meaningful insights into the psychological mechanisms linking social media engagement, impulse buying, and cognitive dissonance in fast fashion, several limitations constrain its scope. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, warranting future longitudinal or experimental research to establish temporal dynamics. The non-significant moderation by sustainability concern may reflect measurement sensitivity or conceptual breadth limitations, suggesting a need to distinguish between environmental, social, and financial dimensions. Potential mediating effects, such as FoMO linking engagement to impulse buying, remain unexplored and could be tested through mediation models. The exclusive use of quantitative self-report data may also overlook deeper emotional processes; qualitative methods such as interviews or diary studies could offer a richer contextual understanding. While platform usage was measured, platform-specific effects were not analysed, despite algorithmic and content differences between Instagram and TikTok that may shape consumer responses. Lastly, the sample's demographic concentration on UK-based Gen Z and Millennials limits generalisability; future studies could broaden the participant pool to examine cross-cultural or generational variations in digital fashion behaviour. Addressing these gaps would enhance future research's theoretical depth and practical relevance in this evolving field.

5.7 Final Conclusion

This dissertation investigated how social media engagement with fashion-related UGC influences impulse buying and post-purchase dissonance, focusing on the mediating roles of FoMO and social comparison and the moderating role of sustainability concern. Anchored in the SOR framework, the study found that higher engagement with platforms like Instagram and TikTok significantly increased FoMO and upward social comparison, highlighting the psychological effects of algorithmically amplified content. Crucially, FoMO emerged as a key affective mechanism driving impulsive consumption, reinforcing the emotionally reactive nature of fast fashion purchasing. However, social comparison did not significantly predict impulse buying, nor did impulse buying, or sustainability concern reliably predict cognitive dissonance. These findings indicate that post-purchase discomfort does not uniformly result from impulsive behaviour and may instead be contingent on contextual or emotional moderators, such as individual value alignment or rationalisation mechanisms. The study offers a more holistic view of online fashion consumption by extending the SOR model to include post-purchase outcomes and situating sustainability within a digital consumer context. Ultimately, it reinforces the importance of designing marketing strategies that prioritise engagement and conversion, long-term consumer well-being, and ethical alignment in an increasingly saturated and emotionally charged digital environment.

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7. APPENDICES

Appendix One – Individual Learning Agreement

Individual Learning Agreement

Student Name	Dannah Cruz				
Title of Project	From Likes to Buys: Examining Social Media-Driven UGC on Impulse Buying and Cognitive Dissonance in Fast Fashion Consumption				
Name/s of collaborators if applicable					
Supervisor	Shuyu Lin				
Aim of the project:	To quantitatively examine how social media-driven user-generated content (UGC) influences impulse buying behaviour and cognitive dissonance in fast fashion consumption, focusing on consumers with varying levels of sustainability concern in the UK context.				
Objectives (max 5)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To explore how user-generated content (UGC) on social media influences impulse buying in fast fashion consumption. 2. To assess the cognitive dissonance experienced by fast fashion consumers post-impulsive purchases, particularly among high- and low-sustainability-concern groups. 3. To evaluate the rationalisation strategies employed by consumers to address cognitive dissonance after impulse purchases. 4. To propose strategic recommendations for social media platforms and fast fashion brands to align consumer behaviour with sustainability goals and reduce the AIB gap. 				
Agreed outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissertation draft and final submission of a 16,000-word research paper. • SPSS-based statistical analysis and visual data representation. • Ethical approval documents and raw survey data in appendices. 				
Formats	PDF				
Research away from College	Where?		Why?		Dates:
Agreed contact points/ Tutorial dates	21 st Jan	Mid-Feb	Early April	May	
Project Timeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • January: Refine aim and objectives, ethics approval, and literature review. • February: Design and pilot survey, begin data collection. • March: Complete data collection, commence analysis. • April: Finalize analysis, write findings, and discussion chapters. • May: Complete dissertation draft, revisions, and submission. 				
Ethics Form Attached	Yes		Risk Assessment Attached		No

Learning Outcomes	How you will evidence attainment of the outcome (max 200 words per outcome) <i>Text in Grey are prompts to help you complete this form and should be removed from the final copy</i>
<p>1. Effective self-directed research (primary and secondary) at an advanced level using appropriate methodologies (process);</p> <p>2. Identification and definition of issues and demonstrate use of analytical and evaluative skills throughout the project (enquiry);</p>	<p>I will demonstrate advanced self-directed research by conducting a comprehensive literature review on the AIB gap, UGC, and cognitive dissonance. This will involve identifying and critically analysing academic papers and statistical data to ensure theoretical rigor. Methodologies, such as quantitative survey designs and SPSS-based data analysis, will be employed to collect and process primary data. Evidence of this will include pilot-tested survey instruments, documented research decisions, and alignment with methodological standards.</p> <p>This project will investigate how UGC influences impulse buying and cognitive dissonance in fast fashion, addressing gaps in segmentation analysis and rationalisation strategies. A deductive approach will frame hypotheses derived from existing research. Evaluation will include pilot-testing, SPSS analysis (e.g., exploratory factor analysis and regression models), and maintaining detailed records of methodological and analytical adjustments. Evidence will include survey results, coding documentation, and reflective evaluations of research gaps filled.</p>
<p>3. A good knowledge of contextual issues and application of appropriate theoretical concepts leading to suitable management solutions to a specific issue or problem (knowledge);</p>	<p>I will analyse findings in relation to the AIB gap, social media influence, and consumer behavior theories. This will involve comparing research outcomes to the existing literature and positioning the project within the broader context of sustainability in fast fashion. Strengths and limitations of the theoretical frameworks applied will also be evaluated. Evidence will include a thorough discussion section and practical recommendations for industry stakeholders, supported by theoretical insights.</p>
<p>4. A thorough understanding of the relationships and tensions that may occur between management decisions and creative decisions (enquiry, knowledge);</p>	<p>By examining how fast fashion brands and social media platforms balance consumer engagement with sustainability goals, this project will explore conflicting priorities. Evidence will include strategic recommendations that reconcile these tensions, supported by segmentation data and an evaluation of the trade-offs between brand marketing strategies and ethical consumerism.</p>

<p>5. Analysis and utilisation of research data to synthesise a clear argument (knowledge, realisation);</p>	<p>I will utilise SPSS to analyse survey data, focusing on segmentation analysis, factor validation, and causal relationships between UGC, impulse buying, and cognitive dissonance. Findings will be synthesised into clear, evidence-based arguments and visualised through graphs and tables. Evidence will include statistical outputs, data interpretation, and actionable insights presented in the findings and discussion chapters.</p>
<p>6. The synthesis of appropriate knowledge and skill to propose satisfactory resolutions of management issues in clear conclusions or recommendations (communication);</p>	<p>Recommendations will be developed for fast fashion brands and social media platforms to mitigate cognitive dissonance and reduce the AIB gap. These will address academic and practical audiences, ensuring relevance to both fields. Evidence will include a conclusions chapter outlining actionable steps for industry practices and areas for future research.</p>
<p>7. Evidence of an ability to be self-directed and act autonomously (process).</p>	<p>A structured project timeline with milestones will guide progress, from literature review and ethics approval to data collection, analysis, and dissertation submission. Tutorials will be attended with prepared materials, and feedback will be implemented iteratively. Reflection tools, such as a learning journal, will document personal and professional growth. Evidence will include the timeline, tutorial feedback summaries, and a reflective journal.</p>

Signed Tutor: *Shy - L*

Date: 06.05.2025

Signed Student: Dannah Cruz *D Cruz*

Date: 11/1/2025

Students should submit any written work for review by their supervisor **three working days** prior to a tutorial, in order to give the supervisor sufficient time to consider your work and respond to any issues. Students should **normally** expect a response to an email by your supervisor within five working days. It is your responsibility to find out when your supervisor will be on leave or out of the country.

Appendix Two – Research Ethics Form

ual:

Educational Ethics Approval Form

IMPORTANT: UAL staff, please refer to the Educational Ethics Code of Practice and associated flowchart which indicates if the use of this form is required.

Declaration to be completed by the student: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have read the Educational Ethics Code of Practice • I have accessed the Ethics of Making https://ethics.arts.ac.uk website and applied the learning to my work • I have reviewed the ethics resources on Academic Support Online to help me consider the ethical parameters of the Code of Practice • I have discussed my work with my unit leader <p>Please use these resources to inform your answers to questions 1 to 7 in the boxes below.</p>	Please tick: Yes ✓ Yes ✓ Yes ✓ Yes ✓
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Applicant name:	Dannah Cruz
Course Title:	MSc Strategic Fashion Management
Unit Title:	Final Major Project

If you are a tutor applying on behalf of a student or student group, please give your name here:	
Tutor name:	

1. The code of practice sets out four key areas for ethical consideration. Which one or more of these ethical principles does this application for ethical consideration relate to?	
a. An ethics of care is supported by the Educational Ethics subcommittee as a positive ethic that is the University's responsibility to foster in relation to students, educational content, educational process including material resources, and in students' relations with anyone who participates or interacts with their work.	Yes
b. The principle of social justice obliges the student to identify the risks and benefits of participation in creative or investigative practice. Any risks to persons participating should be weighed against any potential benefits – to the participants or the student, and also the wider benefits to society of the knowledge gained. As with the principle of respect for persons, there is a need to promote equality and racial justice and protect vulnerable groups.	Yes

<p>c. Respect for persons recognises the capacity and rights of all individuals to make their own choices and decisions. It refers to the autonomy and rights to self-determination of all human beings, acknowledges their equality, dignity, freedom and rights. An important component of this principle is the need to provide special protection to vulnerable persons, both students and in student activity involving others.</p>	Yes
<p>d. Beneficence is the principle of acting for the good and wellbeing of others. It requires students to serve the interests of others. In so doing, students comply with the principle of neither doing, nor permitting, any foreseeable harm as a consequence of creative or investigative practice. This is the principle of non-maleficence, it is the principle of doing no harm.</p> <p>The specific duties of promoting equality and good relations are assumed under these principles, as defined by the Equality Act 2010.</p>	Yes

<p>2. Please provide a 100-word summary of the ethical issues that relate to the work/enquiry that is planned. Please relate it directly to one or more areas of the code and resources above.</p>
<p>This research addresses ethical considerations related to respect for persons, ensuring participants' autonomy, informed consent, and confidentiality. It also upholds the principle of beneficence, avoiding harm by safeguarding participant data and offering a transparent, voluntary process. The study considers social justice by minimising risks to participants and aiming for societal benefits through insights on sustainable consumption. Special attention is given to avoid exploiting vulnerable groups. Adherence to the ethics of care ensures participant well-being by creating a respectful and secure research environment. These measures align with the Equality Act 2010 and the University's ethical code of practice.</p>

Does your work or enquiry require you to work with participants, or reuse personal data that has been obtained elsewhere? If people are participating directly, please ensure they fill in the participant information and consent template (Ask your Course Leader to provide these). If not, go to Questions 6 to 9.

<p>3. Who will the participants be? Please tick the boxes as appropriate.</p>	
✓	Students at the University
✓	Staff at the University
✓	Other. Please specify: Social media peers

4. What will participants be asked to do and/or how will their personal information be used? Explain in terms appropriate to a layperson.

Participants will complete a short 6-8 minute online survey about their experiences with social media and shopping behavior, focusing on how they interact with user-generated content (UGC), whether they experience Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) or social comparison, their impulse buying habits, and how they feel after making unplanned purchases, particularly in relation to sustainability concerns. All responses will be completely anonymous and used solely for academic research as part of a final-year university project. No identifying information will be collected, and participants can exit the survey at any time. By proceeding, participants confirm that they voluntarily agree to take part in the study.

5. What potential risks to the interests of participants do you foresee and what steps will you take to minimise those risks?

A participant's interests include their physical and psychological well-being, their commercial interests e.g. IP; and their rights of privacy and reputation. Please note that compliance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR is a legal obligation.

This study poses minimal risks to participants, but some may experience mild psychological discomfort when reflecting on impulse buying, FoMO, or cognitive dissonance. To minimise risks, participation is entirely voluntary, and responses will remain anonymous, with no personally identifiable information collected. Participants can exit at any time without consequence, and support resources will be provided if needed. All data will be securely stored and used solely for research purposes, ensuring full compliance with GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018.

6. Does your project involve children or minors (anyone under the age of 18) or vulnerable adults (e.g. a person with a learning disability)?

✓	No. Go to Question 6.
	Yes. Please be aware that a project involving children or vulnerable adults is likely to require you to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. Please discuss this with your unit or course leader. Please be aware that a DBS check normally takes 4 weeks but can take longer.

7. What potential risks do you foresee to yourself and what steps will you take to minimise those risks? E.g. does your work raise issues of personal safety, impact on vulnerabilities for you (or anyone with whom you are collaborating), especially if taking place outside working hours or off University premises?


This study presents minimal risks to me as the researcher, as it involves conducting an online survey with no direct physical interaction. However, potential challenges include managing participant queries, ensuring data protection compliance, and handling any ethical concerns that arise. To minimise risks, I will follow GDPR guidelines, securely store all collected data, and avoid collecting personally identifiable information. If any unexpected ethical concerns arise, I will consult my supervisor for guidance.

8. Are there other areas of ethical concern? How do you plan to manage these ethical considerations?

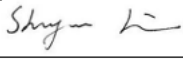
There are no major ethical concerns anticipated in this study. However, to ensure ethical integrity, I will obtain informed consent from all participants, clearly explaining the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and anonymity.

9. I confirm my responsibility to deliver the project in accordance with the Code of Practice on Educational Ethics of the University of the Arts London (the University)

If I am using personal data: I will only store it on UAL-managed systems and will use the Participant Information and Consent Template to collect personal data. I will ensure I follow the [data protection principles](#) at all times.

Print name of applicant:	DANNAH CRUZ
Signature of applicant:	
Date:	19/2/2025

10. I support this project and have reviewed it with the applicant.

Print name of Tutor:	Shuyu Lin
Signature of Tutor:	
Date:	28.03.2025

Please submit this form and the relevant attachments to your Unit Leader/Course Leader/Programme Director.

Appendix Three – Final Survey Design

Welcome! This survey is part of a Final Major Project at the London College of Fashion. The study investigates how social media influences impulse buying and cognitive dissonance, with a particular focus on feelings of FoMO (Fear of Missing Out) and social comparison when browsing fashion content online.

Your responses will help analyse what drives impulse buying behaviours and whether consumers experience post-purchase regret or sustainability-related concerns.

The survey will take approximately 3-5 minutes. Your participation is completely voluntary, and your responses will remain anonymous and confidential. All data will be used for academic purposes only.

By continuing, you confirm that you understand the purpose of the study and consent to participate. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at: d.cruz0420211@arts.ac.uk

Thank you ♥

* By consenting to take part in this survey, you agree that:

- You are 18 years or older
- You consent to the information you provide being used only for the purposes of the research project

Agree

Disagree

* Do you currently live in the United Kingdom?

Yes

No

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* What is your age group?

- 18-21
- 22-25
- 26-29
- 30-34
- 35+

* What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / other
- Prefer not to say

* Which social media platform(s) do you use the most?

Instagram

TikTok

Facebook

Twitter/X

YouTube

Other (please specify)

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The following questions ask about how you interact with user-generated-content (UGC). UGC refers to fashion-related content on social media, such as reviews, hauls, or recommendations.



* Social Media Engagement

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I frequently like, comment on, or share/repost UGC.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I follow creators/influencers that post UGC.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often save or bookmark UGC to refer to later.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I rely on UGC before making a purchase.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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* Please indicate how often you experience the following thoughts or feelings while using social media to view fashion content.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel anxious when I see people talking about or wearing fashion items I don't own.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I fear others are enjoying more rewarding fashion experiences or purchases than me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I worry that I am missing out on new or trending fashion items.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel left out when others post about their new fashion purchases.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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* The following statements relate to how you evaluate your own fashion choices in relation to others on social media.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I compare my fashion choices to others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel envious when I see people wearing fashion items I like.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seeing well-dressed people makes me feel like I should improve my style.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I tend to judge my fashion choices based on what others wear.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* To make sure you're paying attention, please select Strongly Agree for this statement.

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree

* Please indicate the extent to which the following statements reflect your fashion purchasing habits.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I often buy fashion items spontaneously.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often buy fashion items without thinking.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I buy fashion items according to how I feel in the moment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"I see it, I buy it" describes me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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* Think about a recent impulsive fashion purchase. Please indicate how much you agree with the following feelings or thoughts you experienced afterwards.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I felt disappointed with myself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I felt uneasy about whether I made the right choice.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I wondered if I needed the product I impulsively bought.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I wonder whether I should have bought anything at all.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
After I bought this product, I wondered whether I had been fooled.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
After I bought this product, I questioned whether the deal I got was fair.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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* The following items ask about your attitudes towards sustainability.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
It is important to me that a product is made from recycled materials.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I consider it important that products can be disposed of in an environmentally friendly manner.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I care about whether workers' human rights are adhered to when producing products I buy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I find it important that no illegal child labour is involved in manufacturing products I purchase.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Even when I can afford more, I only buy what I need.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I try to avoid purchases that may cause long-term financial strain.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Appendix Four – Changes after Piloting

Pre-Piloting	After Piloting
The estimated completion time shown on the welcome page was based on internal testing.	The estimated completion time was revised after pilot participants completed the survey in under five minutes.
The survey did not include an attention check item.	An attention check item was added mid-survey to improve data quality by identifying inattentive responses.
No formal validation from target participants was completed prior to launch.	The survey was piloted with 12 UK-based Gen Z and young millennial participants to assess clarity, usability, and structure.
Instructional clarity and item wording were reviewed internally only.	Participants confirmed that instructions and question wording were clear, requiring no further revisions.
Item sequencing was based on construct order.	Item sequencing remained unchanged, as participants found the structure intuitive and logically grouped by construct.

Appendix Five – Cronbach's Alpha

Combined Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha (Standardised)	Number of Items
Social Media Engagement	0.802	0.803	4
Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)	0.858	0.860	4
Social Comparison	0.816	0.819	4
Impulse Buying Behaviour	0.819	0.819	4
Cognitive Dissonance	0.839	0.838	6
Sustainability Concern	0.781	0.783	6