

How Social Media Influencers Drive Purchase Intentions: A Stimulus-Organism-Response Analysis of Vietnamese Consumers' Psychological Responses

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Abstract. Purpose: This study investigates how exposure to social media influencers affects Vietnamese consumers' purchase intentions through key psychological mediators within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected via a structured survey from 406 Vietnamese social media users and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The model tested the mediating roles of desire to mimic, materialism, fear of missing out (FOMO), and social comparison.

Findings: All proposed hypotheses were supported. Influencer exposure significantly influences purchase intention directly ($\beta = 0.400$) and indirectly through psychological mediators. FOMO mediates the relationship between social comparison and materialism ($\beta = 0.027$), while materialism partially mediates the effect of desire to mimic on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.050$).

Practical implications: Marketers should design FOMO-driven and lifestyle-centric influencer content to stimulate consumer engagement and drive purchase behavior. The findings suggest that both direct imitation and materialistic aspirations underlie consumer responses to influencer content.

Originality/value: This is among the first studies to integrate the S-O-R framework into influencer marketing research in Vietnam. It uncovers novel mediation pathways and contributes to cross-cultural understanding of digital consumer psychology.

Keywords: Social media, Influencer marketing, Influencers, Purchase intention, Desire to mimic, Materialism, Social comparison, Fear of missing out.

1. Introduction

Social media has become a cornerstone of contemporary life, significantly shaping users' behaviors, beliefs, and social interactions. It has evolved into a fundamental pillar of global communication, enabling dynamic and reciprocal engagement between consumers, brands, and fellow users (Pentina et al., 2018; Ryan, 2014). Unlike traditional forms of communication, which typically follow a one-way broadcast model, the Internet has introduced an interactive space where dialogue flows freely between multiple participants, fostering a more inclusive and participatory media landscape. Social media platforms have also become essential tools within organizational strategies, particularly in integrated marketing communication, with platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram playing pivotal roles in brand promotion (Bianchi et al., 2017). As social media usage continues to soar, multinational corporations are increasingly integrating these platforms into their marketing efforts, with global ad revenue on social media projected to reach \$220 billion in 2024 and grow at a compound annual growth rate of 3.86% through 2028 (Statista, 2024; Statista, 2028).

A prominent marketing trend that has surged in recent years is influencer marketing. Influencers, with their vast and engaged followings, wield substantial influence in shaping consumer perceptions and driving purchasing decisions (Boerman & Muller, 2022). Research indicates that influencer marketing generates significantly higher returns on investment compared to traditional digital marketing methods (Catalina, 2017), prompting brands to increasingly leverage influencers for spreading product information and trends (Markethub, 2016; Hudders et al., 2021). Influencers now play a central role in promoting cultural trends and shaping consumer behavior (Kim, 2021). Studies confirm that influencers exert considerable influence on consumers' perceptions and purchasing intentions (Tafesse & Wood, 2021), and brands strategically employ influencers to cut through the noise of a saturated digital space and reach potential customers (Muda et al., 2010). In 2024, over 85% of marketers plan to incorporate influencers into their campaigns, with the market value of influencer marketing expected to reach a staggering \$21.1 billion (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024; Statista, 2024).

Despite the growing prominence of influencer marketing, academic research in this area remains relatively limited. Most existing studies concentrate on influencers' popularity, credibility, and engagement with followers (Pittman, 2021; Yap & Ismail, 2022; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), while others examine distinctions between influencers and traditional celebrities, gender dynamics, or the integration of artificial intelligence in influencer campaigns (Kay et al., 2020; Hudders, 2020; Afifah, 2024). However, there is a notable gap in understanding the psychological mechanisms through which exposure to influencers translates into consumer action. Specifically, the roles of materialism, fear of missing out (FOMO), social comparison, and especially the desire to mimic remain underexplored in the context of digital consumer behavior.

This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how these psychological factors mediate the relationship between influencer exposure and purchase intention within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework. In particular, it highlights the novel inclusion of “desire to mimic” and “materialism” as core constructs to explain better how consumers internalize influencer content. While influencer marketing is widely practiced, the specific internal dynamics—including aspirational mimicry, materialistic values, and anxiety induced by FOMO—that shape consumer decision-making are not yet well understood.

By investigating these interconnected factors, this study aims to advance theoretical understanding of how influencers impact consumer perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. The findings will offer both conceptual contributions to the influencer marketing literature and practical implications for brands seeking to design more psychologically resonant influencer campaigns.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers cultivate and engage in intimate connections with their followers to impart valuable lessons and deliver extremely entertaining material. Influencers possess the capacity to affect the opinions, emotions, and behaviors of their audience (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

Exposure to social media influencers happens when consumers actively choose to follow an influencer and view their content. Social media influencer exposure can occur in two ways. The first is when followers voluntarily choose to view and interact with an influencer's content. According to a study by Lipsman et al. in 2012, consumers voluntarily engage with influencer postings, leading to substantial organic reach for these posts without brands incurring marketing expenses. According to a report, approximately 75% of social media users who follow over 10 influencers engage with their content for enjoyment, product evaluations, and to remain updated on contemporary trends (GRIN Report, 2023). Over 90% of social media users engage weekly with influencers on SNS platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat (Statista, 2020).

A second method of exposure to influencers involves the passive consumption of branded content that features influencers. Brands frequently use influencer advertisements to engage social media users. Consumers often show greater receptivity to content created by influencers. They tend to prefer more organic, non-branded content and are less receptive to typical branded advertisements from brands' channels (Cho & Cheon, 2004).

Properly, embedding an advertising message into the appropriate influencer content can enhance consumers' likelihood of engaging with the advertisement and more effectively convey the advertising message (Goodstein, 1993).

2.2. Stimulus-Organism-Response Framework

Originally proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and later expanded by Jacoby (2002), the S-O-R framework explains how external stimuli influence individual responses through internal cognitive and emotional processes. The model consists of three components: (1) Stimulus (S) – external or internal cues that trigger a reaction, (2) Organism (O) – the individual's cognitive and affective processing of the stimulus, and (3) Response (R) – the resulting behavior or intention (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Bagozzi, 1986). This framework is widely applied in consumer behavior and influencer marketing research (e.g., Li et al., 2021; Rana et al., 2023; Koay et al., 2021).

In this study, social media influencer exposure represents the Stimulus. The psychological variables: desire to mimic, materialism, fear of missing out, and social comparison constitute the organism. The final variable: response is the consumer's purchase intention. The S-O-R framework facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how exposure to influencers shapes consumer behavior.

2.3. Hypothesis Development

Social media influencers are recognized as independent online endorsers who shape public attitudes and behaviors through engaging content in areas such as beauty, food, music, and gaming (Freberg, 2011; Jin et al., 2019). Exposure to influencers typically occurs in three stages: audiences evaluate and react to influencer content (Lyons & Henderson, 2005), develop affinity and a desire to emulate their lifestyles (Ruvio et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2024), and ultimately demonstrate behavioral responses such as content sharing or forming purchase intention (Ki & Kim, 2019). The effectiveness of influencer exposure is further strengthened by the influencer's credibility, based on perceived expertise (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), and attractiveness, defined as relatability and familiarity (McGuire, 1985).

H1: Social media influencer exposure positively influences purchase intention.

Social media users often imitate influencers to construct their self-identity and enhance self-worth through curated behaviors and lifestyles (Boon, 2001; Xiao et al., 2021). This imitation is intentional,

driven by the influencer's perceived talent, expertise, and taste (Ki & Kim, 2019; Keller & Berry, 2003). Users tend to adopt influencers' habits, appearance, and product choices, especially when they trust and admire the influencer (Kemp et al., 2012; Chan, 2008; Ruvio et al., 2013). Increased exposure to influencer content strengthens this desire to mimic and deepens engagement (Lou & Kim, 2019; Jin & Phua, 2014).

H2: Social media influencer exposure positively influences desire to mimic.

Social media influencers serve as key reference points for followers, shaping perceptions of success, beauty, and lifestyle through idealized content (Kasser, 2004; Seo & Hyun, 2018). Exposure to such content can intensify upward social comparison, particularly when influencers display wealth, achievements, or physical ideals (Chae, 2018; Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019). This comparison is further fueled by the curated nature of social media, where users often present exaggerated versions of their lives, reinforcing perceived gaps between themselves and influencers (Hudders et al., 2021; Hjetland et al., 2022).

H3: Social media influencer exposure positively influences social comparison.

Social comparison has been found to significantly shape materialistic values, particularly as individuals equate possessions and luxury experiences with social status and personal achievement (Díaz & Arroyo, 2017; Hu & Liu, 2020; La Ferle & Chan, 2005). Frequent upward comparisons—especially via social media—tend to heighten material aspirations (Chan & Prendergast, 2007; Zhao et al., 2022), often as a coping strategy to alleviate negative self-evaluation or emotional discomfort (Meier & Johnson, 2022; Kasser, 2002). However, not all studies find a uniform effect; cultural context and individual resilience may moderate this relationship (Xie et al., 2017; Leavitt et al., 2019), suggesting that materialistic outcomes of social comparison are not universally consistent.

H4a: Social comparison positively influences materialism.

Beyond its direct impact, social comparison also contributes to materialism indirectly through FOMO. Social media intensifies upward comparisons by constantly exposing users to curated content, creating perceptions of exclusion from desirable experiences (Pang, 2021; Reer et al., 2019; Alfina et al., 2023). For psychologically vulnerable users, this exclusion can heighten FOMO and stimulate compensatory consumption (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Buglass et al., 2017). Yet, empirical findings are mixed: while some research supports this linkage (Taylor, 2019), others argue that not all social comparisons evoke FOMO or drive materialism equally (Dinh & Lee, 2022b).

FOMO has been linked to increased anxiety, compulsive buying, and the belief that acquiring material goods is essential for social inclusion (Tarka, 2020; Milyavskaya et al., 2018; Hussain et al., 2023). It reflects a broader psychological drive for belonging and validation, often expressed through visible consumption (Alt, 2015; Long, 2021). However, this connection may vary depending on consumers' self-control, social connectedness, or digital literacy—factors not consistently addressed in prior literature.

H4b: Social comparison positively influences fear of missing out.

H4c: Fear of missing out positively influences materialism.

H4d: Fear of missing out mediates the relationship between social comparison and materialism.

Another key construct influencing consumer behavior is the desire to mimic, which refers to individuals' tendency to emulate admired figures—such as influencers—in their consumption choices. This mimicry is often subconscious and reflects aspirational identification (Jacob et al., 2011; Tanner et al., 2008). When influencers are perceived as symbols of success or status, consumers may internalize their lifestyles as ideal, thereby increasing purchase intention (Ki & Kim, 2019; Ruvio, 2013). Yet, studies rarely distinguish between deliberate imitation and aspirational identification, leaving a conceptual gap in understanding mimicry's varied psychological dimensions.

H5a: Desire to mimic positively influences the purchase intention.

The indirect effect of mimicry on purchasing behavior operates through materialism. By emulating influencer lifestyles, individuals often adopt materialistic values, associating visible consumption with achievement and self-worth (Kasser et al., 2004; Chan & Zhang, 2007). Such mimicry can reinforce consumer ideals that equate material possessions with personal identity, especially among younger users (Chan, 2008; Hannell, 2019). Nonetheless, some scholars argue that mimicry might not always result in materialism—ethical or minimalist influencers, for instance, may evoke value-based rather than materialistic imitation.

Materialism itself has consistently been linked to heightened purchase intention, as individuals seek to reduce the gap between their actual and ideal selves (Moran, 2015; Türk & Ercis, 2017). However, the strength of this link can differ by socioeconomic background, cultural norms, or susceptibility to peer influence—variables that deserve more empirical attention (Sen & Nayak, 2019).

H5b: Desire to mimic positively influences materialism.

H5c: Materialism positively influences purchase intention.

H5d: Materialism mediates the relationship between desire to mimic and purchase intention.

The research model is depicted in Figure 1.

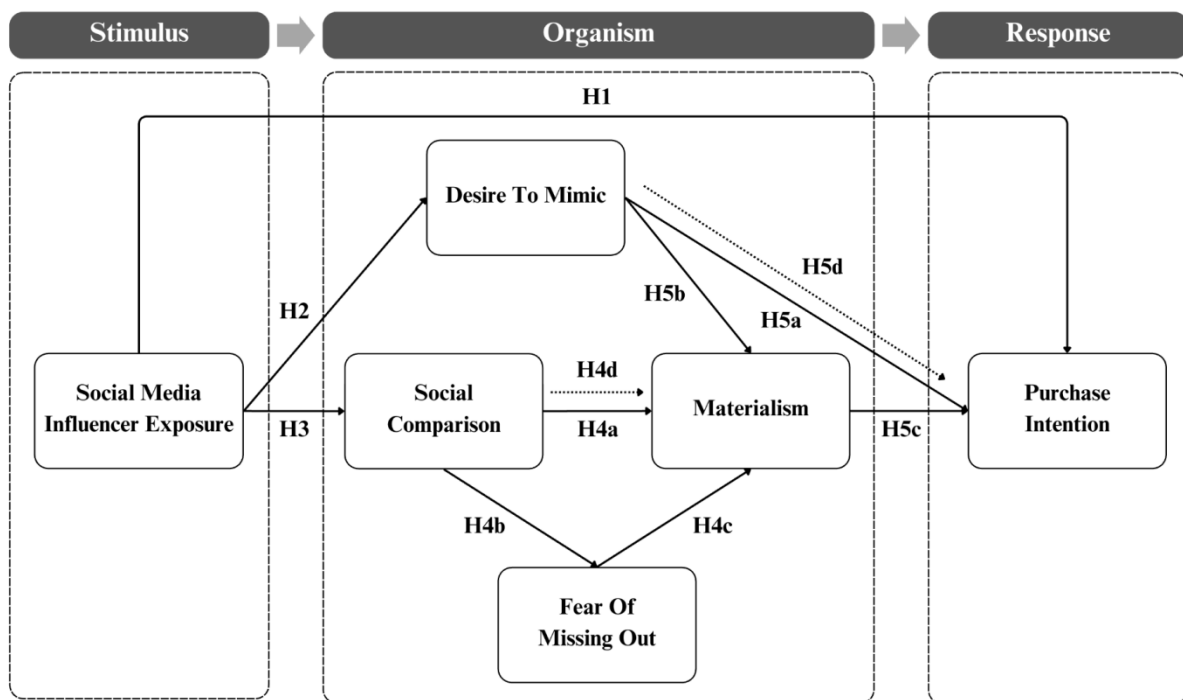


Fig. 1: Research Model

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

All measurement scales used in this study were adapted from previously validated instruments to ensure construct validity and reliability. Social media influencer exposure (EX) was measured using items adapted from Ross et al. (2009), capturing participants' daily engagement and emotional connection with influencers on social networking platforms. Desire to mimic (MM) was assessed using the scale from La Ferle and Chan (2008), reflecting individuals' aspirations to emulate influencers' intelligence, humor, style, and lifestyle. Social comparison (SC) was measured using items adapted from Solberg et al. (2002), focusing on perceived differences in lifestyle and material resources between participants and influencers. Fear of missing out (FM) was measured using items from Good and Hyman (2020), capturing participants' anxiety and concern over missing out on influencer-endorsed products or

experiences. Materialism (MA) was evaluated using the scale developed by Richins (2004), reflecting the degree to which individuals associate personal success and happiness with material possessions. Lastly, purchase intention (PI) was measured using the scale from Khan et al. (2019), indicating the extent to which participants are drawn to influencer-endorsed products.

To collect data for this study, a convenience sampling technique was employed, focusing on individuals who were readily available and willing to respond. The survey instrument was developed and administered via Google Forms, ensuring accessibility and ease of use for participants. All measurement items were rated using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), enabling the capture of respondents' attitudes and perceptions with greater precision. The final part of the questionnaire gathered demographic data to support descriptive analysis and examine potential differences across subgroups within the sample.

Table 1: Sample Description

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	197	48.5
Female	209	51.5
Age Group		
Under 18	8	2.0
18 - 30 years	368	90.6
30 - 45 years	28	6.9
Over 45 years	2	0.5
Monthly Income		
Under 5 million VND	142	35.0
5 - 10 million VND	123	30.3
10 - 20 million VND	90	22.2
Over 20 million VND	51	12.6
Education Level		
High school or below	7	1.7
College/University (current or graduated)	389	95.8
Master's or higher	10	2.5
Occupation		
Student	210	51.7
Part-time employee	12	3.0
Office employee	131	32.3
Professional/Expert (doctor, teacher, engineer, etc.)	18	4.4

Freelancer	22	5.4
Others	13	3.2

The study received 417 responses from the target population, of which 11 responses were excluded from the data due to filtering question data selection. Therefore, 406 responses were considered valid and were analysed for demographics. As shown in Table 1, 90.6% of respondents were aged between 18 and 30, indicating a predominantly young sample. While this demographic reflects the active user base of social media platforms, it introduces a potential limitation in terms of external validity, as older age groups were underrepresented. This age skew restricts the generalizability of findings and should be considered when interpreting the results.

Moreover, as all data were collected via self-report measures at a single point in time, the study is subject to common method bias (CMB). To address this concern, Harman's single-factor test was conducted post hoc to examine the extent to which a single factor accounted for the majority of variance. The results indicated that no single factor accounted for more than 50% of the variance, suggesting that CMB was not a pervasive issue.

3.2. Data Analysis

This study employed partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), conducted using SmartPLS 4 software. The analytical process was carried out in two main stages. First, the measurement model was evaluated to assess the reliability and validity of the constructs, ensuring that the data met the requirements for structural analysis. Second, the structural model was analyzed by examining path coefficients to test the proposed hypotheses and determine the statistical significance of each relationship. The procedure followed the recommended methodological framework outlined by Hair et al. (2021).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Measurement Model

To ensure the reliability of the constructs, the CS8 indicator was removed following preliminary reliability analysis. After this adjustment, the measurement model was re-evaluated using PLS-SEM.

Table 2: Reliability Tests

Latent Variables	Indicators	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Influencers Exposure	EX1	0.721	0.887	0.914	0.640
	EX2	0.784			
	EX3	0.841			
	EX4	0.814			
	EX5	0.827			
	EX6	0.806			
FOMO	FM1	0.852	0.954	0.961	0.755
	FM2	0.883			
	FM3	0.871			
	FM4	0.861			
	FM5	0.845			
	FM6	0.886			
	FM7	0.889			
	FM8	0.863			
Materialism	MA1	0.781	0.872	0.903	0.609
	MA2	0.756			
	MA3	0.812			

	MA4	0.763			
	MA5	0.790			
	MA6	0.780			
Desire to Mimic	MM1	0.747	0.854	0.896	0.633
	MM2	0.806			
	MM3	0.849			
	MM4	0.823			
	MM5	0.746			
Social Comparison	SC1	0.738	0.896	0.918	0.616
	SC2	0.766			
	SC3	0.825			
	SC4	0.812			
	SC5	0.817			
	SC6	0.803			
	SC7	0.727			
Purchase Intention	PI1	0.760	0.887	0.914	0.642
	PI2	0.772			
	PI3	0.833			
	PI4	0.780			
	PI5	0.923			
	PI6	0.723			

Table 2 presents the results of the reliability tests. All constructs exhibit strong internal consistency, with outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeding the recommended thresholds (Hair et al., 2021). No additional items were removed.

Table 3: HTMT

	EX	FM	MA	MM	PI	SC
EX	0.800					
FM	0.520	0.869				
MA	0.384	0.305	0.781			
MM	0.546	0.356	0.520	0.795		
PI	0.57	0.624	0.406	0.504	0.801	
SC	0.278	0.226	0.466	0.465	0.327	0.785

Discriminant validity was assessed using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The Fornell–Larcker results indicated that each construct's square root of AVE exceeded its correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), satisfying the standard criterion. The HTMT values ranged from 0.785 to 0.869 and were below the threshold of 0.90, confirming acceptable discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2021). While PLS-SEM does not require global model fit indices such as those used in CB-SEM, we evaluated the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) to assess model fit. The SRMR value was 0.058, which is below the conservative threshold of 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), indicating acceptable model fit and enhancing methodological rigor.

4.2. Structural Model

Table 4: R-squared and Q²_predict Values

	R Square	Q²_predict	VIF (min-max)
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EX			1.671-2.472
FM	0.051	0.061	2.740-3.968
MA	0.347	0.132	1.724-2.050
MM	0.298	0.294	1.585-2.451
PI	0.392	0.319	1.719-4.442
SC	0.077	0.071	1.591-2.417

Table 4 presents the R^2 and Q^2 values for the endogenous variables. Purchase intention (PI) showed the strongest explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.392$), followed by materialism (MA, $R^2 = 0.347$) and desire to mimic (MM, $R^2 = 0.298$). However, social comparison (SC) and fear of missing out (FOMO) demonstrated relatively low R^2 values (0.077 and 0.051, respectively), suggesting that additional explanatory variables may be needed to more fully account for the variance in these constructs. This limitation highlights potential avenues for model refinement in future research.

Predictive relevance (Q^2) was also examined using the blindfolding procedure. The Q^2 values for PI (0.319) and MM (0.294) were above the acceptable cutoff, indicating substantial predictive power. However, Q^2 values for SC (0.071) and FOMO (0.061) were lower, further underscoring the limited predictive strength of the current model for these two constructs.

Multicollinearity was assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF), with all values falling below the threshold of 5 (Sinh, 2024), confirming the absence of multicollinearity among predictors.

4.3. Discussion

All hypotheses were tested using a two-tailed t-test with 5,000 bootstrapped samples. As shown in Table 5, all path coefficients were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), with most achieving significance at the 1% level.

Table 5: Hypothesis Testing

		β	p values	Results
H1	EX \rightarrow PI	0.400	0.000	Supported
H2	EX \rightarrow MM	0.546	0.000	Supported
H3	EX \rightarrow SC	0.278	0.000	Supported
H4a	SC \rightarrow MA	0.277	0.000	Supported
H4b	SC \rightarrow FM	0.226	0.000	Supported
H4c	FM \rightarrow MA	0.118	0.010	Supported
H5a	MM \rightarrow PI	0.211	0.000	Supported
H5b	MM \rightarrow MA	0.349	0.000	Supported
H5c	MA \rightarrow PI	0.142	0.010	Supported
H4d	SC \rightarrow FM \rightarrow MA	0.027	0.050	Supported
H5d	MM \rightarrow MA \rightarrow PI	0.050	0.014	Supported

Exposure to social media influencers (EX) emerged as the strongest predictor in the model. The path coefficient for EX \rightarrow desire to mimic (MM) was 0.546, indicating a strong influence. EX also significantly predicted purchase intention (PI) with a coefficient of 0.400, supporting its role in shaping consumer behavior directly.

The influence of EX on social comparison (SC) was positive yet more moderate ($\beta = 0.278$), suggesting that influencer exposure does lead to upward comparison but with less intensity than the desire to mimic.

Social comparison had a meaningful impact on materialism ($\beta = 0.277$), aligning with prior findings that upward comparison fosters materialistic values. It also significantly influenced FOMO ($\beta = 0.226$), reflecting the tendency of social comparison to evoke anxiety about missing out on desirable experiences.

FOMO, in turn, was positively associated with materialism ($\beta = 0.118$), though the effect size was relatively modest. These results suggest that emotional responses to social comparison, such as anxiety and perceived exclusion, may drive materialistic attitudes, though additional affective constructs (e.g., envy, inadequacy) may further explain these dynamics and should be investigated in future work.

The desire to mimic influencers demonstrated significant direct effects on both materialism ($\beta = 0.349$) and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.211$). These findings support the idea that aspirational identification with influencers not only fosters materialistic tendencies but also enhances consumers' willingness to purchase promoted products.

Materialism also positively influenced purchase intention ($\beta = 0.142$), although its effect was weaker than the direct impact of influencer exposure or desire to mimic. This suggests that while materialistic values contribute to purchasing decisions, they may serve more as a secondary pathway rather than a primary driver.

Table 5 highlights significant indirect effects. Specifically, the pathway SC \rightarrow FOMO \rightarrow MA (H4d) had an indirect effect coefficient of 0.027 ($p = 0.05$), indicating that FOMO partially mediates the relationship between social comparison and materialism. Likewise, the path MM \rightarrow MA \rightarrow PI (H5d) had a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.050$, $p = 0.014$), supporting materialism as a partial mediator in the link between mimicry and purchase intention.

These findings underscore the multi-step psychological processes underlying influencer marketing effectiveness. Notably, the emotional and aspirational triggers—rather than purely financial considerations—play a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior. The results also reveal areas for improvement in model development, particularly in better capturing the variance in constructs like FOMO and social comparison.

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1. Conclusion

Grounded in the S-O-R framework and the theory of social influence, this study offers a comprehensive exploration of the psychological mechanisms through which exposure to social media influencers shapes Vietnamese consumers' purchase intentions. Building on previous work (e.g., Dinh et al., 2023; Dinh & Lee, 2022, 2024; Steinberger & Kim, 2023; Hussain et al., 2023), the present research departs from studies that emphasize direct relationships by uncovering the complex affective and cognitive pathways—including desire to mimic, social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), and materialism.

A key contribution lies in the identification of partial, rather than full, mediation by materialism in the link between desire to mimic and purchase intention, contrasting with Dinh & Lee (2022), who found a fully mediated effect. Likewise, this study expands on the literature by showing that FOMO mediates the relationship between social comparison and materialism, shifting the focus away from FOMO's traditional role as a moderator or as a mediator between social comparison and purchase intention. These nuanced findings underscore the emotional and aspirational dimensions of consumer decision-making in the influencer marketing context and contribute to a more psychologically rich understanding of digital consumer behavior.

While the findings generally support the positive influence of influencer exposure on purchase behavior, the relatively low explanatory power for FOMO and social comparison suggests that additional psychological, cultural, or contextual variables may play a role and should be integrated into future studies.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes novel theoretical insights to the literature on influencer marketing and consumer psychology by proposing and validating an extended Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model. Specifically, it examines how exposure to social media influencers affects purchase intention through four psychological constructs: desire to mimic, materialism, social comparison, and fear of missing out (FOMO). Unlike many prior studies that emphasized direct influencer effects, the present model reveals a more complex web of indirect and mediating psychological processes. All hypotheses were supported, reinforcing the model’s internal validity and theoretical robustness.

Importantly, this study sheds new light on the role of FOMO by positioning it as a mediating factor between social comparison and materialism. This perspective differs from existing research, which has treated FOMO primarily as a mediator between social comparison and purchase intention (e.g., Dinh & Lee, 2022) or as a moderator in similar frameworks (Dinh et al., 2023). By identifying FOMO as a key emotional mechanism that links feelings of upward social comparison to increased materialistic values, the study adds an original layer of understanding to how influencer content emotionally activates consumer behavior.

Another theoretical advancement lies in the discovery that materialism partially mediates the relationship between the desire to mimic and purchase intention. Previous research, such as Dinh and Lee (2022), suggested a full mediation effect, implying that mimicry influenced purchase intentions only through materialistic values. In contrast, this study shows that mimicry also exerts a direct influence on purchase intention, suggesting that aspirational identification with influencers can drive consumer action even without a materialistic mindset. This finding points to a dual pathway—both materialistic and aspirational—by which consumers respond to influencer content.

Finally, by situating the study in the Vietnamese market, the research provides cross-cultural relevance to the S-O-R framework. It highlights how psychological responses to influencer exposure may vary across cultural contexts, particularly in emerging digital economies where social media usage is rapidly increasing. This cultural lens distinguishes the study from Western-centric models and calls for further cross-national comparative research to deepen understanding of global digital consumer behavior.

5.3. Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable implications for marketers and brand strategists aiming to enhance the effectiveness of influencer marketing. The identified mediating role of FOMO between social comparison and materialism suggests that marketing campaigns should actively incorporate FOMO-inducing tactics. Collaborations with influencers should emphasize urgency and exclusivity—for example, through limited-time discounts, early-access sales, or exclusive product drops. These techniques not only heighten consumers’ emotional engagement but also amplify upward social comparison, thereby motivating materialistic attitudes that drive purchase behavior.

In addition, the mediating role of materialism in the link between the desire to mimic and purchase intention emphasizes how influencer content can shape consumer identity and aspirations. Influencers who portray lifestyle improvements associated with product use—such as enhanced self-image, status, or convenience—can inspire consumers to adopt similar consumption patterns. This approach helps brands position their products not just as functional offerings, but as symbols of success, self-enhancement, or belonging.

Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of designing influencer campaigns that go beyond surface-level endorsements. By leveraging psychological triggers such as mimicry and FOMO, and aligning them with well-crafted narratives of lifestyle transformation, brands can more effectively influence consumer decision-making. In markets like Vietnam, where digital engagement is high and consumers are increasingly influenced by social media trends, these insights are particularly relevant for practitioners seeking to connect with aspirational, digitally active audiences.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study provides meaningful insights into how exposure to social media influencers influences purchase intention through psychological mechanisms. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of convenience sampling resulted in a sample heavily skewed toward younger participants (aged 18–30), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to older or less digitally engaged populations. Future research should aim to include more demographically diverse and representative samples to strengthen external validity. Second, although the study employs previously validated scales and robust analytical methods such as PLS-SEM, it does not examine potential moderating factors such as gender, social media platform type, or users' familiarity with influencers—all of which may influence psychological responses and purchase behaviors. Lastly, the exclusive focus on internal psychological constructs like fear of missing out and materialism excludes important contextual variables, such as product category, influencer credibility, and brand reputation. Incorporating these factors in future models would offer a more comprehensive understanding of influencer marketing effectiveness.

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