

CLICKING UNDER PRESSURE: A NETNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION OF FOMO AND IMPULSIVE BUYING IN FLASH SALE CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract

Flash sale campaigns have become a dominant digital marketing tactic, yet their heightened temporal pressure often triggers consumers' fear of missing out (FOMO), leading to unplanned and impulsive purchases. However, empirical understanding of how these psychological dynamics unfold within real consumer communities remains limited. This study aims to explore how FOMO is constructed, expressed, and translated into impulsive buying behavior during flash sale events. Employing a netnographic methodology, data were collected from online consumer forums and social media discussions to capture naturally occurring narratives and behavioral cues. The findings reveal three main patterns: collective emotional contagion that amplifies FOMO, heuristic-driven decision-making under time pressure, and social validation loops that normalize impulsive buying. These insights deepen theoretical understanding of digital consumer psychology and provide actionable implications for ethical marketing practices, particularly in managing persuasive design within flash sale environments.

Keywords: FOMO, Impulsive Buying, Flash Sale, Netnography, Digital Consumer Behavior.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of global e-commerce has fundamentally transformed how consumers evaluate offers, process information, and make purchase decisions in digital environments. Among the most influential marketing tactics in this landscape are flash sale campaigns, which leverage time scarcity, product scarcity, and competitive pressure to stimulate accelerated decision-making. Prior research highlights that urgency cues such as countdown timers, limited stock notifications, and real-time purchasing indicators create heightened psychological pressure capable of shifting consumers from deliberate evaluation to impulsive action (Soliman, 2017; Hao & Huang, 2025; Waskita et al., 2025). Within this heightened environment, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has emerged as a pervasive emotional driver that amplifies the perceived cost of inaction and triggers compulsive monitoring and rapid purchasing behavior (Przybylski et al., 2013; Abel et al., 2016). As digital platforms increasingly integrate social and interactive features such as live comments, community reactions, and user-generated engagement, consumers' expressions of excitement, anxiety, and competitive urgency become publicly observable,

offering a naturalistic “digital trace” of real-time psychological responses (Floh & Madlberger, 2013; Kozinets, 2019). Consequently, understanding how FOMO shapes impulsive buying during flash sales is not only essential for advancing consumer behavior theory but also critical for marketers designing persuasive digital experiences in an era where platform-induced pressure increasingly defines the online shopping journey.

Problem Statement

Despite the growing scholarly interest in impulsive buying within digital marketplaces, a significant gap remains in understanding the real-time psychological mechanisms that drive consumers to make rapid, pressured purchases during flash sale events. Existing research largely relies on surveys and experimental designs, which capture consumers’ stated attitudes but fail to reflect the dynamic and socially embedded nature of FOMO-driven behavior as it unfolds in natural digital settings (Kimura & Nakajima, 2023; Shi et al., 2023). In highly interactive e-commerce environments, consumers are continuously exposed to urgency cues such as countdown timers, shrinking stock levels, and live buyer activity that intensify psychological pressure and elevate the immediacy of FOMO experiences (Soliman, 2017; Hao & Huang, 2025). Yet, little is known about how these cues are interpreted, negotiated, and expressed through consumers’ discursive interactions, including comments, chat messages, reactions, and social signals visible during flash sale campaigns. This gap is critical because FOMO is not merely an internal emotion but a socially reinforced phenomenon shaped by platform design and community engagement (Abel et al., 2016; Kozinets, 2019). Therefore, the central problem addressed in this study is the lack of empirically grounded, context-specific insights into how FOMO manifests and translates into impulsive buying within the immediacy of flash sale environments. Understanding this problem is essential for advancing theoretical perspectives on digital consumer behaviour and for informing the ethical design of persuasive e-commerce interfaces.

Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve a deeper and more contextualized understanding of how Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) shapes impulsive buying behavior within highly interactive flash sale environments on e-commerce platforms. Specifically, the research pursues the following objectives:

1. To examine how FOMO emerges, evolves, and is expressed through consumers’ digital interactions during flash sale campaigns, including comments, community discussions, real-time reactions, and platform-generated social cues.
2. To analyze the mechanisms through which urgency cues such as countdown timers, stock scarcity indicators, and live purchasing notifications; trigger psychological pressure that leads to impulsive buying decisions.

3. To identify the discursive patterns and emotional expressions that characterize FOMO-driven consumer behavior in naturalistic online settings, as captured through netnographic observation of user-generated content.
4. To develop an empirically grounded conceptual understanding of platform-induced pressure and its role in shaping digital impulsive consumption, contributing to broader theoretical discussions in consumer behaviour, digital persuasion, and interactive marketing.
5. To provide insights for practitioners on how digital promotional strategies, particularly flash sales, ethically influence consumer decision-making, informing future design considerations for responsible e-commerce marketing.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship on digital consumer behaviour has extensively documented how scarcity cues, time pressure, and platform design features influence impulsive buying in online environments (Waskita, 2025; Waskita et al., 2024). Studies have shown that countdown timers, stock depletion messages, and real-time purchase indicators heighten consumers' perceived urgency and reduce cognitive deliberation (Soliman, 2017; Hao & Huang, 2025). Parallel research on Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) positions it as a significant emotional and motivational force that drives consumers toward constant monitoring, competitive behavior, and spontaneous consumption in digital contexts (Abel et al., 2016; Kozinets, 2019). Additionally, research on interactive e-commerce atmospherics highlights that social cues, user-generated reactions, and community engagement further amplify emotional arousal and platform-induced pressure (Shi et al., 2023). While these studies collectively advance our understanding of digital urgency and impulsive consumption, they predominantly employ cross-sectional surveys, experiments, or controlled simulations, which may not fully capture the dynamic, real-time nature of consumer decision-making during flash sale events.

Despite robust literature on urgency-driven consumption, several critical gaps remain. First, the spontaneous and socially embedded expressions of FOMO during flash sales have not been sufficiently explored through naturalistic methods. Most existing studies examine FOMO as an internal psychological state rather than a socially co-constructed phenomenon visible through online discourse and interaction. Second, there is limited empirical work capturing how consumers negotiate, interpret, and emotionally respond to platform-generated urgency cues within the actual moment of purchasing pressure. Flash sale environments are fast-paced and socially interactive, yet prior research has treated them as static contexts rather than evolving digital ecologies shaped by both platform architecture and community behaviour. Third, there is a lack of netnographic investigations that observe consumers' real-time reactions, comments, and digital traces during flash sale events. Netnography offers methodological richness that can reveal discursive, emotional, and behavioural cues that conventional methods cannot (Kozinets, 2019), yet it remains underutilized in research on FOMO-driven impulsive buying. Collectively, these gaps constrain our ability to understand the holistic, moment-to-moment processes through which FOMO manifests and triggers impulsive consumption online.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a netnographic approach to observe and interpret consumers' naturally occurring digital interactions during e-commerce flash

sale campaigns. By focusing on real-time comments, communal reactions, and emotional expressions, the research advances a contextualized understanding of how FOMO is constructed, intensified, and translated into impulsive buying behavior within platform-induced pressure environments. The study contributes to theory by integrating insights from digital persuasion, interactive marketing, and consumer psychology into a unified framework that captures the lived experience of purchasing under urgency. Methodologically, this research extends the application of netnography into the domain of flash sales, an area that has rarely been examined through qualitative, interaction-centered approaches. Practically, the findings offer actionable implications for designing ethical and consumer-centered promotional strategies, informing the development of digital interfaces that balance commercial objectives with psychological well-being. Overall, this research provides a novel and empirically grounded contribution to the evolving discourse on FOMO, digital impulsiveness, and interactive e-commerce behavior.

Novelty and Research Justification

This study offers a distinct scholarly contribution by introducing a netnographic lens to examine how FOMO-driven impulsive buying unfolds within real-time flash sale environments, an approach that remains largely absent from existing consumer behaviour literature. Prior research has predominantly conceptualized FOMO as an *individual psychological construct*, measured through self-reported surveys or controlled experiments that fail to capture its socially constructed, dynamically expressed, and interaction-dependent nature in digital marketplaces. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on naturally occurring discursive behaviours, including live comments, communal reactions, and emotional expressions that surface during flash sale events, thereby providing empirical access to the *moment-to-moment construction of urgency, pressure, and impulsivity* in ways unattainable through traditional methodologies. Furthermore, this research advances theoretical understanding by integrating digital persuasion theory, scarcity-driven consumer psychology, and interactive marketing dynamics into a unified analytical perspective that situates FOMO as both an emotional state and a platform-amplified social phenomenon. In doing so, the study not only expands the conceptual boundaries of FOMO research but also offers one of the first context-rich qualitative mappings of how e-commerce architectures co-produce impulsive consumption behaviours. Methodologically, the application of netnography to flash sale contexts represents a significant innovation, yielding fine-grained insights into how consumers interpret, negotiate, and respond to urgency cues within real digital ecologies rather than artificially constructed settings. Taken together, these contributions position the study as a novel and timely intervention in advancing global scholarly discourse on digital consumer behaviour in high-pressure online shopping environments.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a netnographic approach to capture the lived digital experiences, meanings, and behavioral expressions of consumers during flash-sale campaigns. Netnography is particularly suitable for examining real-time online interactions because it provides naturalistic access to spontaneous user-generated discussions, emotional expressions, and decision-making

cues in digital communities (Costello et al., 2017; Morais et al., 2020). Given the phenomenon's inherently social, digitally embedded, and affect-driven dynamics, netnography offers the depth and contextual sensitivity needed to explore how FOMO and impulsive buying unfold within fast-paced promotional environments.

Data collection was conducted through prolonged, non-intrusive observation of public online spaces where flash-sale conversations emerge organically, including e-commerce comment threads, product review sections, buyer communities on social media, and discussion forums dedicated to real-time sale events. The researcher systematically documented discourse patterns, emotional expressions, behavioral cues, and narrative fragments that revealed how consumers negotiate urgency, scarcity cues, and social influence. Consistent with qualitative best practices, data were collected iteratively until thematic saturation was reached, ensuring analytical completeness and robustness (Guest et al., 2020; Naeem et al., 2024; Rahimi & Khatoon, 2024).

The research procedures followed a structured, multi-stage netnographic protocol beginning with site identification and entry, continued with sustained data immersion, and proceeded to the systematic extraction and coding of relevant textual interactions. The coding process employed an inductive–deductive strategy: initial open coding allowed themes to emerge organically from the data, while axial coding refined these categories by linking them to established theoretical constructs on FOMO, impulsive buying, digital nudges, and high-pressure online purchasing environments. This analytical flow supports the development of interpretive depth and theoretical alignment, consistent with standards articulated in contemporary qualitative consumer behavior methodologies (Chan et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2022; Bingham, 2023).

To strengthen analytical rigor, the study incorporated continuous reflexivity, triangulation of digital sources, and cross-validation with recent systematic literature reviews on digital impulsivity, scarcity-driven online purchasing, and emotional triggers in e-commerce settings. This integration of empirical netnographic insights with up-to-date scholarly reasoning enhances the credibility, dependability, and theoretical contribution of the study. Ethical considerations were fully observed by focusing exclusively on publicly accessible online data, anonymizing user identities, and adhering to ethical guidelines for digital ethnography established in reputable international research communities.

3. Results and Discussion

The netnographic analysis reveals a set of behavioral and emotional patterns that illustrate how consumers experience, negotiate, and respond to the pressures embedded within flash sale environments. Rather than acting as isolated decision-makers, consumers appear to participate in a socially charged digital space in which time pressure,

perceived scarcity, and collective emotional dynamics converge to shape rapid, and often impulsive, purchase decisions.

A dominant pattern emerging from the data is the central role of scarcity-induced urgency. Countdown timers, fluctuating stock indicators, and real-time cues regarding product demand consistently heightened consumers' sense of temporal pressure. These elements functioned not merely as informational signals but as affective triggers, amplifying perceptions of limited opportunity and narrowing the cognitive space available for deliberation. The speed at which consumers oriented their attention around these cues suggests that scarcity in digitally mediated contexts operates with a heightened intensity, reinforcing the perception that hesitation is costly.

The analysis also demonstrates that social validation plays a crucial role in shaping emotional and behavioral responses. Consumers frequently oriented themselves toward the visible actions, expressions, or signals of others within the digital environment (Abdelsalam et al., 2020; Waskita & Ashari, 2024). Collective reactions such as growing attention toward particular items or observable shifts in engagement served as indicators of desirability and urgency. This dynamic illustrates that FOMO within flash sale settings is not solely an individual psychological response but a socially emergent phenomenon shaped by patterns of communal participation. Emotional tension appears to escalate as consumers perceive themselves embedded in a shared, competitive moment.

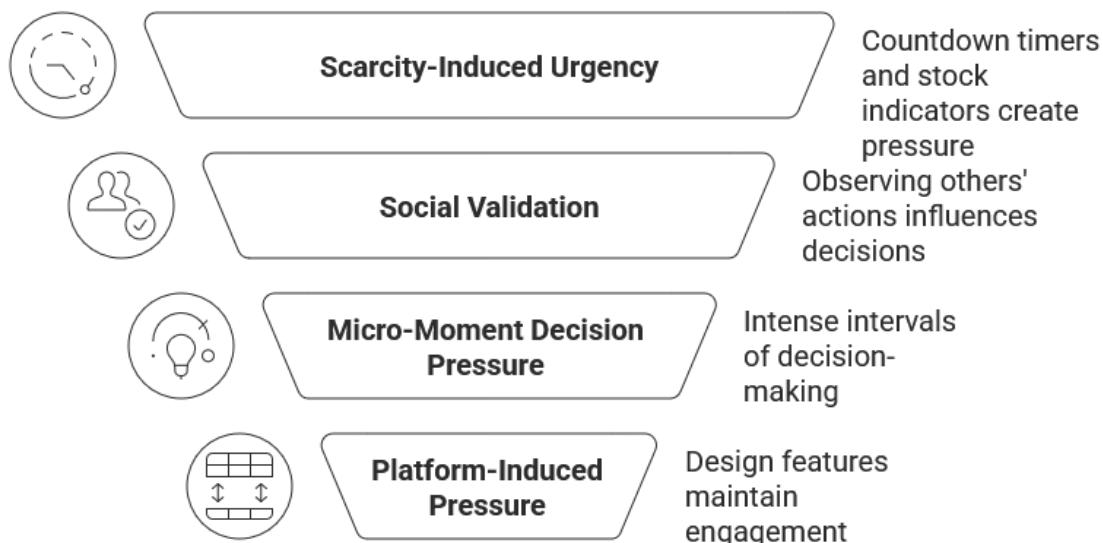
Another notable finding is the emergence of what can be conceptualized as micro-moment decision pressure. These are brief yet intense intervals during which consumers experience a convergence of time scarcity, emotional arousal, and heightened attention. Within these micro-moments, cognitive processing becomes compressed, and decision-making shifts toward rapid, affect-driven responses. The urgency to act, paired with the anticipation of potential regret, often supersedes rational evaluation, highlighting how flash sale architecture structures consumers' behavior toward immediacy.

Compounding these psychological and social pressures is the architecture of the platform itself. The design features such as real-time notifications, dynamic visuals, and interface cues operate as behavioral catalysts, carefully orchestrated to maintain momentum and sustain engagement. The interplay of these elements reinforces the sense of competition and intensifies the overall atmosphere of scarcity. Although consumers may recognize the persuasive nature of these mechanisms, the analysis indicates that the digital environment's design effectively maintains a continuous sense of pressure that influences even those who are aware of its intentional structure.

Post-purchase reflections reveal a nuanced emotional aftermath. While some consumers express satisfaction after securing desired products at discounted prices, others describe a lingering sense of uncertainty or subdued regret, suggesting that impulsive decisions made under time pressure may lead to ambivalent emotional outcomes. This

ambivalence highlights the complex relationship between FOMO-driven behavior, fleeting emotional intensity, and subsequent cognitive reassessment once the immediacy of the flash sale dissipates.

Collectively, the findings illustrate that flash sale participation is characterized by a dynamic interplay of urgency, emotional contagion, social awareness, and platform-induced pressure. These interacting forces shape a digital consumption experience that is fast-paced, highly affective, and deeply influenced by contextual cues embedded within both the technological and social layers of the online marketplace.



Picture.1 Consumer Decision-Making in Flash Sale

The findings of this study provide important insights into the psychological, social, and technological mechanisms that underlie consumer behavior in flash sale environments. Interpreting these results through the lens of consumer behavior theory suggests that flash sale participation is not simply a transactional episode but a complex interplay between affective arousal, social dynamics, and platform-driven persuasion. The prominence of scarcity-induced urgency reinforces long-held propositions regarding the influence of temporal and resource constraints on decision-making, while also highlighting how digital interfaces heighten these effects by compressing decision time and amplifying perceptions of competition. In this context, FOMO emerges not as a static emotional state but as a dynamic, socially reinforced experience that intensifies in real-time, demonstrating how online environments extend and reshape classical models of impulsive consumption.

The findings further enrich theoretical discussions by revealing how emotional contagion and social validation operate in digital commerce. Rather than functioning merely as informational cues, the actions and visible engagement patterns of other users contribute to a collective escalation of urgency, thereby situating FOMO within a socially constructed framework. This suggests that impulsive buying during flash sales is partially produced through communal participation, expanding theoretical understandings of impulse-driven consumption from the individual to the collective level. Additionally, the identification of micro-moment decision pressure offers a new conceptual layer for explaining rapid online purchasing decisions. These brief, affectively charged intervals reveal how cognitive processing is reshaped under highly compressed temporal conditions, supporting emerging perspectives on fragmented, momentary decision-making in digital marketplaces.

Beyond theory, the results also hold meaningful implications for practice. For e-commerce platforms, the study illuminates how specific architectural and interface elements such as real-time notifications, dynamic scarcity indicators, and rapid interface transitions serve as behavioral catalysts that effectively nudge consumers toward immediate action. Understanding these mechanisms can assist platforms in designing more effective, ethically grounded engagement strategies. For marketers, the insights highlight the potential of flash sale campaigns to generate strong emotional engagement but also point to the need for responsible promotional practices that balance commercial objectives with consumer well-being. For consumer protection agencies, the findings underscore the importance of monitoring how persuasive technologies shape consumer decision-making and assessing whether certain design features may contribute to exploitative digital environments.

Despite the richness of the data, the study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, as a netnographic investigation, the analysis relies on naturally occurring online interactions, which limits the ability to fully capture consumers' private thought processes or behaviors that occur outside observable digital spaces. Second, the findings are contextually tied to specific platform architectures and cultural dynamics, potentially constraining their generalizability across different markets or types of e-commerce environments. Third, the real-time nature of flash sale conversations may obscure less visible forms of consumer reflection or post-event rationalization, which could be better explored through complementary methodological approaches.

Building on these limitations, future research could adopt mixed-method designs that include interviews or behavioral experiments to more closely examine how consumers internalize and interpret flash sale cues beyond what is publicly observable. Cross-platform or cross-cultural comparative studies would also help identify whether the dynamics observed here are universal or shaped by specific technological ecosystems. In addition, longitudinal research could explore how repeated exposure to flash sale

environments influences the development of habitual decision-making patterns, emotional responses, or resilience to persuasive digital tactics.

Finally, the study's findings raise important social and ethical considerations. The intensification of urgency, the amplification of social pressure, and the emotional volatility associated with FOMO-driven flash sale participation point to potential risks for consumer autonomy and psychological well-being. While digital commerce benefits from heightened engagement, the persuasive design elements identified in this study may disproportionately affect vulnerable consumers who are more sensitive to emotional triggers or time pressure. As platforms increasingly rely on interface cues that blur the line between persuasion and manipulation, the ethical responsibility of balancing commercial success with consumer protection becomes more pronounced. Ensuring transparency, promoting responsible design, and safeguarding user agency should therefore be central considerations in the future development of flash sale mechanisms.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

The study demonstrates that consumer engagement in flash sale environments is shaped by a multilayered interplay of urgency, emotional tension, social validation, and platform-driven persuasion. Through a netnographic lens, the findings reveal that FOMO operates not merely as an individual emotional response but as a socially constructed and technologically amplified experience. The compressed temporal structure of flash sales creates micro-moments of decision pressure in which cognitive deliberation is overshadowed by emotional arousal, leading consumers toward impulsive purchasing behaviors. These insights extend existing theories of consumer behavior by illustrating how digital architectures, real-time social cues, and competitive atmospheres interact to produce highly affective consumption experiences.

The study also underscores the dual nature of flash sale participation: while it may provide consumers with excitement and perceived value, it simultaneously introduces psychological strain and the potential for post-purchase ambivalence. Such findings highlight the increasing importance of understanding digital consumption not only in terms of transactional outcomes but as an emotional and socially embedded process shaped by the design of contemporary online marketplaces.

In practical terms, the results call attention to the responsibility of e-commerce platforms and marketers to consider the ethical implications of persuasive design. While scarcity cues, dynamic notifications, and social signals may enhance engagement, they also risk undermining consumer autonomy if applied without restraint. A more balanced approach prioritizing transparency, informed decision-making, and user well-being will be essential as digital commerce continues to evolve.

Given the study's qualitative and context-specific nature, the conclusions should be interpreted with an awareness of the inherent limitations of netnography, particularly regarding unobservable private behaviors and variation across platforms or cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the insights derived here provide a strong foundation for expanded inquiry.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should consider integrating multiple methodological approaches to deepen the understanding of FOMO-driven consumption. Experimental designs may help isolate the causal effects of scarcity cues or time pressure, while in-depth interviews could illuminate consumers' internal reasoning processes and emotional trajectories before, during, and after flash sale events. Cross-cultural or cross-platform comparisons would also enrich theoretical generalizability, revealing whether observed patterns stem from universal psychological tendencies or context-specific digital ecosystems. Moreover, longitudinal research could explore how repeated exposure to flash sale environments shapes consumer resilience, susceptibility to persuasive tactics, or evolving perceptions of platform credibility.

Social and Ethical Considerations

As digital marketplaces become increasingly adept at shaping emotional and behavioral responses, greater attention must be directed toward safeguarding consumer agency. Flash sale mechanisms that rely heavily on accelerated decision-making and emotional escalation may disproportionately impact vulnerable users, including youth, individuals with limited digital literacy, or those prone to impulsive tendencies. Ethical digital design should therefore incorporate safeguards that promote informed choice such as clearer disclosures, balanced messaging, or user-centered timing controls ensuring that innovation in online commerce does not come at the expense of consumer well-being.

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