



Fear of Missing Out and Skincare Decisions: A Review of Gen Z's Digital Consumption Behavior

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Abstract

Generation Z consumers demonstrate evolving consumption behaviors, heavily influenced by social media engagement, peer interactions, and viral content exposure. This study examines the role of emotional and social factors particularly Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) in shaping brand preference within the skincare product segment. Grounded in the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) framework, the research conceptualizes digital stimuli such as viral trends and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) as external triggers (stimulus) that elicit psychological responses (organism), which subsequently influence behavioral outcomes, notably brand preference (response). A preliminary online survey involving 155 Gen Z respondents aged 15–25 in Lumajang and Madura was conducted to identify key determinants in their skincare brand selection. Findings indicate that social media platforms, particularly TikTok, and peer recommendations serve as the primary sources of brand exposure. The emotional response of FOMO emerges as a significant psychological factor that precedes rational product evaluation and contributes to impulsive purchasing behavior. Supporting literature further highlights the influence of selfcongruity and brand personality in reinforcing brand attachment among Gen Z consumers. The study underscores the importance of incorporating psychological constructs, especially FOMO, into digital marketing strategies to effectively engage Gen Z audiences and foster meaningful brand relationships.

Keywords: FOMO; SOR; Gen Z

1. Introduction

In the highly connected digital era, consumer behavior, particularly among younger generations like Gen Z, has undergone significant transformation. This study extends the authors' previous research on digital consumer behavior, which examined the mediating role of brand awareness in the relationship between viral marketing and customer satisfaction among Gen Z skincare users (Putri et al., 2025). (Kotler et al., 2024) marketers are encouraged to go beyond transactional strategies by integrating emotional and social dimensions into digital communication. In the context of Gen Z, understanding psychological drivers such as FOMO becomes essential for building deeper brand engagement. While that study focused on cognitive responses through brand recognition, the current research shifts the focus toward emotional and psychological responses, particularly Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), as a critical factor influencing brand preference formation in the digital era. Gen Z not only actively seeks information through social media but also forms purchasing decisions based on trends, friend recommendations, and exposure to viral content. Following up on previous research on Gen Z preferences in product purchasing decisions (Latifa et al., 2023; Putri, 2023), this study will deepen our understanding of the emotional and social roles that influence Gen Z's consumption behavior, particularly through the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) phenomenon. FOMO, as a psychological trigger, is increasingly prominent in the digital era, where Gen Z is highly exposed to viral content, peer recommendations, and social pressure on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. This study conducted an initial survey of 155 Gen Z respondents to identify factors that influence their preferences in choosing skincare products.

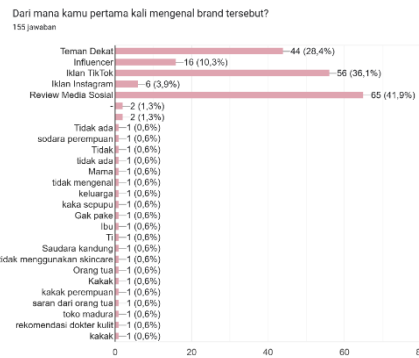


Figure 1. first time getting to know the brand

Source: Preliminary survey (n = 155), processed by the authors.

Note: The original chart labels are presented in Bahasa Indonesia as used in the survey.

Survey results indicate that social media, especially TikTok, and recommendations from close friends are the primary sources of information influencing brand awareness. Furthermore, key reasons for brand choice include trusted ingredients, affordable prices, and viral visual appeal. (Dhir et al., 2018; Indra Cahaya Tresna, 2025; Kang et al., 2019) state that FOMO is an individual psychological issue that has become increasingly significant with the rise of social media usage. FOMO is described as a negative emotion that arises when someone perceives that others are engaged in a rewarding experience, while they are not participating. This phenomenon then creates a strong urge or desire to stay connected with the activities and experiences of others to avoid feeling left behind. Skincare products are one category heavily influenced by social trends (Putri, 2023). Viral content on social media platforms often displays instant results, peer testimonials, and even celebrity endorsements, which indirectly trigger feelings of fear of missing out among Gen Z. The limited research examining the direct link between FOMO and skincare brand preferences among Gen Z Indonesia indicates a gap that requires further investigation. Yet, FOMO as a psychological phenomenon is highly relevant in today's digital context, where Gen Z is exposed to viral content and social influence almost daily. Skincare products themselves have strong personal and social dimensions because they are closely related to self-image, aesthetic standards, and social acceptance (Keiza Zeta Lazuardi & Osly Usman, 2025). Therefore, this study is important to deepen the theoretical understanding of how FOMO influences the brand preference process, especially in product categories that are sensitive to trends and social validation such as skincare

2. Methods

This study uses the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) Model to explain how external factors, such as social media content and social recommendations (Stimulus), influence an individual's psychological state in the form of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) (Organism), which ultimately shapes consumption behavior such as brand choice or purchasing decisions (Response).



Figure 2. Conceptual Framework Based on the SOR Model

Source: (Mehrabian & Russell, 1980; Vieira, 2013)

This research is supported by a preliminary survey conducted on 155 Gen Z respondents aged 15–25 years who live in the Lumajang and Madura regions. Respondents in this preliminary survey came from the Lumajang and Madura regions, which represent non-urban areas in Indonesia. This selection of regions was based on considerations of questionnaire distribution accessibility, as well as to observe how the influence of FOMO and brand preferences occurs outside the main urban environment. Gen Z in both regions is also known to be quite active on social media and involved in digital trends, including skincare trends. Thus, the distribution of the survey in Lumajang and Madura is expected to provide additional perspectives in understanding Gen Z consumption behavior in the local context. The survey was conducted online via Google Forms distributed through social media.

The data collected includes variables that represent components in the SOR model, namely: type of stimulus (source of brand influence), psychological response (level of FOMO), and form of behavior (skincare brand preference).

3. Results and Discussion

This research uses the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) framework to analyze how external stimuli influence Gen Z's psychological responses and brand preferences toward skincare product consumption. The discussion is structured around three components of the SOR model and supported by preliminary survey data from 155 Gen Z respondents aged 15–25 years living in Lumajang and Madura.

3.1 Stimulus: The Influence of Social Media and Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)

Survey results show that social media, especially TikTok, and e-WOM, specifically recommendations from close friends, are the main sources influencing skincare brand awareness among Gen Z. Viral content, user reviews, and peer influence are external stimuli that shape initial interest in a product. Millennials and Generation Z respond more effectively to digital marketing that is short, emotionally engaging, and often delivered via influencers. These features enhance brand awareness and initial engagement among young consumers in digital channels (Munsch, 2021).

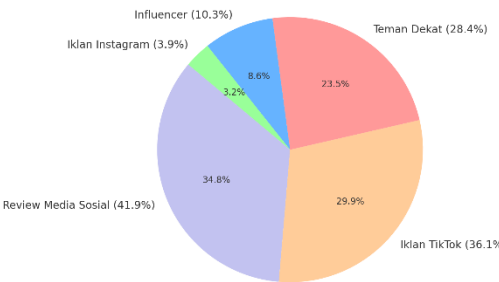


Figure 3. Distribution of First Brand Exposure Sources Among Gen Z Respondents

Source: Preliminary survey (n = 155), processed by the authors.

Note: The original chart labels are presented in Bahasa Indonesia as used in the survey.

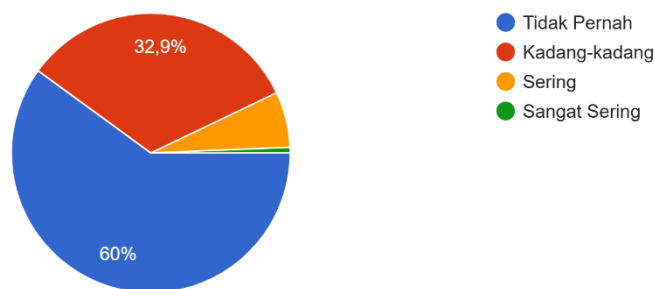
These results are in line with (Latifa et al., 2023; Putri, 2023) research findings that suggest Gen Z tends to use social media and its social circle as primary references in recognizing and considering a product. Both emphasize that social media stimuli through trending content and social validation from peers can significantly influence the formation of brand preferences, even before truly considering whether the product is personally needed. (Keiza Zeta Lazuardi & Osly Usman, 2025) also found in their research that e-WOM, especially from peers and user reviews on TikTok, is the main trigger for the formation of FOMO, which drives impulsive buying behavior among Gen Z. (Hajli et al., 2014) social word of mouth constructs such as recommendations, ratings, and online community discussions positively influence consumer trust in new products and services. High quality e-WOM can thus play a significant role in shaping brand awareness and predispose consumers to deeper engagement.

This means that not only content from brands or influencers is influential, but also social validation from the closest environment conveyed through digital media plays a major role in shaping preferences and purchasing decisions.

3.2 Organism: Psychological Response through FOMO

From a psychological perspective, survey results show that many Gen Z respondents experience a fear of missing out (FOMO) when they haven't tried a viral skincare product.

Figure 4. Respondents' answers to whether they have experienced FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) due to not trying a viral skincare product. Most answered "Never" (60%), followed by "Sometimes" (32.9%).



Source: Preliminary survey (n = 155), processed by the authors.

Note: The original chart labels are presented in Bahasa Indonesia as used in the survey.

The survey results showed that 40% of respondents admitted to experiencing fear of missing out (FOMO) because they hadn't tried a viral skincare product. 32.9% answered "Sometimes," about 6% "Often," and about 1% "Very Often." Although the majority of respondents stated "Never" (60%), this data still indicates that FOMO is a real psychological response experienced by most consumers, although not always in extreme forms. This feeling arises because they see their friends or other social media users already using the product. FOMO is a psychological reaction that arises after being exposed to viral content or positive reviews, especially on TikTok and Instagram. Research by (Rinonce et al., 2025) supports this. They found that FOMO does influence Gen Z's impulsive buying behavior. This means that the higher the fear of missing out, the more likely Gen Z is to buy something spontaneously, without much prior consideration. A similar finding was also found by (Clivnye Eugenia Charles & Immanuel, 2025) who explained that FOMO and materialistic traits drive Gen Z to make impulsive online purchases. Afterward, some of them even regret buying items they didn't really need. Based on this explanation, it can be seen that FOMO is not just a passing feeling, but can greatly influence the behavior of Gen Z. In the context of the SOR model, FOMO is part of the organism, namely an internal reaction that appears after seeing external stimuli and can encourage purchasing actions without even thinking long.

3.3 Response: Brand Preference as a Form of Behavioral Response

Brand preferences among Gen Z are formed by a combination of psychological, social, and digital aesthetic factors. In the context of skincare product use, Gen Z tends to choose brands that are not only popular but also align with their character, self-values, and lifestyle.

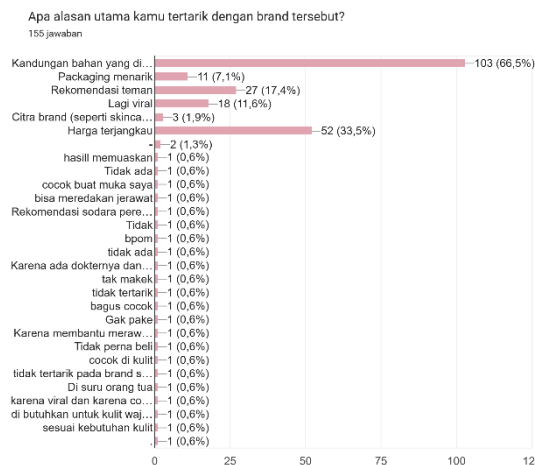


Figure 5. Top Factors Influencing Brand Choice

Source: Preliminary survey (n = 155), processed by the authors.

Note: The original chart labels are presented in Bahasa Indonesia as used in the survey.

The survey asked respondents about the primary reason they were attracted to a particular skincare brand. The most cited reason was the suitability of product ingredients (66.5%), followed by affordable pricing (33.5%), recommendations from friends (17.4%), and the brand's viral popularity (11.6%). These findings indicate that brand preference is influenced by both functional factors (ingredient suitability, pricing) and social emotional factors (peer influence, trend awareness), supporting the notion that behavioral responses in brand choice are multifaceted.

Research (Faheema et al., 2022) shows that the congruence between self-image and brand image, as well as consumer personality traits, plays a significant role in driving purchase intentions for personal care products. This means that when a brand is perceived as representing who they are, Gen Z tends to show greater interest in purchasing and recommending it. Furthermore, brand preferences are also shaped by emotional and social factors, such as the fear of missing out or FOMO. (Clivnye Eugenia Charles & Immanuel, 2025) in their research revealed that FOMO, often triggered by social environments and digital media content, drives Gen Z to make impulsive purchases. This reinforces the idea that brand preferences do not always arise from rational considerations, but are often a spontaneous response to social pressure and a desire to remain relevant within their community. Furthermore, (Widyaningrum et al., 2025) research shows that FOMO, along with co-branding strategies and brand personality, has a significant influence on consumer preferences and purchase intentions. This finding emphasizes that brands that successfully combine emotional factors, brand identity, and social connections are able to form strong preferences in the minds of young consumers. Based on the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR), brand preference can be understood as a form of final response from exposure to external stimuli (such as viral content, reviews, and visual branding) that is processed through psychological reactions such as FOMO and self identification.

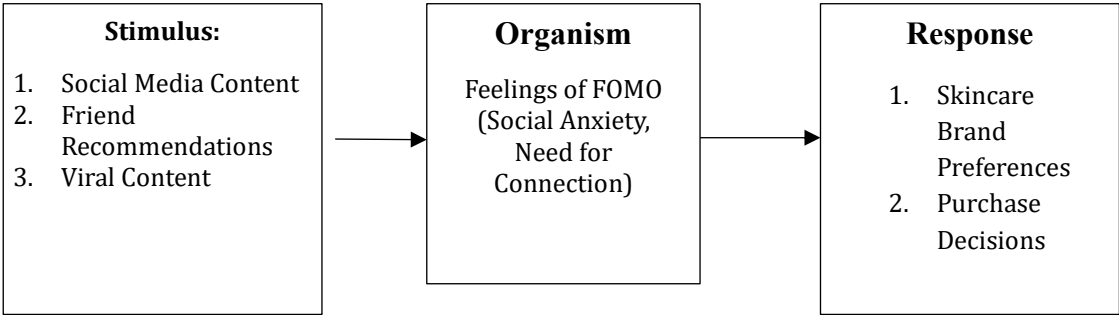


Figure 6. Gen Z Response Model in Skincare Brand Preferences

4. Conclusion

This study shows that Gen Z's consumption behavior, particularly in selecting skincare products, is heavily influenced by stimuli from social media and digital user reviews (e-WOM). Viral content, peer recommendations, and digital campaigns serve as external stimuli that trigger a psychological response called fear of missing out, or FOMO. This FOMO then drives Gen Z to respond more quickly to trends, including when making brand choices. Brand preferences formed by Gen Z are not only based on logical considerations such as price or product content, but are also influenced by emotional factors and self identity. The congruence between self image and brand image, the emotional appeal of the brand's personality, and the social connections that emerge from online interactions also strengthen brand attachment. Within the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) framework, brand preference can be understood as the final response that arises from a combination of external influences and the consumer's psychological state. Through this approach, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding Gen Z's consumption patterns more comprehensively, not only from a rational or functional perspective, but also from an emotional and social perspective. Therefore, business actors and marketers who want to reach Gen Z need to develop communication strategies that are more relevant to their psychological characteristics, including paying attention to the role of FOMO and identity congruence in shaping brand perceptions.

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