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WHEN DO VIRAL MARKETING AND SOCIAL PROOF DRIVE PURCHASE? THE MEDIATING ROLE OF FEAR OF MISSING OUT IN SOCIAL COMMERCE

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Abstract: This study examines when and how viral marketing and social proof shape purchase intention in social commerce, and whether Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) mediates these effects. Drawing on Social Influence Theory, we model viral marketing and social proof as antecedents, FOMO as a mediator, and purchase intention as the outcome. Data were collected from 231 active social commerce users in Indonesia and analyzed using variance-based structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The measurement model met accepted criteria for reliability and convergent validity. The structural results show that viral marketing exerts a positive and significant direct effect on purchase intention while also increasing FOMO. Social proof significantly elevates FOMO but does not directly influence purchase intention, indicating that endorsement cues operate primarily through affective urgency rather than as stand-alone drivers. FOMO has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention and mediates the paths from both viral marketing and social proof to purchase intention, implying partial mediation for viral marketing and full mediation for social proof. These findings advance theory by integrating normative and informational influence with an affective mechanism central to the attention economy. Managerially, they suggest prioritizing diffusion design and credible validation cues that ethically heighten urgency, while monitoring authenticity and overload to prevent reactance.

Keywords: *Viral marketing, Social proof, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), Purchase intention, Social commerce*

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1. Introduction

The digital transformation of the past decade has profoundly reshaped the marketing landscape, particularly through the convergence of social media and commercial activities that has given rise to the phenomenon of social commerce (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Within this environment, consumer behavior is no longer driven solely by economic rationality but increasingly by social interactions, collective validation, and the psychological dynamics that emerge within digital networks (J et al., 2023). Network-based mechanisms such as viral marketing and social proof have evolved into strategic levers that shape value perceptions, brand credibility, and purchase decisions (Doshi et al., 2022; J et al., 2023). While viral

marketing facilitates exponential message diffusion through voluntary consumer participation (Fatah & Arsyad, 2022; Martín et al., 2020), social proof strengthens trust in such messages by enabling individuals to observe and internalize the behaviors and preferences of others deemed socially relevant (J et al., 2023).

Grounded in social influence theory and information cascade models, the social effects observable in social commerce reveal that consumers often emulate collective behavior when faced with informational uncertainty (Bikhchandani et al., 2021; Tu & Neumann, 2022). Viral marketing operates through the amplification of emotional exposure, as content that elicits strong emotions tends to be shared more widely and become viral (Pirraglia et al., 2022), whereas social proof activates cognitive validation mechanisms by reinforcing the legitimacy of majority opinions through rational processing of social cues like reviews and recommendations (J et al., 2023; Tan & Chen, 2023). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is not deterministic. Not every viral message induces a corresponding purchase intention, nor does every instance of social endorsement lead to behavioral conversion. Such inconsistencies across empirical findings suggest the presence of unobserved psychological constructs that remain insufficiently articulated within the digital marketing literature (Dinh et al., 2023).

A particularly salient construct that may bridge this relationship is Fear of Missing Out, a psychological condition characterized by anxiety arising from perceived exclusion from socially valued experiences (Bui et al., 2021; Samsura & Rufaidah, 2025). FOMO encapsulates not only the affective drive to remain connected to social trends but also the perceptual bias toward urgency and scarcity in evaluating products or experiences (Morsi, Alnazer, El-Said, & Hammad, 2025). In social commerce settings, heightened exposure to viral content and intense social validation can evoke emotional pressure, rendering consumers more reactive to marketing stimuli (Ezzat et al., 2023). Consequently, FOMO may serve as a mediating mechanism that transforms social influence into purchase intention by amplifying emotional engagement and the anticipation of potential loss (Dinh et al., 2023).

A conceptual exploration of the interrelation among viral marketing, social proof, and FOMO is therefore essential for advancing our understanding of consumer behavior within the attention-based digital economy (Alfina et al., 2023). As social media algorithms are increasingly optimized to sustain engagement, FOMO can intensify the social effects produced by viral content, thereby narrowing the temporal gap between exposure and purchase action by creating psychological pressure and urgency (Kleitsch & Drămnescu, 2025). Investigating FOMO's mediating role provides a more comprehensive theoretical foundation for explaining how digital social influence translates into consumption behavior. This perspective not only deepens theoretical insight into the psychological mechanisms underpinning digital marketing but also underscores the ethical challenges inherent in managing communication strategies that capitalize on social and emotional pressures (Benjelloun & Kabak, 2024)

Accordingly, this study seeks to address the central question of when and how viral marketing and social proof effectively drive consumers' purchase intention, and to what extent Fear of Missing Out mediates these relationships. By integrating social influence theory, information processing theory, and affective motivation frameworks, this research aspires to contribute theoretically to the broader discourse on the complexities of digital consumer behavior. Practically, it aims to guide marketers in designing network-based communication strategies that are not only effective in stimulating engagement but also

ethically responsible in managing consumers' emotional involvement without inducing excessive psychological distortion.

2. Research Method

This study employed a quantitative approach to examine the causal relationships among Viral Marketing, Social Proof, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), and Purchase Intention within a social commerce context. The exogenous variables were Viral Marketing and Social Proof, FOMO was specified as the mediating variable, and Purchase Intention served as the endogenous variable. The target population comprised active users of social commerce platforms in Indonesia who had recently engaged with viral product content and observable social proof cues. Purposive sampling was applied to select respondents that satisfied the study criteria, namely consumers aged at least 18 years, active social media users, who had been exposed to viral content and social proof signals (e.g., likes, comments, shares, ratings, testimonials), and who had formed or considered a purchase intention within the recent period specified in the questionnaire (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). A total of 231 responses were collected through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms and, after screening, were deemed suitable for analysis.

The measurement instrument was developed by adapting items from prior literature relevant to the constructs. Indicators for Viral Marketing captured perceived spreadability, shareability, and momentum of campaign content across networks (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). Social Proof drew on indicators reflecting the perceived strength and credibility of aggregated social signals, including engagement volume and valence, ratings, testimonials, and peer usage cues (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). FOMO referred to anticipatory anxiety and social urgency associated with potentially missing a time- or trend-sensitive consumption opportunity viewed as socially valuable (Przybylski et al., 2013). Purchase Intention measured respondents' readiness, willingness, and likelihood to purchase within a near-term horizon in social commerce settings (Spears & Singh, 2004). The questionnaire was organized systematically, beginning with respondent demographics, an ethics statement on data confidentiality, informed consent, and followed by core items measured on a five-point Likert scale.

Data were analyzed using variance-based structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS, given the study's predictive orientation, model structure, and inclusion of a mediating variable (Hair et al., 2021; Ringle et al., 2015). The analytical stages covered tests of indicator reliability, convergent and discriminant validity, assessments of internal consistency (composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha), and evaluation of the structural model (path significance, explanatory power, and predictive relevance) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Partial analyses were conducted to estimate direct and indirect effects, including the mediating role of FOMO in explaining the relationships from Viral Marketing and Social Proof to Purchase Intention, with statistical inference obtained via nonparametric bootstrapping (Hair et al., 2021).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

Table 1 reports the demographic profile of the sample. Drawing on 231 valid responses, the age distribution is concentrated in the 20–25 bracket at 49.8 percent, followed by 26–30 at 25.5 percent. By gender, female respondents account for 54.5 percent and male respondents for 45.5 percent. With respect to exposure length, most respondents have been

exposed to viral content for 1–3 years (34.6 percent), whereas the smallest groups report less than 6 months (18.2 percent) and more than 3 years (18.2 percent). In terms of access frequency, 40.7 percent consume social-commerce content daily, while 10.4 percent do so only rarely. As for the breadth of followership, the majority follow 3–5 brand or creator accounts (43.7 percent), and 30.7 percent report following more than 5 accounts.

Taken together, these distributions indicate a sample that skews young with high and regular exposure to social-commerce content, characteristics that are consistent with active social-commerce users. The prevalence of daily consumption and multi-account followership suggests a context in which diffusion and validation mechanisms are salient in day-to-day decision making, providing an appropriate empirical setting to test the proposed relationships among Viral Marketing, Social Proof, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), and Purchase Intention.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Respondents (N = 231)

Profile	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	105	45.5%
	Female	126	54.5%
Age	< 20 years	28	12.1%
	20–25 years	115	49.8%
	26–30 years	59	25.5%
	> 30 years	29	12.6%
Exposure to Viral Content (Duration)	< 6 months	42	18.2%
	6–12 months	67	29.0%
	1–3 years	80	34.6%
	> 3 years	42	18.2%
Access Frequency (Social-Commerce Content)	Daily	94	40.7%
	2–3 times per week	77	33.3%
	Once per week	36	15.6%
	Rarely	24	10.4%
Breadth of Followership (Brands/Creators)	1–2 accounts	59	25.5%
	3–5 accounts	101	43.7%
	> 5 accounts	71	30.7%
Visibility of Social Proof Cues	Often see likes/comments/shares/ratings/testimonials	120	51.9%
	Sometimes	86	37.2%
	Rarely	25	10.8%
Sharing/Forwarding Behavior	Daily/Weekly	112	48.5%
	1–2 times per month	72	31.2%
	Never/Rarely	47	20.3%
Recency of Purchase Consideration	Past week	58	25.1%
	Past month	84	36.4%
	Past 3 months	61	26.4%
	> 3 months	28	12.1%

Table 2 presents the measurement model evaluation, covering outer loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability, and Cronbach's alpha to assess convergent validity and internal consistency reliability. All indicator loadings meet the recommended

minimum of 0.70, indicating that each observed item adequately reflects its latent construct. The loading ranges by construct are: Viral Marketing 0.711-0.820, Social Proof 0.722-0.804, FOMO 0.710-0.761, and Purchase Intention 0.714-0.783.

All AVE values exceed 0.50 (VM 0.584, SP 0.582, FO 0.534, PI 0.571), which indicates that more than half of the variance in the indicators is captured by their respective constructs, thus establishing convergent validity. Internal consistency reliability is satisfactory, with composite reliability values above 0.80 (VM 0.875, SP 0.847, FO 0.851, PI 0.842) and Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 (VM 0.821, SP 0.760, FO 0.781, PI 0.749). Overall, the measurement model demonstrates adequate convergent validity and internal reliability, and is suitable for subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 2. Outer Loadings, AVE, Composite Reliability, and Cronbach's Alpha

Variable & Indicators	Outer Loading	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Viral Marketing		0.584	0.875	0.821
VM1: I frequently encounter this product through viral content on social media.	0.711			
VM2: Viral content makes me interested in trying this product.	0.758			
VM3: The viral content I see provides clear information about this product.	0.820			
VM4: I am more inclined to trust this product because it is going viral on social media.	0.791			
VM5: Viral content helps me learn about the latest features/benefits of this product.	0.735			
Social Proof		0.582	0.847	0.760
SP1: The large number of likes, comments, and shares convinces me that this product is worth considering.	0.722			
SP2: High ratings and positive review valence make this product appear more trustworthy.	0.767			
SP3: User testimonials and UGC help me judge the product's quality.	0.754			
SP4: Recommendations from friends or my community strengthen my belief that this product is a good choice.	0.804			
Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO)		0.534	0.851	0.781
FO1: I feel anxious about being left behind if I do not try a product that everyone is talking about.	0.712			
FO2: I worry about missing out on valuable opportunities when I do not respond to	0.751			

trending promotions.				
FO3: Seeing others enjoy this product makes me fear missing that experience.	0.718			
FO4: I feel pressured to act quickly when a deal appears limited in time or quantity.	0.761			
FO5: I frequently check updates about this product to avoid missing important information.	0.710			
Purchase Intention		0.571	0.842	0.749
PI1: I intend to purchase this product.	0.778			
PI2: I plan to purchase this product in the near future.	0.714			
PI3: Given the opportunity, I am very likely to buy this product.	0.783			
PI4: I consider this product a top choice when I need items in its category.	0.746			

Table 3 presents the parameter significance tests for the hypothesized direct and indirect paths in the structural model. The direct effect of Viral Marketing on Purchase Intention is positive and significant (β = 0.328, T-stat = 3.090, p = 0.002), indicating that diffusion intensity, repeated exposure, and momentum cues are associated with stronger intentions to buy in social commerce. Fear of Missing Out also exerts a positive and significant direct effect on Purchase Intention (β = 0.392, T-stat = 2.986, p = 0.003), consistent with the proposition that anticipated loss and urgency translate social exposure into purchase-oriented action. On the antecedent side, Viral Marketing increases FOMO (β = 0.461, T-stat = 5.063, p < 0.001) and Social Proof increases FOMO (β = 0.390, T-stat = 4.645, p < 0.001), confirming that diffusion signals and aggregated endorsements intensify consumers' fear of missing out. By contrast, the direct path from Social Proof to Purchase Intention is statistically insignificant (β = 0.138, T-stat = 1.459, p = 0.145), suggesting that endorsement cues alone do not culminate in an intention to purchase in this sample.

The mediation tests show that FOMO transmits the effects of both antecedents onto Purchase Intention. The specific indirect effect of Social Proof on Purchase Intention through FOMO is positive and significant (β = 0.153, T-stat = 2.622, p = 0.009), and the specific indirect effect of Viral Marketing on Purchase Intention through FOMO is likewise positive and significant (β = 0.180, T-stat = 2.705, p = 0.007).Taken together, these results imply full mediation for the Social Proof pathway (indirect significant; direct not significant) and partial mediation for the Viral Marketing pathway (both direct and indirect significant).

Overall, the model highlights Viral Marketing as a dual driver, acting directly and by heightening FOMO, while Social Proof operates primarily by elevating FOMO rather than functioning as a stand-alone determinant of intention. This pattern is consistent with an attention-economy mechanism in which diffusion and validation cues heighten urgency and

anticipated loss, thereby accelerating the transition from exposure to intention in social commerce.

Table 3. Parameter Significance Test for Direct and Indirect Effects

Relationship	Coefficient	St. Dev	T-Stat	P-Value	Decision
Viral Marketing → FOMO	0.461	0.091	5.063	0.000	Accept
Social Proof → FOMO	0.390	0.084	4.645	0.000	Accept
FOMO → Purchase Intention	0.392	0.131	2.986	0.003	Accept
Viral Marketing → Purchase Intention	0.328	0.106	3.090	0.002	Accept
Social Proof → Purchase Intention	0.138	0.094	1.459	0.145	Rejected
Viral Marketing → FOMO → Purchase Intention	0.180	0.067	2.705	0.007	Accept
Social Proof → FOMO → Purchase Intention	0.153	0.058	2.622	0.009	Accept

3.2. Discussion

The finding that Viral Marketing exerts a direct positive effect on Purchase Intention while simultaneously heightening FOMO substantiates the joint operation of cognitive and affective pathways in intention formation. Broad message diffusion, repeated exposure, and momentum cues such as trending status and engagement velocity increase information diagnosticity and lower decision thresholds through heuristic processing (Klein et al., 2020). When credible narratives of temporal scarcity and exclusivity are present, the decision horizon tightens, compressing the interval between attention and intention (Khetarpal & Singh, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). In other words, Viral Marketing not only augments utilitarian evidence through clearer benefits, reduced search frictions, and credibility transfer from peers but also elicits emotional arousal that primes consumers to act swiftly, particularly within algorithmic environments that prioritize high-interaction content (Segev & Fernandes, 2022). By contrast, Social Proof shows no statistically significant direct effect on Purchase Intention, yet it increases FOMO, which in turn drives intention. This pattern indicates that aggregated social legitimacy conveyed by ratings, review valence, testimonials, and community adoption primarily reduces uncertainty and shapes descriptive norms, but is insufficient to activate conation without an emotional mediator (Espinosa et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2021). In this context, FOMO functions as a psychosocial transducer that converts the signal that many others are already enjoying benefits into urgency to act in order to avoid anticipated exclusion (Alabri, 2022; Holte et al., 2022). Full mediation along the Social Proof pathway suggests that collective endorsement is most effective when it activates loss aversion and the motivation to preserve social currency rather than when it operates as a stand-alone numerical cue (Ahn & Lee, 2024; J et al., 2023).

The strength of the FOMO mediation on both antecedents advances understanding of how normative influence, represented by Viral Marketing as an invitation to join an ongoing trend, and informational influence, represented by Social Proof as a validity reference, converge within the attention economy. FOMO integrates four elements that are often examined separately: injunctive and descriptive pressures, a preference for loss avoidance, needs for affiliation and status, and perceptions of temporal and social scarcity (Alabri, 2022; Rifkin et al., 2024). When these elements move in concert, consumers experience a reduction in evaluative thresholds and an acceleration of conative processes (Samsura & Rufaidah, 2025). As a result, attention transitions into intention within a shorter window, especially

under staged campaigns that cultivate verifiable momentum (Good & Hyman, 2020; Özen & Hus, 2025). The configuration of effects also reveals critical boundary conditions. First, signal authenticity. Excessive, homogeneous, or seemingly orchestrated Social Proof invites skepticism and psychological reactance, eroding trust and potentially dampening the FOMO mediation (Ghiassaleh et al., 2020; Silver et al., 2020). Second, information load. High review volume with heterogeneous quality creates information overload and decision fatigue, weakening perceived diagnosticity and encouraging postponement (Seutter et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Third, contextual relevance. Product category, decision stage, and consumer involvement moderate sensitivity to diffusion and validation cues (Ahn & Lee, 2024; Bhukya & Paul, 2023). High-risk or high-ticket categories, for example, require more substantive evidence than interaction metrics to mobilize intention (Otterbring et al., 2021).

Theoretically, these results clarify the differentiated functions of Viral Marketing and Social Proof within Social Influence Theory. Viral Marketing operates as a dual driver that channels cognitive effects, such as diagnosticity and credibility transfer, together with affective effects, such as arousal and temporal urgency, both directly and through FOMO. Social Proof, in contrast, acts mainly as an enabler that elevates affective readiness via FOMO rather than as an autonomous determinant of conation. The articulation of FOMO as a consistent mechanistic bridge on both paths adds precision to a literature that has reported inconsistent findings regarding the direct effect of Social Proof on intention (Cheah et al., 2024; Kollmer et al., 2022). The model therefore provides causal clarification that links social norms, anticipatory emotions, and consumption behavior within algorithmically curated platforms. Managerially, effective orchestration of Viral Marketing requires staged content that builds verifiable momentum rather than transient spikes (Dinh & Lee, 2024). Scarcity framing should be accurate and transparent so that urgency is not perceived as manipulative (Cui, 2025). Curation of Social Proof should emphasize quality and relatedness by highlighting informative reviews, showcasing diverse user experiences, and addressing questionable content ethically (Tjikhoeri et al., 2024). To mitigate overload, present summaries of the most diagnostic evidence, for example top insights or verified badges, aligned with call-to-action windows that are reasonable rather than coercive (Singhal et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2025). Because FOMO is central, ethical guidelines are essential: disclose terms and conditions clearly, avoid pseudo-scarcity, and audit anomalous metrics to maintain trust capital (Morsi et al., 2024).

This study has limitations, including a cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported measures that may be subject to perceptual bias. Generalizability across product categories, age cohorts, and platform cultures warrants further testing. Future research can employ field experiments to manipulate diffusion intensity, Social Proof strength, and scarcity horizons while observing behavioral outcomes such as clicks, basket activity, and actual conversion. Testing moderators such as trait FOMO, status needs, review skepticism, and risk tolerance will illuminate response heterogeneity and enable dynamic segmentation. Longitudinal designs are also relevant to assess the persistence of FOMO effects on post-purchase behavior, including satisfaction, regret, and advocacy.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that purchase intention in social commerce is not determined solely by rational information processing but emerges from the interplay between social diffusion mechanisms and affective drivers centered on Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). First, Viral Marketing exerts a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention. Diffusion intensity,

repeated exposure, and momentum cues enhance information diagnosticity, lower evaluative thresholds, and strengthen cognitive readiness to act. This effect is reinforced by the capacity of viral content to elicit temporal urgency and perceived scarcity, thereby converting attention into intention.

Second, Social Proof does not display a significant direct effect on Purchase Intention, yet it consistently elevates FOMO. This pattern indicates that collective legitimacy generated by ratings, reviews, testimonials, and community adoption primarily reduces uncertainty and shapes descriptive norms, but is insufficient to trigger action without affective mediation. In other words, Social Proof becomes effective when validation cues are translated into emotional urgency to avoid missing valued opportunities.

Third, FOMO has a positive effect on Purchase Intention and functions as the causal bridge from both antecedents. The mediation of FOMO is partial for the Viral Marketing pathway and full for the Social Proof pathway. These findings clarify FOMO's role as a transduction mechanism that integrates normative pressure, informational reference points, loss aversion, and affiliation and status needs into a strong behavioral impulse.

Theoretically, the results refine Social Influence Theory by revealing the differential functions of two sources of social influence: Viral Marketing operates as a dual driver, acting directly and through FOMO, whereas Social Proof operates primarily as an enabler that activates FOMO. This clarification helps explain prior inconsistencies regarding the direct effect of Social Proof on intention.

Managerially, campaign orchestration should combine content designs that build verifiable momentum with curated, authentic, and relevant social evidence, while managing information load to avoid skepticism or decision fatigue. Urgency cues must be accurate and transparent to preserve trust. Future work should employ field experiments and longitudinal designs to test individual and category-level moderators and to assess the durability of FOMO's effects on post-purchase behavior. In sum, evidence-based and ethically guided social commerce strategies can convert social exposure into high-quality purchase intention in a sustained manner.

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