

Cognitive Dissonance and Regret in Consumers Facing Unmet Purchase Desires

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ABSTRACT:

In India's rapidly evolving consumer marketplace, increasing exposure to advertising and expanding digital retail platforms have intensified consumer aspirations while simultaneously amplifying experiences of unmet purchase desires. Such situations often generate psychological tension and negative emotional responses. Drawing upon the theoretical foundations of Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory and research on consumer emotions by Marcel Zeelenberg, the present study examines the relationship between cognitive dissonance, consumer regret, and unmet purchase desire.

A quantitative research design was employed with a sample of 100 consumers, and data were collected using structured self-report measures. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, reliability testing, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis. The findings revealed significant positive relationships between cognitive dissonance and consumer regret ($r = .64, p < .001$) and between unmet purchase desire and consumer regret ($r = .67, p < .001$). Regression analysis further indicated that unmet purchase desire significantly predicted consumer regret ($R^2 = .45, p < .001$). The results highlight the psychological consequences of unfulfilled consumer aspirations and contribute to a deeper understanding of emotional dynamics in consumer decision-making within emerging market contexts.

Keywords: Cognitive dissonance, consumer regret, unmet purchase desire, consumer behaviour.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary consumer markets, purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by psychological, emotional, and social factors. Consumers are constantly exposed to aspirational products and lifestyles, which intensify purchase intentions and consumption desires. However, not all consumer desires are fulfilled. Situations in which consumers are unable to obtain desired products due to financial constraints, situational limitations, or delayed decision-making can generate psychological discomfort and emotional reactions that influence subsequent consumer behaviour.

One of the most influential theoretical explanations for such psychological reactions is provided by Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory. The theory proposes that individuals experience psychological tension when inconsistencies exist between their beliefs, desires, and behaviours. In consumer contexts, cognitive dissonance may arise when individuals strongly desire a product but are unable to purchase it, creating a conflict between aspiration and actual behaviour. Consumers often attempt to reduce this psychological discomfort through rationalization, attitude change, or information seeking.

Another important emotional outcome associated with consumer decision-making is regret. Research by Marcel Zeelenberg suggests that regret occurs when individuals compare the outcome of their decisions

with alternative possibilities and perceive that a different choice might have produced a more favourable outcome. In consumption contexts, regret may arise not only after making a purchase but also when individuals fail to purchase a desired product and later perceive that the missed opportunity resulted in a loss.

Recent studies have increasingly highlighted the role of psychological and emotional factors in shaping consumer behaviour. For instance, recent empirical research has shown that cognitive dissonance significantly influences consumer dissatisfaction and post-decision evaluations in digital consumption environments. Similarly, studies on consumer emotions indicate that regret often emerges when individuals perceive that alternative decisions could have produced more desirable outcomes. Moreover, the rapid expansion of online shopping platforms and digital marketing has intensified consumer aspirations while simultaneously increasing the likelihood of unmet purchase desires.

Despite growing scholarly attention to consumer emotions and decision-making processes, the psychological consequences of unmet purchase desire remain relatively underexplored. Much of the existing research on cognitive dissonance has focused primarily on post-purchase dissonance, while studies on regret have often examined decision outcomes after purchasing behaviour. However, situations in which consumers are unable to purchase desired products may also produce significant psychological conflict and emotional responses.

The limited empirical research has examined the combined relationship between unmet purchase desire, cognitive dissonance, and consumer regret, particularly within emerging consumer markets such as India. Understanding these relationships is important because modern consumers are increasingly influenced by digital advertising, social comparison, and aspirational consumption patterns, which may intensify psychological reactions when purchase desires remain unfulfilled.

From a theoretical perspective, the present study contributes to consumer psychology by integrating insights from Cognitive Dissonance Theory and consumer regret research to better understand the emotional consequences of unfulfilled purchase intentions. By examining the relationship between unmet purchase desire, cognitive dissonance, and consumer regret, the study extends existing literature on consumer decision-making and provides a deeper understanding of psychological responses associated with unrealized consumption goals.

The present study aims to investigate the relationship between cognitive dissonance, consumer regret, and unmet purchase desire among consumers. By analysing these constructs simultaneously, the study seeks to provide insights into the emotional and cognitive processes that arise when consumer aspirations remain unfulfilled.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory explains the psychological tension individuals experience when their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors conflict. Consumers try to reduce this discomfort by justifying their decisions, selectively seeking supportive information, or avoiding contradictory evidence. For example, after buying a smartphone, consumers may focus on positive reviews to reassure themselves that they made the right choice and ignore negative comments. In intense cases of dissonance, some consumers even return the product to restore psychological balance.

Lee and Chae (2021) found that social media-based comparison significantly increases unmet purchase desire and post-purchase regret. Their study reported that constant exposure to peers' luxury purchases on

platforms such as Instagram heightens cognitive dissonance, leading to both action regret and inaction regret among consumers.

Harmon-Jones (2000) expanded Festinger's theory by emphasizing that self-justification plays a central role in reducing dissonance. Consumers often defend expensive or difficult decisions to protect their self-esteem. For example, a consumer disappointed with a product may downplay its flaws and highlight minor advantages to maintain confidence in their choice. This attitudinal shift is stronger when the decision involved high effort or personal investment.

Sweeney et al. (2000) found that post-purchase dissonance is strongest for high-involvement purchases that feel irreversible, such as electronics or luxury items. Their research showed that consumers cope with discomfort by reviewing alternatives or seeking reassurance. They recommended that marketers reduce post-purchase anxiety by offering warranties, after-sales support, and satisfaction reinforcement to build loyalty.

Park and Lee (2019) observed that emotional dissonance is higher in online shopping due to lack of physical experience with products. When expectations do not match product reality, customers experience heightened regret, dissatisfaction, and increased return behavior.

Zaka et al. (2025) conducted a study examining the antecedents of consumer regret using survey data from 1,200 respondents. The findings revealed that perceived risk, unmet expectations, and materialistic orientation significantly predict consumer regret among consumers. The study further indicated that when consumers perceive a mismatch between expectations and outcomes, they are more likely to experience dissatisfaction and regret, which may lead to negative word-of-mouth behaviour and reduced brand loyalty.

Sarwar et al. (2023) investigated the relationship between online impulse buying behaviour and purchase regret among consumers. Data collected from 317 online shoppers showed that impulsive buying behaviour significantly increases the likelihood of consumer regret. The study also reported that cognitive dissonance often emerges after impulsive purchasing decisions as consumers begin to question their choices, resulting in feelings of regret and dissatisfaction.

Koller and Salzberger (2007) demonstrated that consumers experiencing dissonance selectively process information. Positive information is accepted, while negative reviews are ignored to justify the purchase. This confirmation bias is especially strong in high-value, high-regret purchases like premium gadgets. Their findings suggest that marketers can strategically use positive reviews, influencer endorsements, and supportive online communities to reduce defection.

Bawa and Kansal (2008) found that cognitive dissonance in Indian consumers commonly occurs after purchasing expensive, aspiration-driven products such as smartphones, appliances, and automobiles. Aggressive advertising and social comparison amplify expectations, leading to regret and anxiety when performance falls short. Their study emphasized collectivistic influences—Indian consumers often consult family, read reviews, and seek reassurance. The authors recommend realistic advertising, stronger after-sales services, and loyalty programs to reduce dissonance.

Nusir et al. (2026) conducted a systematic review of studies published between 2018 and 2025 examining impulsive buying behaviour and post-purchase regret. The review indicated that digital marketing strategies, social media exposure, and easy access to online shopping platforms have intensified consumer purchase desires. However, these factors also increase the likelihood of regret when consumers evaluate their decisions more critically after the purchase.

Zeelenberg (1999) argued that regret is shaped by self-blame and counterfactual thoughts such as “What if I had chosen differently?” Regret increases when outcomes are negative, responsibility is internal, or dissonance is high. In consumer settings, regret often leads to brand switching, refund requests, or avoidance of similar purchases. Clear choices, product trials, and bundling can reduce counterfactual thinking and minimize regret.

Inman and McAlister (1994) introduced the concept of “missed opportunity regret,” which occurs when consumers fail to act during promotions. They distinguished this from traditional purchase regret and showed that opportunity loss reduces trust in marketing tactics. Excessive scarcity-based persuasion can harm long-term customer trust, so marketers must balance urgency with fairness.

Tsiros and Mittal (2000) linked post-purchase regret to decreased repurchase intentions and loyalty. Regret was found to be a stronger predictor of brand defection than dissatisfaction alone, particularly in high-involvement categories like electronics. They suggested offering product previews, post-purchase reassurance, and enhanced service recovery to prevent regret-driven switching.

Sharma and Nayak (2019) reported that Indian online shoppers experience high digital regret due to poor product expectations, lack of sensory evaluation, and inadequate return policies. They emphasized that regret lowers trust in online platforms. Improving return processes, using AR try-on technology, and enhancing digital transparency can reduce regret in e-commerce.

Kivetz and Simonson (2002) explained that consumers feel remorse when self-control conflicts with desire, such as buying luxury items or missing out on pleasurable experiences. Their research showed that both indulgence guilt and opportunity loss contribute to regret. To manage this, marketers use time-limited promotions and experiential framing to encourage purchases while minimizing guilt.

Research Problem and Rationale

Consumer desires are often shaped not only by what individuals purchase, but also by what they are unable to obtain. In modern consumer societies, continuous exposure to advertising, social media, and digital marketplaces has intensified consumer aspirations and purchase intentions. However, many consumers are unable to fulfil desired purchases due to financial constraints, situational limitations, or delayed decision-making, which may result in psychological discomfort and negative emotional responses.

Although previous research has extensively examined post-purchase evaluations, comparatively limited attention has been given to the psychological consequences of unmet purchase desires. Drawing upon theoretical perspectives such as Leon Festinger’s Cognitive Dissonance Theory and research on consumer regret by Marcel Zeelenberg, the present study seeks to explore how unmet purchase desire contributes to cognitive dissonance and consumer regret. By addressing this gap, the study aims to advance understanding of the emotional and cognitive processes underlying contemporary consumer decision-making.

Objectives

1. To examine the level of cognitive dissonance experienced by consumers when they are unable to purchase a desired product.
2. To assess the extent of regret associated with unmet purchase desire among consumers.
3. To analyze the relationship between cognitive dissonance and consumer regret in situations of unmet purchase desire.
4. To explore whether demographic variables (such as age and gender) influence cognitive dissonance and regret in unmet purchase situations.

Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between unmet purchase desire and consumer regret.

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between unmet purchase desire and cognitive dissonance.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive–correlational research design to examine the relationships among cognitive dissonance, consumer regret, and unmet purchase desire. The descriptive component enabled assessment of the levels of each construct, while the correlational approach facilitated examination of their interrelationships without experimental manipulation. This design is appropriate for investigating psychological constructs and identifying statistically significant associations within consumer behavior research.

Variables

Independent Variables:

- Cognitive Dissonance
- Unmet Purchase Desire

Dependent Variables

- Consumer Regret

Sample

The sample comprised 100 adult consumers (aged 18 years and above) who actively engaged in online and/or offline purchasing and had experienced at least one instance of unmet purchase desire (i.e., inability to purchase a desired product). Participants below 18 years of age and individuals without purchasing involvement were excluded. The sample size was considered adequate for correlational and regression analyses in behavioral research.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants for the study. This technique was considered appropriate because the research aimed to collect data from individuals who had experienced situations involving unmet purchase desires and consumer decision-making. A total of 100 participants were included in the study.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

1. Participants aged 18 years and above
2. Individuals with experience in consumer purchasing decisions
3. Participants willing to provide informed consent

Exclusion Criteria

1. Individuals below 18 years of age
2. Participants who did not complete the questionnaire fully
3. Individuals unwilling to participate in the study

Instruments

The instruments used in the study were adapted from previously validated scales in consumer behaviour

research.

Cognitive Dissonance Scale demonstrated good reliability in previous studies with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .82 to .90. Consumer Regret Scale developed by Marcel Zeelenberg has shown strong internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values above .85 in earlier research. These reliability values indicate that the scales possess adequate internal consistency and measurement reliability for assessing consumer psychological responses.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and provided informed consent before participation. Their responses were kept confidential and anonymous, and participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time.

Procedure

Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered in both online (via Google Forms) and offline formats to ensure sample diversity. Participants were recruited through social media platforms, educational institutions, workplaces, and marketplaces. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained, and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The average completion time was approximately 8–10 minutes. Completed responses were screened for accuracy and completeness before analysis.

Statistical Analysis

Data were coded in Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values) were computed to assess central tendencies and dispersion. Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine associations among cognitive dissonance, unmet purchase desire, and consumer regret. Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the predictive effects of cognitive dissonance and unmet purchase desire on consumer regret. Where applicable, independent samples t-tests were conducted to explore demographic differences.

All analyses were performed in accordance with the study objectives to systematically test the proposed hypotheses and ensure methodological rigor suitable for scholarly publication.

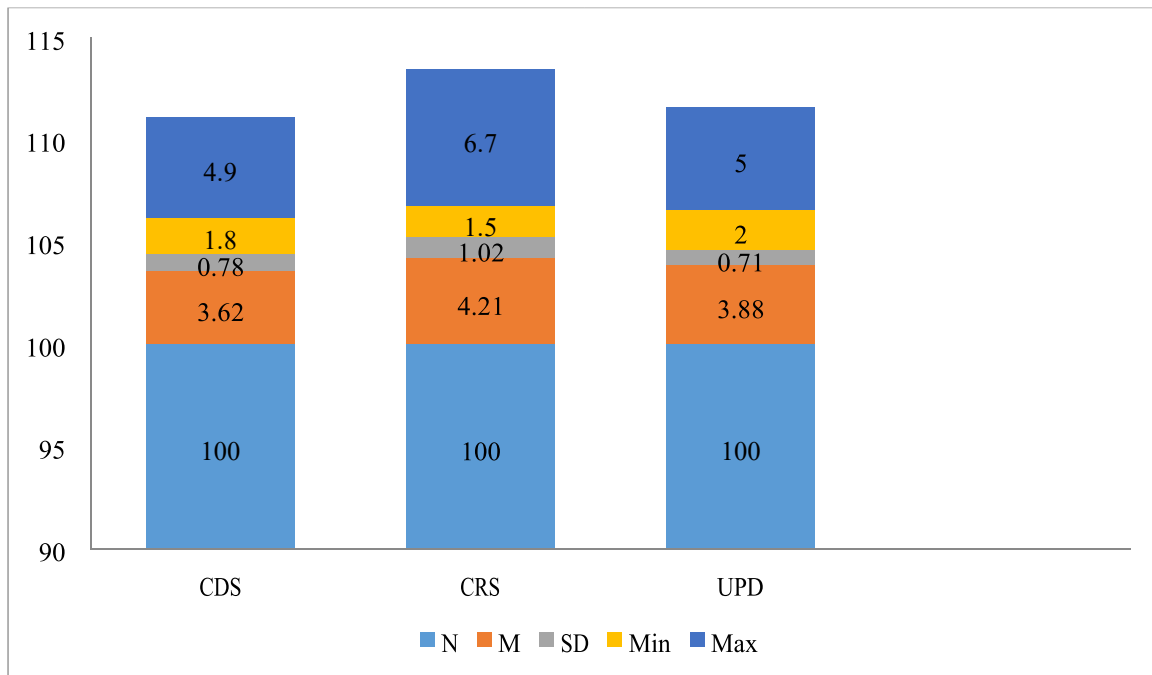
4. RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The present study examined levels of cognitive dissonance and consumer regret among individuals experiencing unmet purchase desire. A total of 100 consumers who reported wanting a product they were unable to purchase participated in the study.

Output 1: Descriptives Table.

Variable	N	M	SD	Min	Max
CDS	100	3.62	0.78	1.8	4.9
CRS	100	4.21	1.02	1.5	6.7
UPD	100	3.88	0.71	2.0	5.0

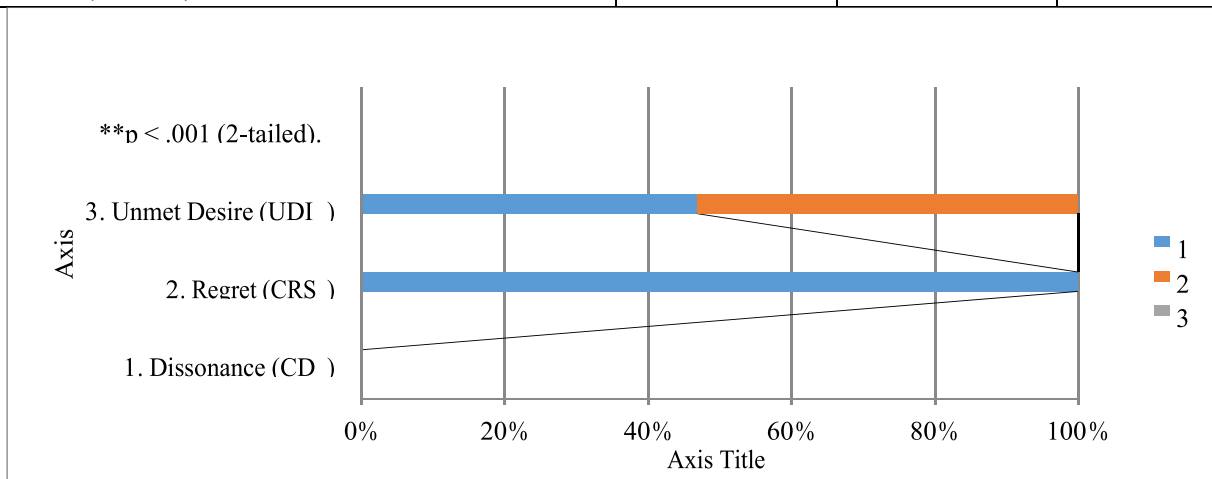


Interpretation

Descriptive statistics revealed moderate to high levels of cognitive dissonance (M = 3.82, SD = 0.78), consumer regret (M = 4.21, SD = 1.02), and unmet purchase desire (M = 3.88, SD = 0.71). The mean scores indicate that these psychological responses were prevalent among participants who were unable to purchase desired products. The relatively low standard deviations suggest limited variability and a reasonable degree of consistency in responses across the sample

Output 2: Pearson Correlations Table

Variable	1	2	3
1. Dissonance (CD)	-	.64	0.59
2. Regret (CRS)	.64	-	0.67
3. Unmet Desire (UDI)	.59	.67	-
**p < .001 (2-tailed).			



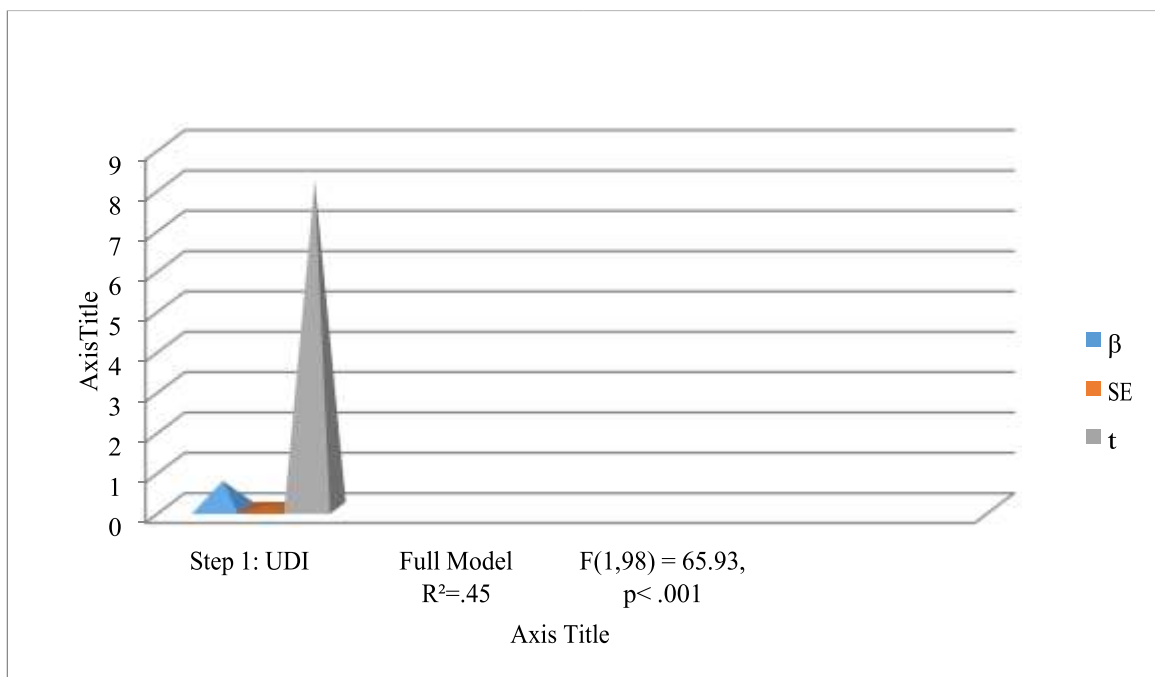
Interpretation

Pearson’s correlation analysis showed significant positive relationships among all variables. Cognitive

dissonance was positively correlated with consumer regret ($r = .64, p < .001$) and unmet purchase desire ($r = .59, p < .001$). Unmet purchase desire was also positively correlated with consumer regret ($r = .67, p < .001$). All correlations were significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

Output 3: Regression Table

Predictor	β	SE	t	p	ΔR^2
Step 1: UDI	.67	.08	8.12	<.001	.45
Full Model $R^2 = .45$					
$F(1,98) = 65.93, p < .001$					



Interpretation

Simple linear regression analysis revealed that unmet purchase desire significantly predicted consumer regret ($\beta = .67, t = 8.12, p < .001$). The model explained 45% of the variance in consumer regret ($R^2 = .45$). The overall model was statistically significant, $F(1, 98) = 65.93, p < .001$, indicating that unmet purchase desire is a strong predictor of consumer regret.

5. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between unmet purchase desire, cognitive dissonance, and consumer regret among consumers. The results of the correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between cognitive dissonance and consumer regret ($r = .64$), indicating that higher levels of psychological conflict are associated with stronger feelings of regret. Similarly, unmet purchase desire was positively correlated with consumer regret ($r = .67$), suggesting that consumers who experience stronger unfulfilled desires tend to report greater regret. Furthermore, the findings showed that unmet purchase desire was also positively related to cognitive dissonance ($r = .59$), indicating that when

consumers are unable to obtain desired products, they are more likely to experience psychological tension or conflict.

These findings can be explained through Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory, which proposes that individuals experience psychological discomfort when their desires, beliefs, and actions are inconsistent. In the context of consumer behaviour, when consumers strongly desire a product but are unable to purchase it, a discrepancy arises between their aspirations and their actual behaviour. This inconsistency produces cognitive dissonance, which may lead to negative emotional responses.

The findings are also consistent with the concept of consumer regret described by Marcel Zeelenberg, who suggests that regret occurs when individuals compare their decisions with alternative outcomes and perceive that a better outcome could have been achieved. When consumers fail to obtain a desired product, they may later perceive that they missed an opportunity, which increases feelings of regret and dissatisfaction.

The results of the present study are consistent with previous empirical research. For example, Sarwar et al. (2023) found that cognitive dissonance significantly contributes to consumer regret and dissatisfaction after decision-making. Similarly, Zaka et al. (2025) reported that unmet expectations and discrepancies between desired and actual outcomes are significant predictors of consumer regret. These studies support the present findings that unmet desires and psychological conflict play an important role in shaping emotional responses in consumer behaviour.

Overall, the findings suggest that unmet purchase desire can trigger psychological conflict, which subsequently contributes to emotional regret among consumers. These results highlight the importance of understanding the emotional and cognitive processes involved in consumer decision-making, particularly in environments where consumers are frequently exposed to aspirational products and marketing influences.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study highlights that unmet purchase desire is a critical driver of consumer psychological and emotional responses, triggering significant cognitive dissonance and regret. Descriptive analysis revealed moderate-to-high levels of cognitive dissonance ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.78$), consumer regret ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.02$), and unmet purchase desire ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.71$), indicating that the inability to purchase desired products is a common and emotionally meaningful experience. Frequency data showed that 70% of respondents reported regret, while the majority experienced moderate to high cognitive dissonance, underscoring regret as a dominant emotional outcome of unfulfilled purchase intentions.

Correlation analysis demonstrated strong, positive relationships among the variables ($r = .59-.67$, $p < .001$), confirming that unmet desires intensify both psychological discomfort and emotional dissatisfaction. Regression results further established unmet purchase desire as a robust predictor of consumer regret ($\beta = .67$, $R^2 = .45$, $p < .001$), suggesting that a substantial proportion of post-decision regret can be attributed to unfulfilled desires. Additionally, 65% of participants reported that advertisements heightened cognitive dissonance, highlighting the role of marketing in amplifying consumer dissatisfaction.

Overall, the findings provide strong empirical support for theoretical frameworks of cognitive dissonance and regret, demonstrating that unfulfilled consumption goals have tangible emotional consequences. Practically, marketers and retailers can reduce negative outcomes by offering alternatives, providing reassurance, or minimizing stock unavailability. This study underscores that unmet purchase desire is not

merely a consumer inconvenience but a significant antecedent of psychological discomfort, emphasizing the need to address these effects in both research and practice.

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