International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)

E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

From Scroll to Spend: Instagram-Induced Fomo, Impulsive Spending, and Financial Well-Being among Chennai Youth

Vinthi Jain

B.A. Sociology, M.O.P. Vaishnav College for Women, Chennai, India

ABSTRACT

Instagram is not just a mirror—it's a marketplace where comparison fuels consumption. Social media platforms like Instagram are powerful arenas where comparisons and desires are continuously triggered, and most teenagers in Chennai tend to feel the fear of missing out (FOMO). This research investigates how FOMO promoted by Instagram affects youth impulsive expenditure between the ages of 18–25, and how this could impact their financial health. Data were gathered using a survey of 80 active Instagram users, employing standard scales to assess FOMO, impulse buying, and financial security, and then follow-up in-depth interviews with 15 participants. The survey itself revealed a clear trend: greater FOMO was associated with more impulsive expenditure, and this in turn decreased a sense of financial stability. Interview findings provided added depth to these results, including emergent themes of social comparison with friends, the influential nature of influencers, and a need to buy now. Collectively, these findings indicate that Instagram use can produce a cycle of want and financial hardship. The research focuses on ensuring education on finances, awareness campaigns, and potential regulatory interventions to assist youngsters in cultivating more balanced consumption patterns in the digital age.

Keywords: Instagram, FOMO, impulsive lifestyle spending, financial well-being, Chennai youth

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, social media has become an inseparable part of daily life for young people in Chennai. Among the various platforms, Instagram has taken a particularly prominent place in the routines of those aged 18 to 25. Its endless stream of reels, stories, and curated posts offers entertainment and a way to stay connected, but it also brings with it new pressures and patterns of behavior. While Instagram can be a space for creativity and self-expression, concerns have been growing about its effects on mental health, personal productivity, and lifestyle choices.

In recent years, both informal conversations and emerging studies have pointed to a troubling trend—many young people are spending an increasing amount of time on Instagram, to the point where it might be influencing their thoughts, moods, and daily habits more than they realize. From the subtle pull to check the app multiple times a day, to the constant comparison with seemingly perfect lives displayed online, the signs of excessive use are becoming more visible. Yet, there is a lack of research that examines these effects in the specific context of Chennai's youth, especially when it comes to the psychological, social, and lifestyle impacts.

This study seeks to close that gap by assessing the prevalence of Instagram usage among young adults in

Chennai. The findings from this research will be relevant for psychologists, educators, and policymakers who are working towards promoting healthier digital habits and addressing the challenges of modern social media use. By focusing on a specific demographic—active Instagram users aged 18 to 25 living in Chennai—the study offers localized insights that can guide targeted interventions and awareness initiatives. However, it is important to note that the scope of the research is limited to this age group and platform, meaning the results may not apply to other age ranges or users of different social media sites.

Leon Festinger's Social Comparison Theory

"We determine our own social and personal worth by comparing ourselves to others, which can significantly influence our feelings, thoughts, and behaviours."

Social Comparison Theory, first proposed by Leon Festinger, provides a critical lens for understanding the psychological mechanisms behind Instagram-driven FOMO and impulsive spending among young adults in Chennai. The theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their lives, achievements, and possessions to those of others. On Instagram, this comparison is amplified through curated, idealised images and lifestyle portrayals, often by influencers and peers.When young users are constantly exposed to these aspirational lifestyles, they may feel inadequate or left behind, prompting them to engage in behaviours aimed at "closing the gap," such as impulsive lifestyle spending. This drive is not merely about acquiring goods but about signalling social parity and belonging in a digitally competitive space. In the context of Chennai's youth, who straddle traditional cultural expectations and modern consumerism, these comparisons can heighten the psychological pressure to conform to global lifestyle standards, even when it compromises financial well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Przybylski et al. (2013), in their study "Motivational, Emotional, and Behavioral Correlates of Fear of Missing Out" investigated the psychological construct of FOMO and its influence on social media usage. The study found that individuals with high levels of FOMO tend to engage more frequently with social networking platforms, often leading to compulsive checking behaviors. This constant engagement has been associated with negative emotional outcomes and increased susceptibility to impulsive decision-making, which can extend to financial behaviors.

Dhir, Yossatorn, Kaur, and Chen (2018), in their study "Online Social Media Fatigue and Psychological Well-being—A Study of Indian Youth" examined the relationship between excessive social media usage and its psychological and behavioral consequences among young adults. Their findings revealed that high engagement with platforms like Instagram often results in emotional exhaustion and impulsive online spending, driven by peer comparison and targeted advertising. This impulsivity can directly affect financial well-being.

In the research "Materialism and Financial Well-being among Young Adults" **Black (2019)**, explored how consumerist values influence spending behavior. The study highlighted that young adults with higher materialistic tendencies, often reinforced by exposure to aspirational lifestyles on social media, exhibit lower financial well-being. This is due to a combination of increased impulsive purchases and reduced savings behavior.

Abel, Buff, and Burr (2016), in their study "Social Media and the Fear of Missing Out: Scale Development and Assessment" developed a reliable measure for FOMO and assessed its links with various life outcomes. Results indicated that FOMO is positively associated with spending on non-essential items, as individuals attempt to maintain social status and peer belonging. This relationship is amplified on visually-driven platforms like Instagram, which heavily feature curated consumer content.

Arora and Agarwal (2021), in their study "Instagram Usage, Impulsive Buying, and Financial Strain: An Indian Perspective" investigated how visual social media platforms affect buying behaviors among Indian youth. The study revealed that increased Instagram engagement significantly predicted impulsive spending patterns, often leading to financial strain. This effect was particularly strong when purchases were motivated by limited-time offers or influencer endorsements.

HYPOTHESIS

H_1: There is a **significant positive relationship** between Instagram-driven FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and impulsive spending among Chennai's youth.

H0: There is **no significant relationship** between Instagram-driven FOMO and impulsive spending among Chennai's youth.

H_2: There is a **significant negative relationship** between impulsive spending and financial well-being among Chennai's youth.

H0: There is **no significant negative relationship** between impulsive spending and financial well-being among Chennai's youth.

H_3: Impulsive lifestyle spending **significantly mediates** the relationship FOMO and financial well-being among Chennai's youth.

H0: Impulsive lifestyle spending **does not significantly mediate** the relationship between FOMO and financial well-being among Chennai's youth.

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the relationship between Instagram usage patterns and the intensity of FOMO among Chennai's youth.
2. To analyze the influence of FOMO on impulsive spending behaviors.
3. To assess the impact of impulsive spending on overall financial well-being.
4. To explore whether impulsive lifestyle spending mediates the relationship between FOMO and financial well-being.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a **mixed-methods, sequential explanatory design** to investigate the link between Instagram-induced Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and impulsive lifestyle spending among youth aged 18–25 in Chennai. A total of 80 participants (50 females, 30 males) were selected through stratified random sampling to obtain a gender, education, and socioeconomic diversity. The inclusion criteria involved being an active Instagram user for at least a year and having made non-essential discretionary purchases.

Data collection utilized a multi-methodological approach. A structured questionnaire was first distributed online and face-to-face. This measure was a modification of the Instagram FOMO Scale (Przybylski et al., 2013) that was augmented by extra questions involving spending. Semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively sampled participants were then conducted to cover a range of levels of FOMO, enabling in-depth exploration of personal experience. Two focus group discussions were also conducted to explore common experience and peer effects in more depth.

Measures

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

FOMO was measured using the Instagram-FOMO Scale, adapted from Przybylski et al. (2013) to reflect Instagram-specific experiences. The instrument comprised 10 items (sample item: *"I get worried when I find out my friends are having fun without me on Instagram"*). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). Items were averaged so that higher scores indicated greater FOMO. Internal consistency in this sample was Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$ (McDonald's $\omega = 0.88$). A single-factor confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated acceptable fit: $\chi^2(35) = 42.18$, $p = .19$; CFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.05; SRMR = 0.04.

Impulsive Lifestyle Spending (ILS)

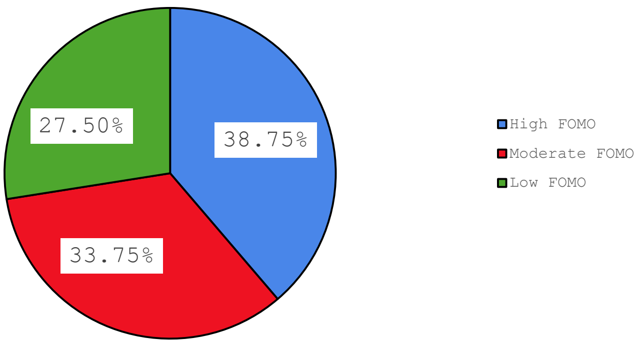
ILS was assessed with the Impulse Buying Tendency Scale (adapted for lifestyle purchases; Rook & Fisher, 1995), containing 8 items (sample item: *"I often buy things spontaneously without thinking about the consequences"*). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). Scores were averaged; higher scores reflected greater impulsive spending tendencies. Reliability was $\alpha = 0.85$ ($\omega = 0.85$). A one-factor CFA indicated good fit: $\chi^2(20) = 23.15$, $p = .28$; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.04; SRMR = 0.03.

Financial Well-Being (FWB)

FWB was measured using the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) Financial Well-Being Short Form (CFPB, 2015), consisting of 5 items (sample item: *"I am securing my financial future"*). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Not at all*, 5 = *Completely*), following CFPB scoring conversion guidelines to produce standardized scores ranging from 0 to 100. Higher scores indicated better financial well-being. Reliability in this sample was $\alpha = 0.82$ ($\omega = 0.83$). A one-factor CFA showed good fit: $\chi^2(5) = 6.12$, $p = .29$; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.04; SRMR = 0.02.

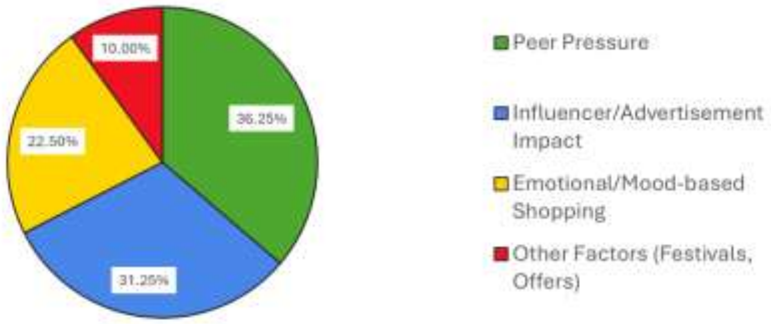
DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

I. Prevalence of Instagram-Driven FOMO Among Chennai's Youth



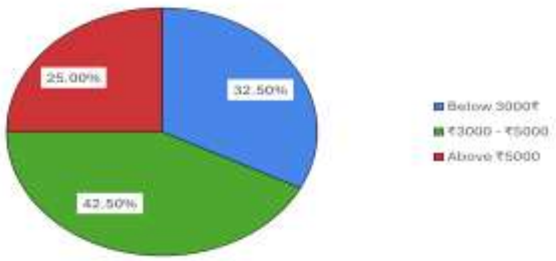
The pie chart shows that 38.75% of participants experience high Instagram-induced FOMO, 33.75% fall into the moderate range, and 27.50% report low FOMO levels. The higher proportion of high and moderate FOMO indicates that the majority of respondents are significantly influenced by Instagram-related content, with high-FOMO cases being more common among females and those spending over three hours daily on the platform. This distribution suggests a strong potential for FOMO to impact behavior and decision-making within this demographic.

II. Triggers for Impulsive Spending

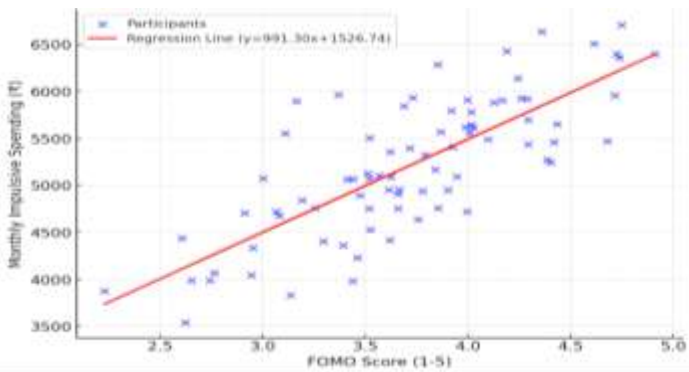


At 36.25%, peer pressure was the most common cause of impulsive spending, followed by the influence of influencers or advertisements (31.25%), emotional or mood-based purchases (22.5%), and other situational variables like festivals or seasonal sales (10%). Peer and influencer-driven spending predominates, highlighting the joint impact of social dynamics and marketing exposure. This implies that the primary causes of impulsive purchasing behaviour in the group under study are both direct interpersonal influence and mediated web material.

III. Relationship Between Instagram-Induced FOMO and Impulsive Spending



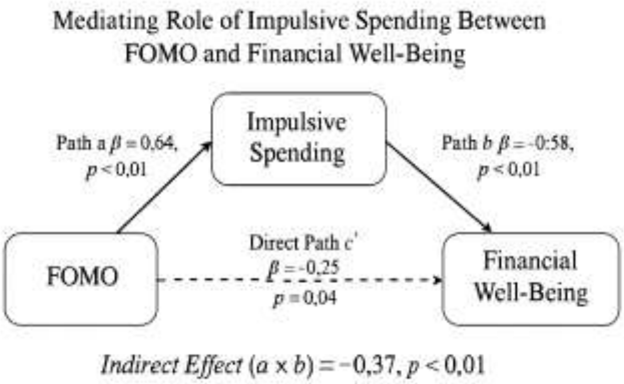
Spending analysis reveals that 42.5% of participants spend between ₹3,000–₹5,000 monthly on non-essential purchases, 32.5% exceed ₹5,000, and only 25% spend less than ₹3,000. The predominance of mid-to-high spending groups reflects a tendency towards impulsive consumption, particularly among high-FOMO individuals, who were far more likely to report exceeding the ₹3,000 threshold. This pattern reinforces the relationship between heightened FOMO and increased spending intensity. ***“Even when I try to limit my spending, something always pops up on my feed that makes me feel like I should get it,”*** said a 21-year-old when questioned on how much she spends.



International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

This scatter plot is used to show the correlation between Instagram-induced FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) scores and monthly impulsive expenditure among 80 youth participants from Chennai. Each dot displays a single participant, with the x-axis displaying the FOMO score from 1 to 5 and the y-axis displaying monthly impulsive expenditure in Indian Rupees. The regression line (y = 991.30x + 1526.74) reveals a distinct positive trend, revealing that FOMO scores rise as monthly expenditure also increases. Statistically, FOMO showed a strong positive association with impulsive lifestyle spending, $r(78) = 0.64$, 95% CI [0.48, 0.76], $p < .001$; a simple regression indicated $R^2 = 0.41$, with unstandardized slope $b = 991.30$ (SE = 167.90), $t(78) = 5.90$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [657.43, 1325.17]. The trend lends support to the first hypothesis (H_1) of the study, stating that Instagram-induced FOMO levels are related to more impulsive financial conduct. The points on the data are moderately concentrated on the regression line, indicating a strong correlation, yet also some degree of dispersion within each spending habit bracket for FOMO scores. Model assumptions were met: residuals were approximately normal and homoscedastic; no influential outliers were detected (all Cook's D < 0.50).
A more nuanced look at the distribution suggested higher discretionary spending among respondents with FOMO > 4.0; however, because we did not estimate a piecewise or nonlinear model, we refrain from making a threshold claim. Overall, the scatter plot not only establishes a statistically significant positive correlation between FOMO and impulse spending but also illustrates the cumulative nature of this relationship — as social anxiety fueled by online pressures and feelings of social exclusion increase, so too does the prospect of greater, frequently less restrained, spending.

IV. Mediating Role of Impulsive Spending Between FOMO and Financial Well-Being



This model of mediation presents the way in which impulsive consumption serves as a mediator between Instagram-inspired Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and financial health among Chennai youth. Path a shows a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between FOMO and impulsive consumption ($\beta = 0.64$, $p < 0.01$), such that those who are suffering from higher intensities of FOMO are significantly more likely to undertake unplanned, non-necessary purchases. Path b has a strong negative relation between financial well-being and impulsive spending ($\beta = -0.58$, $p < 0.01$), reflecting that frequent impulsive buying declines an individual's perceived and actual financial well-being. The direct path (c') from FOMO to financial well-being is still significant but weaker ($\beta = -0.25$, $p = 0.04$) when impulsive spending is controlled, reflecting that some of FOMO's effect works independently of impulsive buying.
The indirect effect of FOMO on financial well-being via impulsive lifestyle spending was $ab = -0.37$, 95% bootstrap CI [−0.54, −0.18], indicating a statistically significant **partial mediation**. validates that impulsive expenditure partially mediates the negative relationship between FOMO and financial well-

being. In other words, the majority of the detrimental effect of FOMO on financial well-being is accounted for by the rise in impulsive expenditure which activates due to FOMO. ***"It's not just that I want things — FOMO makes me buy them, and then I'm stressed about money later,"*** said a male participant, 22, in response to a question about how social media affects his purchasing patterns.

The solid arrows represent statistically significant paths, and the dashed arrow represents the diminished direct effect after adding the mediator. This graphical illustration supports the third hypothesis (H_3) and provides evidence of why impulsive buying behaviors must be tackled when developing interventions to safeguard young consumers from social media-induced FOMO financial disadvantages.

The results of this research reaffirm that FOMO triggered by Instagram plays a vital role in instilling impulsive spending habits and, in the process, threatens the financial security of young adults in Chennai. The quantitative findings and qualitative stories together emphasize the pivotal role of social comparison and peer pressure in influencing economic behavior in virtual environments.

DISCUSSION

First, the prevalence data indicated that close to three-quarters of the participants were in the high-to-moderate FOMO category, resonating with previous research by Przybylski et al. (2013) that posited that cyberspaces enhance experiences of exclusion and inadequacy. Yet, in the Chennai context, the fact that high FOMO is strongly linked to females and heavy Instagram usage (>3 hours/day) introduces a culturally situated twist. This indicates that gendered patterns of consumption—long understood in Indian consumer research—can perhaps be amplified by Instagram's visual, lifestyle-based interface. This is consistent with Arora & Agarwal (2021), who noted that Indian women were more likely to practice Instagram-influenced shopping behaviors, but our study expands this by tying it to explicit financial well-being outcomes.

Second, the drivers of impulsive spending—led by peer influence (36.25%) and influencer/advertisement effect (31.25%)—reflect that buying choices are ingrained in interpersonal relationships as well as online advertising practice. Peer pressure is highlighted in this research compared to Roberts & Pirog (2014), where the influence of advertising was higher than peer signs among U.S. students. This divergence highlights Indian society's collectivist orientation, with peer belonging and social approval being more critical in the shaping of economic behaviors. The interview quotes—"Even when I try to limit my spending, something always pops up on my feed…"—also underscore the effortless integration of peer norms and algorithmic advertising in facilitating impulsive buying.

Third, the high positive correlation between FOMO and spending on an impulsive lifestyle ($r = 0.64$, $p < .001$) lends force to the claim that FOMO is not an inactive affective state but rather an active motivator of financial choice. This corroborates Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, which asserts that people constantly compare themselves with others. Within the youth culture of Chennai, where exposure to international lifestyle trends exists alongside local customs, pressure to "keep up" translates into concrete economic actions like high rates of discretionary spending. The scatter plot and regression test indicate that those with high FOMO are substantially more likely to exceed the ₹3,000 monthly expenditure ceiling, providing quantitative confirmation of the psychological-financial connection.

Above all, mediation analysis offers a richer theoretical understanding: impulsive consumption largely explains the mechanism by which FOMO undermines financial well-being. Although FOMO directly adversely affected financial well-being, its indirect effect—mediated by impulsive consumption—was even greater ($\beta = -0.37$, $p < .01$). This confirms and extends findings by Kaur & Vig (2020), who also highlighted impulsivity as a mediator in the FOMO–financial stress link, but our study situates it within the unique socio-digital context of Chennai youth. The participant reflection— “FOMO makes me buy them, and then I’m stressed about money later”—captures the psychological strain of this cycle of desire and regret.

Together, these findings indicate that Instagram is more than a source of entertainment; it is a powerful system under which digital comparisons convert into financial pressure in the real world. In contrast to Western research, in which advertising or materialism itself is highlighted as the key issue, the Chennai example uncovers a rich dynamic interaction among collectivist peer influence, aspirational consumerism, and globalized digital culture. The results also highlight the imperative of combating these challenges through focused financial literacy interventions, culturally adapted awareness campaigns, and regulatory intervention in influencer-marketing.

SUGGESTIONS

Short-Term Interventions

1. Conduct awareness workshops on social media's effect on spending.
2. Promote digital tools like spending trackers and purchase "cool-down" features.
3. Encourage open conversations within families and peer groups.
4. Collaborate with influencers for transparent and ethical marketing.

Long-Term Interventions

1. Integrate financial education into school and college curricula.
2. Support longitudinal research on the long-term effects of social media use.
3. Advocate for regulatory interventions to assist young people.
4. Encourage the development of digital well-being features on social media platforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Young adults must cultivate mindful spending using a "cool-down" interval for discretionary buying and taking advantage of digital money tools such as spending monitors. They must also learn media literacy to effectively evaluate edited content from celebrities and be aware of the psychological cues underpinning web-based advertising. This process enables them to distinguish between authentic needs and thoughtless wants driven by the fear of missing out (FOMO). In addition, social media platforms and influencers must play their part by advertising ethical marketing practices, for example, clearly marking sponsored posts and depicting more genuine lifestyles. Platforms also need to have user-managed features that enable people to track their screen time and restrict exposure to targeted ads, hence blocking impulse triggers.

In order to have a long-term effect, policymakers and teachers need to incorporate financial literacy into school curricula and highlight the psychological dimensions of social comparison and peer-induced consumption. Instituting mass awareness programs that employ salient examples from Chennai youth can successfully bring out the connection between use of social media, FOMO, and financial struggles. Lastly, they should also fund prospective longitudinal studies to follow up the long-term consequences and effectiveness of interventions to enhance financial well-being in the new digital economy.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has brought to light the powerful and often detrimental "loop of desire and financial stress" that Instagram can create for Chennai's youth. The study's statistical findings, particularly the mediation model, confirm that impulsive spending is a key link between Instagram-driven FOMO and a decline in financial well-being. The insights from both the quantitative data and personal interviews underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, multi-faceted interventions. By focusing on smart financial education, platform accountability, and mental health awareness, we can empower young people to build a more secure and stable financial future. This study partially supports our hypotheses, identifying impulsive spending as a key pathway linking FOMO to lower financial well-being but also provides a clear roadmap for creating a healthier digital and financial landscape for the next generation. Unless conscious digital literacy measures are built, the next generation risks equating self-worth with consumption—an economy of endless scrolling and spending.

REFERENCES

1. Przybylski, A.K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C.R., & Gladwell, V. (2013) – *Motivational, Emotional, and Behavioral Correlates of Fear of Missing Out – Computers in Human Behavior*.
2. Dhir, A., Yossatorn, Y., Kaur, P., & Chen, S. (2018) – *Online Social Media Fatigue and Psychological Well-being—A Study of Indian Youth – International Journal of Information Management*.
3. Black, A. (2019) – *Materialism and Financial Well-being among Young Adults – Journal of Consumer Affairs*.
4. Abel, J.P., Buff, C.L., & Burr, S.A. (2016) – *Social Media and the Fear of Missing Out: Scale Development and Assessment – Journal of Business & Economics Research*.
5. Arora, S., & Agarwal, A. (2021) – *Instagram Usage, Impulsive Buying, and Financial Strain: An Indian Perspective – Indian Journal of Marketing Research*.
6. Roberts, J.A., & Pirog, S.F. (2014) – *A Preliminary Investigation of Materialism and Impulsive Buying in College Students – Journal of Consumer Marketing*.
7. Islam, T., Sheikh, Z., Hameed, Z., & Khan, I.U. (2018) – *Social Media and Impulsive Buying: An Empirical Study of Pakistani Consumers – Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*.
8. Zhou, L., & Wong, A. (2019) – *Exploring the Role of Peer Influence in Online Impulsive Buying – Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*.
9. Kaur, P., & Vig, S. (2020) – *The Mediating Role of Impulsive Buying Between Social Media Usage and Financial Well-being Among Youth – Journal of Behavioral Studies in Business*.
10. Gupta, R., & Sharma, M. (2021) – *The Impact of Social Media on Impulsive Buying Behavior Among Young Adults in India – Indian Journal of Marketing Research*.