Journal of Society and Management Studies (JSMS)
Volume 1| Issue 1 | June 2026
ISSN(online): 3102-0828
DOI: https://doi.org/10.68473/jsms.11.54

REVIEW ARTICLE

Fear of Missing Out, Instant Gratification, and Social Validation in Digital Marketing: A Systematic Thematic Review

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Abstract

Purpose: This conceptual paper explores the influence of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), instant gratification, and social validation on consumer behaviour in digital marketing environments.

Design/methodology/approach: The study employs a conceptual synthesis of existing theoretical and empirical literature through a systematic thematic review.

Findings: The review indicates that FOMO, instant gratification, and social validation are key psychological drivers of consumer behaviour in online marketing. FOMO creates urgency, while instant gratification and social validation encourage impulsive purchasing and peer-influenced decision-making, particularly among Generation Z. Recent empirical evidence (2024–2025) further confirms that FOMO mediates the relationship between social media marketing and consumers' purchase intentions for lifestyle, limited-edition, and discounted products.

Implications: Though short-term benefits are obvious, long-term psychological costs, such as compulsive buying and lower well-being, underline the need for ethical examination. The debate emphasises consequences for balanced marketing plans, stressing transparency and consumer protection in addition to persuasive effectiveness.

Originality/value: This study offers an integrated conceptual perspective on the interplay of FOMO, instant gratification, and social validation, providing valuable insights for marketers and policymakers to promote responsible digital marketing practices.

JEL Classification: D12, D91, M31, M37

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received on: March 12, 2026
Revised on: May 16, 2026
Accepted on: June 10, 2026

Keywords

FOMO, instant gratification, impulse buying, online marketing, social validation

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How to Cite (APA Style)

Ramachandran, R. (2026). Fear of missing out, instant gratification, and social validation in digital marketing: A systematic thematic review. *Journal of Society and Management Studies, 1*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.68473/jsms.11.54

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Introduction

In the contemporary digital economy, online marketing has evolved into a highly immersive, psychologically driven ecosystem in which consumer decisions are increasingly shaped in real time (Shakya & Karki, 2025). Platforms such as social media, e-commerce marketplaces, and live streaming environments are no longer passive channels of information but active architectures of influence that continuously stimulate consumer attention and behaviour. Within this landscape, three interrelated psychological mechanisms, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), instant gratification, and social validation, have emerged as central drivers of online consumer engagement and decision-making. These constructs are not only theoretically significant but also strategically embedded within digital marketing practices, enabling firms to influence consumer perceptions, accelerate purchase decisions, and enhance conversion outcomes.

FOMO, conceptualised by Przybylski et al. (2013) as a pervasive apprehension that others may be experiencing rewarding events in one's absence, represents a critical emotional and cognitive trigger in digital contexts. It reflects a deeper psychological need for belonging, inclusion, and participation, which is amplified by constant exposure to curated, real-time content on social media platforms. Unlike traditional forms of consumer anxiety, FOMO operates dynamically, driven by continuous connectivity and visibility into others' experiences. This phenomenon has been further expanded by Tandon et al. (2021), who emphasise its multidimensional nature, linking it to antecedents such as unmet psychological needs, social comparison tendencies, and technological immersion, as well as outcomes such as compulsive use, impulsive consumption, and diminished well-being. In online marketing, FOMO is deliberately activated through mechanisms such as limited-time offers, scarcity cues, countdown timers, and exclusive product releases, all of

which create a perceived urgency that compels immediate consumer action.

Complementing FOMO is the concept of instant gratification, which reflects the consumer's preference for immediate rewards over delayed benefits (Morsi et al., 2025). In digital environments, this tendency is significantly intensified by technological affordances that reduce friction in the purchasing process, including one-click transactions, personalised recommendations, and real-time notifications (Chandrasekhar et al., 2024). These features align closely with hedonic consumption motives, where the emphasis is placed on pleasure, excitement, and emotional satisfaction rather than rational evaluation. The temporal compression of decision-making processes, facilitated by ephemeral content such as stories and flash sales, further reinforces this behaviour by minimising perceived opportunity costs and encouraging rapid responses (Gupta, 2025). As a result, consumers are increasingly drawn into a cycle of immediate reward-seeking, where the speed of gratification becomes a defining characteristic of online consumption.

Social validation represents the third critical mechanism, operating through the human need for approval, recognition, and social belonging. In digital marketing contexts, this is manifested through social proof elements such as user reviews, ratings, influencer endorsements, live viewership counts, and visible engagement metrics (Sanak-Kosmowska, 2021). These signals serve to reduce uncertainty and perceived risk, reassuring consumers that their choices are aligned with collective preferences. More importantly, social validation interacts synergistically with FOMO, as the visibility of others' participation intensifies the fear of exclusion and reinforces the urgency to conform (Nesbit & Lole, 2025). This interplay creates a powerful behavioural loop in which consumers are not only motivated by personal desires but also by the perceived expectations and actions of others.

The convergence of FOMO, instant gratification, and social validation is particularly evident in emerging digital marketing formats such as social commerce and live streaming commerce (Zhang & Rosli, 2025). These platforms integrate real-time interaction, influencer presence, and immediate purchasing capabilities, creating an environment where psychological triggers are continuously activated and reinforced. Consumers are exposed to live demonstrations, limited-time deals, and visible audience engagement, all of which collectively compress decision timelines and encourage impulsive buying behaviour (Kathuria & Bakshi, 2024).

This phenomenon is further amplified in product categories characterised by high symbolic or social value, such as fashion, lifestyle goods, and luxury items, where conformity and trend participation play a significant role in consumption decisions. While these psychological mechanisms provide marketers with highly effective tools for driving engagement, conversion, and revenue growth, they also raise important ethical and societal concerns. The same strategies that enhance marketing performance may contribute to negative consumer outcomes, including impulsive spending, financial strain, post-purchase regret, and reduced psychological well-being. The normalisation of urgency-driven and socially influenced consumption patterns emphasises the need for a more balanced and responsible approach to digital marketing practices.

Against this backdrop, the present study offers a comprehensive conceptual perspective on the interplay of FOMO, instant gratification, and social validation in online marketing. By synthesising existing theoretical and empirical literature, the study aims to develop a critical understanding of how these psychological mechanisms interact to shape consumer behaviour across digital platforms. Furthermore, it explores their implications for marketing strategy, consumer welfare, and future research, thereby contributing to the advancement of knowledge in both marketing and consumer psychology domains.

Research Methods

The study adopts a systematic and thematic literature review combined with conceptual synthesis to integrate the emerging constructs of FOMO, instant gratification, and social validation within the domain of online marketing. To ensure methodological rigor and relevance, only peer-reviewed journal articles, high-quality conference proceedings, and authoritative reports published between 2015 and 2026 were included. Foundational studies published before 2015 were selectively incorporated where they contributed to theoretical grounding. Non-peer-reviewed studies that lacked empirical or conceptual rigor, or were not situated within digital or online contexts, were excluded to maintain analytical precision.

A comprehensive search was conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and SSRN, to ensure breadth and depth of coverage. The search strategy employed a combination of keywords such as "FOMO," "instant gratification," "social validation," "online marketing," "social media engagement," "impulse buying," "live streaming commerce," and "scarcity," allowing for the identification of multidisciplinary insights. Retrieved studies were systematically screened and coded based on core constructs, behavioural outcomes, platform contexts, and underlying theoretical frameworks.

The thematic analysis facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and relationships among psychological drivers, technological affordances, and consumer behavioural responses. Conceptual synthesis was further employed to cluster interrelated themes and develop a coherent network of linkages between antecedents, mediators, and outcomes in digital consumption behaviour. This methodological approach is particularly appropriate for a conceptual inquiry as it enables the consolidation of fragmented empirical evidence into an integrative framework while simultaneously uncovering research gaps and advancing future scholarly directions.

Theoretical Foundations

FOMO, instant gratification, and social validation operate as interrelated psychological mechanisms in digital marketing, influencing consumer behaviour by appealing to fundamental human needs for social belonging, immediate gratification, and timely decision-making. They are often supported in this by real-time features and platform algorithms. This enhances short-term engagement and sales but also fosters compulsive behaviours and undermines consumer autonomy (Hussain et al., 2023; Morsi et al., 2025).

Table 1. Theoretical Contributions Comparison – Uses and Gratifications (U&G), Regret Avoidance, and Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Theory	Core Principle	Mechanism Explaining FOMO/ Instant Gratification/Social Validation	Marketing Application Example	Key outcomes
Uses and Gratifications	People actively select media to satisfy needs	Entertainment, social interaction, monitoring others à engagement	Content offerings: likes, shares, or comments	Higher platform engagement, social validation
Regret Avoidance	People act to avoid future regret	Limited-time offers, scarcity, social proof	Flash sales, trending products	Impulsive purchases, FOMO-driven behaviour
Self-Determination Theory (SDT)	Autonomy, competence, relatedness	Unmet relatednessà FOMO	Influencer campaigns, community groups	Temporary social satisfaction, trend conformity
Social Comparison Theory	Evaluate via comparison with others	Comparing peers drives social validation	User-generated content campaigns, public metrics	Increased engagement, envy-induced activity
Behavioural Economics	Cognitive biases affect decisions	Hyperbolic discounting à Instant gratification	Limited offers, reward points	Impulsive buying, repeated engagement
Psychological Ownership	Feeling of ownership drives behaviour	Perceived personal stake à attachment and sharing	Pre-orders, beta-testing, and exclusive access	Loyalty, advocacy, and content sharing

Note. Compiled by the author based on Davidai and Gilovich (2018), Whiting and Williams (2013), and Ryan and Deci (2000), and integrated critiques from Gupta and Sharma (2021) and Kang et al. (2020).

How FOMO Drives Urgency

FOMO induces urgency by triggering anticipatory anxiety regarding exclusion from enjoyable events, exacerbated by social media's real-time updating. As customers view inactivity as damaging to social standing (Platon, 2024), this urgency shows itself in quick reactions to time-limited events. Scarcity signals—countdown timers or restricted stock notifications- increase this by implying possible regret and so spur immediate action to guarantee inclusion (Rodrigues, 2025).

A comprehensive meta-analysis of 416 effect sizes across 131 studies confirms that scarcity cues generally enhance purchase intentions, with demand-based scarcity (e.g., "limited stock" signals) proving most effective for utilitarian products, supply-based for experiential items, and time-based for high-involvement purchases (Barton et al., 2022).

Dopamine, the neurotransmitter linked with pleasure and reward expectation, is highly correlated with fast gratification. Similar to gaming systems, the erratic likes, comments, or alerts of social media's variable reward schedules set off dopamine rushes that promote obsessive involvement (Kang et al., 2020). Flash sales and live streams in marketing provide instant benefits, satisfying wants for excitement and fulfilment without delay.

Ephemeral material further sharpens this as vanishing chances force immediate replies to prevent loss (Mavilinda et al., 2025). Encouragement of impulse buying, in which the hit from obtaining a popular item outweighs logical decision-making (Aliyev, 2024).

Likes, shares, and comments help one to get social validation since they function as digital acknowledgements of value and inclusion. These metrics offer instant social proof, meeting needs for relatedness under SDT and providing satisfaction through apparent approval. FOMO exacerbates this, and, in live streaming or social commerce, real-time viewer counts and interactions magnify this, transforming validation into a motivator of consumption to signify status and inclusion. FOMO-driven urgency seeks immediate rewards, which is reinforced by social validation, moulding online consumer behaviour.

Critically, while regret avoidance effectively explains urgency, it overlooks cultural variations in collectivist societies where social validation amplifies herd behaviour more than individual regret (Kang et al., 2020).

To synthesise the interplay of these mechanisms, Figure 1 presents an integrative conceptual model.

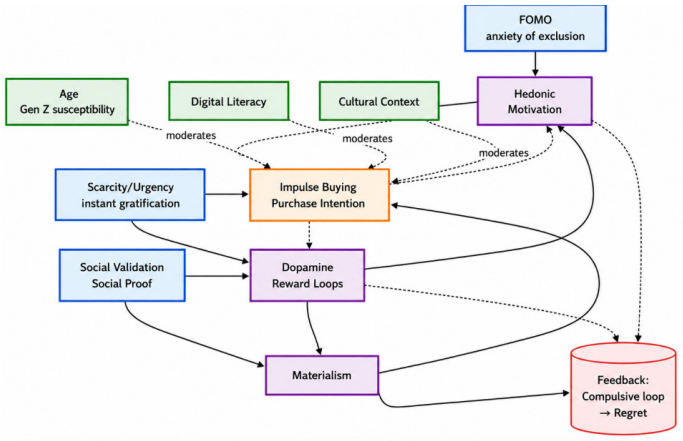


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of FOMO, Instant Gratification, and Social Validation in Driving Online Impulse Buying

This model fills in cross-sectional studies' flaws by including dopamine-mediated loops and cultural moderators, therefore extending earlier frameworks (for example, Gupta & Sharma, 2021).

Instant Gratification and Social Validation Mechanisms

Instantaneous pleasure and social approval, the primary driving forces behind modern online marketing, synergistically work with FOMO to speed consumer judgments. Passive surfing becomes active buying via these techniques, which use social needs and neurological rewards.

Artificial time pressure produced by scarcity and urgency tactics, including push notifications, countdown timers, limited-stock alerts, and flash sales, magnifies sensed loss aversion. Often promoted using limited-time-only messaging, flash sales would cause fast responses by suggesting that delay means lifelong exclusion from a desired result (Rodrigues, 2025).

Real-time indications from notifications bring users back to platforms and inspire quick action to make the most of brief chances. Particularly in e-commerce and social commerce, where one-click buying lowers friction (Aliyev, 2024), these techniques take advantage of the brain's liking for fast rewards and so shorten deliberation time and encourage impulse purchases.

Visible endorsements that convince customers of wise decisions help to provide social proof and validation. Communal approval is provided by influencer endorsements, verified blue ticks, user reviews, live viewer counts, and shareable testimonials, addressing the inherent need for belonging and lowering perceived risk.

In live streaming, real-time interactions, such as comments, likes, and joint purchases, heighten this effect as viewers see other people's enthusiasm and feel impelled to join for inclusion.

A dual-stage SEM-ANN analysis reveals that parasocial interaction, vicarious experience, scarcity persuasion, and price perception in live streaming drive cognitive and affective reactions, leading to strong impulsive buying tendencies among consumers (Lo et al., 2022).

Applying the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) framework to live-streaming commerce, information quality, social presence, and financial bonds on platforms significantly shape consumers' internal states, ultimately promoting impulsive buying through heightened emotional and cognitive responses (Chung et al., 2025).

From an SOR perspective, stimulus factors in live-streaming shopping, such as platform interactivity, visual appeal, and promotional cues, elicit organism-level responses (e.g., pleasure and arousal) that directly trigger impulse buying behaviours among viewers (Lin et al., 2023).

Promoting replication to build equivalent social capital, blue ticks indicate trustworthiness and influencer credibility. Among younger customers like Gen Z and millennials, whose increased vulnerability comes from frequent social media exposure and developmental emphasis on peer acceptance, these aspects are intimately linked to impulsive and compulsive behaviours.

Young consumers, exposed to endless comparison, seek quick pleasure through purchases that provide an immediate emotional boost, whether from obtaining popular products or getting likes/shares post-purchase (Hanushya & Mitra, 2025).

Compulsive behaviours develop when seeking validation becomes ingrained, which causes continual checking and purchasing to reduce anxiety or preserve social relevance. Limited drops, fashion, and lifestyle items are often targets for impulsive buying in this population since social validation through peer or influencer action overrides logical analysis (Kang et al., 2020).

Low financial literacy worsens vulnerability since strong campaigns take advantage of emotional triggers over long-term effects (Ayyasy et al., 2025). While social proof gives the pull of belonging, scarcity/urgency provides the push toward immediacy, generating a strong cycle that boosts short-term sales but threatens to promote dependency on external validation and incentives.

Empirical Evidence and Recent Trends

A critical examination reveals methodological limitations in recent empirical research (2024–2025), highlighting FOMO's function in propelling engagement and purchases across venues. These studies, with an emphasis on Gen Z and emerging live-streaming mediums, confirm heightened vulnerability among Gen Z (Habib & Almamy, 2025; Hanushya & Mitra, 2025). But critical analysis limits generalisability, as it shows over-reliance on Asian samples and self-reported data (Samsura & Rufaidah, 2025).

Few studies establish causality or examine long-term financial harm. This echoes earlier syntheses highlighting the need for broader, longitudinal approaches to FOMO's impacts (Tandon et al., 2021). Table 2 summarises the recent key empirical studies on FOMO in digital marketing.

Table 2. Summary of Key Empirical Studies (2023–2025) on FOMO in Digital Marketing

Study	Journal	Context	Sample	Key Findings	Critical Limitations
Morsi et al. (2025)	Business Horizons	FOMO appeals in general marketing	57 qualitative interviews (FOMO -prone consumers)	FOMO triggers post-purchase regret, financial strain, and brand avoidance	Small sample; Western bias possible
Eitan and Naor (2025)	International Journal of Consumer Studies	FOMO vs. JoMO on Facebook	Content analysis (1,372 posts) + 20 interviews	FOMO drives short-term engagement but erodes trust; JoMO builds loyalty	Focus on organic posts only
Habib and Almamy (2025)	Journal of Innovative Digital Transformation	Social media marketing and lifestyle products	Survey (India)	FOMO mediates SMM → purchase intention	Cross-sectional; cultural specificity
Barbu et al. (2025)	Journal of Media	Young adults and compulsive buying	Correlational survey	FOMO + notifications → shopping motivation	Self-report bias; no longitudinal data
Ngo et al. (2025)	Acta Psychologica	TikTok Shop impulse buying	Vietnamese users	Scarcity + social influence → arousal → impulse via FOMO	Emerging market focus

Note. Compiled by the author

Table 2 highlights the dual-edged nature of the existing evidence, demonstrating strong short-term effects while revealing persistent methodological limitations, particularly the predominance of cross-sectional designs and limited capacity for causal inference. Future research should prioritise experimental and longitudinal designs, along with more diverse and representative samples, to strengthen the robustness and generalisability of findings. For example, exposure to influencer content and limited-edition product releases has been shown to trigger herd behaviour and impulsive purchasing, particularly in the apparel and lifestyle sectors (Hanushya & Mitra, 2025). Through real-time social proof, audience numbers, comments, and host performances, livestreaming strengthens this, as FOMO moderates the relationship between platform features and purchase intent. Research on sites like TikTok Shop indicates how short videos use emergency cues together with pleasure to increase emotional arousal and unplanned purchases (Habib & Almamy, 2025).

Doan et al. (2023), quoting TikTok research, find that FOMO positively influences flow experience, which significantly drives impulse purchases, although FOMO does not directly predict buying behaviour without the mediating role of immersion and enjoyment.

Kang et al. (2020) find evidence from cross-cultural studies to back these trends, showing that social approval increases FOMO's influence on conformity consumption in collectivist settings, usually alongside materialism or hedonic motivation (Christin et al., 2025). Mediation studies always place FOMO as a bridge from social media involvement to purchase intention.

Ethical issues become more important among these developments. FOMO marketing increases conversions but also raises issues about exploitation, especially of young customers with poor financial literacy and impulse control.

Morsi et al. (2025) found that marketing techniques creating false urgency or artificial scarcity can lead to consumer regret, financial strain, and diminished well-being. Similarly, Enginkaya and Sağlam (2025) argued that such practices border on deception by prioritising commercial gains over consumer autonomy and long-term well-being. Consequently, transparent promotional practices, balanced marketing communication, and financial literacy initiatives are essential for fostering responsible marketing and mitigating these adverse effects. Collectively, these findings reflect the evolution of the field from simple correlational analyses toward more sophisticated models that incorporate platform-specific dynamics and demographic moderators.

Discussion

The thematic synthesis reveals that FOMO creates urgency that instant gratification fulfils through low-friction digital nudges, while social validation (via likes, shares, and live metrics) reduces perceived risk and encourages conformity. This integration strongly predicts impulsive purchasing and consumer engagement. However, it may also contribute to diminished well-being, financial strain, and post-purchase regret, particularly among Generation Z consumers with lower levels of financial literacy. Key behavioural results are driven by this synergy are impulsive purchases, increased participation, short-term loyalty, and sharing or advocacy behaviour. Marketing methods used are Platform nudges, gamification, influencer endorsements, scarcity techniques, and social proof.

Strong evidence indicates their connection to short-term sales increases, but there are always gaps in longitudinal data, causality, and ethical effects on vulnerable populations. Patterns point to excessive reliance on self-reported assessments and cross-sectional Asian samples.

Theoretically, the results build on Uses and Gratifications Theory (active need satisfaction), Regret Avoidance (urgency via expected loss), and Self-Determination Theory (frustrated relatedness) by including viewpoints from both behavioural economics (loss aversion, herd behaviour)

and neurological (dopamine) domains. Platform-specific dynamics and cultural moderators underline neglected aspects frequently disregarded in earlier models.

Practically, these methods boost short-term results but also raise ethical issues about influencing sensitive groups. Harm may be reduced without compromising efficiency by means of transparency and balanced methods, including JoMO components (Eitan & Naor, 2025).

Conclusion and Implications

FOMO, instant gratification, and social validation combine to create strong psychological powers in internet marketing that turn digital spaces into high-stakes settings of urgency and belonging. While social proof, through influencers, likes, and community measures, validates decisions and reduces exclusion concerns, scarcity techniques and real-time notifications encourage instant action by providing quick rewards. This synergy, especially among young consumers on social commerce and livestream channels, propels herd consumption, impulse buying, and engagement spikes.

Marketers successfully use these methods to improve short-term performance. But the emotional economics expose trade-offs, as elevated sales usually bring sensitive consumers remorse, anxiety, and decreased well-being.

Critically, transparent, value-aligned approaches can preserve loyalty and trust without taking advantage of weaknesses; persuasion and ethics must be balanced. These events mirror larger digital-age conflicts between autonomy and connection in essence. Knowing the psychological roots of platforms helps stakeholders to promote more wholesome relationships as they develop. Future studies should give responsible innovation, customer empowerment, and longitudinal insight top priority so as to guarantee marketing uses human motivations without sacrificing financial and mental health. Ultimately, in an increasingly regulated digital landscape, balancing persuasion with ethics, through hybrid FOMO/JoMO strategies, will sustain consumer trust.

FOMO, immediate pleasure, and social validation's interaction provide marketers with strong tools but call for deliberate implementation. Recommended ethical strategies include "JoMO-balanced" campaigns (Eitan & Naor, 2025) and transparency disclaimers on scarcity. Targeted scarcity in flash sales, genuine influencer collaborations for validation, and real-time engagement in livestreams help one to use urgency without deception as effective techniques. By matching techniques with audience psychology, e.g., limited drops for trend-sensitive Gen Z, brands can maximise conversions and watch for overexploitation.

Implications for consumer protection include regulatory examination of false urgency claims and platform features that magnify addictive loops. According to Morsi et al. (2025), training on digital literacy and conscious consumption could help consumers to resist impulsive impulses to lower financial stress and remorse.

In addition to its methodological limitations, the existing literature exhibits a publication bias favouring positive marketing outcomes and gives limited attention to the ethical exploitation of consumers with low financial literacy; cultural generalisability remains weak.

Future research should prioritise longitudinal and experimental studies to establish causal relationships and assess the long-term effects of FOMO-driven marketing strategies. Key research directions include examining how AI-driven personalised FOMO influences long-term financial behaviour and debt among Generation Z consumers, whether digital literacy interventions can moderate these effects, and the comparative effectiveness of JoMO and FOMO-based marketing campaigns. Experimental studies evaluating interventions, such as digital detox programs and ethical marketing strategies, would provide valuable evidence for mitigating adverse consumer outcomes. Furthermore, emerging trends in AI-powered personalisation and immersive commerce warrant greater scholarly attention to understand new manifestations of FOMO. Integrating perspectives from neuroscience, ethics, and consumer psychology could further advance the development of sustainable and responsible digital marketing models.

Acknowledgement

The authors express their sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions who facilitated the preparation of this research article.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

The author declares having obtained no external source of funding for the research.

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Disclosure of AI Use

The author used AI-based tools, including Grammarly for grammar checking and language refinement, and paraphrasing tools such as QuillBot to improve clarity and readability. These tools were used solely for linguistic enhancement. No generative AI tools were used to create original content, develop ideas, or conduct any part of the study. The author retains full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the manuscript.