

How Brands Utilize the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) as an Advertising Tactic

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I. Introduction to the Concept of FOMO

In 2000, marketing strategist Dan Herman published an article in *The Journal of Brand Management* explaining a “fear of missing out” as a motivation behind certain consumer behaviors and thus certain marketing methods (Herman, 332). For the past two decades, this term has grown to not only describe a type of advertising tactic but to represent an entire genre of marketing with dominance primarily across various social media platforms. The prevalence of this experience has increased so significantly that many major dictionary publishers, including Oxford, Merriam Webster, and Dictionary.com list FOMO as an official defined term. Oxford English Dictionary defines FOMO as: “anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may currently be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on social media.” (OED.com).

Social media does indeed play a prominent role in the way FOMO presents itself in society. Many marketers and organizations utilize the basic concepts of a fear appeal to produce advertising campaigns aimed at creating feelings of FOMO within consumers. Social media is an increasingly prevalent form of communication: not just for individuals to communicate with other individuals, but for corporations and brands to communicate with individuals. Hootsuite’s Digital 2021 reports that as of January 2021, there are 4.2 billion social media users worldwide; this figure has grown by more than 13% in the last 12 months (Hootsuite). Social media usage is rapidly catching up to more traditional forms of entertainment, such as television and broadcast radio. Hootsuite’s report states the average amount of time spent watching television for people ages 16-64 was 3 hours and 24 minutes per day. According to the same report, the average time the same group spent on social media per day was 2 hours and 25 minutes.

The way in which advertisers communicate with consumers is changing to reflect these trends. According to a 2020 report published by Kantar, a leading data and insights company,

U.S. advertisers spent \$7.2 billion on advertising in the second quarter of 2020, and 21.3% of all industry spending during this period went to Facebook and Instagram (Kantar.com). Advertisers are taking advantage of the growing popularity of social media and using these platforms to market to consumers. Due to the interactive nature of social media platforms, this effectively changes the ways in which advertisements affect consumers. Advertisers utilize the concept of FOMO to sell products and services to consumers based on a fear appeal. A prevalent fear marketers try to exploit is fear of a social nature. Social media does an excellent job of letting consumers know who is doing what – when, where, and with whom. This makes it an excellent breeding ground for FOMO to arise within users as they see all that is going on within their inner circles and within the world – it allows them to see all they are missing out on.

This thesis aims to evaluate the effectiveness of FOMO as a marketing tactic across different forms of advertisements. This paper will examine advertisements posted by public figures and influencers in collaboration with companies and brands through paid partnerships on social media.

II. Major Sections of Findings

FOMO is used by advertisers to market brands and products to consumers by eliciting a fear response in the consumer. The type of fear is typically social – i.e., a fear of not being included or accepted by a certain group. This thesis will primarily focus on instances of FOMO on social media as well as its effectiveness. However, this tactic is used in various other forms of advertising media. Many television commercials strive to create a sense of urgency surrounding certain sales on products and services in order to drive consumers to make a purchase. Despite the growing popularity of social media – and the decline of teens and millennials watching television – the NFL Super Bowl still remains the largest advertising opportunity for brands.

Advertisers try to tap into the FOMO effect by previewing teasers of their upcoming ads in order to generate greater buzz surrounding the event and their brands. This strategy utilizes FOMO by conveying the idea that the debuts of these commercials – often star-studded with A-list celebrities – are just as unmissable as the big game itself. As Smith School marketing professor Henry C. Boyd III describes it: “No one wants to be left out of the watercooler talk on Monday morning.” (WAMU.com).

Although television ads – primarily during live events such as sports games and awards shows – are still huge revenue generators in terms of advertising dollars, there is no question that the ways in which companies communicate with consumers are changing. According to a 2018 report from MarketingCharts, those aged 18-34 watch about 40% less traditional television than they did five years ago (MarketingCharts.com). Whereas social media advertising may have been a supplemental strategy for brands at the start of the decade, it is now one of the primary ways in which companies market to their target audiences.

In his 2000 article in *The Journal of Brand Management*, Dan Herman described that he first identified the concept of FOMO in the 1990s (Herman, 331). While describing an emerging trend of consumers preferring new brands rather than existing brands, he provided the phrases “long-term brands” and “short-term brands,” stating that marketers must change their behaviors and plan for a “limited life expectancy” of their brands (Herman, 332). He cited a possible cause of this phenomenon to be a “new basic motivation” in consumers: an “ambition to exhaust all possibilities and the fear of missing out on something.” Thus, the idea of FOMO as an advertising tactic as we know it today was introduced. This concept was largely unfamiliar within the context of marketing at that point in time, mainly due to the fact that most advertisers hoped and planned for their brands to last for long periods of time. The concept that consumers

may jump quickly from one brand or product to another rather than display loyalty to brands they know and love was a novel idea. The “fear of missing out” did a considerable job explaining this trend, as FOMO has presented itself in other ways throughout history. The concept “Keeping up with the Joneses” has been around since as early as 1913, when a comic strip of the same name by Arthur R. Momand began running in *The New York World* (Reagle). Keeping up with the Joneses refers to the idea that consumers are aware of their social and economic status compared to their peers and thus may engage in conspicuous consumption to publicly display their wealth or buying power. The rise of materialism in the 20th century United States may be at least partially attributed to the Keeping up with the Joneses effect (Reagle). Mass production significantly increased the number of goods available to consumers and triggered a subsequent shift in the advertising industry that focused on selling to consumers.

FOMO makes for an effective advertising strategy because of the powerful psychological and even physical effects that can be associated with the experience. According to a 2019 study, FOMO is closely related to experiencing physical symptoms such as increased stress levels, fatigue, and sleep problems (Hope, Koestner, Milyavskaya, and Saffran). Psychological symptoms commonly associated with FOMO include depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Hope, Koestner, Milyavskaya, and Saffran). Furthermore, a 2020 study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* found that limiting social media usage to less than ten minutes per day for three weeks decreased depressive symptoms and loneliness significantly (Brown and Kuss). This research also suggested that participants with higher social media usage felt more isolated and that offline relationships promote higher mental well-being than online relationships (Brown and Kuss). Ultimately, this research – along with similar research that has been published within the last five years – points to the conclusion that higher

rates of social media usage led to higher rates of FOMO, and higher rates of FOMO lead to loneliness and other depressive symptoms. Corporations and brands capitalize on this by curating posts and advertisements that actively seek to trigger FOMO within the consumer. These feelings can only be absolved by participating in the activity that would make the consumers feel as if they are part of the in-group rather than the out-group: whether that be by purchasing a product, subscribing to a service, or attending an event.

III. Ways FOMO is Used in Advertising

FOMO is used in advertising as a way for companies and brands to create a fear appeal to the consumer. Rather than establish a fear that the consumer's physical well-being is in danger, FOMO creates a social anxiety. The fear that an individual might be left out of anything – i.e., a particular trend – is somewhat analogous to the fear that the individual will become part of the out-group. In psychology, the in-group is the group with which an individual identifies, and the out-group is a group the individual does not associate with or wish to associate with (UTexas.edu). This fear has deep psychological roots in the idea that being a member of the out-group rather than the in-group will lead to loneliness, depression, or even have a detrimental effect on one's physical well-being. The need to be accepted within society is not a novel idea, and the modern concept of FOMO is simply an evolved version of this basic fear and the need to be a member of the in-group.

When an individual incorporates a brand, product, or service so profoundly into their persona or aesthetic that it becomes a part of their identity, this is known as self-signaling (CNBC.com). Some companies try to establish their brand as more than just a product or service: they want their brand to be considered so necessary to the consumer that it becomes part of their identity. This strategy creates brand loyalty and allows the company to differentiate itself from

competitors and potentially achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. For example, Apple's advertising strategy is quite different from its main competitors. In 2019 when the iPhone 12 was announced, 80% of Americans already owned a smartphone, and 900 million active smartphones across the globe were iPhones (CNBC.com). Yet, 2 million people preordered the iPhone 12 within the first 24 hours of the new model being announced. Apple has established and maintained a brand loyalty so strong that it transcends simply choosing the iPhone over Samsung's Galaxy; Apple customers jump at the chance to buy the newest iPhone before it has even been released and reviewed. Apple drives the urgency surrounding a new iPhone release by cultivating a fear of missing out amongst consumers.

By continually adding new features to each iPhone model, Apple perpetuates the idea that consumers will miss out on certain experiences by not picking up a new iPhone as soon as it comes out. For example, the iPhone 4, which was released in 2011, debuted the front-facing camera: a standard feature on today's smartphones. With this feature came the popularity of the "selfie," made possible only by the front-facing camera. Similarly, the iPhone X introduced the "Animoji," a cartoon avatar that users can customize to resemble themselves. The facial recognition technology in this iPhone enabled users to record videos of themselves speaking as their customized avatar or as a variety of cartoon animals modeled after Apple's emojis. While this specific feature on its own may not be enough to convince users to upgrade to the iPhone X, it certainly acted as a device for FOMO. As iPhone X users began sending and sharing their Animoji creations, consumers with older iPhone models – or non-Apple competitor models – could not participate in this trend and thus missed out. Apple does a remarkable job of creating social experiences that tie into the actual functionality of its products, and thereby marketing

through a social fear in addition to marketing high-quality products. This strategy has allowed Apple to remain at the top of the U.S. smartphone industry, despite its high prices.

Companies that do not sell physical products are also capable of creating a social experience around their services. Spotify's annual Wrapped campaign serves as an excellent example of this. Every year in December, Spotify presents users with a breakdown of several data points related to their account. These statistics inform users what their most-listened-to songs, albums, and artists of the year were. They even tell users how many times they played their top five songs and how many minutes they spent listening to their favorite artists. The most brilliant part of the Wrapped campaign is the addition of the "share" action button, giving users the option to share their personalized stats with friends via Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. As users begin to share their Wrapped statistics on their social media channels, their friends and followers notice the trend of sharing their statistics and may start to do the same. As Spotify global head of consumer marketing put it: "This also creates this FOMO effect that happens and that inherently entices new users to consider Spotify." (Zhang, 2020).

Scarcity is also used to create FOMO. Brands advertise limited-time offers or one-day-only sales as a way to increase urgency around the purchase and ultimately develop a fear of missing out within the consumer. Advertising that there are "only a few left in stock" conveys to the consumer that (a) this popular product is selling rapidly, and (b) therefore, the possibility exists that the consumer may miss out on the opportunity to buy the product for themselves. Apple does an excellent job of accomplishing this, as well. Encouraging preorders of new iPhone models as soon as they are announced and lines that wrap around malls and on busy streets communicate that this product is scarce, and consumers should snag it quickly lest they be left out. Online retailers such as Amazon and eBay have also been known to utilize these tactics;

while viewing an item, the screen will display a message that reads “Only _ left in stock!” which tells consumers that there is scarcity. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, for consumers to verify the validity of these statements.

As they do with any well-constructed fear appeal, advertisers utilize the experience of FOMO within consumers by offering a solution to avoid or overcome the FOMO. Usually, this entails buying a product or service or otherwise patronizing a brand. In order to instill the fear of missing out within the consumer, advertisers must first establish that their brand or product is worth not “missing out” on. Advertisers may accomplish this through establishing social proof: the idea that individuals mimic the actions of others – if others are behaving a certain way, people often assume that this must be the “correct” behavior (Abdul Talib and Mat Saat). Advertisers must relay to the consumer that purchasing their product or service is what others are doing, and thus the individual will be compelled to copy this behavior. Advertisers accomplish this in a variety of ways: creating a sense of urgency around sales or promotions (i.e., “Only a few left in stock!”) or establishing strong, long-lasting brand loyalty (i.e., Apple has high brand loyalty that allows it to charge a premium price for iPhones). Another way in which brands may take advantage of the concept of social proof is by collaborating with celebrities, public figures, or well-known social media “influencers” to promote their brands or products.

Social proof is demonstrated on social media through metrics such as likes, comments, follows, and views. Influencers – bloggers who have obtained a large enough social media following to collaborate with brands via paid partnerships – and public figures bring social proof through the high number of engagements their social media posts gather. Influencers are called “influencers” for a reason: their thousands or even millions of followers and subscribers are exposed to whatever content they post and recommend. Brands that seek to appeal to their target

audiences through social proof will often partner with an influencer or celebrity with millions of followers in order to provide the brand or product with more credibility. Seeing a brand associated with someone who is liked, trusted, or respected in online social circles lends the credibility needed in order to instill the desired effect of FOMO within consumers. Gainesville-based fashion blogger Kristin Pressley promotes hair care products in a sponsored partnership with the brand Hairfood in this post:



This illustrates how a brand can utilize an influencer with a large following – over 300,000 followers at the time of posting – who already posts about content related to the brand – fashion, beauty, and lifestyle – and curate content that is both original and persuasive to the consumer.

A social fear appeal through the establishment of FOMO creates a need to resolve the feeling of FOMO through whatever means is advertised to the consumer. This method is most effective when the consumer is unaware that a fear is being established deliberately. Once the

consumer realizes that the advertiser is actively trying to establish a feeling of fear, the corresponding effects become less significant. Consumers are more easily persuaded to change their behaviors when they are not fully aware that they are being persuaded to do so. In partnering with an already established and trusted public figure or social media influencer, a brand is able to create feelings of FOMO in a more subtle way. As Instagram users scroll through their newsfeeds, they are not seeing an advertisement from a company's official account: they see someone they like and trust recommending a product or service. Of course, this is still an advertisement. The consumer may even be aware that it is an advertisement – especially since law now requires influencers and public figures to disclose that they are being paid to advertise a product or service (Federal Trade Commission). However, this form of advertising is still more nuanced than an old-fashioned television commercial or magazine ad. An Instagram influencer's profile is filled with a mixture of original, non-sponsored content and paid partnerships with brands. When a consumer sees an aforementioned paid partnership amongst non-sponsored content, it is not as glaringly obvious that a brand is trying to sell something to them on Instagram. Additionally, this content is usually unique and created, at least in part, by the influencer themselves.

An influencer posing in their own home – which many of their followers have most likely seen before in prior posts – with the products being advertised comes off as a natural, non-sponsored product recommendation. Many influencers start out as bloggers – sharing tips and tricks for various content ranging from home and lifestyle to fashion and beauty, to hiking and other outdoor activities. These curated posts that brands pay social media influencers to create and share with their followers give brands the social proof they are looking for. Seeing a liked

and respected public figure recommend a product or service is more effective at creating a sense of FOMO than traditional advertisements.

IV. Content Analysis

The following content analysis aims to examine the relationship between paid partnerships of brands and social media influencers and FOMO. The analysis consists of 15 Instagram posts from various individuals and influencers. This study seeks to discover whether or not a FOMO appeal is elicited in posts wherein an established social media influencer collaborates with a brand in order to sell or promote products or services.

Method of Content Selection

The posts included in this content analysis were chosen from Instagram's "discover" page. This page suggests posts based on an algorithm that presents users with posts related to other posts they have previously interacted with. After purposefully following and interacting with accounts of prominent Instagram influencers and lifestyle bloggers, Instagram's discover page suggested similar posts. In order to be selected, the posts had to (a) originate from the account of an individual person, not a brand or organization, and (b) appear to be selling or promoting a product, brand, or service. Fifteen posts from Instagram's discover page that fit these criteria were randomly chosen for this study.

Coding Scheme

Instagram posts were coded for the following categories: (1) date created, (2) post URL, (3) number of post likes, (4) number of total post interactions, (5) source of post, (6) visual content of post, (7) who or what is featured in the post, (8) whether or not the post's caption contains the phrase "FOMO," (9) the objective of the post, (10) the role of FOMO within the post, (11) how FOMO is characterized, and (12) how central FOMO is to the post. The analysis then seeks to

FOMO mentioned?	Includes #FOMO	Tense			Objective				None
		Past	Present	Future	Promotional	Descriptive	Persuasive	Call-to-Action	
					1				
									1
									1
									1
					1				
					1				
					1				
									1
									1
									1
									1
						1			
									1
									1
									1

FOMO Role	FOMO Characterization				FOMO Centrality			Fear-Eliciting?			
	Persuasive To Concept itself	Experiencing it	Avoiding it	Threatening it	Ironical reference	Headline?	Central	Incidental	Strong	Weak	None
1			1						1		1
1			1					1		1	
1			1					1		1	
1				1				1			1
1			1					1			1
1				1				1		1	
1				1				1		1	
1				1				1		1	
1				1				1		1	
1			1					1		1	
1				1				1		1	
1				1				1		1	
1			1					1		1	
1				1				1		1	
1			1					1			1
1			1					1			1

Did you "feel" FOMO as you viewed the post?	Why or why not?
Yes	I did not want to miss out the product
Yes	The sale was limited time/ending soon
Yes	The sale was limited time/ending soon
Yes	The sale was limited time/ending soon
Yes	I did not want to miss out the product
Yes	I did not want to miss out the product
Yes	The sale was limited time/ending soon
Yes	The sale was limited time/ending soon
Yes	The sale was limited time/ending soon
Yes	The sale was limited time/ending soon
Yes	The sale was limited time/ending soon
Yes	The sale was limited time/ending soon
Yes	The sale was limited time/ending soon
Yes	The sale was limited time/ending soon
Yes	I did not want to miss out the product
Yes	I did not want to miss out the product

Analysis

The data show a strong trend between visual content, the role of FOMO, and whether or not FOMO was felt as the post was viewed. 11 out of the 15 posts selected were posted by an influencer, meaning the original poster was paid by a company or brand to create and share specific content to their Instagram page. All of the posts analyzed featured a product or brand, and a majority of the posts only featured the original poster in the image. The post objectives were fairly mixed between either a promotional objective or a call-to-action objective. All 15 posts selected for analysis were successful in eliciting a feeling of FOMO in the viewer. These findings suggest that a successful social fear appeal by use of FOMO may be more effective when the advertisement originates from a respected individual, rather than a brand. The posts included in this analysis averaged 486,721 likes per post and 466,592 total interactions per post. The highest number of likes on one post was 6,888,729, and the highest number of interactions on one post was 6,803,144, both originating from Kim Kardashian West's Instagram page, which currently has 215 million followers. Brands that collaborate with individuals who have garnered a significantly large social media following may be in a better position to generate feelings of FOMO within consumers by capitalizing on the influence that these individuals possess.

V. Ethical Issues

Ethical issues surrounding the use of FOMO in advertising are mainly issues specific to social media. As mentioned previously, recent studies have shown a positive relationship between social media usage and feeling of FOMO, as well as a positive relationship between feelings of FOMO and depression and loneliness. These symptoms are not limited to FOMO as a direct result of advertising efforts: Many social media users have reported feeling symptoms of FOMO resulted from seeing social media posts from friends and colleagues spending time

together or engaging in a social event (Anik, Gürhan-Canli, and Hayran). A 2013 study published in *Computers in Human Behavior* found that FOMO “promotes a state of continuous psychological flux” wherein feelings of FOMO drive further social media usage, which then causes more FOMO (Betts, Binder, Buglass, and Underwood). Users may experience more significant feelings of loneliness or sadness in regard to posts of people they know in comparison to posts from advertisers or influencers.

Advertisers and influencers have an ethical responsibility to disclose what content is a sponsored advertisement. This can help prevent not only feelings of FOMO, but feelings of distrust towards the brand or the influencer. By fully disclosing the nature of an advertisement, consumers are aware that the content being shown to them is not completely authentic or genuine; though the influencer may use and love the product, they are nonetheless being paid to promote it. If the effects of FOMO in advertising are more powerful when the consumer is not fully aware they are being advertised to, brands and influencers must recognize the ethical responsibility of providing the consumer with full disclosure.

False claims are another ethical issue prevalent within social media advertising. Advertisers seeking to create a FOMO appeal should be mindful of the validity of claims such as “only one left in stock.” Claims such as these aim to create a sense of urgency and solidify a purchase. According to the Baymard Institute, 69.75% of online shoppers who add items to their cart end up abandoning said cart altogether and not making a purchase (Baymard Institute, 2019). Advertisers try to overcome this obstacle by advertising that items are low in stock or implying that the current promotion or sale price is only temporary. If these statements are true, then the advertiser, of course, has committed no wrongdoing. However, making these statements when they are, in fact, not true – or even if they are grossly exaggerated – may constitute false

advertising. There are no regulations expressly prohibiting this: The Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) advertising guidelines on truth-in-advertising primarily focus on the advertisement's content, i.e., claims about the actual product's quality or service (Federal Trade Commission). Furthermore, research published by the Social Science Research Network (SSRN), a message of low availability may actually have an adverse effect on sales: consumers may infer that the retailer is trying to turn over all inventory of the product because it may be low quality or disliked amongst consumers (Park, Rabinovich, Tang, and Yin, 2).

False claims regarding the effectiveness of or the ingredients in a product are a serious matter and expressly prohibited by the FTC (Federal Trade Commission). However, the growing trend of brands collaborating with influencers in paid partnerships has seemingly begun to blur the lines between what constitutes a brand making a false claim, and an individual making a false claim on behalf of the brand. Flat Tummy Co., the makers of Flat Tummy Tea and other weight loss products, has a history of collaborating with celebrities and social media influencers to promote their products. The brand also has a history of making false claims related to their products' effectiveness and the ingredients within them. The company has been criticized for marketing one of the site's most popular items – Detox Tea – to teenagers: the main active ingredient is the laxative senna (TruthInAdvertising.org). The company has also come under fire for advertising appetite-suppressing lollipops to teenagers through means of paid partnerships with 17 and 18-year-old spokesmodels. Though not expressly illegal under current FTC advertising laws, this type of marketing is quite unethical, as it is dangerous for teenagers to regularly ingest laxatives as a means of weight control. Flat Tummy Co. has also been criticized for exaggerating the effectiveness of its product. By partnering with celebrities such as Khloe Kardashian – who have personal trainers and nutritionists – Flat Tummy Co. implies that using

their products alone will lead to weight loss more significant than what is actually possible (TruthInAdvertising.org). There is also the issue of a paid spokesmodel or influencer directly contradicting the brand's claims: actress Amber Rose claimed that Flat Tummy Tea is "safe to take while pregnant or breastfeeding," though Flat Tummy Co.'s website explicitly states to "not use the products available on the Site when pregnant or breastfeeding." (Flat Tummy Co.). In this situation, who is liable for false advertising claims? Flat Tummy Co. discloses the proper usage instructions on its website, but Amber Rose was compensated for her promotion of the product, likening this relationship to that of a company and an independent contractor. It is unclear if Amber Rose actually used this product herself or if she was merely promoting it on her Instagram account. Whatever the situation may be, it is clear that claims made by Flat Tummy Co. and its affiliates are certainly unethical, and possibly even illegal.

VI. Conclusion

FOMO is a powerful fear appeal that plays on a deep-rooted desire humans have to feel accepted within society and accepted within their own social circles. It is natural to experience social fears if presented with the possibility that one is missing out on something: an event, a product, a trend, or a service. Due to its evolutionary history, it can be difficult for humans to recognize and eliminate this fear completely; thus, an advertising opportunity is born.

Advertisers will continue to exploit this vulnerability when in order to establish social proof for their products and create a sense of urgency around purchases.

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