

Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Exquisite Poverty and Consumption Intentions among Generation Z: The Roles of Scarcity Mindset, Social Comparison, Narcissism, and Psychological Ownership

Hung-Yu Chen,¹ Chien-Chih Chen,¹ and Yao-San Lin^{2*}

¹Department of Information Management, National Chin-Yi University of Technology,
No. 57, Sec. 2, Zhongshan Rd., Taiping, Taichung 411, Taiwan (R.O.C.)

²Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, National Chin-Yi University of Technology,
No. 57, Sec. 2, Zhongshan Rd., Taiping, Taichung 411, Taiwan (R.O.C.)

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In recent years, the phenomenon of “exquisite poverty” has become prevalent among the younger generation, reflecting the diversity of contemporary social values. “Exquisitely poor” refers to people with high consumption demands but limited financial resources, who pursue a tasteful lifestyle but cannot splurge like the wealthy. The aim of this study is to explore the consumption behavioral intentions and psychological motivations of Generation Z in the social media environment. In this study, we propose a theoretical model; we believe that the scarcity mindset of social attention will trigger social comparison behavior. Narcissistic admiration plays a mediating role. Psychological ownership also has a mediating effect between social comparison and behavioral intention. We collected 323 valid samples, including 284 samples from college students. The results of our study show that narcissistic admiration partially mediates between scarcity mindset and social comparison, while psychological ownership fully mediates between social comparison and behavioral intention. Overall, the aim of this study is to make up for the lack of integrated research on social media and the exquisite poverty phenomenon in the existing literature. The results not only provide theoretical contributions but also offer a new perspective for understanding the consumption behavior of the younger generation.

1. Introduction

In recent years, an interesting consumption trend has emerged in society. Two eye-catching phenomena, collectively called “exquisite poverty”, are popular among the younger generation. This has profoundly affected consumer behavior and highlighted the diversity of values in contemporary society.

“Exquisitely poor” refers to people with high-quality and high-consumption needs but relatively limited financial resources. These people usually have high requirements for the

*Corresponding author: e-mail: yslin@ncut.edu.tw
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quality of life and like to pursue fashion trends and taste life. However, because of limitations in financial capacity, they cannot squander money as the rich do. The modern luxury consumer group is no longer limited to the traditional elite class but is becoming younger and more diversified.⁽¹⁾ Millennials and Generation Z (Gen Z) are globally minded and dominate the luxury goods market as well as the travel industry. Fueled by low-cost airlines and Instagram, these two generations travel far more frequently than previous generations.⁽²⁾

Social media provide rich communication opportunities and are important for social exchange and product promotion.⁽³⁾ The main reason for using social media is to share one's own content or view content shared by others, which drives the use of social media platforms (SMPs).⁽⁴⁾

According to a 2022 survey data, more than 1/3 of Gen Z share their social or political views on social media. This generation of young people pays attention to their online image and builds personal brands. SMPs such as TikTok, Threads, and X have become their main place of self-expression. The survey shows that in 2022, 44% of Gen Z consumers pay special attention to their personal image online.⁽⁵⁾

We note that research on the integration of social media and the phenomenon of refined poverty is in its infancy. Past social psychological research theories might explain this exquisite poverty phenomenon. However, in this study, we propose a theoretical explanation model in which social comparison (SC) is motivated by the scarcity mentality of community concern and is mediated by narcissistic admiration (NA). Subsequently, SC will affect the behavioral intention (BI) of consumption, and psychological ownership (PO) will also impact SC and BI.

Therefore, Gen Z may have a social media attention scarcity mentality when facing a decline in social attention (a decrease in the number of likes). Scarcity mindset (SM) induces psychological threats to oneself, leading individuals to engage in compensatory behaviors.⁽⁶⁾ Specifically, SM may direct individuals' attention toward the desire to seek more resources.⁽⁷⁾

In this state, driven by SM and more SC behavior in social media, Gen Z consumers no longer choose expensive products but seek luxury goods that help show taste and personal expression, emphasizing self-presentation in the digital realm.

Other researchers previously pointed out that using social media for self-presentation (self-oriented) is positively related to self-esteem while using social media for comparison (other-oriented) will lead to decreased self-esteem.⁽⁸⁾ Receiving positive feedback after posting on social media is a social reward for users⁽⁹⁾ and, therefore, may induce positive emotions.

Users will pursue attention and recognition on social media to make up for the emptiness and insufficiency they feel and more actively seek social recognition by, for example, increasing their consumption of luxury goods and sharing their travel posts on social media, posting to gain the attention of others, and frequently sending limited-time updates to maintain a sense of presence on social media.

Social networking sites are often used for self-marketing and exhibitionism.⁽¹⁰⁾ Research shows that SMPs allow users with narcissistic tendencies to demonstrate their success and gain social recognition through likes and appreciation messages in online communities. Scholars have also pointed out that image management and SC are crucial for individuals with narcissistic tendencies.

Considering the impact of PO, Gen Z's purchase of luxury goods or specific lifestyle items in society may be affected by the feeling of "mine", which affects their consumption intentions. PO is the feeling that something is "mine". This concept has attracted attention in consumer research because it can develop without regard to actual physical or legal relationships and has implications for various target experiences, including brands. To establish a clear connection with sensing technology, we posit that the psychological constructs examined, such as SM and SC, can be effectively monitored using sensor systems. For example, sensors embedded in digital devices could track user engagement levels, emotional responses, and consumption patterns in real time. Such data would provide valuable insights for marketers and SMPs aiming to understand and predict consumer behavior. By leveraging advancements in sensor technology, the psychological findings from this study can be applied to develop more sophisticated and responsive consumer engagement strategies.

On the basis of the above arguments, we aim, in this study, to make up for the scarcity of integrated research on social media and the phenomenon of exquisite poverty, which has not been fully explored up to now. In particular, through questionnaires, we will explore the impact of narcissism, SM, SC, and PO on Gen Z's consumer BIs regarding social media use to gain a deeper understanding of Gen Z's behavior in the social media environment and psychological motivations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 SM

SM can be recognized as a psychological state wherein the subjective has the feeling of having relatively few resources, which may deplete an individual's mental resources and make them less concerned about other matters. Mullainathan and Shafir⁽¹¹⁾ noted that SM increases an individual's cognitive burden by focusing on resource scarcity.

Research on SM suggests that this mindset may result from having or experiencing constraints on resources, including quantifiable entities such as products, energy, time, and money. SM, psychological stress, and negative emotions are considered to arise from the lack of a variety of resources, and this mentality is considered to cause a psychological threat to oneself, thereby triggering individuals' behaviors to compensate for this threat.⁽⁶⁾

Overall, research on SM illustrates how it affects individuals' emotions, behaviors, and social interactions. Whether confirmed in economics, psychology, behavioral economics, or evolutionary psychology, SM can help us more fully understand how people respond to resource scarcity.

2.2 SC

SC theory predicts that individuals compare themselves with others to validate their opinions and reduce judgment uncertainty. Because of this concern, they strive to shape their behavior to conform to certain standards or norms, regardless of whom they are compared with.

SC theory emphasizes that individuals tend to evaluate themselves by comparing themselves with others, which may impact their sense of self-worth and the pursuit of social status. When individuals feel a relative disadvantage in SC, it may trigger a scarcity mentality, affecting their behavioral patterns. When resources are lacking, individuals may be more concerned about their relative position and tend to compare themselves with others. This implies that SC may lead to the “above-average effect”; that is, individuals tend to think that they are better than most people in some aspects and work harder to maintain their positive views of their abilities and value.⁽¹²⁾

SM is well adopted in psychology and behavioral economics, which means that individuals evaluate themselves by observing the behaviors and achievements of others. Individuals may compare themselves on social media with others’ lives, achievements, and social activities. When individuals experience decreased social attention, social status and self-worth concerns may arise.

On the basis of current research progress, we believe that, in the context of social media use, SM may push individuals to make more SCs via social media to enhance self-visibility and importance, thereby gaining social recognition. Secondly, SC may affect individuals’ BIs on social media. Individuals may participate in social media activities more frequently after comparison with others, which will trigger consumption BIs that will make up for their sense of resource insufficiency and look for comparative advantages.

We propose the following hypotheses:

H1: SM positively affects SC.

H2: SC positively affects consumer behavior intention.

2.3 NA

NA is an ordinary personality trait characterized by a high sense of self-importance and entitlement to special treatment.⁽¹³⁾ Research suggests that image management and SC are key characteristics of narcissistic individuals.⁽¹⁴⁾ Another recent study by Kong *et al.*⁽¹⁵⁾ revealed that narcissism is associated with SC and addiction to use, even in the context of mobile devices.

The relationship between narcissism and SC in SMPs⁽¹⁶⁾ has been examined in many studies, and there is some literature showing a significant relationship between the two. Jabeen *et al.*⁽¹⁷⁾ showed that fear of missing out (FOMO) would drive narcissistic people to engage in self-disclosure and SC to support their perceived self-worth and recognition. Therefore, we expect a positive relationship between NA and SC, as admiration and competitive strategies involve higher social platform use and self-sales behavior.

Given that NA emphasizes the pursuit of self-worth and superiority⁽¹⁸⁾, we reasoned that NA may mediate between SM and SC. When individuals experience SM, they may compensate for their lack of resources through NA behaviors.⁽¹⁹⁾ This may take the form of constantly emphasizing one’s achievements, appearance, or lifestyle on social media to gain more compliments and positive feedback. NA may compensate for the perceived lack of resources through SC, especially by being admired.

Referring to the above, we propose the following research hypotheses:

H3: SM positively affects NA.

H4: NA positively affects SC.

2.4 PO

The dual type of ownership includes the legal and psychological states, which means that ownership is divided into legal and PO. The former refers to the right to own and use property under the provisions and protection of the law, while the latter is the state of an individual feeling that they own something.

PO exists in individual and collective forms, with the core concept being a sense of ownership. Individual PO refers to the feeling that something is “mine”, while collective PO refers to the individual feeling that something belongs to “our” group. There are three pathways to the emergence of PO: control over the object, close knowledge of the object, and investment in the object.

PO can involve tangible or intangible objects, from an individual’s seat to an entire country. Self-concept is closely related to PO, and identification with a destination may expand self-concept.

In addition, social media users with high PO express a higher BI to purchase.⁽²⁰⁾ When consumers develop the PO of a product, they invest time and resources and feel cognitively and emotionally connected to the product. When a company develops a product to meet consumer needs, consumers sacrifice their economic interests and invest energy in psychologically owning the product.

From the above, we expect that individuals may compare themselves with others in SC situations, thus affecting their PO of specific items or resources. We hypothesize that when an individual experiences comparison with others, his or her psychological sense of ownership of the item or resource may be enhanced because the comparison may inspire a stronger sense of belonging and self-worth for the item or resource.

We propose the following hypotheses:

H5: SC positively affects PO.

H6: PO positively affects consumers’ BI.

The research hypothesis model proposed in this study is depicted in Fig. 1.

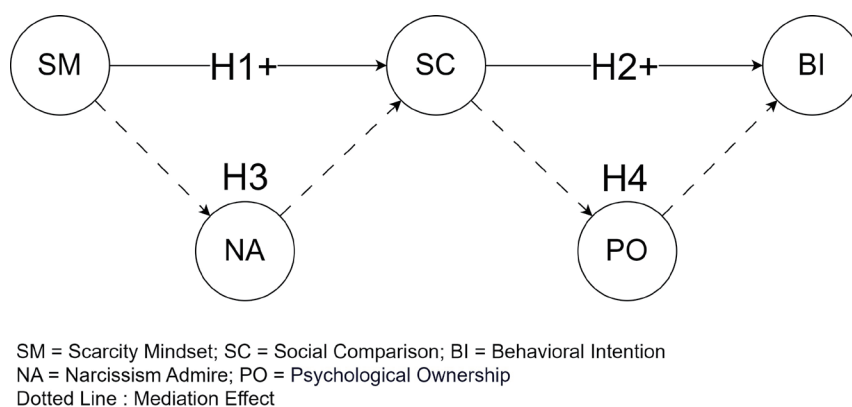


Fig. 1. Proposed model.

3. Methodology

3.1 Survey design

The first part of the research questionnaire requires the subjects to recall the products or content they have wanted to buy on social media in the past week (e.g., clothing, brand-name bags, and places they want to travel to).

There are a total of five constructs in the second part. The questions in the constructs are selected and modified from previously verified questions to be related to the SM in social media. The three questions on the scarcity psychological facet were modified from Tang *et al.*,⁽²¹⁾ the seven questions on NA were modified from the version of Akdeniz *et al.*,⁽²²⁾ the three questions on the SC facet were selected and modified from Stibe and Cugelman,⁽²³⁾ and the three questions on the PO aspect and the three questions on BI were selected and modified from Qiu *et al.*⁽²⁴⁾ All items were evaluated using the five-point Likert scale (5: strongly agree; 1: strongly disagree).

To maintain the reliability and validity of each construct, no questions were added or deleted after the constructs were selected. The above 19 questions were then adapted into a questionnaire that fit the background of this study, as shown in Table 1 below. Finally, demographic variables (gender, age, education level, commonly used social media, and daily usage hours) were used as control variables to develop the research tool design of this study.

3.2 Data collection

The research method used convenience sampling to obtain data and utilized an online questionnaire administered through Google Forms. This process required participants to log in

Table 1
Measurement items for the research tool.

Construct	Item
SM	1. I don't get enough attention on social media.
	2. I need to maintain the social media attention I have gained.
	3. I need more attention on social media.
NA	1. I prefer to connect with people who can help me achieve my goals on social media.
	2. The content I post should improve my reputation on social media.
	3. I follow people with high social status, professional, and educational standards on social media.
	4. I share content on social media that highlights my skills and abilities.
	5. I would like to know people's opinions about what I share on social media.
	6. I would like to be appreciated for the content I share on social media.
	7. Before posting pictures on social media, I ensure that I look presentable in the photos.
SC	1. I tend to compare myself with others.
	2. I frequently compare my performance with those of others.
	3. I will assess my performance based on feedback from others.
PO	1. I believe that owning this product or visiting travel destinations is an extension of my identity.
	2. I feel that this product or tourist destination is tailor-made for me.
	3. I feel a strong connection to this product or travel destination.
BI	1. I would like to purchase this product or visit the destination.
	2. I intend to buy this product or travel to the destination in the future.
	3. I choose to purchase this product or travel to the destination.

to complete the questionnaire, which was then distributed across various Facebook groups and prominent online forums. Note that the Pew Research Center explicitly defines Gen Z as those born after 1996.

We selected Gen Z as the main research object on the basis of the following two points:

1. Gen Z, often called “digital natives,” have grown up in a world where technology is deeply integrated into their daily lives. SMPs are filled with life updates and highlight moments from peers. This instant, well-edited content makes it easier for Gen Z to be led to purchasing behavior because they constantly see others displaying seemingly perfect lives.
2. SMPs have become part of their daily lives and affect their interactions with brands. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter are not only sources of entertainment but also key conduits for discovering new trends, products, and brands. According to a Booking.com survey, more than half of Taiwan’s Gen Z (53%) are deeply attracted by social media content. As many as 65% of Taiwan’s Gen Z look forward to traveling to places where they can take beautiful photos.

3.3 Data analysis tools

In this study, we used partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) as the primary data analysis tool. PLS-SEM is a widely acknowledged method, especially in research that is aimed at making predictions. One of its prominent advantages is the sample size requirement being lower than those of other methods. Additionally, it can effectively manage more intricate models, particularly those incorporating mediating variables and moderators. Furthermore, it allows for greater flexibility in the modeling of variables.

PLS-SEM demonstrates strong performance in terms of model validation and prediction. Note that PLS-SEM enables the validation of structural models and integrates prediction and causality analysis within the same model, which is essential for constructing accurate predictive models. We utilized the SMART-PLS 4.0 software package to execute PLS-SEM. A total of 323 valid samples were collected, with 284 samples obtained from college students. Comprehensive sample characteristics are outlined in Table 2.

3.4 Future research directions

To enhance the robustness and objectivity of our findings, we acknowledge the importance of integrating sensor-based data collection methodologies. In future studies, wearable devices or smart sensors could be incorporated to monitor physiological responses such as heart rate variability or galvanic skin response during social media usage. Additionally, digital tracking technologies could be employed to capture real-time behavioral data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying Gen Z’s consumption intentions and behaviors. This integration will align our research more closely with advancements in sensor technology and expand the potential applications of our findings.

Table 2
Demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Demographic		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	161	47
	Female	182	53
Age	Under 20	286	83.4
	20–29	45	13.2
	Over 30	12	3.4
Frequently used social media	Instagram	184	53.6
	YouTube	58	16.9
	Facebook	35	10.2
	Line	32	9.3
	Others (Twitter, TikTok)	34	10
Education	Bachelor's degree	302	88
	Master's degree	38	11.1
	Others	3	0.9
Daily use duration	1–2 hours	90	26.2
	2–4 hours	130	37.9
	Over 4 hours	106	30.9
	Others	17	5
Total		343	100

4. Discussion

4.1 Scale testing

We used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate internal consistency (reliability), convergent validity, and discriminant validity. We utilized Cronbach's α and composite reliability (CR) to measure reliability, and our findings indicated that the constructs demonstrate high internal consistency. Table 3 shows that each item strongly corresponds to its designated construct.

It is recommended that standardized factor loadings exceed 0.708 to account for approximately 50% of the observed variance.⁽²⁵⁾ In this study, the item loadings ranged from 0.725 to 0.954 (SM1, NA3, and NA7 are below 0.7 and were deleted) with no cross-loading, as detailed in the table below, leading to the retention of all item indicators.

Moreover, the average variance extracted (AVE) threshold of greater than 0.5 was used to measure validity. The lowest AVE value in this study was 0.647, indicating good reliability. To evaluate discriminant validity, it is recommended that each construct shares more variance with its indicators than with other constructs.⁽²⁵⁾ As shown in Table 3, the matrix diagonal values (the square root of AVE) exceeded the off-diagonal values in their respective rows and columns, confirming adequate discriminant validity for this research.

4.2 Model testing

In this research, we employed the bootstrap method to analyze path coefficients and explainable variance, as illustrated in Fig. 2. The model accounted for 36.5% of the variance in BI, 36.2% in NA, 25.6% in SC, 16% in PO.

Table 3
Results of reliability and validity for constructs.

*Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE	NA	PO	SC	SM	BI
NA	NA1	0.725	0.863	0.877	0.647	0.804				
	NA2	0.848								
	NA4	0.876								
	NA5	0.755								
	NA6	0.808								
PO	PO1	0.882	0.840	0.844	0.757	0.447	0.870			
	PO2	0.872								
	PO3	0.857								
SC	SC1	0.923	0.893	0.898	0.824	0.489	0.400	0.908		
	SC2	0.872								
	SC3	0.870								
SM	SM2	0.942	0.887	0.916	0.898	0.602	0.322	0.399	0.948	
	SM3	0.954								
BI	BI1	0.912	0.895	0.921	0.827	0.279	0.602	0.295	0.144	0.909
	BI2	0.899								
	BI3	0.916								

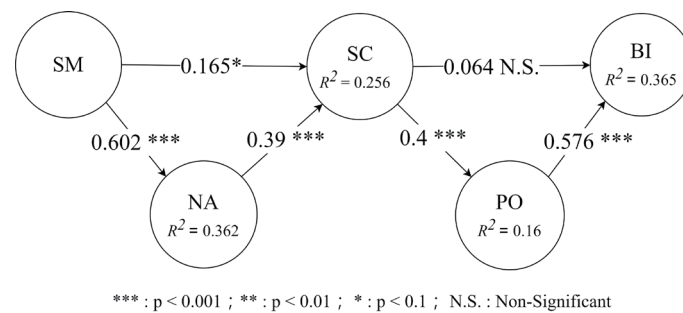


Fig. 2. Result obtained using proposed model.

Table 4
Hypotheses testing results of the research model.

	Hypothesis	β	p -value	Support
H1	SM \rightarrow SC	0.142	0.013	Yes
H2	SC \rightarrow BI	0.064	0.206	Not Support
H3	SM \rightarrow NA	0.602	0.000	Yes
H4	NA \rightarrow SC	0.390	0.000	Yes
H5	SC \rightarrow PO	0.400	0.000	Yes
H6	PO \rightarrow BI	0.576	0.000	Yes

The observed path coefficients are as follows: between SC and BI ($\beta = 0.064$, $p > 0.05$), between PO and BI ($\beta = 0.576$, $p < 0.01$), between SC and PO ($\beta = 0.4$, $p < 0.01$), between SM and SC ($\beta = 0.165$, $p < 0.05$), between NA and SC ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$), and between SM and NA ($\beta = 0.602$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, hypotheses H1, H3, H4, H5, and H6 are supported, while there is insufficient evidence to support H2, as shown in Table 4. Under these six hypotheses, the intended structural equation can explain 36.5% of the variance (R^2), as shown in Fig. 2.

5. Conclusions

Our findings underscore the significant relationships between PO, SC, NA, and SM in influencing BI. The model highlights the intricate interplay of these factors, suggesting that PO is a critical determinant of BI, mediated by SC and NA driven by the SM in social media interactions. Understanding these dynamics is essential for marketers, SMPs, and policymakers seeking to influence user behavior and engagement. By recognizing the nuanced relationships between these constructs, tailored strategies can be developed to enhance user experiences, promote positive social interactions, and mitigate potential negative effects associated with the SM in digital environments.

Additionally, these findings contribute to the broader body of literature on consumer behavior and social media psychology, providing insights into the underlying mechanisms driving user engagement and decision-making processes in digital contexts.

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the academic understanding of how PO, SC, NA, and SM influence BI. By elucidating the complex interplay between these psychological factors, the research extends the theoretical framework of social media usage behaviors. This deeper comprehension offers a valuable foundation for future studies examining the psychological motivations behind online interactions and engagement.

Practically, the findings provide valuable insights for businesses and SMPs. For businesses, understanding the psychological mechanisms that drive user behavior can lead to more effective marketing strategies and customer relationship management practices. Recognizing the role of PO and how it can be leveraged to enhance user engagement is particularly crucial. For SMPs, the study highlights the importance of designing user experiences that account for the negative impacts of SM, such as anxiety and competitive behavior over resources. By mitigating these adverse effects, platforms can improve user well-being and foster a more positive, sustainable online environment. Expanding on the practical implications, sensor networks, wearables, and data analytics can be leveraged to track and influence social media behaviors and psychological states. For instance, integrating biosensors into SMPs could help identify users experiencing high levels of SC or narcissism-related stress. These platforms could then provide personalized content or interventions designed to mitigate negative psychological impacts. Additionally, sensor data could be used to create more engaging and personalized user experiences, ultimately enhancing consumer satisfaction and brand loyalty. Such applications demonstrate the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration between social media psychology and sensor technology.

Addressing SM presents a dilemma for SMPs. On one hand, they aim to reduce the negative impacts of SM, such as anxiety and competitive behaviors among users. These negative effects can lead to diminished user satisfaction and potential disengagement from the platform. On the other hand, SM *also* drives SC, which can enhance PO and, consequently, increase BI. This PO can lead to higher user engagement and loyalty, benefiting the platform's goals.

Balancing these opposing outcomes requires a nuanced approach. Platforms must find ways to leverage the positive aspects of SM, such as increased user engagement through PO, while minimizing negative impacts such as user anxiety and unhealthy competition. This balance is crucial for sustaining a positive user experience and ensuring long-term user retention and satisfaction.

Despite the significant insights into the relationships between PO, SC, NA, and SM in influencing BI, several limitations should be considered.

- (1) **Sample Representativeness:** The sample mainly comes from specific SMPs or regions, which may limit the generalizability of the results. User behavior and psychological states may vary significantly across different platforms and regions. Future research should broaden the sample scope to validate the findings.
- (2) **Cross-sectional Design:** We used a cross-sectional design, capturing data at a single point in time, which cannot establish causal relationships. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to better understand the dynamic relationships and causal mechanisms between variables.
- (3) **Self-report Data Limitations:** We relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability or memory bias. Combining self-reports with behavioral data or physiological measurements in future research could improve the reliability and validity of the findings.
- (4) **Measurement Tools for Psychological Constructs:** While the measurement tools for PO, SC, NA, and SM proved effective, they might not capture all aspects of these constructs. Future studies should develop and use more comprehensive measurement tools.
- (5) **Cultural Influences:** PO, SC, and SM may be influenced by cultural background. Their manifestations and effects might differ across cultures. Future research should test these constructs in diverse cultural contexts to enhance the cultural applicability of the results.
- (6) **Complexity of Interaction Effects:** The study revealed complex interactions between PO, SC, NA, and SM, but these interactions may be influenced by other unexamined variables. In future research, the introduction of additional moderating and mediating variables should be considered to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these relationships.

These limitations highlight the need for the cautious interpretation and application of the findings, providing directions for future research to further explore and validate these psychological constructs across different contexts and populations. We recognize the limitations of a cross-sectional design in understanding the causal relationships between SM, SC, narcissism, and PO. Future research should adopt a longitudinal design, potentially coupled with the sensor-based tracking of user behaviors over time. This approach would enable the monitoring of changes in psychological states and consumer behaviors across different stages of social media engagement. Incorporating sensor-based methodologies such as the use of wearable devices to track real-time physiological data would also provide a more dynamic and holistic view of the evolving psychological constructs examined in this study.

To bridge the gap between the psychological constructs studied and sensor-driven technologies, we propose the utilization of sensor systems to monitor and influence consumer engagement. For example, sensor networks could be used to track emotional responses to social media content through facial recognition and eye-tracking technologies. Wearable sensors could measure physiological changes in real time as users engage with luxury goods advertisements on digital platforms. These applications would provide valuable data on the relationship between digital behaviors and psychological states, thereby extending the relevance of our research to sensor-driven behavioral monitoring and intervention strategies.

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About the Authors



Hung-Yu Chen is an assistant professor in the Department of Information Management at National Chin-Yi University of Technology, Taiwan. His current interests are concentrated on human behavior with misinformation. His articles have been published in *Decision Support Systems*, *Neurocomputing*, *International Journal of Advanced Manufacturing Technology* and other publications. (chenhy@ncut.edu.tw)



Chien-Chih Chen is an assistant professor in the Department of Information Management at National Chin-Yi University of Technology, Taiwan. His current interests are focused on machine learning with small datasets. His articles have appeared in *Decision Support Systems*, *Omega*, *Automation in Construction*, *Computers and Industrial Engineering*, *International Journal of Production Research*, *Neurocomputing*, and other publications. (frick@ncut.edu.tw)



Yao-San Lin is an associate professor in the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management at National Chin-Yi University of Technology, Taiwan, and has taught statistical analysis, information management, and machine learning for many years. In the past ten years of research, he has twice won the IEEE Best Paper Award (2019, 2013), and his research results have been published in the following international academic journals: *Applied Soft Computing*, *Decision Support Systems*, *Neurocomputing*, *European Journal of Operational Research*, *International Journal of Production Research*, *Computers & Operations Research*, and *Expert Systems with Applications*. His current research interests are mainly in the field of manufacturing and natural language processing. (yslin@ncut.edu.tw)

