

Fear of Missing Out and Flexing as Manifestations of Digital *Taṇhā*: A Buddhist Framework for Understanding Digital Suffering

ABSTRACT

The development of social media has intensified the phenomena of fear of missing out (FOMO) and flexing, which affect individuals' inner peace and psychological well-being. This study analyzes FOMO and flexing as forms of digital suffering from the perspective of Buddhist teachings and formulates alternative approaches to addressing these phenomena based on the *Dhamma*. This study employs a qualitative approach and a literature review method. The study draws its data from Buddhist texts, particularly the *Suttas*, and contemporary scientific literature. The researchers analyzed the data through thematic content analysis and conceptual interpretation. The findings show that FOMO and flexing represent contemporary manifestations of *taṇhā*, particularly *kāma-taṇhā*, which focuses on sensory pleasure, and *bhava-taṇhā*, which drives the desire for social recognition. *Issā*, *māna*, and the tendency to compare oneself with others further intensify both phenomena. This study confirms that mindfulness, sense restraint, an understanding of *anicca*, and the cultivation of inner contentment can break the cycle of digital suffering. In practical terms, these findings provide an ethical and spiritual framework for developing Buddhist-based digital literacy. The originality of this study lies in its integration of the concept of *taṇhā* with the dynamics of FOMO and flexing as distinctive patterns of suffering in digital society.

Keywords: *Bhava-taṇhā*; digital flexing; FOMO; *kāma-taṇhā*; digital suffering.

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INTRODUCTION

The expansion of social media has transformed how individuals build relationships, obtain information, and present their social identities. By April 2026, the number of social media user identities worldwide had reached 5.79 billion. In Indonesia, the number of social media user identities reached 180 million in October

2025, representing 62.9% of the population. During the same period, Indonesia recorded 230 million internet users and an internet penetration rate of 80.5% (Kemp, 2025). Indonesians also spent an average of 21 hours and 50 minutes per week using social media and watching online videos (We Are Social, 2025). These data indicate that social media no longer functions merely as a supplementary communication channel. Instead, it now serves as a primary space in which digital society forms social experiences, consumption patterns, and self-representations.

Intensive social media use continuously exposes individuals to streams of content that showcase other people's achievements, activities, possessions, and lifestyles. However, such content generally presents only selected aspects of life rather than life as a whole. Users tend to select, edit, and display aspects of their lives that create an idealized image for their audiences. Exposure to these curated representations encourages individuals to compare their circumstances with other people's achievements (Tandon, Dhir, Almugren, AlNemer, & Mäntymäki, 2021). These comparisons can subsequently generate fear of missing out (FOMO), which refers to anxiety that other people may be having more enjoyable, valuable, or meaningful experiences. FOMO also encourages individuals to monitor social media continuously because they do not want to miss information, trends, or opportunities to gain social recognition (Milyavskaya, Saffran, Hope, & Koestner, 2018).

FOMO has developed into a significant social and psychological issue, particularly among adolescents and young adults. A study involving 226 high school students found that 11.06% of the respondents experienced a high level of FOMO, 56.64% experienced a moderate level, and 32.30% experienced a low level. Thus, most respondents experienced a moderate level of FOMO (Wahyuningtyas, IM Hambali, & Muslihah, 2024). These findings indicate that FOMO no longer represents merely an individual phenomenon. Instead, it constitutes a widespread issue that requires serious attention in adolescents' social lives.

FOMO also produces compulsive digital behavior. Individuals who fear missing information tend to check their phones repeatedly, disregard face-to-face conversations, and prioritize digital connectivity over direct physical interaction. This behavior can develop into phubbing, in which users ignore other people because their phones capture their attention. At the same time, social comparison and low self-esteem can strengthen the relationship between FOMO and problematic social media use (Servidio, Soraci, Griffiths, Boca, & Demetrovics, 2024). Therefore, FOMO operates through a psychological cycle: exposure to content triggers social comparison, social comparison generates anxiety, and anxiety encourages greater social media use. This increased use then exposes individuals to more content that triggers FOMO again.

Social media further strengthens this cycle because it not only displays social experiences but also facilitates flexing. In this study, flexing refers to the demonstrative display of wealth, possessions, achievements, or lifestyles to attract attention and gain social recognition (Susanto, Nadiroh, Abbas, & Purwanto, 2023). This practice transforms consumer goods into status symbols and instruments of identity construction. For example, the release of the latest smartphones, vehicles, branded clothing, or technological products not only stimulates consumption but also prompts users to upload unboxing videos, product photographs, and displays of ownership on social media (Rachman, Verawati, & Rusandi, 2023). Such content

can trigger technology-related FOMO because users believe that they must own the latest products to avoid appearing outdated, irrelevant, or socially inferior.

FOMO and flexing form a mutually reinforcing relationship. Flexing content provides objects for social comparison, while FOMO creates an impulse to imitate the consumption patterns and forms of self-representation that other users display (Udasromo & Marai, 2025). Individuals consequently consume goods not only for their practical functions but also for the recognition associated with those goods. After acquiring a particular product or experience, individuals may engage in flexing to affirm their social position. This cycle demonstrates that the central problem of social media does not solely involve the duration of use. It also involves the cultivation of desire, attachment, and dependence on external validation.

Research on the relationship among digital media, desire, and well-being has developed along at least three major strands. The first strand examines social media use as addictive behavior characterized by craving, difficulty controlling use, and discomfort when users lose access to digital media. Wilcockson et al. (2019) investigated how smartphone abstinence affected mood, anxiety, and craving. Robertson et al. (2023) compared attitudes toward digital detox and levels of craving among regular social media users and high-frequency users. James et al. (2025) subsequently examined hedonic digital consumption within the framework of behavioral addiction. Together, these three studies demonstrate that digital engagement can develop from a routine habit into a psychological urge that individuals find difficult to control. However, this approach primarily explains the mechanisms of addiction rather than the structures of desire and attachment that underlie such behavior.

The second strand examines mindfulness as an approach to reducing problematic social media use and improving digital well-being. Liu et al. (2023) demonstrated that mindfulness can help users recognize their cognitive and emotional responses when they interact with the internet and new media. More specifically, Uthaphan and Phooriko (2024) connected Buddhist practices with the cultivation of digital mindfulness in social media use. Pandey et al. (2026) expanded this approach by integrating Ayurveda, yoga, and neuroscience to understand social media addiction. Studies within this strand have offered relevant self-regulation strategies, but they generally position mindfulness as a psychological intervention technique. These studies have not fully explained the relationship among mindfulness, the structure of *taṇhā*, FOMO, and flexing as an interconnected sequence of digital suffering.

The third strand investigates the relationship between Buddhism and the transformation of digital life. Phoowachanathipong (2017) examined changes in values and consumption behavior within social networks by integrating Buddhist psychology. Ouyang and Xie (2025) discussed functional and digital forms of religious engagement among young people in China. Tei et al. (2026) applied Buddhist network philosophy to develop an understanding of digital health. These studies demonstrate that scholars can apply Buddhist concepts to interpret changes in behavior, religiosity, and well-being in digital society. Nevertheless, these studies have not specifically examined FOMO and flexing as two phenomena that create a reciprocal relationship among anxiety, consumption, self-presentation, and status seeking.

These three strands leave a conceptual gap. Research on digital addiction has identified craving but has rarely differentiated forms of desire according to Buddhist teachings. Research on mindfulness has proposed interventions but has not always connected them with the origins of suffering within the structures of *taṇhā* and *upādāna*. Meanwhile, studies of digital Buddhism more often focus on religious practices, digital health, or changes in consumption values without analyzing the relationship between FOMO and flexing in an integrated manner. Consequently, previous literature does not adequately explain how social media architecture activates sensory desire, the desire for existence, self-comparison, and attachment to social recognition.

A Buddhist perspective provides a theoretical foundation for addressing this gap through the concept of *taṇhā*. The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* identifies *taṇhā* as the cause of *dukkha* and distinguishes three forms of craving: *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā*, and *vibhava-taṇhā* (*Samyutta Nikāya* 56.11/S V 421–425). *Kāma-taṇhā* refers to craving for sensory pleasure, whereas *bhava-taṇhā* refers to the desire to become, to exist, and to maintain a particular form of existence. In the context of social media, individuals may express *kāma-taṇhā* through their desire for visual stimulation, material goods, novel experiences, and new forms of pleasure. They may express *bhava-taṇhā* through their desire to maintain an image, status, relevance, and recognition before digital audiences. When individuals develop these two forms of *taṇhā* into attachment, or *upādāna*, they anchor their identities and happiness in trends, possessions, and other users' responses.

To address this gap, this study analyzes FOMO and flexing as manifestations of *taṇhā* in digital life. Specifically, this study explains the relationship of FOMO and flexing with *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā*, *issā* or envy, *māna* or conceit and self-comparison, and *upādāna* or attachment. This study also formulates a *Dhamma*-based approach to reducing digital suffering through mindfulness, sense restraint, an understanding of *anicca*, and the cultivation of inner contentment.

This study argues that FOMO and flexing do not constitute two separate digital behaviors. Instead, they represent two mutually reproducing manifestations within the cycle of digital *taṇhā*. FOMO represents the anxiety that individuals experience when they have not obtained the experiences, possessions, or recognition that they desire, whereas flexing represents their attempt to affirm their existence through symbolic displays. Social media reinforces this cycle by providing visual stimuli, popularity metrics, and spaces for continuous comparison. Accordingly, this study expands the concept of *taṇhā* from an individual interpretation of craving toward a relational and technological interpretation. Within this framework, individuals' internal impulses do not solely generate *taṇhā*; the architecture of digital platforms also produces, directs, and amplifies it. This study contributes theoretically by formulating digital *taṇhā* as a mechanism that connects platform-generated stimuli, social comparison, FOMO, symbolic consumption, flexing, attachment, and *dukkha* within a unified analytical sequence.

METHOD

This study analyzes the concepts and representations of FOMO and flexing in digital life through a Buddhist perspective. The analysis focuses on the relationship

between these two phenomena and *taṇhā*, particularly *kāma-taṇhā* and *bhava-taṇhā*, as well as related concepts such as *upādāna*, *issā*, *māna*, *anicca*, and *dukkha*. Therefore, this study does not examine the behavior of individual social media users. Instead, it investigates the structures of desire, attachment, and suffering that underlie these digital phenomena.

This study employs a qualitative approach and a literature review design (Maxwell, 2008). The researchers selected a qualitative approach because the study seeks to understand the meanings, conceptual relationships, and relevance of Buddhist teachings in explaining FOMO and flexing. The literature review allows the researchers to integrate normative Buddhist sources with contemporary research findings from psychology, digital media studies, consumer behavior, and religious studies.

The research data consist of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include Buddhist texts from the *Tipiṭaka*, particularly the *Suttas* that discuss the Four Noble Truths, *taṇhā*, *upādāna*, sense restraint, mindfulness, and impermanence. The secondary sources include scientific journal articles, academic books, and research reports that examine FOMO, flexing, social media addiction, digital craving, social comparison, symbolic consumption, mindfulness, and digital Buddhism.

The researchers collected the data by systematically identifying and documenting literature relevant to the research focus. They selected the literature according to thematic relevance, publisher credibility, conceptual significance, and publication recency. During the data collection process, the researchers identified definitions, arguments, research findings, and Buddhist concepts that could explain the relationships among social media exposure, FOMO, flexing, *taṇhā*, attachment, and digital suffering.

The researchers analyzed the data through thematic content analysis and conceptual interpretation. They conducted the analysis in five stages: reading the sources closely, identifying the main concepts, coding the data according to relevant themes, organizing the relationships among the themes, and interpreting the findings through the framework of Buddhist teachings. They then organized the analytical findings into a relational pattern that connects digital stimuli, social comparison, *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā*, FOMO, flexing, *upādāna*, and *dukkha*. This process produced a conceptual explanation of digital *taṇhā* and formulated a *Dhamma*-based approach to reducing the suffering that arises from social media use.

RESULT

1. FOMO as a Manifestation of Kāma-Taṇhā and Bhava-Taṇh

Fear of missing out (FOMO) refers to the anxiety that individuals experience when they assume that other people are gaining experiences, information, or opportunities that hold greater value than their own. This condition relates to individuals' need to remain connected, monitor other people's activities, and ensure their involvement in social developments that they consider important (Neumann, 2020; Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013). FOMO does not arise solely from an actual lack of participation. It also emerges from individuals' perception that they are absent from events that could strengthen their acceptance,

identity, and social position. The need for belonging, the fear of exclusion, and the belief that a particular activity holds a central position within a group increase individuals' susceptibility to FOMO (Alabri, 2022). Therefore, individuals who experience FOMO tend to maintain intensive digital connectivity because they do not want to miss conversations, trends, experiences, or forms of recognition circulating within their social networks.

Social media intensifies FOMO by providing a continuous stream of updates, making other users' activities highly visible, and allowing individuals to monitor multiple experiences simultaneously. Such exposure encourages individuals to check social media repeatedly and causes discomfort when they lose access to information (Alutaybi, Al-Thani, McAlaney, & Ali, 2020; Tandon et al., 2021). This pattern may arise situationally in everyday life, but it can develop into a persistent tendency when individuals continually associate digital engagement with social acceptance and personal satisfaction (Milyavskaya et al., 2018). A meta-analysis also identified a consistent relationship among FOMO, the intensity of social networking site use, and problematic social media use (Fioravanti et al., 2021). The consequences extend beyond longer periods of access and include impaired concentration, anxiety, reduced life satisfaction, and difficulty controlling the urge to monitor digital activities continuously (Citko & Owsieniuk, 2020; Littman-Ovadia & Russo-Netzer, 2024). Thus, the interaction among affiliation needs, social comparison, information exposure, and the urge to maintain a digital presence generates FOMO.

The desire to obtain continuous digital stimulation reflects the pattern of *kāma-taṇhā*, which refers to craving for pleasure that arises through sensory contact. In social media use, individuals direct their desire not only toward material goods but also toward new content, current information, visual experiences, popular trends, and emotional responses generated by likes, comments, and notifications. Each update produces only a temporary sense of pleasure, which encourages users to search repeatedly for the next object of stimulation. This pattern indicates that FOMO involves more than the fear of missing information. It also reflects individuals' inability to sustain satisfaction after they obtain a particular stimulus. *Kāma-taṇhā* operates through the relationship between pleasant feelings and the urge to prolong or repeat those experiences. Consequently, the more content individuals consume, the more strongly they seek new stimulation (Peacock, 2018; Somaratne, 2021b). Within the framework of the Four Noble Truths, this repetitive cycle of desire cannot produce stable fulfillment because sensory objects continually change and cannot provide a foundation for permanent satisfaction (Dhammavajiro, Vaisopha, & Srinonyang, 2020; Rāhula, 1974). The *Dhammapada* statement that desire ensnares human beings illustrates this pattern: the pursuit of validation, trends, and digital experiences does not eliminate a sense of deficiency but instead expands the range of objects that individuals believe they must obtain (Norman, 1997).

FOMO also reflects the pattern of *bhava-taṇhā* because individuals use digital engagement to maintain their existence and preserve the continuity of their social identities. Users do not merely want to view content or follow trends; they also want to remain present, relevant, and recognizable within their social networks. The fear of falling behind arises when individuals perceive their absence from digital

participation as a threat to their status, group acceptance, or established self-image. Under these conditions, social media provides a space for “I-making” and “mine-making,” through which individuals attach experiences, achievements, relationships, and audience responses to their personal identities (Amaro, 2021). *Bhava-taṇhā* therefore appears in the desire to become and remain relevant, modern, connected, or socially recognized through a continuously updated digital presence. This desire creates problems because digital identity depends on audience attention and shifting trends that individuals cannot control. The need to preserve a continuous sense of self ultimately transforms connectivity into a psychological obligation. Individuals feel compelled to follow conversations continuously, update their images, and reaffirm their positions to avoid losing their social presence (Somaratne, 2021c; Thera, 2004).

The pattern of FOMO becomes clearer when interpreted through *issā* and *māna*. *Issā* arises as discomfort when other people receive experiences, respect, opportunities, or advantages that one does not possess, whereas *māna* operates through the habitual tendency to evaluate oneself as superior, inferior, or equal to others. These two mental tendencies transform social media content into an instrument of self-evaluation. Individuals use other people’s travel experiences, possessions, achievements, and social recognition as standards for measuring their own success. Buddhist texts describe a similar pattern when an ascetic becomes displeased because other practitioners receive respect, praise, and material support from lay followers. His concern about other people’s social positions then displaces his attention to spiritual practice (*Dīgha Nikāya* III, 44). A comparable pattern of social comparison appears when monks compare their meditative experiences and become distressed because they do not attain the light or tranquility that other practitioners experience (*Majjhima Nikāya* III, 153–160). These two narratives demonstrate that the feeling of being left behind does not depend on technology. Instead, it arises from a mental mechanism that interprets other people’s experiences as threats to one’s self-worth. Social media expands this mechanism by presenting objects of comparison continuously, quantifiably, and publicly. Consequently, *issā* produces discomfort in response to other people’s advantages, whereas *māna* sustains FOMO through self-evaluations that depend on one’s relative position within a social network (de Silva, 2018; Ditrich, 2022).

Exposure to digital content generates FOMO through a recurring process. Content that presents achievements, experiences, possessions, and social involvement first provides objects for comparison. Individuals then evaluate their positions according to other people’s representations of life and develop desires to obtain similar experiences, follow the same trends, or maintain comparable relevance. When they cannot immediately satisfy these desires, they experience anxiety about falling behind, which encourages them to check social media repeatedly. This monitoring does not resolve their anxiety because each instance of access presents new objects for comparison. FOMO therefore operates through a cyclical pattern: digital exposure triggers social comparison, social comparison activates *kāma-taṇhā* and *bhava-taṇhā*, unfulfilled desire generates anxiety, and anxiety strengthens attachment to social media. This pattern explains why greater access does not necessarily reduce the feeling of being left behind but instead

sustains the need to remain continuously connected (Fioravanti et al., 2021; Milyavskaya et al., 2018; Tandon et al., 2021).

Table 1. Forms of FOMO and Their Relationships with Buddhist Concepts

FOMO Indicator	Pattern Identified in the Literature	Buddhist Concept
Desire to follow trends	The impulse to obtain the latest experiences, information, or objects in order to maintain sensory gratification	<i>Kāma-taṇhā</i>
Fear of becoming irrelevant	The need to maintain one's presence, identity, and social acceptance within digital networks	<i>Bhava-taṇhā</i>
Self-comparison	Self-evaluation based on one's relative position in relation to other people's achievements and recognition	<i>Māna</i>
Envy of other people's experiences	Discomfort when other people receive opportunities, respect, or advantages that one does not possess	<i>Issā</i>
Repeated social media monitoring	The continuous urge to obtain stimulation, information, and social reassurance	<i>Taṇhā</i>
Difficulty disengaging from digital connectivity	Attachment to content, trends, identity, and social validation	<i>Upādāna</i>

This mapping demonstrates that FOMO does not emerge as an isolated psychological response. Instead, it develops through a series of interrelated mental conditions. The desire to obtain new experiences reflects the characteristics of *kāma-taṇhā*, whereas the impulse to maintain one's existence and social recognition reflects *bhava-taṇhā*. These two forms of craving develop through *māna*, which encourages individuals to compare themselves continuously with others, and *issā*, which generates distress when other people obtain experiences or advantages that they do not possess. When this process occurs repeatedly, individuals develop attachment, or *upādāna*, to information, trends, and social validation, which drives them to monitor social media continuously. This sequence demonstrates that FOMO represents a contemporary manifestation of the dynamics of *taṇhā*, which operates through mechanisms of social comparison and attachment to digital experiences.

2. Flexing as a Practice of Social Validation and Digital Attachment

Flexing on social media takes various forms, but all of these forms operate through the same representational pattern: they transform objects, experiences, and achievements into publicly visible status symbols. These forms include displays of wealth, branded products, exclusive travel, professional achievements, physical appearance, associations with influential figures, and visually curated lifestyles. The diversity of these objects does not alter the underlying logic because the value of a post no longer depends solely on its informational function. Instead, its value also

depends on its ability to distinguish the owner from other users. Luxury products, rare experiences, and personal achievements acquire symbolic value when individuals present them as evidence of success, taste, and social position (Siepmann, Holthoff, & Kowalczyk, 2022; Susanto et al., 2023). In digital contexts, conspicuous consumption does not end with ownership. It continues through the public display of possessions in order to gain social recognition (Cleveland & Yuan, 2026). Therefore, flexing should be understood as a practice of self-image production rather than merely a habit of sharing one's private life. This practice can also blur the boundary between actual achievement and symbolic construction because users select, arrange, and dramatize the displayed forms of luxury, social proximity, or success before audiences consume them (Udasmoro & Marai, 2025).

The motivation to engage in flexing closely relates to the need for external validation. Likes, comments, view counts, and follower growth function as direct measures of audience acceptance of the projected image. These metrics transform social recognition into something visible, quantifiable, and comparable, which encourages users to adjust their posts according to audience responses. Flexing therefore does more than attract attention. It also tests whether the projected identity successfully gains group legitimacy. The anticipation of audience engagement can even encourage conspicuous consumption before users upload content because they have already estimated the social value of the goods or experiences that they intend to display (Yusainy et al., 2025). In this situation, digital validation does not function merely as an additional consequence. Instead, it becomes part of the motivation for consumption and self-presentation. However, dependence on public responses creates a fragile structure of recognition because users must continually renew their digital status through subsequent posts. When public attention declines, users feel compelled to produce more prominent representations to maintain visibility. This pattern explains why flexing can intensify status competition, erode public trust, and encourage communicative behavior that disregards social sensitivity (Hidayat, Dirantika, & Lampe, 2024; Rachman et al., 2023).

Flexing reflects the characteristics of *bhava-taṇhā* when individuals use possessions and achievements to construct and maintain particular social identities. Individuals do not simply desire goods, experiences, or status. They also use these elements to answer questions about who they are in the eyes of others. Branded products can construct an image of financial success, the latest technological devices can signify a modern identity, and exclusive travel or professional achievements can affirm an individual's position as successful or influential. Within this pattern, displayed objects function as instruments of "I-making" and "mine-making" because individuals attach their personal identities to possessions, experiences, and audience evaluations (Amaro, 2021). *Bhava-taṇhā* appears in the need to remain valuable, visible, and recognized through continually updated digital representations. This identity never becomes truly stable because it depends on trends, public attention, and one's relative position in relation to other users. Consequently, individuals must repeat flexing practices to maintain the images that they have constructed. This pattern demonstrates that conspicuous consumption on social media does not seek only temporary status. It also seeks the continuity of a

symbolic self through social recognition (Cleveland & Yuan, 2026; Somaratne, 2021c; Yusainy et al., 2025).

At the same time, flexing also originates in *kāma-taṇhā* because social displays generally begin with the desire to obtain new objects, experiences, and pleasures. For example, the release of the latest technological device can stimulate the desire to purchase it not solely because of functional needs but also because the product offers the pleasure of novelty and an opportunity to attract digital attention. After obtaining the object, users extend sensory satisfaction by displaying it, documenting it, and waiting for audience responses. At this stage, *kāma-taṇhā* develops into *upādāna* when individuals no longer merely enjoy goods, experiences, and engagement metrics but use them as foundations for self-worth and social identity. Users then find it difficult to relinquish the need to acquire the next product or maintain the consumer-oriented image that they have constructed. Because objects and trends continually change, they provide only temporary satisfaction, while the demand to update one's possessions continues (de Silva, 2018; Peacock, 2018; Somaratne, 2021a). Therefore, the relationship between *kāma-taṇhā* and *upādāna* in flexing creates a multilayered pattern: desire drives consumption, consumption provides objects for representation, and representation binds identity to public validation.

The reproduction of flexing operates through a mutually reinforcing sequence. The desire to obtain a particular object or experience initially drives consumption that emphasizes not only functional utility but also the symbolic value attached to the object. Individuals then convert this symbolic value into demonstrative posts so that audiences can view, evaluate, and compare their possessions. Responses in the form of likes, comments, view counts, and follower growth provide validation that strengthens the projected self-image. However, this satisfaction does not last because public attention fluctuates and prestigious objects quickly lose their novelty. When validation declines, individuals seek new objects or experiences that they can display to maintain social relevance. Therefore, flexing does not end with a single act of representation but instead forms a cycle: desire generates symbolic consumption, consumption produces demonstrative posts, posts generate temporary validation, and temporary validation stimulates the need for further displays. This cycle demonstrates that social media transforms conspicuous consumption into an identity practice that individuals continually reproduce through their dependence on audience attention (Cleveland & Yuan, 2026; Siepmann et al., 2022; Yusainy et al., 2025).

Table 2. Objects, Forms of Representation, Social Motives, and Buddhist Concepts in Flexing Practices

Flexing Object	Form of Representation	of Social Motive	Buddhist Concept
Technological products	Unboxing videos, photographs of the latest devices, and demonstrations of product features	Displaying novelty, modernity, and engagement with current trends	<i>Kāma-taṇhā</i> and <i>bhava-taṇhā</i>

Flexing Object	Form Representation	of Social Motive	Buddhist Concept
Luxury goods	Emphasizing logos, brands, prices, or product exclusivity	Gaining status and recognition and distinguishing oneself from other users	<i>Bhava-taṇhā</i> and <i>māna</i>
Exclusive travel	Documenting destinations, premium facilities, and rare experiences	Building prestige and reinforcing one's social position	<i>Bhava-taṇhā</i> and <i>māna</i>
Personal achievements	Posting certificates, professional positions, awards, or career accomplishments	Gaining recognition for one's competence and personal identity	<i>Bhava-taṇhā</i>
Physical appearance	Posting photographs of one's body, clothing, physical fitness, and curated visual image	Attracting attention and gaining recognition for personal appeal	<i>Kāma-taṇhā</i> , <i>bhava-taṇhā</i> , and <i>māna</i>
Social relationships	Posting photographs with celebrities, elite groups, or influential figures	Demonstrating social proximity, access, and position within a social network	<i>Bhava-taṇhā</i> and <i>māna</i>
Lifestyle	Curating routines, consumption patterns, places, and everyday activities	Constructing an idealized image and maintaining the consistency of one's digital identity	<i>Bhava-taṇhā</i> and <i>upādāna</i>
Audience responses	Highlighting the number of likes, comments, views, and followers	Gaining validation and maintaining social visibility	<i>Upādāna</i>

This mapping demonstrates that flexing does not center on the displayed object itself. Instead, it centers on the process through which individuals construct social meaning around that object. Technological products, luxury goods, travel experiences, achievements, physical appearance, and lifestyles function as symbols through which individuals construct identities and gain recognition within digital environments. In this process, *kāma-taṇhā* drives the desire to obtain objects that individuals consider valuable, whereas *bhava-taṇhā* directs individuals to maintain an image of themselves as successful, modern, or influential. *Māna* reinforces this need by positioning identity within a comparative relationship with others. This need then develops into *upādāna* when individuals use possessions and digital validation as foundations for self-worth. This sequence demonstrates that flexing constitutes a manifestation of *taṇhā* that extends beyond acts of consumption and

continues through the reproduction of identity and attachment to social recognition in digital spaces.

3. The Digital *Taṇhā* Cycle and Dhamma-Based Approaches to Addressing It

FOMO and flexing create a reciprocal relationship that sustains the cycle of desire in digital spaces. Flexing content provides objects for comparison by displaying curated possessions, experiences, achievements, and forms of status. This exposure encourages other users to evaluate themselves according to the presented standards, which subsequently generates anxiety when they perceive themselves as falling behind, less successful, or insufficiently visible. This anxiety then activates the desire to follow trends, engage in symbolic consumption, and display similar achievements to preserve one's social position. Therefore, FOMO does not merely result from flexing; it also drives the reproduction of subsequent flexing practices. Individuals who fear losing their relevance may shift from being audience members to becoming producers of demonstrative content, while the content they produce becomes a new source of FOMO for other users. This relationship creates a reciprocal cycle: flexing triggers comparison and a sense of falling behind, whereas FOMO drives consumption and self-presentation in pursuit of social validation (Fioravanti et al., 2021; Siepmann et al., 2022; Tandon et al., 2021; Yusainy et al., 2025).

Individual desire does not operate alone in this cycle because social media architecture also reinforces it. Notifications create a sense of urgency that encourages users to check new activities immediately, recommendation algorithms prolong exposure to similar content, and infinite-scrolling features remove the natural boundaries of information consumption. At the same time, likes, comments, view counts, and follower counts transform social recognition into measurable and comparable metrics. Trending features and continuous content updates shorten the period during which an experience remains relevant, which encourages users to follow emerging developments continuously so that they do not lose visibility. Through this structure, social media does not merely channel desire. It also organizes the objects that users should desire, the time within which they should respond, and the standards that define social success. Digital *taṇhā* therefore operates through the interaction between internal impulses and platform design: users seek stimulation and recognition, while platforms sustain this pursuit through continuous updates, personalization, and engagement metrics that never provide a definitive sense of completion (Alutaybi et al., 2020; Chan, Ananthram, Thaker, & Liu, 2022; Cleveland & Yuan, 2026; Tandon et al., 2021).

Digital stimuli generate a cycle of suffering when visual objects, information, and status symbols first activate *taṇhā* as the desire to obtain pleasure, relevance, or recognition. Social comparison and the pursuit of validation then intensify this desire. The desire takes the form of FOMO when individuals feel that they are falling behind and takes the form of flexing when individuals attempt to affirm their existence. When individuals begin to attach their identities, self-worth, and sense of security to possessions, trends, and audience responses, *taṇhā* develops into *upādāna*. This attachment produces only temporary satisfaction because digital objects, public attention, and social status continually change. The loss of novelty, declining engagement, or the emergence of new standards subsequently creates

further dissatisfaction and reactivates the search for other objects. This cycle follows a consistent sequence: digital stimuli activate *taṇhā*; *taṇhā* drives comparison and the pursuit of validation; FOMO or flexing reinforces *upādāna*; and temporary satisfaction ultimately produces *dukkha* in the form of anxiety, inadequacy, and dependence on external recognition (Bodhi, 2021; Gethin, 1998; Peacock, 2018; Somaratne, 2021c).

Awareness of *anicca* establishes a pattern that directly opposes the mechanisms of FOMO and flexing. An analysis of Buddhist texts demonstrates that the objects that attract attention in digital spaces—including trends, popularity, possessions, and social recognition—continually change, remain unstable, and cannot last permanently. When users regard these objects as things that they must acquire or maintain to preserve their identities, they strengthen their attachment and perpetuate the cycle of *taṇhā*. In contrast, an understanding that every experience remains impermanent reduces the tendency to use digital trends as measures of self-worth. This awareness supports the development of inner contentment, or *santutthi*, which enables individuals to accept what they possess without continually pursuing recognition, new objects, or experiences that other people have obtained. Within this context, inner contentment does not depend on the intensity of digital engagement or audience responses. Instead, it rests on the ability to release attachment to constantly changing objects. This pattern moves in the opposite direction from FOMO and flexing. While both phenomena sustain the cycle of *taṇhā* through the pursuit of external validation, an understanding of *anicca* and the cultivation of inner contentment weaken this impulse by redirecting attention toward inner stability that does not depend on changes in the digital world (Wangmo & Kumar, 2025).

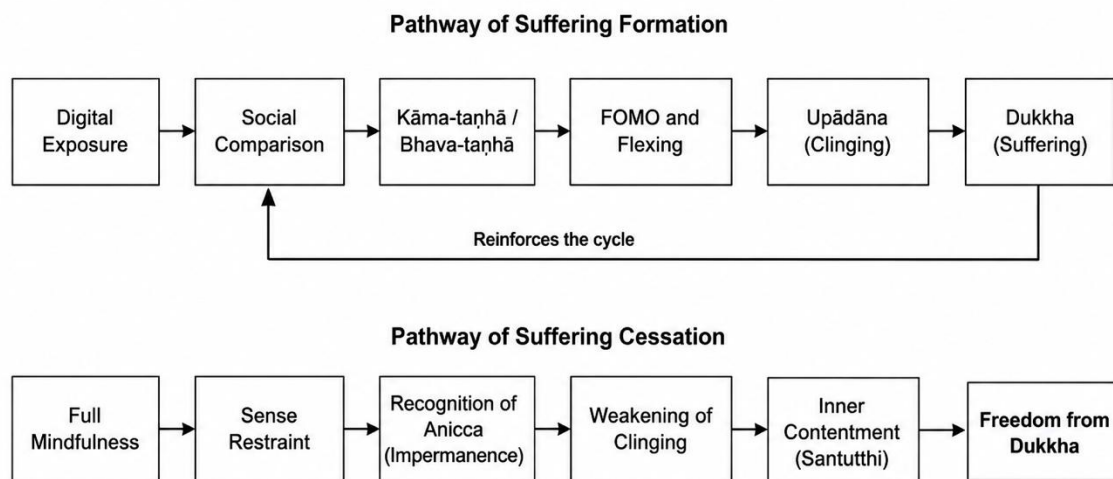


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Digital *Taṇhā* Cycle and the Path toward the Cessation of *Dukkha*

Source: Developed by the authors based on a synthesis of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (SN 56.11), Rāhula (1974), Bodhi (2021), Somaratne (2021c), Tandon et al. (2021), Fioravanti et al. (2021), Cleveland and Yuan (2026), and Yusainy et al. (2025).

The model presented in Figure 1 demonstrates that digital suffering does not arise from a single cause. Instead, a sequence that connects media exposure, social

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comparison, *taṇhā*, FOMO, flexing, and *upādāna* produces this suffering. The first pathway shows that digital exposure provides both objects of desire and standards for comparison. *Kāma-taṇhā* and *bhava-taṇhā* then transform these stimuli into desires to obtain pleasure, maintain relevance, and gain recognition. FOMO and flexing subsequently operate as two mutually reinforcing expressions of desire before they develop into attachment and *dukkha*. In contrast, the second pathway identifies mindfulness, sense restraint, an understanding of *anicca*, the weakening of attachment, and *santutthi* as stages that interrupt the cycle. This model confirms that efforts to address FOMO and flexing cannot rely solely on limiting social media use. Individuals must also transform how they respond to stimuli, construct their identities, and evaluate the sources of happiness. Therefore, liberation from digital *dukkha* requires individuals to shift their orientation from external validation toward inner stability that trends, possessions, and audience attention do not determine.

The literature synthesis demonstrates that a *Dhamma*-based approach to FOMO and flexing does not require individuals to avoid technology. Instead, it transforms how they relate to digital objects. Buddhist texts and contemporary literature consistently identify four approaches: cultivating mindfulness (*satī*) to recognize the emergence of desire at an early stage, practicing sense restraint (*indriya-saṃvara*) to limit attachment to digital stimuli, understanding *anicca* to recognize the instability of trends, popularity, and social validation, and cultivating *santutthi* to develop inner contentment without depending on external recognition. These four elements operate sequentially. Mindfulness helps individuals recognize *taṇhā*, sense restraint limits the reinforcement of desire, an understanding of *anicca* weakens attachment, and *santutthi* provides a foundation for inner stability. This sequence demonstrates that individuals can address digital suffering not by eliminating social media but by transforming their mental responses to digital stimuli (Chan et al., 2022; Dhammavajiro et al., 2020; Rāhula, 1974; Wagner, 2020).

DISCUSSION

The mapping presented in the Results section demonstrates that FOMO does not arise merely as anxiety about missing information. Instead, it develops through a sequence of digital exposure, social comparison, the desire to follow trends, and the need to maintain one's presence within social networks. This pattern indicates that FOMO operates on two levels simultaneously. At the first level, users pursue stimulation, experiences, and novelty, which reflect *kāma-taṇhā*. At the second level, users attempt to remain visible, relevant, and recognized, which reflects *bhava-taṇhā*. *Māna* and *issā* reinforce both forms of desire because individuals continually measure their self-worth against the achievements and recognition that other people receive. When individuals repeat this process, digital connectivity no longer functions merely as a means of communication but becomes an object of attachment. Therefore, FOMO should be understood as a mechanism of digital suffering that connects desire, self-comparison, and dependence on social validation.

The relationship between FOMO and flexing follows a cyclical pattern because each stage creates the conditions that activate the next stage. Exposure to other people's achievements, possessions, and lifestyles encourages individuals to

evaluate themselves according to visible social standards. When individuals perceive themselves as inferior or left behind, they attempt to compensate through consumption, participation in trends, and the production of posts that affirm their social presence. Audience responses then provide temporary validation, but they do not resolve the sense of inadequacy because public attention changes rapidly and standards of success continually evolve. Individuals eventually seek new objects, experiences, or images to maintain the positions that they have constructed. This mechanism explains how FOMO can develop into flexing, while the resulting flexing content becomes a new source of FOMO for other users. The cycle provides no final point of satisfaction because each form of validation creates a new demand to update one's digital identity (Fioravanti et al., 2021; Milyavskaya et al., 2018; Siepmann et al., 2022; Yusainy et al., 2025).

A lack of user self-control alone cannot explain this cycle because social media architecture also shapes the intensity and repetition of desire. Notifications create a sense of urgency, algorithmic recommendations extend users' exposure to similar objects, and infinite-scrolling features remove the natural limits of information consumption. Popularity metrics transform social recognition into comparable numbers, while trending and personalization features accelerate the replacement of objects that users consider important. Therefore, platforms do not create *taṇhā* from nothing. Instead, they accelerate, quantify, and repeatedly present objects of desire through engagement-oriented design. This perspective expands the analysis of FOMO and flexing from an individual issue into a relational problem involving the interaction between internal impulses and technological structures that continually provide new stimuli (Alutaybi et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2022; Tandon et al., 2021).

The model in Figure 1 demonstrates that the transition from *taṇhā* to *upādāna* and *dukkha* occurs when individuals no longer experience desire merely as an impulse to acquire something but begin to attach that desire to their identities. *Taṇhā* arises as the desire for particular experiences, objects, attention, or social positions. Individuals develop *upādāna* when they incorporate possessions, projected images, and audience responses into their conceptions of "I" and "mine." At this stage, individuals perceive the loss of attention, the failure to follow trends, or the inability to maintain a particular image as a threat to the self. *Dukkha* then arises not merely because an object remains unavailable but because individuals base their inner peace on conditions that continually change and remain beyond their control. Therefore, consumption and validation provide only temporary satisfaction, while attachment sustains anxiety, inadequacy, and dependence on external recognition (Amaro, 2021; Bodhi, 2021; Gethin, 1998; Somaratne, 2021c).

This study proposes the concept of digital *taṇhā* to explain a form of desire that arises not only from internal impulses but also from platform architecture, social metrics, and the circulation of user representations. In digital spaces, algorithms produce and select objects of desire, users engage in public comparison, platforms quantify validation, and individuals must continually update their identities to remain visible. These conditions make *taṇhā* relational because other users' representations shape an individual's desires. They also make *taṇhā* technological because platform design influences the intensity and objects of desire. This concept does not replace the classical Buddhist understanding of *taṇhā* as the

cause of *dukkha*. Instead, it extends that understanding by demonstrating how digital environments can systematically organize, accelerate, and reproduce desire. Therefore, this study contributes theoretically by connecting Buddhist mental structures with the sociotechnological mechanisms that integrate FOMO, flexing, *upādāna*, and *dukkha* into a single analytical cycle.

The findings demonstrate that the type of object displayed does not determine flexing. Instead, the process of transforming an object into a symbol of identity and social status defines the practice. Technological products, luxury goods, exclusive travel, professional achievements, physical appearance, and social relationships acquire new meanings when users curate them to distinguish themselves from others. Therefore, flexing cannot be understood as an ordinary practice of sharing information. The emphasis on brands, exclusivity, visual composition, and anticipated likes and comments indicates that users design posts to create particular impressions before their audiences. Digital metrics then transform recognition into a measurable outcome, so users assess the success of their representations through the numbers of views, comments, and followers. This pattern aligns with studies of conspicuous consumption, which demonstrate that social media expands the function of goods from objects of consumption into instruments of self-presentation and status display (Cleveland & Yuan, 2026; Siepmann et al., 2022; Susanto et al., 2023; Yusainy et al., 2025).

From a Buddhist perspective, flexing reflects *bhava-taṇhā* because its primary purpose extends beyond ownership to the construction of an identity as a wealthy, successful, modern, influential, religious, or exclusively connected individual. The displayed objects merely serve as media through which individuals maintain their symbolic existence in the eyes of an audience. However, this impulse also originates from *kāma-taṇhā*, which refers to the desire to obtain pleasure, novelty, and enjoyment through particular goods or experiences. This sequence develops into *upādāna* when individuals base their self-worth on possessions and audience responses. Therefore, the central problem of flexing does not lie in owning or displaying something but in attaching one's identity to possessions, images, and public recognition. At this stage, social validation no longer functions as an additional consequence; instead, it reinforces the continuous need to update one's image.

The effects of flexing also extend beyond the individuals who engage in it because this practice creates standards of success that the public consumes. The normalization of exclusive lifestyles can increase consumption pressure, intensify social comparison, and generate FOMO among other users. When public officials or influential figures engage in flexing, the practice can also generate distrust and ethical tensions in communication because representations of luxury contrast with unequal social conditions (Hidayat et al., 2024; Rachman et al., 2023; Udasmoro & Marai, 2025). These findings extend the literature on conspicuous consumption by demonstrating that flexing constitutes not only a status practice but also a combination of *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā*, *māna*, and *upādāna*. Consumer objects serve as media for maintaining the continuity of the symbolic self, while social validation strengthens attachment to an identity that requires continuous renewal.

The integrated findings of this study demonstrate that FOMO and flexing form a reciprocal relationship that sustains the cycle of digital *taṇhā*. Flexing content

provides objects for comparison through curated displays of possessions, achievements, and lifestyles, while these comparisons generate a sense of falling behind among other users. FOMO then drives consumption, participation in trends, and self-presentation as efforts to match visible standards. The new posts that emerge from this process become forms of flexing and create further objects for comparison. Therefore, FOMO does not merely result from the consumption of digital representations, and flexing does not merely constitute self-expression. Instead, these phenomena operate as two mutually reproducing mechanisms through the pursuit of relevance and social validation (Fioravanti et al., 2021).

This relationship follows a cyclical pattern because the process provides no final point of satisfaction. Digital exposure encourages self-evaluation, self-evaluation produces a sense of falling behind, and this sense of falling behind generates a desire to compensate through consumption and demonstrative posts. Audience responses provide validation, but this validation remains temporary because public attention shifts and standards of success continually change. New trends, products, or images that users perceive as more relevant quickly replace each new achievement. This mechanism explains the transition from *taṇhā* to *upādāna* and *dukkha*. *Taṇhā* operates as the impulse to acquire, *upādāna* arises when individuals attach objects and recognition to their identities, and *dukkha* emerges in the form of dissatisfaction, anxiety, and dependence on external responses (Amaro, 2021; Bodhi, 2021; Gethin, 1998; Somaratne, 2021a).

The interaction between internal impulses and social media architecture also produces the cycle of digital *taṇhā*. Notifications accelerate users' responses, algorithmic recommendations and personalization prolong exposure, infinite scrolling removes the boundaries of consumption, and popularity metrics and trending features transform recognition and relevance into quantifiable outcomes. Social media does not create *taṇhā* from nothing. Instead, platform design accelerates, quantifies, and repeatedly presents objects of desire. On this basis, this study proposes the concept of digital *taṇhā* to explain a form of desire that originates not only from internal impulses but also from the circulation of user representations, social metrics, and algorithmic selection. This concept extends the classical understanding of *taṇhā* by demonstrating that desire in digital spaces becomes both relational and technological: other users shape it, platforms sustain it, and continuous identity updates reproduce it (Alutaybi et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2022; Tandon et al., 2021).

Limiting social media use can reduce exposure, but this strategy does not automatically eliminate the need for validation, the habit of self-comparison, or attachment to a digital image. Studies of digital detox indicate that temporary abstinence from digital devices can affect mood, anxiety, and craving, but its effects do not always address the psychological factors that drive individuals to reconnect (Robertson et al., 2023; Wilcockson et al., 2019). Therefore, reducing the duration of social media access alone cannot adequately address FOMO and flexing. A *Dhamma*-based approach transforms how individuals respond to stimuli by positioning *sati* as the ability to recognize the emergence of *taṇhā*, anxiety, and impulsive urges before they develop into automatic actions. This position aligns with studies that demonstrate how mindfulness can help users distinguish actual

needs from digital impulses and reduce reactive responses to social comparison (Chan et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Uthaphan & Phooriko (Phutawang), 2024).

The recognition of *taṇhā* requires the complementary practice of *indriya-saṃvara*, which involves regulating one's relationship with sensory stimuli without rejecting technology entirely. In digital contexts, individuals can apply this principle by managing notifications, limiting exposure to accounts that trigger comparison, establishing periods of use, pausing before responding to impulsive urges, and selecting content consciously. These strategies reduce the reinforcement of desire at an early stage, but individuals can weaken attachment only when they understand *anicca*. FOMO and flexing depend on the assumption that individuals must maintain trends, audience attention, products, and social images. An understanding of impermanence challenges this assumption by demonstrating that popularity remains unstable, objects lose their novelty, and digital identities continually change. Therefore, exposure management limits external triggers, while an understanding of *anicca* corrects how individuals evaluate the objects that social media presents.

The next stage involves cultivating *santutthi*, or inner contentment that does not base self-worth on public recognition. *Santutthi* does not signify passivity or resistance to development. Instead, it enables individuals to use technology and consume goods proportionally without using social metrics as foundations for self-worth. These four strategies form a unified path toward ending *dukkha*: *sati* recognizes *taṇhā*, *indriya-saṃvara* limits its reinforcement, an understanding of *anicca* weakens *upādāna*, and *santutthi* cultivates contentment that does not depend on external validation. This path confirms that individuals do not overcome digital suffering by eliminating social media but by transforming their internal relationships with stimuli, identities, and objects of desire, as illustrated in Figure 1 (see Figure 1).

Previous studies of FOMO and digital addiction have generally emphasized repetitive social media use, anxiety, craving, and the need to remain connected as primary psychological mechanisms (Fioravanti et al., 2021; Milyavskaya et al., 2018; Tandon et al., 2021; Wilcockson et al., 2019). This study supports this pattern but extends the explanation by demonstrating that digital impulses do not operate solely through affiliation needs or weak self-control. *Taṇhā* as the impulse to acquire, *māna* as a mechanism of self-comparison, *issā* as discomfort with other people's advantages, and *upādāna* as attachment to connectivity and social validation also shape FOMO. This perspective reframes FOMO from a mere symptom of problematic media use into a sequence of suffering that involves desire, identity, and attachment to external recognition.

Studies of conspicuous consumption and flexing have demonstrated that individuals use goods, experiences, and lifestyles to gain status, construct identities, and attract audience responses (Cleveland & Yuan, 2026; Siepmann et al., 2022; Yusainy et al., 2025). Meanwhile, studies of mindfulness and digital Buddhism have confirmed that mindfulness can reduce impulsive use and support users' well-being (Chan et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Uthaphan & Phooriko (Phutawang), 2024). This study connects these two bodies of literature within a more comprehensive framework. Status motives in flexing develop into *upādāna* and *dukkha*, while the proposed approach extends beyond mindfulness as a self-regulation technique. This

study positions *sati*, *indriya-saṃvara*, *anicca*, and *santutthi* as a unified pathway for interrupting digital *taṇhā*. Therefore, this study bridges the literature on digital psychology, symbolic consumption, and Buddhist ethics through a model that explains both the formation and cessation of digital suffering.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its formulation of digital *taṇhā* as a relational and technological mechanism that connects platform exposure, social comparison, FOMO, flexing, *upādāna*, and *dukkha* within a unified analytical framework. Previous studies have tended to discuss FOMO as psychological anxiety, flexing as conspicuous consumption, and mindfulness as a self-regulation strategy separately. In contrast, this study demonstrates that FOMO and flexing form a reciprocal relationship that continually reproduces itself through *kāma-taṇhā* and *bhava-taṇhā*. This study also extends the classical concept of *taṇhā* by emphasizing that digital desire does not arise solely from internal impulses; algorithms, popularity metrics, personalization, and engagement-oriented platform architecture also reinforce it. The conceptual model further strengthens this contribution by explaining not only the pathway through which digital *dukkha* develops but also the pathway through which individuals can interrupt it by cultivating *sati*, practicing *indriya-saṃvara*, understanding *anicca*, and developing *santutthi*. Therefore, this study contributes theoretically to the field of digital Buddhism and offers an interdisciplinary framework for understanding how technology, identity, desire, and suffering intertwine in social media life.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that FOMO and flexing do not constitute two separate digital phenomena. Instead, they represent two mutually reinforcing expressions within the cycle of digital *taṇhā*. FOMO arises from the desire to obtain experiences, information, and recognition, which reflects *kāma-taṇhā* and *bhava-taṇhā*. Flexing, meanwhile, functions as a practice of identity production that transforms possessions, achievements, and lifestyles into status symbols. *Māna*, *issā*, and social comparison strengthen both phenomena, which subsequently develop into *upādāna* when individuals attach their self-worth to trends, images, and audience responses. Under these conditions, digital satisfaction remains temporary, while the need to remain visible, relevant, and recognized continually produces *dukkha* in the form of anxiety, inadequacy, and dependence on external validation.

The scientific contribution of this study lies in its formulation of digital *taṇhā* as a relational and technological mechanism. This concept extends the classical Buddhist understanding of *taṇhā* by demonstrating that desire in digital spaces arises not only from internal impulses but also from algorithms, popularity metrics, personalization, and engagement-oriented platform architecture. This study also proposes a conceptual model that connects digital exposure, social comparison, FOMO, flexing, *upādāna*, and *dukkha*. At the same time, the model formulates a pathway for interrupting this cycle through *sati*, *indriya-saṃvara*, an understanding of *anicca*, and the cultivation of *santutthi*. Therefore, this study integrates digital psychology, symbolic consumption, and Buddhist ethics within a unified analytical framework that explains both the formation and cessation of digital suffering.

This study has several limitations because it employs a literature review design and does not test the digital *taṇhā* model using empirical data from social media users. The analysis also focuses on *Theravāda* Buddhist sources and does not systematically compare perspectives from other Buddhist traditions or different religious frameworks. In addition, this study does not directly measure the relationships among platform features, user characteristics, and the intensity of FOMO and flexing. Future studies should test this model through in-depth interviews, digital observation, surveys, or mixed-methods designs across different age groups and social media platforms. Researchers should also develop instruments to measure *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā*, *upādāna*, and *dukkha* in digital behavior so that they can empirically test, refine, and apply the concept of digital *taṇhā* more broadly.

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