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Consumer psychology in the digital era: the impact of social media on impulsive buying

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Abstract

The transformation of communication models in the digital age has produced profound changes in both the cognitive and affective dimensions of consumer behavior. One particularly salient phenomenon – impulsive buying facilitated by intensive use of social media—has become a focal point of contemporary psychological research. This paper offers a theoretical and empirical synthesis of current findings on psychological processes that stimulate and shape impulsive purchasing decisions within digital environments. Key factors such as impaired self-regulation, emotional arousal, heuristic information processing, and digital cognitive overload are examined in depth. Special attention is given to the influence of algorithmically driven stimuli, visually dominant content, and social comparison mechanisms in triggering purchasing impulses. The aim of this paper is to identify the principal psychological determinants of this behavioral pattern and contribute to the development of integrated models capable of validly explaining the dynamics of impulsive consumption in the context of digital hyperconnectivity.

Keywords: *consumer psychology, impulsive buying, digital environment, psychological factors, social media*

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, the rapid development of information and communication technologies and the widespread presence of the Internet at all levels have transformed the ways in which people perceive, process, and use information. The modern accelerated development of information and communication technologies, along with the widespread use of the Internet at all levels, has transformed the way humans perceive, process, and use information. Social networks, as the most influential product of this digital revolution, have become the key platform not only for interpersonal communication but also for the creation, distribution, exchange, and consumption of marketing content. The traditional linear model of communication and one-way messages sent from producer to consumer has now been replaced by interactive, multi-layered, and algorithmically controlled systems. In this way, the ground has been prepared for the emergence of new patterns of consumer behavior, among which impulse buying has become one of the most researched topics.

Impulse buying, defined as an unplanned and immediate purchase decision driven by intense emotional arousal and reduced cognitive control, acquires a more complex meaning and role in the digital context. On social media, consumers are continuously exposed to visually dominant and emotionally charged stimuli, often personalized through sophisticated algorithms that analyze users' searches, past purchases, demographics, and even emotional interaction patterns. All of this is designed to optimize the placement of content with the highest potential to trigger a purchase impulse in the audience.

In addition to the partly mentioned technological factors, the influence of psychological mechanisms plays a decisive role. In digitally mediated communication, the temporal gap between desire and the opportunity to purchase is significantly reduced - the decision-making process is compressed to only a few seconds, facilitated by integrated "click-to-buy" options. At the same time, digital cognitive overload, generated by the constant influx of information and notifications, can impair the capacity for rational evaluation of offers. Emotional arousal, intensified by visual stimuli and social validation cues (likes, comments, views), further weakens self-regulation and self-control, thereby increasing the likelihood of impulsive responses.

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A particularly important role in this process is played by mechanisms of social comparison and the need for social approval. On social media, consumers unconsciously compare themselves with idealized portrayals of other people's lives, which can produce dissonance between their current reality and desired identity. In such cases, purchasing - especially impulsive buying - functions as a rapid strategy for reducing psychological discomfort and achieving a sense of belonging to a particular group or status level.

Understanding the phenomenon of impulsive buying in the digital era carries multiple implications: theoretically, as it contributes to the development of new models of consumer behavior that account for the influence of algorithmically mediated communication flows; and practically, as it offers guidelines for the creation of ethically sustainable marketing strategies and interventions aimed at safeguarding consumer well-being. Given the increasing intensity of digital connectivity, the identification of key psychological determinants of this behavioral pattern becomes essential, both for the timely recognition of risks and for strengthening consumer resilience against undesirable impulses.

Building on the outlined theoretical and empirical frameworks, this review paper seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the psychological processes that stimulate and shape impulsive buying in digital environments, with a particular focus on the role of social media as a catalyst of this phenomenon. Based on an analysis of selected literature and relevant studies, the discussion will address the factors linking emotional arousal, heuristic information processing, cognitive overload, and algorithmic personalization in creating conditions conducive to impulsive consumption.

2. Theoretical framework and conceptualization of impulsive buying

In contemporary consumer psychology, impulsive buying is conceptualized as a sudden, strong, and hedonically charged urge to purchase a product, in which cognitive evaluation is reduced or suppressed in favor of affective drive. This description stems from the classical definition according to which a "buying impulse" is a spontaneous and often urgent urge to act, phenomenologically distinct from planned and rational consumption. Historically, earlier marketing studies indicated that impulsive buying is not monolithic: it encompasses different types of impulses, all of which involve a disruption of prior intentions and the dominance of situational stimuli at the moment of decision-making. This typology remains useful today, as it allows for a nuanced differentiation of the roles of external cues (advertisements, promotional messages) and internal states (affect, motives) in generating impulses (Hofmann et al.,2009).

Considering the theoretical continuum of impulsive behavior across past decades, impulsive buying, as an unplanned and immediate purchasing decision characterized by strong affective drive and minimal reflective cognitive control, closely aligns with Rook's (1987) classical interpretation of a "buying impulse" as a sudden, urgent urge that makes behavior substantially different from previously planned purchases. He identifies three primary elements observed in all impulsive buying behavior: the purchase is unplanned, difficult to control, and accompanied by an emotional reaction. Early research further conceptualized impulsive buying as unplanned activity executed without additional deliberation. The phenomenological aspect of impulses is additionally described in the works of Rook and Hoch (1985) and Piron (1993), who characterize impulsive buying through sudden and imperative desire, feelings of powerlessness, affective experiences (pleasure, guilt), or the absence of rational consideration of consequences. Furthermore, according to Weinberg and Gottwald (1982), impulsive buying involves purchases with high emotional arousal, low cognitive control, and predominantly reactive behavior.

Impulsive buying behavior entails a sudden and spontaneous urge to act, representing a clear departure from ongoing behavioral patterns, accompanied by psychological disequilibrium as well as internal conflict and struggle (Rook & Hoch, 1985). Iyver (1989) emphasizes that all impulsive purchases are at least unplanned, but not all unplanned purchases are necessarily made impulsively, highlighting that the key dynamic element of impulsivity lies in consumers' internal psychological motivations. An integrative approach to the consumer experience aims to provide a synthesis by linking the complementary roles of reason and emotion in consumer behavior, as focusing exclusively on one aspect - whether actions or reactions - may lead to a distorted perception of the consumer experience (Holbrook et al., 1990).

Unplanned purchases, resulting from exposure to a stimulus and decided "on the spot," can be differentiated by five key elements: a sudden and spontaneous urge to act, psychological disequilibrium, internal conflict and struggle, reduced cognitive evaluation, and purchasing without regard for consequences (Piron, 1991). A change in desire or willpower can cause the consumer to cross the "buying threshold," resulting in a purchase, where emotions influence cognitive factors (e.g., desire motivating rationalization of negative consequences) and vice versa (e.g., cost analysis reducing desire) (Hoch & Lewenstein, 1991). Impulsive buying behavior is often intense and hedonically complex, with the speed of the impulsive decision-making process predicting the degree of deliberate and thoughtful consideration of information and choice alternatives (Han et al., 1991).

Buying impulsiveness is defined as the consumer's tendency to purchase spontaneously, unreflectively, immediately, and kinetically, with highly impulsive buyers more likely to respond to spontaneous buying stimuli; their shopping lists are "open" and receptive to sudden, unexpected purchase ideas (Rook & Fisher, 1995). Moreover, impulsive buying can be influenced by internal states or personality traits, as well as environmental and sensory factors; lack of self-control, stress reactivity, and absorptive capacity are major general personality factors underlying the tendency to buy impulsively (Youn & Faber, 2000).

Dholakkia (2000) proposes a model examining cognitive and volitional processes, distinguishing between consonant (harmonious) and dissonant (conflicting) impulses, elaborating on the role of the impulsivity trait, situational variables, and constraining factors in enacting or resisting impulsive consumption. Shopping experiences can elicit emotions such as feeling uplifted or energized, as consumers shop not merely to acquire products but also to satisfy diverse psychological needs (Hausman, 2000).

Impulsive buying can also be defined as the act of purchasing undertaken without prior recognition of a problem or formation of a buying intention upon entering the store, while the degree of impulsiveness describes how prone an individual is to unintended, immediate, and unreflective purchases (Weun et al.,1998). Overall, impulsive buying behavior represents a complex interaction of internal motivations, affective states, and external stimuli, making it a significant phenomenon for study in consumer psychology.

Although impulse buying, as a psychological phenomenon, has been the subject of research for more than five decades, there have been relatively few empirical attempts to examine its normative aspects, which refer to consumers' normative evaluations—that is, their own judgment regarding the appropriateness of such purchasing behavior (Rook & Fischer, 1995). In this context, the focus is on consumers' value-based judgments about whether impulse buying is acceptable or not, particularly in terms of its alignment with personal and social norms—whether the consumer's behavior in impulsive purchasing is properly directed or, instead, irresponsible and immature; whether it is appropriate to spend money on items that are not necessary or essential at the given moment; and, more broadly, what forms of behavior individuals exhibit in challenging situations and to what extent they are able to regulate psychological mechanisms such as emotions and self-control. It is also relevant here to mention the relationship between the trait of buying impulsiveness and related purchasing behavior, which is considered significant only when consumers perceive acting on impulse as appropriate (Rook & Fischer, 1995).

3. Digital transformation of consumer behavior

Contemporary consumer practices cannot be examined outside the context of accelerated digitalization. The linear decision-making model traditionally proceeds through the stages of need recognition, evaluation of alternatives, and making a rational choice, whereas today's purchasing patterns increasingly reflect fragmented, emotionally driven, and situationally conditioned decisions occurring on multiple levels (Hotoi,2024). Digital tools such as mobile applications, social networks, and integrated e-commerce platforms have created an environment in which the boundaries between desire and action have become significantly thinner and shorter, with decisions being made in real time and under strong contextual influence (Kabir et al., 2025). The personalization of consumer experiences represents one of the key perspectives of this transformation. Based on processed user preferences, algorithms deliver content tailored to prior interactions, thereby reducing cognitive effort in decision-making and increasing the likelihood of impulsive behavior. This, in turn, creates space for the intensified influence of emotional factors, leading to a rise in impulse-driven purchases (Ngo et al.,2025). Thus, personalization is not merely a technical tool for enhancing sales, but a psychological catalyst that amplifies the consumer's sense of relevance and urgency regarding the offer or purchase.

In addition to personalization, the digital environment is also characterized by the dominance of audiovisual formats: dynamic formats such as short video clips or live-stream sales increase users' affective engagement through entertainment, aesthetic pleasure, and social interaction, thereby reducing consumers' ability to maintain cognitive distance from the commercial message (Ngo et al., 2025). Consequently, impulsive purchasing is increasingly tied to states of emotional arousal and pleasure, rather than to rational evaluation.

Digital marketing, on the other hand, demonstrates a distinct capacity to integrate diverse social and normative stimuli into consumer communication. Influencer recommendations, peer reviews, and mechanisms of social proof emerge as powerful drivers of purchasing decisions, as consumers internalize the attitudes and behaviors of their digital communities as normatively acceptable (Kabir et al., 2025). In this way, digital contexts simultaneously shape cognitive representations of purchasing desirability and affective responses that lead to its immediate execution. Thus, the digital transformation of consumer behavior implies a threefold shift:

- Technological – through the transition from traditional to interactive and personalized channels of communication;
- Psychological – through the heightened role of emotions, reduced self-control, and accelerated decision-making;
- Social – through the internalization of digital norms and collective behavior patterns.

In this sense, digital transformation can be understood not merely as a process of market modernization, but as a profound restructuring of consumers' psychological dynamicscons - tituting a key framework for understanding impulsive buying in the digital era.

In more recent theoretical approaches, impulse buying is increasingly viewed through the lens of self-regulation and habitual behavior. Verplanken and Sato (2011) emphasize that impulsive purchasing behavior is largely associated with automatic action patterns that bypass reflective cognition. In other words, once an impulse is formed, individuals often respond in accordance with deeply ingrained habits and emotional cues, while their capacity for self-control is temporarily weakened. This explanation provides a broader framework for understanding why identical external stimuli do not elicit the same reaction in all consumers - the crucial factor lies in the individual's ability to manage their own automatic responses. In this way, impulse buying can be understood not only as a short-term affective urge but also as the outcome of an interaction between stable psychological characteristics (e.g., impulsivity tendencies), habits shaped through prior experiences, and situational control in the moment. Particularly important is the authors' claim that impulse buying represents a failure of self-regulation: when attention is depleted or cognitive resources are weakened, individuals are more prone to making impulse-driven decisions. This interpretation, which links classical descriptions of impulse with contemporary models of behavioral control in the consumer context, contributes to a modern understanding of the phenomenon (Verplanken & Sato, 2011).

4. The role of social media in fostering impulse buying

In contemporary consumer civilization, social media are not merely channels of communication but represent complex ecosystems interwoven with individual needs, social influences, and marketing pressures. Their importance in stimulating impulsive buying lies in their simultaneous impact on consumers' attention, emotions, and social norms. The distinctiveness of social media is reflected in their ability to provide users with a continuous flow of visually appealing and emotionally charged information, thereby creating fertile ground for rapid, affect-driven purchasing decisions. Unlike traditional media and earlier eras, social media combine elements of personalized advertising, social comparison, and real-time interaction, which further enhances their persuasive power.

Social media function as central psychological and social mediators whose role in encouraging impulsive buying is complex. Above all, the distinction between active and passive use of these platforms is important in shaping users' emotional experiences. Empirical research conducted among Chinese university students shows that both active and passive social media use amplify feelings of enjoyment, while passive use also contributes to the emergence of depressive states. Furthermore, both emotional reactions—enjoyment and depression—show a strong correlation with impulsive buying tendencies. Materialism amplifies the effect of enjoyment on impulsive consumption, whereas self-control mitigates the effect of depression on impulsive buying (Chen et al., 2022).

One particularly significant and interesting mechanism explaining the influence of social media on impulsive purchasing is the phenomenon of "social proof." When consumers see that their friends, acquaintances, or influencers purchase certain products and share positive experiences, the likelihood of an impulsive reaction increases, driven by the need for belonging and the desire for social approval. This behavioral pattern supports the idea that impulsive decisions are not merely the result of internal psychological motives but also of processes of social validation (Yang et al., 2024). In this study, conducted on a sample of 625 respondents, several relevant factors related to the impact of social media were identified, including source credibility (comprising attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness), social presence, and consumer innovativeness. The results show that attractiveness and expertise significantly influence the "inspired-by" phase of consumers, while trustworthiness does not have a notable effect. Moreover, consumer inspiration leads to the "inspired-to" phase, which directly triggers impulsive purchasing.

The first phase ("inspired-by") refers to the initial stimulus in which social media content provokes an emotional or cognitive reaction, evoking a sense of something "new, interesting, or worthy of attention" that sparks user inspiration. Source attributes—such as content appeal or influencer expertise—together with the perception of social presence and individual innovativeness, directly foster this sense of inspiration. The second phase ("inspired-to") marks the transition from feeling to intention and action. At this stage, the consumer, driven by prior inspiration, develops a desire to possess a particular product, transforming inspiration into a concrete impulse: "I want this now." The authors conclude that this phase directly leads to impulsive buying, as it involves the conversion of affective experience into quick, uncontrolled purchase decisions (Yang et al., 2024).

The study by Liu et al. (2023) emphasizes the importance of social media influencers in shaping purchase decisions. The findings show that functional values (such as product usefulness and practical features) and emotional values (such as satisfaction and enjoyment) significantly contribute to impulsive buying, while the perception of social value (i.e., how a product affects social status or group belonging) does not exert a direct effect on impulsive behavior. The authenticity of influencers—their sincerity in representation—and their persuasiveness emerge as key drivers of impulsive purchasing. Moreover, influencer authenticity and credibility enhance product perception by allowing the emotional dimension to outweigh rational purchase considerations, thereby creating a context of trust and identification that can be decisive in triggering impulsive behavior (Liu et al., 2023).

The emotional dynamics linking social media to impulsive buying are reflected in users' interactions with content, which can influence their immediate emotional responses. These emotions span a broad continuum—from enthusiasm and inspiration to feelings of reward and relief—and they tend to reduce cognitive control. Research indicates that active and passive social media use can have different effects: while active participation (e.g., interacting with content, creating one's own posts) can reduce feelings of loneliness and foster positive emotions, passive use (e.g., browsing others' posts) may induce frustration, comparison, and negative feelings, which, when combined with low self-control, lead to increased impulsivity (Zafar et al., 2021).

In terms of marketing strategies employed by brands in the digital environment, visually appealing advertisements, time-limited promotions, and offers of exclusivity create psychological pressure through a sense of urgency. These stimuli interact with consumers' psychological predispositions, such as impulsivity tendencies, the need for stimulation, or a propensity for self-reward. Advertising messages that combine emotional appeals with dynamic visual elements increase the likelihood of impulsive buying, particularly among younger consumers who are digitally literate and highly engaged on social media (Kavas & Kavas, 2025).

Empirical findings indicate that different patterns of social media use generate distinct emotional shifts. For instance, active participation—through commenting or posting—is typically associated with positive affective states, whereas passive browsing can evoke negative emotions such as boredom or dissatisfaction. Interestingly, both positive and negative emotional states act as reinforcing factors of impulsive buying, particularly when individual traits such as self-control and materialism come into play (Chen et al., 2022).

Social proof mechanisms (likes, comments, influencer recommendations) exert a strong influence: observing the actual or perceived actions of others on the network enhances the perceived acceptability of impulsive behavior, making unplanned purchases more likely. Influencers, through their impact and authenticity, act as important catalysts of such behavior, demonstrating that the effectiveness of digital endorsements often surpasses that of traditional marketing (Koay et al., 2021).

The technical architecture of platforms should not be overlooked as a catalyst. Visually appealing interfaces that are easy to navigate and provide a sense of security, together with elements of "serendipitous discovery" when users scroll out of boredom, increase the likelihood of impulsive buying. According to the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model, these technological stimuli influence consumer decision-making through perceived value and emotional responses, ultimately facilitating spontaneous purchasing decisions (Xue et al., 2024).

5. Methodological empirical insights on impulse buying in the digital environment

Impulsive buying in the digital environment is not determined solely by external stimuli, but rather results from a complex interaction between the design of digital platforms, individual affective states, and self-regulatory capacities, as demonstrated by empirical literature. For instance, a comprehensive meta-analysis based on 54 studies (Zhao et al., 2021) classified the key determinants of impulsive purchasing into three categories: website design (such as visual appeal and ease of use), marketing stimuli, and affective triggers. These factors were found to be strongly and positively associated with impulsive buying, with the exception of elements such as website security and negative emotions, which showed no significant effects. Furthermore, the economic context of the country in which the purchase takes place was identified as a moderating factor in shaping the strength of these influences (Zhao et al., 2021). Economic development, as a moderating variable, and the categorization of samples into developed and developing countries exert a significant moderating influence on the relationship between website visual appeal, ease of use, price, promotion, enjoyment, positive emotions, and online impulsive buying. For instance, for consumers in developed countries, the visual effect of a website plays a more crucial role, whereas for consumers in developing countries, ease of use represents a more important factor stimulating impulsive buying, as indicated by the cited research.

Another meta-analysis (Iyer, 2020) confirms the importance of emotions and self-control. Emotional states directly affect impulsive buying, while self-control partially mitigates such impulses, highlighting the complex dynamics of cognitive and affective processes. The findings suggest that consumers with higher levels of self-control, as well as those more susceptible to social norms, are less prone to impulsive buying. Understanding these constraints can assist marketing professionals in identifying stimuli that facilitate unplanned purchases while simultaneously reducing unrestrained impulsive buying that may lead to regret or consumer dissatisfaction. An interesting insight from this meta-analysis (Iyer, 2020) is the proposition that marketing professionals should balance between achieving immediate sales—which may result in consumer dissatisfaction—and demonstrating care for the consumer in order to encourage future product or service engagement. Given that emotions intensify impulsive buying, affective strategies should be favored in stimulating impulsive purchases that align with consumers' personal resources. The focus on self-control, social norms, and emotions represents a valuable resource for professionals seeking to reduce unhealthy impulsive buying behaviors characteristic of consumerist societies.

A substantial body of empirical research confirms that algorithmic personalization and recommendation systems exert a significant influence on consumers' impulsive decisions. For instance, Zhu et al. (2016) demonstrated that recommendation agents in e-commerce increase the likelihood of impulse buying by shaping consumers' perceptions, self-control, and overall satisfaction. Their findings are grounded in the fundamental behaviorist framework of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model, which posits that external digital stimuli affect internal psychological processes, subsequently leading to consumer behavior. One particularly important insight from this study is that one of the main purposes of online shopping lies in avoiding direct interaction with sales personnel. This absence of interpersonal pressure creates a sense of freedom, as consumers feel less obligated to make a purchase, even when they do not genuinely intend to buy a product. The perception of autonomy, combined with the lack of human factors in the online environment, was found to reinforce consumers' psychological sense of choice (Zhu et al., 2016).

Empirical findings by Gong and Jiang (2023) further confirm that live-streaming commerce, through interactive and dynamic product presentations, significantly enhances impulse buying. According to their results, the key determinant is the degree of consumer involvement with the product. Several independent variables were identified as influencing this factor, including the functional value of money, perceived product quality, perceived scarcity, immediate product feedback, and the perceived expertise of the streamer. Notably, product design functionality also emerged as a significant determinant, shaping affective engagement with the product (Gong & Jiang, 2023).

In everyday life within contemporary civilization, it is often observed that younger consumers perceive mobile app–based impulsive purchases as a form of entertainment and social interaction, whereas older users tend to engage in higher levels of cognitive evaluation prior to purchase. These patterns underscore generational differences in consumer behavior and social functioning. The marketing literature provides extensive evidence of the psychological and behavioral consequences of impulse buying, including post-purchase regret, complaints, negative word-of-mouth, and product return intentions. Given that impulsive consumption behaviors are preceded by distinct psychological processes (Dholakia, 2000), there is a pressing need for deeper understanding of these mechanisms, particularly in light of mediators and moderators shaping the relationship between mindfulness and online impulse buying behavior. As highlighted by Vihari et al. (2022), recognizing these individual-level predictors is essential for developing effective intervention strategies and consumer-oriented approaches. Therefore, it is important to understand the psychological mechanisms through which consumers can resist unplanned purchasing in the contemporary digital environment.

6. Conclusion

This review highlights the significant role of social networks in stimulating impulsive buying: they are not merely mediators between products and consumers but active generators of emotional experiences, social norms, and cognitive pressures. Therefore, impulsive buying in the digital era should be understood as the result of the interaction between individual dispositions, emotional stimulation, and the social environment shaped by social media. These platforms represent a complex digital ecosystem that fosters impulsive purchasing behavior not only through immediate access to products but also by influencing consumers' emotional, social, and cognitive mechanisms. Such an environment encourages affective—and often unreflective—action through the synergy of visual stimulation, algorithmic personalization, and social validation. The system of interaction between platform design and consumers' psychological needs makes impulsive buying a sophisticated phenomenon. Hence, social networks provide rapid access to products while simultaneously creating an atmosphere in which consumer reactions are grounded in affect, identity, and social connectedness—often in the complete absence of deeper cognitive analysis. Within this mixture of emotion, social approval, and technological manipulation lies the very essence of impulsive buying in the digital age.

This analysis offers valuable implications for professionals, researchers, and practitioners in the fields of marketing, consumer behavior, and digital communications. Understanding how social networks shape impulsive purchasing behavior enables experts to develop more effective strategies based not only on the functional and qualitative aspects of products but also on the emotional and social factors that drive consumer decision-making. In the academic sphere, this opens possibilities for more detailed exploration of the interactions among technology, psychology, and social processes, thereby deepening the understanding, prediction, and explanation of impulsive buying phenomena in digital environments. Practical implications include the development of ethical and sustainable approaches to digital marketing that balance commercial objectives with the protection of consumers from excessive and unreflective spending. Ultimately, understanding these mechanisms contributes to the advancement of education and training in marketing and consumer psychology, preparing future professionals to use digital tools responsibly and to better interpret the complex behavioral patterns of consumers in contemporary society.

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