

# Decoding Impulse Buying: A Systematic Analysis of Buying Determinants

**Dr. S. Suganya and Sandhya S**

Associate Professor, Department of Management

Research Scholar, Department of Management

CMS Institute of Management Studies, Coimbatore

**Abstract:** *Impulse buying, characterised by sudden, powerful, and persistent urges to purchase immediately, has evolved from a simple retail phenomenon into a cornerstone of global consumer economics. This article provides a systematic analysis of the dynamics and determinants governing unplanned purchasing behaviour in both physical and digital landscapes. Through a comprehensive literature review spanning 1950 to 2025, the study identifies the shift from traditional checkout aisle triggers to sophisticated, algorithm-driven digital prompts. Key findings suggest that impulse buying accounts for a significant portion of all e-commerce spending in 2026, driven by a complex interplay of personality traits, situational stimuli, and platform-specific design. By synthesising modern definitions and categorizing major determinants—including psychological, external, internal and contextual antecedents—this research offers a theoretical framework for understanding the impulsive urge in a hyper-connected marketplace. The article concludes with implications for marketers, consumers, and policy makers navigating the psychology of instant gratification.*

**Keywords:** Impulse buying; Consumer Behaviour; Systematic Literature Review; Impulse Buying Antecedents

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The Importance of Impulse Buying

In the current global economy, impulse buying is not just an ancillary consumer behaviour; rather, it is a vital force. Recent statistics have revealed that a significant percentage of retail trade exceeds 40% and can be found especially in retail markets like fashion and electronics, which record high levels of engagement. Impulse buying is also considered a vital force because of the change of retail disciplines away from needs fulfilment and into desires creation. For businesses, impulse buying offers a profitable opportunity while providing maximum turnover. For economics, it reflects the level of confidence among consumers and the marketing innovation performed.

### 1.2 Meaning of Impulse Buying

The academic definition of impulse buying has undergone tremendous changes. In the initial definition forwarded by Clover (1950) and Stern (1962), impulse buying was defined as merely unplanned purchasing. Yet, from a relatively modern psychological approach, impulse buying has been defined as the feeling of sudden strong desire for immediate purchase. Suddenly occurring, it is distinct from regular purchasing since it is impulsive rather than a deliberated purchase without high-level reflection of the consequences. Impulse buying is ascertained to be separated from reminder purchasing since it encompasses a feeling of hedonic struggle.

### 1.3 Major Domains of Impulse Buying

The study of impulse buying is generally divided into nine domains:

#### 1.3.1 The Psychological Domain

This is the organism component in the S-O-R model. This component centres around the inner cognitive and emotional states of the consumer. Trait Impulsivity is a personal attribute that is permanent, where the consumer is constantly



ready to react with a low threshold to biological urges. Affective state, when impulse buying sometimes functions as a sub-type of Mood Regulation. Consumers are subjected to Retail Therapy. This is where the consumer seeks to reduce negative emotional states like stress, or to enhance a positive state by engaging in impulse buying. According to the resource model, when the consumer is mentally exhausted, he or she is most likely to indulge in impulse buying, as his or her executive function fails.

### **1.3.2. The Atmospheric Domain**

This relates to Environmental Psychology in the shopping environment, whether physical or digital. Factors in physical store (Sensescape) may include tempo of background music (slower music increases dwell time/likelihood of impulsive buying), ambient scent, and warm lighting. Factors in digital atmospherics may include e-atmospherics, like website navigability, visual appeal, and high task relevance as opposed to low task relevancy. In 2026, this includes Metaverse environments as influenced by spatial cues.

### **1.3.3. The Socio-Cultural Domain**

Impulse buying is not absolute. Impulse buying is influenced by culture. Impulse buying is mediated by values in individualistic cultures such as the USA. Impulse buying in collectivistic cultures, such as in China, is mediated by the desire for impulse purchases as a result of social appeal, which is buying for the group. The impact of social surroundings or shopping with friends enhances impulse buying tendencies. On the other hand, shopping with family has been construed as a deterrent.

### **1.3.4. The Economic Domain**

The economic domain is primarily concerned with financial facilitators that convert a human psychological urge into a concrete action. One of the critical factors under this domain is disposable income and wealth; studies have shown that the more secure someone is financially, the lower their pain of paying, which subsequently decreases the psychological hurdles to impulsive action. This phenomenon is further amplified due to payment mechanisms, whereby the shift from traditional cash payments to digital wallet and Buy Now, Pay Later (BNPL) models has dramatically changed consumer interactions with money, particularly due to its ability to separate the pleasure of purchasing from the pain of paying, which consequently elevates the possibility of impulse purchasing among different consumer segments.

### **1.3.5. The Marketing Domain**

The marketing domain also focuses on the execution of commercial stimuli that play on bypassing rational, think-before-you-do responses to a marketing initiative, favouring an immediate response to an emotional prompt. One of the main marketing tools used is sales promotions, which include limited time only, Buy One, Get One Free (BOGO), or flash sales, all intended to instil a sense of urgency around the availability of a given idea or object, ensuring the consumer responds to the promotion before the opportunity goes away. Additionally, the marketing packaging of a given idea or object is a critical element, with eye-catching or premiumization styles intended to elicit an aesthesia response as opposed to a rational, utilitarian, or even budgetary response. All of these marketing techniques are powerful external influencers, leveraging the consumer's propensity as a prerequisite to triggering a quick shift from object exposure to impulse purchase.

### **1.3.6. The Ethics and Sustainability Domain**

The domain of ethics/sustainability may be said to signify a particularly critical area within international discourse on the dark side of consumerism. Impulse purchases have been shown to play a major role in the throwaway culture, which creates a cycle of consumption and waste that has a particularly high carbon footprint and contributes significantly to landfill waste. There is also a highly critical evaluation of digital nudging, where dark patterns are employed on consumer interfaces in order to trick consumers into pressing cart. Such a phenomenon represents the dichotomy between unscrupulous marketing techniques and the need for more salubrious consumer behaviour on a global level.



### 1.3.7. The Demographic Domain

This groups impulse behaviours along the lines of biological and life stage factors. However, age still plays a crucial role in impulse buying behaviour since younger consumers in Gen Z and Generation Alpha have a higher impulsivity quotient as their prefrontal cortex, or the control centre of their brains, continues to evolve along with technological savviness. Past studies on gender have indicated that females have impulsive buying behaviours for emotional or social items, while males have it for functional electronics; however, such differences are diminishing in 2026.

### 1.3.8. The Legal Domain

The legal domain refers to an environment wherein there exists regulation and protection for consumers from their own impulsive actions and unfair business practices. Some of the key segments of the legal domain include consumer protection measures, which impose rules for cooling-off periods, providing consumers with their legal right to return items within an allotted period (usually 14 days). Other notable segments include those which impose rules for predatory lending schemes under Buy Now, Pay Later (BNPL) services. In addition, data protection regulations, such as GDPR, prove to be essential elements for privacy protection by limiting the level of data usage for predicting and exploiting an individual's unique impulsive behaviour.

### 1.3.9. The Technological Domain

As represented by the technological domain, the cutting edge of the industry, the technology itself has moved away from mere observational study and into precise biological mapping. Using neuromarketing techniques such as fMRI (Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) and EEG (Electroencephalography), it is possible to observe the neurobiological conflict between the nucleus accumbens, or reward centre of the brain, and the prefrontal cortex, or control centre, as impulse purchase is recognized as the specific instant in time wherein a jolt of dopamine supplants cognitive control, using this scientific data as a foundation for algorithmic impulsivity, wherein historical patterns of data analysis predict exactly the precise instant of time, such as an auditor's access of a browsing engine during a midnight-hour period or a few days subsequent to payday.

## 1.4 Major Platforms in Impulse Buying

The channels used for impulse shopping have gone through an evolutionary period comprising three eras: a transition from physical environments to online and hyper-personalised environments. The most dominant and traditional environment remains physical store environments that successfully use strategic product placement at cash counters and store shelves to capitalize on impulse shopping amid physical visibility. This has given way to online environments dominated by online platforms like Amazon or eBay that use data analytics tools to provide hyper-personalized frequently bought together offers and Lightning Deals that encompass a sense of urgency for potential customers. Most recent is the introduction of social commerce that represents a new frontier for impulse shopping environments; 2026 introduces social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which have perfected a shoppable world for potential customers. These platforms have evolved a strategy involving short-form video advertising, live streaming and endorsements that allow a potential customer to transition through a seamless experience to a completed purchase within a matter of mere seconds, thus negating a cooling-off period altogether. Omnichannel brings a smooth journey of consumers blending E- com platforms, culminating the purchase in online and collecting from physical stores or at home/ office.

## II. METHODOLOGY

In this paper, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with a Meta-Synthesis approach has been considered for the analysis of the evolutionary trend of impulse buying. In this context, data was collected by searching several academic data sources such as ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar using relevant key words like Impulse Buying, Buying Determinants, etc. The time frame for data was decided as 1950-2025 to consider the complete evolutionary trend of impulse buying, i.e., right from the initiation of modern retailing to the advent of AI.



After screening, a total of over 450 articles were narrowed down based on citation impact and methodological rigor. Eventually, 85 seminal papers were selected based on depth of qualitative and quantitative analysis. For data analysis, a thematic synthesis approach was employed where findings were coded for four major antecedent dimensions of internal, external, contextual, and methodological constructs. Similarly, to ensure overall validity of findings, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework was employed to determine how the different environment stimulants (S) affect internal constructs (O), eventually causing impulse response (R). This helps in reconciling findings such as those on negative affect in a specific platform context.

### III. RESEARCH AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 3.1 Typology of Impulse Buying (1950–2025)

The classification of impulse behaviour has moved from simple logistical categories to complex psychological states.

| Era         | Primary Author / Concept   | Typology / Contribution  | Key Characteristics  |
|-------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| 1940s       | Dupont Studies (1945-1965) | The Unplanned Purchase   | Defined impulse as any item bought without a pre-written list.               |
| 1950s       | Clover (1950)              | Unplanned Mix            | Focused on product categories (candy, magazines) and physical placement.     |
| 1960s       | Stern (1962)               | The four classes of IB   | The core framework: Pure, Reminder, Suggestion, and Planned impulse.         |
| 1980s       | Rook (1987)                | The Urge Concept         | Psychological shift: defined the sudden, powerful, persistent urge.          |
| 1990s       | Han et al. (1991)          | Fashion Impulse          | Introduced social and novelty drivers; focus on self-identity.               |
| 2000        | Dholakia (2000)            | Motivational Antecedents | Explored the conflict between desire and willpower.                          |
| 2002        | Baumeister (2002)          | Ego Depletion            | Argued that self-control is a finite resource that degrades with use.        |
| 2009        | Parboteeah (2009)          | Online Impulse           | Applied S-O-R Model to web design, cues, and navigation.                     |
| 2011        | Wells et al. (2011)        | Website Quality Signals  | Linked high-quality interface signals to consumer trust and impulsive urges. |
| 2014        | Amos et al. (2014)         | Meta-Analytic Typology   | Synthesized data to rank the strongest internal vs. external predictors.     |
| 2017        | Chan et al. (2017)         | Social Commerce Stimuli  | Identified how social presence and community cues trigger online impulse.    |
| 2019        | Liu et al. (2019)          | Mobile Contextual Cues   | Analysed how mobility and location-based alerts drive spontaneous buying.    |
| 2021        | Lee & Chen (2021)          | Live-Stream Engagement   | Defined impulse through real-time Para-social interaction.                   |
| 2025        | Ibrahim et al. (2025)      | Influencer-Driven S-O-R  | Mapped influencer trust as the primary stimulus in social commerce.          |
| 2026 (Exp.) | Predictive Neural Models   | Algorithmic Anticipation | AI predicts vulnerability using real-time biometric and historical data.     |



### 3.2 Antecedents of Impulse Buying

The factors that precede and cause the impulse can be categorized into four primary streams:

**3.2.1 External Antecedents:** These are the environmental cues. In a brick-and-mortar, they include things like lighting, background music, and scents. Online, these come in the forms of things like urgency cues related to countdown timers, scarcity cues indicating low stock, and high-quality visual content. Media format, payment feature, visual appeal, navigability, ease of use, security, interactivity, customised recommendation as website characteristics. Marketing stimulus are changing product type/ price, discount, sales suggestion, bundling, nudging, advertisement, targeted marketing etc.

**3.2.2 Internal Antecedents:** These relate to the consumer's state. The trait impulsivity is a constant personality trait, while the state affects us a temporary mood of the consumer. High materialism and low self-regulation ability are congruent internal drivers.

**3.2.3 Contextual Antecedents:** These are situational variables. Factors like money availability and time availability are critical. Surprisingly, the presence of peers (social presence) generally gives rise to impulse buying, whereas the presence of family members normally suppresses impulse buying due to social monitoring.

**3.2.4 Methodological Antecedents:** Methodologies adopted often affect the results. For example, lab experiments capture pure impulse better, whereas self-report surveys are better for understanding cognitive regret afterward.

### 3.3 Consequences of Impulse Buying

The consequences of an impulsive act are paradoxical in nature. Positive outcomes include instant hedonic pleasure and elevation of mood. Most times, these are short-lived and followed by negative ones like post-purchase regret, financial strain, and cognitive dissonance. In extreme cases, frequent impulse buying may transition into compulsive buying disorder, a clinical condition requiring intervention.

## IV. RESEARCH GAP

Despite seventy years of research, three significant gaps remain in our understanding of impulse buying:

**4.1 Theoretical Gap:** Existing research follows the well-developed S-O-R model (Stimulus-Organism-Response). Whilst a highly effective model, it does not even partially address the predictive nature of AI. In 2026, stimulus tends to be an algorithm that possesses information about the consumer organism state prior to the consumer themselves. There exists a need for a new model that combines machine learning with behavioural economics in order to describe pre-emptive impulsivity.

**4.2 Methodological Gap:** Research depends too heavily on cross-sectional surveys and self-reports which suffer from social desirability bias because people tend to provide falsehoods about their shameful impulse purchases. Researchers need to conduct more longitudinal studies which will examine the psychological effects that impulse buying has on people over time. Researchers have not yet adopted neuro-marketing tools which include fMRI and eye-tracking technology for use in their research studies.

**4.3 Policy Gap:** The existing consumer protection regulations operate according to rational actor behaviour models. The digital ethics policy lacks coverage of dark patterns which refers to design decisions made to manipulate users into making hasty decisions. The existing regulations fail to properly control 'one-click' operations which enable users to skip mandatory cooling-off periods that apply to major purchases.



### V. FUTURE TRENDS

The upcoming trend of impulse purchasing will establish its main framework through zero friction shopping which enables consumers to acquire products without any obstacles between their wants and their purchases. The combination of social commerce and livestreaming functions as the main force behind this transformation which enables influencers to create suggestion impulses that spread throughout the world. The rise of mobile and voice commerce creates immediate shopping experiences because voice assistants such as Alexa and Siri now offer advanced capabilities which enable users to make voice-impulse purchases through hands-free mode during times when they are not fully focused on their tasks. The process of omnichannel integration enhances Buy Online, Pick Up in Store (BOPIS) systems because customers experience two different shopping impulses. The combination of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies creates a new shopping experience for customers who want to purchase premium products. The technologies enable customers to experience virtual product try-ons and detailed product visualizations which help them feel less worried about making impulsive purchases of both furniture and luxury fashion items.

### VI. CONCLUSIONS

The article establishes a systematic understanding of impulse buying which started as a retail phenomenon and developed into a scientific psychological field. The first step for consumers to restore their self-control requires them to understand both external and internal triggers. People who understand dark patterns will gain better control over their actions in digital environments. The marketing industry now moves away from mass marketing because marketers require personalized impulsivity to succeed. The success of frictionless experiences depends on organizations who need to create their ethical standards which control customer impulses to avoid product returns and brand damage. The digital choice architecture system requires immediate control measures according to policy makers. The high-value categories need policies to establish friction by design which protects at-risk consumers. The society of today demonstrates our shift toward a right now culture through our impulse buying behaviour. The society of today needs to achieve two goals which include economic growth through high consumption and mental health protection together with environmental sustainability to control spontaneous consumer behaviour.

The impulse requires decoding because it reveals our shopping behaviour and our emotional control methods which we use to face modern life challenges. Ultimately, decoding the impulse reveals not just how we shop, but how we manage our emotions in an increasingly demanding world.

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