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IMPACT OF IMPULSIVE BUYING BEHAVIOUR ON CONSUMERS - A LITERATURE REVIEW

Tushar D. Bagul[1], Dr. Karuna D. Kushare [2]

[1] Research Scholar, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, Department of Commerce & Research Center, MVP's KRT Arts, BH Commerce and AM Science (KTHM) College, Nashik

[2] Research Guide Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, LBRD Arts & Commerce Mahila Mahavidyalay, Nashik Road, Nashik

ABSTRACT

Impulsive buying - unplanned, sudden purchases prompted by internal impulses or external stimuli - has long attracted scholarly interest because of its prevalence and complex effects on consumer welfare, firm performance, and marketplace dynamics. This literature review synthesizes theoretical frameworks, measurement approaches, antecedents (internal and external), the particular dynamics of online impulse buying, and the consequences of impulsive purchases for consumers (financial, psychological, and behavioural). It highlights key moderators and mediators identified in recent empirical work, evaluate managerial and policy-relevant implications, and outlines gaps and priorities for future research. Drawing from classic foundational work and recent systematic and meta-analytic syntheses, we show that impulsive buying is both widespread and heterogeneous: it can bring immediate hedonic benefits yet also produce negative downstream effects like buyer's remorse, financial stress, and increased returns - especially in digital commerce contexts. The review concludes with a research agenda emphasizing longitudinal, multimethod designs; cross-cultural samples; and connections between impulse buying, digital payment innovations (e.g., BNPL), and consumer wellbeing.

KEYWORDS: ***Impulsive Buying, Impulse Purchase, Consumer Wellbeing, Online Shopping, Buyer's Regret, Retail Stimuli***

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1. Introduction

Impulsive buying describes a consumer behavior characterized by spontaneity: purchases made without prior planning, often quickly, and frequently driven by strong affective states or situational stimuli. Across product categories and retail formats, impulsive purchases account for a substantial share of sales and represent an important nexus between marketing practice and consumer wellbeing. Scholars have studied impulse purchasing from psychological, sociological, and managerial perspectives to explain why some consumers are more susceptible, how retail environments encourage impulse purchases, and what outcomes these behaviors produce for consumers and firms. This review integrates decades of research to present a coherent picture of antecedents, mechanisms, consequences, and open questions.

Consumer buying behavior is traditionally explained through rational decision-making models that assume individuals evaluate alternatives, compare prices, and consider long-term utility before making purchases. However, real-world consumption patterns frequently deviate from this rational framework. One such deviation is impulsive buying behavior (IBB), which involves spontaneous, immediate purchases made without prior planning or extensive evaluation of consequences (Rook, 1987).

Impulsive buying has gained renewed relevance in recent decades due to transformations in retail formats, marketing strategies, and digital commerce. The expansion of online shopping platforms, mobile applications, and digital payment systems has created environments that facilitate instant purchasing decisions, thereby increasing impulsive buying tendencies among consumers (Dawson & Kim, 2009). As a result, impulsive buying has become both a powerful revenue driver for firms and a potential source of consumer vulnerability.

Understanding the impact of impulsive buying behavior on consumers is crucial because such purchases can produce mixed outcomes. While impulsive buying may provide immediate emotional gratification and enjoyment, it can also result in post-purchase regret, financial stress, and unsustainable consumption habits. This literature review aims to synthesize existing research to provide a comprehensive understanding of impulsive buying behavior and its consequences for consumers.

2. Methodology

The all the study has been based on secondary data. This review integrates seminal theoretical pieces, key empirical papers, and recent syntheses (systematic reviews and meta-analyses) to balance historical development with current findings. Priority was given to widely-cited foundational works and high-quality recent reviews that aggregate primary studies across contexts.

1. Conceptual Meaning & Nature of Impulsive Buying

The concept of impulsive buying was formally introduced into consumer research by Rook (1987), who described it as behavior characterized by sudden urges, emotional excitement, and a lack of deliberate evaluation. According to Rook, impulsive purchases are accompanied by strong feelings of desire and are often made with little regard for potential negative outcomes.

Later studies expanded this definition by emphasizing the role of affect and situational cues. Beatty and Ferrell (1998) defined impulsive buying as an immediate purchase with no pre-shopping intention, triggered by exposure to a stimulus. Verplanken and Herabadi (2001) further conceptualized impulsive buying as comprising two dimensions:

1.1 Cognitive impulsivity, reflecting lack of planning and deliberation

1.2 Affective impulsivity, reflecting emotional excitement and pleasure

Importantly, impulsive buying differs from compulsive buying. While impulsive buying is situational and episodic, compulsive buying is repetitive, uncontrollable, and often associated with psychological distress (Faber & O'Guinn, 1992). This distinction is essential for understanding impulsive buying as a common consumer behavior rather than a pathological condition.

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Volume 13(4), December 2025

2. Theoretical Foundation Of Impulsive Buying Behaviour

Several theories underpin impulsive buying research:

2.1 Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model

The S-O-R framework explains impulsive buying as a response to environmental stimuli that influence internal emotional and cognitive states, which in turn lead to behavioral responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Retail stimuli such as discounts, store ambience, and online interface design act as stimuli that trigger emotional arousal and impulse purchases.

2.2 Self-Control Theory

Self-control theory suggests that impulsive buying results from failures of self-regulation. Consumers with limited self-control are more likely to succumb to immediate gratification, prioritizing short-term pleasure over long-term financial goals (Baumeister, 2002).

2.3 Hedonic Consumption Theory

Hedonic consumption theory emphasizes the experiential and emotional aspects of consumption. Impulsive buying often occurs when consumers seek pleasure, novelty, or excitement rather than functional utility (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

3. Measurement Approaches

Researchers measure impulsive buying in multiple ways:

3.1 **Self-report scales of impulsive buying tendency (trait):** inventories that assess stable predispositions to make unplanned purchases.

3.2 **State/behavioral measures:** recall-based items asking about frequency or proportion of purchases that were unplanned in a recent period (e.g., "In the last month, how many purchases did you make on impulse?").

3.3 **Experimental and in-store observations:** field or lab manipulations of store/environmental cues (music, layout, promotions) with measurement of immediate purchase choices.

3.4 **Behavioral footprints in e-commerce:** clickstream and transactional data capturing unplanned add-to-cart events, time-to-purchase metrics, and conversion following impulse-triggering stimuli (flash sale, scarcity cues).

Measurement debates center on (a) discriminating impulsive from compulsive buying, (b) capturing affective arousal in situ, and (c) harmonizing scales across cultures and channels. Recent scale development work emphasizes validating culturally sensitive instruments and combining self-report with behavioral traces for improved ecological validity

4. Antecedents Of Impulsive Buying

4.1 Internal (consumer) antecedents

- **Personality and trait impulsivity:** Individuals high in trait impulsivity or low in self-control are more likely to engage in impulse purchases. Personality constructs such as sensation-seeking and impulsiveness predict a greater frequency of unplanned buys.
- **Mood and affective state:** Positive moods (e.g., excitement) can increase impulse purchases by lowering deliberation; conversely, negative moods sometimes trigger impulse buying as a mood-repair strategy. The affect-driven model posits that hedonic motivation amplifies susceptibility to situational cues.
- **Attitudes and normative beliefs:** Consumers' internalized norms about spending and thriftiness moderate whether impulses translate to action; those perceiving impulse buying as acceptable are more likely to purchase on impulse.

4.2 External (situational/retailer) antecedents

- **Store environment and merchandising:** Layout, shelf placement, sensory stimuli (music, lighting, scent), and point-of-sale displays are consistently associated with higher impulse purchase rates. Retailers design focal "impulse zones" near checkouts and at aisle-ends to capture unplanned purchases.

- **Promotions and scarcity/urgency cues:** Discounts, time-limited offers, "only X left" scarcity messages, and bundling encourage rapid decisions and lower consumer deliberation.
- **Sales personnel and social context:** Sales prompts, social normative cues (others buying), and salesperson suggestive selling foster impulse purchases.

5. Online Impulsive Buying Behaviour

Online shopping environments amplify impulsive buying due to convenience, anonymity, and technological cues. One-click purchasing, personalized recommendations, flash sales, and scarcity messages reduce decision time and enhance emotional arousal (LaRose, 2001).

Social commerce features such as live chats, reviews, and social media integration further intensify impulse buying by creating a sense of social presence and fear of missing out (FOMO). Studies show that online impulse buying is particularly prevalent among young adults and smartphone users (Chen et al., 2020).

6. Impact Of Impulsive Buying On Consumers

6.1 Psychological Impact

Impulsive buying is often associated with immediate emotional gratification, as consumers experience a sense of pleasure, excitement, or mood enhancement at the point of purchase. Such behavior is frequently driven by emotional triggers rather than rational evaluation. However, the positive psychological effects tend to be short-lived. Post-purchase reflections often lead to feelings of guilt, regret, anxiety, and dissatisfaction, particularly when the purchase is perceived as unnecessary or inconsistent with personal financial goals. Stern (1962) emphasizes that impulsive buying lacks deliberate planning, which increases the likelihood of negative emotional consequences after the initial excitement subsides.

6.2 Financial Impact

From a financial perspective, repeated impulsive purchasing can significantly disrupt personal budgeting and long-term financial planning. Consumers who frequently engage in impulsive buying are more prone to overspending, accumulation of debt, and reduced savings. The growing use of credit cards and Buy-Now-Pay-Later (BNPL) services further intensifies this behavior by minimizing the immediate financial burden of purchases. Prelec and Loewenstein (1998) explain this phenomenon through the concept of the "pain of paying," wherein delayed or non-cash payment methods psychologically detach consumers from the actual cost, thereby encouraging unplanned and excessive spending.

6.3 Behavioral Impact

Impulsive buying also has notable behavioral consequences. Purchases made without adequate evaluation often fail to meet consumer expectations, resulting in higher rates of product returns and dissatisfaction. This pattern contributes to wasteful consumption and inefficient use of resources. Moreover, repeated disappointment from impulsive purchases can weaken brand loyalty, as consumers may attribute dissatisfaction to the brand rather than their own decision-making process. Over time, such behavior fosters unstable purchasing patterns and undermines consistent consumer–brand relationships.

7. Consequences of Impulsive Buying for Consumers: -

7.1 Immediate hedonic outcomes

Impulsive purchases often deliver immediate pleasure - excitement, mood enhancement, and short-term satisfaction. For many consumers these hedonic gains are the primary motivation and can contribute to perceived life satisfaction in the short term.

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Volume 13(4), December 2025

7.2 Post-purchase affect: satisfaction vs. regret

Research finds heterogeneous post-purchase reactions. Some impulse buys lead to ongoing enjoyment and positive evaluation; others produce buyer's remorse, guilt, and cognitive dissonance when the purchase conflicts with budgetary or self-image goals. Normative beliefs and product type (hedonic vs. utilitarian) play a role: hedonic impulse purchases yield greater immediate pleasure but also increased likelihood of regret if they threaten financial or identity-related goals. (Springer)

7.3 Financial consequences and wellbeing

Unplanned spending can have negative financial consequences when recurrent or when financed via credit (or BNPL), contributing to debt accumulation, reduced savings, and financial strain. Studies increasingly document links between frequent impulsive buying and financial stress, particularly when consumers lack awareness of long-term budget impacts or use deferred payment instruments. Evidence also suggests a bidirectional relationship: financial stress may increase susceptibility to emotion-driven purchases, while impulsive buying exacerbates financial strain over time.

7.4 Behavioral outcomes: returns, waste, and environmental impact

Impulsive purchases - especially online - have higher return rates because decisions are made rapidly and with less deliberation. Returns impose costs on retailers and create environmental externalities (transportation emissions, increased packaging waste). Thus, impulse buying has marketplace-level consequences beyond individual wellbeing.

8. Moderators and Mediators: Unpacking When and How Impulse Buying Affects Consumers: -

The relationship between impulse-buying triggers (such as promotions, emotions, or environmental cues) and consumer outcomes is not uniform across individuals or situations. Prior research indicates that this relationship is shaped by several **moderating and mediating variables** that determine when impulse urges translate into actual purchases and how these purchases affect consumers psychologically and financially.

8.1 Self-control and Trait Impulsivity (Moderator):

Self-control plays a critical moderating role in impulsive buying behavior. Consumers with higher levels of self-control are better equipped to regulate immediate desires and resist situational impulse triggers, even in highly stimulating retail environments. In contrast, individuals with high trait impulsivity tend to act spontaneously, placing greater emphasis on immediate gratification over long-term consequences. Empirical studies suggest that low self-control amplifies the impact of impulse triggers, leading to a higher frequency of unplanned purchases and post-purchase regret (Baumeister, 2002; Rook & Fisher, 1995). Thus, self-control moderates the strength of the relationship between impulse stimuli and buying behavior.

8.2 Product Type (Moderator):

The nature of the product significantly influences impulsive buying tendencies. Hedonic products—such as fashion apparel, cosmetics, confectionery, and entertainment items—are more strongly associated with impulse purchases because they evoke emotional pleasure, excitement, and sensory gratification. Utilitarian products, on the other hand, are typically purchased based on functional necessity and rational evaluation. Research consistently finds that impulse buying is more prevalent in hedonic consumption contexts, where emotional rewards outweigh cognitive deliberation (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). Therefore, product type moderates the likelihood that impulse triggers result in immediate purchase decisions.

8.3 Payment Method (Mediator/Moderator):

Payment mechanisms play both a mediating and moderating role in impulsive buying behavior. Frictionless and deferred payment options—such as credit cards, digital wallets, and Buy-Now-Pay-Later (BNPL) services—reduce the immediate psychological discomfort associated with spending,

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Volume 13(4), December 2025

commonly referred to as the "pain of paying." This reduced salience of monetary loss increases consumers' willingness to make impulsive purchases and mediates the relationship between impulse triggers and financial consequences such as overspending and debt accumulation (Prelec & Loewenstein, 1998). Additionally, payment methods can moderate impulse buying by intensifying or dampening the effect of situational cues depending on how immediate and tangible the payment feels.

8.4 Cognitive Appraisal and Anticipated Regret (Mediator):

Cognitive appraisal processes, particularly anticipated regret, act as key mediators between impulsive urges and actual purchase behavior. Before acting on an impulse, consumers often engage in brief mental simulations regarding post-purchase outcomes, including financial strain or dissatisfaction. Higher levels of anticipated regret weaken the impulse–action link by prompting consumers to delay or abandon the purchase decision. Conversely, when anticipated regret is low or overshadowed by emotional arousal, impulse buying is more likely to occur (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). This mediating mechanism highlights the role of reflective thought in moderating impulsive tendencies.

8.5 Cultural and Normative Context (Moderator):

Cultural values and social norms significantly moderate impulsive buying behavior by shaping attitudes toward consumption, saving, and self-restraint. In cultures that emphasize material success, consumption, and individual gratification, impulsive buying is more socially acceptable and prevalent. In contrast, cultures that prioritize frugality, long-term planning, and financial prudence tend to discourage impulsive consumption. Normative pressures from family, peers, and society further influence whether impulsive purchases are perceived as acceptable or irresponsible (Kacen & Lee, 2002). Thus, cultural context moderates both the frequency and the perceived consequences of impulse buying.

9. Gap in the Literature & Future Research Directions: -

9.1 Longitudinal and causal evidence on wellbeing

Much existing research relies on cross-sectional or recall-based measures. There is a need for longitudinal studies and natural experiments that trace how persistent impulsive buying patterns affect financial health and subjective wellbeing over months and years.

9.2 Interaction with digital payment innovations

Rapid diffusion of BNPL, stored payment credentials, and one-click flows likely amplify impulsivity's financial consequences, yet rigorous empirical work connecting specific payment technologies to long-term outcomes remains limited. Research should examine causal links and heterogeneous effects across income groups.

9.3 Multimethod combining behavioral trace data, psychophysiology, and surveys

Combining transaction logs, passive digital traces, eye-tracking, and physiological markers of arousal (e.g., heart rate variability) would improve measurement of in-the-moment impulse states and better link triggers to decisions and subsequent affect.

9.4 Cultural and socioeconomic variation

Comparative studies across countries and socioeconomic strata are needed to understand whether antecedents, normative constraints, and consequences vary systematically by culture and income level.

9.5 Distinguishing harmless hedonic impulses from harmful patterns

A clearer taxonomy separating occasional hedonic impulse buys from patterns that resemble compulsive or addictive purchasing would help tailor interventions and policy responses.

10. Conclusion

Extant research over several decades clearly establishes impulsive buying as pervasive and multifaceted consumer behaviour, shaped by interplay of internal psychological predispositions and external situational triggers. The rapid expansion of e-commerce platforms and the increasing use of frictionless and deferred payment systems have fundamentally transformed the mechanisms through which impulse buying is stimulated, while simultaneously amplifying its potential adverse consequences for consumer financial well-being. Although impulsive purchases often generate immediate hedonic gratification and temporary mood enhancement, repeated or high-value impulse buying frequently culminates in post-purchase regret, financial strain, and increased product returns. Consequently, future scholarly inquiry and policy-oriented research should prioritize longitudinal and multimethod approaches to examine the long-term welfare implications of impulsive buying, particularly in the context of evolving digital payment technologies. In parallel, there is a growing need for evidence-based consumer protection interventions that balance the mitigation of harmful impulsive behaviours with the preservation of consumers' legitimate enjoyment and autonomy in the marketplace.

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