



Social Media's Role in Impulse Purchasing Decisions

Dr Manish Singh

Rector

Karwan University (Division of American University of Malta)

Abstract

The world of shopping has undergone a massive transformation, particularly due to the rise of social media. Social media platforms have evolved from being spaces to connect with friends and share personal moments to becoming powerful tools for influencing consumer behavior. One of the most profound impacts these platforms have had is on impulse purchasing. The seamless blend of entertainment, connection, and targeted advertising on social media makes it a fertile ground for spontaneous and often unplanned buying decisions. Social media plays a vital role in consumers' purchasing decision making. There are still gaps in existing research on the relationship between divided dimensions of social media use and impulse buying, as well as the mediating and moderating effects therein. This study explored the mediation and moderation effects in the relationship between different social media usage patterns, emotional responses, and consumer impulse buying. Data from 479 college students who were social media users in China were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results showed that active and passive social media use were significantly and positively associated with users' enjoyment, whereas passive social media use significantly increased depression. Both enjoyment and depression were significantly and positively associated with users' impulse buying. Materialism positively moderated the relationship between enjoyment and impulsive consumption, while self-control significantly reduced the effect of depression on impulse buying. These findings that emotion mediated and personality traits moderated relationships between social media use and impulse buying expand impulsive purchase literature and provide insights for guiding college students' healthy use of social media and rational consumption.

Keywords: Social Media, Consumer Behavior, Purchasing Decisions, Influencer Marketing, Social Commerce, Ethical Marketing

Introduction

In today's digital age, social platforms have become pivotal in guiding consumer behavior with a particular focus on impulse buying. This paper explores the psychological aspect of the complex relationship between impulse buying among teenagers on the widely popular social media platform Instagram, investigating the psychological triggers that drive such triggers. After examining various psychological studies and theories, our conclusion helps us understand the underlying mechanisms contributing to impulse buying in our identified group: teenagers. Impulse purchasing refers to the spontaneous, unplanned buying decisions that consumers make when confronted with a product or service. These purchases are often driven by emotions, desires, and immediate gratification, rather than long-term needs or thoughtful consideration. Social media plays a significant role in stimulating impulse buys, as it creates an environment where advertisements, product recommendations, and social influence converge, often without a consumer even realizing it.

The growing influence of social media on consumer behavior has revolutionized how people shop. Social media platforms offer instant access to products, brand promotions, and peer recommendations, providing an environment ripe for impulse purchases. With targeted ads, engaging content, and influencer endorsements, social media has become a powerful tool in encouraging consumers to make buying decisions in real-time. With the continuous development of mobile internet, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media (e.g., Facebook and YouTube) encompasses a broad range of online venues that facilitate communication, interaction, and the exchange of content among users (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Wang P. et al., 2020). In addition to its social feature, social media also offers commercial features, which have created a new e-commerce model known as social commerce (Van Tran et al., 2022). For example, social media provides a platform for businesses to attract consumers and promote products, and for consumers to obtain suggestions and share experiences (Leong et al., 2018). Through new ways of marketing (e.g., word-of-mouth marketing, brand marketing, and influencer marketing), social media has greatly changed business marketing strategies and consumer purchase decision-making processes (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Guo and Li, 2022). Several studies have demonstrated that social media significantly influences consumer behavior (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Zafar et al., 2020, 2021), but the purchase decision-making process of social media users with different usage patterns has been relatively ignored. It has been claimed that 30 to 50% of purchase decisions are impulsive purchases, and that 84% of all shoppers have bought items impulsively (Husnain et al., 2019; Zafar et al., 2021). Therefore, the main concern of this study is to explore how social media usage patterns affect users' impulse buying behavior.

Research shows that the two most common patterns of social media use refer to active and passive use (Burke et al., 2010; Chen, 2021). Active use includes posting, liking, commenting on content, and interacting with others on social media, whereas passive use refers to browsing others' posts or content shared by friends without any liking, commenting, or interacting (Verduyn et al., 2017). Previous empirical studies have reported that active social media use increases users' social connection and social support, and enhances their positive emotion and well-being, whereas passive social media use increases users' negative emotions, such as upward social comparison, envy, depression, and anxiety (Chen S. et al., 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2021, 2022). Accordingly, active and passive social media use induce different emotional responses. It has been shown that emotions play a vital role in shaping impulse purchases, whether positively or negatively (Verplanken et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2021). Therefore, active and passive social media use may impact users' impulse purchases through different mediating effects of positive or negative emotions. The outbreak of COVID-19 has led to a rapid growth of individuals' social media use, greater emotional ups and downs, and exacerbated depression and anxiety (Wang C. et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2021b), which cause increased impulsive consumption (Lahath et al., 2021). However, to the authors' best knowledge, no study has examined how active and passive social media use influence users' impulse buying behavior, and the emotional mediation therein. Past research indicates that gender, materialism, and self-control play key roles in impulsive consumption decision-making (Isabelle, 2016; Li et al., 2020), but how these factors moderate the relationship between social media use and impulsive consumption is still unknown.

Social media has irrevocably transformed the communication landscape, ushering in an era of hyper-connectivity and interactive engagement. Defined as interactive online platforms that empower users to create and share content, fostering social interaction (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), social media has rapidly evolved from its nascent origins (e.g., MySpace) into a constellation of digital behemoths: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

This meteoric rise is fueled by several key trends: the inexorable dominance of mobile-first platforms, the visual revolution exemplified by the primacy of images and videos (Van Dijck, 2013), and the constant emergence of innovative features such as short-form videos, live streaming, and augmented reality. With its captivating short-form video format, TikTok has redefined user engagement, while Instagram's Reels have further amplified the appeal of this dynamic content. This digital revolution has captivated a global audience, with an estimated 4.9 billion users worldwide in 2023, according to Statista (2024), representing a staggering 62% of the global population.

The Indispensable Role of Social Media in Modern Marketing

In today's hyper-connected world, social media has ascended from a mere marketing channel to an indispensable strategic asset (Chaffey et al., 2019). It empowers organizations to:

Forge Brand Luminosity: Precisely target audiences through data-driven strategies, cultivating brand awareness and establishing a powerful market presence (Keller, 1993).

Cultivate Customer Intimacy: Foster direct, two-way conversations with consumers, nurturing enduring relationships and fostering unwavering loyalty (Rust & Lemon, 2000).

Unleash Market Intelligence: Gain real-time insights into the evolving desires and preferences of the modern consumer (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016).

Ignite Sales Velocity: Drive a surge in website traffic and catalyze a significant increase in online sales (Chaffey et al., 2019).

Elevate Customer Support: Provide rapid and personalized support, addressing customer concerns with unparalleled speed and enhancing overall satisfaction (Rust & Lemon, 2000).

Amplify Product Launches: Leverage the viral potential of social media campaigns to maximize the reach and impact of new product introductions, creating a powerful launchpad for market dominance (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

How social media powers impulse purchases

The numbers tell a compelling story about spontaneous buying behavior. GoDaddy's survey found that only 9% of Gen Z and 12% of Millennials plan their social media shopping in advance. More striking still, 21% of these generations make several purchases weekly through social platforms.

Three distinct elements create the perfect environment for these unplanned purchases:

Visually Appealing Content

Visual content works wonders for capturing attention and creating desire. High-quality images and videos showcase products in use, helping customers envision ownership.

Unlike traditional catalogs, social media content depicts items in real-world scenarios, immediately clarifying benefits. This dynamic presentation creates an emotional connection that static product listings cannot match, prompting quicker purchase decisions.

Influencer Marketing

With the advent of social media commerce, consumer trust now lies in peer recommendations instead of traditional advertisements. When trusted content creators promote products authentically, their suggestions carry significant weight. Why? Because influencers spend time building a genuine connection with their audience through consistent, relatable content. Their recommendations feel like advice from a friend, not a sales pitch, leading followers to make confident buying decisions. GoDaddy's data also backs up this impact, showing that 52% of Gen Z consumers make purchases from TikTok—a platform driven by creator content.

Limited-Time Offers

Traditional sale events required planning and deliberate shopping trips. Social media flash sales and exclusive codes create exclusive instant purchasing opportunities. Additionally, scarcity tactics like “only five left” notifications or “24-hour only” deals trigger fear of missing out, turning casual browsing into immediate action. This combination of convenience and urgency eliminates purchase hesitation.



Drivers of social media purchases

“Fear of Missing Out” (FOMO) strikes

The fear of missing out on limited-edition products or exclusive deals packs more purchasing power than most marketers realize. When paired with social media’s real-time nature, FOMO turns simple marketing tactics into sales magnets. Social platforms tap into this psychological trigger at every turn. Instagram stories showcase 24-hour flash sales that disappear forever. TikTok’s “Shop Now” buttons appear under coral product reviews with “Limited Stock” warnings. Facebook Marketplace highlights how many other shoppers are viewing the same item. And these tactics work. Meta reports that posts featuring limited-time offers receive significantly higher engagement than standard product posts. When consumers see “Only 2 left” or “Offer ends in 1 hour,” their decision-making process kicks into high gear. The fear of regret trumps the need for careful consideration.

The impact of social proof

People buy what other people recommend. It’s a simple truth that carries even more weight on social media, where likes, comments, and shares act as digital votes of confidence for products and services.

Social media platforms amplify this effect through features that showcase collective approval. Instagram highlights when someone’s friends have already purchased an item. TikTok displays view counts on product reviews, while Facebook groups buzz with recommendations and real-world experiences.

Each interaction serves as a mini-endorsement, building a wave of social validation that makes products increasingly irresistible. And the numbers back this up. As per recent studies, 92% of consumers trust peer recommendations over traditional advertising.

When potential customers see others engaging with products through authentic reviews and unboxing videos, their hesitation melts away. A single genuine customer photo often outperforms professional product shots in driving conversions.

The “scroll-stopping” effect

In a world where users scroll through 300 feet of social media content daily, capturing attention requires more than just good products—it demands scroll-stopping visual appeal.

The psychology behind this is simple yet powerful: our brains process images 60,000 times faster than text. Visual content serves as a pattern interrupt, forcing users to pause their mindless scrolling.

So, when that perfectly staged product photo or cleverly edited video appears, it creates a micro-moment of engagement that can quickly transform into purchase intent.

Short-form video content has revolutionized this dynamic. TikTok’s algorithm-driven feed and Instagram Reels have mastered the art of stopping thumbs mid-scroll, with users spending 95 minutes daily on TikTok alone. These platforms have perfected the formula of combining entertainment with eCommerce, making product discovery feel less like shopping and more like entertainment.

How emotions play on buyer behavior

Social media isn't just about logic—it's deeply rooted in emotion. Whether it's the joy of discovering the perfect solution to a problem or the excitement of joining a trending movement, emotions drive buying decisions more powerfully than rational thinking. Platforms have become increasingly sophisticated at triggering these emotional responses. Pinterest boards tap into aspirational feelings, while Instagram Stories create FOMO-inducing narratives.

Even LinkedIn's professional environment isn't immune, as B2B buyers increasingly make emotionally driven decisions based on thought leadership content and peer recommendations. The most successful brands understand this emotional environment. They don't just sell products; they sell feelings—confidence, belonging, success, or relief.

When users encounter content that resonates with their emotional state, such as boredom, stress, or excitement, they are more likely to make impulsive purchasing decisions.

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