

A Behavioural Perspective on Online Impulse Purchasing: The Influence of Social Factors, Arousal and Habit

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of digital commerce has intensified the prevalence of online impulse purchasing, driven by socially embedded platforms that integrate interaction, emotional stimulation, and seamless transactions. Despite extensive research on impulse buying, limited studies integrate social, affective, and automatic mechanisms within a unified framework. Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) theory and Dual-Process Theory, this study examines how social influence, emotional arousal, and habit shape online impulse purchasing behaviour. Social influence is conceptualized as an external stimulus embedded in digital environments, arousal as the organismic mechanism translating stimuli into behavioural tendencies, and habit as an automatic processing pathway that reinforces impulsive responses. Using a quantitative research design, data are collected from online consumers to test the proposed relationships through structural modelling analysis. By integrating social, emotional, and habitual perspectives, this study advances theoretical understanding of impulse purchasing in digital commerce and provides insights for developing responsible and effective online marketing strategies.

Keywords: Online purchase, habit

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital commerce has fundamentally transformed consumer purchasing behaviour. Online platforms, social media ecosystems, and live-streaming commerce have created highly interactive and socially embedded shopping environments that blur the boundaries between entertainment, communication, and consumption. Unlike traditional retail settings, digital marketplaces enable instantaneous transactions, personalized recommendations, and real-time social interaction, significantly increasing consumers' exposure to persuasive cues. Within such environments, online impulse purchasing is defined as spontaneous and unplanned buying behaviour occurring without deliberate evaluation and it has become increasingly prevalent. While impulse purchasing contributes substantially to firms' short-term revenues, it also raises important concerns related to consumer self-control, post-purchase regret, and sustainable consumption practices. Understanding the mechanisms underlying online impulse purchasing is therefore both theoretically and practically significant.

Prior research has identified various determinants of impulse buying in digital contexts, including website design, promotional tactics, and emotional responses. However, existing studies often examine these factors in isolation. In particular, social influence has been widely explored in the contexts of influencer marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, and social media engagement, yet limited research integrates these social stimuli with the affective and cognitive mechanisms that drive impulsive responses. Similarly, emotional arousal has been recognized as a key predictor of impulse buying, but it is frequently treated as a standalone psychological

state without examining how socially embedded digital cues activate it. Furthermore, while habit formation has been shown to shape automatic purchasing behaviour in online environments, its role in amplifying impulse purchasing remains underexplored within an integrated theoretical framework. Consequently, a comprehensive explanation that jointly considers social influence, arousal, and habit remains insufficiently developed.

To address this gap, the present study integrates the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework with Dual-Process Theory to examine how socially embedded digital stimuli trigger emotional activation and automatic behavioural tendencies that lead to online impulse purchasing. Specifically, social influence is conceptualized as an external stimulus, arousal as an organismic mechanism, and habit as an automatic processing pathway that reinforces impulsive responses. By combining social, affective, and cognitive perspectives, this study advances theoretical understanding of online impulse purchasing and provides a more holistic explanation of impulsive behaviour in contemporary digital commerce environments. The findings have important implications for both scholars seeking to refine impulse-buying theory and practitioners aiming to design responsible yet effective digital marketing strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Impulse buying

Recent studies consistently demonstrate that online impulse buying is strongly shaped by emotionally rich digital environments, particularly within short-form video and social commerce platforms. Ngo et al. (2025) found that time pressure, economic benefits, entertainment experience, and social influence significantly heighten emotional arousal, which subsequently weakens self-control and encourages spontaneous purchases among TikTok Shop users. Similarly, Ngo et al. (2024) reported that external stimuli such as time pressure, quantity pressure, economic benefits, and social influence impulsive buying on Shopee video primarily through arousal and pleasure, confirming the mediating role of affective states. These findings indicate that immersive video content combined with urgency cues (e.g., flash sales and limited availability) intensifies excitement and fear of missing out, making consumers more susceptible to impulsive decisions. Collectively, this stream of research highlights emotional arousal as a central psychological mechanism translating online stimuli into impulsive purchasing behaviour.

Beyond emotional triggers, social mechanisms, and technological affordances further amplify online impulse buying. Huang et al. (2025) demonstrated that both the quantity and quality of social proof, such as likes, comments, and interaction cues, significantly increase impulse buying on short-form video platforms by signalling product popularity and credibility. From a social commerce perspective, Han (2023) showed that brand familiarity and social interaction enhance consumer trust, which subsequently strengthens impulse-buying intentions, even when checkout convenience alone does not directly trigger impulsivity. Extending this perspective into tourism e-commerce, Ferdowsi and Moradi (2026) found that chatbot interaction quality and blockchain affordances directly stimulate impulse buying while also indirectly influencing behaviour through fear of missing out, trust, and curiosity. Taken together, these studies suggest that online impulse buying arises from the interplay of social influence, emotional arousal, habitual engagement with platforms, and frictionless purchasing systems, thereby supporting the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework for explaining impulsive consumption in digital contexts.

Li and Deng (2026) describe impulse buying as an unplanned purchasing behaviour shaped by emotional arousal, social influence, and digital platform features in modern online marketplaces. Their findings show that peer endorsement, influencer engagement, and livestream interactions heighten impulsive tendencies by creating a sense of urgency and social validation, while emotions such as excitement and mood enhancement directly stimulate spontaneous purchases.

Technological elements, including personalised recommendations, scarcity cues, and seamless payment systems, further reduce resistance to buying. Overall, the study suggests that online impulse buying results from the combined effects of emotional arousal, social influence, habitual platform use, and technological convenience (Li & Deng, 2026).

Other scholars describe online impulse buying (OIB) as characterized by spontaneous, unplanned purchases triggered by immediate stimuli in digital environments (Lee et al., 2025). In online and social commerce settings, impulse buying is frequently stimulated by external cues such as influencer characteristics, social interactions, and platform features (Ahmad & Lilani, 2025; Zhou et al., 2023). Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, prior research conceptualizes social influence as a critical stimulus that shapes consumers' internal states (organism), which in turn drives impulsive responses (response) (Ahmad & Lilani, 2025; Lee et al., 2025). For example, influencer trustworthiness and informativeness enhance perceived trust, which in turn increases impulse buying tendencies (Ahmad & Lilani, 2025). Similarly, earned media and electronic word-of-mouth can awaken interest and strengthen brand trust, thereby intensifying impulse buying intention (Zhou et al., 2023). In highly interactive environments such as live streaming commerce, real-time social presence, streamer charisma, and peer interaction amplify emotional engagement and reduce deliberation, further increasing impulsive purchasing behaviour (Lee et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies highlight social influence as a powerful antecedent of online impulse buying, particularly in digitally mediated and socially embedded consumption contexts.

Beyond social influence, internal affective and habitual mechanisms also play a pivotal role in driving online impulse buying. Emotional arousal, manifested through excitement, pleasure, and heightened affective states, has been identified as a central organismic mechanism that transforms environmental stimuli into impulsive responses (Lee et al., 2025). Digital environments rich in cues, immersive design, and personalized recommendations intensify such arousal, increasing susceptibility to spontaneous purchases. Furthermore, habit theory provides an important explanatory lens, particularly in understanding how repetitive internet use fosters automatic, cue-driven behaviours that facilitate impulse buying (Aghaei et al., 2026). Internet addiction, conceptualized as a deeply ingrained internet habit, has been shown to significantly predict online impulse buying through failures in self-regulation and heightened affective drives (Aghaei et al., 2026). Importantly, impulse buying not only occurs at the purchase stage but also carries post-purchase consequences such as regret and product returns, underscoring its behavioural and psychological complexity (Li et al., 2026). Overall, the literature suggests that online impulse purchasing is shaped by an interplay between social influence (external stimuli), emotional arousal (affective organism), and habit-based automaticity, providing a strong theoretical foundation for examining social influence, arousal, and habit as key predictors of online impulse purchasing.

2.2 Social Influence and Online Impulse Purchasing

Social influence has emerged as a dominant external driver of consumer behaviour in digital commerce environments. Unlike traditional retail contexts, online platforms are inherently social, embedding interactive features such as influencer endorsements, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and user-generated content. Social media marketing activities, including interaction, customization, entertainment, and eWOM, shape consumers' perceptions and behavioural intentions by creating a socially immersive shopping environment (Yadav & Rahman, 2017). Influencer-based communication further amplifies this effect, as credibility, attractiveness, and trustworthiness enhance consumer engagement and purchase intention (Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008). In particular, fashion influencers' relatability strengthens emotional attachment and increases purchase intention by fostering perceived authenticity and

closeness. In socially embedded digital environments, such cues can accelerate decision-making processes and reduce cognitive deliberation, increasing the likelihood of impulse buying.

Beyond influencer characteristics, social influence operates through informational and normative mechanisms embedded in online reviews and peer interactions. Electronic word-of-mouth plays a critical role in shaping trust and reducing uncertainty in digital contexts. The interaction between social media influencers and online reviews further strengthens their persuasive impact, as influencer endorsements enhance the perceived credibility of online reviews. Additionally, emerging digital actors, such as virtual idols, generate parasocial relationships that increase psychological closeness and influence purchase intention. These mechanisms collectively demonstrate that social influence serves as a powerful stimulus that shapes consumers' internal evaluations and triggers spontaneous purchase decisions.

The impact of social influence becomes even more pronounced in highly interactive formats such as live-streaming commerce. Live streaming integrates synchronous communication, real-time feedback, and social presence, thereby enhancing perceived authenticity and reducing product uncertainty (Chen, Chen, & Tian, 2022). By combining entertainment, social interaction, and commerce, live streaming environments blur the boundary between hedonic engagement and purchasing behaviour. As consumers observe peer reactions, interact directly with streamers, and experience immediacy, they become more susceptible to affect-driven responses rather than rational evaluation. Consequently, social influence in digital commerce extends beyond information transmission; it functions as a socially constructed mechanism that heightens engagement, reduces resistance, and increases the likelihood of online impulse purchasing.

2.3 Arousal

Emotional arousal is a central organismic mechanism that translates environmental stimuli into behavioural responses in digital commerce contexts. Arousal, rooted in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework and arousal theory, refers to the intensity of emotional activation experienced by consumers (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Recent empirical evidence demonstrates that fluctuations in arousal levels significantly predict approach behaviours, including spending and unplanned purchases. Caruelle et al. (2024) show that peak arousal during service encounters increases customer approach responses, including unplanned purchasing behaviour. Similarly, Jiang et al. (2026) demonstrate that emotional arousal triggered by beauty streamer characteristics directly increases impulse buying while simultaneously diminishing cognitive control. These findings confirm that heightened emotional activation weakens deliberative processing and strengthens impulsive purchase tendencies in live-streaming and online retail environments.

In online settings, arousal can be stimulated through multiple cues, including language intensity, visual dynamism, and atmospheric design. Language arousal is defined as the level of excitement conveyed through communication, which significantly influences purchase intentions, particularly when aligned with the type of influencer (Wang et al., 2025). Within virtual influencer marketing, the Pleasure–Arousal–Dominance (PAD) model further shows that arousal and hedonic motivation positively predict willingness to buy recommended products (Lee et al., 2025). Beyond linguistic cues, visually dynamic imagery, especially looming motion, elevates arousal and enhances purchase intentions (Fennell & Schneider, 2023). Moreover, high-arousal live-streaming atmospheres interact with brand positioning to shape brand attitudes and behavioural responses (Shao et al., 2026). Collectively, these studies suggest that arousal operates as a unifying psychological mechanism through which diverse digital stimuli, such as textual, visual, and atmospheric, translate into stronger purchase intentions and impulsive behaviour.

Importantly, arousal does not operate linearly; its effects depend on context and intensity. Research on online reviews shows that high arousal, particularly when combined with displeasure (e.g., anger, fear), significantly shapes consumer evaluations (Yun et al., 2024). Similarly, Du et al. (2025) find an inverted U-shaped relationship between emotional arousal and review usefulness, indicating that moderate arousal enhances perceived value, whereas excessive arousal reduces credibility. Environmental factors such as weather and temperature also influence consumer behaviour through arousal-based mechanisms, with both high and low temperature extremes increasing arousal and altering choice behaviour (Sui et al., 2026). These findings suggest that arousal functions as a powerful but context-sensitive driver of consumer response. In digital commerce, where real-time interaction, immersive atmospheres, and emotionally charged communication are prevalent, elevated arousal can reduce cognitive control and increase susceptibility to impulse purchasing.

2.4 Habit

Habit represents an automatic behavioural tendency developed through repeated behaviour in stable contexts, and it plays a crucial role in shaping purchase decisions in digital environments. Drawing from dual-process theory, habit operates through an automatic mechanism that bypasses extensive cognitive deliberation and activates purchase behaviour based on prior experience (Chen et al., 2022). In live-streaming commerce, consumers gradually develop usage habits through repeated exposure, interactive engagement, and seamless purchasing processes, thereby positively influencing purchase intention. Similarly, predictable contextual cues, such as repeated mobile promotions, can strengthen associative memory links between cues and purchasing behaviour, reinforcing automatic purchase responses (Lamei et al., 2025). As habit formation reduces reliance on conscious evaluation, consumers may make online purchases impulsively when triggered by familiar digital cues, suggesting that habitual mechanisms can directly enhance impulse purchasing tendencies.

Beyond digital promotional contexts, habit also manifests in purchase decision-making through heuristic processing and bounded rationality. Consumers frequently rely on mental shortcuts rather than systematic evaluation when faced with information overload, time pressure, or repetitive purchase situations (Begho & Yu, 2026). Such habitual or heuristic-based processing aligns with thinking, where decisions are made quickly and automatically. In online environments characterized by abundant information and rapid interactions, habitual reliance on simple cues such as familiar brands, price tags, or emotional framing can override reflective evaluation. This mechanism parallels findings that consumers often default to automatic decision rules even when more detailed information is available. Consequently, habitual purchasing patterns in online settings can reduce cognitive control and increase susceptibility to impulse buying.

Habit is also intertwined with emotional reinforcement and moral negotiation processes that shape purchase behaviour over time. Research shows that individuals with unhealthier eating habits report stronger positive emotional responses and higher purchase intent, indicating that repeated consumption patterns reinforce favourable affective associations (Melios et al., 2025). Moreover, food purchasing decisions are embedded in moral and contextual negotiations, in which consumers reconcile personal values with situational constraints (Duus et al., 2025). Repeated exposure to contextual cues and information-seeking behavior, such as digital access to animal welfare information, can gradually influence dietary habits and purchase adjustments (Schlereth et al., 2025). Over time, these repeated behaviours solidify into habitual patterns that operate with reduced cognitive effort. In online commerce, where digital interfaces facilitate repeated exposure, ease of access, and contextual consistency, such habits can amplify impulsive purchase responses when consumers encounter triggering stimuli.

Social influence plays a critical role in shaping consumer behaviour in digital commerce environments, where purchasing decisions are embedded within interactive and socially rich contexts. Online platforms incorporate influencer endorsements, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), live-stream interactions, and user-generated content, all of which function as social stimuli that shape consumers' perceptions and behavioural responses. Influencer credibility, attractiveness, and relatability enhance trust and emotional connection, thereby increasing purchase intention and reducing deliberative processing (Amos et al., 2008; see also social media influencer studies provided earlier). Social media marketing activities, including interaction and customization, further create immersive shopping experiences that encourage spontaneous responses. Moreover, live-streaming commerce intensifies social presence and immediacy, reducing perceived uncertainty and encouraging affect-driven purchases (Chen et al., 2022). Within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, such socially embedded cues operate as powerful external stimuli that can accelerate decision-making and heighten purchase urges. As online environments amplify peer visibility, real-time interaction, and perceived social validation, consumers are more likely to act on sudden purchase impulses. Therefore, social influence is expected to positively relate to online impulse purchasing.

H1: Social influence is positively related to online impulse purchasing

Emotional arousal represents a central organismic mechanism through which environmental stimuli translate into impulsive behavioural responses. According to arousal theory and the S-O-R framework, heightened emotional activation increases approach tendencies and reduces reliance on reflective cognitive evaluation. Empirical evidence demonstrates that elevated arousal during online interactions significantly enhances spending behaviour and impulse buying (Caruelle et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2026). Digital environments stimulate arousal through dynamic atmospherics, vivid imagery, emotionally charged language, and real-time engagement (Wang et al., 2025; Shao et al., 2026). The Pleasure–Arousal–Dominance (PAD) model further confirms that arousal positively predicts willingness to buy in virtual influencer contexts (Lee et al., 2025). When arousal levels rise, consumers experience heightened excitement and urgency, which weaken cognitive control and strengthen immediate purchase urges. Given that online platforms are designed to evoke emotional stimulation through immersive and interactive cues, heightened arousal is likely to increase spontaneous and unplanned purchasing behaviour. Therefore, arousal is expected to positively relate to online impulse purchasing.

H2: Arousal is positively related to online impulse purchasing

Habit reflects automatic behavioural tendencies developed through repeated exposure and reinforced contextual cues, and it operates through a non-conscious decision-making mechanism. Drawing from dual-process theory, habit functions within System 1 processing, where decisions are made quickly and automatically without extensive cognitive deliberation (Chen et al., 2022). In digital environments, repeated exposure to promotional cues, seamless purchasing interfaces, and live-stream interactions fosters habit formation, strengthening cue-response associations over time (Lamei et al., 2025). Research further shows that consumers frequently rely on heuristics and mental shortcuts under information overload, reflecting bounded rationality in purchase decisions (Begho & Yu, 2026). Habitual consumption patterns are reinforced by positive emotional experiences, increasing purchase intent and automatic repurchasing tendencies (Melios et al., 2025). As habits reduce the need for conscious evaluation and increase behavioural automaticity, consumers may engage in purchases spontaneously when triggered by familiar digital cues. Consequently, stronger habitual tendencies are expected to increase susceptibility to online impulse purchasing.

H3: Habit is positively related to online impulse purchasing

2.5 Theory

Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) Theory

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) provides a foundational explanation for consumer behaviour in digital environments. The theory posits that environmental stimuli (S) influence individuals' internal states (O), which subsequently drive behavioural responses (R). In online commerce, social cues such as influencer endorsements, electronic word-of-mouth, interactive features, and live-streaming dynamics function as external stimuli that shape consumers' psychological reactions. Prior research demonstrates that social media marketing activities and live-stream features heighten emotional engagement, perceived authenticity, and purchase intentions (Chen et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2020). Within this framework, emotional arousal represents a key organismic state, as heightened excitement and affective activation increase approach tendencies and reduce deliberative processing (Caruelle et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2026).

Applying S-O-R theory to the present study, social influence is conceptualized as the stimulus, arousal as the organismic mechanism, and online impulse purchasing as the behavioural response. Online platforms are intentionally designed to intensify social interaction and emotional stimulation, thereby increasing impulsive purchase tendencies. The S-O-R framework, therefore, provides a coherent structure for explaining how socially embedded digital stimuli translate into impulsive online purchasing behaviour.

Dual-Process Theory

While the S-O-R framework explains the stimulus–response pathway, Dual-Process Theory offers insight into the cognitive mechanisms underlying impulsive behaviour. Dual-process models distinguish between two systems of decision-making: a fast, automatic, intuitive system (System 1) and a slower, analytical, deliberative system (System 2) (Kahneman, 2011). In digital shopping environments characterized by information overload, time pressure, and immersive interactivity, System 1 processing often dominates. Emotional arousal activates intuitive processing, reducing cognitive control and increasing susceptibility to spontaneous purchases (Jiang et al., 2026).

Habit plays a critical role within the automatic processing pathway. Repeated exposure to digital cues, promotional triggers, and live-stream engagement strengthens associative learning and reinforces habitual purchasing behaviour (Chen et al., 2022; Lamei et al., 2025). Habitual mechanisms operate independently of deliberate evaluation, making consumers more likely to respond impulsively when encountering familiar stimuli. Thus, Dual-Process Theory complements S-O-R by explaining how arousal and habit jointly reduce cognitive deliberation and increase impulsive purchase tendencies. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive foundation for examining the influence of social stimuli, emotional activation, and automaticity on online impulse purchasing.

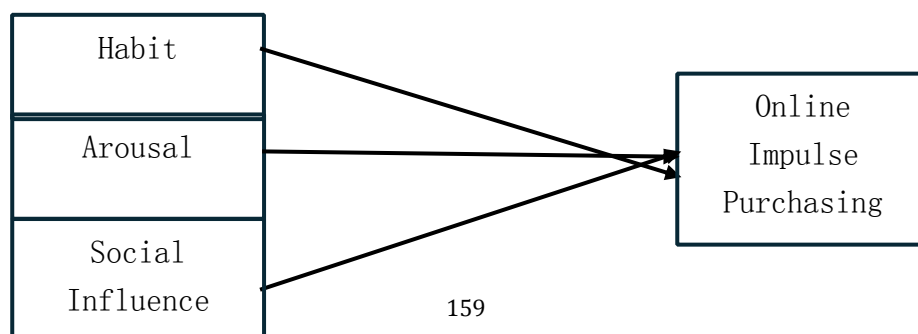


Figure 1. Conceptual Model.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a quantitative approach, using a survey to collect information on factors influencing online impulse buying. Detailed information, including demographic characteristics, online impulse buying, social influence, panic buying, arousal, and habit, will be collected through questionnaire items adapted from previous studies. In addition, a Google Form platform will be used to distribute the questionnaires online to respondents. Since the target respondents are among youth or younger generations, this method and platform are deemed suitable to them as they are accessible through an online platform every day.

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