



Antecedents of impulse buying behaviour: A systematic literature review

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Abstract

Impulse buying behaviour, defined as an unplanned, spontaneous purchase driven by a strong urge to buy, challenges rational consumer decision-making models (Rook, 1987) ^[17]. This systematic literature review synthesises evidence from 65 peer-reviewed studies (1990–2024) to identify antecedents of impulse buying using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework. Antecedents are categorised into psychological, environmental, and demographic factors. Psychological elements such as trait impulsivity, hedonic motivation, and emotional states underpin buying tendencies, while environmental triggers — including store atmospherics, promotional cues, and online design — catalyse purchases. Demographic variables like age, gender, and income influence the likelihood and intensity of impulse buying. The review highlights the dynamic interaction between emotional arousal and situational stimuli in driving purchase decisions. Practical implications include strategic sensory marketing, targeted promotions, and personalised layouts. Future research should address cultural variations, digital platform influences, and ethical considerations in leveraging impulse buying for sustainable marketing practices.

Keywords: Impulse buying behaviour, consumer behaviour, retail environment, stimulus-organism-response

Introduction

Impulse buying is one of the most intriguing phenomena in consumer behaviour research because it represents a departure from the rational decision-making models that traditionally dominate economic and marketing theory. Unlike planned purchases, impulse buying occurs when consumers experience a sudden and compelling urge to buy, often with little deliberation and without prior intent (Rook, 1987) ^[17]. This urge can be so strong that it overrides self-control, resulting in spontaneous purchases driven by emotional or hedonic gratification rather than functional necessity. The significance of impulse buying behaviour extends beyond its psychological interest — it carries substantial implications for both marketers and consumers. From a marketing perspective, impulse purchases contribute a large share of retail sales across industries, with estimates suggesting that up to 62% of in-store sales are unplanned (Inman, Winer, & Ferraro, 2009) ^[12]. From a consumer welfare perspective, however, impulse buying can lead to financial strain, post-purchase regret, and the reinforcement of undesirable consumption patterns (Verplanken & Herabadi, 2001) ^[21].

In recent years, the nature of impulse buying has been transformed by shifts in retail formats and the advent of digital commerce. The ease of access to online marketplaces, the prevalence of targeted advertising, and the integration of social media with shopping platforms have created a fertile environment for impulsive purchasing. While early studies on impulse buying focused heavily on brick-and-mortar retail settings, contemporary research increasingly recognises the need to examine impulse behaviour in omnichannel and digital contexts (Luo, 2005) ^[14]. Despite the breadth of research, the antecedents of impulse buying remain a key area of scholarly inquiry. Understanding the psychological, situational, and demographic factors that predispose consumers to act impulsively is essential for developing both effective retail strategies and informed consumer education initiatives. This paper conducts a systematic literature review of the antecedents of impulse buying behaviour, integrating

findings across studies to present a holistic theoretical synthesis.

Theoretical Background

Impulse buying behaviour has been examined through several conceptual lenses, with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework serving as one of the most widely applied theoretical models (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) ^[16]. In this framework, stimuli refer to external factors such as store atmospherics, promotional cues, and product placement; the organism represents the consumer's internal states, including emotions, motives, and personality traits; and the response is the act of making an impulsive purchase. The SOR model emphasises that impulse buying results from the interaction between environmental triggers and the consumer's psychological readiness to act. From a psychological perspective, early conceptualisations by Rook (1987) ^[17] framed impulse buying as a hedonically complex and emotionally charged behaviour, characterised by diminished cognitive evaluation and heightened affective involvement. Trait theories suggest that consumers differ in their baseline impulsivity, meaning that some individuals are inherently more susceptible to impulsive actions due to personality dimensions such as sensation seeking, self-control, and materialism (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998; Verplanken & Herabadi, 2001) ^[3, 21].

Emotion regulation theory provides another lens, positing that impulse buying can serve as a coping mechanism for alleviating negative emotions or enhancing positive ones (Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001) ^[19]. This aligns with the mood management hypothesis, where consumers engage in impulse purchases as a form of immediate gratification to influence emotional states. From an economic and marketing theory standpoint, impulse buying can also be linked to prospect theory and scarcity heuristics (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Cialdini, 2009) ^[5, 13]. Limited-time offers, stock scarcity, and promotional framing can alter the perceived value of products, nudging consumers toward immediate purchase decisions. Furthermore, advances in online consumer behaviour models have

introduced the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and flow theory into impulse buying research. These frameworks highlight how user-friendly interfaces, interactivity, and immersive experiences in online shopping environments can facilitate impulsive purchases by reducing cognitive barriers and enhancing shopping enjoyment (Hoffman & Novak, 1996)^[11].

In summary, the antecedents of impulse buying can be understood as emerging from an interplay of personality traits, emotional states, and situational stimuli, mediated by cognitive and affective processes. This review will systematically analyse empirical studies across these theoretical domains, aiming to present a consolidated framework for understanding the drivers of impulse buying in contemporary retail settings.

Antecedents of Impulse Buying Behaviour

The antecedents of impulse buying can be broadly classified into psychological factors, environmental factors, and demographic moderators, consistent with the SOR framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974)^[16].

1. Psychological Factors

Psychological antecedents are the internal, consumer-related traits and states that predispose individuals to impulsive behaviour.

- **Trait Impulsivity:** Consumers high in impulsivity exhibit a tendency to act without forethought, making them more vulnerable to impulse purchases (Rook & Fisher, 1995)^[18]. This trait is linked to low self-control and a preference for immediate gratification (Baumeister, 2002)^[2].
- **Hedonic Shopping Motivation:** Shopping as a source of pleasure, entertainment, or emotional fulfilment significantly correlates with impulse buying (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003)^[1]. Hedonic motives heighten receptivity to sensory and promotional cues.
- **Mood and Affect:** Both positive and negative moods can trigger impulsive actions. Positive moods amplify the enjoyment of buying, while negative moods may prompt compensatory consumption aimed at mood repair (Tice *et al.*, 2001)^[19].
- **Materialism:** High materialistic values increase susceptibility to impulse purchases, as material possessions are viewed as central to happiness and success (Dittmar, 2005)^[6].

2. Environmental Factors

Environmental antecedents refer to situational triggers in physical or digital retail contexts.

- **Store Atmospherics:** Elements such as lighting, music, scent, and layout influence emotional states, increasing the likelihood of unplanned purchases (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001)^[15].
- **Promotional Cues:** Discounts, “buy one get one free” offers, and flash sales create urgency and scarcity perceptions, encouraging immediate purchases (Cialdini, 2009)^[5].
- **Online Interface Design:** In digital environments, personalised recommendations, easy navigation, and gamified shopping features reduce cognitive effort and enhance impulsive tendencies (Floh & Madlberger, 2013)^[10].
- **Social Influence:** Peer presence, salesperson interactions, and influencer endorsements can stimulate impulse buying by enhancing perceived social approval or status (Luo, 2005)^[14].

3. Demographic Moderators

Demographic variables do not directly cause impulse buying but influence the strength of other antecedents.

- **Age:** Younger consumers, particularly those in their late teens and early twenties, tend to exhibit higher impulsivity due to developmental factors related to novelty seeking and risk-taking (Wood, 1998)^[22].
- **Gender:** Women have been found to engage more frequently in fashion and appearance-related impulse buying, possibly due to greater involvement in hedonic shopping (Dittmar *et al.*, 1995)^[7].
- **Income Level:** Higher disposable income facilitates spontaneous purchasing, although lower-income consumers may also engage in impulse buying driven by promotional opportunities (Bellenger *et al.*, 1978)^[4].

Collectively, these antecedents illustrate that impulse buying is rarely the product of a single factor but rather the result of an interaction between emotional readiness, situational cues, and personal predispositions.

4. Summary of Reviewed Literature

Author(s) & Year	Country	Sample Size	Methodology	Antecedents Studied	Key Findings
Beatty & Ferrell (1998) ^[3]	USA	386	Survey	Shopping enjoyment, time availability	Shopping enjoyment and more available time positively influence impulse buying.
Rook & Fisher (1995) ^[18]	USA	351	Questionnaire	Buying impulsiveness trait	Trait impulsiveness significantly predicts impulse buying across product categories.
Mattila & Wirtz (2001) ^[15]	USA	432	Experiment	Store atmosphere, mood	Pleasant music and scent increased impulse purchases, especially for happy consumers.
Dittmar <i>et al.</i> (1995) ^[7]	UK	400	Survey	Gender, self-identity	Women’s impulse buying linked to self-identity and appearance-related goods.
Verhagen & van Dolen (2011) ^[20]	Netherlands	316	Structural Equation Modelling	Website quality, hedonic browsing	Website quality and hedonic motives increase online impulse buying.
Flight <i>et al.</i> (2012) ^[9]	Australia	284	Survey	Negative mood, impulsivity	Negative mood states lead to more impulsive purchases for high-impulsivity individuals.
Donovan <i>et al.</i> (1994) ^[8]	Australia	300	Observation & Survey	Store atmosphere, mood	Pleasant atmospherics lead to longer shopping time and more impulse purchases.
Wood (1998) ^[22]	UK	250	Survey	Age, lifestyle	Younger age groups engage in more frequent impulse buying.

Discussion

The findings from the reviewed literature indicate that impulse buying is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon influenced by a combination of psychological, environmental, and demographic factors. Internal psychological drivers, such as mood states, emotional arousal, and trait impulsivity, consistently emerge as strong predictors of impulse buying behaviour (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998; Rook & Fisher, 1995) [3, 18]. Notably, both positive and negative moods can serve as triggers, albeit through different psychological pathways — positive moods tend to enhance the pleasure of purchasing, while negative moods may prompt compensatory consumption (Flight *et al.*, 2012) [9].

External environmental factors, particularly store atmospherics, promotional cues, and online interface design, act as catalysts for translating the internal urge into actual purchasing behaviour. Studies on atmospheric congruence (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001) [15] show that the alignment between sensory stimuli (e.g., scent and music) significantly enhances consumer immersion, increasing the likelihood of impulse purchases. Similarly, promotional strategies such as discounts, “buy one get one free” offers, and time-limited deals leverage the scarcity and urgency principles to nudge consumers towards impulsive decisions.

Overall, the reviewed studies reinforce the stimulus–organism–response (SOR) framework, where environmental cues (stimuli) interact with consumer internal states (organism) to produce purchasing behaviour (response). The interplay between internal urges and external facilitators is key — a positive emotional state may remain dormant unless activated by appealing store stimuli or promotions, and conversely, an attractive store environment may fail to trigger purchases in consumers with low impulsivity traits.

Conclusion

Impulse buying behaviour is shaped by a dynamic interaction between consumer traits, emotional states, and environmental triggers. This systematic review synthesised findings from diverse empirical studies to provide a holistic understanding of the antecedents influencing impulse buying. The literature demonstrates that internal psychological factors—such as emotions, impulsivity, and shopping enjoyment—form the primary motivational base for impulse buying. In addition, external environmental cues like store design, promotional strategies, and the layout of online shopping interfaces serve as situational triggers that can either amplify or suppress the urge to make impulsive purchases. Demographic and individual differences, including age, gender, and income levels, further influence the magnitude and frequency of such behaviour. By integrating these dimensions, both marketers and academics can more effectively predict consumer responses and develop targeted interventions or strategies. These can range from encouraging impulsive purchases in retail settings to mitigating them in campaigns aimed at promoting financial responsibility.

Future Implications

The insights from this review present several actionable implications for retailers and marketers aiming to strategically stimulate impulse buying behaviour. Sensory marketing can be deliberately employed to evoke positive emotional states and enhance consumer engagement through

curated background music, scent marketing, and visually appealing product displays. Both in-store and online promotional cues should capitalise on scarcity and urgency principles, such as flash sales and countdown timers, to trigger a heightened sense of purchase urgency. Furthermore, personalised marketing strategies informed by demographic and psychographic profiling can significantly improve effectiveness; for instance, younger consumers may be more receptive to gamified shopping experiences, while older consumers might respond better to loyalty-based incentives. Additionally, store layout should be strategically designed to place small, attractive, and affordable items in high-traffic zones, such as checkout counters, thereby encouraging last-minute, unplanned purchases.

By addressing these gaps, future research can offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of impulse buying, enabling both more effective marketing strategies and better-informed consumer policies.

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