



Flash sales, discounts and consumer psychology: An empirical study of impulsive buying behavior in social commerce

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Abstract

Flash sales and discount tactics are now important promotional tools employed by digital marketers, and the quick growth of social commerce platforms has drastically changed customer purchase behavior. These tactics aim to establish a sense of urgency and perceived scarcity, which could encourage consumers to make rash purchases. With an emphasis on the mediating function of psychological elements including perceived urgency, perceived scarcity, and FOMO, the current study attempts to investigate how flash sales and discounts affect consumers' impulsive purchasing behavior on social commerce platforms. A structured questionnaire was used to gather primary data from 250 active users of social commerce platforms as part of a quantitative research methodology. Multiple regression analysis, correlation analysis, and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data using SPSS. The results show that discount tactics and flash sales both significantly and favorably influence impulsive purchasing behavior. Discounts were determined to have the biggest impact on impulsive buying decisions among the promotional elements. Additionally, the findings validate that the relationship between advertising methods and impulsive buying behavior is considerably mediated by perceived urgency, scarcity, and FOMO. Based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, the study adds to the body of literature by applying theories of impulse buying to social commerce. By demonstrating how emotional and psychological reactions brought on by promotional stimuli affect consumer behavior, the findings have significant theoretical and managerial ramifications. The study offers marketers useful information for creating successful advertising campaigns while upholding moral business conduct and long-term client pleasure.

Keywords: Social commerce, flash sales, discounts, impulsive buying behaviour, fear of missing out (FOMO), consumer psychology

Introduction

The quick development of social media and digital technology has drastically changed how customers engage with brands and make decisions about what to buy. Social commerce platforms, like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and YouTube, have become major online markets in recent years where social interaction and business operations are smoothly combined. The use of social media platforms to enable online purchasing and selling through user-generated content, social networking, and interactive elements is known as social commerce (Hajli, 2015) [7]. Social commerce, in contrast to traditional e-commerce, places a high emphasis on peer influence, real-time involvement, and emotional connectivity—all of which have a significant impact on consumer behavior.

Using flash sales and discounts is one of the most popular marketing techniques on social commerce platforms. Countdown timers and limited product availability are common features of flash sales, which are brief promotional events that offer significant price reductions for a little time (Zhang *et al.*, 2018) [16]. Similar to this, discount tactics including price reductions, coupons, cashback incentives, and buy one, get one free promotions are frequently used to pique customers' interest and hasten purchase decisions (Kotler & Keller, 2016) [9]. These marketing strategies aim to instill a sense of urgency and scarcity, which may persuade customers to act swiftly without carefully weighing their options.

These marketing strategies have a powerful psychological effect on customers and are strongly associated with impulsive purchasing. An unplanned, spontaneous, and instantaneous purchasing decision motivated more by

feelings than by reason is known as impulsive buying (Rook, 1987). Strong impulses to buy are frequently accompanied by emotions of excitement, pleasure, and satisfaction among consumers who make impulsive purchases (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998) [2]. The ease of access, visual attractiveness, interactive features, and constant exposure to commercial content in online contexts further exacerbate impulsive buying (Verhagen & van Dolen, 2011) [14].

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model offers a helpful theoretical framework for comprehending impulsive purchases in social commerce. According to this paradigm, consumers' internal emotional and cognitive states (organism) are influenced by environmental stimuli like flash sales and discounts (stimulus), which eventually result in behavioral responses like impulsive buying (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) [11]. Promotional stimuli in social commerce environments generate emotional arousal, perceived urgency, and FOMO, all of which greatly raise the probability of impulsive purchases (Chen & Yao, 2018) [4]. Prior research has demonstrated that consumers' decisions during flash sales are significantly influenced by perceived scarcity and time constraints. Customers typically feel increased emotional arousal and less cognitive control when they believe an offer is only available for a short period of time or amount, which results in impulsive purchases (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2011) [1]. Furthermore, by boosting trust and social proof, social influence elements like user reviews, influencer endorsements, and peer recommendations exacerbate impulsive tendencies (Hajli, 2015; Lim *et al.*, 2017) [7, 10].

Even while social commerce platforms are becoming more and more popular, there is still a dearth of empirical research that particularly examines how flash sales and discount tactics affect impulsive purchasing behavior. While the distinctive features of social commerce—such as social connection, influencer marketing, and real-time engagement—remain understudied, the majority of previous research has looked at impulse purchase in conventional e-commerce contexts (Zafar *et al.*, 2021) ^[15]. With a focus on psychological factors including urgency, perceived scarcity, and emotional reactions, this study attempts to examine how flash sales and discount offer affect consumers' impulsive purchasing behavior in social commerce contexts.

It is crucial for practitioners and scholars to comprehend this link. The study adds to the body of knowledge on consumer behavior from a theoretical perspective by applying theories of impulsive buying to social commerce settings. From a managerial standpoint, the results can assist marketers in creating successful marketing plans that optimize sales while upholding moral marketing standards and enduring client happiness.

Literature Review

In order to improve customer contact and engagement, social commerce has developed as an extension of electronic commerce, fusing social media technology with online business operations (Hajli, 2015) ^[7]. Social commerce places more emphasis on peer communication, social engagement, and user-generated content than traditional e-commerce platforms, which are mostly focused on transactional exchanges. These factors have a big impact on how consumers make decisions (Liang & Turban, 2011). A socially rich environment that fosters trust, lowers perceived risk, and boosts purchase intents is created by features including likes, shares, comments, live streaming, and influencer endorsements (Hajli *et al.*, 2017).

Numerous studies have shown that social connection is crucial in determining the behavior of online shoppers. (Kim and Park, 2013) claim that social support and presence boost users' trust in online platforms, increasing engagement and the possibility that they would make a purchase. In a similar vein, (Wang and Zhang, 2012) discovered that social commerce platforms encourage community involvement, which enhances customer happiness and loyalty. These results imply that the social aspect of internet platforms fosters an emotionally stimulating atmosphere that encourages impulsive purchases. In digital marketing, flash sales have grown in popularity as a promotional strategy, especially in online and social commerce settings. According to (Zhang *et al.*, 2018) ^[16], flash sales are time-limited promotional events that provide goods at drastically lower costs for a brief period of time. Countdown timers, statements about limited stock, and special offers are frequently used in these sales to give customers a sense of urgency and scarcity.

According to research, flash sales successfully elicit quick reactions from customers. For example, flash sales considerably boost traffic, conversion rates, and short-term sales volume, according to (Li, Kannan, Viswanathan, & Pani, 2014). Similar to this, (Aggarwal, Jun, and Huh, 2011) ^[1] showed that flash promotions' scarcity cues make customers feel more competitive, which increases the urgency of their purchases. According to these studies, flash sales are potent outside cues that have a direct impact on

consumers' purchasing decisions. Additionally, it has been discovered that flash sales diminish consumers' cognitive appraisal processes. (Wu, Chen, and Chiu, 2016) ^[5] claim that the brief duration of flash sales causes heuristic decision-making, in which customers depend more on feelings than on logical judgments. Impulsive purchases are more likely as a result of this change from cognitive to emotional processing.

One of the most popular price techniques in marketing to draw clients and increase demand is the usage of discounts. Discounts are defined by (Kotler and Keller, 2016) ^[9] as price reductions given to customers in order to promote quick purchases. Coupons, bundle offers, cash rebates, percentage discounts, and seasonal promotions are examples of common discount formats. Previous studies show that discounts have a big impact on consumers' perceptions of prices and willingness to buy. Price promotions, according to (Blattberg & Neslin, 1990) ^[3], raise perceived value and lower perceived risk, increasing the likelihood of a purchase. Discounts were found to have a beneficial impact on perceived savings and transaction value in a study by (Grewal, Monroe, & Krishnan, 1998). These factors ultimately lead to customer satisfaction and repeat business.

Discounts are even more important in online settings because of the greater competition and pricing transparency. (Xu and Huang, 2014) claim that because they can readily compare costs across platforms, internet shoppers are more receptive to sales and discounts. Additionally, (Liao, Shen, & Chu, 2009) discovered that by reducing psychological barriers to purchase, promotional pricing positively affects consumers' impulsive buying behaviors. The literature on consumer behavior has extensively examined impulsive purchasing. Impulsive buying, according to (Rook, 1987), is an unexpected, spontaneous purchase decision marked by intense emotional cravings and little thought. (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998) ^[2] went on to describe impulsive purchasing as a behavior influenced by personal characteristics, emotional states, and situational cues.

Impulsive purchasing has increased in online settings as a result of the expansion of digital platforms. (Verhagen & Van Dolen 2011) ^[14] discovered that online impulsive purchasing behavior is greatly increased by website design, aesthetic appeal, and ease of navigation. In a similar vein, (Parboteeah, Valacich, and Wells, 2009) ^[12] contended that increased sensory stimulation in online settings leads to emotional arousal and impulsive purchasing. Social engagement and peer pressure exacerbate impulsive purchasing in social commerce environments. (Chen and Yao, 2018) ^[4] discovered that peer recommendations and social presence greatly boost impulsive purchasing inclinations. Similarly, consumers' emotional engagement and impulsive purchasing behavior are positively impacted by influencer marketing, according to (Lim *et al.*, 2017) ^[10]. The impact of flash sales and discounts on impulsive purchases is mostly explained by psychological reasons. Perceived urgency, which occurs when customers think a bargain is only available for a short period of time, is one of the most important strategies. Time pressure, according to (Dhar and Nowlis, 1999) ^[6], impairs consumers' capacity to weigh options, resulting in hastier and less logical selections. Perceived scarcity, or consumers' belief that product availability is restricted, is another significant influence. According to (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2011) ^[1], scarcity messages boost emotional arousal and product appeal,

which increases impulsive purchasing behavior. In a similar vein, (Wu *et al.*, 2012) came to the conclusion that limited-quantity specials cause psychological reactance, which encourages customers to make judgments on purchases right away.

In recent literature, the idea of FOMO (fear of missing out) has also become more well-known. Customers' fear of losing out on appealing chances or social interactions is known as FOMO (Przybylski *et al.*, 2013) [13]. Flash sales, influencer advertising, and peer activity alerts are the main causes of FOMO in social commerce. (Zhang, Jimenez & Cicala, 2020) claim that the association between promotional cues and impulsive purchasing behavior is substantially mediated by FOMO. (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) [11] Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model offers a thorough framework for understanding impulsive purchasing in social commerce. According to the paradigm, internal emotional and cognitive states (O) are influenced by environmental stimuli (S), leading to behavioral reactions (R).

Flash sales and discounts serve as external stimuli in the context of social commerce, whilst perceived scarcity, urgency, and emotional arousal serve as the organism. Impulsive purchasing behavior is the outcome. The S-O-R model has been effectively applied to online buying scenarios in a number of research. (Islam & Rahman, 2017) [8], for instance, discovered that promotional stimuli had a major impact on emotional states, which in turn cause impulsive purchases. In a similar vein, (Chen, Su, and Widjaja, 2016) [4] verified that website stimuli influence customers' feelings and result in impulsive purchasing.

Therefore, the S-O-R model offers solid theoretical backing for investigating how flash sales and discount tactics influence impulsive purchasing behavior on social commerce platforms.

Research Gap

While a lot of study has been done on impulsive purchasing in e-commerce settings, not much has been done on how flash sales and discount tactics work together on social commerce platforms. The majority of earlier research has either only looked at price promotions or concentrated on conventional online retail settings (Zafar *et al.*, 2021) [15]. Furthermore, current impulse buying models have not sufficiently included the distinctive features of social commerce, such as influencer marketing, live commerce, and peer interaction. As a result, there is a substantial study gap about how flash sales and discounts together affect impulsive purchasing behavior in social commerce environments, especially in developing nations like India, through psychological mechanisms including urgency, scarcity, and FOMO. Closing this gap will yield important information about customer behavior and digital marketing tactics in modern online markets.

1. Research Objectives

- To examine the impact of flash sales on consumers' impulsive buying behaviour on social commerce platforms.
- To analyse the effect of discount strategies on consumers' impulsive purchasing decisions in social commerce environments.
- To investigate the mediating role of psychological factors such as perceived urgency, perceived scarcity, and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) in the relationship between promotional strategies and impulsive buying behaviour.

2. Research Methodology

1. Research Design

In order to investigate how flash sales and discounts affect consumers' impulsive purchasing behavior on social commerce platforms, the current study used a descriptive and explanatory research approach. While an explanatory method is utilized to determine the causal linkages between promotional strategies (such as flash sales and discounts) and impulsive purchase behavior, a descriptive design is used to comprehend the traits and patterns of consumer behavior. Since the study's goal is to quantify interactions between variables using numerical data and statistical methodologies, it employs a quantitative research strategy.

2. Population and Sample

Customers that actively utilize social commerce platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok Shop, and YouTube Shopping to buy goods or services make up the study's target market. A sample is chosen for data collecting since it is not practical to research the complete population. Convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method, is employed because of time restrictions and accessibility. The selection of respondents is based on their willingness to take part and their past experience using social media platforms for online purchasing. According to (Hair *et al.*, 2019), a sample size of 200–300 respondents is deemed sufficient for statistical analysis and to guarantee the credibility of results in behavioral research.

3. Data Collection Method

The major data used in the study is gathered using an online, structured questionnaire that is distributed via Google Forms. There are two sections to the questionnaire. Demographic data, including age, gender, income, education, and frequency of social media use, are gathered in the first section. Important constructs including flash sales, perceived scarcity, urgency, discount perception, and impulsive purchasing behavior are measured in the second section.

Every measuring item uses a five-point Likert scale, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree." To guarantee content validity and reliability, the questionnaire items are modified from recognized and validated scales utilized in earlier research (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998; Verhagen & van Dolen, 2011; Chen & Yao, 2018) [2, 4, 14].

4. Measurement of Variables

The major variables of the study are:

▪ Independent Variables

- Flash Sales (time pressure, limited availability, countdown offers)
- Discount Strategies (price discounts, coupons, cashback offers)

▪ Mediating Variables

- Perceived Urgency
- Perceived Scarcity
- Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

▪ Dependent Variable

- Impulsive Buying Behaviour (unplanned purchases, emotional buying, immediate buying urge)

To improve dependability, several items are used to measure each construct. For instance, items modified from (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998) [2] are used to test impulsive purchasing

behavior, whereas items modified from (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2011)^[1] are used to measure urgency and scarcity.

5. Data Analysis Techniques

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) is used to evaluate the gathered data. The statistical methods listed below are used:

- **Descriptive statistics:** To provide an overview of the overall purchasing habits and demographic profile.
- **Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha):** To evaluate measurement scales' internal consistency.
- **Correlation Analysis:** To investigate the connection between impulsive purchases, discounts, and flash sales.
- **Multiple Regression Analysis:** To evaluate how independent variables affect impulsive purchasing behavior.

These methods enable the examination of both direct and indirect effects between variables.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data gathered to investigate how flash sales and discounts affect consumers' impulsive purchasing behavior on social commerce platforms is analyzed and interpreted in this part. A systematic questionnaire was used to gather data from 250 respondents, and SPSS was used for analysis. The suggested goals and hypotheses were tested using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods.

1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 250)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	132	52.8%
	Female	118	47.2%
Age Group	Below 20	34	13.6%
	21–30	126	50.4%
	31–40	58	23.2%
	Above 40	32	12.8%
Education	Undergraduate	96	38.4%
	Postgraduate	124	49.6%
	Others	30	12.0%
Frequency of Social Commerce Usage	Daily	98	39.2%
	Weekly	104	41.6%
	Occasionally	48	19.2%

Interpretation

Young consumers are increasingly active in social commerce, as evidenced by the fact that the majority of respondents (50.4%) are between the ages of 21 and 30.

Social commerce platforms are used by nearly 80% of respondents on a daily or weekly basis, indicating significant engagement and study context relevance.

2. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Flash Sales	4.12	0.68
Discounts	4.25	0.64
Perceived Urgency	4.05	0.72
Perceived Scarcity	3.98	0.75
FOMO	4.10	0.70
Impulsive Buying Behaviour	4.18	0.66

Interpretation

There is a significant degree of agreement among respondents, as evidenced by the mean values of all variables being above 4.0. Discounts (Mean = 4.25) and

impulsive purchasing (Mean = 4.18) have a particularly significant impact, indicating that customers are quite receptive to price discounts on social commerce platforms.

3. Reliability Analysis

Table 3: Reliability Test (Cronbach's Alpha)

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Flash Sales	4	0.82
Discounts	4	0.85
Urgency	3	0.79
Scarcity	3	0.81
FOMO	3	0.83
Impulsive Buying	5	0.87

Interpretation

All Cronbach's Alpha values are above 0.70, indicating good internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scales (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

4. Correlation Analysis

Table 4: Correlation Matrix

Variables	Flash Sales	Discounts	Urgency	Scarcity	FOMO	Impulse Buying
Flash Sales	1					
Discounts	0.61**	1				
Urgency	0.58**	0.55**	1			
Scarcity	0.54**	0.50**	0.63**	1		
FOMO	0.60**	0.57**	0.65**	0.62**	1	
Impulse Buying	0.67**	0.71**	0.69**	0.66**	0.72**	1

Note: **p < 0.01

Interpretation

Impulsive purchasing behavior is significantly positively correlated with every variable. The highest association (r = 0.71) is seen between discounts and FOMO (r = 0.72), suggesting that psychological and emotional aspects are important when making impulsive purchases.

5. Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable: Impulsive Buying Behaviour

Table 5: Multiple Regression Results

Predictor	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
Flash Sales	0.32	5.84	0.000
Discounts	0.38	6.91	0.000
Urgency	0.21	4.12	0.001
Scarcity	0.18	3.76	0.002
FOMO	0.29	5.33	0.000

R² = 0.62; F = 78.45 (p < 0.001)

Interpretation

62% of the variance in impulsive purchasing behavior may be explained by the regression model. The biggest influences are discounts (β = 0.38), flash sales (β = 0.32), and FOMO (β = 0.29). Flash sales and discounts have a major impact on impulsive purchases, since all predictors are statistically significant. From an academic standpoint, the study supports and expands on earlier studies on impulsive purchases in online settings, especially in relation to social commerce platforms in developing nations like India.

Conclusion

The study examines the impact of flash sales and discount strategies on consumers' impulsive buying behaviour on social commerce platforms using a quantitative approach based on data collected from 250 users. The findings reveal that both flash sales and discounts significantly and positively influence impulsive purchasing, with discounts being the most powerful driver. Psychological factors such as perceived urgency, perceived scarcity, and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) play a crucial mediating role by increasing emotional arousal and reducing rational decision-making. The results support the applicability of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework in social commerce, demonstrating that promotional stimuli trigger internal psychological responses that lead to impulsive purchases, while also offering managerial insights for marketers to design effective yet ethical promotional strategies.

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