

Impulsive Buying Behaviour Triggered By Social Media Ads

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of social media advertisements on impulsive buying behaviour among individuals aged 16 to 25. With the growing influence of digital platforms on consumer behaviour, the research explores how exposure to targeted social media ads contributes to unplanned purchasing decisions. Drawing from the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model and existing literature, the study highlights how emotional triggers and visual appeal in advertisements can drive spontaneous buying behaviour. A quantitative methodology was employed, surveying 100 participants within the target demographic using a structured questionnaire. The results reveal a significant correlation between ad exposure on social media and impulse buying tendencies, with a notable number of participants agreeing to clicking on ads while scrolling. The findings emphasize the powerful role of social media in shaping modern consumer habits and underline the importance for marketers to ethically leverage these platforms. The study also opens avenues for further research into psychological and contextual factors influencing digital purchasing behaviour.

Keywords: *Impulsive buying, social media, unplanned purchasing, emotional triggers, visual appeal.*

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I. Introduction

In today's fast-paced digital world, social media has become much more than a tool for communication—it has transformed into a thriving marketplace, especially for the younger generation. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube have seamlessly woven advertising into the daily experiences of users, blurring the lines between organic content and commercial messaging. For individuals aged 16 to 25, who are among the most active users of these platforms, social media is not just a place to connect with friends; it is a space where buying decisions are made, often impulsively and in real time.

Impulse buying refers to making spontaneous, unplanned purchases without prior intent. While this behaviour has always been part of traditional retail environments—like grabbing an extra item at a checkout counter—the phenomenon has grown significantly in online spaces. In the digital world, the triggers for impulsive decisions are more frequent, more personalized, and more subtle. Algorithms curate what users see based on their preferences, showing them products they didn't even know they wanted, making it incredibly easy to slip into unplanned buying behaviour with just a few taps. Unlike physical shopping, where certain barriers such as physical effort, time, and social pressure might restrain a purchase, online shopping—especially through social media—removes most of these barriers, encouraging immediate action without significant reflection.

The 16–25 age group represents a critical demographic for studying impulse buying behaviours. At this stage of life, individuals are navigating new financial freedoms, shaping their consumer identities, and developing long-term purchasing habits. However, psychological research shows that the cognitive control systems responsible for long-term decision-making are still maturing in this age group. As a result, young consumers are often more susceptible to emotional and environmental cues when making purchase decisions. Emotional triggers such as boredom, excitement, stress, loneliness, and even the fear of missing out (FOMO) can drive spontaneous buying, particularly when amplified by well-designed, visually appealing, and highly targeted social media advertisements.

The instant gratification that online shopping offers further fuels impulsive behaviour. The ability to make a purchase within minutes—without leaving the app or needing much conscious deliberation—creates a perfect environment for impulsive decision-making. Flash sales, time-limited offers, influencer promotions, and peer recommendations (through likes, shares, and comments) all work together to create a sense of urgency and desirability. In such environments, rational evaluation often takes a backseat to emotional responses and external cues.

Recognizing the growing influence of these factors, this study aims to explore the phenomenon of **impulse buying triggered by social media ads** through a **quantitative research approach**. By surveying individuals aged 16 to 25, this research seeks to understand not just how often impulse buying occurs, but also

what specific triggers are most effective in the online context. This quantitative design will allow for the identification of patterns, relationships, and statistical trends that can provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon across a diverse sample of young consumers.

Specifically, the objectives of this study are:

1. To measure the frequency and tendency of impulse buying behavior among young social media users.
2. To identify which types of ads (e.g., influencer-endorsed, time-limited discounts, user-generated content) are most influential in prompting spontaneous purchases.
3. To explore the emotional and psychological factors that contribute to impulsive decision-making in online shopping contexts.

The insights gained from this research will not only contribute to the academic understanding of consumer psychology but also offer practical value for marketers aiming to design more ethical, responsible advertising campaigns. In addition, the findings may serve as an educational resource for promoting greater financial awareness and self-control among young consumers, encouraging more mindful engagement with online shopping platforms.

In conclusion, as social media continues to expand its reach and influence, understanding its impact on consumer behaviour – particularly among vulnerable younger audiences – becomes increasingly important. Impulse buying, once limited to physical retail spaces, has found a new, more potent form in the digital world. By shedding light on the psychological underpinnings and external factors influencing impulsive online purchases, this research hopes to contribute meaningfully to the broader discourse on digital marketing, youth culture, and responsible consumerism.

II. Literature Review

Social Networking Sites like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube influence purchasing decisions by exposing users to targeted advertisements. Casual scrolling often leads to spontaneous, unplanned purchases (impulse buying).

Impulse buying is a sudden, compelling urge to purchase without prior planning, often emotionally driven (Amos et al., 2014; Stern, 1962). It can have negative financial and emotional consequences if uncontrolled. Impulse buying is influenced by emotional states, social pressure, disposable income, and strategic marketing tactics (Chen & Wang, 2016; Rook, 1987; Zafar et al., 2021).

The concept of impulse buying first emerged in the 1940s and was initially described as an unplanned, irrational action (Aragoncillo & Orus, 2018). Early studies defined it as a spontaneous purchase that occurs without careful consideration, differing from intentional and rational buying behaviour (Ahn et al., 2020; Li & Jing, 2012). Researchers like Stern (1962) and Applebaum (1951) further explored this idea, highlighting how exposure to promotional cues often triggers these sudden purchases. Applebaum, for instance, explained impulse buying as a direct response to in-store promotions, emphasizing that purchases are sometimes driven by immediate stimuli rather than logical decision-making.

Later researchers refined the concept, arguing that not all unplanned purchases are impulsive — true impulse buying usually involves a strong emotional urge and personal gratification (Kollat & Willett, 1969; Rook, 1987; Koski, 2004; Hashmi et al., 2019). Simply stumbling upon a good deal isn't enough; genuine impulsive buying typically comes with excitement, emotional attachment, and a compelling need to purchase without prior intention (Amos et al., 2014).

In the digital era, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model has often been used to understand online impulse buying behaviour. However, research on impulse buying in online and social media environments is still developing, with many gaps remaining (Busalim & Hussin, 2016).

Social media has emerged as a powerful driver of impulse buying. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube allow users to share their experiences, reviews, and purchases, often influencing the buying behaviour of others (Xiang et al., 2016; Anderson et al., 2011). User-generated content — such as posts, comments, and product recommendations — can stimulate emotional reactions, leading to impulsive purchasing decisions among other users.

Despite decades of research on impulse buying, earlier studies mainly focused on website factors rather than social media marketing strategies. Given the growing dominance of social platforms in young consumers' lives, it is crucial to examine how social media ads and peer influence drive impulse buying behaviour today (Busalim & Hussin, 2016).

III. Methodology

Research Design

This study follows a quantitative research design aimed at examining the impact of social media advertisements on impulse buying behavior among young consumers. A structured survey method was employed to gather primary data, enabling the collection of measurable and analysable responses.

Population and Sample

The target population for this research includes individuals aged 16 to 25 years who are active users of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. A sample size of 100 participants was selected using a non-probability convenience sampling method, as it was the most practical approach given the age-specific criteria and the need for quick, wide-reaching data collection.

Data Collection

Primary data was collected through an online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms and direct messaging. The questionnaire was designed to capture information about participants' social media usage habits, their exposure to advertisements, and their tendencies toward impulse buying. The survey consisted mainly of close-ended questions using Likert scales and multiple-choice formats to ensure consistency in responses.

Instrument Design

The questionnaire included:

Demographic questions (age, gender, education, etc.)

Social media usage questions (frequency, platforms used)

Impulse buying behavior questions (frequency of impulse purchases, emotional triggers, advertisement influence)

Questions were framed based on previous studies on impulse buying behavior and adapted to suit the social media context.

Data Analysis

The collected data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and frequencies) to summarize the responses. Further, inferential statistics such as correlation analysis may be employed to determine the relationship between exposure to social media ads and impulse buying behavior.

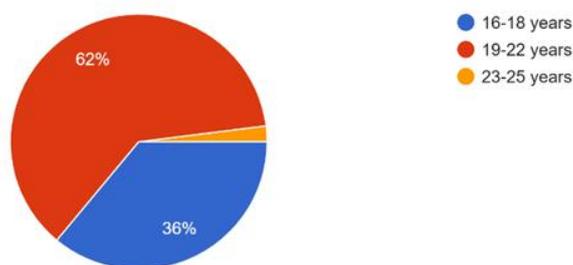
Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and participants had the option to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. The data collected will be used strictly for academic purposes.

IV. Findings

Age distribution

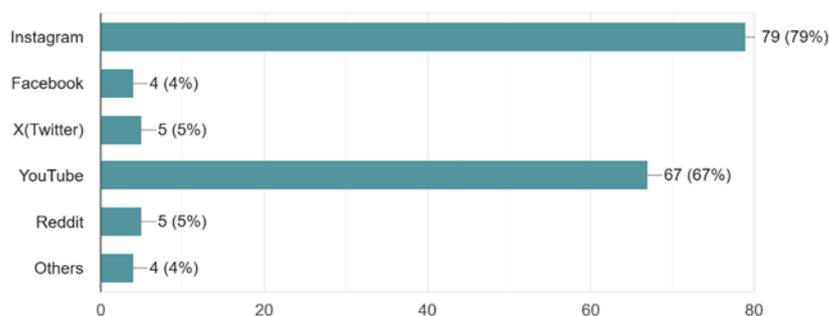
Age
100 responses



The pie chart illustrates the age distribution of 100 respondents who participated in the study on impulsive buying behaviour triggered by social media advertisements. This distribution indicates that the majority of the study's participants are in late adolescence to early adulthood, a group that is highly active on social media and potentially more vulnerable to impulsive buying behavior influenced by online advertisements. The minimal representation of the 23–25 age group suggests either lower engagement with impulsive purchases via social media or lesser survey reach to that age bracket.

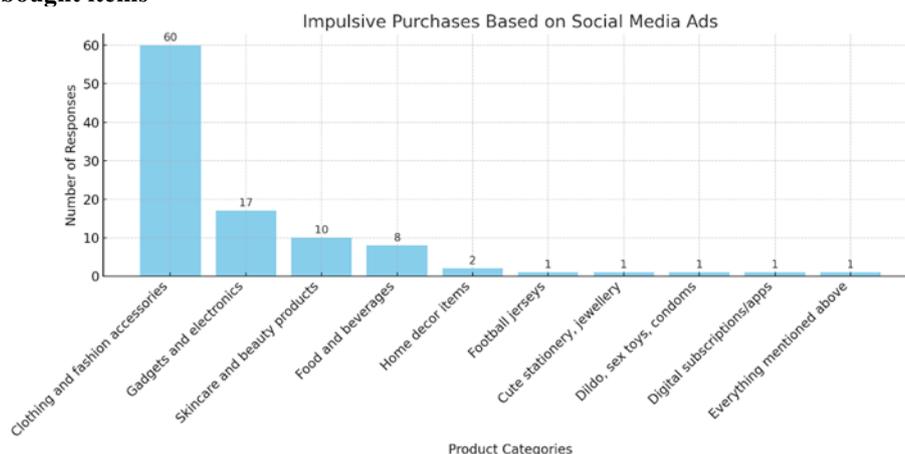
Social Media Platform usage

On which of these social media platforms do you encounter the most ads?
100 responses



This data indicates that Instagram and YouTube are the dominant platforms in terms of ad visibility among young users aged 16–25. This aligns with broader usage trends, as these platforms prioritize visual content and algorithm-driven ad placement. The relatively low ad encounter rates on Facebook, X, Reddit, and others suggest either lesser engagement or lower ad penetration among the younger demographic on those platforms.

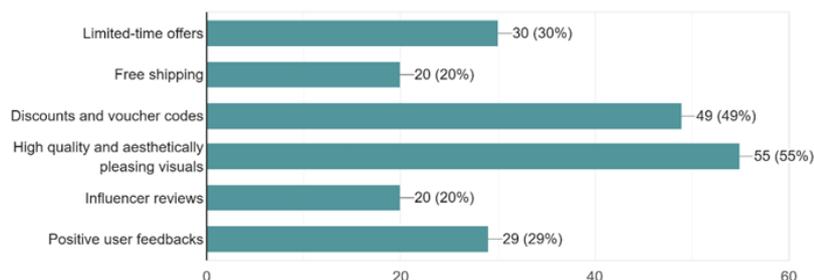
Impulsively bought items



The bar graph underscores that **visual and lifestyle-centric product categories**, such as fashion, beauty, and electronics, are the most susceptible to impulsive purchases triggered by social media advertising. Marketers targeting these categories should continue leveraging strong visuals, influencer endorsements, and time-sensitive offers to capitalize on this consumer behavior.

Factors responsible

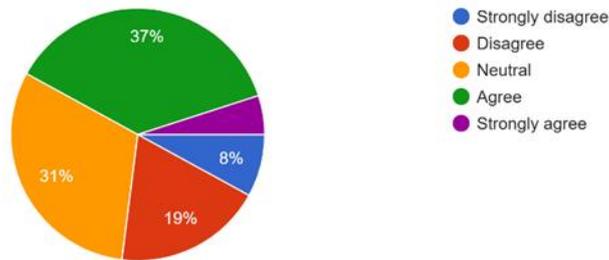
Which of these features in a social media ad encourage you to make a purchase?
100 responses



The findings suggest that **social media ads are most effective when they combine striking visuals, clear value propositions (like discounts), and strong social proof**. For marketers and advertisers, aligning campaigns with these insights can significantly increase engagement and sales outcomes, particularly among younger demographics who are highly active and visually driven in the digital space.

Frequency of Ad Clicking

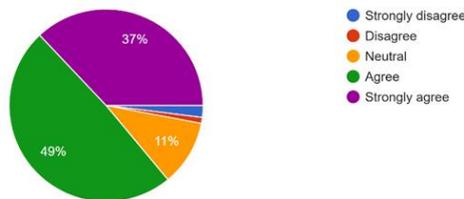
I often click on ads that appear while I'm scrolling through social media.
100 responses



While a significant number of users (**42% combined agree or strongly agree**) are inclined to engage with social media ads, a large portion remains passive or indifferent. This suggests that **engagement is achievable but highly dependent on factors like content relevance, ad quality, and user targeting**. Marketers should focus on crafting visually appealing and personalized ads to convert neutral users into active clickers.

Awareness

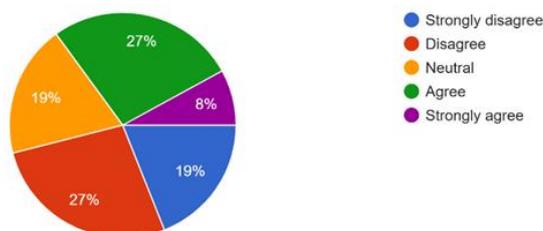
I am aware that social media ads are targeted based on my behavior and preferences.
100 responses



This chart shows that a large majority of respondents are aware that social media ads are tailored based on their behavior and preferences. Specifically, **49% agree** and **37% strongly agree**, totaling **86%** who acknowledge targeted advertising. In contrast, only a small portion are unaware or uncertain: **11% are neutral**, **2% disagree**, and **1% strongly disagree**. This indicates that most users have a clear understanding of how digital advertising algorithms work and recognize that their online actions influence the ads they see. This awareness could affect how users perceive ad content and how receptive they are to personalized marketing efforts.

Critical Thinking

I rarely think deeply before buying something I saw in a social media ad.
100 responses

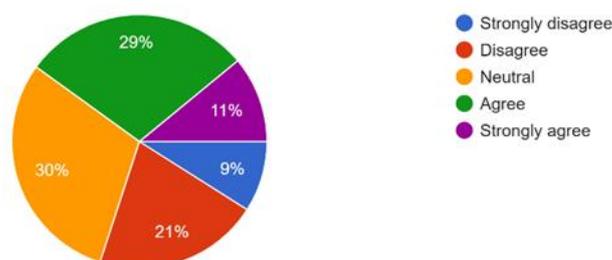


This chart reveals how often respondents engage in critical thinking before making purchases from social media ads. A majority appear to exercise caution: 19% strongly disagree and 27% disagree, totaling 46% who say they do not rarely think deeply—implying they do reflect before purchasing. On the other side, 27% agree and 8% strongly agree, meaning 35% admit they rarely think deeply, suggesting more impulsive buying behavior. The remaining 19% are neutral, indicating indecision or mixed behavior.

The Feeling of Regret

I regret some purchases I've made after being influenced by social media ads.

100 responses



This chart explores whether respondents regret purchases made under the influence of social media ads. A notable portion—**29% agree** and **11% strongly agree** (a combined **40%**)—indicate they **do** experience regret. On the contrary, **21% disagree** and **9% strongly disagree** (**30%** total) report **not** regretting such purchases. Meanwhile, **30%** remain **neutral**, possibly reflecting uncertainty or limited experiences. These findings suggest that while many users are influenced by social media ads, a significant number later question the value or necessity of their purchases—highlighting a gap between impulse buying and post-purchase satisfaction.

V. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the impact of social media advertising on consumer behavior, and the findings reveal clear trends in how users respond to digital marketing strategies. A significant majority of respondents are drawn to advertisements featuring high-quality visuals and promotional incentives such as discounts and vouchers. These features were shown to be highly persuasive, suggesting that visual appeal and perceived value play a central role in the effectiveness of social media ads.

The responses also indicate that while many users are aware that social media ads are tailored based on their behaviour and preferences, this does not always lead to impulsive buying. In fact, a notable portion of respondents claimed to think critically before making purchases, although others admitted to occasionally being swayed by trending products and experiencing FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). This split demonstrates that while personalization increases engagement, it doesn't uniformly translate to immediate consumer action.

Moreover, the data reveals that not all social media-driven purchases lead to satisfaction. Approximately 40% of respondents expressed regret over some of their ad-influenced purchases, which raises questions about the long-term effectiveness and ethical considerations of persuasive advertising. This suggests a need for more responsible advertising practices that prioritize transparency and product relevance.

In conclusion, social media advertising holds significant sway over consumer decisions, particularly when paired with compelling visuals and monetary incentives. However, consumer awareness and skepticism are also rising. Brands must strike a balance between persuasive techniques and authentic, value-driven messaging if they wish to build trust and sustain long-term customer relationships.

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