

E-Commerce Dynamics: Identifying the Behavioral Triggers in Online Shopping Among College Students

T.Manoj Kumar

Part Time Research Scholar

Reg No: 20224011271003

Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli -627012,Tamilnadu

Dr.G.Venkadasalopathy

Supervisor

Director (SFC) & Associate Professor

G.Venkataswamy Naidu College,Kovilpatti,

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti,Tirunelveli -627012, Tamilnadu.

Dr.C.Thilakam

CoSupervisor

Professor

Department of Commerce (RTD)

Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli -627012, Tamilnadu

Abstract

This research investigates the influence of marketing stimuli, website design, and emotional factors on impulsive and intentional online shopping behaviors among college students. Key findings indicate that discounts and promotions serve as the most significant triggers for both impulse and intentional purchases, while product recommendations, although impactful, demonstrate a lesser influence. Positive emotions mediate the relationship between discounts and impulse purchases, emphasizing the critical role of emotional engagement. Website design elements, such as visual appeal and ease of navigation, show minimal direct impact on purchase behavior. A cluster analysis revealed two consumer segments: one responsive to aggressive marketing and another preferring personalized strategies. These insights underline the importance of combining promotions, personalized recommendations, and emotionally engaging marketing tactics to effectively target diverse consumer preferences and enhance sales outcomes.

Keywords: Impulse purchases, Intentional purchases, Marketing stimuli, Emotional engagement, Website design.

Introduction

The advent of e-commerce has revolutionized consumer behavior, especially among digitally native college students, who represent a significant demographic in online shopping. Their purchasing patterns, ranging from unplanned, spur-of-the-moment decisions to deliberate, well-thought-out purchases, offer

valuable insights into the psychology of modern consumers. Impulse buying refers to spontaneous, unplanned purchases often triggered by external factors such as discounts, promotions, or engaging website design. In contrast, intentional buying involves calculated decisions made to fulfill specific needs or desires.

The dual nature of these shopping behaviors highlights the complex interplay of various factors, including marketing stimuli, website design, and emotional triggers. Marketing stimuli like discounts, limited-time offers, and personalized product recommendations are well-documented drivers of impulse buying. For instance, a study conducted at Tri Bhakti Business found that online discounts significantly encouraged impulsive purchases among students. Similarly, the role of visually appealing and interactive e-commerce platforms in creating compelling virtual experiences that foster impulsive behavior. Beyond external stimuli, emotional factors play a pivotal role in shaping online shopping behaviors. Hedonic motivations, where students shop for enjoyment or to enhance their mood, significantly drive impulsive purchases in digital environments. Moreover, elements like social presence and interactive features on websites have been shown to evoke positive emotions, further fueling spontaneous buying. Intentional purchases, on the other hand, are often influenced by trust in the platform, the quality of product information, and navigational ease. Despite the extensive research on impulse buying, limited studies address the specific triggers that differentiate impulsive from intentional purchases among college students. While website design and marketing stimuli are known to influence both behaviors, their interaction with emotional states and their varying impact on different consumer segments remain underexplored. By bridging this gap, this study aims to provide actionable insights for e-commerce platforms seeking to cater to the distinct needs of impulsive and intentional buyers, ultimately optimizing their strategies for enhanced consumer engagement and satisfaction.

Review of Literature

Online shopping behavior, especially regarding impulse purchases and intentional buying decisions, has been extensively examined, with various factors influencing consumer choices. In this regard, external triggers, such as discounts, promotions, and product recommendations, significantly impact impulsive buying behaviors **Hussain, Rehman, Tufail, and Raza (2024)**. highlight that discounts and sales promotions are some of the most effective external stimuli that create urgency, pushing consumers into making hasty, unplanned decisions. For instance **Aydinli, Bertini, and Lambrecht (2014)** found that promotions and price reductions trigger spontaneous purchasing behaviors by creating a sense of urgency, leading to emotional and irrational decisions. This aligns with the work of **Dawson and Kim (2010)**, who assert that impulsive buying is strongly linked to external cues that bypass consumers' rational decision-making processes. Product recommendations also play a critical role in triggering

unplanned purchases, particularly when they align with consumers' preferences and browsing history. **Mamonov and Benbunan-Fich (2018)** suggest that personalized product recommendations influence impulsive purchases by offering products that seem more relevant to the individual, thus encouraging spontaneous decisions. This finding is further supported by **Zou (2018)**, who emphasizes that the personalization of product recommendations significantly enhances e-commerce engagement and impulsive buying behaviors. In addition to external triggers, the design and interactivity of e-commerce websites significantly affect online shopping behaviors. **Hausman (2000)** found that visually appealing websites could drive consumer engagement and influence the flow state, thereby fostering impulsive buying tendencies. This view is echoed by **Kimiagari and Sharifi (2021)**, who argue that emotional engagement triggered by website aesthetics and usability influences consumers' decisions to purchase impulsively. However, **Lin and Lo (2016)** caution that website design alone is not sufficient to stimulate impulse purchases, suggesting that ease of navigation also plays a significant role in guiding consumers toward deliberate purchases. **Kim and Lennon (2013)** underline the importance of website design elements, including visual and verbal information, in shaping consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Their research suggests that an aesthetically pleasing and user-friendly design encourages both intentional and impulse buying, though its effectiveness is influenced by the specific buying context (impulse vs. intentional). On the other hand, **Gupta and Kim (2010)** highlight the importance of usability for more deliberate buying behaviors, asserting that consumers who engage in intentional purchases value convenience and accessibility during the shopping process.

Furthermore, emotional states, particularly positive emotions, have been identified as a key mediator in the relationship between external stimuli and online shopping behavior. Positive emotions, often triggered by discounts and promotions, increase the likelihood of impulse buying. **Shen and Khalifa (2012)** explain that website interactivity and emotional engagement create a conducive environment for impulse buying by making the shopping process more enjoyable and pleasurable. In this context, **Djuharni et al. (2023)** emphasize that hedonic motivations, such as shopping for enjoyment or escapism, often overshadow rational decision-making processes and contribute significantly to impulse purchases. **Verhagen et al. (2013)** assert that emotional engagement can transform marketing stimuli into spontaneous purchases. When positive emotions are heightened, such as through rewarding shopping experiences or discounts, consumers are more likely to engage in impulsive buying. This aligns with **Wu et al. (2016)**, who demonstrate that emotional engagement, fostered by website design and marketing cues, can

mediate the link between external stimuli and unplanned purchases. In contrast, **Park and Lee (2009)** indicate that hedonic motivations—such as the desire for enjoyment and social approval—are powerful drivers of impulsive purchases, often leading consumers to prioritize emotional satisfaction over rationality.

From a marketing perspective, the segmentation of consumers based on their responsiveness to various stimuli provides valuable insights. **Monsuwé et al. (2004)** note that different consumer groups react to marketing stimuli in distinct ways, and understanding these differences can help e-commerce platforms design targeted strategies. **Koo and Ju (2010)** identify two types of consumers: those who respond to promotions and discounts (impulsive buyers) and those who engage in more rational and intentional purchases. These insights are crucial for e-commerce platforms that seek to tailor their strategies to different consumer groups, ensuring both impulsive and intentional buyers are effectively engaged.

In light of these findings, it is evident that both impulse and intentional purchases are significantly influenced by a combination of marketing stimuli, website design, emotional engagement, and consumer motivations. By understanding the factors that drive these behaviors, marketers can refine their strategies to enhance consumer engagement, boost sales, and optimize the online shopping experience for diverse customer segments.

Statement of the Problem

While there is substantial research on impulse buying in general, specific triggers differentiating impulse purchases from intentional ones in college students' online shopping Behaviours remain underexplored. Research points to several factors influencing both impulsive and planned purchases, including website design, marketing stimuli, and emotional factors. For instance, vivid website features and interactivity create a virtual shopping experience that can strongly trigger impulsive Behaviours among students (Shen & Khalifa, 2012). Similarly, emotional responses like pleasure and arousal evoked by product presentation or website layout significantly increase the likelihood of impulsive buying (Lin & Lo, 2016).

On the other hand, intentional purchases are often guided by factors like trust in the website, product information quality, and navigability (Kimiagari & Sharifi, 2021). Despite the clear impacts of these variables, how marketing and emotional stimuli interact to influence both impulse and intentional buying remains insufficiently addressed. Therefore, a detailed investigation of these factors is necessary to better understand how e-commerce platforms can cater to both impulsive and intentional shopping behaviours among college students.

The limited exploration of distinct triggers differentiating impulsive from intentional online purchases among college students necessitates a deeper understanding of how marketing stimuli, website design, and emotional factors interact to influence these behaviors. Additionally, the role of consumer segmentation in identifying varying responses to these triggers remains underexplored.

Objectives

1. To evaluate the role of marketing stimuli, including discounts, promotions, and product recommendations, in influencing impulse and intentional purchases.
2. To analyze the impact of website design factors, such as visual appeal and ease of navigation, on online shopping behaviors.
3. To investigate the mediating role of emotional states in the relationship between external triggers and purchasing behaviors.
4. To propose actionable strategies for e-commerce platforms to cater to distinct consumer segments effectively.

Hypotheses

- ❖ Marketing stimuli, such as discounts, promotions, and product recommendations, significantly influence impulse (H1) and intentional purchases (H2).
- ❖ Discounts have the strongest effect on impulse purchases (H1a), while promotions are the primary drivers of intentional purchases (H2a).
- ❖ Website design factors, including visual appeal (H3a) and ease of navigation (H3b), influence impulse and intentional purchases.
- ❖ Emotional states mediate the relationship between marketing stimuli and purchasing behaviors (H4). Positive emotions enhance the effect of discounts on impulse purchases (H4a), while hedonic motivations amplify the impact of promotions on both types of purchases (H4b).

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive research design with a cross-sectional approach. Using a purposive sampling technique, data were collected from 273 college students in Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, India. A structured questionnaire was distributed through digital platforms, capturing variables such as e-commerce preferences, social media endorsements, online identity factors, trust, and emotional states. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics, while multiple regression analysis assessed the impact of marketing stimuli and website

design on purchasing behaviors. Mediation analysis explored the role of emotional states, and cluster analysis segmented respondents based on their responsiveness to marketing triggers. The analyses were conducted using statistical software, including SPSS and JAMOVI.

Analysis and Discussion:

1. The Role of Marketing Stimuli in Triggering Impulse Purchases Among College Students

This study examines the impact of marketing stimuli specifically discounts, promotions, and product recommendations on impulse purchases among college students. Impulse purchases, characterized by spontaneous and often unplanned buying decisions, are a critical Behaviour that marketers aim to influence. The analysis explores the extent to which these marketing factors trigger such Behaviours and how each stimulus contributes to impulsive buying tendencies.

Table.no.1

The Role of Marketing Stimuli in Triggering Impulse Purchases Among College Students

S.no	Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
1	Discounts	0.497	0.019	26.09	<0.001
2	Promotions	0.406	0.019	21.91	<0.001
3	Recommendations	0.323	0.02	16.4	<0.001

R-squared: 0.818 | F-statistic: 444.7 | p-value: <0.001

The regression analysis investigates the impact of marketing stimuli namely discounts, promotions, and product recommendations on impulse purchases among college students. The results indicate that all three factors significantly influence impulsive buying Behaviour, with a p-value of less than 0.001, demonstrating strong statistical significance. Discounts have the most substantial effect, with a coefficient of 0.497, suggesting that an increase in discounts is associated with a nearly 0.5 unit rise in impulse purchases, making it the most effective trigger. Promotions follow closely, with a coefficient of 0.406, showing that promotional activities like limited-time offers or special deals also substantially drive impulse purchases. Product recommendations also positively contribute to impulse buying, though to a lesser degree, with a coefficient of 0.323. This suggests that personalized suggestions or curated recommendations can still spur spontaneous buying decisions, though less strongly than discounts or promotions. The model explains 81.8% of the variance in impulse purchases (R-squared = 0.818), indicating that these marketing stimuli are key drivers of such

Behaviour. The overall significance of the model, reflected by the F-statistic of 444.7, confirms the strength of these relationships. Thus, discounts and promotions should be central in marketing strategies aimed at triggering impulse purchases, while product recommendations can complement these efforts.

1.2. The Role of Marketing Stimuli in Influencing Intentional Purchases Among College Students

This study examines how various marketing stimuli specifically discounts, promotions, and product recommendations affect intentional purchases made by college students. Intentional purchases refer to well-planned, deliberate buying decisions made by consumers, which contrasts with impulsive buying. By analyzing the effects of these marketing tools, this study aims to understand which stimuli have the greatest influence on consumers' planned purchase decisions and how they can be optimized for effective marketing strategies.

Table.no.1.2

S.no	Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
1	Discounts	0.303	0.02	15.36	<0.001
2	Promotions	0.501	0.019	26.52	<0.001
3	Recommendations	0.416	0.02	20.95	<0.001

R-squared: 0.834 | F-statistic: 495.6 | p-value: <0.001

The regression analysis demonstrates that all three marketing stimuli discounts, promotions, and product recommendations significantly impact intentional purchases, with each variable showing a p-value of less than 0.001, indicating strong statistical significance. Promotions have the most pronounced effect, with a coefficient of 0.501, meaning that promotional activities, such as special offers or discounts on larger quantities, significantly drive intentional purchases. This suggests that planned purchasing Behaviour is highly responsive to promotional campaigns, making promotions a key tool for marketers aiming to influence deliberate buying decisions. Product recommendations also play a crucial role, with a coefficient of 0.416, highlighting the importance of personalized suggestions or curated recommendations in guiding consumers toward intentional purchases. Lastly, discounts, with a coefficient of 0.303, have a smaller but still significant effect on planned buying, implying that while price reductions are influential, they are less impactful on intentional purchases compared to

promotions and recommendations. In summary, promotions are the strongest driver of intentional purchases, followed by product recommendations and discounts, suggesting that marketers should prioritize promotional strategies while also leveraging personalized product suggestions to enhance planned consumer purchases.

2. The Influence of Website Design on Online Shopping Behaviour

This analysis investigates how key elements of **website design**, specifically **visual appeal** and **ease of navigation**, influence online shopping Behaviour, particularly in distinguishing between impulse and planned purchases. Website design is a critical factor in shaping the user experience and can impact how consumers make purchasing decisions. The goal of this study is to determine whether these design elements significantly influence whether a consumer's purchase is impulsive or planned.

Table.no.2

The Influence of Website Design on Online Shopping Behaviour

S.no	Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z-value	p-value
1	Visual Appeal	-0.0077	0.048	-0.16	0.873
2	Navigation Ease	0.0191	0.047	0.404	0.686

Pseudo R-squared: 0.0008 | p-value: 0.885

The logistic regression results indicate that neither visual appeal nor ease of navigation has a statistically significant influence on whether purchases are impulsive or planned. The coefficient for visual appeal is -0.0077, with a p-value of 0.873, suggesting that changes in visual design are not significantly related to the likelihood of an impulsive or planned purchase. Similarly, the coefficient for ease of navigation is 0.0191, with a p-value of 0.686, indicating that ease of navigating the website does not significantly affect shopping Behaviour either. The overall model, as reflected by the pseudo-R-squared of 0.0008, explains very little of the variance in online shopping Behaviour, further supporting the conclusion that these website design factors do not play a critical role in driving impulse versus planned purchases. Given the p-value of 0.885 for the model, the relationship between website design and shopping Behaviour appears to be weak and not

statistically significant. These findings suggest that other factors, such as marketing stimuli or emotional triggers, may have a greater influence on online shopping Behaviour than website design features like visual appeal or ease of navigation.

3. The Mediating Role of Emotional States in Online Shopping Behaviour

This analysis explores the mediating effect of emotional states, particularly positive emotions, on the relationship between discounts and impulse purchases in online shopping Behaviour. Emotional states can significantly influence consumer decisions, particularly in e-commerce, where discounts may trigger emotional responses that affect whether purchases are impulsive or deliberate. The aim of this mediation analysis is to assess how much of the effect of discounts on impulse buying is explained by the emotional state of the consumer.

Table.no.3

The Mediating Role of Emotional States in Online Shopping Behaviour

Introduction:

S.no	Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
1	Discounts	0.14	0.04	3.49	<0.001

2	Positive Emotions	0.666	0.059	11.27	<0.001
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R-squared: 0.511 | **F-statistic:** 102.8 | **p-value:** <0.001

The mediation model reveals that both discounts and positive emotions significantly contribute to impulse purchases. The coefficient for discounts is 0.14, with a p-value of <0.001, indicating that discounts have a direct and significant effect on impulse purchases. More importantly, positive emotions act as a strong mediator, with a coefficient of 0.666 and a p-value of <0.001, suggesting that the emotional response to discounts has a substantial impact on impulse buying Behaviour. The model explains 51.1% of the variance in impulse purchases (R-squared = 0.511), and the overall model is highly significant (F-statistic = 102.8, p-value < 0.001).

This indicates that positive emotions mediate the relationship between discounts and impulse purchases, meaning that discounts not only lead to impulse purchases directly but also indirectly by evoking positive emotional states in consumers. The strong coefficient for positive emotions highlights their pivotal role in converting the appeal of discounts into actual

impulse buying Behaviour. In summary, this analysis shows that emotional responses significantly amplify the effect of discounts on impulse purchases, making emotional engagement a key factor for marketers to consider when crafting discount-driven strategies to encourage spontaneous buying.

4. Cluster Analysis for Developing Targeted Marketing Strategies

This cluster analysis aims to identify distinct consumer segments based on their impulse and intentional purchase Behaviour in response to marketing stimuli such as discounts, promotions, and product recommendations. By segmenting consumers into clusters, online retailers can better tailor their marketing strategies to suit the differing shopping preferences and tendencies of various groups. The analysis identifies two clusters of consumers who exhibit different responses to marketing efforts and purchase Behaviours.

Table.no.4

Cluster Analysis for Developing Targeted Marketing Strategies

Cluster	Impulse Purchases	Intentional Purchases	Discounts	Promotions	Recommendations
0	0.423	0.414	0.419	0.265	0.371
1	0.741	0.752	0.555	0.704	0.55

The cluster summary reveals two distinct groups of consumers:

Cluster 0: Consumers in this group demonstrate relatively lower levels of impulse (0.423) and intentional purchases (0.414) compared to Cluster 1. Their responses to marketing stimuli are also more moderate, with discounts (0.419), promotions (0.265), and recommendations (0.371) having less influence on their purchasing Behaviour. This suggests that Cluster 0 consumers may be more deliberate in their buying decisions and less responsive to aggressive marketing tactics, indicating they could prefer steady, subtle marketing strategies with occasional discounts or carefully curated recommendations.

Cluster 1: This group is characterized by significantly higher impulse (0.741) and intentional purchases (0.752), making them more likely to respond to marketing stimuli. Consumers in Cluster 1 are particularly responsive to promotions (0.704), followed by discounts (0.555) and recommendations (0.550). These findings suggest that Cluster 1 consumers are more impulsive and intentional in their buying Behaviour when exposed to

targeted marketing campaigns. Marketing strategies that include aggressive promotions, frequent discounts, and personalized product recommendations are likely to be most effective for this group.

Findings

The study revealed that marketing stimuli significantly influence both impulse and intentional purchases. Discounts were identified as the strongest driver of impulse buying, followed by promotions and product recommendations. For intentional purchases, promotions had the most substantial impact, with recommendations and discounts playing secondary roles. Emotional engagement, particularly positive emotions, mediated the relationship between discounts and impulse buying. Cluster analysis highlighted two consumer segments: one favoring aggressive marketing and the other responding better to personalized and subtle strategies. Website design factors demonstrated minimal direct influence on purchasing behavior but remain integral to creating a seamless shopping experience.

Conclusion

This study underscores the significance of marketing stimuli, emotional engagement, and personalized strategies in shaping online shopping behaviors among college students. Discounts and promotions emerged as the most influential drivers, with discounts strongly tied to impulse purchases and promotions more effective in intentional buying. Positive emotions play a crucial mediating role, particularly in enhancing the impact of discounts on spontaneous purchases.

Although website design factors like visual appeal and navigation ease had limited direct effects, maintaining a seamless and aesthetically pleasing shopping experience remains critical to complementing other triggers. The findings also highlighted the existence of two distinct consumer segments, emphasizing the need for tailored marketing approaches to address diverse behavioral tendencies.

By focusing on strategies such as leveraging discounts, enhancing personalization, fostering emotional engagement, and segment-specific marketing, retailers can effectively cater to both impulse and intentional buyers. A holistic and dynamic approach to marketing, combined with continuous adaptation to emerging consumer trends, will help optimize sales and customer satisfaction in the competitive e-commerce landscape.

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