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Same Impulse, Different Trigger: A Conceptual Comparison of Offline and Online Impulse Buying Behaviour

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Abstract

Impulse buying has long been studied as a retail-floor phenomenon, but the shift of consumer purchasing to digital platforms has changed the mechanics of the behaviour itself. This paper offers a conceptual, literature-based comparison of the psychological triggers driving impulse buying in offline and online retail environments. Drawing on established typologies of impulse buying and recent empirical and review literature, the paper maps which triggers carried over from physical retail into digital retail, which were substantially transformed, and which are unique to the online environment. The paper concludes with a proposed comparative framework and directions for future empirical research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A shopper grabs a chocolate bar at checkout which they never meant to buy, another scrolls past a pair of sneakers for five minutes and buys them anyway. Setting is different but same weakness. Impulse buying research has a long history in retail psychology rooted in Stern's early typology of impulse purchase [1]. Although this thought was based on physical stores (aisles, shelves, smell) but online shopping imitates the same behaviour. It rebuilt the mechanics of temptation from scratch.

Comparative work directly testing offline against online impulse buying is still relatively rare, but the studies that exist point to real differences rather than a simple transfer of behaviour from store to screen. In one of the few direct offline-online comparisons in the literature, the offline channel was found to be slightly more conducive to impulse buying than the online channel, and the factors that encourage online impulse buying were found to explain the behaviour more strongly than the factors that discourage it [2]. That single finding is enough to justify a closer theoretical look: if the two channels aren't behaving the same way, the underlying trigger mechanisms are probably not the same either.

This paper does not attempt to resolve that empirical question further - it doesn't collect data, and it doesn't need to. Instead, it does the groundwork that should come before more data collection: it lays offline and online impulse triggers side by side, using existing theory and recent empirical findings, and proposes a simple comparative framework that later researchers can test directly.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a conceptual and literature-based research design rather than an empirical one. Conceptual papers of this kind are a standard and recognized approach within consumer behaviour research. They are particularly used to synthesize a body of literature that has grown across disconnected contexts as impulse buying research has. Such a scenario is particularly the case for research dealing with consumer impulse buying that encompasses both traditional retailing studies and e-commerce writings, which rarely intersect.

Literature was drawn from Scopus-indexed and other peer-reviewed sources — Journal of Consumer Behaviour, Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Consumer Research, Internet Research, Heliyon, Frontiers in Psychology, and Journal of Computer Information Systems among them using search terms including "impulse buying," "online impulse buying," "store atmospherics," "dark patterns," and "livestream shopping." Sources were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings from 2015 onward, so the comparison reflects the current digital retail environment rather than early-2000s e-commerce. Two exceptions — Rook [3] and Stern [1] are kept because they're the origin papers for the typology this entire literature still builds on; every post-2015 source cited here cites them too. Sources were chosen for direct relevance to specific triggers, prioritizing ones that allow a like-for-like offline-online comparison. This is a narrative synthesis, not a systematic review because the aim is theoretical integration, not exhaustive coverage.

3. Theoretical Background

Rooks' definition of buying from 1987 is still important today. He said it is when you really want to buy something and you usually cannot resist it [3]. After you buy it you might feel bad about what you did. This idea is still the basis for most of the work people do on this topic now. People who study this have started to look at how it works when people shop on the internet. They have been studying impulse buying for twenty-five years. They want to know what makes people do it what happens when they do it and what the results are. They think that buying things on impulse when you are online is different from doing it in a store. So, they are treating it like its area of study rather than just something that happens because of what people do, in stores.

A recurring theoretical lens across both channels is the stimulus–organism–response (S–O–R) model, which frames a retail cue (stimulus) as producing an internal emotional or cognitive state (organism) that leads to a behavioural outcome (response). This framing appears throughout recent offline and online impulse-buying research and gives the two literatures a shared vocabulary even though the specific stimuli differ sharply by channel.

Meta-analytic work has also confirmed what many smaller studies suggested individually: impulse buying research has drawn on multiple underpinning theories and covers a wide range of contexts and methodological approaches [4], which is precisely why a paper that simply lines the theory up side by side, without adding new data, still has value as the field has enough scattered findings that a synthesis is overdue.

4. Offline Impulse Triggers

Physical retail's impulse-buying tools are built around the environment itself. Store atmospherics like lighting, layout, music, scent remain central to this literature. Recent Indian-context research on store ambiance found that a comfortable, clean, and well-organized store environment increases how long shoppers stay and how many products they explore, which raises the likelihood of impulse purchases, echoing older atmospherics research but confirmed in a more recent, emerging-market setting [5].

Attention research adds a mechanism underneath this. Shoppers whose visual attention is drawn wider across a store shift into something close to an exploratory mindset, and that mindset predicts unplanned purchases on its own — independent of what they originally came in for [6]. Retailers have understood this instinctively for decades, even without the vocabulary for it: the longer someone lingers and looks around, the more they buy without meaning to.

Sensory cues are extremely important. It has been proven multiple times through research, for instance when speaking of retail environments, the visual, auditory, and tactile cues elicit specific responses within us. They make us feel as if the products are of higher value. As well as making us want to buy products that we didn't intend on buying. When a retail environment has a vast variety of these cues it makes the

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products seem like they have a deeper value. This deep value makes us want to purchase it. Touch is a big contributor to this; it's a sense that is unrivaled by technology such as phones and computers. Touching products makes us want to buy them, more than if we saw them on a screen [7]. Some researchers did a study regarding this topic. They concluded that tactile interaction did have a strong influence on our purchasing choices. De Canio and Fuentes-Blasco were the brilliant minds that conducted this experiment, it was done in 2021, and its results have very insightful.

Recent research conducted among emerging-markets shoppers contributes an important nuance to the discussion presented in this article. Specifically, studies exploring the retail environment appeal to shoppers in this population identify the role of both external factors and internal characteristics as predictors of unplanned purchase, thus confirming their influence beyond the domestic market [8]. This is an invaluable insight that should be noted when extrapolating research results to other emerging-markets' contexts since the majority of studies included in this article's review are based on Western populations. Acknowledging this fact is crucial, as it allows making informed inferences while comparing the retail environment's effect on shoppers in developed and developing economies like India.

Social presence adds another offline-specific layer. Being physically accompanied while shopping changes buying behaviour - a "shopping pal" and the surrounding store atmosphere jointly shape impulse buying store atmospherics and marketing stimuli influence impulse buying behaviour, with the presence of a shopping companion playing a documented role in that process. None of this companionship, scent, tactile feedback has a clean digital equivalent, which is exactly why offline retail cannot simply be treated as an earlier draft of online retail.

5. Online Impulse Triggers

Online retail replaces environmental triggers with interface and data-driven ones. Scarcity and urgency cues are the clearest example: countdown timers, low-stock warnings, and flash-sale banners are deliberately engineered to compress decision time. This category of digital cue has been documented as functioning specifically to trigger fast, low-deliberation heuristic processing rather than considered evaluation interface features such as countdown timers, low-stock alerts, and limited-time discounts induce time pressure and activate fast, heuristic processing while reducing deliberation time [9]. The same body of work situates these tactics within the broader "dark pattern" literature, noting that interface designs which pressure users through fabricated urgency have measurable behavioural effects on shoppers' large-scale audits of retail interfaces have documented widespread manipulative design elements that steer users through pressure tactics and fabricated scarcity, with measurable effects on consumer behaviour [10].

Recommendation systems are the online equivalent of a helpful in-store salesperson, but built from aggregate data rather than a live read of the individual shopper. Consumer research on this mechanism found out that recommendation systems shape consumers' psychological outcomes when interacting with an online store, positioning customisation as a distinct psychological trigger rather than a neutral convenience feature [11].

Two other online-specific mechanisms are worth adding to the picture. Flow theory is the sense of being fully absorbed in an activity and has been applied specifically to online shopping, where research found that flow and social capital both play a meaningful role in shaping online impulse buying [12], suggesting that the immersive, low-friction browsing experience itself (independent of any single interface cue) is a trigger category with no direct offline equivalent - a store aisle doesn't produce "flow" in the same absorbed, uninterrupted sense a scrolling feed does. Separately, research tracking online shoppers in Sweden found that impulse buying tendencies among online shoppers were shaped by factors specific to the digital shopping environment [13], reinforcing that online impulse buying is not simply offline impulse buying relocated to a browser, but a behaviour with its own developing theoretical literature.

Newer immersive technologies are also entering this space and partially closing the sensory gap that once separated online from offline retail. Augmented reality features, for instance, have been shown to meaningfully increase impulsive purchase behaviour by making digital products feel more tangible. Augmented reality has been shown to play a role in triggering impulsive purchases by making the shopping experience feel more tangible and immersive [14]. It is an attempt, essentially, to reintroduce the "touch" trigger that was identified as uniquely offline.

Livestream shopping shows online retail generating entirely new trigger categories with no offline history at all. A large-sample study found susceptibility to social influence, general impulse-buying tendency, and both cognitive and affective reactions all predicting impulse buying during livestreams, with price perception and manufactured scarcity moderating the effect [15]. A separate model tracing the same behaviour through streamer interaction and stream "realness" found these cues shape emotional state first, and emotional state — more than raw perception — is what actually drives the purchase [16]. A broadcast-and-storefront hybrid, in other words, with no pre-digital equivalent to compare it to.

6. RESULTS

Laying sections 4 and 5 side by side, three patterns stand out.

Firstly, few triggers translate directly but lose intensity. Atmospheric cues exist in both channels. Sensory richness in offline and interface design in online, but the offline version consistently engages more senses simultaneously (sight, sound, smell, touch together) while the online version is largely visual and auditory, with touch simulated rather than experienced.

Secondly, some triggers are functionally equivalent but structurally different. The in-store salesperson and the recommendation engine both serve a "suggestion" function in Stern's (1962) typology [1], but one reads a live human reaction and the other reads historical purchase data across millions of accounts. This distinction matters for a comparative framework because it means "suggestion impulse" is not a single mechanism anymore but it has split into a real-time

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interpersonal version and a data-driven algorithmic version, and these two versions may not produce identical psychological effects.

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, internet retail has created completely new trigger categories, such as algorithmically customized urgency, livestream shopping, and scarcity countdown timers, that have no physical equivalent. These are genuinely new additions to the impulse-buying toolkit rather than digital translations of traditional store tactics. This is probably part of the reason why direct comparative research consistently finds quantifiable differences between the channels rather than convergence factors, which were found to explain the behaviour to a greater extent than discouraging factors, in contrast to the offline pattern observed in the same study.

Table 1 summarises this comparison conceptually.

Trigger category	Offline mechanism	Online mechanism	Relationship
Environmental atmosphere	Lighting, scent, music, layout	Interface design, visuals, navigation flow	Weakened translation
Suggestion/ recommendation	Live salesperson	Algorithmic recommendation engine	Structurally different equivalent
Urgency/scarcity	Crowding, limited shelf stock	Countdown timers, stock alerts	Engineered intensification
Touch/tangibility	Physical handling of product	AR/simulated tangibility	Partial digital substitute
Social proof	Visible other shoppers, companion presence	Reviews, ratings, UGC, livestream audience	New digital-native form

7. Managerial and Practical Implications

Although this paper is theoretical, the comparative framework has direct implications for practice.

For offline retailers, the findings suggest that atmospheric investment should not be treated as a universal formula imported from Western retail research. Emerging-market conditions may moderate how strongly store ambiance translates into impulse purchases, meaning local testing matters more than assumed best practices. Retailers should also treat the shopping-companion effect as a design lever, not an incidental factor: store layouts, promotions, and group-oriented offers (family bundles, referral discounts) can deliberately activate the social trigger that online retail structurally cannot replicate.

For online retailers and platform designers, the framework raises an ethical dimension alongside a practical one. Because scarcity cues, countdown timers, and personalized urgency have been documented as functioning through the same manipulative "dark pattern" mechanisms studied in HCI research, retailers using these tools sit closer to regulatory and reputational risk than they may realize. This is no longer just a marketing tactic question but a consumer-protection one, especially as awareness of dark patterns grows among regulators and consumers alike. On the opportunity side, the AR and livestream findings suggest that the biggest unexploited lever for online retailers is not more urgency, but more tangibility which is closing the touch gap identified, rather than compensating for it with pressure tactics.

For researchers, the clearest next step flagged by this paper is empirical testing of whether algorithmic recommendation and human sales suggestion produce comparable purchase and satisfaction outcomes, a question this conceptual paper can raise but not answer.

8. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This paper is set out to map, conceptually, how impulse buying triggers differ between offline and online retail and not to determine which channel produces more impulsive behaviour, since that's a question for empirical, data-driven research. The literature review shows that the two channels share a psychological foundation (impulse buying as a low-deliberation, affect-driven decision) but have developed largely separate toolkits for triggering it, with online retail increasingly generating trigger types - algorithmic personalization, livestream urgency, simulated tangibility that have no clean offline history at all.

For future researchers building on this framework, three directions stand out. First, empirical testing of the "structurally different equivalent" claim, do algorithmic recommendations and human salesperson suggestions actually produce comparable purchase outcomes, or does the mechanism matter psychologically? Second, further comparative (not just single-channel) studies are still rare in this literature, and more of them would sharpen the framework proposed here. Third, as AR and livestream shopping mature, it will be worth revisiting whether these hybrid tools are closing the offline-online gap identified in this paper or simply creating a third, hybrid category of impulse trigger altogether.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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