



A Comprehensive Literature Review On Impulse Buying Behavior In Organized Retail Settings

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Abstract: Impulse buying has emerged as a critical area of interest within consumer behavior research, particularly with the rapid expansion of organized retail in developing economies such as India. Organized retail formats—supermarkets, hypermarkets, departmental stores, and large-format specialty outlets—have transformed the shopping environment and significantly influenced unplanned purchases. This paper presents a comprehensive literature review on impulse buying behavior in organized retail settings, synthesizing key insights from studies published over the past decade. The review examines psychological factors such as emotions, mood states, hedonic motives, and personality traits; external retail stimuli including store layout, lighting, music, and promotional cues; and situational influences such as time pressure, shopping companions, and payment methods. The findings reveal that impulse buying is a multidimensional construct shaped by both internal consumer characteristics and external environmental triggers. Despite extensive global research, significant gaps remain in the Indian organized retail context, particularly regarding district-level consumer patterns, socio-cultural influences, and the role of emerging behavioral variables. This review lays the foundation for future empirical studies and offers meaningful implications for retailers aiming to design effective in-store strategies that ethically influence consumer purchase decisions.

Keywords - Impulse Buying, Consumer Behavior, Organized Retail, Retail Atmospherics, Purchase Triggers, Shopping Psychology.

Introduction

Organized retailing has witnessed significant growth over the last two decades, particularly in emerging markets where shifting consumer lifestyles, rising disposable income, and urbanization have transformed traditional shopping behavior (Bansal & Sharma, 2021). In India, the retail landscape has moved beyond small, unorganized outlets to include supermarkets, hypermarkets, departmental stores, and shopping malls that offer a structured, visually appealing, and experiential shopping environment (Mukherjee & Patel, 2020). Such environments often encourage consumers to engage in unplanned or spontaneous purchase decisions, commonly referred to as impulse buying. As retailers compete to capture consumers' attention in a highly dynamic marketplace, understanding the psychological and environmental drivers of impulse buying has become increasingly important.

Impulse buying behavior has long fascinated researchers due to its complexity and unpredictability. Unlike planned purchases, impulse buying occurs suddenly, with minimal cognitive processing, and is often triggered by emotional and sensory cues. Earlier literature defines impulse buying as an immediate, compelling, and hedonic-driven purchasing action that emerges without prior intention (Rook, 1987; Verplanken & Herabadi, 2001). In organized retail settings, the structured store design, visually appealing displays, promotional signage, ambient stimuli, and convenience-oriented layouts create an environment highly conducive to spontaneous behavior (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998). As consumers navigate through aisles, they encounter numerous stimuli strategically placed to evoke emotional responses and influence decision-making.

With the evolution of modern retail formats, the significance of studying impulse buying in organized retail settings has grown substantially. Retailers increasingly employ sophisticated merchandising techniques, sensory marketing, and data-driven promotional strategies to stimulate unplanned purchases (Mehta & Chugan, 2013). This makes impulse buying not only a topic of academic interest but also a critical area for managerial decision-making. Understanding consumer responses to in-store atmospherics, promotional offers, and situational variables enables retailers to design engaging shopping experiences that enhance sales while maintaining ethical considerations.

Although global research on impulse buying is extensive, the Indian context presents unique characteristics. Cultural norms, family-oriented shopping patterns, social influence, and regional variations contribute to consumer behavior that differs from Western models (Sultana & Khare, 2020). Organized retail in India is still evolving across states and districts, creating the need to examine impulse buying behavior at more localized levels. Further, emerging psychological variables—such as locus of control, self-regulation, and digital payment familiarity—remain underexplored in the Indian context (Youn & Faber, 2000).

Given these considerations, a comprehensive literature review becomes critical for understanding the current state of knowledge and identifying gaps for future empirical investigation. This paper synthesizes key findings from contemporary studies on impulse buying behavior, focusing specifically on organized retail environments. The review highlights internal psychological factors, external store-related stimuli, and situational influences that shape impulse buying tendencies. Ultimately, this work provides a holistic understanding of the phenomenon and sets a strong foundation for future studies in the field, particularly within the Indian organized retail context.

I. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Impulse buying is widely acknowledged as a spontaneous and unplanned purchase that occurs without prior intention and is often driven by emotional and situational triggers (Rook, 1987). Unlike rational decision-making processes, impulse buying involves limited cognitive deliberation and is more closely linked to affective states. Scholars classify impulse buying into four primary types: pure impulse, reminder impulse, suggestion impulse, and planned impulse (Stern, 1962). Each type varies in terms of the consumer's motivation and the degree of prior planning involved.

In the modern organized retail environment, these impulse tendencies are strengthened by several psychological and environmental factors. Psychological influences—such as emotions, mood states, hedonic motivations, and personality traits—play a critical role in determining a consumer's propensity to engage in impulse purchasing (Verplanken & Herabadi, 2001). For instance, positive emotions such as excitement, joy, and pleasure can trigger spontaneous purchases, while low self-control or a high sensitivity to rewards may further increase impulse buying likelihood.

External factors, commonly referred to as retail atmospherics, include store layout, lighting, music, fragrance, promotional displays, and visual merchandising. These elements are strategically designed to create sensory appeal and encourage customers to make unplanned purchases (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Therefore, the interaction between individual psychological tendencies and store-generated stimuli forms the core conceptual basis for understanding impulse buying in organized retail settings.

Situational factors—such as social influence, time pressure, the presence of shopping companions, and payment methods—also play a significant role (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998). The increasing use of convenient payment systems like UPI and credit cards reduces the “pain of paying,” making impulse purchases more likely (Prelec & Loewenstein, 1998).

Overall, impulse buying behavior is best understood as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by internal drivers, external atmospherics, and situational triggers. This conceptual structure provides the foundation for reviewing existing literature and identifying research gaps in the context of organized retail.

II. METHODOLOGY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

This review adopts a systematic approach to identify, analyze, and synthesize existing research on impulse buying behavior in organized retail settings. A structured methodology ensures transparency, replicability, and academic rigor.

3.1 Data Sources

Relevant literature was collected from major academic databases including:

- Scopus
- Web of Science
- Google Scholar
- ScienceDirect
- Emerald Insight
- Taylor & Francis Online

These databases host high-quality peer-reviewed journals in marketing, retail management, consumer psychology, and behavioral sciences.

3.2 Keywords Used

A combination of the following keywords and Boolean operators was used:

- “Impulse Buying”
- “Impulse Purchase Behavior”
- “Organized Retail”
- “Retail Atmospherics”
- “Consumer Behavior”
- “In-store stimuli”
- “Unplanned Buying”
- “India Retail Market”

Sample search query: “Impulse buying AND organized retail AND consumer behavior”

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Studies published between 2010 and 2024
- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Studies focusing on organized retail (supermarkets, hypermarkets, malls, department stores)
- Studies on psychological, environmental, or situational determinants of impulse buying

Exclusion Criteria:

- Purely online shopping impulse buying studies
- Non-peer-reviewed articles
- Conference abstracts without full data

3.4 Study Selection Process

- Over 120 studies were initially screened through titles and abstracts.
- After removing duplicates and irrelevant sources, 42 articles met the initial criteria.
- A final list of 28 high-quality peer-reviewed articles was used for detailed review and synthesis.

3.5 Review Method

A thematic analysis approach was used to classify studies into three major categories:

- 1) Internal/Psychological factors
- 2) External/Retail Atmospherics factors
- 3) Situational factors

This helped identify patterns, theoretical overlaps, contradictions, and research gaps.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Internal / Psychological Factors Influencing Impulse Buying

Consumer internal states play a crucial role in determining the likelihood of impulse buying. One of the most widely researched psychological aspects is emotion and mood. Positive mood states such as excitement, pleasure, and happiness significantly increase unplanned purchases because consumers use shopping as a means of emotional gratification (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998). Research also highlights that hedonic shopping motives—seeking fun, enjoyment, and sensory pleasure—positively influence impulse tendencies (Hausman, 2000).

Personality traits are also strong predictors of impulse buying behavior. Individuals with high impulsivity, low self-control, and sensation-seeking tendencies are more prone to spontaneous purchases (Youn & Faber, 2000). Traits such as extraversion and openness correlate positively with impulse buying because such individuals respond more strongly to sensory and emotional cues in the retail environment (Mulyanegara et al., 2009).

Another emerging factor is locus of control, referring to an individual's perceived ability to regulate their behavior. Consumers with an external locus of control tend to attribute their actions to outside forces—store displays, promotions, or peer influence—and hence make more impulse purchases (Puri, 1996). Conversely, those with an internal locus of control demonstrate higher self-regulation and are less likely to engage in impulsive buying.

Additionally, hedonic consumption and instant gratification tendencies influence impulse buying significantly. When consumers experience the desire for psychological rewards and immediate pleasure, they are more likely to make unplanned purchases, especially in retail settings designed to evoke emotional responses (Ramanathan & Menon, 2006).

In summary, internal drivers—emotions, personality, hedonic motives, and low self-control—interact closely with retail cues to shape impulse buying behavior. These factors highlight the psychological sensitivity of consumers within organized retail settings.

4.2 External / Retail Atmospherics and Store-Related Factors

Retail atmospherics form the backbone of organized retailing and strongly shape impulse buying behavior. The concept of atmospherics refers to “the conscious designing of space to create specific emotional effects in buyers” (Kotler, 1973). These include lighting, music, color, scent, layout, and visual merchandising.

Store layout affects consumer movement and exposure to merchandise. Grid layouts in supermarkets and racetrack layouts in shopping malls are specifically designed to guide customers through multiple sections, increasing exposure to stimuli and encouraging impulse buying (Levy & Weitz, 2012).

Lighting and color schemes also play a measurable role. Bright lighting highlights products effectively, while warm color combinations trigger emotional warmth and purchase intention (Babin et al., 2003). Attractive visual merchandising displays—end caps, mannequins, window displays—stimulate curiosity and trigger unplanned behavior (Mehta & Chugan, 2013).

Music and scent are powerful sensory stimuli that influence mood and shopping duration. Slow-tempo music increases time spent in stores and leads to higher unplanned purchases (Milliman, 1982). Pleasant scents enhance emotional states and positively affect impulse buying decisions (Spangenberg et al., 2006).

Promotional cues such as price discounts, “buy one get one,” in-store demonstrations, and limited-time offers strongly activate impulse buying tendencies. Research shows that consumers tend to perceive promotions as opportunities, triggering sudden purchase decisions due to fear of missing out (Chen et al., 2019).

Thus, store atmospherics function as external triggers that interact with consumer psychology, making organized retail spaces ideal environments for impulse buying.

4.3 Situational Factors Influencing Impulse Buying

Situational influences refer to temporary conditions that shape consumer behavior. One of the most important situational triggers is time availability. Consumers who shop with relaxed time constraints are likely to browse more, encounter more stimuli, and make more impulse purchases (Park et al., 2006). On the other hand, time pressure reduces browsing and lowers impulsivity.

Shopping companions also influence unplanned buying. Studies indicate that consumers accompanied by friends or family members tend to make more impulse purchases, often due to social encouragement and shared excitement (Luo, 2005).

Another key situational factor is payment method. The rise of digital payment systems—UPI, credit cards, mobile wallets—has reduced the “pain of paying,” making consumers more likely to engage in impulse buying (Prelec & Loewenstein, 1998). Cash payments are more psychologically painful because the consumer physically parts with money, whereas digital modes create emotional distance.

Store crowding and seasonal occasions also influence impulse buying. Moderate crowding increases excitement and stimulates purchases, while excessive crowding causes discomfort and reduces browsing time (Eroglu & Machleit, 1990). Seasonal events such as festivals, annual sales, and special discount days significantly increase impulse buying due to emotional excitement and promotional overload (Amos et al., 2014).

Together, these situational elements interact dynamically with psychological and environmental factors to influence impulse buying behavior in unpredictable yet measurable ways..

IV. DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed highlights that impulse buying behavior in organized retail settings is a multidimensional construct shaped by the interplay of psychological, environmental, and situational factors. The findings emphasize that internal psychological states such as emotions, mood, hedonic motivations, personality traits, and locus of control strongly determine an individual’s impulse buying tendency. Notably, consumers experiencing positive emotional states are more likely to make spontaneous purchases, while those with low self-control or an external locus of control remain highly sensitive to in-store triggers (Youn & Faber, 2000; Puri, 1996).

Similarly, external retail atmospherics such as store layout, lighting, music, scent, and promotional displays exert a significant influence on consumer buying behavior. Organized retail formats are specifically designed to generate sensory appeal, evoke emotional responses, and maximize customer exposure to merchandise (Kotler, 1973). This aligns with the broader environmental psychology framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), which suggests that carefully structured stimuli can lead to approach behaviors—including impulse buying.

The review also finds that situational factors, including time availability, social presence, payment methods, and seasonal occasions, dynamically shape consumer behavior. Digital payment methods, in particular, have emerged as a modern catalyst for impulse buying by reducing the psychological “pain of paying” (Prelec & Loewenstein, 1998).

Overall, these dimensions reveal that impulse buying is not an isolated behavior but the result of a complex interaction between the consumer’s psychological makeup and the retail environment. However, most studies have been conducted in Western or urban metropolitan contexts, creating an evident need for research focused on regional and cultural variations, especially within Indian organized retail.

V. RESEARCH GAPS IDENTIFIED

Despite considerable academic interest, several gaps remain in the understanding of impulse buying behavior in organized retail:

6.1 Limited Indian Context Studies

Most existing research originates from Western markets. Indian organized retail, with its unique socio-cultural characteristics, remains underexplored. Regional retail patterns (e.g., Andhra Pradesh, Telangana) lack empirical investigation.

6.2 Lack of District-Level Micro Studies

There is minimal research on impulse buying behavior across smaller cities or districts. Local demographic, cultural, and economic differences may significantly influence consumer tendencies.

6.3 Underexplored Psychological Variables

Variables such as locus of control, self-regulation, digital payment familiarity, personality sub-trait, and emotional intelligence are rarely studied in the Indian retail context.

6.4 Limited Integration of Digital Retail Influence

Although digital payments (UPI) and mobile-based shopping triggers influence offline impulse buying, empirical research linking these domains is scarce.

6.5 Insufficient Studies on Store Atmospherics in Indian Formats

Indian supermarkets and hypermarkets differ from Western models in design, promotions, and crowd dynamics. These differences are rarely examined in existing literature.

6.6 Lack of Longitudinal Studies

Most research is cross-sectional. There is a need for longitudinal studies to track how impulse buying evolves over time with changes in payment habits or retail exposure.

These gaps provide strong justification for future empirical research, particularly for Ph.D.-level work in Indian organized retail settings.

VI. CONCLUSION & FUTURE SCOPE

This literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of impulse buying behavior within organized retail settings and synthesizes insights from key studies published over the past decade. The findings indicate that impulse buying is influenced by a blend of psychological traits, emotional states, sensory stimuli, retail atmospherics, and situational cues. Organized retail environments—through sophisticated design, visual merchandising, and promotional strategies—actively shape and stimulate spontaneous purchases.

In the Indian context, the rapid expansion of organized retail, growing digital payments, and evolving consumer lifestyles create conditions that are highly favorable for impulse buying. Yet, academic research in this area remains limited, particularly at regional and district levels. The identified gaps highlight opportunities for future empirical studies that examine psychological constructs like locus of control, cultural influences, and emerging digital behaviors.

For retailers, the insights from this review offer practical implications. Retail managers can design consumer-friendly store layouts, sensory-rich atmospheres, and targeted promotions that ethically enhance customer experience while driving sales. For researchers, the review provides a strong conceptual foundation and highlights promising directions for future investigations.

Overall, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on consumer behavior and underscores the need for deeper, more context-specific research in India's organized retail sector.

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