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Swipe, Like, Buy: A Netnographic Study On The Impulse Buying Behavior In Tiktok Shop Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates impulse buying behavior within the TikTok Shop ecosystem through a netnographic lens. As TikTok evolves into a dominant force in social commerce, it blurs the boundaries between entertainment and shopping. This research explores how algorithm-driven content, influencer marketing, live streaming, and user-generated interactions stimulate unplanned purchase decisions. Drawing on data collected from three months of online observation of Indonesian TikTok Shop environments, this study identifies key emotional, social, and technological triggers of impulse buying. The findings reveal a novel model of algorithm-induced impulsivity, contributing to consumer behavior theory and offering implications for marketers, platform designers, and digital literacy advocates.

INTRODUCTION

The convergence of entertainment and commerce on digital platforms has revolutionized how consumers discover, engage with, and ultimately purchase products. Among these platforms, TikTok has emerged not only as a dominant short-form video application but also as a key player in the evolution of social commerce. TikTok's integration of TikTok Shop enables users to seamlessly transition from content consumption to purchase behavior in a single swipe, creating a fluid and immersive shopping environment. This development reflects broader trends in digital marketing and consumer behavior, wherein algorithmic recommendations and influencer marketing converge to produce new patterns of spontaneous consumption (Hudson et al., 2021; Appel et al., 2020).

Impulse buying, traditionally understood as an unplanned and emotionally driven purchasing decision (Rook, 1987), has found fertile ground in the algorithmic and socially interactive design of TikTok. Unlike conventional e-commerce platforms where purchases are often intentional and search-based, TikTok Shop capitalizes on real-time emotional arousal and social validation to trigger impulsive consumption (Zhang & Liu, 2022). Through personalized video feeds curated by TikTok's For You Page (FYP), consumers are constantly exposed to engaging product content, often presented by micro-influencers in entertaining formats such as unboxings, live demonstrations, and product challenges. This unique configuration demands renewed theoretical and empirical investigation into the psychological and technological mechanisms underlying consumer decision-making in such environments.

Indonesia represents a particularly vibrant context for studying this phenomenon. As the second-largest market for TikTok globally, with over 125 million active users as of 2024 (Statista, 2024), the country has witnessed an unprecedented adoption of social commerce. Mobile-first behavior, high social media penetration, and a digitally savvy Gen Z demographic have created an ecosystem where impulse buying is not merely incidental but embedded within daily social media routines (Kemp, 2023). TikTok Shop Indonesia launched in mid-2021 and rapidly scaled, becoming a primary channel for micro-entrepreneurs, SMEs, and content creators to monetize their audience engagement through product sales. Simultaneously, consumers increasingly describe their purchases as driven by emotional appeal, peer influence, or the virality of contentwhat they term "keracunan" (being poisoned by peer pressure and trends).

While impulse buying in digital environments has been extensively studied in relation to traditional e-commerce and social media platforms (Verhagen & van Dolen, 2011; Amos et al., 2014), there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning platforms like TikTok, where entertainment, commerce, and algorithmic mediation coalesce in real time. Existing models of impulse buying behavior often fail to capture the immediacy, social intensity, and emotional volatility characterizing short-video commerce.

Moreover, empirical studies on impulse buying tend to rely on survey-based methodologies that may not adequately reflect the spontaneous, socially embedded nature of behavior observed on TikTok (Duan et al., 2023).

To address these gaps, this study adopts a netnographic methodology (Kozinets, 2015), enabling the observation of naturalistic consumer interactions within TikTok Shop environments. Netnography is particularly suitable for examining lived experiences and expressions of impulse buying as they unfold in real time, without the intrusion of structured questionnaires or artificial prompts. By immersing in the TikTok ecosystem as a digital ethnographer, the researcher captures the nuanced dynamics of content, emotion, social proof, and technological design that inform consumers' immediate purchase decisions. This approach facilitates a deep, contextualized understanding of how impulse buying is shaped by the interplay of algorithmic stimuli, influencer charisma, and communal validation.

The study is structured as follows. First, the literature review situates impulse buying within the broader discourse on digital consumer behavior, social commerce, and algorithmic influence. Second, the methodology section outlines the netnographic procedures used, including site selection, data collection, and analytical framework. Third, the findings reveal the thematic patterns of impulse buying behavior as observed in TikTok Shop Indonesia. Fourth, the discussion connects these themes with existing theories and proposes a conceptual model of algorithm-induced impulsivity. Finally, the study concludes with implications for theory, marketing practice, and digital consumer protection.

By grounding the research in both empirical observation and theoretical inquiry, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital marketing and social commerce, while offering novel insights into the psychological mechanisms and sociotechnical contexts that drive unplanned online consumption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Impulse Buying in Digital Contexts

Impulse buying has traditionally been defined as an unplanned and emotionally driven purchasing behavior characterized by a sudden urge to buy, often accompanied by low cognitive control (Rook, 1987; Beatty & Ferrell, 1998). With the advent of digital platforms, this behavior has evolved into more complex forms influenced by the interplay of user interface design, personalized content delivery, and immediate payment systems (Verhagen & van Dolen, 2011). Contemporary studies emphasize that digital environments amplify impulsivity by reducing friction in the purchase journey and increasing exposure to affect-laden stimuli (Kimiagari & Malafe, 2021).

The integration of social networking elements into commerce platforms further intensifies impulsive buying behaviors. Social presence, peer-generated content, and real-time interaction have been shown to significantly elevate consumers' emotional arousal and perceived urgency, leading to spontaneous purchases (Chen et al., 2019). While much of the early impulse buying research focused on individual psychological traits, newer models incorporate technological affordances and social interactivity as co-constitutive elements of digital impulse buying (Kukar-Kinney et al., 2016).

The Rise of Social Commerce and the TikTok Phenomenon

Social commerce refers to the use of social media platforms to facilitate and enhance e-commerce transactions through user engagement, community feedback, and social influence (Liang et al., 2011). Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and more recently TikTok have transformed from mere social networks into marketplaces where entertainment and commerce coalesce. TikTok distinguishes itself through its short-form, algorithmically curated content, which is uniquely designed to maximize user retention and engagement (Anderson, 2023).

TikTok Shop integrates shopping features directly into the content feed, enabling users to discover, evaluate, and purchase products without leaving the app. Studies indicate that this seamless flow between entertainment and commerce fosters a state of cognitive absorption, making consumers more susceptible to unplanned purchases (Sun et al., 2022). Furthermore, TikTok's recommendation algorithm ensures constant exposure to popular, visually stimulating, and emotionally resonant content that often includes product placements or direct selling segments.

The rise of influencer-led commerce on TikTok further fuels the impulse buying mechanism. Influencers, especially micro and nano influencers, cultivate intimate and authentic relationships with their followers, which translates into high levels of trust and persuasive power (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Parasocial relationships developed through habitual engagement contribute to the perception of influencers as friends or advisors, enhancing the credibility of product endorsements and reducing perceived risk in spontaneous purchase decisions (Schouten et al., 2020).

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Emotional and Social Drivers of Impulse Buying

Emotions play a critical role in impulse buying behavior, especially in environments rich with audiovisual stimuli. Research shows that emotional arousalexcitement, joy, fear of missing out (FOMO)can override rational decision-making and lead to immediate purchasing actions (Xu et al., 2020). TikTok, with its fast-paced, music-backed, and visually dynamic content, is particularly effective in stimulating emotional engagement.

In addition to emotional triggers, social influence mechanisms such as social proof and conformity significantly contribute to digital impulse buying. Comments sections, viewer counts, and live reactions during selling events serve as cues that validate the popularity and desirability of products (Zhao & Balague, 2015). When consumers observe others purchasing in real time, it creates a herd behavior effect, which intensifies urgency and reduces hesitation (Lim et al., 2016).

Netnography as a Tool for Studying Digital Consumer Behavior

Netnography, conceptualized by Kozinets (2015), is a qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic techniques to the study of online communities. It allows researchers to unobtrusively observe interactions, content creation, and discourse in digital spaces, thus capturing the cultural and behavioral dimensions of consumer life. Netnography has been effectively used to investigate brand communities, fandoms, and online subcultures, offering deep insight into user motivations and meanings (Caliandro, 2018).

In the context of TikTok Shop, netnography enables the researcher to understand how impulse buying unfolds in a naturally occurring setting, where consumers engage with content, respond to influencer cues, and validate each other's choices. This methodology is particularly suited for capturing ephemeral, emotionally charged behaviors that might be difficult to elicit in structured interviews or surveys. By examining the comment threads, live video interactions, and creator–audience exchanges, netnography sheds light on the nuanced triggers of impulse consumption in the algorithmic age.

This literature review reveals the necessity of an interdisciplinary framework that combines consumer psychology, platform studies, and digital ethnography to fully understand impulse buying in environments like TikTok Shop. The present study contributes to this emerging intersection by employing netnographic methods to analyze how emotional engagement, social validation, and algorithmic design intersect to drive impulsive digital purchases.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Epistemological Positioning

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research paradigm to explore the manifestation of impulse buying within the TikTok Shop ecosystem. The interpretivist stance assumes that consumer behavior is socially constructed and best understood by interpreting the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To capture the nuances of consumer engagement in a digitally mediated and socially dynamic environment such as TikTok Shop, the study employs netnography as the core methodology (Kozinets, 2015).

Netnography, an adaptation of ethnography for online environments, enables researchers to immerse themselves in virtual communities, observing user behavior in naturalistic settings without imposing artificial constraints (Caliandro, 2018). In this context, it offers a powerful lens through which the interplay between consumers, influencers, content, and platform algorithms can be examined in real time. Given the research focus on the lived, situated, and performative aspects of impulse buying, netnography provides the appropriate methodological framework to uncover how affect, sociality, and digital architectures shape consumption.

Research Site and Context

The research was conducted on TikTok Shop Indonesia between January and March 2025. Indonesia presents a compelling site for digital consumer research due to its significant mobile-first population, deep penetration of social media, and cultural emphasis on communal validation and expressive consumption (Kemp, 2023). TikTok Shop Indonesia, launched in 2021, has experienced rapid uptake among small businesses, influencers, and Gen Z consumers.

The platform integrates short-form video content with e-commerce functions, allowing users to view, engage with, and purchase products within the same interface. The shopping experience on TikTok Shop is highly interactive, with features such as live selling, flash sales, comment sections, creator endorsements, and AI-driven product recommendations.

Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select ten active TikTok Shop accounts. The selection criteria included:

- High engagement rates (likes, comments, shares)
- Active use of live streaming and promotional videos
- Diverse product categories (fashion, beauty, home, F&B)
- Variation in seller scale (micro-entrepreneurs, SMEs, macro-influencers)

Data were collected through non-participant digital observation of the following:

- 50 live selling sessions (ranging from 30–90 minutes each)
- 100 short videos featuring product pitches or user testimonials
- 1,000 top user comments across selected content
- Comment replies and reactions to influencer content

All data were recorded through screen captures, digital field notes, and time-stamped logs. Usernames and personal identifiers were anonymized to preserve privacy. A total of approximately 150 hours of content and interactions were analyzed.

Analytical Procedure

Data analysis followed Kozinets' (2015) five-step netnographic approach: entrée, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, member checks, and ethical reflection. Analytical coding was conducted using NVivo 14 software, allowing systematic organization of themes and patterns.

Thematic analysis was performed in several cycles:

1. Initial open coding identified emergent categories based on repeated expressions, emotive language, and observable behavioral triggers (e.g., "keracunan," "check out now," "ga tahan lucunya").
2. Axial coding grouped categories into broader thematic constructs such as Emotional Triggers, Social Proof, Algorithmic Cues, and Influencer Trust.
3. Selective coding linked these themes to theoretical concepts from consumer behavior and digital marketing literature.

Visualizations (e.g., word clouds, thematic trees) were generated to support interpretive depth and pattern recognition. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the analysis to document researcher bias, interpretation shifts, and data context.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical compliance was a critical component of this research. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for online research as stipulated by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2019). The data analyzed were publicly available content, and no interaction or deception was used in the data collection process.

Wherever content from live sessions was recorded, explicit permission was sought from the creators via direct message. Informed consent was granted in six of the ten cases; in the remaining four, only textual data from public comment sections were included. All identifiers were anonymized, and screenshots were securely stored.

Given the fluid and personal nature of social media engagement, particular attention was paid to avoid sensationalizing or misrepresenting consumer behavior. The research was designed to be empathetic to participant perspectives, positioning them as meaning-makers within their digital ecosystems.

Trustworthiness and Validity

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were employed:

- Triangulation : Data were drawn from various content formats (live videos, comments, influencer posts).
- Member Checks : Where possible, informal feedback was obtained from participating content creators to confirm thematic interpretations.
- Peer Debriefing : Preliminary findings were reviewed by two academic peers specializing in digital ethnography and marketing.
- Audit Trail : All coding procedures, decisions, and field observations were documented.

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These steps were taken to enhance the methodological rigor and ensure that interpretations were grounded in participant narratives and platform-specific contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Overview of Emergent Themes

The analysis of 150 hours of TikTok Shop content revealed four major thematic categories shaping impulse buying behavior: (1) Emotional Triggers, (2) Algorithmic Cues, (3) Social Validation, and (4) Influencer Trust. Each of these themes encapsulates patterns of interaction and user response that were consistently observed across comment sections, live selling events, and influencer-led product showcases. These themes were derived from NVivo-based coding cycles and are illustrated in Figure 1.

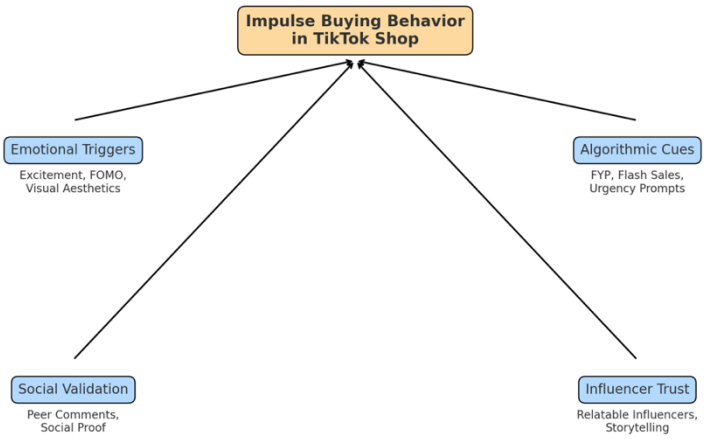

Figure 1. Thematic Framework of Impulse Buying in TikTok Shop

Emotional Triggers: Excitement, FOMO, and Visual Appeal

Consumers frequently expressed impulsivity in emotionally charged language. Common expressions in the comments included “ga tahan lucunya” (can’t resist how cute it is), “langsung checkout” (instantly checked out), and “keracunan netizen” (influenced by others’ enthusiasm). Live selling events were especially effective in generating emotional excitement through countdown timers, discount banners, and animated influencer performances.

Figure 2. Word Cloud of Common Emotional Expressions in TikTok Shop Comment Sections

A notable example comes from a creator selling pastel-themed homeware products: within the first five minutes of a live session, over 300 items were sold after the influencer performed a mock competition “Siapa paling cepat checkout?”inviting viewers to race each other. Emotional arousal was further

intensified by the use of upbeat music, emoji storms (e.g., ❤️🔥😱), and spontaneous testimonials from buyers commenting “udah dapet! makasih kak.”

Algorithmic Cues and Platform Design

TikTok’s recommendation engine plays a central role in shaping what products users encounter. Participants often commented that they “didn’t plan to buy anything” but were repeatedly shown the same product via the For You Page (FYP). This repeated exposure created a sense of “meant to be,” interpreted by some users as algorithmic fate. Notifications such as “Flash Sale ends in 3 minutes!” and AI-generated urgency bars (e.g., stock meters) intensified the compulsion to act immediately.

This phenomenon reflects the concept of algorithm-induced impulsivity, where the platform’s design and recommender systems subtly nudge users toward purchasing decisions, often bypassing deliberation.

Social Validation and Comment Influence

Peer interactions in comment sections significantly influenced purchase behavior. Statements like “aku juga beli,” “pada beli semua nih,” and “aku kena racun TikTok” reflect a collective dynamic of validation. These comments served as social proof, making viewers feel part of a trending movement.

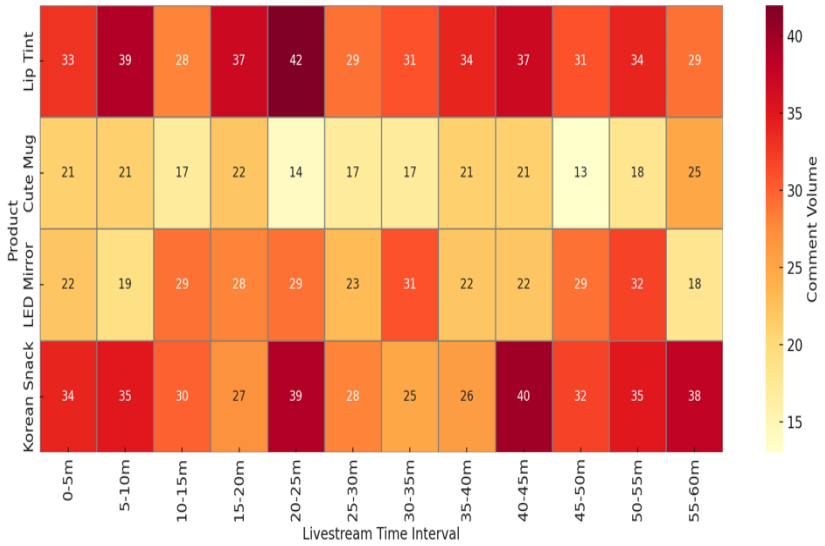

Figure 3. Heatmap of Comment Frequency During TikTok Shop Livestream

A high-selling video featuring a viral “banana milk lip tint” garnered 1.8 million views and 5,200 comments, the majority of which either confirmed purchase or encouraged others. The interplay between comment sentiment and sales activity was evident when an item received a surge of positive sentiment, live reactions and stock depletion followed within minutes.

Influencer Trust and Parasocial Bonds

The credibility and relatability of influencers emerged as key factors in impulse purchases. Micro-influencers with daily storytelling formats were seen as more trustworthy than macro-celebrities. Commenters often referred to influencers using familiar language, e.g., “aku tuh percaya sama kakak ini, selalu jujur.” This familiarity fostered parasocial bonds, reducing purchase hesitation.

In a notable case, a beauty creator hosted a 45-minute skincare routine live session, interspersed with emotional sharing about her own skin journey. Her authenticity led to a spike in purchases during a brief “special price” window, supported by 740 concurrent viewers commenting “aku beli karena ceritanya.”

Synthesizing the Model: Algorithm-Induced Impulsivity

The findings suggest that impulse buying in TikTok Shop is not solely a result of personal predisposition but a dynamic outcome of emotional stimulation, algorithmic suggestion, social reinforcement, and influencer intimacy. These four forces converge to form what we propose as the model of Algorithm-Induced Impulsivity (AII).

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Table 1. Summary of Key Themes and Illustrative Data

Theme	Sub-elements	Illustrative Quote/Behavior
Emotional Triggers	Excitement, FOMO, urgency	“Langsung checkout, takut kehabisan”
Algorithmic Cues	FYP repetition, AI urgency bars	“Kok ini muncul terus ya, padahal ga nyari?”
Social Validation	Peer proof, collective sentiment	“Pantesan viral, semua orang beli”
Influencer Trust	Storytelling, daily presence	“Aku percaya review-nya, selalu cocok”

Discussion

The integration of content, commerce, and community in TikTok Shop represents a paradigmatic shift in digital marketing. Unlike traditional impulse buying models that emphasize individual affective states (Rook, 1987), this study reveals a more complex, socio-technological system of influence. The role of the algorithm in shaping exposure and timing, combined with the emotional aesthetics of content and social interactivity, produces a hybrid space where consumption is not only entertained but socially enacted.

These findings expand existing literature on digital impulse buying by incorporating platform-specific mechanisms and social dynamics. They also align with emerging theories on platform capitalism and affective labor, where user engagement becomes a monetizable behavior (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). The TikTok Shop ecosystem illustrates how consumer decisions are co-produced by design architecture, community discourse, and emotional resonance.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the dynamics of impulse buying within the TikTok Shop ecosystem by employing a netnographic approach to observe and analyze real-time digital consumer behavior. The research identified four interrelated drivers, emotional triggers, algorithmic cues, social validation, and influencer trust that together create an environment of heightened spontaneous consumption. These findings led to the development of a new conceptual framework we termed Algorithm-Induced Impulsivity (AII), which explains how social commerce platforms co-construct impulsive purchasing behavior by integrating emotional engagement, algorithmic design, and community participation.

This study contributes theoretically by enriching existing models of impulse buying, which traditionally emphasize internal affective states or situational triggers. Instead, we argue that consumer impulsivity in digital platforms is dynamically co-produced through interactions between users, content, algorithms, and socio-cultural contexts. The research also reinforces the methodological strength of netnography in capturing rich, situated data in fast-paced digital environments.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study contribute to the advancement of consumer behavior theory in the digital age by introducing the concept of Algorithm-Induced Impulsivity (AII). While previous models of impulse buying primarily emphasized psychological traits or environmental cues, this research demonstrates that algorithmic mediation and social interaction within digital platforms form a powerful mechanism for spontaneous purchase behavior. This underscores the need to integrate socio-technical systems theory with consumer psychology in future models. The study also validates the utility of netnography for capturing real-time, culturally situated behaviors, offering methodological insight for digital consumer research.

Furthermore, this research supports and extends existing literature on parasocial interaction and social proof by illustrating how trust in influencers and comment-driven validation function as co-determinants in the impulse buying process. It also highlights how digital architectures such as recommender systems, countdown mechanisms, and purchase triggers operate as hidden forces in shaping consumer action.

Managerial Implications

From a marketing perspective, the insights gained here are actionable for brands, influencers, and platform designers seeking to optimize user engagement and conversion within social commerce platforms. Marketers should recognize the potency of emotional appeal, authentic storytelling, and community interaction in driving purchase behavior. Brands that collaborate with micro-influencers who maintain consistent, intimate content may yield better impulse conversions than larger, less relatable personalities.

Product presentation strategies that integrate humor, relatability, urgency cues, and interactive live streaming are particularly effective. Embedding flash sale mechanics or "social countdowns" (e.g., “10 people just bought this”) can nudge hesitant consumers without overt persuasion. However, marketers must remain cautious not to overuse these tactics, as fatigue or perceived manipulation could damage brand trust.

Policy and Ethical Implications

This study also raises important ethical considerations around the role of platforms in shaping consumer autonomy. Algorithmic personalization, while enhancing user experience, also carries the risk of reinforcing compulsive consumption patterns, especially among younger demographics. Regulators and consumer advocacy bodies should pay closer attention to the affective design of social commerce interfaces and explore frameworks for transparency in recommendation algorithms.

Digital literacy campaigns could incorporate modules that help consumers critically reflect on persuasive digital environments, helping them differentiate entertainment from marketing intent. Platforms should consider adding friction points (e.g., double confirmations, impulse purchase alerts) for high-frequency buyers to support more conscious consumption.

Methodological Implications

The use of netnography in this study illustrates its strength in capturing fluid, real-time consumer behaviors within platform-native contexts. Unlike surveys or interviews, netnography reveals how users express desire, excitement, and influence within the natural flow of digital discourse. Future research may combine netnography with sentiment analysis or machine learning to map emotion-behavior correlations at scale.

Moreover, the methodological rigor employed, including triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks, demonstrates how qualitative approaches can offer both depth and credibility. Researchers exploring other social commerce platforms (e.g., Instagram Live, Shopee Live) can adopt similar protocols to investigate impulse dynamics across cultural and regional settings.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings and observed gaps, the study proposes several avenues for future exploration:

1. Cross-Platform Comparative Studies
   Future research could examine how impulse buying behavior manifests across other platforms such as Instagram Reels, Shopee Live, YouTube Shorts, or Kwai. Do different platform architectures and community cultures influence the same behavioral triggers in different ways?
2. Longitudinal Behavioral Tracking
   While netnography captures rich real-time expressions, a longitudinal approach could examine how digital impulse buying behavior evolves over time, particularly under changing platform algorithms or user life stages.
3. Neuroscientific or Psychological Integration
   Merging behavioral analysis with biometric data such as eye-tracking, skin conductance, or neural imaging may offer deeper insights into unconscious responses to visual stimuli or algorithmic cues.
4. Cultural and Demographic Variation
   Extending this research to users in other countries, age groups, or socioeconomic backgrounds can offer comparative insights and test the generalizability of the Algorithm-Induced Impulsivity (AII) model.
5. Ethical and Regulatory Considerations
   Further inquiry is needed into the ethical design of impulse-triggering mechanisms. What responsibilities do platforms hold in limiting manipulation? How can transparency in algorithmic targeting be improved?
6. Consumer Education and Platform Design
   Research could also explore the impact of digital literacy interventions and design nudges (e.g., “are you sure?” pop-ups) on moderating impulse purchases and promoting more conscious consumption.

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