

Impulse Buying among University Students: A Proposed Framework

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ABSTRACT

Impulse buying among university students has intensified as digital payment technologies, social media commerce, and psychologically charged marketing converge. This paper proposes a conceptual framework explaining impulse buying behavior among university students through four antecedent variables: digital credit accessibility, social media influence, fear of missing out, and materialism. This study synthesizes the impulse buying, financial technology, social media, and consumer psychology literatures. The Stimulus-Organism-Response framework serves as the theoretical foundation, positioning digital credit accessibility and social media influence as environmental stimuli, FOMO and materialism as internal organismic states, and impulse buying as the behavioral response. Six hypotheses are developed: digital credit accessibility and social media influence has direct relationship with materialism, social media has direct relationship with FOMO, FOMO and materialism are proposed as direct antecedents of impulse buying, and digital credit accessibility has direct relationship with impulse buying. The paper integrates previously fragmented streams of research into a single testable model tailored to the university student context, addressing a gap in the literature on how new digital credit tools combine with social comparison dynamics to drive unplanned spending among young consumers.

Keywords: impulse buying, university students, digital credit, buy-now-pay-later, social media, fear of missing out, materialism,

INTRODUCTION

Impulse buying is acting on a sudden urge to purchase without prior intention or consideration of long term consequences has long been a central concern of consumer research (Nyrhinen et al., 2023). The shift from physical retail to online and mobile shopping has dramatically lowered the barriers to impulsive consumption: convenience, one-click checkout, targeted advertising, and the omnipresence of brands on social media all tempt consumers into hasty purchase decisions (Aragoncillo & Orús, 2018). The scale of the phenomenon is considerable. In the United States, shoppers aged 18 - 24 make almost half (49%) of their purchases on impulse (Thürmer et al., 2020), and this age group is simultaneously accumulating worrisome levels of consumer debt (Faraz & Anjum, 2025).

University students are an especially relevant population for studying impulse buying. They are young adults in a formative stage of identity development, heavily embedded in social media, and increasingly equipped with digital financial tools that were designed for their generation. Buy now pay later schemes, digital wallets, and "pay later" options have become deeply integrated into e-commerce platforms, enabling purchases without immediate payment and thereby reducing the perceived pain of paying (Biradar & Reddy, 2025; Faraz & Anjum, 2025). Generation Z alone accounts for 56.7% of pay later users in some markets (Rochma & Suryandari, 2025), and research demonstrates that BNPL users exhibit a higher online impulse buying tendency than non-users (Fook & McNeill, 2020). The combination of transitioning identities, exposure to commercial social media content, and frictionless digital credit creates a distinct risk profile for young consumers, who may progress from impulsive consumption to over-indebtedness and financial stress (Goyal, 2025).

Despite the maturity of impulse buying research, the literature remains fragmented. Studies have examined social media, materialism, FOMO, and digital credit largely as separate streams, and the evidence on some relationships

is contradictory. Prior work has primarily examined the broad impact of social media while overlooking the specific role of FOMO in shaping impulsive purchasing (Tripopsakul & Tripopsakul, 2026).

This paper addresses the gap by proposing a comprehensive conceptual framework in which social media influence, materialism, FOMO, and digital credit accessibility act as positive antecedents of impulse buying among university students. The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant literature, develops the theoretical foundation, presents the conceptual model with associated propositions, and closes with implications and an agenda for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Impulse Buying

Impulse buying is conventionally defined as an unplanned purchase characterized by relatively rapid decision-making and a subjective bias in favor of immediate possession (Bhakat & Muruganatham, 2013). Rook (1987) described it as occurring when a consumer experiences a sudden, often persistent urge to buy something immediately, an urge that is hedonically complex and may involve diminished regard for consequences (Akyüz, 2018). Stern's (1962) classic typology distinguishes pure, reminder, suggestion, and planned impulse buying, providing an early account of the situational and promotional triggers of unplanned purchases (Akyüz, 2018).

In the digital environment, impulse buying has become more prevalent and more difficult to resist. The ease of selecting a product and "clicking" to purchase creates temptation and increases the likelihood of impulse buying (Aragoncillo & Orús, 2018), while the internet may weaken consumers' capacity to control their buying impulses (LaRose & Eastin, 2002). Social commerce further amplifies the phenomenon, as consumers are exposed to peer activity, social recommendations, and targeted promotions in the same environment where transactions occur (Kanthawongs & Jabutay, 2024).

Social Media Influence

Social media influence encompasses the exposure to and persuasion exerted by social networking platforms peer content, influencer endorsements, targeted advertising, and product displays on consumers' purchase decisions. Its role in shopping is substantial: 65% of social media users affirm that social networks influence their shopping processes, and nearly half say social media inspires their online purchases (Anh, 2024). Among young adults, social media exposure triggers impulsive purchases through at least two mechanisms: hedonic browsing and upward social comparison. Research on young Thai adults found that social interaction motives elicit hedonic browsing and upward social comparison, and that the intensity of browsing and comparison elevates the likelihood of impulse buying (Kanthawongs & Jabutay, 2024). Peer influence operates similarly: the presence of same-age peers increases impulse buying among young consumers, who are particularly sensitive to social cues (Thürmer et al., 2020).

Empirical work in Vietnam similarly found that young adults relied on recommendations from friends and online endorsements, and that social comparison pressure sometimes drove purchases motivated by the desire to conform rather than genuine preference (Anh, 2024). Importantly, low self-control appears to amplify these social-media effects: young consumers with low self-control not only impulsively purchase more directly, but also develop more positive attitudes toward targeted advertisements and become more susceptible to the impulsiveness of their social networks (Nyrhinen et al., 2023).

Digital Credit Accessibility

Digital credit accessibility refers to the ease with which consumers can obtain and use credit in digital form including BNPL schemes, digital wallets, one-click credit, and other pay-later facilities embedded in shopping platforms. Across studies, the convenience and interest-free structure of BNPL encourage more frequent purchases and reduce the psychological impact of spending, often leading to impulsive buying and lower savings, while limited financial literacy and strong social influences make young consumers more vulnerable to hidden fees, repayment delays, and debt accumulation (Goyal, 2025). BNPL use is positively associated with hedonistic

lifestyles and facility utilization, which in turn increase impulsive buying among young consumers (Rochma & Suryandari, 2025), and BNPL users display higher online impulse buying tendencies than non-users (Fook & McNeill, 2020; Juita et al., 2024).

A second mechanism is psychological: digital payments reduce the salience of money, decreasing the "pain of paying" and consumers' psychological resistance to spending. This phenomenon, labeled "spendception," demonstrates that the diminished visibility and physicality of digital transactions alter perceptions of spending, leading to impulse buying and higher purchase behavior (Faraz & Anjum, 2025). Similarly, user friendly digital payment mechanisms have a substantial positive impact on the probability of engaging in online purchases, an effect that is amplified when combined with consumers' impulsive tendencies (Ghaith et al., 2024).

Materialism

Materialism is a value orientation in which the acquisition of possessions is central to life, a path to happiness, and the criterion of success (Šeinauskienė et al., 2016). Richins and Dawson's (1992) influential conceptualization comprises three dimensions: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success (Meng et al., 2019). Materialists value possessions for their cost and status-conferring ability rather than the satisfaction they yield, and they tend to be spenders with high urgency for numerous wants (Thayyib et al., 2024). Consequently, high materialism is associated with irrational and unplanned buying intentions that translate into impulse buying (Thayyib et al., 2024).

Among young adults specifically, materialism has been shown to predict impulsiveness and irresponsible financial behavior (Lučić et al., 2021), to mediate the association between subjective well-being and impulsive buying tendency (Šeinauskienė et al., 2016), and to aggravate compulsive and impulsive consumption (Verawati & Anwar, 2025). Materialism thus occupies a central role in digital-era consumer behavior, connecting psychological states to online compulsive buying (Verawati & Anwar, 2025).

Fear of Missing Out

FOMO is the apprehensive feeling that others are having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, and it is intensified by social media, which curates content that fosters feelings of exclusion (Tripopsakul & Tripopsakul, 2026). Globally, 69% of people experience FOMO in some form, and 37% of users report making purchases directly due to FOMO-triggered urgency; social media advertising has driven impulsive purchases among 60% of Gen Z consumers (Tripopsakul & Tripopsakul, 2026). Consumers with FOMO tend to compare themselves with others, especially when exposed to exclusive promotions and flash sales, and Generation Z's high levels of FOMO can lead to more spontaneous purchases driven by the desire for recognition in their social environment (Charles & Immanuel, 2025). FOMO strongly influences impulsive purchases because buyers worry about losing the chance to obtain desired items, and such purchases sometimes result in post-purchase dissonance (Charles & Immanuel, 2025). In the fast-fashion context, FOMO has been shown to connect perceived scarcity and peer pressure with impulsive purchase (Mokhlis et al., 2025).

Theoretical Foundation

The Stimulus Organism Response Paradigm

The framework is anchored in the stimulus organism response paradigm, originally proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), which holds that stimuli (S) in the environment induce fluctuations in an individual's internal organismic state (O), which in turn produces a behavioral response (R) (Ligaraba et al., 2022). The paradigm has become one of the most widely used theoretical lenses in consumer behavior research (Nugraha et al., 2023).

The three components are defined as follows:

Stimulus (S): any external trigger in the environment that influences the consumer, including marketing stimuli such as promotions, pricing, and scarcity; platform stimuli such as media format, payment features, and visual

appeal; and situational stimuli (Gao et al., 2022). In online settings, stimuli are the elements of the virtual environment that reach the consumer's consciousness and arouse particular emotions (Gatautis et al., 2016).

Organism (O): the consumer's internal cognitive and affective states that intervene between stimulus and response, including attitudes, beliefs, attention, comprehension, knowledge, and emotions such as pleasure and arousal (Gatautis et al., 2016).

Response (R): the behavioral outcome, typically framed as approach or avoidance behavior. In consumer research, responses commonly include purchase intention and, critically for this study, impulse buying (Li et al., 2023; Vazquez et al., 2020).

The SOR paradigm is widely regarded as the most adopted theoretical approach in online impulse buying research (Chopdar et al., 2021), having been extended from physical retail environments into e-commerce settings, where website and platform features replace the physical store atmosphere (Kühn & Petzer, 2018). In the present framework, the strict mediation chain of the classic paradigm is relaxed: rather than proposing that stimuli operate only through organism states, the model predicts direct effects of both external stimuli and internal states on impulse buying. This simplification is consistent with conceptual models that treat environmental and individual characteristics as parallel antecedents of impulsive behavior.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

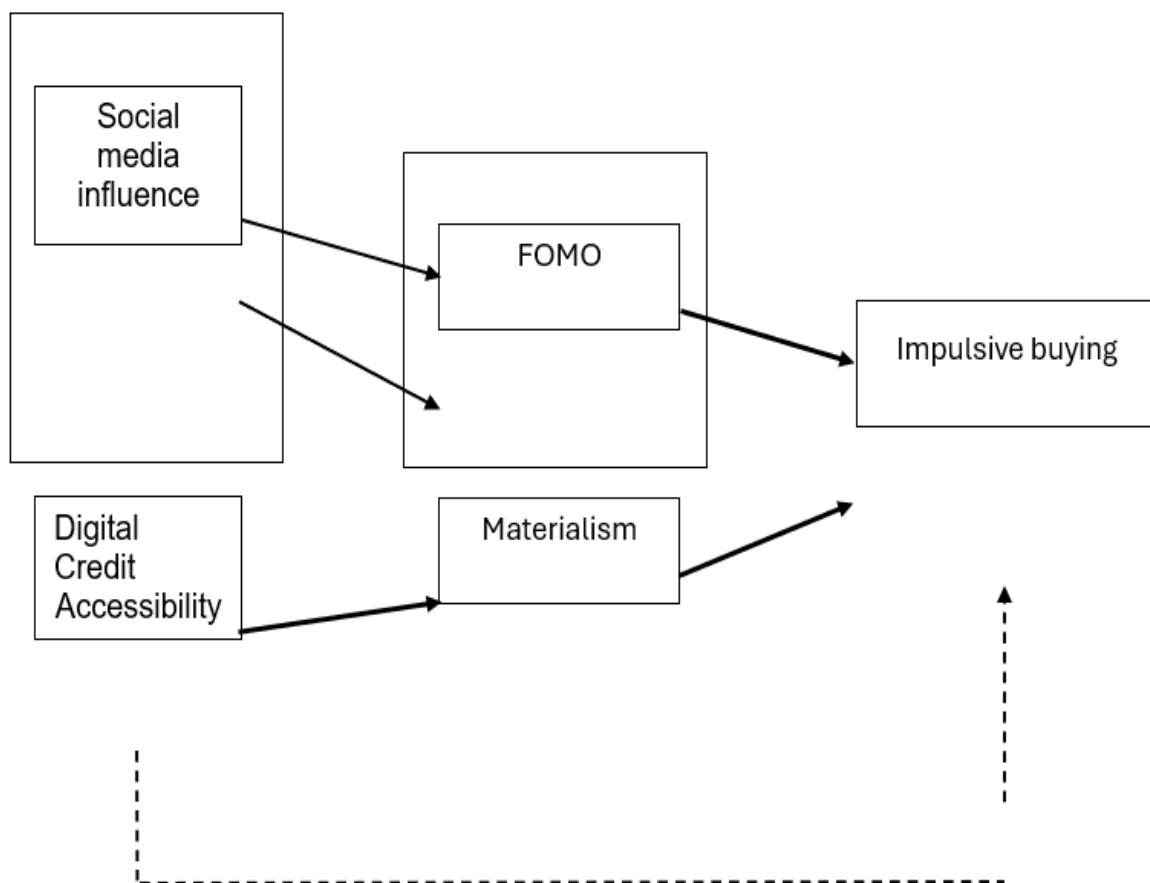


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of impulse buying among university students (direct-effects model).

Direct Stimulus-to-Organism Paths (S → O)

Social media

Social media is widely recognized as a key driver of FOMO, with an estimated 69% of people globally experiencing it in some form; platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat intensify the condition by

curating content that fosters feelings of exclusion (Tripopsakul & Tripopsakul, 2026). The mechanism is inherently comparative: followers view influencers as ideal role models they seek to imitate, and imitation of influencers significantly increases FOMO (Dinh & Lee, 2021). Because university students are among the most intensive social media users, constant exposure to the curated experiences and purchases of peers and influencers heightens the perception that rewarding opportunities are passing them by. Exposure to social media influencers triggers FOMO, which subsequently influences consumption decisions (Dinh & Lee, 2024). Hence:

H1: Social media influence has a significant positive effect on fear of missing out among university students.

The social comparison dynamic of social media does not only generate anxiety; it also cultivates materialistic value orientations. Drawing on social comparison theory, scholars have shown that social comparison plays a significant role in developing materialistic values, with social media use moderating the relationship between comparison with peers and media celebrities and the formation of materialistic values among adolescents and young adults (Islam et al., 2018). Social comparison with social media influencers significantly increases materialism among young adults (Azhar et al., 2026), and heavy social networking is positively associated with financial social comparison, which in turn fuels materialism (Sharif et al., 2021). Influencer imitation likewise drives materialism alongside FOMO (Dinh & Lee, 2021), and exposure to influencers' conspicuous consumption is mediated by both fear of missing out and materialism (Dinh & Lee, 2024). For students immersed in influencer-saturated feeds, acquisition is repeatedly framed as the route to status and belonging, reinforcing materialistic values. Therefore:

H2: Social media influence has a significant positive effect on materialism among university students.

Digital credit accessibility

Digital credit accessibility may also feed materialistic values, though this path has received less attention than the reverse (materialism → credit use). The logic is that frictionless credit normalizes acquisition beyond one's means: BNPL services can put consumers into a debt trap by encouraging them to buy things they cannot afford, thereby promoting a culture of materialism and consumerism (Raj et al., 2023). Relatedly, BNPL usage is positively associated with a hedonistic lifestyle among young consumers, and this lifestyle orientation ultimately contributes to increased impulsive buying (Rochma & Suryandari, 2025). Where credit is instantly available at the point of purchase, the perceived attainability of material goods rises and consumption-oriented value systems are reinforced; conversely, the same literature shows that materialistic consumers are disproportionately drawn to BNPL (Raj et al., 2023), suggesting a mutually reinforcing relationship between credit access and materialistic values. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

H3: Digital credit accessibility has a significant positive effect on materialism among university students.

Direct Stimulus-to-Response Path (S → R)

Digital credit shapes behavior partly by attenuating the pain of payment. The convenience and interest-free structure of BNPL encourage more frequent purchases and reduce the psychological impact of spending, often leading to impulsive buying (Goyal, 2025). BNPL users show a higher online impulse buying tendency than non-users, with a clear link between impulse buying tendency and sensitivity to sales conversion tools (Fook & McNeill, 2020). Accessibility and convenience are decisive: research finds a strong correlation between behavioral intention and increased discretionary spending, driven largely by the accessibility and convenience of BNPL services (Biradar & Reddy, 2025). Among students, fintech payment app use and hedonistic lifestyles positively predict impulsive buying (Fransisca & Loo, 2025), fintech payment adoption has been linked to increased consumptive buying among young people (Rusdian et al., 2026), and BNPL's psychological design deferred payments and perceived affordability predicts impulsive purchasing (Nusir et al., 2026). Because digital credit simultaneously removes payment friction and adds urgency, easy access should directly elevate impulsive digital borrowing and spending, in line with evidence that quick-access credit facilitates impulsive spending financed by debt (Frigerio et al., 2020). Therefore:

H4: Digital credit accessibility has a significant direct positive effect on impulsive buying among university students.

Direct Organism-to-Response Paths (O → R)

FOMO operates as an internal urgency state that lowers self-control and heightens emotional arousal at the point of purchase (Syafila et al., 2025). Studies of student samples confirm that FOMO and social media use exert significant simultaneous effects on impulsive buying, with FOMO showing a significant positive coefficient ($\beta = 0.192$, $p < 0.001$) alongside social media use ($\beta = 0.776$, $p < 0.001$) (Adhi & Psikolog, 2025). Globally, 37% of users make purchases directly due to FOMO-triggered urgency (Tripopsakul & Tripopsakul, 2026). Qualitative evidence among university students shows that FOMO-driven impulsive buying is triggered by trends, livestream promotions, discounts, and free shipping, often followed by guilt (Husna et al., 2025), and that FOMO significantly drives impulsive purchases and short-term gratification followed by post-purchase regret (Siri, 2025). FOMO should therefore translate into impulsive digital spending, with digital credit making the urge trivially easy to discharge. Therefore:

H5: Fear of missing out has a significant positive effect on impulsive buying among university students.

Materialistic value orientation directs identity and self-esteem toward the accumulation of goods (Özdemir, 2022), and this orientation reliably predicts unplanned spending. Materialism increases the inclination toward impulse buying and precipitates compulsive buying behavior, with impulse buying operating as the conduit (Raj et al., 2023). Social comparison-driven materialism directly predicts impulsive buying among young adults (Azhar et al., 2026), materialism positively and significantly influences impulsive buying behavior (Rodrigues & Oliveira, 2021), and materialistic individuals show greater shopping impulsivity, particularly when commodities reflect identity (Šeinauskienė et al., 2016). Because materialistic students are oriented toward immediate acquisition, and digital credit removes the financial constraint that would otherwise delay that acquisition, materialism should directly elevate impulsive digital borrowing and spending. Hence:

H6: Materialism has a significant positive effect on impulsive buying among university students.

Discussion and Implications

Theoretical Implications

This framework contributes to the impulse buying literature in three ways. First, it integrates previously siloed streams cognitive (financial literacy), psychological (materialism, FOMO, self-control), social (social media influence), and technological (digital credit accessibility) into a single parsimonious direct-effects model, responding to calls for research on how consumer-related factors and the digital environment jointly facilitate impulsive purchases (Nyrhinen et al., 2023). Second, the framework addresses the previously overlooked role of FOMO in social-media-driven impulse buying (Tripopsakul & Tripopsakul, 2026) by including it alongside materialism as a distinct antecedent, while also accommodating evidence that financial literacy's effects may be contingent on context and measurement (Putri & Noorrizki, 2024; Sarmiento, 2024). Third, by treating self-control as a direct inhibitory antecedent grounded in deficient self-regulation theory (LaRose & Eastin, 2002), the model recognizes the individual's regulatory capacity as a first-order determinant of impulse buying rather than a peripheral factor.

Practical Implications

For policymakers and educators, the framework underscores the need for financial education programs that go beyond knowledge transfer to include behavioral awareness, emotional regulation, and digital media literacy (Farhana, 2025). University curricula could integrate modules on budgeting, credit costs, and BNPL risks, since low financial awareness among young digital credit users contributes to uninformed decision-making (Biradar & Reddy, 2025). For digital lending and e-commerce platforms, the findings imply a responsibility to design transparent credit disclosures, spending limits, and friction points that counter impulsive defaults (Goyal, 2025); self-control-supporting features such as reflection prompts and salient cost information have already been shown

to reduce impulse purchase urges (Han et al., 2021). For students themselves, the model suggests that cultivating self-control — through conscious regulation strategies and reduced social-media-driven comparison — is a practical lever for resisting impulse buying even in an environment engineered to encourage it (Han et al., 2021; Nyrhinen et al., 2023).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a conceptual paper, this study's propositions require empirical validation; the framework does not yet quantify effect sizes or establish causality. The model is also deliberately bounded to university students, and findings from student samples may not generalize to other age groups or geographies (Pradhan et al., 2018). Several extensions are possible: examining post-purchase regret and financial well-being as outcomes of impulsive buying (Halim et al., 2024; Nusir et al., 2026); testing gender differences in the proposed paths, consistent with evidence that BNPL intention is more strongly driven by impulsive buying among male consumers and by risky indebtedness behavior among females (Hesniati et al., 2025); and exploring self-control and financial literacy as protective moderators that attenuate the proposed relationships.

CONCLUSION

Impulse buying among university students is the outcome of a convergence that is historically new: frictionless digital credit, immersive social media, and the psychological states of FOMO and materialism. This conceptual paper has integrated these forces into a theoretically grounded, testable framework in which digital credit accessibility and social media influence act as stimuli, FOMO and materialism act as organismic states, and impulse buying is the behavioral response. By offering six propositions four direct, the model provides a roadmap for empirical research and a warning for marketers, universities, and regulators alike: the students most susceptible to impulsive spending are precisely those with the easiest access to the digital credit that finances it.

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