

# Unveiling Impulsive Buying Behavior During E-Commerce Discount Events Among College Students

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study explores the factors influencing impulsive buying behavior among students during discount events on e-commerce platforms. **Method:** This study using a qualitative phenomenological approach, then in-depth interviews were conducted with ten active students who have participated in at least two discount events in the past six months. **Results:** The study evidence that large discounts create a sense of increased value, while FOMO (fear of missing out) and social influences heighten the urgency to buy. Additionally, the intuitive design of e-commerce apps facilitates impulsive buying and emotional outcomes such as satisfaction and regret, illustrating the complexity behind these decisions. According to the current research findings, e-commerce platforms are encouraged to integrate features that promote more mindful shopping, while financial literacy initiatives targeting students are recommended. Furthermore, governments could consider regulations to limit excessive promotional practices and ensure greater consumer transparency. **Novelty:** This study contributes to understanding impulsive buying behavior, offering insights for creating a healthier and more sustainable shopping ecosystem for young consumers.

## INTRODUCTION

E-commerce in Indonesia has grown rapidly in recent years, driven by wider internet access and the increasing use of mobile devices (Batavio et al., 2017; Rahim & Oetama, 2019; Yuniar & Fibrianto, 2019). One particularly notable trend is the rise of monthly “double-date” discount events. During these occasions, e-commerce platforms offer massive discounts and exclusive promotions (Barus, 2023; Himawan & Abduh, 2015). While these events are hugely popular, they often encourage excessive consumerism and impulsive shopping, a behavior often described as irrational. Impulsive buying is marked by unplanned, spur-of-the-moment decisions that frequently do not align with the consumer's actual needs (Barus, 2023; Julian et al., 2024; Rani & Catherine, 2023).

Irrational consumer behavior, particularly impulsive buying during discount events, is influenced by various factors. Studies have shown that significant discounts, the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) effect, user interface (UX/UI) design, and the impact of social media and advertisements are key drivers of impulsive purchases, especially among young people. Large discounts incentivize consumers to buy products at seemingly lower prices, often without considering whether the purchase is truly necessary (Cuong, 2023; Gong et al., 2020; Julian et al., 2024). The FOMO effect, or the fear of missing out, creates pressure on consumers to make quick purchasing decisions to avoid losing out on what they perceive as rare or valuable opportunities (Guo et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2024; Liang & Lin, 2023).

Another factor that drives irrational consumer behavior is the design of e-commerce interfaces. Attractive and intuitive user interface (UI) designs on e-commerce platforms are specifically created to provide a fast and seamless shopping experience, making it easier for consumers to make impulsive purchases (Chandrasekhar et al., 2024; Fadli et al., 2024; Wells et al., 2011). In addition, social media and digital ads boost the appeal of products through testimonials, reviews, and recommendations, creating psychological pressure for consumers to buy in order to meet social expectations or satisfy needs that aren't actually urgent (Chen et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2023; Moslehpour et al., 2024; Wells et al., 2011). These external influences can push consumers toward irrational shopping behavior, where decisions are driven more by external stimuli than by careful economic consideration or actual needs.

However, most existing studies tend to focus on the general population or international samples, while limited attention has been given to Indonesian university students—a demographic particularly vulnerable to impulsive buying due to limited financial literacy, peer influence, and frequent engagement with online platforms. This creates a notable research gap regarding how Indonesian students experience, justify, and emotionally process their impulsive purchases during e-commerce discount events.

Research on irrational behavior in the context of online shopping during discount events is highly significant, particularly for understanding how e-commerce platforms encourage unnecessary purchases, which can ultimately harm consumers' financial well-being, especially students. Impulsive buying—defined as sudden, unplanned purchases triggered by external stimuli such as promotions or advertisements—has become a key concern for researchers and practitioners alike. For students, who are typically in a transitional phase toward financial independence, impulsive buying can negatively impact their financial situation. Students are often vulnerable to marketing strategies that create a sense of urgency, such as time-limited discounts, flash sales, and social influences from peers or social media.

With this background in mind, this study aims to identify, analyze, and delve deeper into the factors that drive irrational consumer behavior among students during e-commerce discount events. By combining the perspectives of emotional triggers (e.g., FOMO), external stimuli (e.g., promotional design, user interface), and post-purchase reflections (e.g., regret, satisfaction), the findings are expected to contribute to the academic understanding of consumer behavior in the digital era while also offering practical recommendations for e-commerce businesses and policymakers better to manage the impacts of these discount event phenomena.

To address this issue, the present study seeks to explore the following research questions: 1) What internal and external factors contribute to students' impulsive buying during e-commerce discount events?; 2) How do students perceive and evaluate their purchase decisions after participating in such events?

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore students' subjective experiences and the meanings they assign to impulsive buying behavior during double-date discount events. The aim is to understand students' perceptions, motivations, and the internal and external factors that influence their impulsive purchases in the context of e-commerce promotions.

Specifically, this study employs an interpretive (Heideggerian) phenomenological approach, which emphasizes understanding the lived experiences and contextual meanings constructed by participants. This approach is appropriate for exploring impulsive buying behavior because it allows the researchers to interpret the deeper psychological and emotional layers behind students' spontaneous purchasing decisions, rather than merely describing their experiences.

### **Research Subjects**

The study focuses on active university students in East Java who have shopped during discount events at least twice in the past six months. Purposive sampling will be used to select participants based on the following criteria: 1) Students who actively use e-commerce and participate in discount events; 2) Students who have made impulsive purchases during these events.

The study will involve 10-15 participants to ensure in-depth data while capturing a range of perspectives. The number of participants may be adjusted according to the principle of saturation, where no new themes or insights emerge from additional data.

Participants were recruited through announcements posted on campus bulletin boards, online student forums, and direct invitations via institutional email lists. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving an explanation of the study's purpose, their rights as participants, and the confidentiality of their responses.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews will be the primary method for gathering detailed information about impulsive buying behavior. This flexible approach allows the researcher to explore topics based on participant responses and uncover unexpected themes or insights.

The interview guide will cover key topics, including: (1) Motivations and emotions felt while shopping during discount events; (2) External factors (such as discounts, promotions, and user interface design) that trigger impulsive behavior; (3) Social influences from friends and social media; and (4) Post-purchase feelings, both positive and negative.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview data will be analyzed using thematic analysis. The process will begin with verbatim transcription to preserve data accuracy, followed by initial coding, where



*like entertainment for me. After being busy with assignments, it feels relieving to get something I like at a cheap price.*" (Participant 5). These emotional drives strengthen the connection between the shopping experience and impulsive decisions, even though such decisions are often irrational or not aligned with actual needs.

This supports Hedonic Consumption Theory by illustrating that the act of shopping itself is used as a coping mechanism for emotional regulation and stress relief, rather than a means of fulfilling material needs.

It is worth noting, however, that while most participants expressed excitement and emotional pleasure, a few participants shared more neutral or even ambivalent reactions, suggesting individual differences in susceptibility to emotional triggers. This points to possible moderating variables such as personal financial literacy, shopping self-control, or past experiences with regret.

### **Social Pressure**

Social pressure plays a key role in driving impulsive buying behavior, especially among students. Many participants mentioned being influenced by friends' recommendations or trends they saw on social media during discount events. Social influence theory suggests that people often adjust their behavior to match social norms or expectations to be accepted by their social group (Abdelsalam et al., 2019; Kwak et al., 2006; Thi Phan et al., 2020). One participant shared, *"I often see my friends posting about what they bought during discount events. When they buy something, I feel like I should buy it too, so I don't miss out."* (Participant 1).

On top of that, reviews and recommendations from influencers or peers on social media further push the desire to buy certain products. Social media creates expectations that drive consumers to make purchases as a way to express their identity or stay on trend. Previous studies have shown that social influence, especially from public figures or online communities, can boost impulsive shopping behavior (Hu et al., 2023; Wu & Tseng, 2022). As one participant put it, *"There are so many influencers on Instagram promoting products with big discounts. Since they say it's good, I ended up buying it even though I didn't really need it."* (Participant 8).

Social pressure also shows up in the form of social comparison, where individuals feel the need to keep up with the consumption habits of their peers to maintain their social status (Kwak et al., 2006; Luo, 2005; Yao, 2024). This is particularly true among students, who often exchange information about sales or promotions. One participant noted, *"When my friend bought something on sale, she told me it was a great product and really cheap. I bought it too so I wouldn't feel left out."* (Participant 3). This shows how social pressure can create a strong psychological impulse to make purchases, even if the items aren't needed.

These findings reinforce Social Influence Theory by showing that impulsive purchases are not only influenced by advertising or price, but also by a desire to conform to perceived social norms and avoid exclusion from peer groups. Interestingly, one participant mentioned consciously resisting peer pressure to save money, indicating the presence of counter-narratives and internal conflicts among students. This nuance suggests that not all students are equally influenced by social comparison, depending on their financial goals and mindset.

## Discount

Large discounts during sales events are a key driver of impulsive buying behavior. According to price framing theory, how prices are presented—such as through big percentage discounts or significant price drops—makes consumers perceive a higher value (Cătoiș et al., 2010; Goh & Bockstedt, 2013). These discounts make consumers feel like they're getting a great deal, even when the items aren't necessarily needed (Mukherjee et al., 2017; Nusair et al., 2010; Yoon et al., 2010). One participant shared, "*The discounts during these events are huge. When I saw a 70% off, I just had to buy it without thinking twice.*" (Participant 4).

This effect is even stronger with limited-time promotions like flash sales, which use the theory of scarcity. Discounts that only last for a short time create psychological pressure for consumers to act quickly (Godinho et al., 2016; Mao et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2023). One participant said, "*I'm often swayed by deals with a countdown timer. If I don't buy fast, the item will run out, and I panic.*" (Participant 7). For students on a budget, large discounts seem like a golden opportunity to buy things they couldn't afford otherwise.

These findings support the Scarcity Theory, which posits that perceived limitations in availability enhance the desirability of products. The urgency triggered by time-limited deals aligns with the emotional arousal that drives impulsive action. Furthermore, the perception of getting a bargain relates to the Hedonic Consumption Theory, wherein the act of shopping becomes a source of pleasure beyond utilitarian needs.

Additionally, discounts can spark impulsive buying through the psychological effect of transaction utility—the satisfaction consumers get from feeling they've found a "good deal" (Rani & Catherine, 2023; Vasić Nikčević et al., 2020). Another participant added, "*Sometimes I buy things not because I need them, but because it feels like a great opportunity I'd regret missing.*" (Participant 8). This shows how discounts can influence value perception and push consumers to make unplanned purchases.

However, not all participants responded positively to such discount tactics. A minority mentioned feeling overwhelmed or skeptical, suggesting that the promotional intensity can backfire when consumers feel manipulated. This highlights a nuanced reaction to sales stimuli, where some students are able to resist impulsive urges, pointing to individual differences in self-control and financial literacy.

## User Interface Design of the E-commerce

The design of an e-commerce app plays a crucial role in driving impulsive buying behavior. Research shows that apps with user-friendly designs that simplify navigation and speed up the purchasing process tend to encourage spontaneous decisions (Fadli et al., 2024; Gupta et al., 2021; Soomro & Habeeb, 2024). A key feature is the "buy now" button, which shortens the decision-making process and promotes instant purchases. One participant shared, "*The app is really easy to use. Once I click 'buy now,' the transaction is complete right away, so I don't have time to second-guess it.*" (Participant 9).

In addition, visual elements like bright colors, attractive layouts, and strategically placed promotions contribute to creating a more engaging shopping experience. According to hedonic motivation theory, designs that are visually appealing can enhance emotional involvement, which increases the likelihood of making a purchase (Cheng, 2013; Hashmi et al., 2020; Xing, 2019; Yu & Lu, 2018). One participant mentioned, "*The*

*colors and design of the app really grabbed my attention. When I see a big promo banner, I get curious and immediately open it to check out the deal."* (Participant 10).

This finding supports the Hedonic Consumption Theory, which suggests that consumers engage in purchasing not only for functional needs but for emotional gratification. The sensory-rich design of e-commerce apps enhances affective responses, making the buying process itself a pleasurable experience, particularly among youth immersed in digital cultures.

Furthermore, e-commerce platforms often use algorithms to recommend products based on a consumer's browsing or purchase history (Rahman et al., 2024; Won et al., 2019). This keeps consumers engaged for longer periods, increasing the chance of impulsive buying (Loukili et al., 2023; Peng & Liang, 2023). As one participant explained, *"I started out just browsing, but because the app recommended products similar to what I liked, I ended up making a purchase."* (Participant 3). This strategy reflects the concept of choice architecture, where consumers are subtly nudged toward certain decisions.

In the broader context, such personalized recommendations reflect the increasing influence of algorithmic persuasion in digital economies, where consumers—especially digital-native students—are constantly targeted by data-driven marketing. These practices raise questions about autonomy and ethical consumer manipulation in Indonesia's rapidly growing e-commerce landscape.

### **Post-Purchase Consequences**

After making the purchase, participants reported two contrasting emotional reactions: satisfaction from getting a good deal and regret for buying something they didn't actually need. The satisfaction often came from the joy or sense of accomplishment of getting the item they wanted. According to transaction utility theory, consumers feel excited when they believe they've gotten a "good deal" (Rani & Catherine, 2023; Vasić Nikcević et al., 2020). One participant said, *"At first, I was so happy because I got the item I wanted at such a big discount. It felt really satisfying, like winning the lottery."* (Participant 2).

However, this satisfaction is often followed by regret once they realize the purchase wasn't necessary. This is in line with the concept of post-purchase dissonance, where consumers feel uneasy or regretful because their purchase wasn't entirely rational (Kushwaha et al., 2021; Ranjbarian et al., 2014; Yağcı & Özbozkurt, 2022). One participant shared, *"After shopping, I realized I bought a lot of things just because of the discount, even though I didn't really need them. Then, I regretted it."* (Participant 5). This highlights how impulsive purchases often lack careful consideration of actual needs.

This emotional duality—between joy and guilt—reflects a tension central to Hedonic Consumption Theory, which acknowledges that pleasure-driven actions can yield post-action discomfort when they conflict with personal goals or norms. For students, this may be further complicated by internalized expectations around financial responsibility.

The regret was also worsened by financial stress, especially since students often have limited budgets. Studies suggest that impulsive buying can lead consumers to spend more than planned, negatively affecting their finances (Che, 2024; Radaev, 2023). One participant explained, *"After doing the math, I realized I spent my money on things I didn't need. I had planned to save for other things."* (Participant 10). This creates an emotional

conflict, where the initial satisfaction is replaced by regret, especially as the financial impact of the purchases becomes clearer.

In the broader context of Indonesia's growing digital economy, this finding hints at a deeper societal pattern—where digital platforms enable consumerism even among financially vulnerable youth. As financial literacy initiatives struggle to keep pace with rapid digitalization, college students may be especially susceptible to these emotional-financial trade-offs. The findings thus offer a microcosmic view of how consumer habits are shaped by economic systems, cultural attitudes, and emerging technologies.

## CONCLUSION

**Fundamental Finding:** This study highlights the key factors influencing impulsive buying behavior among students during discount events, including emotional and psychological triggers, discounts, social pressure, app interface design (UX/UI), and emotional outcomes. Large discounts create a sense of greater value, while FOMO (fear of missing out) and social pressure increase the urgency to buy. Easy-to-use interfaces further encourage impulsive purchases, while feelings of satisfaction and regret show the complex emotions behind these decisions. Together, these factors lead students to make spontaneous purchases without much planning. **Implication:** The findings have two main implications for e-commerce platforms and government regulators. E-commerce platforms could introduce features that promote more mindful shopping, such as purchase reminders or spending evaluations. Additionally, financial literacy programs could be offered in collaboration with educational institutions to help students better manage their finances. For their part, the government could implement policies that promote responsible promotions and curb excessive consumption. These might include limits on certain types of promotions and greater transparency for consumers. By understanding the drivers behind impulsive buying, stakeholders can take steps to create a healthier and more sustainable shopping environment, especially for younger consumers like students. **Limitation:** Although this study offers valuable insight, the current study has limitations. First, this study used only 10 participants with the qualitative approach through in-depth interviews. Therefore, the result is only based on the results of the 10 participants. Second, the current study's participants were only from one province in Indonesia (East Java), who have different characteristics than the other provinces and can not generalized to all provinces. **Future Research:** We highly recommend that future research address the current research limitation by including the research participants representing all the provinces to generalize the results to all Indonesian college students.

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