

Understanding the Interplay Between Peer Pressure and Impulsive Buying Tendencies in College Students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between perceived peer pressure and impulsive buying tendencies among college students in the subcontinent of India. It aims to distinguish impulsive buying from a pathological propensity, to a normative socially driven phenomenon, and in that process highlight the factors influencing the same. Data was collected from 107 college students, all aged 18-25, deploying statistical analysis to infer on their relationship. Analysis disclosed a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.399$) between the two variables; perceived peer pressure & Impulsive Buying Tendencies. Inferring upon the findings highlights the need for comprehensive financial education programmes and awareness about the factors that influences everyday decision making. The results indicate that while there exists a positive relation between the two, other factors (that of gender differences, exposure to resources and media, etc) may play as important of a role as these, impacting decision-making during purchases. Future research could look into policy modification to implement some of this knowledge into practical usage; Further expanding the scope of study by including other variables under more defined setting to extract deeper understanding of the underlying relations.

Keywords: Perceived Peer pressure, Impulsive Buying Tendencies, Indian college students peer influence, Consumer Decision Making.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer behaviour has long fascinated psychologists, economists, and marketers alike because it is not only about the act of purchasing but also about the deeper psychological processes that drive decisions. Among the various forms of consumption; Impulsive buying, stands out as a uniquely psychological phenomenon-an action often carried out without deliberate forethought, driven instead by situational cues, emotional states, and social pressures. Unlike rational purchase decisions, impulsive buying reflects the tension between cognitive control and affective impulses, revealing much about the ways individuals negotiate desires, social expectations, and identity. With the rapid expansion of digital markets and social media, impulsive buying is no longer confined to physical shopping contexts; it is increasingly shaped by peer interactions, online visibility, and subtle pressures of conformity. Understanding this behaviour, therefore, requires a lens that brings together psychological theory and contemporary social dynamics.

The way we see it is that at the heart of this issue lies the role of peer pressure, a construct that has traditionally been examined in adolescent development but is equally salient in consumer psychology. Classic psychological research on conformity (Asch, 1955) and normative social influence demonstrates that individuals often adjust their behaviour to align with perceived group norms. In consumer contexts, this alignment manifests in the tendency to purchase items endorsed, displayed, or even casually used by peers. Importantly, peer influence is not always explicit; it often operates subtly, through internalized expectations of “fitting in” or avoiding social exclusion. Social identity theory further suggests that individuals derive self-worth and belonging from group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), making consumer choices a means of hinting at affiliation. These insights show peer pressure not merely as an external force but as an internalized psychological process that links identity, belonging, and consumption. The connection between peer influence and impulsive buying has become increasingly visible in the context of digital consumerism. Social media platforms, online marketplaces, and influencer cultures intensify the immediacy of peer cues by offering real-time visibility into others’ consumption patterns. The speed of digital interaction reduces opportunities for reflective decision-making, amplifying impulsivity. Research has shown that exposure to peers’ consumption behaviours—whether through likes, reviews, or posts—can trigger purchase impulses by heightening social comparison and the fear of missing out (Przybylski et al., 2013). In this way, traditional psychological mechanisms of conformity and normative pressure are now magnified in virtual environments, where the boundary between private preference and public display is blurred. While impulsive buying has often been studied in marketing and consumer economics, its psychological influence demands closer attention. Rook’s (1987) work framed impulsive buying as an emotionally charged, spontaneous act, but subsequent literature has sometimes diluted this conceptualization by focusing on demographic predictors or retail strategies. By returning to a psychological lens, it becomes clear that impulsive buying is fundamentally about affect regulation, as consumers often purchase to manage emotions (Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001); cognitive control, since depleted self-regulation weakens resistance to temptation (Vohs & Faber, 2007); and susceptibility to external cues, with environmental stimuli and product appeal triggering reward responses in the brain (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998; Knutson et al., 2007). Peer pressure intersects with these dimensions by acting as both a motivator (through the promise of social approval) and a destabilizer (by weakening self-control). For students and young adults in particular, this dynamic is crucial: as they navigate identity formation and social belonging, their consumption decisions often carry psychological significance beyond the material transaction. Emerging research highlights that digitally mediated environments, particularly live-commerce platforms, may further compress the gap between peer exposure and purchase action; Nguyen (2025) suggests that the immediacy and social interactivity of such platforms can heighten susceptibility to impulsive buying, a finding that sits coherently within the broader peer influence framework this study advances.

The Indian context illustrates this vividly. With one of the world’s largest youth populations and rapidly growing digital penetration, Indian students are increasingly exposed to peer-shaped consumption environments. Smartphones, fashion, and lifestyle products circulate as markers of social identity within peer groups, making purchases both a personal choice and a social performance. Psychological studies of Indian youth have highlighted the role of peer conformity in shaping attitudes toward risk-taking, academic choices, and lifestyle behaviours (Verma & Saraswathi, 2002). Extending this to consumer behaviour, it is reasonable to expect that peer pressure similarly influences impulsive buying tendencies, especially in a digitalized economy where consumption is not only private but also publicly visible.

Importantly, this does not mean that Indian youth are uniquely susceptible, but rather that the combination of cultural collectivism, aspirational consumerism, and digital connectivity provides a fertile ground for exploring the peer–impulse link.

Existing research has examined impulsive buying from multiple perspectives-personality traits such as low self-control (Vohs & Faber, 2007), affective states like mood regulation (Verplanken & Herabadi, 2001), and situational triggers such as promotional cues (Muruganatham & Bhakat, 2013). Peer influence has also been studied, but often as one among many external factors. What remains underexplored is the direct psychological mechanism by which peer pressure heightens susceptibility to impulsive buying. While economic studies may frame peer influence as an externality in market behaviour, psychology emphasizes the internal processes - social comparison, conformity, belongingness needs - that make individuals vulnerable to such influence. This distinction is not trivial; it shifts the research question from what people buy under peer pressure? to why peer pressure undermines deliberation and fosters impulsivity? This focus also allows us to clarify an important conceptual boundary. Impulsive buying is often conflated with compulsive buying, but the two are distinct. Compulsive buying refers to chronic, repetitive, and maladaptive purchasing driven by underlying psychological distress, whereas impulsive buying may occur occasionally and is not necessarily pathological (Ridgway et al., 2008). By maintaining this distinction, the current study situates impulsive buying as a common psychological behaviour shaped by situational and social factors, rather than a clinical disorder. This framing underscores the importance of examining peer pressure, not as a pathological driver, but as a contextual influence that interacts with ordinary decision-making processes. In synthesizing these strands, the present study aims to advance understanding in two ways. Peer pressure translates into impulsive buying by shaping conformity, identity, and self-control (Bearden et al., 1989; Dittmar, 2005; Baumeister, 2002), dynamics that are especially pronounced among Indian students, for whom consumption is closely tied to belonging and digital identity (Kim & Markus, 1999; Jain & Aggarwal, 2021). While prior studies have addressed impulsive buying and peer influence separately, few have examined their interaction within this specific sociocultural and developmental context. By situating consumer behaviour within broader psychological theories, this research seeks not only to enrich the literature on impulsive buying but also to offer insights into how social environments shape individual decision-making in emerging economies. In doing so, the study contributes to both psychological and consumer research.

For psychology, it highlights how classical theories of conformity and identity remain relevant in explaining contemporary digital behaviours. For consumer research, it demonstrates the value of integrating psychological insights into models of buying behaviour. And for applied contexts-educational institutions, policymakers, and marketers-it raises important questions about how peer dynamics influence youth consumption, with implications for financial literacy, responsible marketing, and student well-being. Ultimately, by placing peer pressure at the centre of the impulsive buying process, this study seeks to bridge the gap between individual psychology and collective consumer patterns.

METHODOLOGY

Aim of the Study: This study aims at understanding and commenting on the relationship between perceived peer pressure as a social influencing factor and impulsive buying tendencies in young adults between the ages of 18 – 25 in India.

Objective of the study: To study the relationship, if any, between peer pressure and impulsive buying among students.

Hypothesis: There is no significant relationship between peer pressure and impulsive buying among students.

Variables:

Independent variable: Perceived Peer pressure:

Peer Pressure can be seen as an instrument of social influence, specifically, forms of persuasions and encouragement which is exerted by a peer group, that, directly or indirectly influence or manifest certain behaviours (McIntosh et al., 2003). Although the depth and complexities of the concept can encapsulate the entire idea. In explicit form as peer pressure is seen as active urges or request by peers to indulges in a certain behaviour, otherwise in implicit forms encompassing the internal struggles of an individuals in response to requests.

Peer pressure refers to the influence exerted by peers on an individual's attitudes, decisions, and behaviours. It is particularly significant during late adolescence and early adulthood, when individuals are more likely to conform to group expectations. Social Influence Theory (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) distinguishes between two main forms of peer influence: normative influence (the desire to be accepted and liked) and informational influence (the acceptance of others' opinions as reality). Both are critical in shaping decision-making and can affect consumer behaviour. In this study, peer pressure is operationalized using the Peer Pressure Scale – Revised (PPSQ-R, Saini, 2016)

Dependent Variable: Impulsive Buying

Impulsive buying is characterized by unplanned, spontaneous purchasing driven by immediate desires, often without consideration of consequences. Rook and Fisher (1995) define it as a tendency to experience sudden urges to buy. Baumeister (2002) further notes that such decisions are linked to emotional states and diminished self-control. Impulsive buying differs from rational purchasing because it prioritizes instant gratification over long-term benefits. In this study, impulsive buying is measured using the Buying Impulsiveness Scale (BIS).

Population and Sample

The population of the present study consisted of college students aged 18–24 years, as this developmental period is marked by increased peer interaction and greater autonomy in financial decision-making. A total of 107 participants were selected using a convenience sampling method from various universities.

The sample comprised 52.3% male and 47.7% female participants, all of whom had completed at least higher secondary education. Inclusion criteria included current enrolment in a college or university and voluntary consent to participate in the study. Participants outside the specified age range or those who submitted incomplete responses were excluded from the final analysis.

Tools

Peer Pressure Scale – Revised (PPSQ-R)

The version of the scale employed in the present study is the revision developed by Sunil Saini, adapted to better reflect the sociocultural realities of the Indian context, wherein peer dynamics are shaped by collectivistic values, joint family structures, and institutionalised academic pressures that differ meaningfully from the Western settings in which the original instrument was conceived. The scale is rooted in the foundational work of Clasen and Brown (1985), who developed the original Peer Pressure Scale to assess the nature and degree of peer influence experienced by adolescents and young adults across

domains such as social involvement, family relationships, school engagement, and conformity to peer norms. Saini's revision retained this domain structure while recalibrating item content and contextual framing to improve cultural validity for Indian respondents. Items are rated on a Likert-type scale, with higher composite scores reflecting greater perceived susceptibility to peer influence. The PPSQ-R has demonstrated robust psychometric properties across validation studies, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients consistently reported above .80, indicating strong internal consistency. In the current sample, the scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .89, further supporting its reliability for use with the Indian college-going population examined here.

Buying Impulsiveness Scale (BIS)

Developed by Rook and Fisher (1995), the BIS operationalises impulsive buying as a stable dispositional tendency, building on Rook's (1987) earlier conceptualisation of impulsive purchasing as a spontaneous, emotionally driven act characterised by urgency and reduced deliberation. The scale consists of nine items rated on a five-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores reflecting stronger impulsive buying tendencies. It has been validated across diverse consumer populations, with Cronbach's alpha values consistently reported above .85, and its construct validity supported through associations with hedonic motivation, affective arousal, and diminished self-control. In the current sample, the BIS yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .86, confirming its reliability for use with the Indian college student population under investigation.

Procedure

Data were collected using an online survey distributed among college students. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The questionnaire included demographic details followed by the PPSQ-R and the BIS. Participants were instructed to respond honestly and spontaneously.

Incomplete responses were excluded during data screening. The study followed ethical guidelines for psychological research. The collected data were prepared for statistical analysis to examine the relationship between perceived peer pressure and impulsive buying behaviour.

RESULTS

The sample data was screened for unusable responses and missing data, the finalised list of usable data of 107 participants were further analysed and tested for assumptions of correlations, and were later found to be true. Descriptive statistics, correlational coefficient were computed to draw further inferences on the data.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients for Study Variables (N = 107)

Variable	M	SD	Range	Cronbach's α
Peer Pressure	61.47	13.27	31–95	.89
Impulsive Buying	23.59	5.92	10–42	.86



Pearson’s product moment correlation coefficient was calculated to examine the relation between perceived peer pressure and impulsive buying in the sample data. Computed results indicate a moderately positive correlation; $r = .40(p < 0.01)$ showing that increase in peer pressure results in higher impulsive buying tendencies in the sample data.



DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between perceived peer pressure and impulsive buying among Indian college students aged 18–25, while also exploring associations with monthly spending patterns and gender differences in perceived peer influence. The findings contribute to existing consumer psychology research by empirically situating impulsive buying within a social and contextual framework, rather than treating it as a purely individual purchasing tendency.

The present findings empirically establish a link between perceived peer influence and impulsive purchasing among the Indian student population, suggesting that impulsive consumption during emerging adulthood reflects social contextual factors rather than purely individual characteristics.

The primary finding of a significant positive association between perceived peer pressure and impulsive buying suggests that individuals who report greater susceptibility to peer influence are more likely to engage in spontaneous and unplanned purchasing behaviour. This pattern is consistent with prior empirical work suggesting that impulsive buying is shaped by normative social influences, particularly when purchasing decisions carry social meaning or visibility. For instance, studies have shown that individuals high in susceptibility to normative influence are more likely to act on purchase impulses when such behaviour aligns with perceived peer expectations or enhances social acceptance (Rook & Fisher, 1995; Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989).

Rather than indicating overt or coercive peer pressure, the present findings align with research demonstrating that social influence often operates through internalized norms and anticipated evaluation. Experimental and survey-based studies have consistently shown that perceived peer approval, rather than direct peer instruction, predicts impulsive purchasing in social consumption contexts, especially among young adults navigating peer-dense environments (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Dittmar, 2005). Within the limits of the present correlational design, the observed association indicates that perceived peer pressure constitutes a psychologically meaningful correlate of impulsive buying.

Importantly, the magnitude of this association suggests a contributory rather than determinative role for peer pressure. Prior research has emphasized that impulsive buying reflects the interaction of affective impulses with situational cues rather than a stable behavioural trait expressed uniformly across contexts. The present findings are consistent with this evidence, suggesting that social susceptibility conditions the likelihood that impulsive tendencies are enacted, without implying that peer influence alone accounts for impulsive consumption behaviour.

Monthly Spending and Impulsive Buying Tendencies

The observation that higher impulsive buying tendencies were associated with increased monthly spending further underscores the role of contextual affordances in impulsive consumption. Empirical studies among student populations have repeatedly documented that higher allowances or discretionary spending are associated with greater frequency of impulsive purchases, particularly in non-essential and hedonic product categories (Pascual et al., 2024; Muruganatham & Bhakat, 2013). These findings suggest that financial access increases opportunities for impulse-driven purchases to occur.

The present data extend this line of evidence by indicating that, within an Indian college context, greater monthly spending may lower practical constraints on purchasing, thereby facilitating the behavioural expression of impulsive urges. This interpretation is consistent with self-regulation research demonstrating that impulsive behaviours are more likely to translate into action when situational barriers are reduced and immediate costs are minimized (Baumeister, 2002; Vohs & Faber, 2007). Importantly, the present findings do not imply that spending capacity causes impulsivity; rather, they suggest that spending capacity shapes when impulsive tendencies are most likely to be expressed.

Gender Differences in Perceived Peer Pressure

The study also identified higher mean levels of perceived peer pressure among male participants. Given the mixed nature of prior findings, our findings must be interpreted with caution. While some research has reported stronger normative pressures among males in domains involving social visibility, status signalling, or competitive peer environments, other studies have found minimal or context-dependent gender differences in susceptibility to peer influence. In the absence of moderation analyses, the present finding does not warrant strong claims regarding gender-specific mechanisms of impulsive buying.

Accordingly, this result should be regarded as exploratory. It suggests that perceived peer pressure may be differentially experienced across gendered social contexts, rather than indicating inherent differences in impulsivity. Future research explicitly testing gender as a moderator would be necessary to determine whether peer pressure exerts differential effects on impulsive buying behaviour across genders.

Cultural and Developmental Context

The relevance of peer pressure observed in the present sample is consistent with prior research highlighting emerging adulthood as a period marked by heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, social comparison, and identity exploration (Arnett, 2000). Empirical work within collectivistic cultural contexts has further demonstrated that individuals are more likely to evaluate personal behaviour in relation to group norms, increasing responsiveness to peer influence in decision-making domains, including consumption (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995).

Studies conducted in South and Southeast Asian student populations have similarly shown that peer norms and reference groups play a substantial role in shaping consumption preferences and impulsive buying tendencies. The present findings align with this body of work, suggesting that impulsive buying among Indian college students is meaningfully shaped by social context rather than occurring in isolation from interpersonal influences.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, the present findings are consistent with prior empirical work suggesting that impulsive buying is best understood as a context-sensitive behaviour influenced by social and situational factors rather than as a purely dispositional trait. The observed patterns also align with established distinctions between impulsive and compulsive buying, as impulsive purchases in this sample appear situational and normative rather than chronic or clinically impairing (Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney, & Monroe, 2008).

Practically, these findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing impulsive spending among students may benefit from addressing peer dynamics alongside individual-level financial education. Research has shown that financial knowledge alone often fails to curb impulsive buying when strong social cues are present, indicating that peer-aware or norm-focused interventions may offer greater effectiveness (Verplanken & Herabadi, 2001).

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The correlational design precludes causal inference regarding the direction of the relationship between peer pressure and impulsive buying. The reliance on self-report measures may reflect subjective perceptions rather than objective peer behaviour, and the use of convenience sampling limits generalizability beyond similar student populations. Additionally, the absence of longitudinal or behavioural measures restricts insight into temporal and situational variability in impulsive buying.

Future research may employ experimental designs manipulating peer presence or normative cues, as well as longitudinal approaches examining how peer influence and impulsive buying evolve over time. Examination of moderating variables such as self-control, digital media exposure, and product category would further refine understanding of the conditions under which peer pressure most strongly influences impulsive consumption.

CONCLUSION:

This study then, digressing from the common question of whether perceived peer pressure influences

student spending, toward a more precise examination of how peer influence shapes the psychological conditions under which impulsive buying occurs. It discusses the various factors that may have a role in influencing students consumer decisions. Our findings suggest that impulsivity in spending habits is seen to be positively correlated with the perceived peer pressure in students. With endless research in this area of study, our findings contribute into the Indian perspective of the problem. With context of digitalisation taking a new era, peer influences are no longer bound by proximity (Ehrenreich, S. E. 2022); thus, the findings extend the existing finding by highlighting that the association between the two factors discussed above is observable in the Indian context. Our paper also strengthens the argument that impulsive buying is not only a personality trait but also a product of socially driven factors like – peer pressure (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Lastly, we attempted at distinguishing impulsive buying from the pathological counterpart of compulsive buying; highlighting that it is normative in nature.

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