

Negative Emotions and Impulse Buying: Psychological Mechanisms, Social Influences, and Strategic Interventions

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Abstract:

In the digital marketplace, understanding how emotions shape consumer choices are essential. This study synthesizes evidence from a systematic literature review to clarify the relationship between negative emotions and impulse buying amid rapid e-commerce growth and intensifying competition. Across studies, loneliness, stress, and boredom reliably heighten impulsive purchase intentions and behaviors. We identify two core psychological pathways: affect-regulation via compensatory consumption and ego depletion that weakens self-control. These effects are amplified by digital environments—personalized recommendations, scarcity cues, one-click checkout, gamified rewards, and social-media social proof shorten deliberation windows and normalize unplanned purchases. We integrate these mechanisms into an emotion-oriented consumption framework and outline strategic interventions: pre-commitment and cooling-off tools, default spending limits, mindful design prompts, and transparency around persuasive architectures. The findings advance consumer psychology by linking emotion-regulation and self-control theories to platform design, and they inform policy and practice in consumer protection and commercial ethics. Guardrails that target emotional triggers and reduce frictionless impulsivity can mitigate harm without unduly constraining choice.

Keywords: Negative emotions; impulse buying; e-commerce

1. Introduction

With the background of rapidly development of consumption and electronic commerce, impulsive pur-

chase has transported from a temporarily consume behavior to a widespread phenomenon, especially the flourish of live-streaming e-commerce, through the interaction of real-time and the creation of atmo-

sphere, has further magnified the results of emotions on consumer decisions. The convenience of online shopping platforms and accurate marketing strategies have laid a solid foundation for a consumption environment that can be completed buying without deliberately [1]. In this environment, emotion gradually plays an important role in the decision-making process, which has been noticed by scholars. Although consumer behavior is influenced by cognition, society and economy, emotion undoubtedly is a strong catalyst. More notably, negative induced emotions, such as loneliness, depression and gloom, is assumed as an inclination in amplify impulsive consumption. This essay aims to explore the central question: are negative emotions likely to contribute to impulse buying? To be specific, we will pay attention to the mechanisms of emotion regulation, the relationship between negative emotions and impulse consumption, as well as intervention measures in the following article.

The significance of this research holds both academic and practical value. Academically, we will deepen the understanding about consumer mentality, trying to explain how the negative emotion weakens self-regulatory resources and stimulates a strong desire for immediate rewards and finally displays a path of hotheaded purchase behavior. Practically, this outcome would benefit valuable insights for multiple parties of stakeholders. For consumers, the first step to understand the emotion-behavior chain is to improve self-modification abilities. When it comes to companies, our essay may provide advice about emotion

marketing methods, emphasizing ethical responsibilities for avoiding utilizing consumers specific emotion to earn profits. When it turns to people who make policies, we stress the necessity of building a regulatory operating framework.

This essay will probe into mechanisms that connect negative mood with impulse purchase, including the dopamine-driven reward system. It will also include the difference between human and the effects of environmental factors by using a comprehensive literature review methodology. For example, the theoretical framework and empirical outcomes from psychologist, marketing and behavioral economics experts. In addition, we will analyze the cases that have been appeared to specifically explain this phenomenon, such as “revenue spending” that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The structure of the essay is organized as follows: following the introduction, the literature review will define the concept of impulse purchase and explore the relationship between emotions and consumption. The discussion will then turn to specific cases and phenomena, with a deeper analysis of the underlying psychological and socio-environmental mechanisms. Based on these insights, response strategies will be proposed for consumers, enterprises and society. Finally, the essay will summarize the research findings, highlight their significance, and suggest future research directions, such as integrating neuroscience methods with cross-cultural comparative studies (Figure 1).

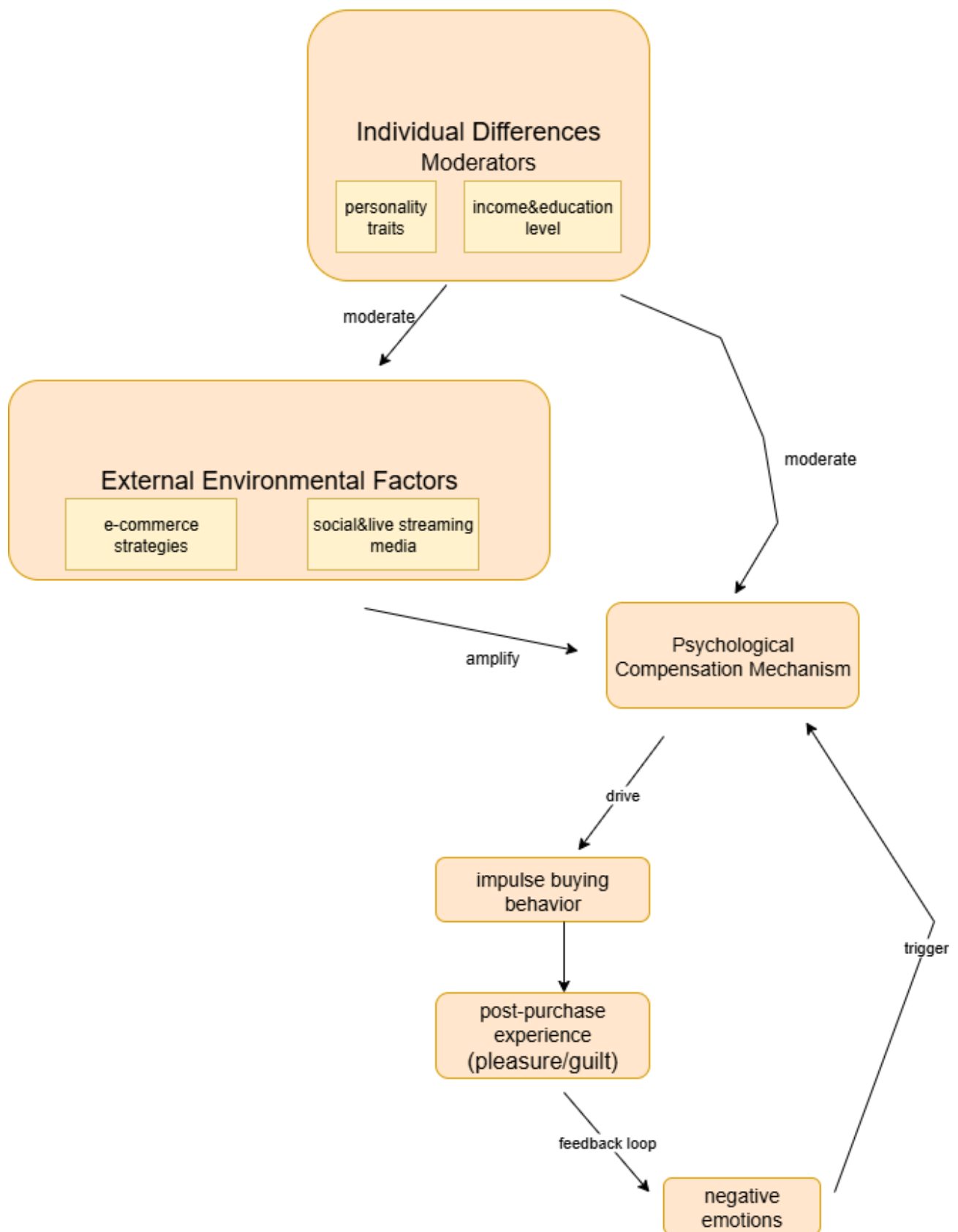


Fig. 1 The overall conceptual framework (Photo/Picture credit: Original)

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Definition and Features of Impulsive Purchase

Impulsive purchasing is an important concept in consumer behavior studies. The meta-analysis gave us a comprehensive definition, describing impulsive purchase as an immediate and emotionally charged decision without a strong plan. It is displayed by a persistent appetency and the ignoring of potential negative consequences [2]. Depending on the purchase motivation and triggering situation, this behavior is usually divided into three categories: firstly, pure impulse purchase, which are consumption due to excitement and novelty and then break the conventional shopping patterns; secondly, prompting impulse purchase is based on in-store displays or advertising reminders to remember the needs; finally, unplanned impulse purchase means buy the on-site promotions or discounts by temporarily adding items although people have their buying lists [3].

2.2 The Relationship between Emotion and Consumer Behavior

Emotion often plays a momentous role in consumers' decision-making. The theory of emotion regulation considered that individuals manage their emotional states through consumption behavior [4]. The emotion activation model further explained that positive and negative emotions generate different effects on consumption behavior, potentially enhancing hedonic consumption. For example, consumers are more willing to pay for experiences and enjoyment when they are in a good mood [5]. On contrary, compensatory consumption theory holds the belief that consumers often release or escape negative mood such as anxiety, restlessness and loneliness through shopping and attempt to repair their depression by obtaining a sense of satisfaction and pleasure from goods [6]. This mechanism of seeking psychological compensation is the main driving force behind impulse purchase caused by negative emotions.

2.3 The Correlation Studies of Negative Emotion and Impulse Purchase

Many empirical studies have supported the strong relationship between negative emotions and impulse purchase. Research during the COVID-19 pandemic strongly demonstrated that widespread anxiety, uncertainty and concern about health predicted a boom of levels of impulsive purchasing, which became a mechanism to cope with emotional distress [7]. Some reports investigated young people and found that the pursuit of thrill-oriented values may contribute to compensatory impulsive purchasing be-

haviors when life satisfaction is low. However, it always led to subsequent financial problems, creating a vicious cycle [8].

Consumption locations play a crucial moderating role in this relationship. Rather than offline environment would amplify the impulsive tendency under negative emotions, online environment has the characteristic of anonymity, convenience and unlimited accessibility [2]. Other research confirmed that the quality of online personalized recommended products significantly promotes electric impulse purchase behavior by stimulating consumers good emotion and suitability. This indicates that the technological mean of online platforms interacts with consumers' internal emotional states, fostering the occurrence of impulse purchase [9].

2.4 Emotional Modification Strategies and Consumption Behaviors

When people face negative emotions, the emotional modification strategies adopted by individuals directly affect their consumption behaviors. Internal regulatory strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal and self-control can effectively suppress the tendency toward impulse purchase. However, ego depletion posits that self-control is a finite resource. Depleting this resource while coping with stress or regulating emotions significantly reduces an individual's ability to resist consumption impulses [10].

On the contrary, when internal regulation fails, an individual will seek external regulation. Social support is originally a healthy form of external modification, but when it is absent, shopping itself becomes an alternative means of emotional compensation [11]. Consumers temporarily raise their mood by conducting retail therapy, but it is often accompanied by feelings of guilt and regret after purchase. This complex experience may also influence the tendencies of future consumption.

3. Case and Phenomena

3.1 Realistic Cases

The global COVID-19 pandemic provided an excellent natural experimental scenario for observing the relationship between negative emotions and impulse purchase. It contributed to consumers experiencing unprecedented pressure, loneliness and boredom, which was followed by an online boom of revenge spending. Research displays the surge in online impulse shopping with sales of many unnecessaries ranging from baking supplies and fitness equipment to electronic products increasing significantly, which reflects the psychological compensation mechanism by which people deal with negative emotions and seek a sense of control in life through shopping.

In addition, the flourishing of social e-commerce has further promoted “emotional purchasing”. Platforms represented by TikTok and Xiaohongshu precisely recommend content by using algorithms, constantly stimulating users’ desire to consume. Some analysis points out that the passionate explanations of the hosts, the atmosphere of time-limited flash sales and the herd effect in the comment areas in the live-streaming e-commerce jointly create a powerful situational pressure, which can quickly evoke the positive or negative emotions of the audience and turn them into immediate purchase impulses, completing a direct transformation from emotions to behaviors [1].

3.2 Typical Group

Groups of different ages in different situations have different characteristics in impulse purchases driven by emotions. Young people especially college students and white-collar workers who have just entered the workplace often face huge academic and competition pressure as well as identity anxiety. Research found that they prefer to relieve pressure and gain social recognition by buying trendy clothing or luxury goods, but it more easily leads to excessive consumption and debt problems [8].

When it comes to the middle-aged group, their impulse purchases are more related to feelings of boredom and anxiety. After entering middle age, one may encounter many problems such as career bottlenecks, increased health risks and family responsibilities, which can easily contribute to a sense of emptiness. Therefore, they are more likely to seek psychological comfort and satisfaction by buying many items for their children and parents or dressing up themselves with expensive cosmetics when

watching live streams.

4. Problem Analysis

4.1 Analysis of Psychological Mechanism

Negative emotions, which trigger the psychological paths of impulse purchase, is multi-layered. Firstly, negative emotions would directly motivate a desire for immediate satisfaction and a strong need for rapid rewards to get rid of discomfort. This process contains a strong dopamine mechanism. When people are shopping, they may experience anticipation, decision-making and a sense of ownership, which can stimulate the brain’s reward circuit to release dopamine and generate transient pleasure and excitement, thereby temporarily offsetting negative emotions [6]. However, this kind of neurochemical reward is short-lived and cannot address the nature of the problems and may even lead to repetitive impulse buying behaviors to continuously obtain enjoyment.

The most important psychological mechanisms is ego depletion. Coping with negative emotions requires expending lots of psychological resources and abilities of self-control. When this resource is depleted, an individual’s ability to resist the temptation of consumption and make rational decisions is weakened, and they will become more prone to succumb to the domination of immediate impulses [10]. This explains why when people are in a low mood and know they should not waste a lot of money, they still find it difficult to control their shopping behavior (Figure 2).

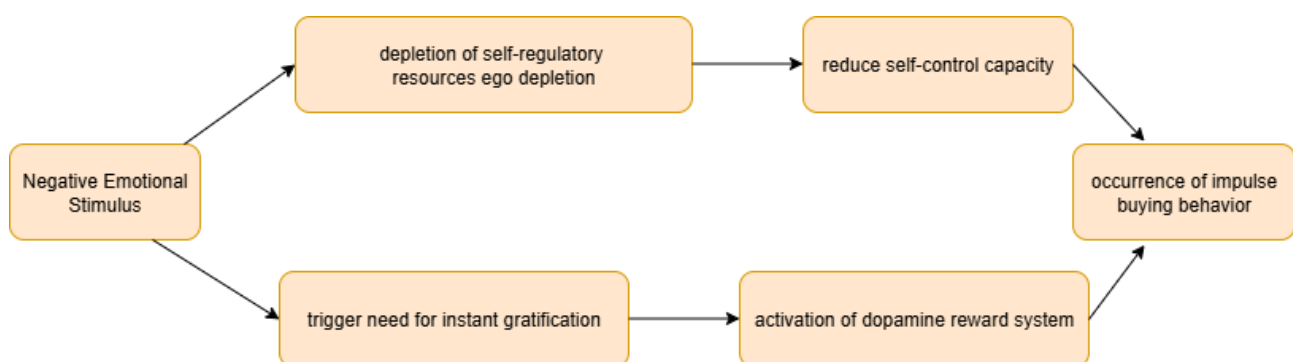


Fig. 2 The psychological mechanism of negative emotions driving impulse purchase (Photo/ Picture credit: Original)

4.2 Social and Environmental Factors

Modern commercial environment, especially the digital consumption ecosystem, has been meticulously designed to exploit these psychological weaknesses. The strategies of e-commerce platforms such as flash sales, time-limited discounts and “only one item left” effectively activate

consumers’ fear of missing out by creating scarcity and urgency. These strategies amplify the impulsive tendency under negative emotions [9].

Social media and live-streaming platforms use personalized recommendation algorithms and the bandwagon effect to push customers. The platform makes precise push notifications based on users’ preferences and emo-

tional states, providing emotional consumption incentives. Meanwhile, the real-time interactions in live streams and many bullet comments shows that everyone is buying this product, creating an atmosphere of collective celebration and herd pressure. Under this circumstance, individuals find it easier to lose rational judgement and make emotional purchases [1].

4.3 Individual Difference

The tendency toward impulse purchase is not equal for everyone but is significantly regulated by individual differences. In terms of personality traits, people who have highly level of neuroticism are more emotionally unstable and react more strongly to negative emotions. Therefore, they are more prone to use shopping as an emotional regulation tool [12].

Income level and educational background also plays an important role. In general, for groups with high financial pressure or unstable income, their impulsive purchasing behavior may lead to serious negative consequences. In contrast, consumers with a higher level of education usually possess better financial knowledge and critical thinking skills and may be better at identifying marketing strategies and exercising self-control, but they are not immune.

4.4 The Contrast between Positive and Negative Emotion

Although positive emotions may lead to impulsive purchase, their nature is completely different from that driven by negative emotions. Impulsive purchase under positive emotions is hedonic, with the motivation being the pursuit of pleasure, rewards and risks. The post-experience is mainly positive with a little bit of guilt [5]. Inversely, impulsive purchase under negative emotions is more compensatory and restorative. Its core motivation is to escape pain, fill emptiness and repair self-image. Post-experiences are more likely to generate intense regret and self-blame [11].

5. Countermeasures and suggestions

5.1 For Consumers

Consumers are the first line of defense against impulse purchase. First, consumers should enhance emotional cognition and self-regulation abilities. They should learn

to recognize their own emotional states especially when they feel anxious and depressed and consciously avoid shopping as the primary emotional outlet. Learn to utilize strategies like cognitive reassessment or through healthier methods such as exercise, meditation and social interaction. Second, consumers should have the abilities to delay gratification. When one has the desire to impulse purchase, one needs to force oneself to wait for a period and make decisions only when very calm. This method can apply the “cold” cognitive system to suppress the dominance of “hot” emotional system. It is crucial to build rational consumption habits such as making shopping lists and starting money management.

5.2 For Enterprises

Enterprises should uphold higher commercial ethics and maintain to seek constant development rather than short-term profits. In terms of marketing strategies, enterprises should use reasonably to avoid emotional exploitation. Although the most effective way for advertising is to utilize emotional resonance, enterprises should avoid deliberately magnifying consumers’ anxiety and insecurity to induce consumption. For example, some broadcasting rooms often spread the phenomenon of body image anxiety and seriously influence people’s mood. In contrast, enterprises need to commit to creating genuine value, pleasure and a sense of belonging for consumers to build brand communities rather than solely relying on using impulses to complete single transaction.

5.3 For Societies and Policies

Both social and government levels should work together to create a healthy consumption culture environment. Promoting consumer education is fundamental. Knowledge of financial management and consumer psychology should be included in the fundamental education and public promotion programs, which are beneficial to enhance the financial literacy and rational decision-making abilities of the entire population. Meanwhile, improving modify regulatory mechanisms and avoiding excessive marketing incentives is essential. Regulatory authorities should deal with the use of dark patterns in some e-commerce platforms, containing misleading information like false countdowns [13]. In addition, it is important to encourage and support the popularization of mental health services to help people better handle negative emotions and reduce their reliance on compensatory consumption by adding more welfare (Figure 3).

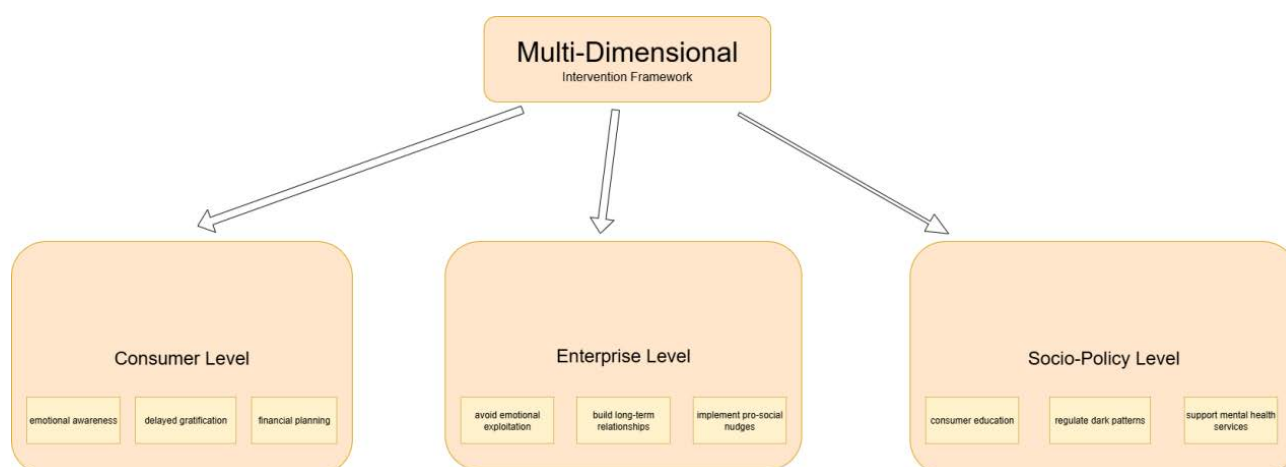


Fig. 3 multi-dimensional intervention framework (Photo/Picture credit: Original)

6. Countermeasures and suggestions

6.1 Conclusion of key findings

This research has systematically examined the complex relationship between negative emotions and impulse purchase, revealing several momentous understandings. Our analysis points out that negative emotions significantly drive impulse buying through psychological compensation and ego depletion. Modern e-commerce environments further amplify this relationship and interact fully with social media, creating powerful triggering factors for impulsive consumption. In addition, individual differences in personality traits and socioeconomic factors delay this relationship, highlighting the nuanced nature of emotion-oriented consumption. Based on these findings, we come up with a multi-level intervention strategy: Consumers should build consciousness of their emotions and self-adjusting strategies; enterprises should use ethical marketing strategies, avoiding utilize vulnerability of emotions; decision maker should facilitate healthier consumption patterns through educational initiatives and regulatory frameworks.

6.2 Research Significance

This research affords significant business value by offering practical insights for multiple stakeholders in the consumer ecosystem. For e-commerce companies and marketing firms, our outcomes illustrate how to ethically utilize emotional triggers to build up long-term client relations, rather than focusing on short-term gains. This research greatly balances the commercial goals and consumer well-being and then solves the concern about emotional exploitation in digital marketing. For consumer protection agencies and policy makers, this research identifies specific fields where the negative influences if emotion-driven consumption can be mitigated through supervision and education, while supporting the sustainable development of the

market. Finally, this research contributes to create a more ethical and sustainable consumption environment, which benefits both enterprises and consumers.

6.3 Limitation and Future Studies

This research has some limitations, which offer opportunities for future studies. Methodologically, as a comprehensive literature review, it relies completely on secondary data rather than primary data investigation, which limits the abilities to establish causal relationships and capture nuanced personal experiences. Future research can adopt mixed methods, integrating investigation, experimentation and neuroimaging techniques, to provide more compelling evidence to support the proposed relationships. To be specific, tracking emotional states and purchase behavior over time will supply valuable insights into the temporal dynamics of emotion-driven consumption. In addition, cross-cultural comparative studies help understand how cultural values and norms regulate these relationships in different societies. Such primitive data collection will significantly increase the validity and reliability of research results and offer more specific applications in different cultural backgrounds.

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