

From Suppressed Desire to Impulsive Action: Cognitive Self-Regulation, Inhibitory Control, and Impulse Buying in Digital Consumer Environments

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Abstract: Impulse buying has moved from a predominantly store-based phenomenon to a continuously available form of consumption embedded in e-commerce, social media, personalized advertising, and low-friction payment systems. Particular attention is given to thought suppression, intrusive cognition, self-control, affective vulnerability, stimulus-specific inhibitory control, and the transition from ordinary impulsive purchasing to compulsive buying-shopping. The literature indicates that purchase-related thought suppression can reduce information search or the accessibility of spending-related thoughts during active control, yet these effects are temporally unstable. When suppression ends or salient promotional cues appear, suppressed cognition can rebound, and its relation to purchase intention may strengthen. This cognitive dynamic operates within a broader system in which scarcity and fear of missing out, negative emotion and intolerance of uncertainty, targeted advertising, problematic Internet use, hedonic advertising, and individual impulsiveness increase vulnerability, whereas cognitive flexibility, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and inhibitory control may provide protection. Research on compulsive buying-shopping further shows that cognitive deficits are often cue-dependent, subtle, and sensitive to task demands. Recent inhibitory-control training research also demonstrates that control can be modified and can reduce impulsive fast-fashion consumption over time. The evidence therefore supports a process model in which impulsive buying emerges from interactions among mental-control strategies, emotional states, environmental cues, and action-control capacity. Major challenges include conceptual overlap, inconsistent measurement, heavy reliance on self-report and cross-sectional designs, and limited direct evidence linking thought suppression to actual purchasing. Future work should integrate multi-phase suppression paradigms with ecologically valid shopping tasks and longitudinal behavioral measures.

Keywords: Impulse Buying; Thought Suppression; Cognitive Rebound; Self-Control; Compulsive Buying-shopping

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1. Introduction

Impulse buying occupies an unusual position in consumer psychology. It is common enough to be treated as an ordinary feature of everyday shopping, yet it can also represent a meaningful failure of self-regulation when purchases are rapid, poorly deliberated, financially harmful, or repeated despite negative consequences. The contemporary relevance of the topic has increased because the conditions that once separated desire from action have changed substantially. Digital marketplaces allow consumers to search, compare, select, pay for, and receive products with little delay. Social media integrates

commercial content into ordinary communication, targeted advertising follows consumers across platforms, and promotional technologies repeatedly place personally relevant products in front of users. A recent knowledge-mapping analysis confirms that impulse-buying research has increasingly shifted toward e-commerce and technology-related contexts, with emerging interests in perceived value, customer experience, and virtual environments (Gong et al., 2024). A systematic review similarly concludes that the field remains fragmented in part because impulse buying has migrated from traditional retail settings into mobile, social, and electronic commerce channels (Redine et al., 2023).

The basic construct is nevertheless more complex than the phrase “unplanned purchase” suggests. Mandolfo and Lamberti (2021) describe impulse buying as a multidimensional phenomenon involving cognitive, visceral, and conative components. The cognitive component concerns reduced reflection and limited consideration of consequences; the visceral component refers to the affective force of a sudden urge; and the conative component concerns rapid movement toward action. This distinction is important because different studies may appear to examine the same phenomenon while measuring different parts of it. A questionnaire about impulse-buying tendency, a reported urge to purchase, a simulated shopping decision, and an actual monetary purchase do not represent interchangeable outcomes. The methodological literature therefore calls for stronger alignment between theory and measurement and for greater use of behavioral, psychophysiological, and consumer-neuroscience approaches (Mandolfo & Lamberti, 2021).

The transition to digital consumption further demonstrates why impulse buying should be studied as an interaction between person and environment rather than as a fixed personality tendency. Nyrhinen et al. (2024), studying young adults in Finland, found that low self-control was directly related to online impulse buying and also indirectly connected to it through favorable attitudes toward targeted advertising and susceptibility to the impulsive characteristics of social networks. In this account, vulnerability does not arise only after an urge appears. Consumers with weaker self-control may also be more receptive to the advertising and social cues that make urges more likely to emerge. At the neural level, Casado-Aranda et al. (2022) similarly found that highly impulsive consumers showed stronger activation in regions associated with reward, trust, and emotion, together with reduced activation in self-control networks, when viewing hedonic banner advertisements. Less impulsive consumers showed stronger recruitment of cognition and self-control regions when evaluating utilitarian banners. These findings reinforce the idea that marketing stimuli and consumer characteristics jointly shape the balance between immediate reward and reflective regulation.

Environmental triggers also interact with affective states. Zhang et al. (2022) showed that scarcity increased impulse buying through fear of missing out and that this process depended partly on bandwagon effects. Yu (2022) found that anxiety and depression were positively associated with impulse buying during the COVID-19 period, while intolerance of uncertainty and cognitive flexibility formed different pathways to affective and cognitive dimensions of impulse buying. Vihari et al. (2022) extended this regulatory perspective to online settings, reporting that mindfulness was inversely related to online impulse buying, that problematic Internet use mediated this association, and that emotional intelligence weakened the link between problematic Internet use and impulse buying. Collectively, these studies indicate that impulse buying is not simply a reaction to a tempting product. It emerges from interactions among cues, emotional states, interpretations, habits of media use, and capacities for self-regulation.

Within this broader system, thought suppression provides a particularly revealing but still underdeveloped perspective. Consumers often attempt to regulate spending by trying not to think about a desired product, a recent expensive purchase, financial difficulty, or a future opportunity to spend. Such efforts appear rational because purchase desire is partly sustained by attention, imagery, memory, and information search. If the consumer can keep the tempting representation outside focal awareness, desire may be easier to manage. Yet the supplied literature shows that suppression is not a temporally neutral strategy. Miao et al. (2025) found that purchase-related thought suppression reduced information search during the suppression phase but generated a rebound afterward. Importantly, the relationship between information search and purchase intention was weaker while suppression was active and stronger after suppression. So et al. (2026) provide complementary evidence in a naturalistic context: consumers experiencing financial constraint deliberately suppressed thoughts related to financial difficulty and spending desires, but those thoughts resurfaced when sales promotions were encountered, especially

among people with stronger indulgence tendencies.

This pattern matters because it suggests that self-regulation can fail even when consumers are actively trying to control themselves. A person can be highly motivated not to spend and still adopt a mental-control strategy whose effectiveness changes over time. Thought suppression therefore needs to be distinguished from broader self-control and from behavioral inhibition. Suppression is directed at mental content; inhibitory control concerns the ability to withhold or stop a response; and self-control encompasses a wider set of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes. Gay et al. (2011) provide an important bridge between these domains by showing that particular facets of impulsivity, especially negative urgency and lack of perseverance, are associated with intrusive thoughts and thought-control difficulties. Efrati et al. (2021) likewise found that both thought suppression and impulsiveness mediated relations between metacognitions and several behavioral addictions in adolescents. Although these studies do not examine impulse buying directly, they indicate that difficulties controlling thought and difficulties controlling behavior can be interrelated manifestations of broader self-regulatory vulnerability.

The severe end of this continuum is represented by compulsive buying-shopping disorder (CBSD). Expert consensus work identifies persistent or recurrent intrusive urges, impulses, cravings, or preoccupations; diminished control; excessive purchasing; use of buying-shopping to regulate internal states; negative consequences and impairment; and persistence despite harm as central features of CBSD (Müller, Laskowski, Trotzke, et al., 2021). Online forms raise additional classification questions because problematic online buying shares characteristics with both offline CBSD and specific Internet-use disorders (Müller, Laskowski, Wegmann, et al., 2021). Cognitive reviews indicate that cue-reactivity and disadvantageous decision making are relevant to CBSD, but experimental evidence concerning inhibitory control, attentional bias, and other executive processes remains incomplete (Thomas et al., 2023). A broader review of stimulus-specific inhibitory control in behavioral addictions reaches a similar conclusion: evidence is mixed and strongly affected by task design, stimuli, sample characteristics, and diagnostic procedures (Antons et al., 2023).

2. Theoretical Background

The first theoretical component concerns cue activation. External stimuli do not mechanically produce buying, but they alter the probability that products will become salient and rewarding. Zhang et al. (2022) illustrate this logic through the stimulus-organism-response framework. Scarcity was the external stimulus, fear of missing out was an internal state that translated scarcity into urgency, and impulse buying was the behavioral response. The bandwagon effect further altered the strength of the process. In digital settings, Nyrhinen et al. (2024) show that targeted advertising and social-media recommendations operate in a similarly interactive way: consumers low in self-control were more favorably disposed toward targeted advertising and more susceptible to impulsive social-network influences. The environment therefore does more than provide a purchase opportunity; it repeatedly shapes attention, interpretation, urgency, and perceived social legitimacy.

The second component concerns affective and cognitive appraisal. Yu (2022) shows that anxiety and depression relate to impulse buying through different cognitive characteristics. Cognitive flexibility fully mediated the effects of anxiety and depression on the cognitive facet of impulse buying, whereas intolerance of uncertainty fully mediated effects on the affective facet. This distinction suggests that self-regulation can break down through multiple pathways. Reduced cognitive flexibility may limit the ability to generate alternative interpretations or courses of action, leaving the consumer trapped in a narrow response pattern. Intolerance of uncertainty may make postponement aversive, thereby increasing the appeal of an immediate purchase that resolves ambiguity. Theoretical accounts of impulse buying should therefore distinguish the pursuit of positive reward from the escape or termination of negative internal states.

The third component is metacognitive and concerns how people relate to their own thoughts. Efrati et al. (2021) provide evidence across Internet gaming disorder, compulsive sexual behavior disorder, and problematic social-network use that thought suppression and impulsiveness can jointly mediate links between metacognitions and behavioral addictions. Although the behavioral domains differ from consumer purchasing, the results are relevant because they indicate that beliefs about thinking may generate efforts to control or eliminate cognition, which can coexist with impulsive behavioral tendencies. Gay et al. (2011) similarly demonstrate that impulsivity is not restricted to action. Negative urgency and lack of perseverance were associated with multiple indices of intrusive cognition and thought-control difficulty. Negative urgency, in particular, emerged

as a strong predictor of intrusive experiences. The theoretical bridge is clear: individuals who act rashly under negative emotion may also have difficulty disengaging from unwanted mental content, making emotional conditions important both before and after suppression attempts.

Thought suppression itself forms the fourth component. Miao et al. (2025) provide direct consumer evidence that suppression is phase-dependent. During active suppression, information search decreased and the association between search and purchase intention weakened. Once suppression ended, information search rebounded and its relation to purchase intention strengthened. Their findings also indicate nonlinearity, showing that the amount of search during suppression can affect subsequent engagement. The theoretical value of this study lies in its temporal precision. A regulatory strategy cannot be judged from a single measurement occasion because the same strategy may reduce target-related cognition at one time and increase its influence later.

So et al. (2026) extend this dynamic by examining self-initiated suppression under financial constraint. Their work is especially useful because financial constraint creates a conflict in which motivation to control spending is strong. Consumers experiencing constraint deliberately attempted to avoid thoughts about financial limitations and spending desires. Suppression effort accounted for reduced recall frequency, indicating that lower accessibility was not merely passive neglect. Yet sales promotions later served as cues that lifted suppression and elicited cognitive rebound. The effect was stronger among consumers higher in indulgence tendency. The theoretical implication is not that suppression inevitably fails, but that suppression is effortful and context-sensitive. It may work as long as the target remains outside attention, while the reappearance of a meaningful cue can restore the suppressed representation.

This temporal account can be understood as a distinction between mental control and action control. Suppression attempts to regulate what is present in awareness; inhibitory control regulates whether a response is executed. Thomas et al. (2023) review experimental work on cognitive functioning in CBSD and conclude that cue-reactivity and disadvantageous decision making fit a broader interactional account of behavioral addiction, while evidence for inhibitory control, attentional bias, implicit associations, and related functions remains insufficient. Antons et al. (2023) sharpen the distinction by focusing on stimulus-specific inhibitory control. Their review shows that individuals can display adequate general inhibition while becoming less effective when addiction-related cues are introduced. Evidence across behavioral addictions is mixed, but the conceptual principle is highly relevant to consumption: an inhibition task that uses neutral symbols may not capture the difficulty of withholding a response to a personally desirable product.

CBSD provides a clinical framework for understanding what happens when regulation becomes persistently impaired. The diagnostic consensus reported by Müller, Laskowski, Trotzke, et al. (2021) places both cognition and behavior at the center of the disorder. Intrusive or irresistible urges and preoccupations coexist with diminished control, repeated excessive purchasing, emotional regulation through buying, negative consequences, and continuation despite harm. This profile cautions against defining severe buying problems only by expenditure. The disorder involves recurrent cognitive capture and repeated behavioral enactment. At the same time, ordinary impulse buying must not be equated with CBSD. A spontaneous purchase can occur without chronic preoccupation, significant impairment, or continued behavior despite serious consequences.

Mindfulness and emotional intelligence represent a theoretically important contrast to suppression. Vihari et al. (2022) found that mindfulness was inversely related to online impulse buying and that emotional intelligence weakened the negative pathway associated with problematic Internet use. These findings do not establish that mindfulness is superior to thought suppression, because the two strategies were not experimentally compared. Nevertheless, they suggest two different regulatory logics. Suppression seeks to remove an unwanted target from focal awareness, whereas mindfulness is compatible with observing internal experience without immediately acting on it. Emotional intelligence similarly emphasizes recognition and regulation rather than elimination of emotion. If rebound is partly produced by rigid attempts to control cognition, flexible awareness may offer a theoretically different route to restraint.

Taken together, the theoretical literature supports a layered model. Commercial cues and internal states activate product representations; affective and cognitive appraisals determine urgency and value; metacognitive beliefs shape how consumers attempt to manage their thoughts; suppression can temporarily reduce accessibility but may create vulnerability to later

rebound; digital re-exposure, scarcity, and promotion can reactivate the target; and stimulus-specific inhibitory control determines whether renewed cognition becomes purchasing behavior. Protective factors such as mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and cognitive flexibility can influence several points in this sequence. This model is more precise than a general “low self-control” explanation because it distinguishes when control is being directed at thought, emotion, attention, or action.

3. Current Research Progress

The most important recent development in this literature is the gradual convergence of consumer research, cognitive-control research, and behavioral-addiction research. Earlier impulse-buying work often treated external marketing stimuli and consumer traits as separate classes of predictors. The studies considered here increasingly show that meaningful explanation requires their interaction. The development is visible at the field level. Gong et al. (2024), using CiteSpace to map 704 publications from 1967 through September 2023, show that e-commerce has become a major context for impulse-buying research and that technology-oriented topics have become increasingly prominent. Redine et al. (2023), using a systematic review organized through the TCCM framework, similarly characterize the field as fragmented but rapidly evolving as purchasing migrates into electronic, mobile, and social commerce. These reviews indicate that impulse buying is now being studied in environments where exposure, decision, and action are digitally integrated.

Methodological progress has accompanied this conceptual shift, although important limitations remain. Mandolfo and Lamberti (2021) identify four major approaches to studying impulse buying: self-report methods, laboratory investigations, field observations, and qualitative interviews. They argue that self-report and interview approaches are particularly informative for cognitive aspects, whereas laboratory and field methods can more directly capture conative and visceral components. They also highlight psychophysiological and consumer-neuroscience measures as important additions. This methodological pluralism is essential for a self-regulation account because thought suppression, emotional arousal, inhibitory control, and actual purchasing cannot all be inferred reliably from one questionnaire. The recent literature increasingly combines subjective and behavioral evidence, but it has not yet established a common measurement framework.

One major research stream concerns the architecture of online temptation. Nyrhinen et al. (2024) provide a large-sample analysis of 2,318 Finnish respondents aged 18 to 29. Their model demonstrates that low self-control is not only directly related to impulse buying but also linked to more favorable attitudes toward targeted advertising and to the impulsive influence of social networks. A positive attitude toward targeted advertising further increased susceptibility to recommendations and product displays encountered through social media. This result is important because it reframes online impulse buying as a feedback system. Consumers who are less resistant to persuasion may interact more positively with targeted content, which then places them in environments where additional product cues become salient.

Casado-Aranda et al. (2022) advance the online-persuasion literature through functional magnetic resonance imaging. Their study compared neural responses to hedonic and utilitarian banner advertisements as a function of consumer impulsiveness. More impulsive consumers showed greater activation in regions related to reward, trust, and emotion and reduced activity in self-control networks when exposed to hedonic banners. Lower-impulsiveness consumers showed stronger activation in cognition and self-control regions while evaluating utilitarian banners. These results support a dual emphasis on stimulus properties and individual traits. Hedonic cues do not simply “cause” impulsive buying; their neural processing varies according to impulsiveness. The findings also suggest why thought suppression may be especially difficult for highly rewarding product categories: suppressing cognition does not necessarily erase the affective and reward value attached to the target.

A second stream concerns urgency generated by environmental constraints. Zhang et al. (2022) examined scarcity during the COVID-19 pandemic, when medical protective products were limited. The study found that scarcity increased fear of missing out, which in turn promoted impulse buying, and that bandwagon effects influenced the scarcity–buying relationship. This research is distinctive because scarcity turns delay into a perceived cost. Under ordinary circumstances, postponing a purchase can support deliberation. Under scarcity, postponement can mean losing the opportunity altogether. Fear of missing out therefore changes the subjective consequences of restraint.

A third stream focuses on negative emotion and cognitive vulnerability. Yu (2022), using 734 Chinese undergraduates, found that impulse buying was positively related to anxiety, depression, and intolerance of uncertainty and negatively related to cognitive flexibility. The mediation analysis is especially informative. Cognitive flexibility fully mediated the association of anxiety and depression with the cognitive facet of impulse buying, whereas intolerance of uncertainty fully mediated their association with the affective facet. The result indicates that impulse buying has at least two psychologically distinct routes under distress. One route involves diminished flexible thinking and poorer deliberation; another involves affective discomfort and the desire to resolve uncertainty.

A fourth research stream examines alternative forms of self-regulation. Vihari et al. (2022) studied 598 participants and found an inverse relationship between mindfulness and online impulse buying. Problematic Internet use mediated the relationship, while emotional intelligence reduced the strength of the association between problematic Internet use and impulsive buying. The study is significant because it shifts attention from resisting a specific product to regulating the broader conditions under which urges arise. Mindfulness may reduce automatic engagement with online cues, while emotional intelligence may help consumers manage the affective states that make immediate purchasing attractive.

The most direct progress concerns purchase-related thought suppression itself. Miao et al. (2025) use a survey and a multiphase experimental design to examine suppression, information search, and purchase intention. Their first key finding is that suppression reduces information search while it is active. This matters because information search is an observable pre-purchase behavior rather than a purely internal cognitive measure. Their second finding is that suppression changes the relation between information search and purchase intention across phases: search has a weaker influence on purchase intention during suppression but a stronger influence after suppression. Their third finding is nonlinear, indicating that moderate information search during suppression can sustain engagement, whereas excessive search can dampen later search behavior. The study therefore rejects a simple linear model in which “more search always means more buying.”

So et al. (2026) deepen this line of research by examining suppression initiated by financial constraint rather than by a narrow laboratory instruction. Across three longitudinal studies, financially constrained consumers reported efforts to suppress thoughts about financial limitations and spending desires. Experimental evidence showed that financial constraint increased suppression effort and that this effort mediated lower recall frequency. The authors therefore distinguish deliberate suppression from mere inattention. This is an important advance because everyday consumer restraint is often self-initiated: people decide to avoid thinking about shopping after expensive events, during periods of limited money, or when discretionary spending conflicts with financial goals.

The third study in So et al. (2026) shows why naturalistic context matters. New Year sales promotions functioned as external cues capable of lifting suppression, and suppressed thoughts resurfaced. The rebound was particularly strong among individuals with higher indulgence tendencies. This moderation result is theoretically valuable because it demonstrates that the motivational value of discretionary consumption shapes the stability of suppression. The same financial constraint can produce different rebound patterns depending on how strongly the consumer values indulgence.

This gap makes the inhibitory-control literature central. Thomas et al. (2023) systematically reviewed experimental evidence on cognitive functioning in CBSD through the lens of the I-PACE framework. Their review found support for cue-reactivity and disadvantageous decision making but highlighted a relative shortage of research on attentional bias, inhibitory control, implicit associations, and related processes. Experimental work on physiological and neural correlates was also described as being at an early stage. The review therefore supports an affect–cognition–execution approach while warning that some components of the model have stronger evidence than others.

Antons et al. (2023) reach a similarly cautious conclusion in their systematic review of stimulus-specific inhibitory control across behavioral addictions. Thirty-one studies met inclusion criteria, most involving gaming disorder and problematic social-network use. Go/No-Go variants were common, but findings were mixed, and studies differed substantially in samples, stimuli, diagnostic instruments, and task design. The authors therefore argue for greater standardization and more clinical samples. For buying research, the key message is that failure on a neutral inhibition task cannot be assumed to represent failure when shopping cues are present, and conversely, normal general inhibition does not rule out cue-specific vulnerability.

Eliyahu et al. (2025) provide new buying-specific evidence that illustrates this point. In their first experiment, participants with higher compulsive-buying scores reported higher impulsivity and compulsivity. They showed more No-Go commission errors during the second part of the response-inhibition task, suggesting that differences became more visible as sustained control demands accumulated. Delay discounting and selective attention did not show equivalent group differences. The pattern is important because it argues against a broad assumption that compulsive buyers are impaired on every executive function. Deficits can be selective and task-dependent.

The subsequent simulated shopping experiment increases ecological relevance. Participants with higher compulsive-buying scores added products to the shopping cart more quickly and spent more money. Impulsivity, but not sensation seeking, contributed to compulsive-buying variance. The simulated environment thereby produced behavioral differences that abstract tasks did not always capture. This finding supports the methodological recommendations of Mandolfo and Lamberti (2021): the closer the outcome is to actual purchasing, the better positioned researchers are to examine the translation of self-regulatory difficulty into behavior.

The clinical literature also clarifies how ordinary impulsive buying differs from persistent dysregulation. Müller, Laskowski, Trozke, et al. (2021) used a Delphi process with international experts to propose diagnostic criteria for CBSD. Consensus emphasized intrusive or irresistible urges, impulses, cravings, or preoccupations; diminished control; excessive acquisition; use of shopping to regulate internal states; negative consequences and impairment; emotional or cognitive symptoms when reducing shopping; and persistence despite harm. This set of features shows that chronic problematic buying involves more than frequent spontaneous purchases. It includes repetitive cognition, affect regulation, control failure, and functional impairment.

At the same time, the digital form of CBSD remains conceptually unsettled. Müller, Laskowski, Wegmann, et al. (2021) review preliminary evidence suggesting that problematic online buying-shopping shares features with both offline CBSD and specific Internet-use disorders. They conclude that the literature is not yet sufficient to determine whether a predominantly online subtype should be distinguished or whether online CBSD can develop independently from offline CBSD. This uncertainty matters because the mechanisms of online shopping may amplify existing pathology without being its primary cause, or they may contribute qualitatively distinct processes through persistent access, habitual browsing, and digital reinforcement.

Efrati et al. (2021) broaden the relevance of thought suppression beyond shopping. Across three adolescent samples and three behavioral addictions, thought suppression and impulsiveness mediated relations between metacognitions and problematic behavior. The consistency of this mediation across different behavioral domains suggests that thought suppression may function as a transdiagnostic or cross-behavioral regulatory process rather than a mechanism unique to one activity. For consumer research, this provides a reason to examine metacognitive beliefs about shopping thoughts: consumers may suppress not only because they want to save money but because they believe certain thoughts are dangerous, uncontrollable, or likely to force action.

Gay et al. (2011) offer an even more basic self-control connection. Their studies show that negative urgency and lack of perseverance are associated with intrusive thoughts and thought-control difficulties. The pattern warns against treating impulsivity as a single score. A consumer high in sensation seeking may differ meaningfully from a consumer high in negative urgency. The latter may be especially prone to buy impulsively when distressed and simultaneously more likely to experience persistent unwanted thoughts. Future purchasing studies that use multidimensional impulsivity measures may therefore identify moderators that are obscured by global trait scores.

The most promising recent progress is the movement from description to intervention. Flachs et al. (2026) tested whether Go/No-Go training could reduce fast-fashion consumption, a domain in which purchasing is often rapid and environmentally consequential. In an incentive-aligned online experiment and a longitudinal field experiment, the training reduced fast-fashion consumption. In the field study, the effect persisted across six weeks and exceeded the effect of an informational strategy alone. This is a major advance because it demonstrates that inhibitory-control mechanisms can be altered and that modification can produce sustained behavior change outside a single laboratory session.

4. Research Challenges and Controversies

The first major challenge is conceptual precision. Impulse buying, impulsivity, compulsive buying-shopping, thought suppression, intrusive thinking, self-control, and inhibitory control are related constructs, but they refer to different levels of analysis. Impulse buying is a purchasing episode or tendency; impulsivity is a broader disposition; thought suppression is an intentional mental-control strategy; intrusive thoughts are unwanted cognitive events; and inhibitory control is an executive function involved in withholding action. CBSD adds persistence, impairment, recurrent preoccupation, and continuation despite negative consequences. The diagnostic consensus of Müller, Laskowski, Trotzke, et al. (2021) makes clear that clinically significant buying cannot be equated with occasional impulse purchases. Yet the literature frequently uses findings from compulsive buyers to explain ordinary consumer behavior. Such translation may be theoretically useful, but it requires explicit caution.

The second challenge is the measurement gap between mental processes and actual purchasing. Miao et al. (2025) measure information search and purchase intention, while So et al. (2026) examine suppression effort and recall frequency. These are strong measures of cognitive and pre-purchase dynamics, but they do not establish that rebound produces real impulse purchases. A person may think more about a product, search extensively, and still choose not to buy. Conversely, a consumer may make a rapid purchase with relatively little conscious search. The field therefore needs designs that connect thought accessibility, urge, information search, inhibitory performance, and actual expenditure within the same temporal sequence.

A third challenge is temporal inference. Suppression and rebound are inherently time-dependent, yet much consumer research is cross-sectional. Yu (2022), Nyrhinen et al. (2024), and Vihari et al. (2022) identify theoretically meaningful mediating or moderating relationships, but the temporal order among traits, affective states, digital behavior, and buying cannot be established conclusively from cross-sectional data. Miao et al. (2025) and So et al. (2026) make progress by using multiphase or longitudinal designs, demonstrating that the direction and strength of relations can change across stages. The broader field needs to adopt this temporal logic more consistently.

The fourth challenge is the heterogeneity of inhibitory-control findings. Thomas et al. (2023) describe limited and sometimes conflicting evidence across cognitive domains in CBSD, while Antons et al. (2023) show that stimulus-specific inhibitory-control research across behavioral addictions varies widely in task characteristics, samples, stimuli, and diagnostic procedures. These differences make it difficult to determine whether poor inhibition is a general vulnerability, a cue-specific deficit, a consequence of disorder severity, or a phenomenon that appears mainly under high cognitive load. Eliyahu et al. (2025) support the latter possibility by finding response-inhibition differences particularly during the later, more demanding portion of a task.

A fifth challenge concerns ecological validity. Real impulse buying occurs in environments containing price information, visual design, social influence, time pressure, payment options, previous browsing history, and personal financial stakes. Laboratory control often removes precisely the features that make the decision motivationally meaningful. Casado-Aranda et al. (2022) increase process validity through neural measures of advertising evaluation, and Flachs et al. (2026) increase behavioral validity through incentive-aligned and field designs. Nevertheless, the field still lacks integrated experiments in which thought suppression is manipulated and actual purchasing behavior is observed under realistic digital cue exposure.

A sixth controversy is whether suppression should be characterized as maladaptive. The available evidence does not support a universal negative conclusion. Miao et al. (2025) show that suppression reduces information search during the active phase, and So et al. (2026) show that greater suppression effort is associated with reduced recall frequency under financial constraint. These are genuine short-term regulatory effects. The problem is that benefits may be unstable when suppression ends or external cues are encountered. Accordingly, the appropriate question is not whether suppression “works,” but how long it works, under which conditions, and at what later cost. Consumers who face no subsequent cue exposure may benefit from temporary disengagement, whereas consumers in personalized digital environments may face repeated reactivation.

The seventh challenge concerns generalizability. The eighteen sources include young adults, university students, adolescents, consumers in pandemic contexts, participants in online studies, compulsive-buying groups, and broader review samples. Cultural settings include Finland, China, Japan, Spain, Israel, and other contexts represented in systematic reviews. Financial

constraint, indulgence, scarcity, social media use, and fast-fashion consumption may carry different meanings across populations. So et al. (2026) explicitly call for work across cultures with differing levels of indulgence, while the pandemic studies raise questions about whether findings generated under exceptional uncertainty generalize to ordinary retail contexts. Finally, there is an ethical controversy. Several studies identify moments at which consumers are especially vulnerable: under financial constraint, after suppression rebounds, in scarcity contexts, when exposed to targeted advertisements, or when low in self-control. Such knowledge can support consumer protection, financial education, and healthier digital design, but it can also be used to optimize persuasion. So et al. (2026) explicitly caution against exploiting financial status or indulgence tendencies to intensify promotional effectiveness. Flachs et al. (2026) demonstrate a more consumer-protective application by using behavioral training to reduce environmentally harmful impulsive consumption. Future research should therefore treat ethical use as part of theoretical and practical evaluation rather than as an afterthought.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

The studies reviewed here support a coherent but still developing account of impulse buying as a dynamic self-regulatory process. The field has moved beyond simple descriptions of unplanned purchasing toward models that integrate environmental cues, emotional states, cognitive regulation, digital persuasion, and behavioral inhibition. Field-level reviews show that impulse-buying research is increasingly concentrated in electronic and technology-mediated contexts and that methodological diversity is both a strength and a source of fragmentation (Gong et al., 2024; Mandolfo & Lamberti, 2021; Redine et al., 2023). Empirical studies further demonstrate that digital advertising, social-media influence, hedonic reward processing, scarcity, fear of missing out, negative affect, and problematic Internet use all shape vulnerability to rapid purchasing (Casado-Aranda et al., 2022; Nyrhinen et al., 2024; Vihari et al., 2022; Yu, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

The most distinctive contribution of the current evidence is the emergence of thought suppression as a consumer-regulation mechanism. Miao et al. (2025) show that suppressing purchase-related cognition changes information search and purchase intention in a phase-dependent manner. So et al. (2026) show that financial constraint can naturally motivate consumers to suppress spending-related thoughts and that promotional cues can later produce cognitive rebound, particularly among highly indulgent consumers. These findings establish that restraint is not psychologically static. A strategy that appears effective while active may create a different cognitive landscape after it ends.

However, cognitive rebound should not be equated with purchase. The transition from renewed thought to actual behavior remains a central missing link. Research on CBSD shows that severe buying problems involve intrusive preoccupation, diminished control, affect regulation through shopping, and persistence despite harm (Müller, Laskowski, Trotzke, et al., 2021). Reviews of cognitive functioning and stimulus-specific inhibitory control indicate that action-control deficits are plausible but methodologically inconsistent and often dependent on cue relevance and task characteristics (Antons et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2023). Eliyahu et al. (2025) provide evidence that inhibition differences can emerge under sustained cognitive demand and that compulsive-buying tendencies are reflected more clearly in realistic shopping behavior than in every generic cognitive task.

Future research should therefore focus on the complete temporal chain from suppression to behavior. The strongest design would combine several phases within the same experiment: initial exposure to a desirable product; assignment to thought suppression, mindfulness, or another regulatory condition; a period measuring immediate accessibility and information search; a delay; re-exposure through a promotion, scarcity message, or targeted advertisement; assessment of intrusive cognition and craving; and finally an incentive-compatible purchase decision. Such a design would determine whether rebound predicts actual spending and whether the relation is moderated by negative urgency, cognitive flexibility, financial constraint, indulgence, or stimulus-specific inhibitory control.

Direct comparisons among regulatory strategies are especially important. The current literature shows potential benefits of mindfulness, cognitive flexibility, and emotional intelligence but does not compare them experimentally with purchase-related thought suppression (Vihari et al., 2022; Yu, 2022). If suppression is vulnerable because it depends on maintaining a target outside awareness, strategies that allow awareness while reducing elaboration or automatic response may have different long-term effects. Future studies should therefore compare short-term and delayed outcomes rather than judging strategies only by

immediate reductions in desire.

Research should also distinguish general from cue-specific control. Antons et al. (2023) show why stimulus-specific inhibition matters, and the findings of Casado-Aranda et al. (2022) indicate that hedonic cues can be processed differently by more impulsive consumers. Future inhibitory tasks should therefore use personally relevant products and compare previously suppressed, previously viewed, and novel items. This would reveal whether suppression history itself changes later action control. Neurophysiological measures could be added where appropriate, but they should complement rather than replace behaviorally consequential purchasing outcomes.

The intervention evidence of Flachs et al. (2026) opens a particularly productive path. Their findings show that inhibitory-control training can reduce fast-fashion consumption and that effects can persist across several weeks. Future studies could combine suppression and training: one group might attempt to avoid purchase thoughts, another might receive cue-specific stopping training, and a third might receive both. Such work could test whether strengthening action control protects consumers when suppressed thoughts rebound. It could also determine whether intervention effects generalize beyond fast fashion to other hedonic or high-frequency online purchases.

Longitudinal naturalistic research is equally necessary. Consumers regularly experience cycles of income, financial constraint, promotional events, emotional stress, and repeated digital exposure. So et al. (2026) demonstrate that suppression and rebound can be studied longitudinally, but longer observation windows could connect these cycles to real expenditure. Experience-sampling methods could record moments of purchase desire, suppression attempts, emotional state, advertising exposure, and subsequent buying. With appropriate ethical safeguards, passive digital measures of browsing and transaction timing could reduce reliance on retrospective self-report.

In conclusion, impulse buying is best understood not as a single moment of irrational choice but as the endpoint of an unfolding regulatory sequence. Consumers encounter cues that acquire reward value, experience emotions and urgency, attempt to manage their thoughts, face repeated reactivation from the environment, and finally either inhibit or enact the purchase response. Thought suppression is one strategy within this sequence. It can reduce engagement temporarily, but its effects are phase-dependent and vulnerable to external cues. The central research problem for the next stage of the field is therefore to explain how the mind moves from “I will not think about buying this” to renewed cognition and, under some conditions, to action. Integrating thought suppression with emotional regulation, digital cue exposure, and stimulus-specific inhibitory control offers a theoretically precise and empirically testable route toward that goal.

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