Exploring Emotional Drivers of Digital Consumption
An Analysis of Anxiety, Stress, Loneliness, and Impulse Buying in Gen Z

A Research Paper by

Riya Maggo

University of Waterloo

Submitted as part of

Independent Behavioural Economics Research Project

November 2025

Abstract

This study examines how emotional states such as anxiety, stress, loneliness, and overall well-being influence impulse buying and digital spending among Gen Z consumers. Ten participants between the ages of seventeen and twenty five completed a quantitative survey measuring emotional variables, impulsive purchasing frequency, and monthly spending across beauty, food delivery, and entertainment categories. The results showed a positive association between anxiety and impulse buying. Participants with higher anxiety scores also reported higher spending in comfort-oriented digital categories. Qualitative responses revealed that shopping frequently served as a short-term emotional regulation strategy. These findings contribute to the existing literature by integrating insights from depression research, anxiety research, and self-regulation theory into the context of Gen Z's digital consumption patterns.

Keywords: impulse buying, anxiety, Gen Z, digital consumption, behavioural economics

Introduction

Digital consumption plays a central role in the everyday lives of Gen Z consumers who rely heavily on mobile applications, online shopping, and rapid delivery services. As emotional pressures increase, purchasing decisions often shift from rational to emotionally driven. Prior research has shown that emotional discomfort, particularly anxiety and stress, can significantly influence consumer decision-making, especially when frictionless digital interfaces reduce barriers to impulsive purchases. The purpose of this study is to examine how emotional states shape impulsive buying tendencies and digital spending patterns in a Gen Z population. By combining behavioural economic theory with psychological research, this study offers insight into how emotional well-being shapes consumption in online environments.

Literature Review

Depression and Consumption

Research has demonstrated that depression influences consumption patterns and shapes the emotional meaning of purchasing. In a cross-cultural study conducted across Brazil and Germany, consumers experiencing depressive symptoms displayed distinct purchasing habits that differed from non-depressed individuals. These behaviours included seeking emotional comfort through consumption and gravitating toward products that temporarily reduced psychological discomfort (Alcoforado et al., 2022). Depression was found to influence consumption both through emotional distress and through consumers' interpretations of marketplace resources.

Anxiety and Consumer Behaviour

Anxiety has also been identified as a major predictor of consumption, particularly within digital environments. According to Huang (2022), anxious individuals demonstrate higher

spending frequency and are more prone to extreme or irrational purchases. Anxiety disrupts cognitive processing and often shifts decision-making from reflective to immediate. This tendency is especially visible in online shopping environments where convenience, speed, and accessibility encourage consumers to act quickly. Anxiety therefore functions as both an emotional catalyst and a behavioural driver, shaping how individuals use consumption to manage internal discomfort.

Impulse Buying and Self-Regulation

Impulse buying occurs when consumers make unplanned purchases driven by emotion rather than intention. Verplanken and Sato (2011) argue that impulse buying represents a breakdown in self-regulation. When emotional demands exceed available psychological resources, individuals become less able to evaluate long-term consequences and instead pursue short-term gratification. This dynamic is intensified in digital environments where personalised recommendations, instant checkout features, and algorithmic targeting heighten emotional responsiveness. Impulsive buying has been shown to relate to both positive emotional motives such as excitement and negative emotional motives such as avoidance of low self-esteem, indicating that both promotion-focused and prevention-focused motivations can lead to the same behavioural outcome.

Gaps in Existing Literature

Although prior studies highlight important links between emotional states and consumer behaviour, several gaps remain. Few studies examine multiple emotional variables together, particularly in Gen Z populations. Most research focuses on general consumer groups and lacks attention to specific digital spending categories such as beauty, food delivery, and entertainment. Furthermore, limited research exists that combines emotional variables with self-reported impulsive buying tendencies in a small-scale exploratory context. This study aims to address these gaps by examining how

multiple emotional states collectively influence spending behaviour among Gen Z consumers.

Research Question and Hypotheses

The central research question guiding this study is:

To what extent do anxiety, stress, loneliness, and well-being predict impulse buying and digital spending among Gen Z consumers?

Based on existing literature, it was expected that higher anxiety would be associated with higher impulsive purchasing. It was also predicted that stress and loneliness would contribute to increased spending across comfort-driven categories. Lower overall well-being was expected to relate to elevated emotional consumption.

Methodology

Participants

Ten participants between the ages of seventeen and twenty five completed the online survey. Convenience sampling was used, and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Measures

Participants rated their levels of anxiety, stress, loneliness, sleep quality, and overall well-being using five point scales. Impulse buying frequency was measured using a scale ranging from “never” to “very often.” Monthly spending was reported for beauty and self-care, food delivery, and entertainment. Open-ended questions allowed participants to describe emotional triggers and feelings after purchases.

Procedure

The survey was administered through Google Forms and took approximately three minutes to complete. Responses were exported into a CSV file and analyzed using Python. Emotional measures were converted into numeric values to enable correlation testing.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics and visualizations were generated for all variables. A correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between anxiety scores and impulse buying frequency. Qualitative responses were reviewed for recurring emotional themes.

Results

Participants reported a wide range of emotional experiences. Anxiety, stress, and loneliness varied significantly across respondents. Impulse buying was common, with most participants indicating that they sometimes or often made unplanned purchases. A majority of respondents also reported shopping when feeling sad or stressed, suggesting that consumption served as an emotional coping mechanism.

Spending patterns indicated that most participants spent between fifty and one hundred dollars per month on beauty or self-care products. Food delivery spending also tended to exceed fifty dollars per month. Entertainment spending showed variation across all categories, reflecting the role of digital leisure in emotional management.

The correlation analysis revealed a positive association between anxiety and impulse buying ($r = .51$). Participants with higher anxiety scores reported higher impulsive buying frequency. Qualitative responses further supported these findings, as several participants described shopping as comforting, distracting, or emotionally soothing.

Discussion

The results align with existing findings on emotional consumption. Anxiety emerged as a strong predictor of impulsive buying and elevated digital spending. This supports Huang's (2022) conclusion that anxiety increases both the frequency and intensity of consumption in online settings. The results also reflect the framework described by Verplanken and Sato (2011), who argue that impulse buying is driven by weakened self-regulation during emotional discomfort. Participants consistently described their purchases as attempts to manage negative feelings, demonstrating how consumption functions as an emotional regulation strategy.

These findings mirror the depressive consumption patterns detailed by Alcoforado et al. (2022), where emotional distress influences spending decisions. Although this study did not directly measure depression, the behavioural similarities suggest that negative emotional states generally lead to elevated digital consumption among young adults.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of emotional consumption by showing how anxiety, stress, loneliness, and well-being influence impulse buying and digital spending in Gen Z consumers. Anxiety was the strongest predictor of impulsive purchasing. Participants frequently turned to shopping for emotional comfort, particularly when interacting with frictionless digital platforms. These findings highlight the need for increased awareness of emotional triggers in consumption and suggest that Gen Z consumers may benefit from strategies that support emotional regulation and financial mindfulness.

Limitations

This study was conducted with a small sample size which limits the generalisation of its findings. Emotional states and spending habits were self-reported and may be influenced by bias. The cross-sectional design prevents the study from capturing changes in emotional states or spending behaviour over time. Future studies should incorporate larger samples, additional spending categories, and longitudinal designs.

References

Alcoforado, D. G., Melo, F. V. S., & Alcoforado, R. G. (2022). Depression and consumption habits: A cross-cultural study. *Journal of Consumer Marketing, 39*(6), 621–631.

Huang, Y. (2022). The influence of anxiety on consumer behavior in the e-commerce environment. *Psychiatria Danubina, 34*(Suppl. 1), 126–128.

Kersten, M., Cox, C. R., Van Enkevort, E. A., & Arrowood, R. B. (2019). The influence of money-related metaphors on financial anxiety and spending. *Journal of Psychology & Financial Behavior, 22*, 229–242.

Verplanken, B., & Sato, A. (2011). The psychology of impulse buying. *Journal of Consumer Policy, 34*, 197–210.