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“TikTok made me buy it”

Consumers' views on how TikTok encourages their impulse buying
behaviour

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ABSTRACT:

The current era has seen the exponential growth of social networking sites. Since its founding in September 2016, TikTok has seen widespread distribution and currently represents one of the most successful Chinese social media applications in the world with millions of active users. Social media users spend a total of 2 hours and 23 minutes on social media every day, on average, and during that time, make impulse purchases encouraged by these platforms. This study focuses on social-relevant factors (external), that encourage such behavior. The question is not "why they buy" rather "what encourages them to buy". The paper provides a comprehensive review of social media platforms, with a particular focus on TikTok. The concept of s-commerce, a subgenre of e-commerce, is examined, and an analysis on the role of these platforms in fostering impulse buying behavior conducted. In the last part of the theoretical framework the paper examines the S-O-R framework and presents a modified version of it for this study. This paper has three objectives; (1) finding out how TikTok is built to attract people on scrolling and how the app works; (2) understanding the impulse buying research done in the field of online environments, and focus on the elements that encourage impulse buying behavior in these social settings; and (3) understanding what aspects within the app encourage consumers to make impulse purchases. While being a popular research area during the past few decades, a great amount of research has been conducted on consumers impulse buying behavior. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the new conditions of impulse buying and examine the features that are encouraging consumers to make impulse purchases. Previous research on other context (e.g. Instagram) has been conducted, but TikTok has been left out from the conversations regarding its power to encourage impulse purchases.

A qualitative study was conducted. The approach of the study is phenomenological-hermeneutic, and the data collection method used for the study was guided and semi-structured individual interviews. A total of ten interviews were conducted. Written interview transcripts (a total of 135 pages in Finnish language) acted as the base for the qualitative content analysis. A S-O-R model is used to describe the results. The findings suggest the following: first, peer endorsements (incl. authentic recommendations coming from regular people and not from influencers) were perceived as the most encouraging aspect of TikTok regarding impulse purchases. Second, buying incentives alone can act as a stimulus in cases where there is a prior need for the product and in these cases the sales promotion tools both remind of the need, and are used to justify the purchase. This is all enabled by the algorithm-driven content loop, and the visual support act as the reinforcing factor for the stimuli. Third, targeted advertising causes irritation which leads to avoidance behavior among respondents, hence not making impulse purchases. This research enriches existing literature on impulse buying in s-commerce context. Based on the findings, managerial implications have been drawn up for companies operating in the field and social media.

KEYWORDS: TikTok, social networking sites, social commerce, impulse buying, impulse buying behavior

VAASAN YLIOPISTO**Markkinoinnin ja viestinnän akateeminen yksikkö**

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TIIVISTELMÄ:

Viime vuosina sosiaaliseen verkostoitumiseen erikoistuneet sivustot ovat kasvaneet räjähdysmäisesti, ja perustamisensa jälkeen, syyskuusta 2016 lähtien, TikTok on levinnyt laajalle ja edustaa tällä hetkellä yhtä menestyneimmistä kiinalaisista sosiaalisen median sovelluksista maailmassa. Sosiaalisen median käyttäjät viettävät keskimäärin 2 tuntia ja 23 minuuttia sosiaalisessa mediassa päivittäin ja tekevät tänä aikana näiden alustojen kannustamana impulssiostoksia. Tämä tutkimus keskittyy sosiaalisesti merkityksellisiin tekijöihin (ulkoiset tekijät), jotka edistävät tällaista käyttäytymistä. Kysymys ei ole "miksi he ostavat", vaan "mikä rohkaisee heitä ostamaan". Tutkimus tarjoaa kattavan katsauksen sosiaalisen median alustoihin keskittyen erityisesti TikTokiin. Lisäksi tutkitaan sähköisen kaupankäynnin uutta alalajia nimeltä s-commerce (sosiaalinen kaupankäynti) ja analysoidaan näiden s-commerce alustojen roolia impulsiivisen ostokäyttäytymisen edistämisessä. Teoreettisen viitekehyksen viimeisessä osassa tutkitaan S-O-R-mallia ja esitetään siitä modifioitu versio tätä tutkimusta varten. Tämä artikkeli pyrkii saavuttamaan kolme tälle tutkimukselle asetettua tavoitetta; (1) ymmärtää TikTokin toimintaa; (2) ymmärtää verkkoympäristöjen elementtejä, jotka kannustavat impulssiostokäyttäytymistä näissä sosiaalisissa ympäristöissä; ja (3) ymmärtää, mitkä sovelluksen ominaisuudet vaikuttavat kuluttajien ostotottumuksiin ja rohkaisevat heitä tekemään impulssiostoksia. Kuluttajien impulsiivista ostokäyttäytymistä on tutkittu paljon viime vuosikymmenien aikana, mutta siitä huolimatta on tärkeää tunnistaa impulsiivisen ostamisen uudet olosuhteet ja tarkastella ominaisuuksia, jotka rohkaisevat kuluttajia impulsiiviseen ostamiseen. Impulsiivista ostamista on tutkittu muissa verkkoympäristöissä kuten Instagramissa, mutta TikTok on monesti jätetty näiden tutkimusten ja keskusteluiden ulkopuolelle.

Tutkimus on laadullinen tutkimus ja sen lähestymistapa on fenomenologis-hermeneuttinen. Tutkimuksessa on käytetty tiedonkeruumenetelmänä ohjattuja ja puolistrukturoituja yksilöhaastatteluita, joita tehtiin yhteensä kymmenen. Laadullisen sisältöanalyysin pohjana olivat kirjalliset haastattelutranskriptiot (yhteensä 135 suomenkielistä sivua). Tulosten kuvaamiseen käytetään S-O-R-mallia. Vertaisarvioinnit (mukaan lukien autenttiset suositukset, jotka tulevat tavallisilta ihmisiltä, ei vaikuttajilta) koettiin TikTokin rohkaisevimmaksi tekijäksi impulssiostosten suhteen. Lisäksi pelkät ostokannustimet voivat toimia ärsykkeinä tapauksissa, joissa tuotteelle on ollut etukäteen tarve. Näissä tapauksissa ne siis muistuttivat kuluttajaa tarpeesta ja niitä käytettiin oston perusteena. Algoritmin luoma 'jatkuvan sisällön silmukka' toimi mahdollistavana tekijänä ja 'visuaalinen tuki' toimi ärsykeitä vahvistavana tekijänä. Näiden vastakohtana kohdennettu mainonta aiheutti vastaajissa ärsytystä, joka johti välttelevään käyttäytymiseen, ja täten impulssiostoksia ei tehty. Tämä tutkimus rikastaa olemassa olevaa kirjallisuutta impulsiivisesta ostamisesta sosiaalisen kaupankäynnin kontekstissa ja tulosten perusteella on laadittu toimintasuositukset alalla ja sosiaalisen median parissa toimiville yrityksille.

AVAINSANAT: TikTok, sosiaaliset verkostoitumissivustot, sosiaalinen kaupankäynti, impulssiosto, impulssiostokäyttäytyminen

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1 Introduction

A social media app with stratospheric dominance and a meteoric rise. An app that revolves rapidly and is guided by a complex algorithm. That is TikTok – an app that is extraordinarily easy to use and is creating history right before our eyes (Stokel-Walker, 2021, pp. 11–17). Herrman (2019, p. 1) described TikTok in the New York Times as “a refreshing outlier in the social media universe” that’s “genuinely fun to use.” User numbers are high and TikTok represents a highly successful social media platform around the globe (Montag et al., 2021). TikTok has blown away all records in its short life by being more addictive and immersive than its competitors (Stokel-Walker, 2021, p. 187).

According to Sharabati et al. (2022, pp. 2–5) the use and adoption of digital technologies follow a social trend as a result of the widespread consumption of social networking sites (SNSs), including the use of TikTok, which is classified as using a social networking site. Sharabati et al. (2022) imply that if a medium gains popularity among users, other users will follow suit and begin utilizing it. This has happened to TikTok. Since its founding in September 2016, TikTok has seen widespread distribution and currently represents one of the most successful Chinese social media applications in the world (Montag et al., 2021; Stokel-Walker, 2021). According to Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 186) TikTok was the most downloaded app on Apple and Android worldwide from January to March 2020 and millions of hours were used scrolling the app. Stokel-Walker (2021) believes that a large part of TikTok is engineering its own success by standing out from the crowd and by doing so it could shape how we shop in the future.

Intentions to use social networking sites differentiate among people, but one of the reasons to motivate the usage is obtaining information (Sharabati et al., 2022). On these SNSs, like TikTok, consumers are presented with emotive and engaging content that has been shared by others, including service and product experiences, feelings, and personal lives (Nyrhinen et al., 2024). This type of social media content is thought to have a significant influence and encourages impulsive actions like sharing, liking and commenting the posts not to mention impulsive purchasing (Nyrhinen et al., 2024, pp. 2–3). Previous

research has discovered that this type of content, on these SNSs like TikTok, can play a relevant role in motivating impulse buying behavior and significantly influence users' attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and behavioral intentions in addition to encouraging impulse purchases (Aragoncillo & Orús, 2018; Xiang et al., 2016).

At the beginning of the 21st century Baumeister (2002, p. 670) defined impulse behavior as behavior that is not regulated and that results from an unplanned and spontaneous impulse, while impulse purchasing on the other hand involves getting a sudden urge to buy something. In 2016 Muratore described impulsive purchase as follows: "An impulse purchase is when a consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately" (Muratore, 2016, p. 1166). When entering the 2020's 'effortless' is the word to describe the buying climate. Online and mobile shopping's convenience and automation have made it more and more effortless to make impulsive purchases (Nyrhinen et al., 2024). According to Wang et al. (2020, p. 208) "impulsive buying without careful planning has become a daily occurrence all over the world". Marketing texts frequently classify impulse purchases into a particular category, but decades of research have shown that impulse purchases are not limited nor restricted to any particular product category (Iyer et al., 2020).

Essi Pöyry, a researcher at the Consumer Research Center of the University of Helsinki, believes that TikTok offers, in many ways, a welcoming environment for making impulse purchases (Inget, 2024). Many people have heard the statement "TikTok made me buy it" – and no wonder why. Even though "TikTok made me buy it" is a relatively new phenomenon (Nycz, 2023), an increasing number of people still own products that they first discovered while scrolling TikTok. The Hashtag #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt is a good illustration of how a trend can really catch on and be leveraged for sales. The hashtag doesn't just let users showcase the newest, cool products they purchased after seeing them on the platform but also describes a more general phenomenon: people are more likely to purchase items they witness in use (Nycz, 2023). Users in this community share purchases they have made after seeing content, which encourages others to follow suit. As

of this writing, on October 10th, 2024, there are over 10.2 million videos uploaded on TikTok with the hashtag #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt. On March 28th, 2025, the number of videos is already 16.1 million.

1.1 Research problem

According to Iyer et al. (2020, p. 401), most studies on impulse buying make assumptions about the context rather than examining its effects. Moreover, the context usually refers solely to the product category, shopping environment, or industry. Unfortunately, the research examining impulse buying from consumers' perspectives on SNSs like TikTok is limited, and therefore it is crucial to study why and how social media encourages customers to make impulse purchases. While being a popular research area during the past few decades, a great amount of research has been conducted on consumers impulse buying behavior. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the new conditions of impulse buying and examine the social-relevant features within a social media app that are encouraging consumers to make impulse purchases. Since social media is a novel form of consumption, the elements that encourage consumers to make impulse purchases there, should differ from those that encourage them offline (Yang et al., 2024, p. 699).

Social media gives users the ability to consume at the same time and gives motivated users the ability to act on their new ideas right away, like making an impulse purchase (Yang et al., 2024, p. 699). Already in the beginning of 2000's Luo (2005) claimed that it would be beneficial to investigate impulse purchasing in a social group context. Unfortunately, there is still very limited research on consumers' impulse buying behavior encouraged by social networking sites such as TikTok, despite TikTok occupying space on people's phones for the past few years. Whereas previous research has proven that there is a difference between impulse buying in-store and in an online store (Akram et al., 2018a), social media platforms and more specifically SNSs and social commerce (s-commerce) have been neglected when talking about impulse buying behavior. This view is supported by Huang (2016) who thinks that the literature on s-commerce is incomplete, since it

does not pay much attention to impulse buying behaviors. Ruiz-Mafe et al. (2018, p. 27) believe that “the social dimension of consumption and the group-level antecedents of eWOM communications have been neglected in previous studies on social media”.

A systematic literature review on impulse buying conducted by Redine et al. (2023) gave suggestions regarding the future research directions: they implied a need for investigating impulse buying in both s-commerce and mobile commerce context and using qualitative methods to explore novel factors that lead to impulse buying in the s-commerce context. According to Chung et al. (2017) future studies should focus on factors that persuade consumers’ impulse buying behavior in s-commerce. Also, Montag et al. (2021) believe that the time for researchers is now to focus more research efforts on the study of TikTok in a comprehensive manner. These arguments are all justified by looking at the numbers. The average session duration in minutes with TikTok users is about 5 minutes and 56 seconds – that is each time the user opens the app, proving how engaging TikTok is (SOAX, 2024). This number can be compared to other SNSs: Facebook (03:42), Instagram (02:44), and Snapchat (01:23). Regarding the time spent in hours per platform, TikTok is the top app for monthly usage: people spend about 34 hours on it (SOAX, 2024).

As Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 245) puts it: “TikTok is big. TikTok is here to stay. We need to pay attention to TikTok.” As proved, prior research provides thorough justification for this kind of study and previous studies show that there is a gap in the literature. This gap in the literature is something this current study aims to address. Research in the context of SNSs and s-commerce is limited and hence this research will contribute to enriching the existing research on impulse buying in social settings. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights to companies working on these platforms and further increase understanding of consumers' behavior on social networking sites and s-commerce.

1.2 Aim and objectives of the research

The aim of this thesis is to examine how the use of TikTok encourages consumers to make impulse purchases. The purpose is to find out from the consumer's point of view what aspects of the use of TikTok and TikTok videos encourage such impulse behavior, and which social-relevant features are valued. This study has three objectives.

The first objective is to find out how TikTok is built to attract people on scrolling and how the app works. The first objective is achieved by getting to know the literature of this subject area and examining previous research done in the field. **The second objective** is to understand the impulse buying research done in the field of online environments, more specifically SNSs and s-commerce, and focus on the elements that boost and inspire impulse buying behavior in these social settings. In addition, understand the elements and aspects of impulse buying, as well as the contexts within which it occurs. The second objective is achieved by studying previous research done in the field. **The third objective** is to understand what aspects within the app (e.g. the content, the creators, commercials) influence purchasing habits of consumers and hence encourage them to make impulse purchases. To add, what products consumers buy impulsively when encouraged by TikTok, is of interest. The third objective is achieved through empirical research.

1.3 Research approach

The approach of the study is phenomenological-hermeneutic. This type of study focuses on bringing what is already known to light and examines the phenomenon of experience's meaning (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 35). Phenomenology and hermeneutics can be combined, which is why the term phenomenological-hermeneutic is used. The empirical part of the research is qualitative. Since the study conducted in the field of impulse buying behavior has been mainly quantitative, and the context of social networking sites, such as TikTok, is rather new, a qualitative approach is considered both

reasonable and applicable for this study. Ghauri and Grønhaug (2005, pp. 110–111) support this idea by claiming that qualitative methods are suitable when the research problem focuses on uncovering a person's experience or behavior and there is a need to understand a phenomenon about which little is known.

The data collection method is semi-structured individual interviews and as a method of analysis the thesis uses qualitative content analysis. These guided and semi-structured interviews outline the topics and/or themes in advance but give the interviewer an opportunity to use variation in wording and sequence (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 93). This type of flexibility gives room for discussion from both interviewer's and interviewee's side.

1.4 Delimitations

The focus of this study is on the phenomenon of impulse buying encouraged by videos and creators on TikTok, a Chinese owned social media app developed by ByteDance. In this thesis, no attention has been paid to the health effects of social media use nor taking a stand on data protection issues related to the use of TikTok. This thesis is not a defensive speech nor is it intended to dig up disadvantages of this particular social media app. This thesis purely focuses on the social-relevant features within TikTok, and content of TikTok videos that encourage consumers to make impulse purchases.

The research is done from the consumer's point of view. The interest is on situations where the consumer has made impulse purchases encouraged by TikTok. Therefore, the purpose is not to focus on situations where the consumer would have only considered buying something/had the intention to buy but carried the situation to the end - made an impulse purchase.

1.5 Structure of the research

The structure of the research proceeds in accordance with the objectives set for the research and presented earlier. The second chapter introduces social networking sites and the context of this research, more specifically TikTok as an app. This includes the description of social networking sites and the aims behind using them, in addition to the history and consumption of TikTok. This is followed by topics such as impulse buying and social commerce, including previous research conducted in the field of impulse buying, and the description and properties of s-commerce. The second chapter culminates in an examination of the #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt-phenomenon. After this, the S-O-R framework and the modified version of the model for this research is presented. This should fulfill both the first and second objective set for the work.

The third chapter discusses the methodological choices made and justifications for these choices. In addition, the chapter discusses the acquisition of material and features related to the analysis. Finally, the quality of data will be critically evaluated. The fourth chapter deals with the research results obtained through the analysis of the material and the review of these results. At this point, the aim is to create a clear, high-quality and comprehensive picture to be able to fulfill the third objective set for the research. The fifth chapter summarizes the most important findings and results. In addition, managerial implications will be discussed, and possible limitations and shortcomings of the research that have appeared during the research will be critically considered. As a final point, this study outlines possible directions for future research.

1.6 Key concepts

Social networking sites (SNSs)

Social networking sites (SNSs) are becoming increasingly popular, and people use them for creating personal accounts to connect with others (Sharabati et al., 2022). Meta's Instagram and Facebook, Snap Inc.'s Snapchat, and LinkedIn owned by Microsoft are all

examples of SNSs. Globally SNSs are becoming increasingly common in people's daily lives (Sharabati et al., 2022) and through them people can inspire their friends to see exciting products and promotions they themselves have found online (Ju & Ahn, 2016). Sharabati et al. (2022) believe that social interactions are crucial for knowledge transfer among individuals and therefore SNSs may encourage the creation and exchange of information among people who share similar objectives and attitudes, producing different perspectives and creative ideas in online communities.

Social-commerce (s-commerce)

Already at the beginning of the 2010s Liang et al. (2011) recognized s-commerce as an emerging but important new delivery platform in the e-commerce world and reasoned this emergence with the increased popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook. S-commerce's main characteristic is using social media for a variety of commercial purposes to capitalize on online social capital (Liang et al., 2011, p. 69). S-commerce's greatest benefit is that it raises public awareness: people are more aware of the products that are available and the environmental threats that are present because of the current trends in s-commerce (Akram et al., 2018b, p. 3).

Impulse buying

Baumeister, p. (2002, p. 670) defines impulse purchasing as "getting a sudden urge to buy something, without advance intention or plan, and then acting on that impulse without carefully or thoroughly considering whether the purchase is consistent with one's long-range goals, ideals, resolves, and plans". Studies throughout the years have showed that consumers' impulse buying is triggered by both internal and external factors (Iyer et al., 2020; Redine et al., 2023).

2 Impulse buying on TikTok

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of social media platforms, with a particular focus on TikTok. It examines the platform's history, features, and uses in detail. Furthermore, the chapter introduces the concept of s-commerce, a subgenre of e-commerce as exemplified by TikTok, and analyzes the role of these platforms in fostering impulse buying behavior. The final section of the chapter examines the S-O-R framework and presents a modified version of it.

2.1 Social media and social networking sites: TikTok

Savolainen et al. (2021, p. 1) believe that the challenge of the modern era is not only the growth and development of technology but also the rise of various social media platforms that enable young people to communicate and come across an overwhelming amount of content on the internet. Social media has grown to be a significant source of influence over consumers' purchasing decisions as it becomes more and more integrated into our daily lives (Zhu et al., 2020b) and the current era has seen the exponential growth of social networking sites (SNSs) (Zafar et al., 2021b). The Internet offers a variety of social media platforms, each with unique features and user experiences, but the unifying factor for all of them is the objective of bringing people together (Sharma & Bumb, 2022, p. 95). In 2024 there are over 5 billion social media users and by 2028, that number is projected to hit 6.05 billion worldwide (SOAX, 2024). In 2024 the average daily time spent on SNSs by internet users worldwide in minutes was 143 minutes per day (Dixon, 2024). That accounts for total of 2 hours and 23 minutes on social media every day.

Reinikainen et al. (2020) believe that human interaction and relationship development are the core of social media, but for Sharabati et al. (2022, p. 3) the most crucial role of social media for humanity is to satisfy needs. These SNSs have undoubtedly and significantly changed human interactions, consumer behavior, and consumer lifestyles along with consumption patterns as a result of the rapid growth of Web-based platforms that

support online social behavior (Thoumrungroje, 2018, p. 276; Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014, p. 703). Social media websites give users the ability to access, share, and communicate a variety of information types leading people spending more time by sharing information on SNSs as a result of changing lifestyles (Thoumrungroje, 2018, pp. 278–279).

During recent years a dramatic shift in both users' role and responsibility has happened: users no longer just consume but are also increasingly responsible for producing the information available, making them both producers and users of user-generated content (Flanagin et al., 2014) transforming them from passive users (receiving information) to active generators and distributors of such information. Customers become active users and are encouraged to socialize with other customers as a result of the empowerment they receive from social media (Hajli, 2014; Hajli, 2015). To customers social media gives the ability to express their opinions and have both individual and group influence over brands and other customers (Kim & Johnson, 2016, p. 98). As Flanagin et al. (2014, p. 683) call them, these 'information pools' online have formed because of this user-generated content, enabling versatile users to find and communicate with other users who are different from the people they may usually meet offline. The volume of SNSs is superior and the user interactivity is a great benefit of SNSs compared to the traditional media (Sharabati et al., 2022, p. 3). Marketers, businesses, and celebrities have been drawn to SNSs due to their explosive growth in user numbers (Thoumrungroje, 2018; Zafar et al., 2020) and one of them is TikTok, who Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 11) think could, according to current events caused by the consumption of TikTok, shape how people shop in the future.

TikTok is owned by private Chinese digital company ByteDance, which was founded in March 2012 and worth about \$180 billion (Stokel-Walker, 2021, p. 186). ByteDance became a sensation after it conquered world with its digital properties: first in 2016 when introducing Douyin to the Chinese market and then later also in the United States after acquiring Musical.ly and branding Douyin's international version as TikTok in November 2017 (Stokel-Walker, 2021, p. 80; Yang & Ha, 2021, pp. 297–298). As extremely popular

in the global scale, TikTok and its Chinese equivalent Douyin are the only SNSs in the world that are available in both China and the United States (Yang & Ha, 2021, p. 297).

TikTok is available for both Android and Apple (Montag et al., 2021) and it is made for both sharing and creating short videos (Herrman, 2019, p. 2). The app is highly immersive and full of content, aiming to capture the attention of users as long as possible (Montag et al., 2021; Stokel-Walker, 2021). Opening TikTok results as a customized stream of videos starting to play on one's screen immediately (Montag et al., 2021). According to Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 119) when the TikTok first launched, it was thought to be just lip-syncing and dancing. However, as the user base has diversified, the content has followed, and the users have started to create the content they are consuming (Stokel-Walker, 2021, p. 119). Hence despite the origin of the app being in lip-syncing and comedy it has now grown to other niches such as food, business, fashion, pets, and health (Sharabati et al., 2022, p. 2). According to Sharabati et al., (2022, p. 4) TikTok is progressively used to communicate with customers, while simultaneously variety of factors are affecting TikTok users' satisfaction and continuous intention to use the app. TikTok encourages users to remain on the platform by providing curated content based on user preferences, furthermore, increasing the time spent on the platform (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 275).

TikTok expanded rapidly across the globe in 2019 and has blown away all records in its short life (Stokel-Walker, 2021). Compared to its competitors it took TikTok a shorter period time to reach the 1 billion user mark – only five years (Dellatto, 2021). In 2019 Herrman (2019) believed that TikTok will change the way social media works in the future – even in cases where people are trying to avoid it. In line with Herrman (2019) Montag et al. (2021, p. 1) think that TikTok currently represents one of the most successful Chinese social media applications in the world. Precisely for these reasons, TikTok is the perfect example to look at when talking about a SNS that has taken over the world, spreading trends and influencing people's consumption behavior.

2.1.1 Competition and interconnected features distinguishing TikTok from its competitors

TikTok has cleared market share from its competitors (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 272) and (Stokel-Walker, 2021, p. 18) believes that TikTok's success is largely the result of its ability to stand out from its competitors. Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 89) argues that TikTok had paid attention to its competitors before it was launched and because of the in-depth analysis of competitors, including an intense focus on details, it was able to spread around the world with such high speed. There are multiple factors behind TikTok's success but according to Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 18) the acceleration of technology adoption matched with word spreading faster about the hottest new apps, can partially explain the success.

Inspired by TikTok's success there has been copying in the industry. TikTok's competitors have created short-form video-sharing functions meant to directly compete with TikTok: Instagram launched Instagram Reels and Youtube launched Youtube Shorts (Dellatto, 2021). This cloning is proving TikTok's success (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 271). In contrast to its competitors TikTok does not keep its users only to themselves. Rather than 'gatekeeping' its users to attending discussions on other platforms or posting there, it encourages such behavior. TikTok differentiates from its competitors by (1) encouraging its users to jump from audience to audience and from trend to another (Herrman, 2019, p. 4), and (2) to share their videos on competing platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 275). The idea behind this is that once the video goes viral or starts trending on other platforms, the users return to TikTok, resulting further engagement (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 275).

TikTok's user behavior highlights the value of using the platform's algorithm and producing original, captivating content. Distinctive characteristic of TikTok is providing short-form videos to its users based on its personalized algorithm that has identified user preferences based on their previous viewing and engagement with the content (Hazari et al., 2024, pp. 275–277). In terms of the keys to TikTok's success, Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 89)

and Hazari et al. (2024, p. 273) believe that these two interconnected features distinguish TikTok from its competitors: the length of the videos and the algorithm - the algorithm, which learns users' preferences based on machine learning and curation of big data.

First the videos on TikTok were between 15-to-30 seconds, which according to the app's head of content partnerships, meant that those creating the content needed to be as creative as they can in a short period of time (Stokel-Walker, 2021, p. 90). As of this writing, in November 2024, it is possible to download videos up to 10 minutes. Still, the original video length hits the sweet spot: user is unlikely to get bored quickly when the video lasts 15 to 30 seconds. Instead of getting bored, Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 91) believes that users are constantly curious to find new content – content that captures their attention right away and give them the dopamine boost they have been waiting for and will carry them through to the next video.

TikTok's algorithm works differently compared to its competitors. TikTok keeps constantly learning from the user and over time creates a model based on what one tends to watch and therefore show more of that or similar content (Herrman, 2019, p. 4). According to Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 96) by making such updates and fine-tuning when building a picture of the user, TikTok tries to make sure it serves everyone with high quality videos on a constant loop and tries to prevent the users to ever abandoning it. As Stokel-Walker (2021) says: "once the users are there, they were there" (p. 186). TikTok starts making assumptions of the user during the first seconds after opening the app, right before any information to work with is even given (Herrman, 2019, p. 4). That is how fast TikTok is, and it seems to work. TikTok builds a picture of the user from the second the person opens up the app to see who the user is and what they like. When opening the app for the first time, it will show the user its most popular content and see a person's reaction – whether the video is skipped, rewatched or dwelled on (Stokel-Walker, 2021, p. 95). According to Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 95) every one of those decisions affects the picture that is being created of the user and that picture is constantly

updated: every time a user reopens TikTok, the new videos presented to the user are designed to better match their personal interests. According to Hazari et al. (2024, p. 273) the watch time of each video is considered important in the calculation of recommended videos by TikTok's algorithm: the longer the watch time, the more information is gathered from the user.

Instead of showing the content based on user's 'social graph', the accounts the user follows, TikTok is looking at what user has previously engaged with and shows the content based on a 'content graph' (Stokel-Walker, 2021, p. 8). TikTok's algorithm recommends related content categories and is driven by user interactions: the videos that are liked, commented on, and watched by the users (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 273). On TikTok, when opening the app, the first thing a person sees is not a feed full of content from one's friends, but a page called "For You", which is an algorithmic feed based on videos a person has previously interacted with (Herrman, 2019, pp. 3–4; Montag et al., 2021, p. 2; Yang & Ha, 2021, p. 297). The "For You" -page (FYP) learns via artificial intelligence (AI) what users like, resulting in longer TikTok use than a user had intended (Montag et al., 2021, p. 2; Y. Yang & Ha, 2021, p. 297). TikTok's algorithm pushes videos to the FYP if they show high engagement (likes, shares, comments) hence all videos posted by users have a chance to end up on other users' FYP (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 274). After all, one of the advantages of TikTok's algorithm is that it never runs out of material (Herrman, 2019, pp. 3–4) and as Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 96) describes "TikTok knows the power of its algorithm – and the addictive nature of its endless roll".

2.1.2 Consumption of TikTok

According to Montag et al. (2021) social media companies are aiming to capture the attention of users as long as possible and have done so by creating services that are being highly immersive. Stokel-Walker (2021, p. 90) thinks that TikTok is fine-tuned to hold people's attention for as long as possible before serving up the next video it knows will keep people scrolling. Despite this, the reasons for the consumption of TikTok varies

from communication to learning new skills, and from entertainment to finding new friends. Pöyry believes that TikTok is primarily used for relaxation, as a form of entertainment, and as a source of inspiration and new ideas (Inget, 2024). On TikTok users can either passively view content but also have the opportunity to create content and interact with others. Montag et al. (2021, p. 3) divide the use into two formats: active use and passive use. In active use, the user has a high engagement toward the platform, including actions such as commenting posts and uploading videos. For example, users on TikTok are encouraged to follow along and make similar videos with others – either as memes or trends (Yang & Ha, 2021, p. 297). Passive use on the other hand refers to browsing and simply consuming videos uploaded to TikTok.

For some, TikTok is a platform dedicated to communication. According to Sharabati et al. (2022, p. 14) one of the various reasons motivating the use of social media is to communicate with others. On TikTok people can share information with others, comment on other people's activities along with sending and receiving private messages (Sharabati et al., 2022, p. 6). These 'information pools' as Flanagan et al. (2014, pp. 691–692) call them, are a rich online resource created and maintained by information contributors and their inputs: sharing and looking for information online may enable users to interact with people who may be geographically distant and in different locations, but who may nevertheless have viewpoints that are somewhat similar to theirs. For some, the platform is used to navigate through both positive and negative changes in life. According to Sharabati et al. (2022, p. 15) people tend to use TikTok as a channel to express their emotions, thoughts and sometimes even personal issues they are facing.

Online communities that unite people from all over the world are the result of the migration of real-world social relationships to the virtual world (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014, p. 703). Offline friendships can be expanded to an online setting using SNSs, such as TikTok, and using them can make it easier than ever before to fulfill one's desire to belong (Sharabati et al., 2022, p. 6). For a SNS like TikTok the name itself says it: the social aspect of TikTok is crucial. This means that instead of pure communication, for some,

TikTok plays a role as a platform for forming friendships and nurturing their sense of belonging. The results from Sharabati et al. (2022) revealed that TikTok became a way for people to communicate and create friends online.

Acquiring information and learning new skills can also be the motives behind the consumption of TikTok. These short videos have become a common way for people to learn from others and share artistic skills such as cooking, drawing, and crafting, and are considered as the main content of TikTok and how it works (Sharabati et al., 2022, p. 6). Hence, TikTok and other SNSs are part of reforming the experience of learning new artistic skills – with the help of visually appealing resources and communication characteristics, TikTok enables people to socialize with others who have common interests (Sharabati et al., 2022, p. 6). In addition to inspiring and educational content, TikTok is full of trends and trendsetters. For some, TikTok serves the newest trends on a silver tray and makes sure people know what is ‘trending on TikTok’. As a platform, TikTok has also been described as the “cultural powerhouse” that brings the digital trends into the mainstream of society, especially since some of the most popular trends in whole social media started from TikTok (Gilroy, 2024).

2.2 Impulse buying

Nyrhinen et al. (2024, p. 2) describe impulse buying as “a shopping behavior in which one is unable to control their behavior despite the harm it may cause, such as overspending and indebtedness”. According to Pöyry, impulse buying is characterized by the fact that the product is bought after a very short consideration period (Inget, 2024). Impulse buying is typically perceived negatively because it is an irrational behavior rather than a planned purchase (Chung et al., 2017, p. 710) but has its benefits, such as feeling of satisfaction. Also, Akram et al. (2018b) agree that impulse buying behavior (IBB) is usually considered as negative behavior, because it is an irrational action rather than a planned shopping: the distinctive feature is that impulse buying is considered something that

gives a feeling of satisfaction and enjoyment rather than being a duty or necessity like planned buying.

According to Iyer et al. (2020, p. 401) despite the fact that impulse buying is common in industries with low price levels, they argue that it is not the only relevant industry context, since impulse buying can also occur when product–identity relationships are strong. According to Wang et al. (2022) impulse buying has been studied for decades from various standpoints: (1) focusing on the investigation of the possible consequences of impulse purchase behavior, and (2) focusing on the determinants of impulse buying behavior. In the 21st century, research on impulse buying has been pushed forward by Iyer et al. (2020) and Redine et al. (2023) who both conducted a very comprehensive analysis on impulse buying. Despite the differences in categorizing the factors behind impulse buying, both Iyer et al. (2020) and Redine et al. (2023) have concluded that there are both internal and external factors that are influencing impulse buying. The former are linked to the intrinsic qualities of the consumer, while the latter are unrelated to the consumer (Wang et al., 2022). According to Iyer et al. (2020) this is a good sign, since in the future it might be possible to pinpoint the circumstances that encourage impulse buying in addition to identifying customers who are prone to it. In the discussion of the internal factors influencing impulse buying, same factors are often recognized and mentioned: personal characteristics and traits, self-control, age and gender. Additionally, other characteristics and personal traits are linked to impulse purchases, and previous research has tried to examine their effects as well (Iyer et al., 2020). Many of the factors are interconnected and are influencing simultaneously – not one without the other. For those interested, the writer recommends reading in the topic (see Iyer et al., 2020; Redine et al., 2023).

When discussing the impulse buying research, Huang and Benyoucef (2013) argue that the findings from the traditional environment cannot be generalized in s-commerce settings. Therefore, it is justified not to cover what the previous research has found regarding the factors behind impulse buying, whether in retail setting or online. Nevertheless,

from the integrated conceptual framework for impulse buying by Redine et al. (2023) the antecedents, mediators as well as dependent variables linked to impulse buying research can be seen (see Figure 1).

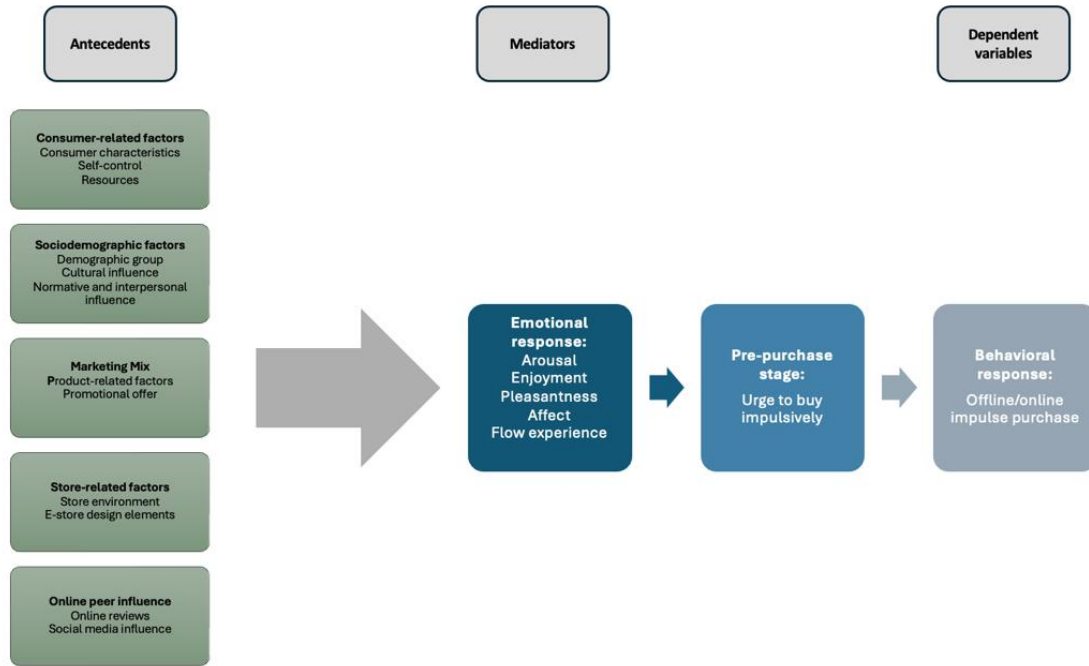


Figure 1. Integrated conceptual framework (Redine et al., 2023, p. 22).

The quick growth of e-commerce has significantly increased consumer initiative in marketing and as a result, research on the factors that influence impulse purchasing has leaned towards the inherent traits of customers, instead of focusing on the external determinants like the early studies primarily did (Wang et al., 2022). Despite this, this study will focus on the external factors, i.e. promotion (incl. buying incentives, targeted advertising, influencer marketing) and eWOM (incl. product reviews and recommendations, peer endorsements, and shared experiences). This delimitation of the subject is very justified when discussing the context of TikTok. For example, Chung et al. (2017, p. 725) believe that future studies should focus on factors that persuade consumers' impulse buying behavior in s-commerce. As Akram et al. (2018b, p. 4) say "emerging marketing trends through social commerce should be seriously considered in studies" and not overlooked.

2.3 S-commerce

Impulse buying has been traditionally divided into two main categories: traditional retailing and online retailing (Redine et al., 2023). Akram et al. (2018b, p. 4) believe that today the access to services and products is better because of online platforms and channels: with the help of information technology, these online platforms and channels are playing a role in encouraging people's impulse buying behavior. According to Redine et al. (2023) because of the popularity online impulse buying gained among researchers, its differences compared to other impulse buying, and the overall emergence of internet and technologies, three sub-domains were identified: e-commerce, s-commerce, and m-commerce. From Figure 2 can be seen the domains in impulse buying research.

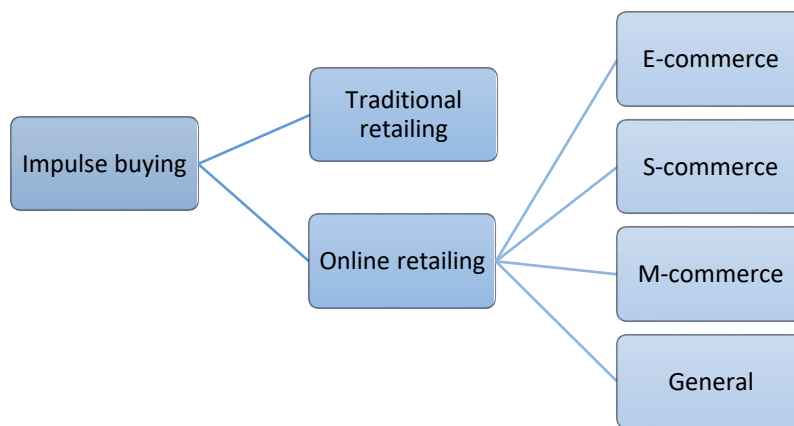


Figure 2. Domains in impulse buying research (Redine et al., 2023, p. 23).

This recent branch of e-commerce called social commerce (Xiang et al., 2016, p. 333) is in the heart of this current study. S-commerce, highlighting the role of technological advancements, is clearing space for itself (Hajli, 2014) and already in 2015, the statistics on s-commerce indicated that it is a phenomenon with great promise (Hajli, 2015). With the goal of integrating Web 2.0 features into e-commerce to create customer-focused businesses, s-commerce is launching new business models centered on online communities (Hajli, 2015). As a relatively new concept, s-commerce serves as a new business model in the e-commerce world and is growing fast with the popularity of social networking services (Ju & Ahn, 2016, p. 285).

S-commerce differentiates from e-commerce in terms of the operators: in s-commerce instead of companies selling their products, individuals are the sellers and are all connected in online social networks (Stephen & Toubia, 2010). Each seller establishes their own store in this marketplace called s-commerce, and network connections between sellers are facilitated by hyperlinks between their stores making s-commerce an online marketplace driven by consumers with a network of individually curated, customized stores (Stephen & Toubia, 2010, p. 216). S-commerce makes it easier for various actors outside the market to exchange operant (nonphysical) resources like information, ideas, and knowledge, which in turn helps the buyer and seller integrate operand (physical) resources like money, and products (Hajli et al., 2017, p. 134).

In their study of s-commerce Huang and Benyoucef (2013) created a s-commerce design model which implies that s-commerce consists of four layers from inner to outer: individual layer (e.g. personal profile and activity), conversation layer (e.g. content creation and information sharing), community layer (e.g. connection and relationship maintenance), and commerce (e.g. social ads and applications). Hajli et al. (2017) commented this model by stating that e-commerce only encompasses the inner layer (individual) and outer layer (commerce), whereas s-commerce takes into account all layers to co-create value among multiple actors. The primary factor that sets s-commerce apart from other types of e-commerce activity is social relationships (Liang et al., 2011). Hajli et al. (2017) differentiate s-commerce from e-commerce by saying that “in social commerce, a network of interactions among actors is the main source of value, while in e-commerce, the facilitation of connections among buyers and sellers is the basis for value co-creation” (p. 134). Akram et al. (2018b, p. 17) state that the differentiating factor between e-commerce and s-commerce lays within their focus: in contrast to e-commerce, which is more focused on products, s-commerce is more focused on customers and sustainability.

In 2016, Ju & Ahn (2016) pointed out that no standard definition of s-commerce exists, at least not yet. Although a year later, Chung et al. (2017) defined s-commerce as “one sort of e-commerce that uses social networks, social media and customer participation

to facilitate the online purchase of services or products” (p. 710). Again, a year later Akram et al. (2018b) described s-commerce as “one kind of e-commerce that uses social media, social networks, and consumer involvement to promote the online shopping of products or services” and by doing so “satisfies the needs and demands of the current consumers” (p. 1). The definitions are essentially comparable, with the distinction lying mainly in the tone and wording.

Chen et al. (2019, p. 236) state that s-commerce has been developed and undergone changes during recent years. With the rapid growth of SNSs both consumers and businesses are paying closer attention to s-commerce (Xiang et al., 2016) and the growth of the economy has been significantly aided by s-commerce (Akram et al., 2018b, p. 3). For example, TikTok Shop is a social media-based marketplace where creators can open their own stores and make money from the goods that their audience purchases (Klass, 2023). Therefore it is important to note that TikTok is categorized among SNSs, as discussed before, as well as s-commerce, just like Instagram. The differentiating factor here is, that TikTok Shop isn't yet available in Finland, unlike Instagram Shop as of this writing in December 2024. Despite this, TikTok in this study is categorized and treated as s-commerce.

2.4 Impulse buying in s-commerce context: TikTok behind impulse buying

Consumer behavior is strongly affected by social media (Xiang et al., 2016) and impulse buying occurs more online (Zhao et al., 2022, p. 1667). The consumption experience has changed as a result of s-commerce: growing evidence shows, in such environment a number of interrelated factors are influencing users to more likely make impulse purchases (Zafar et al., 2021a). Adopting the materialistic values displayed on these social networking sites may lead to impulse purchases (Thoumrungroje, 2018, p. 279). Pöyry believes that the user often does not browse TikTok with purchase intentions, but despite that, or precisely because of it, is in a suitable state of mind for impulse purchases (Inget, 2024). In terms of social networks, Aragoncillo and Orús (2018, p. 61) define the

influence on impulse buying as “impulsiveness of social networks”. Customers who browse social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) can now easily purchase items they had not intended to buy or do not really need thanks to the rapid growth of s-commerce (Thi Phan et al., 2020). TikTok users spend a significant amount of money on unnecessary items that they are unlikely to use: the average American spends about \$109 on impulse purchases in a month, resulting over \$1000 every year (Klass, 2023).

To s-commerce, digital social interaction is central (Pöyry et al., 2013) and empirical testing of s-commerce constructs revealed that consumer behavior is influenced by the social connections and interactions of people on these platforms (Hajli, 2015). On s-commerce websites, customers frequently interact with one another and make impulse purchases (Xu et al., 2020). According to Aragoncillo and Orús (2018, pp. 42–55) social networks have a significant impact on impulse buying and can be effective at motivating impulse buying: participants in their study admitted that social networks like Facebook and Instagram had triggered some impulse buying and they expressed a strong desire to use them to make purchases. The interactive features on social commerce platform (SCP) enable users to communicate with other users and even acquire information from celebrities or experts (Xiang et al., 2016, pp. 334–335) including social media influencers. There is substantial evidence that the interactive aspects of s-commerce encourage people to make impulse purchases (Zafar et al., 2020) and according to Thoumrunroje (2018, p. 279) it is likely that higher intensity in social media engagement leads to higher conspicuous consumption and impulse buying.

The foundation of social media is the idea of utilizing collective intelligence: with the development of s-commerce people can easily access socially available knowledge, hence giving them an opportunity to make accurate and well-informed buying decisions (Akram et al., 2018b, pp. 17–18). On S-commerce or more specifically on SCP the experience of consumers differs from other contexts since on SCP consumers have social interactions with each other (Xiang et al., 2016, p. 335). Social presence in a s-commerce

site have found replicating the presence of consumers in the physical retail environment and making consumers feel like shopping together, indicating higher impulse buying behavior followed by an impulse purchase influenced by social presence of others on s-commerce is possible (Ju & Ahn, 2016, p. 285). For example, on TikTok people can see other users' comments under videos – whether they are hyping a product or speaking negatively about them. Either or, this social presence of others is comparable to what Ju & Ahn (2016) are referring to.

Decades ago, Stern (1962) categorized impulse buying into four distinct types: **pure, reminder, suggestive and planned impulse buying**. According to Xiang et al. (2016, p. 334) and consistent with Stern's (1962) definition, most of users' buying behavior on s-commerce platforms can be seen as impulse buying behavior. The common link between the four distinct types identified by Stern (1962) is the unplanned nature of the behavior itself, meaning that the product or a service is bought on the spot.

'A pure impulse purchase' is a purchase that breaks a normal buying pattern (Parboteeah et al., 2009, p. 61). Pointless browsing of SNS, followed by a purchase decision based on bundle offers and top contextual reviews, are the features describing pure impulse purchases (Zafar et al., 2021b, p. 947). On s-commerce platform (SCP) suitable example of **a pure impulse buying** would be situation where browsing images or videos without an intention to buy leads to a purchase. The simple browsing of TikTok's FYP (For You – page) that primarily provide information about joined communities allows users to come across several digital celebrities' posts that may incite them to buy spontaneously, which can be considered pure impulse buying (Zafar et al., 2020).

There is a fine line between a reminder and suggestive impulse buying, and the two can easily overlap. In terms of **a reminder purchase** a person is reminded of the need to buy a product when seeing it (Parboteeah et al., 2009, p. 61). When users are reminded of a shortcoming through advertisement recall or prior experience while viewing any post, comment, or image of digital celebrities and their communities, this is referred to as **a**

reminder impulse buying (Zafar et al., 2020; Zafar et al., 2021b). Instead, any shopping that occurs as a result of the system's, celebrities'/influencers', or their communities' recommendations and causes users to visualize a need is considered a **suggestive impulse buying** (Parboteeah et al., 2009, p. 61; Zafar et al., 2020; Zafar et al., 2021b). This applies to a situation where a consumer purchases a product based on the recommendations of a SCP.

When searching for a product on social networking site and/or s-commerce using a pre-determined shopping list, users who purchase additional products based on promotions shared by digital celebrities (e.g. influencers) and their communities are considered planned impulse buyers (Zafar et al., 2020; Zafar et al., 2021b). **Planned impulse buying** occurs when the purchase is made based on coupons and promotions while scrolling SCP (Xiang et al., 2016, p. 334). Here a buyer is taking an advantage of sales promotions and doesn't necessarily search for a product but happens to encounter it by chance (Parboteeah et al., 2009, p. 61).

However, according to Zafar et al. (2021b) determining actual impulse buying is quite complex. As in impulse buying in general, the antecedents discovered by previous research (Iyer et al., 2020; Redine et al., 2023) vary from internal factors to external ones, as previously discussed in Chapter 2.2. In terms of impulse buying on s-commerce and SNSs, like TikTok, the focus here in this study is on (1) promotion; buying incentives, targeted advertising, and influencers & influencer marketing; and (2) eWOM; peer endorsements, product recommendations and reviews, shared experiences, and rather new phenomenon called # TikTokMadeMeBuyIt. Figure 3. outlines the chapter structure that will be covered next.

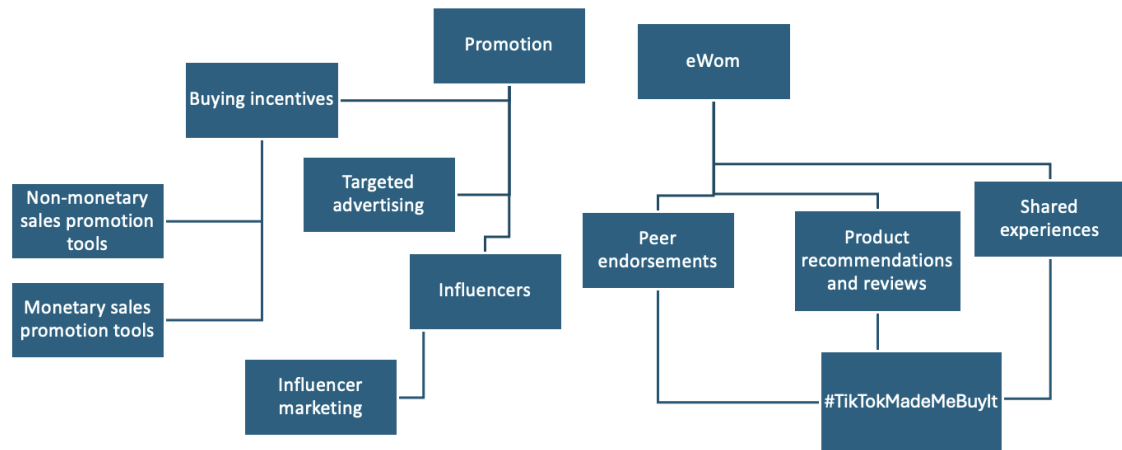


Figure 3. Social-relevant features.

As this study focuses on social-relevant features, it is important to note that promotion itself is not a core socially relevant feature. Nevertheless, the way it is done on TikTok can make it socially relevant and hence extremely important aspect of this study. On social platforms such as TikTok, social interaction and promotional content usually blends, and this is why promotion, including buying incentives, targeted advertising and influencer marketing are areas of interest. This study considers promotion as potential social-relevant feature, in situations where it is delivered through socially embedded mechanisms on TikTok. Some promotional elements, such as influencer marketing, are inherently social but others such as buying incentives and targeted advertising may take a social relevance depending on how they are shared, personalized, and/or engaged in TikTok's environment. Influencer marketing is placed under promotion, because it is categorized as an activity where a brand pays an influencer to promote a product and/or a service (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Hence, seen as a paid marketing strategy, where a brand controls the message being sent out. Nevertheless, it is important to note that influencer content can sometimes blur the lines between unpaid (e.g. eWOM) and paid (e.g. influencer marketing) content.

2.4.1 Promotion: Buying Incentives and Targeted Advertising

The commercialization of social media is resulting from social media influencers and peers sharing more personalized content than ever before, which in turn enhances unplanned buying (Aragoncillo & Orús, 2018; Kim & Johnson, 2016; Xiang et al., 2016). Due to the characteristics and speed of social media, consumers are expected to react more spontaneously to commercial stimuli which frequently results in impulse buying (Nyrhinen et al., 2024, p. 4). Everyone has made impulse purchases in the past; however, people are more prone to make impulse, needless purchases when there are frequent sales and coupons at hand (Klass, 2023). These **buying incentives**, more specifically **sales promotion tools**, such as discounted prices and promotional offers, have positive effects on impulse buying behavior (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Park et al., 2012; Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2011). In this study the term buying incentives is used to describe both monetary (e.g. discounts and discount codes, flash sales, BOGO (Buy One Get One Free), limited-time price reductions) and non-monetary (e.g., free gifts and samples, giveaways) sales promotion tools. Iyer et al. (2020, p. 385) recognizes that some previous studies have focused on the role of marketing drivers and have highlighted the role of store and shelf placements, attractive displays, and in-store promotions as factors driving impulse buying. According to this view, impulse buying can be influenced by external factors (Iyer et al., 2020, p. 385).

As previously discussed, the TikTok's FYP is never full of people one knows, instead it is full of things that a person seems to have demonstrated they want to watch, no matter what they say they prefer watching (Herrman, 2019, pp. 3–4). Klass (2023) describes FYP as “a page temptation”, where every other video is an ad for an item that happens to be on sale and all these different kinds of ads are for unnecessary products. According to Pöyry, social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram can lead to making impulse purchases especially because they are able to offer their users precisely targeted content (Inget, 2024). Dodoo and Wu (2019) believe that since social media offers people a distinctive platform designated for personal advertising, one of the societal challenges within these online environments is the allure and ease of impulse buying.

Promoting cheap items on TikTok is causing people to buy things they do not really need (Klass, 2023). As previously discussed in Chapter 2.1.1 the TikTok's algorithm knows how to target consumers with personalized content – not to mention **personalized advertisements** from brands. This information is called 'serendipity information' and it appears when the information is related to consumer's interests and they are exposed to it by coincidence (Akram et al., 2018b, p. 5). Consumers may perceive such advertisements as more relevant to them because they match their personalities (Dodoo & Wu, 2019). Customers are more likely to make impulse online purchases when they receive serendipitous information in a s-commerce setting (Akram et al., 2018b, p. 17). Therefore, videos recommended by TikTok's algorithm have a high probability of containing products that users are genuinely interested in. Seeing those low prices makes people believe there is an actual need not to mention seeing one's favorite influencers promoting affordable products, which makes people want to buy them even more (Klass, 2023).

TikTok has many benefits as an advertising and marketing platform. Businesses have recognized the potential TikTok has as a marketing platform and for marketing purposes: TikTok has the highest social media engagement rates per post and consumer spending was \$2.3 billion in 2021 (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 271). According to Yang and Ha (2021, p. 298) investigating on TikTok is essential from an advertising standpoint due to its potential for eWOM advertising and information dissemination, as well as its value in reaching a diverse range of audiences. TikTok gives businesses a variety of options and formats for displaying advertisements to its users: the ads can be designed to promote a new product launch, direct sales to existing customers, drive traffic to external websites, or raise brand awareness (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 271).

2.4.2 Promotion: Influencers and Influencer Marketing

The representation of brands in this new environment, where online reviews and eWOM are more significant than ever, presents a challenge for advertising agencies (Childers et

al., 2019, p. 258). Marketers have been using well-known, influential brand ambassadors to target particular audiences for decades, i.e. infomercials and the Home Shopping Network, which are great examples from the early days of influencer marketing (Childers et al., 2019, p. 260). New categories of celebrities have emerged as a result of the widespread use of social media, including social media influencers and Instagram celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). These **social media influencers** (SMIs) on SNSs are crucial to marketing these days because of the influence they have on consumers: they introduce their audience to new products (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p. 1). SMIs initiate trends, leading to the 'bandwagon effect' allowing the widespread reach of a message among followers (Sharma & Bumb, 2022, p. 100). This so-called **influencer marketing**, where brands and influencers collaborate with each other to promote brand's products, offers previously unattainable consumers brand engagement and connectivity through digital and social media platforms (Childers et al., 2019, p. 258).

Hazari et al. (2024, p. 273) describe social media influencers as "users on social media platforms who have a large following of other users and bring credibility to the content shown in their videos". TikTok influencers have a great impact on consumer trends and their endorsement or creative use of a product can cause it to go viral, increasing consumer interest and revenue. TikTok contains a lot of content created by social media influencers, which arouses the desire to buy particularly effectively - whether it is an advertisement or a genuine recommendation from one consumer to another (Inget, 2024). In terms of endorsers, it is believed that the familiarity and similarity are the key features that matter the most: the use of endorsers who are thought to share characteristics with the consumer, may improve the effectiveness of advertising (Munnukka et al., 2016, p. 184). According to Pöyry, the fact that the recommendation comes as if from a friend or at least from someone you can identify with or whose taste and recommendations you trust, is all part of "the power of influencers" (Inget, 2024).

Although paid endorsers have long been used in traditional advertising, sponsored influencer posts on social media platforms that seamlessly integrate with unpaid content are

relatively new phenomenon (Childers et al., 2019, p. 260). These days, businesses are promoting their brands and products through more digital communication, making influencer marketing and social media an inevitable part of marketing strategy development (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p. 7). Brands are increasingly using SMIs to attract consumers' attention and to earn their trust (Reinikainen et al., 2020, p. 279). Influencer marketing campaigns highlight the value of WOM in the decision-making process for both consumers and advertisers (Childers et al., 2019, p. 259). In recent years, both professionals and scholars have been interested in the beneficial effects of influencer marketing (Reinikainen et al., 2020, p. 280) and despite the variety of advertising options marketers have on TikTok, the popular method is to use TikTok brand influencers (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 271).

Brand influencers are a subset of social media influencers who collaborate with brands to promote their products or services and are often used in different types of promotions in various product categories (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 273). The main roles of a brand influencer on TikTok are (1) to help to develop a community around a brand, (2) help brands to reach the engagement they are aiming to achieve (likes, comments, shares), (3) extend the reach of the content, and (4) grow follower base by developing loyalty in TikTok followers (Hazari et al., 2024, p. 273). According to Hazari et al. (2024, pp. 273–277) users are used to seeing brand influencers promote products on TikTok and their advertising messages are in most cases presented as a form of entertainment to help users better connect with the brand. The favorable perceptions of SMIs allow influencers to have an impact on followers' choices: when shaping the attitudes, views and behaviors of their followers and considered as the experts of their own fields, they can even influence followers' purchase decisions (Sharma & Bumb, 2022, p. 105).

By using consumers' trust relationship with the SMIs and combining it with a huge following on one or more social networks, this influencer marketing gives the brands an opportunity to reach different audiences online and target more niche groups (Childers et al., 2019, p. 261). Study by Hazari et al. (2024, p. 283) showed that brand influencers

can influence conversion of TikTok users who are familiar with a product: the user will either have a desire to learn more about the product or be convinced to buy the product. The majority of participants in Djafarova and Bowes (2021) stated that they had bought a previously unknown item solely because of the recommendations coming from a celebrity whom they trusted on Instagram. Reinikainen et al. (2020, pp. 290–291) imply that distrust and trust may transfer in different ways: while mistrust of an influencer may not always have the same impact, trust in the influencer can lead to trust in the brands that the influencer promotes.

Depending on the influencers, audiences, brands, and social media platforms, influence encompasses dynamic and pervasive processes that keep emerging and changing (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p. 8). By following influencers' social media posts and subscribing to their content, users of SNSs can establish 'a relationship' with influencers, hence making the audience feel there is a connection between them and the influencer (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p. 8). Online personalities, influencers, and content producers can connect with audiences and broadcast themselves on more recent social media platforms, like TikTok, and as the followers start to develop the intimate internal relationship with the influencers, they may eventually take the opinions of influencers very seriously (Yang & Ha, 2021, pp. 299–302). According to Chung and Cho (2017) SNSs are ideal for fostering **parasocial connections**, and when discussing the influence influencers have on consumers, it is important to note the role of parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationship (PSR) that consumers develop. Although parasociality has been a prominent focus in impulse buying research, in terms of both PSI (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Xiang et al., 2016) and PSR (Masuda et al., 2022; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Yang & Ha, 2021; Zafar et al., 2020), it is not central to the present study. Interested readers may refer to prior work for additional context (see, e.g., Chung & Cho, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

2.4.3 eWOM

In the age of s-commerce, people provide a supportive online environment by sharing their knowledge, experiences, and information about goods and services with their peers (Hajli, 2014). According to Aragoncillo and Orús (2018), social media has a significant impact on people's behavior due to the diverse experiences (e.g. product presentation, evaluation and endorsement) they share through social media networks. In the context of purchasing Savolainen et al. (2021, p. 2) refer to these experiences as social encounters that contribute to the development of subjective norms, which in return influence one's purchasing choices. As a result, users' impulse buying can be stimulated when sharing their product related experiences in addition to offering recommendations to others (Xiang et al., 2016). This electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has become a universal and powerful source of product information with the rise of online social media and SNSs (Thoumrungroje, 2014, p. 9). What used to be traditional word of mouth (WOM) has now turned to eWOM on these SNSs, including product recommendations and reviews from peer to peer regarding products and services. The discussions that SNSs facilitate through eWOM communication, whether it's comments or reviews, may influence people's opinions or purchase behaviors toward the reviewed products (Yang & Ha, 2021, p. 298), creating a new environment where eWOM and online reviews are more important than ever before (Childers et al., 2019, p. 258).

According to Liang et al. (2011, p. 69) social media users are encouraged to share product information with their peers, and they may also reach out to their social community to ask for advice in their purchasing decisions. According to Hajli (2015) ratings, recommendations, and reviews are among the crucial elements that influence the s-commerce: for the benefit of other prospective buyers, these evaluations and ratings provide thorough product information. Social media platforms can influence consumers to make unplanned purchases through personalized content shared by peers (Aragoncillo & Orús, 2018; Kim & Johnson, 2016; Xiang et al., 2016) and the personal experiences and contentment with the promoted product are what make these "peer endorsers" effective at communicating their expertise (Munnukka et al., 2016, p. 184). SNSs have made it

possible for consumers to communicate instantly and directly with peers, family, and marketers, resulting customers being more involved and vulnerable to social network influences because of these technological advancements (Thoumrungroje, 2018, p. 276). According to Chen et al. (2019, p. 236) consumers have increasing opportunities to access product recommendations because of s-commerce and evidence shows that these recommendations may lead to impulse buying. Hence users on these SCPs may be easily influenced by other users and participate on impulse buying (Xiang et al., 2016, p. 335). Yet, according to Chen et al. (2019, p. 239) online impulse buying literature implies that trust is more important than risk – this is linked to individuals who read product recommendations, from what they believe are credible sources, being easily persuaded to buy the product. Sometimes the recommendations can still be rather positive and polished, when people are avoiding posting negatively about the brands in question. In fact, some of the respondents in Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) stated that if they were unhappy with a purchase or did not recommend it, they were likely to tell their friends and family members in person, instead of putting it out on social media.

As previously discussed, on TikTok everyone has an opportunity to not just create their own videos but also react, share their opinions, comment and recommend products. On TikTok users can make video ‘testimonials’ about the products they have purchased (Yang & Ha, 2021, p. 297) and many customers read and watch these recommendations and incorporate them into their search processes (Hajli et al., 2017, p. 135). Previous studies (Aragoncillo & Orús, 2018; Xiang et al., 2016) have showed that this shared content strongly affect users’ beliefs, emotions, attitudes and behavioral intentions not to mention stimulate impulse buying. Nyrhinen et al. (2024, p. 2) believe that product recommendations spreading through social media networks, are promoting the formation of subjective norms. Buying something based on a provided recommendation without a prior shopping objective is considered an impulse purchase (Parboteeah et al., 2009, p. 61). Hence in line with this definition from Parboteeah and colleagues (2009) a purchase made based on a recommendation coming from someone on TikTok is considered an impulse purchase, when there is no prior shopping goal.

“TikTok made me buy it” is a sentence many have heard and seen used as a hashtag on TikTok (Inget, 2024; Nycz, 2023). Despite **#TikTokMadeMeBuyIt** being a relatively new phenomenon, an increasing number of people have bought and currently own products that they first discovered while scrolling TikTok. This user community shares purchases made as a result of content they have seen, which in turn influences others to do the same. The hashtag lets users show their newest products but also is a great example of a situation where people purchase items, they have witnessed in use (Nycz, 2023). According to Pöyry the audiovisual contents offered by TikTok make people want to buy especially visually pleasing products that are linked to appearance, such as clothes and cosmetics (Inget, 2024). Trends like **#TikTokMadeMeBuyIt** are a great example of platform’s impact on purchasing decisions and driving sales of trending products. Forbes (Loper, 2023) for example, listed 17 **#TikTokMadeMeBuyIt** trending products from TikTok, tested them and wrote reviews on whether they are actually worth the hype. These 17 products were from various categories such as kitchen & home, health & fitness, beauty, and fashion proving that any product can explode in popularity with the help of TikTok.

TikTok also has its share in the marketing utilized by physical stores: marketing these days does not rely solely on the product features. In terms of books, for example, the plot or the writer are no longer the main attraction, rather how well reading communities on TikTok have received the book. One of the famous subcategories of TikTok is called BookTok: people are posting videos about the books they find either intriguing or boring and the reviews can have a major impact not just the sales of the books but how they are placed in physical retail stores. The image 1 is a writer’s own evidence from a local bookstore to demonstrate how they promoted books and leveraged “TikTok trending products” for sales around Christmas 2024 in Southwestern Finland (see Appendix 1). For example, similar to BookTok, are CookTok (cooking and recipes), FitTok (training and workout tips), TravelTok (travel hacks and adventures), and BeautyTok (make-up and skincare).

2.5 Stimulus-Organism-Response Framework

In the early years of environmental psychology, Mehrabian and Russell (1974) proposed the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model and it has since been applied in numerous studies to analyze impulse purchasing patterns (Chen & Yao, 2018). The S-O-R framework is an extension of the stimulus-response (S-R) model, which describes an individual's direct response to a stimulus (Chan et al., 2017; Zafar et al., 2020). According to Kim and Johnson (2016) and Chan et al. (2017) S-O-R model is often applied in consumer behavior research, and it has traditionally provided the foundation for consumer behavior studies. With the rise of online shopping, the S-O-R model has emerged as the most widely used basis for researching online impulse buying (Chen & Yao, 2018).

According to Kim and Johnson (2016, p. 99) the S-O-R model has been used in consumer research to better understand consumer responses to different consumption contexts, and, for example, previous research has successfully applied the S-O-R framework to an online shopping context. When examining consumer behavior, the S-O-R model aids in distinguishing between environmental cues and the internal and external behaviors of consumers (Chen & Yao, 2018, p. 1250). Chan et al. (2017) by doing a systematic review of studies of online impulse buying found that the S-O-R framework was the most commonly used theoretical foundation in online impulse buying studies. From the articles that Redine et al. (2023) covered, S-O-R framework was the most used theory in impulse buying research. Supported by the aforementioned reasons, the S-O-R framework was chosen to be used as the theoretical approach in this study on impulse buying.

2.5.1 Components of S-O-R and framework's application in previous studies

The S-O-R model is used as a structure to illustrate how external influences affect consumers (S), internal processes (O), and behaviors (R) (Kim & Johnson, 2016, p. 99). According to Zhu et al. (2020a, p. 1961) "the core idea of S-O-R model is that the atmosphere created by the physical environment affects the state of the organism followed by

its decisions and behaviours". Chan et al. (2017) describe how the S-O-R framework functions as follows: "the framework postulates that stimulating cues (stimuli) perceived from the environment trigger one's internal evaluation (organism), which subsequently leads to an approach-and-avoidance behavior (response)" (p. 207). The framework consists of three major elements; (S) the environment or stimulus – a trigger that arouses consumers and sets off consumer behaviors and reactions; (O) organism – consumers internal evaluation; and (R) response – a subsequent behavior, an outcome of consumers' reactions toward the online impulse-buying stimuli and their internal evaluations (Ampadu et al., 2022; Chan et al., 2017; Chen & Yao, 2018). The goal of this model is to incorporate individual responses to explain how people perceive and feel about external stimuli, as well as the resulting positive or negative behaviors (Chen & Yao, 2018, p. 1250).

According to Zafar et al. (2020, p. 1734) "a stimulus is something that provokes individuals' actions". In the S-O-R model, **the stimulus** (S) "refers to a large number of factors that can trigger or affect the organism's state" (Zhu et al., 2020a, p. 1961). Previous studies on s-commerce platforms have identified several technological and social factors that s-commerce contains and are considered as a stimulus in s-commerce environment; product and service review quality and recommendations; visual appeal; social presence of others and parasocial relationships (Parboteeah et al., 2009; Xiang et al., 2016). There are two types of stimuli; external, including website stimuli, marketing stimuli and situational stimuli; and internal, including consumer characteristics (Chan et al., 2017). According to Parboteeah et al. (2009, p. 61) the stimulus can refer either to an actual product or the extrinsic attributes of the product, such as the shopping environment and other buyers. In this study about TikTok **the stimuli** refer to eWOM (e.g. recommendations coming from peers) and promotion, i.e. buying incentives, targeted advertising, and influencers and influencer marketing.

The 'O' in the S-O-R model refers to **the organism**: this is the internal process that an individual responds to the stimuli with (Zafar et al., 2020, p. 1374). Chan et al. (2017) refer to organism as consumers' internal evaluations, which can be either cognitive, also

known as the mental processes, or affective, also known as the emotional responses. As possible cognitive reactions Bagozzi (1986) listed perceived risk, dissonance and expectations. Throughout the years the list of possible cognitive responses has varied from Mehrabian and Russell (1974) categorizing pleasure and arousal as the emotional reactions, Bagozzi (1986) complementing the category by adding fear and liking, and later Chan et al. (2017) founding that enjoyment, impulsiveness, pleasure and arousal were the most frequently researched affective reactions associated with online impulse buying (OIB) responses. Nevertheless, research has proved that an organism (O) can be almost anything, depending on the object of the study; brand attitude and product attractiveness (Zhu et al., 2020b); impulse buying tendency (Zafar et al., 2021b) or urge to purchase (Leong et al., 2018); perceived information quality (Kim & Johnson, 2016); parasocial interaction (Xiang et al., 2016); curiosity, concentration and autotelic experience (Zhu et al., 2020a); or shopping enjoyment (Hashmi et al., 2020). Most used affective, so-called emotional responses are pleasure and arousal (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Hashmi et al., 2020; Kim & Johnson, 2016; Shen & Khalifa, 2012).

A consumer's response to organisms and stimuli that encourage impulse online purchases is known as **a response** (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Rook (1987) sees the response (R) having two possible options: either having the urge to buy or making an impulse purchase. By going through number of studies to conduct a systematic review of studies of online impulse buying, Chan et al. (2017) found that 'the urge to buy impulsively' and 'an online impulse buying' were the two most commonly cited response variables in studies which applied S-O-R framework. In previous research either the urge to buy impulsively is examined as the only individual response (Lin & Lo, 2016; Parboteeah et al., 2009; Xiang et al., 2016) or the focus has been the actual impulse buying or impulse purchases (Leong et al., 2018; Vazquez et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020a).

From the literature perspective, the S-O-R model is one of the most adopted frameworks when it comes to consumer behavior and impulse buying (Anindito & Handarkho, 2022; Chan et al., 2017; Redine et al., 2023). The model has been used in many consumer

behavior and impulse buying research and it has been applied to both qualitative and quantitative studies. S-O-R framework can also be used together with other theories; for example, with social capital theory and flow theory (Huang, 2016); or with dual systems theory (Xu et al., 2020). Unfortunately, in terms of qualitative studies, the use has been limited with the exception of Djafarova and Bowes (2021), who applied the model when studying gender differences in relation to impulse purchasing behavior in the context of Instagram. In terms of quantitative studies, there are many examples of studies using S-O-R model; store atmospherics and impulse buying behavior (Hashmi et al., 2020); brand perception, attractiveness of the product, and impulse to buy (Zhu et al., 2020b); mobile auctions and impulse buying behaviors (Chen & Yao, 2018).

One of the groundbreaking studies on the field was Parboteeah et al. (2009) who applied S-O-R framework to their research on the influence of web features. Later in studies, the model has been applied to e-commerce (Floh & Madlberger, 2013), s-commerce (Huang, 2016; Sihombing et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020; Zafar et al., 2021b; Zhu et al., 2020b), and in the context of social networking sites (Leong et al., 2018; Zafar et al., 2020). Here categorization is challenging, as Facebook and Instagram are not only classified as social networking sites but also fall under the category of s-commerce. This classification follows the terminology used by the researchers in their studies. The study by Zafar et al. (2021b) was one of the first to use the S-O-R framework in s-commerce to support integrated marketing and social factors, and their findings highlight the importance of these factors on impulse buying on SNS. Before Zafar et al. (2021b) literature primarily focused on general web features and parasocial interaction (Xiang et al., 2016).

As previous studies have proved, S-O-R framework does fit as the foundation to both qualitative and quantitative studies. From research point of view, its main benefit has been its flexibility. While previous studies offer valuable insights, they are not without limitations. Notably, certain recurring themes (e.g. influence of social media personalities and peer endorsements, parasocial relationships, product recommendations, and the role of s-commerce) have captured the attention of scholars in the context of impulse

buying. In addition, Instagram has gathered attention as the interest of impulse buying research on s-commerce (Sihombing et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020b), while TikTok remains largely underexplored. The shortcomings of previous studies emphasize not only the need for such focus, but also the functionality of the S-O-R model. Next, the S-O-R model of this study, which draws on both the findings of previous research and the gaps identified within them, is presented.

2.5.2 Modified S-O-R Model for the current study

According to Huang (2016) the circumstances on social networking sites are ideal for stimuli, because they not only cover the commerce but also both personal and social influence. Previous studies in s-commerce have been conducted, but their focus has been on parasocial interaction, online reviews and product recommendations (Chen et al., 2019; Xiang et al., 2016). Previous studies have used S-O-R model in regard of different s-commerce sites: Instagram (Sihombing et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020b), and Facebook (Zafar et al., 2020), but not TikTok, as this current study does. According to Huang (2016) both social interactions and content act as an important stimulus on SNS. Reflecting on the study that Parboteeah et al. (2009) conducted, Xiang et al. (2016) believe that the social relationship aspect in context of s-commerce platforms should be highlighted in the S-O-R modelling. Hence, in this current study the external factors are referred to as social-relevant features (S), as in Xiang et al. (2016): the features related to the enhancement of interpersonal interaction and attraction among users in a SCP and are incorporated into the current research study as external stimuli that affect the process of users' impulse buying behavior.

As previously mentioned, the modified version of the S-O-R model is based on the previous research, but also on the research gaps identified by previous studies. For example, Zhu et al. (2020b) state, they only studied celebrity endorsement in s-commerce, leaving other types of s-commerce (e.g. community or friends' recommendations, direct business promotions) unexplored, still thinking these would be interesting research areas to

investigate in s-commerce. Therefore, this current study aims to be more comprehensive and take these aspects into consideration. The S-O-R framework was selected for this current study because the constructs included and the relationships among them illustrate the core interests of this research. The S-O-R model for this study is a modification from the revised Stimulus-Organism-Response model (adapted from Mehrabian & Russell (1974)) that Djafarova and Bowes (2021) introduced on their study in Instagram. The model has been adapted from several sources (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Xiang et al., 2016) and is now modified to better fit the aim of this current study. Figure 4. represents the modified S-O-R model for this study based on literature.

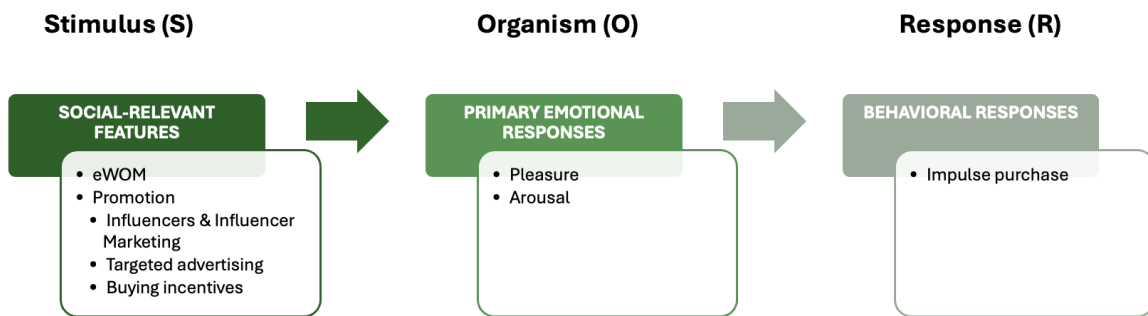


Figure 4. Modified S-O-R model (adapted from Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Xiang et al., 2016).

In this current study eWOM and promotion act as a stimulus (S) in evoking positive emotions (e.g. pleasure, arousal) (O), which in turn trigger impulse buying (R) on TikTok. As noted by Rook (1987), the response (R) can take two forms, which Chan et al. (2017) identified as the most commonly cited response variables in S-O-R framework studies: ‘urge to buy’ and ‘impulse buying.’ Previous research has often relied on either of these as the sole behavioral response and therefore, it is appropriate to apply the S-O-R model with a single response. In this study, impulse buying behavior is selected, consistent with the approach of Djafarova & Bowes (2021).

3 Methodology

This chapter will first outline the research method, followed by a discussion of the data collection method, i.e. interviews (incl. sampling technique). Respondents' representation and interview guide are presented before moving to data analysis procedures. The considerations regarding the quality of the data will also be addressed.

3.1 Research method

This chapter introduces the research method selected for this current study and the reasons for the chosen method. The selection was guided by the idea of fulfilling the three aims set for the study. The approach of the study is phenomenological-hermeneutic. The term interpretivism is often used for hermeneutics, referring to the necessary condition of interpretation and understanding as part of the research process (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 21). Despite the majority of the studies in this research context, i.e. impulse buying, being quantitative, this current study chooses a qualitative approach. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015, p. 5) justify the use of qualitative methods in such cases where the research aims to provide a better understanding on some issues which have remained unclear in quantitative studies. They also claim that qualitative methods have been used in business studies as the first phase of studying, followed and complemented by a quantitative study.

According to Alasuutari (2011, p. 83) one of the main characteristics of qualitative studies is to turn and look at the phenomenon from many angles. As Ghauri & Grønhaug (2005, pp. 110–111) explain, qualitative methods are suitable when the research problem focuses on uncovering a person's experience or behavior and there is a need to understand a phenomenon about which little is known. Hence, the emphasis is on understanding and the focus is on the respondent's point of view. This study focuses on gaining understanding on consumers' views and is examining the impulse buying from consumer's point of view. Taking into consideration the objectives this study aims to

fulfill and the fact that the study aims to discover something previously unknown from the consumers' point of view, it is justified to choose such an approach.

As previously discussed, the studies conducted in the field of impulse buying behavior has been mainly quantitative and the context of SNSs and s-commerce such as TikTok is rather new, it is both reasonable and applicable to choose a qualitative approach for this study. In situations where something has remained unclear or the results have been incomplete, Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015, p. 5) support choosing qualitative methods to provide a better understanding. In previous quantitative studies some aspects, such as the influence of eWOM and targeted advertising, have remained unclear and therefore conducting a qualitative study instead is supported. Moreover, in line with the modified theoretical framework for this research (see Figure 4.), it is evident that the social-relevant features evoke consumers' internal emotional reactions and might cause impulse buying.

3.2 Data collection: Interviews

In all simplicity, when wanting to know what someone thinks or why they act the way they do, they should be asked about it (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 84). Therefore, it is appropriate to select **interview as the data collection method** of this study to gain access to that information. One of the advantages of the interview is that people who have experience in the phenomenon under investigation or knowledge of the subject can be selected for the interview (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 86). In this case, it was important to select people with the knowledge and personal experience (e.g. know what TikTok is and have made impulse purchase under the influence coming from the platform). According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015, p. 304) other than the number of interviews conducted, more important for good-quality research are (1) the materials obtained from the interviews, (2) the quality of the interviews, and (3) the logic behind the decision to select specific interviewees or cases. The selection process of the qualitative data collection method was led by Ghauri & Grønhaug (2005) who argue that interviews are

often considered as the best data collection method. Semi-structured interviews differ from both structured and unstructured interviews but were selected for this study for couple of reasons: **participant's point of view, flexibility, and freedom.**

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) emotionalists, also known as subjectivists, interview studies view interviews as a means of gaining insight into participants real-life experiences. In this case, how consumers experience and see TikTok encouraging impulse buying behavior. In these types of interviews, the interview questions focus on people's (1) perceptions, (2) viewpoints, and (3) emotions, hence being a useful tool for exploring the research subject from the **participant's point of view** (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 92-95).

Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, p. 85) name **flexibility** as the interview's most significant advantage: the interviewer can repeat the question, correct misunderstandings, clarify the wording of expressions, and have a conversation with the interviewee. In a guided and semi-structured interview, the topics are predetermined in addition to sample sizes, people to be interviewed and what questions will be asked (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005). When the topic and/or themes are outlined in advance, it gives the interviewer an opportunity to use variation in wording and sequence, meaning that the interviewer pre-designs the interview but the interviews vary (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, pp. 93–95). Part of flexibility is the option to ask the questions in the order the researcher deems appropriate and change the order of the questions accordingly, even ask the questions in different order in each interview (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The variation in sequence and wording allows the use of both 'what' and 'how' questions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 93).

The qualitative research interview can be considered flexible also because the interview is not understood as a quiz (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 85). The respondents are given an opportunity to discuss and elaborate their answers instead of picking from ready-

made or predetermined answers (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). This way, in contrast to structured interviews, the respondents are allowed to more **freedom** in terms of what they want to talk about and how (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 95).

3.2.1 Sampling strategy and respondents' representation

The target population for this research are Finnish consumers, who have made impulse purchase because of TikTok's influence. To obtain applicable and information-rich data, a purposeful sampling strategy is employed. There were two limiting factors: (1) the respondent had to be over 18 years old, and (2) an active TikTok user. Activity here meant daily use of the application. First, the author sought voluntary participants through author's own networks and social media channels. Once a list of volunteers was compiled, two respondents were randomly selected, each of whom was asked to recommend one additional participant. If a recommended individual declined participation, a new respondent was randomly selected from the original list of volunteers. To ensure the data relevance, the author personally contacted potential respondents to confirm whether they had made impulse purchases encouraged by TikTok and if they were willing to participate. During these brief discussions, the author provided a concise explanation of impulse buying to clarify the concept and ensure respondents' understanding of the interview topic. This sampling method was chosen to strike a balance between respondents who are familiar with the author and the risk of introducing bias into the study.

The author approached a total of fifteen potential respondents, of which five did not meet the prerequisite, resulting in a final sample of ten respondents. The interviews were conducted during February 2025 (1.-10.2.2025), both face-to-face and remotely via Zoom and MS Teams. Participants were allowed to choose the location of the interview to ensure a peaceful environment in which they could freely discuss the themes of the interview. A total of ten interviews were conducted. To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, they were given codes in accordance with the order of the interview, i.e. the

first respondent was named R1, the second R2, and so forth. A summary of respondent information and their respective interviews are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents' representation.

Inter-viewee	Age	Date	Method	Length (in minutes)	Activity statistics on TikTok (average h/week)
R1	18	30.1.2025	In-person	31:59	9h 30min
R2	20	31.1.2025	Zoom	34:11	1h 33min
R3	29	31.1.2025	Zoom	33:54	7h 16min
R4	20	31.1.2025	Zoom	33:08	7h 15min
R5	22	4.2.2025	Zoom	28:08	9h
R6	27	4.2.2025	Zoom	30:23	2h 45min
R7	24	4.2.2025	Zoom	45:20	1h 17min
R8	20	6.2.2025	MsTeams	42:45	8h
R9	28	6.2.2025	MsTeams	26:56	7h 44min
R10	28	10.2.2025	MsTeams	35:26	9h

3.2.2 Interview guide

Before conducting the actual interviews, the interview guide was tested to ensure its clarity, relevance, and ability to obtain the necessary information. A pilot round of two interviews was conducted and the feedback from these preliminary interviews was used to refine the phrasing of the questions, clarify any ambiguous items, and assess the flow of the interview process. Based on this feedback, the guide was revised accordingly. These steps helped the author to confirm that the interview guide was effective in addressing the research objectives and would generate valid and meaningful responses.

The interviews were conducted using a pre-established interview guide that featured open-ended questions, which were divided into six themes; consumption of TikTok; impulse buying behavior and purchase likelihood; influencers; targeted advertising and buying incentives; eWOM and product recommendations; and #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt. These themes were designed in alignment with the theoretical background and the research objectives, intending to capture information-rich data about the respondent's own experiences. During the interview process, the author introduced some unscripted questions to compliment the ones in the interview guide aiming to encourage the respondents to provide more elaborate responses, without leading the interviewees to any desired direction. The original interview guide is in Finnish and the interviews were conducted using Finnish language. The version provided as an Appendix 2. (see Appendix 2) has been translated from Finnish to English by the author.

3.3 Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and based on the recordings the written transcripts of each interview were created by the author. A total of 135 pages of Finnish language transcripts were collected. In this study, qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data, which is a general approach to processing qualitative research data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, pp. 103–145). Since the aim is to increase the understanding of the phenomenon under study in its proper context, in this case impulse buying on TikTok, the qualitative content analysis was selected (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 120). Qualitative data used for doing qualitative content analysis in this study are the transcribed interviews.

The research approach can be characterized as theory-driven analysis, where prior knowledge guides and assists the analysis, but the units of analysis are selected from the data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, Chapter 4.4.5). This approach is located in the middle ground between pure data-driven and theory-driven analysis. The research utilized existing theory, i.e. the factors encouraging people to make impulse purchases emerged in

previous studies, but at the same time, it sought to maintain openness to new perspectives emerging from the data.

In the first stage of the analysis, the researcher carefully studied the transcribed interview data. After this, a more systematic analysis was carried out, which utilized coding and categorization (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 123). Sentences and broader themes served as coding units. Themes that had emerged in previous studies were first utilized in coding the data, such as influencer marketing, targeted advertising, buying incentives, and eWOM. These categories were used to search for and color-code relevant expressions in the data according to which category they belonged to (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 123). As the coding process progresses, the researcher may notice a need for new categories, so it is recommended to maintain an open and flexible approach to forming and modifying categories (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 123). This was the case, for example, with the theme “algorithm-driven content loop”. As coding progressed, the categories were critically examined and modified as necessary. The researcher paid attention to ensuring that the categories did not overlap too much and that an appropriate amount of material was placed in them.

In addition, descriptive quotes were extracted from the data to support the analysis and enliven the results section (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 28). These quotes served as concrete examples of the interviewees’ personal views and own experiences. This multi-stage analysis process enabled the systematic processing and interpretation of the data. The analysis helped to meet the research objectives, which were related to building an understanding of what aspects Finnish consumers perceive as encouraging their impulse purchasing behavior on TikTok. The analysis resulted in a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, which is presented in more detail in the results section of the study.

3.4 Quality of Data

Since it can be hard to access the trustworthiness of the data in qualitative studies and because the various qualitative research approaches do not share any unified evaluation criteria, the 'goodness' of the data will be evaluated (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 307). This includes dependability, transferability, credibility, and conformability.

Dependability is linked to the idea of the researcher's responsibility to offer the reader accurate information. This means that the researcher should inform the reader how the research process was conducted and to prove that the process has been logical, traceable and documented (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 308). This study has attempted to describe the different stages of the research process as accurately and transparently as possible. The research proceeded consistently from setting the objectives of the study to creating a theoretical framework and then collecting and analyzing empirical data. The data collection and analysis process has been described in detail so that the reader can understand how the research results and conclusions were reached. All interview recordings and transcripts were securely documented and stored.

Transferability is linked to the idea of researcher's responsibility to show the reader whether there are similarities between the current work and previous studies. This creates some form of link between the current research, and previous studies and their results (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 308). In this study transferability has been improved by going through previous studies from the field and being transparent about their results. This study has sought to establish clear connections to previous research on consumer behavior and impulse buying on s-commerce context. In addition, it has been attempted to clearly connect the research results to previous theory and research knowledge. These results along with the research gaps have been used as a basis for forming the theory of this study. Additionally, when forming the modified S-O-R model for the current study, it was brought to reader's attention, how previous researchers have deployed the same model and modified it accordingly.

Credibility of the study can be measured by evaluating; (1) whether the data is sufficient, and the researcher is familiar with the topic; (2) are there strong logical links between the observations; and (3) is it possible for other researchers agree with current interpretations or claims based on the materials that have been provided (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 308). In this study, credibility has been strengthened by carefully reviewing previous studies on the topic before starting data collection. A theoretical framework was formed based on a comprehensive literature review, which created a solid foundation for the implementation of the empirical part. The author conducted 10 guided and semi-structured interviews, where the used sampling strategy (incl. limiting variables applied to all respondents) aimed to mitigate the risk of biased responses from the respondents and enhance the credibility of the research.

Conformability is all about proving the findings and interpretations real instead of just imagination, by linking them to the data, and first and foremost in a way that is easily understood by others (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 308). The conformability of the study has been strengthened by ensuring that the findings are supported by the data and can be traced back to the participants' responses. An attempt has been made to argue the interpretations clearly and to support the argumentation – authentic and direct quotes from interviews have been provided.

4 Findings

In this chapter, the findings of the empirical research are structured based on the modified theoretical framework of this research. The findings are intended to address the third research objective initially proposed by the author at the beginning of the research. The results are divided into two distinct sections: consumption habits of TikTok and purchased goods, and encouraging aspects of the app.

4.1 Consumption habits of TikTok and purchased goods

In the beginning on the interview the respondents were asked to describe their consumption habits regarding TikTok. With this, the interviewer referred to the ways people use the app (e.g. location, reasons, context) and why they use it. Many of the respondents referred TikTok as something *“outside their normal life”*, also known as something *“to get their minds off from their everyday life”*. Respondents mentioned that using TikTok is like a *“break”* and always an easy way to spend time. The ways for using TikTok varied from consuming time (e.g. in the morning after waking up or in the evening before bedtime) to information and inspiration seeking (e.g. recipes, DIY-ideas, training advice). Still, majority of the respondents mentioned that when they are *“just killing time”* they end up scrolling TikTok and are in a loop – some even for hours.

“I open it and scroll. What's going on in the world, what's that person doing today, what's up with this guy, and what's happening. And I really don't even concentrate. Because when after a while I might notice that I don't know what I have looked at, I don't even remember what was seen there anymore.” (R8)

R2 used the term *“switch my brain off”*, and R3 and R4 said that TikTok is a great tool when someone wants to *“brain rot”*. *“Brain rot”* as a term was selected as the Oxford Word of the Year 2024 and has gained new significance in the digital age, especially in the past year. In 2024 the term refers to both the low-quality content found on social media and the internet, and the negative effects this content is believed to have on individuals and society (Oxford University Press, 2024). Among the respondents, there is a

clear understanding of how TikTok is harmful to their mental ability, and many feel that it could be replaced with something. Still, many of the respondents claim that the easiness of TikTok is the winning factor in this battle.

“If you want to a brain rot. When you get thoughts, you know, a bit like somewhere else. Break. Maybe it's that you're not trying to pass the time, but that you're trying to get all the thoughts of the day out of your mind. It's bad, but it works for it. Easy too.” (R4)

When discussing the social aspects of TikTok, majority of the respondents felt like TikTok is not the platform where they maintain their relationships. They rather just act as “*a silent bystander*” who does not post own videos nor comment others’ videos but might like other people’s comments, which they find relatable, or share funny videos with friends. Respondents felt that other platforms, such as Instagram, fits better to the idea of maintaining the relationships and creating new ones. Here it is important to note that one of the ten respondents was a content creator, who did interact more on the platform regarding posting own videos and replying to comments, but still did not point out TikTok as a platform for sociality and creating or maintaining relationships.

“TikTok is perhaps just more of a scrolling tool. That the same personal relationships of mine are more present on other social platforms. Of course, it's nice that at a fairly low threshold you can bond with people on TikTok by sending videos or something to TikTok friends. And that way to be connected. But maybe I would say that the social aspect is not as strong on TikTok, it is bigger on other platforms.” (R5)

When asking about impulse purchases with the influence coming from TikTok, few categories were pointed out more than others: cosmetics, skincare, haircare, and clothes. Compared to other respondents, R7 had mainly bought services and experiences with the influence coming from TikTok and was the only one pointing them out in the interviews. All other respondents had bought actual products and goods, some more than others. Still, majority of the respondents pointed out that the impulse purchases have been affordable, low-threshold purchases and they would not buy expensive things on impulse, especially if they require high investment from them financially. Some emphasized that expensive products are rarely seen on one’s FYP.

4.2 How TikTok encourages impulse buying

When asked about TikTok's role regarding the impulse purchases (e.g. does TikTok from respondents' point of view encourage such impulse buying behavior) all ten of the respondents agreed. The respondents shared the same idea: TikTok has a role as a platform encouraging its users to make impulse purchases and therefore is changing its' users' consumption habits. The respondents also made comparison to other platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram: nine out of ten respondents mentioned that they feel like the content on TikTok is more easily accessible compared to Instagram. Respondents linked words such as 'casual' and 'easy' when asked about how the content on TikTok is perceived and what differentiates it from its competitors.

"You just never know what video will come next. Perhaps no other platform brings so much content and such a wide range of videos from different countries and different types. It really has that position. It will certainly affect many people's purchases." (R5)

"As a platform, TikTok definitely encourages impulse buying more than if compared to Instagram or Facebook. There is no such buying hysteria there. Yes, it incites consumption in a way. There is so much content, there are sales, there are shopping haul videos. In a way, it stirs up "I need that too" -attitude. It creates such a sense of urgency that the decision must be made here and now. And look "everyone else has bought it too" - feeling." (R8)

"If you compare it to Instagram, TikTok really encourages people to buy. Yes, in Instagram there is a lot like advertising and other things, but I don't think it's the same. It doesn't come as close to me as it does on TikTok." (R4)

When discussing TikTok, the concept of trendiness is inherently linked to the platform. This association extends to the phenomenon of impulse buying driven by TikTok as well. For instance, both R3 and R6 emphasized that TikTok operates with a lower entry barrier and has the potential to reach a broader audience in comparison to competitors like YouTube or Instagram.

"Yeah, maybe I think that's where the trendiness comes in - it's the kind of platform where different things can trend. The potential audience is so much larger compared to e.g. YouTube or Instagram. People will be interested because it's such a short video, so you can watch it a couple of times and it's received at such a low

threshold. The reach is so much greater at this point, so it is a superior platform to get people to buy.” (R3)

One of the video types called shopping hauls (e.g. people showcasing what they have bought either from supermarkets) has gained popularity among TikTok users. In this study, the opinions between respondents varied from “*I don’t watch them at all*” to “*they are my favorite content to watch*”. Main reasons why the videos are watched are because they are perceived as interesting and as a source of inspiration (e.g. what to buy from grocery store). Main reasons to not watch the shopping haul videos were that they either do not match the viewer’s preferences or they are perceived as annoying and irritating. Despite the opposing views among respondents regarding shopping haul videos, they shared the same view regarding building brand image and opinions; every respondent believed that videos on TikTok (1) influence their image of brands and companies; (2) build, reinforce, and change perceptions; and (3) influence purchase decisions and hence encourage to make impulse purchases.

When asking about the impulse purchases and what encouraged the interviewees to buy, meaning which features acted as a stimulus (s), the following features came up: **genuine recommendations from peers** and **buying incentives**, i.e. monetary and non-monetary sales promotion tools. This is all possible because of the algorithm-driven content loop. Visual support and the audiovisual experience that TikTok offers were mentioned as a reinforcing factor. In contrast, the aspects that stopped purchase decisions or even caused them to be canceled, were **targeted advertising, and influencers and influencer marketing** (incl. paid commercial posts). Next, the information provided of each feature is reviewed.

4.2.1 Algorithm-driven content loop

While the primary focus of this study is on socially relevant features, the interviews revealed an additional theme of interest related to previously discussed power of TikTok’s algorithm. Participants frequently referred to “*repetition of content*” and “*infinite*

content loop”, indicating its significance. Many of the respondents claimed that for them one of the main reasons why they buy impulsively on TikTok is the infinite amount of content that no other platform can compete with: in terms of the amount of content, TikTok is superior. Many of the respondents mentioned that they have recognized how their FYP starts repeating same content after just watching one video.

“It seems that there is always something interesting coming to that For You Page. You see a nice video, you like it, and there is a nice product. Go through those comments a bit. It's the same product over and over again in new videos. You can't get rid of that thought at all. And one video or like is enough to make it happen. I feel like I can find something nice every week. So, it's a completely new product for me, but I see it repeatedly all of a sudden, and then I just want it immediately.” (R1)

“Then at one point there was a self-tanner from one brand, so I really HUNTED it, and I was like “I have to buy this”. There were a lot of those videos and all the time. And then I was like “this has to be good”. And then it was over everywhere, so I thought maybe it's really good. It increased that urge to buy. And that's exactly the point that video comes to me, to my FYP. Finally, I found it and bought it. I was almost obsessing over it because of those videos.” (R2)

Respondents mentioned that this loop where they end up in, is one of the main reasons they buy impulsively. The findings indicate that TikTok’s algorithm knows how to make people want something. Nevertheless, the algorithm-driven content loop alone does not act as a stimulus for the respondents, rather as an enabling factor for the other factors to stimulate such impulse purchases.

4.2.2 Potential stimulus: Genuine recommendations with visual support

Regarding infinite content loop, TikTok is full of recommendations and the videos seen on one’s FYP act as a stimulus to buy. Linked to the videos themselves, the visual proof (e.g. results of a face cream, how well a running shoe works etc.) that the videos provide was mentioned by majority of the respondents: the audiovisual experience makes you buy. In this study nine out of ten respondents had made impulse purchases because of the peer reviews and product recommendations they had received and seen on TikTok. Some of the recommendations are positive, some comments are negative but when

asked about the images and opinions people have about the brands, many of the respondents claimed that the videos have a way of not only creating but shifting those images.

“Those images and impressions can change one way or the other. Sometimes there can be criticism directed at a certain brand, which certainly affects how I see that brand. And vice versa. Can change my opinion in such a way that I can be interested in a brand. There are a lot of brands that I know nothing about, I have assumptions about them, and they are then challenged and/or confirmed when different users talk about them on TikTok.” (R5)

Linked to the infinite loop are the genuine recommendations seen on those videos. Many of the respondents claim they do not trust influencers, rather listen to peer recommendations and that way also seek the validation for their purchases. With level of trust, the respondents’ responses varied, but the respondents repeatedly mentioned the same things that increase the reliability and trustworthiness regarding recommendations coming from what they call *“regular people”*: expertise, honesty, relatability, authenticity, and visual proof. The recommendations coming from *“regular people”* are seen as more trustworthy and authentic compared to influencers, and respondents prefer listening to real stories and actual experiences that are shared sincerely.

“I trust recommendations from ordinary people much more. Perhaps the idea is that ordinary people are closer to me and therefore more approachable and trustworthy.” (R5)

“The deception of TikTok is that ordinary people tell you how they have found a solution to their own problem with a specific product. You get the impression that it is trustworthy compared to ordinary generic TV commercials. Yes, those recommendations make me buy more often.” (R7)

Everyone else, except R10, claimed trusting more recommendations coming from peers and *“regular people”* compared to influencers and their paid collaborations – R10 trusted them equally. Paid collaborations and commercial posts received a lot of criticism from R1-R9, and many of the respondents question the authenticity of influencers and whether they can really be trusted. The discussion about influencers and paid collaborations with brands will continue in Chapter 4.2.4.

“Videos like that, where that closeness to people is present, and no one has paid you to make that video. I trust them more. The authentic idea of “damn I want to recommend this product to others because it is so good”. (R4)

“That same sincerity. That you want to make that video because “this product is such a good product”. But if the cooperation is paid, they must do it anyway. And that's a little different.” (R2)

“I feel that in many paid collaborations it is precisely that you are paid, you get the product for air, and it is the so-called ‘must promote’ it. But if there is no brand in the background, it's much more authentic and honest.” (R1)

For all the respondents the videos give the visual support for them as a viewer compared to reading just written product reviews. TikTok as platform is now covering another layer of eWOM (e.g. product reviews & recommendations) by creating a platform where people openly share their experiences in both videos and comments. Respondents in this study claimed they have read both positive and negative comments. The videos and comments form a base for purchasing decisions and encourage to make impulse purchases.

“TikTok is a place where when you're wondering whether you should buy something, you go there to check it out. When you used to use Trustpilot and others, you found out if this product was good or if this online store was popular or generally reliable. Now you go to TikTok. You can see what people think there. What is the general opinion on the matter. If you used to Google it, now you go straight to TikTok. And it better reinforces the purchase decision when the video has something concrete vs. regular discussion boards where anonymous people comment. So, reviewing a product with your own face gives a much stronger signal that “this could really be good”.” (R3)

“Yes, I read and watch those review videos a lot. Especially when I want to test a new product and get to know it. I read the comments. I want to see what ordinary people have said about the product, written about the service or commented on it. And yes, they have influenced my purchase decision.” (R8)

“Yes, I read the comments too because it gives a broader picture. From there, the comments reveal people's opinions about the products. Add praise or something that a product isn't that good.” (R5)

The phenomenon known as #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt is closely associated with the platform TikTok. Initially a hashtag used by individuals to showcase their latest discoveries

and best purchases, it has since evolved into a marketing tool leveraged by retailers to drive sales. The interviews conducted with participants revealed that nine out of ten respondents were familiar with the hashtag, yet only two of the nine had encountered it directly on TikTok. Interestingly, all nine participants acknowledged the use of variations of the hashtag, such as "*hot on TikTok*" and "*Trending on TikTok*," by stores on both physical premises and websites. Interviewees were able to give examples of stores employing these labels and phrases to categorize products.

4.2.3 Potential stimulus: Buying incentives and targeted advertising

All respondents recognized the use of buying incentives, i.e. sales promotion tools, in posts and videos on TikTok. The most common sales promotion tool mentioned were discount codes, that companies and/or influencers share on the platform. Some of the respondents had made impulse purchases encouraged by sales promotion tools (R1, R2, R4, R6, R9) but all claimed there was a prior thought about buying the product and the discount code (or such) closed the deal. For some, like R3 the codes can lead to checking out the website, but the difficulty of the purchase path slows impulse buying down. According to the respondents, the discount codes and others can (1) act as an incentive to buy, (2) lower the threshold for purchasing, (3) remind you of the need to buy, or (4) serve as justification for a purchase.

"Yes, they (sales promotion tools) affect my impulse buying. Immediately, somehow, the threshold for buying is lowered. Especially if it (the product) is something I've already been interested in. Especially in situations where there's an offer or promo code, it does affect it. They have an effect." (R5)

"I've come across these discount codes a lot on TikTok. If I see a discount code, my first thought isn't "now I'm going to buy it" but more like "I've been thinking about buying this for a long time, so now I can buy it since this discount code is here". It kind of justifies my entire purchase. And I think "why not"." (R4)

"Discount codes are a big vice for me. They appeal to me. It makes me feel like I finally have the opportunity to buy something now that I get the discount. It makes me feel like I'm benefiting from watching this video." (R2)

Although TikTok's algorithm is praised as the best when it comes to targeted content, respondents say it is not the best when it comes to targeted ads. Opinions about targeted advertising on TikTok differ, but the respondents' views can be divided into two distinctive categories according to their views on "how well does TikTok's advertising work". The first category is called **"the adds do not work at all"**. In this category, respondents claimed that they hate the ads coming on their FYP, the ads aren't properly targeted, and the algorithm is lacking behind in this matter – compared to TikTok's competitors. It was also pointed out, that the ads are so generic, they are even forgotten. Linked to the idea of algorithm-driven infinite content loop, some of the respondents said they could not even remember or describe the adds they have seen since they get lost in loop. According to the respondents there are so many videos on TikTok that the adds do not stand out in a needed way.

"No one comes there (to TikTok) to watch any ads! So, some of them (the ads) are exceptionally annoying. I don't think I'm the target audience. I immediately feel like "I'll swipe this video away". Of course, it's not terribly good for any company that you profile yourself as an annoying advertiser - especially on TikTok where those images of brands are created today." (R7)

"It takes less than 0.2 seconds, and I have skipped it. It's annoying. I've also noticed that the targeting is clearly wrong. I notice that TikTok's algorithm doesn't know how to find the right target groups -yet- when it comes to advertising and it's not as advanced and fast as Meta's." (R10)

"The ads I've seen recently and even remember - they're surprisingly generic and lack targeting. I get the feeling that the algorithm is just judging my age and showing them based on that. I haven't seen an ad on TikTok that really appealed to me." (R7)

"Even if you think TikTok does its job and targets advertising correctly, when you compare it to other social media platforms, there is a lot more poorly targeted advertising on TikTok - yes, the amount is also bigger, but there are also things that have gone wrong." (R6)

The second category is more neutral and rather positive one, called **"the ads are okay"**. In this category, respondents claimed that they either do not pay attention to the ads or the ads are matching their preferences. Still, it is important to note that none of the respondents felt like the targeted advertising was 100% matching their preferences nor

could anyone point out a single ad that would have made an impression on them. Therefore, the second category is more neutral than the first one. In this category, the respondents; (1) do not mind the ads, despite getting the feeling of them sometimes being too pushy; (2) prefer watching videos made by regular people instead of ads; (3) think the targeting works rather okay, except for some random ads that come across; and (4) the ads run rather “smoothly” and are unobtrusive. Still only one out of ten respondents had made an impulse purchase because of a targeted advertising on TikTok. The link between repetition of the content and the ads was mentioned: the repetition increases interest.

“Yes, those ads generally seem to suit me. I can see why they're targeted at me. I've never bought anything because of them, but if you see the same ad several times, your interest slowly starts to grow.” (R5)

4.2.4 Potential stimulus: Influencers and influencer marketing

Respondents’ opinions about influencers, influencer marketing, and paid collaborations on TikTok varied. Only two out of ten respondents claimed they had made impulse purchases on TikTok because of the influence coming from influencers. Yet, in both cases the purchase decision was made because of the supportive comments from peers, not solely because an influencer recommended something. In these cases, the supportive comments were the stimulus, not the influencer. Rest eight out of ten respondents had not made impulse purchases encouraged by influencers. The respondents’ perception of influencer marketing on TikTok can be divided into three categories that not only differ from each other in part but also intersect.

The first category is **critical but neutral**. The first category consists of people who are critical of influencers and prefer videos from ordinary consumers. Trust in influencers is low, but some impulse purchases have been made – still not solely because of their influence. For example, there is more trust towards posts that are not part of any influencer marketing campaign compared to videos from peer endorsers. In this category,

respondents felt that influencer can either weaken or strengthen the image of the brand that they already have.

"I usually make purchasing decisions by thinking "what do I think about this" and that influencer can either strengthen or weaken that image. But the impact on the brand or product is not so great that the influencer can make me buy or not buy." (R6)

The second category is **critical and avoidance**. Respondents avoid content from content creators and especially paid collaborative videos. These consumers say paid collaborations even eat away at their purchasing interest. They have not made any impulse purchases because of influencer marketing and say they trust peer endorsers more. There is more trust towards posts where there is no brand behind the post, and they do not solely trust on recommendations coming from influencers – rather needs verification from multiple sources instead. One of the main worries among respondents in this group was that especially in cases where they see multiple influencers showcasing a similar new product from the same brand (e.g. the influencers have received PR-packages) the respondents start to wonder are the influencers posting because they have to, or because they want to.

"I feel like in situations where there is "paid promotion" my trust is lower. I'm not convinced that they are being honest when praising the product. I trust it more when someone genuinely recommends something. Without it being a sponsor or a collaborative publication. Then I trust it more." (R5)

The third category is **positive and trusting**. The third category consists of people who trust the influencers' own judgement regarding partners and influencer marketing: the influencer would not promote products they do not like nor make collaborations with companies they themselves do not trust. The collaborative post still cannot be unauthentic, since the unauthenticity lowers the level of trust. These respondents admit they almost rely on their 'parasocial relationship' with the influencer and give credit to the ones that they have followed for years: some sort of a trust-relationship with the influencer has developed over time. The trust is built up on expertise and visual support the influencers can provide. Influencers who have been there since the 'born of social media' have earned their trust more compared to "the new TikTok influencers".

"I trust influencers that I've followed for a long time, I know how they work. But I don't trust those that I don't follow. Those that I have followed, I listen to their tips and trust them. I've been a follower of some for so long, I start to trust that their actions are good and not that suspicious. I start to "know that person" - although of course it's not mutual - but that creates such a bond. I dare to trust what is said. And especially if they bring out their own professional skills, knowledge and can provide evidence of them." (R4)

"That trust is tied to the person. I give grace to those influencers that I have followed for a long time. I feel like I know them, it's parasocial, but I recognize it. There is definitely a difference between those influencers who have seen the birth and destruction of social media and those who emerged from TikTok." (R7)

5 Conclusion and implications

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study in relation to the main findings of the study. In addition, the chapter presents managerial implications, limitations of the study, and provides recommendations for future research based on the findings presented.

5.1 Discussion

The third objective set for this study was to understand what aspects within the app (e.g. the content, the creators, the commercials) influence purchasing habits of consumers and hence encourage them to make impulse purchases. To add, what products consumers buy impulsively when encouraged by TikTok, was of interest. The third objective has been achieved through empirical research.

The results of this study support Sharabati et al. (2022, p. 4) who refer social media as something to use when wanting to step further away from mandatory chores and using a form of entertainment. Sometimes the social networking sites might get users intensively immersed and therefore allowing the users to get away from their everyday issues (Thoumrungroje, 2018, p. 279) and so had happened to the respondents in this study. Based on how the respondents described their consumption of TikTok, the interviews show support for Pöyry (Inget, 2024), who claimed that people's sense of time and place might become blurred when scrolling TikTok and for some the consideration phase of the purchase process dissipates or disappears completely - therefore, it is easy to make impulse purchases when an interesting product appears on the screen. All respondents had made impulse purchases encouraged by TikTok. As the interviews showed, the impulse purchases are from various categories (e.g. cosmetics, food, skincare, clothes) which is in line with Iyer et al. (2020) who claimed that impulse purchases are not limited nor restricted to any product category. The interviews showed that the influence can reach from products to even services, like trying out new restaurants. Nevertheless, all the purchases are considered as "easy" and requiring "low investment" from the buyers.

The findings of this study support the findings of Chen et al. (2019, p. 236) who studied product recommendations on social media such as friends' recommendations on social networking sites (SNS) and showed, that compared to traditional e-commerce, which focuses on product-centered commerce with firm-provided information, s-commerce focuses on consumer-driven commerce and social interaction. The findings from this study are in line with Chen et al. (2019, p. 244) who imply that providing recommendations with compelling narratives (storytelling) and visual cues (aesthetic appeal) will increase users' positive emotional response to the product and ultimately lead to the urge to buy impulsively. This is in line with both "the authentic stories and real experiences" and "the visual support" mentioned by the respondents. To add, in this study the recommendations did not only lead to urge to buy, but making impulse purchases.

The findings from this study are challenging the ones from Hazari et al. (2024, p. 273) who claimed that brand influencer advertisements are thought to be trustworthy intermediaries between brands and consumers because they feature original content as well as the influencers' use of products. The findings from this study show that majority of the respondents do not trust influencers, especially not the recommendations they get from them if there is a brand collaboration or similar behind the post. Therefore, it can be said that the findings from this study are more in line with Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) who claim that despite the aim behind using celebrity endorsements is the added value they bring to a brand, product, or a service offering, consumers also in their study deemed bloggers and "lower end" celebrities to be the most influential because their opinions and stories matter to the users. At this point, the authenticity, genuineness, honesty, and relatability that the respondents of this study mentioned are emphasized.

Results from this study are contrasting the ones from Zhu et al. (2020b) who claimed that followers' attitudes did not appear to be influenced by the distinctive characteristics of social media, i.e. interaction with others, suggesting that the social commerce platform is primarily a commercial one rather than a social one. The findings from this study propose the opposite: other people's presence in the platform (e.g. recommendations

and comments) is the most encouraging aspect of TikTok regarding impulse purchases. Hence, TikTok as a s-commerce is a social one, where the commercial and social aspects merge in a form of eWOM, i.e. the product recommendations people share with each other.

5.2 Revised S-O-R model and main findings

Based on the findings of this study the following S-O-R model is proposed. The algorithm-driven content loop acts as an enabling factor. In the revised S-O-R model, peer endorsements and buying incentives act as a stimulus (S) for the respondents to buy. Linked to all these features is the reinforcing factor “visual support” that TikTok videos offer. Primary emotional responses named pleasure, enjoyment, arousal, excitement, and satisfaction (O) lead to impulse purchases (R).

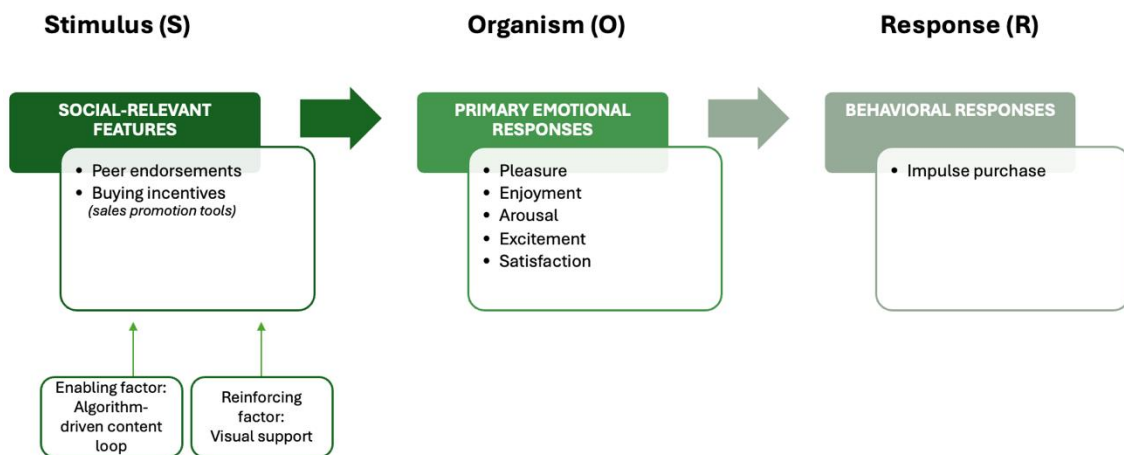


Figure 5. Revised S-O-R model.

As one of the main findings of the study the following is proposed. Based on the interviews, peer endorsements (incl. authentic recommendations coming from regular people and not from influencers) were perceived as **the most encouraging aspect of TikTok regarding impulse purchases**. The recommendations can be in a form of a video or a comment, but the involvement of other people encourages consumers’ impulse buying

to a great extent. Linked to the recommendations is the algorithm-driven content loop, which enables such peer endorsements to start appearing on one's FYP: seeing the same product on many people in a short period of time makes people buy. As the interviews showed, this loop where people end up in, is one of the main reasons they buy impulsively. Algorithm-driven content loop hence enables this repetitive content to appear on one's screen, including product recommendations. All of this is reinforced by the visual support the TikTok videos offer for the respondents. This is in line with Stern (1962) and Zafar et al. (2021b) who categorized such purchases as pure impulse purchases: pointless browsing of TikTok, followed by a purchase decision based on contextual reviews. Yet, such behavior can also be categorized as suggestive impulse buying (Parboteeah et al., 2009, p. 61; Zafar et al., 2020; Zafar et al., 2021b) since the consumer purchases a product based on the recommendations of a SCP.

As the second main finding of the study the following is proposed. Buying incentives alone can act as a stimulus in cases where there is a prior need for the product and in these cases the sales promotion tools, such as discount codes, both reminded of the need and is used to justify the purchase, creating a feeling of satisfaction. This is in line with Stern (1962) who categorized such purchases as either reminder or planned impulse buying: a person is reminded of the need to buy a product when seeing it (Parboteeah et al., 2009, p. 61) or the purchase is made based on coupons and promotions while scrolling TikTok (Xiang et al., 2016, p. 334). Results of this study support Iyer et al. (2020) who claimed that impulse buying can be influenced by external factors. In more detail, by buying incentives, such as discounted prices and promotional offers, that Mattila & Wirtz (2001), Park et al. (2012) and Verhagen & Van Dolen (2011) showed to have positive effects on impulse buying behavior.

As the third main finding of the study the following is proposed. Negative emotions caused by the stimuli do not lead to impulse buying let alone buying anything at all and creating even stronger negative feelings and avoidance. Despite the somewhat positive image some of the respondents had about influencers, influencer marketing, and

collaborative posts, none of them acted as the stimulus for respondents. To add, targeted advertising (S) caused irritation (O) which led to avoidance behavior (R) among respondents. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that either influencers' content or targeted advertising would act a stimulus for the respondents in this study regarding impulse purchases on TikTok. Rather, both created irritation which lead to avoidance behavior meaning that no purchases were made.

5.3 Managerial implications

Real Stories & Unfiltered Moments: TikTok's power of authentic content. Influencers and their representatives (e.g. managing agencies) should systematically think through and calculate whether it is worthwhile for the influencer to make commercial content on TikTok in terms of their own personal brand, or whether the platform should be kept as one where people can get closer to them and get to know them without commercial ties. Instead, focus the commercial activities on Instagram. As the findings showed, according to the respondents, influencers' commercial content on TikTok gets easily lost and does not get the desired recognition from potential buyers. In addition, for many, the real and authentic content, in which viewers can identify themselves with, has been seen more trustworthy and valuable than the commercial posts.

TikTok as an Advertising Tool: overhyped and underperforming. Companies should consider how much marketing effort they want to put into TikTok. Hence, it would be beneficial to keep the content on TikTok light and continue to monetize the content on other platforms. This is especially because many of the respondents felt that the advertising content not only drowns in all the other content but is also less targeted on TikTok and therefore does not match with the consumers' own preferences. Furthermore, this creates irritation and frustration – not towards TikTok but towards the brand whose ad is appearing on one's FYP.

Leveraging TikTok for Business Growth: Follow the discussion to capture consumer attention. In cases where the company does not have a TikTok account, does not mean they are not there. The ever-growing eWOM and TikTok users will take care of the fact that in cases where you did something right, it will get noticed. Let alone in cases where your company messed up – whether it was product related or customer service – TikTok will hear about it. Make sure you know how your company is portrayed on TikTok and engage in the conversation. As the results of this study showed, some might not even know your brand, but rely their opinion and image of it based on the videos on TikTok. As the findings showed, it can be negative or positive, but what is important, is that the content on TikTok, especially the authentic recommendations from consumers, are what create traffic to your websites and web shops – so it would be better to be positive rather than negative. As the findings showed, the information (e.g. experiences, reviews, recommendations, opinions etc.) is searched from TikTok and if people on TikTok have made it clear not to buy from you, people won't buy. Hence, (1) engage in the conversation in the comments, and (2) make authentic content – you want to win the algorithm on your side and drive traffic to your website.

5.4 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

As in any qualitative research, the aim is not to make statistical generalizations, but instead to describe a phenomenon or event, to understand a certain activity, or to provide a theoretically meaningful interpretation of a phenomenon (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 98). In this study, the findings rely on author's own understanding of the topic and analysis related to what has been said in the interviews. As Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018, p. 40) also point out, understanding is always interpretation, and the basis of all understanding is what has already been understood of the topic at hand. Still, as with any qualitative interview-based study, there is an inherent risk of interviewer bias. The way in which questions are framed, and the interpretation of responses may be influenced by the researcher's own assumptions or expectations. Efforts were made to minimize this bias

through semi-structured interviews and follow-up questions to clarify responses, but it is important to acknowledge this limitation.

Another limitation applies to the respondents. Participants of the study may not always accurately recall or openly disclose their impulse buying behaviors due to many different possible reasons (e.g. social desirability bias, lack of self-awareness, forgetfulness, fear of judgement etc.). The findings of this study are based on participants' own experiences and perceptions, and it is possible that some respondents did not fully or accurately recall their impulse buying behaviors on TikTok. For example, social desirability bias may have led participants to underreport certain behaviors or present themselves in a more socially acceptable light. This has been attempted to be reduced through open discussion: the interviewer tried to create a feeling that there is no need to be ashamed of the matter, i.e. impulse buying, and everything said will stay anonymous. Many interviewees relaxed as the interview progressed, but there is always the possibility that things have been left unsaid.

The following aspects of the study will affect the findings: (1) sample size and demographics, and (2) limited focus on specific platform, i.e. TikTok. The respondents were between 18 and 29 years old, all full-time students or working students, located in the top six biggest cities in Finland, and therefore the results might not apply to broader populations. Future studies could expand the sample size or target different demographic groups to explore cross-cultural or age-based differences in impulse buying behavior in s-commerce context. It would be beneficial for the future studies to investigate how impulse buying behavior in s-commerce varies across different cultures or regions. For example, s-commerce behavior might be significantly different in countries where e-commerce is still developing versus more mature markets.

As the interviews in this study proved, some of the respondents felt that the buying path has been made easier for users in Instagram, which encouraged them to make impulse purchases. Because this study focused on impulse buying behavior encouraged by TikTok,

it would be interesting for future studies to examine a wider range of s-commerce platforms to identify differences in impulse buying behavior across different social media environments (e.g. TikTok vs. Instagram).

For future research it would be valuable to examine the influence of TikTok on marketing strategies, both within physical retail environments and across online shopping platforms, to better understand how social media-driven trends are shaping consumer purchasing behavior in these spaces. Especially since the interviews conducted in this study revealed that stores, like Normal, are leveraging from such trends. These stores are commonly referred to as "discovery stores", which are intentionally designed to promote exploration: products are often arranged in a manner that guides customers through various sections, fostering the discovery of new and unexpected items. Such arrangement is encouraging curiosity and facilitating impulse buying, as highlighted by several respondents in this study. Given these findings, future research could benefit from exploring impulse buying behavior within such retail contexts, particularly in relation to the stimuli derived from social media platforms. As some participants noted, encountering a product in a store like Normal that had previously been seen on TikTok prompts an impulse purchase with the rationale: "I recognize this product from TikTok and have seen many using it".

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Appendices

Appendix 1. TikTok made me buy it: #Booktok.



Image 1. #BookTok. The image is writer's own picture from the local bookstore around Christmas 2024.

Appendix 2. Interview Guide

Theme	Questions	Purpose
Consumption of TikTok	<p>How often do you use TikTok? (according to your phone's screen time data)</p> <p>Could you describe (with your own words) the nature of your consumption?</p>	To gain insights on the respondent's consumption habits regarding TikTok.
Impulse buying behavior and purchase likelihood	<p>Please recall one specific moment you ended up buying something impulsively because of TikTok?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What it was? - What influenced you to do so? <p>Does seeing videos on TikTok help you make product purchase decisions?</p> <p>Do you feel like TikTok, as a platform in general, encourages its users to impulse buying/make impulse purchases? (<u>Yes/No</u> → describe/elaborate please – how/what/why?)</p> <p>Do you feel that the videos you see on TikTok influence your own opinion about the brand/product/service? (<u>Yes/No</u> → describe/elaborate please – how/what/why?)</p>	To understand the respondent's view and perception on how TikTok encourages them to make impulse purchases and hence change their buying behavior.
Influencers	<p>Do you trust the recommendations coming from influencers?</p> <p>Have you made impulse purchases because an influencer recommended something on TikTok?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes/No → If yes, describe <u>what did you buy</u> and <u>why did you buy it</u>? 	To understand what kind of role influencers, play on respondents TikTok consumption and gather insights into the respondents' idea of influencers' credibility. In addition to whether influencers encourage to make impulse purchases.
Targeted advertising and buying incentives (sales promotion tools; monetary & non-monetary)	<p>Do you feel like the ads on TikTok are targeted to your preferences?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - yes/no? Can you give examples? 	To understand do the respondents receive sales promotion tools and/or targeted

	<p>Have you made impulse purchases because of the buying incentives and/or targeted advertising you have seen on TikTok? (<i>With buying incentives, the interviewer refers to both monetary and non-monetary sales promotion tools such as bundle offers, limited offers, sales, promotional codes and coupons, free gifts etc.</i>)</p> <p>Have you made impulse purchases because of the targeted advertising you have seen on TikTok?</p>	<p>advertising and whether they work the way intended (e.g. is respondent's buying behavior influenced by promotional codes, bundle offers etc.)</p> <p>In addition to understanding whether these encourage them to make impulse purchases.</p>
<p>Peer (product) recommendations and eWOM</p>	<p>Do you watch shopping haul videos on TikTok?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes/No → If yes, describe <u>why do you watch them.</u> <p>Do you trust the recommendations coming from peers on TikTok?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes/No → please elaborate/describe either <u>why do you trust or don't trust?</u> <p>Have you bought something impulsively, because you saw/received/read a peer (product) recommendation on TikTok?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes/No → If yes, describe <u>what did you buy and why did you buy?</u> <p>Do you share your own product experiences on TikTok?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes/No → If yes, describe <u>what do you share and why do you share?</u> 	<p>To understand do respondents value peer recommendations and eWOM on TikTok and whether these encourage them to make impulse purchases.</p>
<p>#TikTokMadeMeBuyIt</p>	<p>Are you familiar with the hashtag? Could you explain it to me with your own words?</p> <p>Have you ever bought anything marketed with that hashtag?</p>	<p>To understand whether the respondents are familiar with the marketing trend and therefore has it encouraged them to make impulse purchases.</p>