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The mediating effect of neuro-branding on the relationship between social media marketing and impulsive buying behaviour

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Abstract
Social media has become a powerful force in shaping how people shop, often driving quick and unplanned purchases. This study explores how social media marketing encourages impulsive buying behavior and looks at the role of neuro-branding in this process. Neuro-branding focuses on the emotional and subconscious connections consumers form with brands, which can strongly influence their decisions. The study suggests that social media content such as interactive posts, influencer promotions, and personalized campaigns not only attracts attention but also builds deeper brand associations. These brand cues, in turn, increase the likelihood of impulsive buying. Using a quantitative approach and structural equation modeling, the research examines both the direct effect of social media marketing on impulsive buying and the indirect effect through neuro-branding. The findings are expected to show that while social media marketing alone can drive impulsive purchases, its impact is stronger when neuro-branding acts as a mediator. This work adds to our understanding of consumer behavior in the digital age and offers practical guidance for marketers aiming to create strategies that resonate emotionally with customers.

Keywords: Digital marketing, Impulsive buying, Neuro branding, social media marketing

Introduction
The rapid growth of social media has transformed the way businesses connect with consumers, creating new opportunities for personalized engagement, interactive communication, and influencer-driven promotions. Unlike traditional marketing, social media marketing operates in real time and often appeals to emotions, desires, and social validation, which can trigger impulsive buying behavior (Chen, Lu, & Wang, 2017; Lim *et al*., 2018) [3, 6]. At the same time, brands are increasingly relying on neuro-branding strategies that tap into consumers' subconscious associations through visual cues, emotional storytelling, and sensory appeal to strengthen brand attachment (Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012; Reimann, Zaichkowsky, Neuhaus, Bender, & Weber, 2010) [8, 9]. Together, these factors highlight a complex relationship where social media marketing not only influences consumer behavior directly but also does so indirectly by shaping the way brands are perceived and experienced at a neurological and emotional level. This study investigates these dynamics, focusing on how neuro-branding mediates the link between social media marketing and impulsive buying, thereby offering fresh insights into digital consumer psychology.

Statement of the problem
In today's digital marketplace, social media has emerged as a dominant platform for brand communication and consumer engagement. With its ability to deliver personalized content, instant feedback, and influence-driven promotions, social media marketing often stimulates unplanned and emotionally driven purchases (Chen *et al*., 2017; Lim *et al*., 2018) [3, 6]. While prior studies confirm the link between social media marketing and impulsive buying behavior, the underlying psychological mechanisms that explain *how* and *why* consumers are driven to make such purchases remain underexplored. At the same time, the growing field of neuro-branding emphasizes the role of subconscious brand cues such as colors, symbols, emotional narratives, and sensory experiences in shaping consumer perceptions and decisions (Plassmann *et al*., 2012; Reimann *et al*., 2010) [8, 9].

Despite this, limited research has integrated neuro-branding into models that explain impulsive consumer behavior in the context of social media. This gap raises important questions about whether neuro-branding acts as a mediator that amplifies the influence of social media marketing on impulsive buying. Addressing this issue is vital not only for advancing theoretical understanding in consumer psychology and neuromarketing but also for helping marketers design more effective and ethically responsible strategies in the digital age.

Review of literature

Social media marketing and Neuro branding

Social media marketing has emerged as a critical tool for shaping consumer perceptions by fostering interactive, personalized, and emotionally resonant brand experiences. Prior studies suggest that social media campaigns stimulate consumer engagement through visual aesthetics, storytelling, influencer endorsements, and interactive content, all of which appeal to subconscious cognitive processes (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Alalwan, 2018) [2, 1]. In parallel, neuro-branding research emphasizes that consumer decisions are largely influenced by emotional and neurological triggers, such as colors, logos, and sensory cues, which activate memory and reward pathways in the brain (Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012) [8]. When integrated, social media marketing strategies can leverage neuro-branding principles to enhance brand recall, trust, and loyalty by tapping into subconscious decision-making mechanisms (Morin, 2011; Sebastian, 2014) [7, 11]. Thus, literature indicates that social media marketing not only communicates brand value but also influences consumer behavior through neuropsychological responses, providing a strong foundation to hypothesize that social media marketing significantly impacts neuro-branding outcomes.

H_1: Social media marketing has a significant influence on Neuro branding

Neuro branding and impulsive buying behavior

Neuro-branding emphasizes the role of subconscious processes, emotions, and sensory cues in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors. Research indicates that branding elements such as colors, logos, music, and storytelling activate neural pathways associated with pleasure, memory, and reward, which in turn influence decision-making beyond rational evaluation (Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012; Morin, 2011) [8, 7]. Impulsive buying, often characterized by spontaneous and unplanned purchases, is closely linked to emotional arousal and reduced cognitive control, making it highly susceptible to neuro-branding cues (Verplanken & Sato, 2011) [12]. Studies also highlight that emotionally charged brand experiences trigger immediate gratification tendencies, leading consumers to act on impulse rather than deliberation (Chen, Teng, & Liao, 2018) [3]. Thus, literature suggests that neuro-branding strategies heighten consumers' emotional engagement and cognitive bias, ultimately fostering impulsive buying behavior.

H_2: Neuro branding has a significant influence on impulsive buying behavior.

Social media marketing and impulsive buying behavior

Social media marketing has become one of the most influential factors shaping consumer purchase decisions, particularly in stimulating impulsive buying behavior. The interactive and persuasive nature of social media platforms through personalized advertisements, influencer endorsements, and real-time promotions creates a sense of urgency and emotional arousal that often leads to unplanned purchases (Lim *et al*., 2017; Chen, Lu, & Wang, 2017) [6, 3]. Studies suggest that visually appealing content, social proof, and limited time offers on social media enhance consumers' hedonic motivations, reducing self-control and fostering impulsive purchase intentions (Xiang, Zheng, Lee, & Zhao, 2016; Ladhari, Gonthier, & Lajante, 2019). Furthermore, the integration of algorithms and targeted marketing intensifies exposure to desirable products, heightening consumers' impulsive tendencies (Islam, Sheikh, Hameed, Khan, & Azam, 2021). Thus, literature highlights that social media marketing plays a crucial role in driving impulsive buying by stimulating both emotional and psychological triggers in consumers.

H_3: Social media marketing has a significant influence on impulsive buying behavior.

Mediation effect of neuro branding between social media marketing and impulsive buying behavior

Social media marketing has been widely recognized as a driver of impulsive buying behavior by fostering emotional arousal, peer influence, and exposure to persuasive content (Xiang *et al*., 2016; Islam *et al*., 2021). However, the mechanism through which social media marketing shapes consumer impulses can be better understood by examining neuro-branding, which highlights how subconscious emotional triggers and sensory cues influence consumer decisions (Morin, 2011; Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012) [8]. Neuro-branding strategies embedded in social media such as appealing visuals, storytelling, and influencer-driven content activate brain regions associated with reward and memory, reinforcing brand attachment and lowering cognitive control (Sebastian, 2014; Chen, Teng, & Liao, 2018) [11, 3]. These neural and emotional responses act as a psychological bridge between marketing stimuli and impulsive consumption tendencies. Thus, literature suggests that neuro-branding mediates the relationship between social media marketing and impulsive buying behavior by transforming persuasive marketing cues into subconscious motivations that trigger spontaneous purchases.

H_4: Neuro branding has a significant mediating effect between social media marketing and impulsive buying behavior.

Research Methodology

The present study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the mediating role of neuro-branding in the relationship between social media marketing and impulsive buying behavior. Data were collected from 190 consumers (as the scale contains 19 items, Hair *et al*. (2022) in Kerala who were purposively selected based on the criterion of having at least two years of online buying experience**,** ensuring relevant exposure to digital marketing

practices. A structured questionnaire was employed, incorporating established scales for social media marketing (Yadav & Rahman, 2017) [14], neuro-branding (Sebastian, 2014) [11], and impulsive buying behavior (Rook & Fisher, 1995). Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagreement to strongly agree. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling, which is suitable for predictive modeling and testing complex mediation effects with relatively small sample sizes.

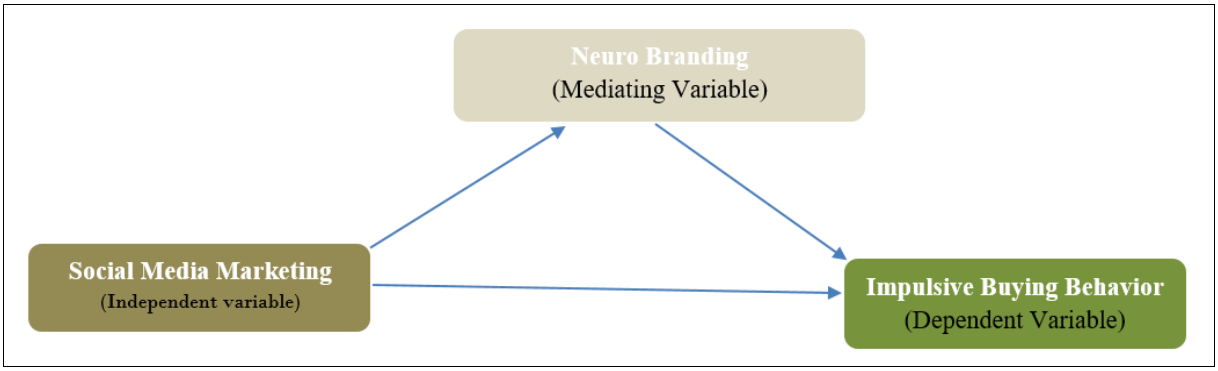

Fig 1: Conceptual model

The conceptual model (figure 1) of this study examines the mediating role of neuro-branding in the relationship between social media marketing and impulsive buying behavior the direct effect of Social Media Marketing on Impulsive Buying Behavior also explained.

Analysis and Discussion

Measurement Model Analysis: The reliability and validity statistics indicate that the measurement model demonstrates strong psychometric properties all factor loadings (SMM1-SMM6, NB1-NB5, IBB1-IBB8) are above 0.7, ranging from 0.791 to 0.882. This indicates that the items are reliable indicators of their respective latent constructs (SMM, NB, IBB).

Construct reliability and validity: From table 1. Cronbach's alpha values for impulsive buying behavior (0.933), neuro-branding (0.905), and social media marketing (0.924) are all well above the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming excellent internal consistency among the items of each construct. Similarly, the composite reliability values (rho_a & rho_c) for all three constructs, ranging between 0.906 and 0.945, further establish the robustness of construct reliability. The average variance extracted (AVE) values of impulsive buying behavior (0.682), neuro-branding (0.724), and social media marketing (0.725) all exceed the 0.50, indicating that more than half of the variance in the indicators is explained by their respective latent constructs.

Table 1: Construct reliability and validity

	Cronbach's alpha	(rho_a)	(rho_c)	AVE
IBB	0.933	0.934	0.945	0.682
NB	0.905	0.906	0.929	0.724
SMM	0.924	0.931	0.941	0.725

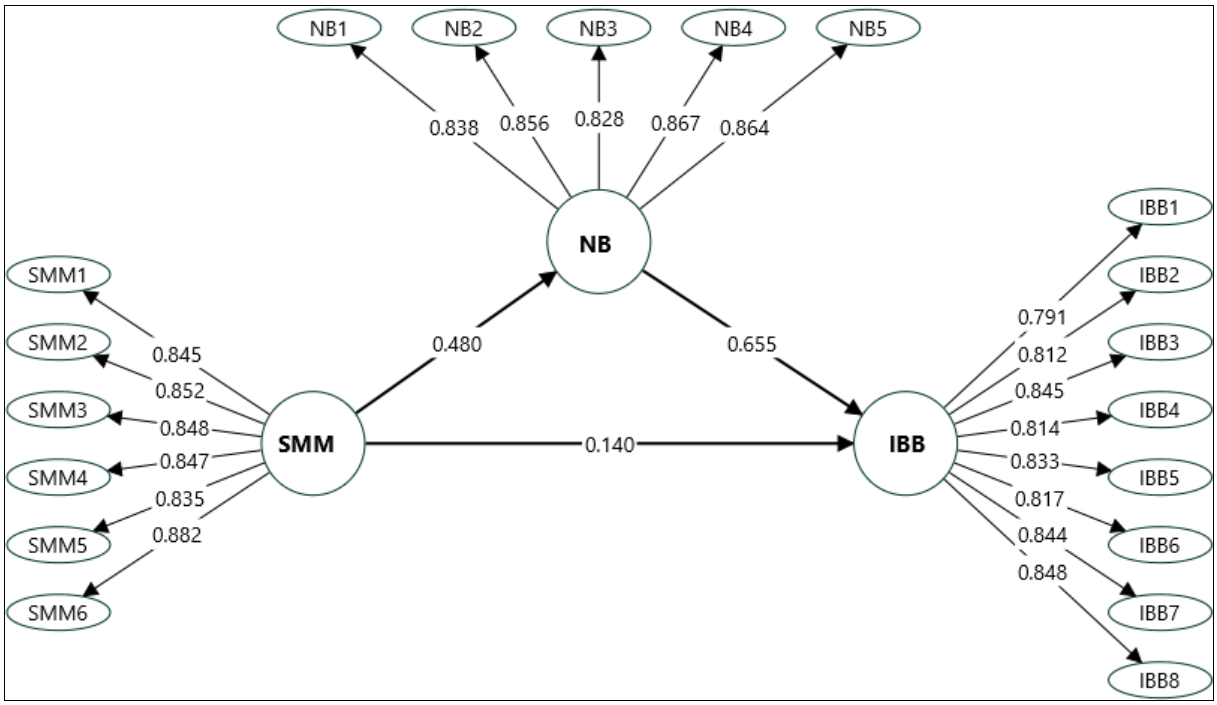

Fig 2: Measurement model

Table 2: Discriminant validity- HTMT- Matrix

	IBB	NB	SMM
IBB			
NB	0.783		
SMM	0.484	0.518	

Table 3: Discriminant validity- Fornell-Larcker criterion

	IBB	NB	SMM
IBB	0.826		
NB	0.722	0.851	
SMM	0.454	0.480	0.852

The HTMT results (Table 2) demonstrate that discriminant validity is well established among the study constructs. The HTMT values are 0.783 for NB-IBB, 0.484 for SMM-IBB, and 0.518 for SMM-NB**,** all of which fall below the conservative threshold of 0.85**.** This indicates that each construct is conceptually distinct from the others and measures unique dimensions within the model. Hence, discriminant validity is confirmed, ensuring that the latent variables do not overlap excessively and can be reliably used in the structural model analysis.

The square roots of the AVE values, reported on the diagonal, are IBB = 0.826, NB = 0.851, and SMM = 0.852**.** Each of these values is higher than the corresponding inter-construct correlations in their respective rows and columns; this indicates that each construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs, thereby satisfying the Fornell-Larcker criterion of discriminant validity.

Table 4: Model Fit

	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.046	0.046
d_ULS	0.406	0.406
d_G	0.180	0.180
Chi-square	192.976	192.976
NFI	0.928	0.928

The model fit indices (Table 4) indicate that the structural model demonstrates a satisfactory overall fit. The SRMR for both the saturated and estimated models is 0.046, which is well below the threshold of 0.08, confirming a good fit between the observed and predicted correlations. The d_ULS = 0.406 and d_G = 0.180 values are low, further supporting model adequacy. The chi-square statistic is 192.976, although in PLS-SEM it is less emphasized due to sensitivity to sample size. NFI = 0.928 exceeds the recommended cut-off of 0.90, indicating a strong comparative model fit. Collectively, these indices suggest that the proposed structural model fits the data well and is suitable for hypothesis testing.

Structural Model Analysis: From Figure 3, path from SMM to NB is positive and significant **(**β = 0.480, t = 8.701**),** indicating that social media marketing strongly enhances neuro-branding. Similarly, the path from NB to IBB is also positive and highly significant **(**β = 0.656, t = 15.222**),** suggesting that neuro-branding substantially increases impulsive buying behavior. The direct path from SMM to IBB is weaker but remains significant **(**β = 0.139, t = 2.271**).** These results highlight that while social media marketing exerts a small direct influence on impulsive buying, its indirect effect through neuro-branding is much stronger.

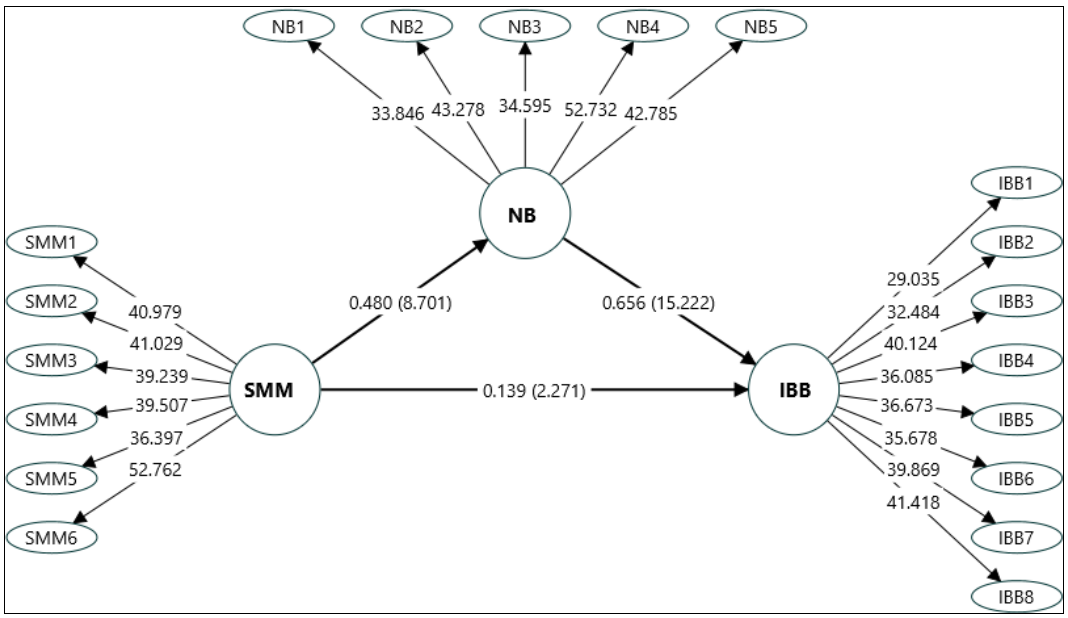

Fig 3: Structural Model

Table 5: Path analysis - Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Path	β (Original Sample)	t-value	p-value	Result
H_1	SMM → NB	0.480	8.701	0.000	Supported
H_2	NB → IBB	0.656	15.222	0.000	Supported
H_3	SMM → IBB	0.139	2.271	0.023	Supported
H_4	SMM → NB → IBB	0.315	7.557	0.000	Supported (Partial Mediation)

H_1: Social media marketing (SMM) significantly influences neuro-branding (NB) **(**β = 0.480, t = 8.701, p<0.001), confirming that SMM activities positively shape consumers' neurological and emotional brand connections. It demonstrates that digital marketing strategies play a vital role in shaping consumers' subconscious brand associations. This aligns with neuro marketing theory, which posits that emotional and neurological responses drive much of consumer decision-making rather than purely rational evaluations (Plassmann *et al*., 2012) [8]. Social media platforms, through interactive campaigns, storytelling, and personalized content, activate neurological pathways linked to trust, memory, and attachment, embedding the brand into consumers' subconscious (Sebastian, 2014) [11]. Prior studies also confirm that effective SMM enhances consumer engagement and brand-related emotions, thereby reinforcing psychological connections that translate into loyalty and purchase behaviors (Yadav & Rahman, 2017; Hubert & Kenning, 2008) [14, 5]. These findings underscore that SMM is not merely a promotional tool but a mechanism that strengthens emotional and cognitive brand responses, validating the role of neuro-branding in the digital marketplace.

H_2: NB has a strong and significant positive effect on impulsive buying behavior (IBB) **(**β = 0.656, t = 15.222, p<0.001), demonstrating that neuro-branding is a key driver of impulsive purchases. Subconscious brand associations are powerful triggers of unplanned purchases. Neuro-branding emphasizes the role of emotional and neurological responses in influencing consumer actions, often bypassing rational control (Sebastian, 2014) [11]. Prior studies confirm that positive brand-related emotions such as excitement and attachment increase the likelihood of impulsive buying (Verplanken & Sato, 2011) [12]. This finding is consistent with the broader neuro marketing perspective that emotional connections with brands can act as immediate behavioral drivers, reinforcing the role of NB as a predictor of impulsive consumer behavior (Hubert & Kenning, 2008) [5].

H_3: The direct relationship between SMM and IBB is positive but comparatively weaker (β = 0.139, t = 2.271, p = 0.023), indicating that while social media marketing can directly stimulate impulsive purchases, its impact is modest. Research on online consumer behavior highlights that promotional cues, scarcity messages, and influencer content on social media can nudge consumers toward unplanned buying (Lim *et al*., 2017) [6]. However, without deeper emotional and neurological connections, the effect remains limited. This finding is consistent with studies suggesting that impulsive buying in digital environments is more effectively driven when SMM strategies are combined with emotional branding elements (Chen *et al*., 2019) [3].

H_4: The mediation analysis confirms that neuro-branding (NB) significantly mediates the relationship between SMM and IBB, with the indirect effect (β = 0.315, t = 7.557, p<0.001) being stronger than the direct effect of SMM on IBB. This indicates that SMM primarily influences impulsive purchases by first shaping subconscious brand associations, which in turn act as the main driver of consumer behavior. Prior studies also highlight the mediating role of branding in translating marketing stimuli into consumer actions (Sebastian, 2014; Yadav & Rahman, 2017) [11, 14]. Thus, NB serves as a crucial psychological bridge between SMM efforts and impulsive buying outcomes.

Taken together, these findings indicate that NB partially mediates the relationship between SMM and IBB, with the indirect pathway exerting a more powerful influence than the direct effect. Thus, hypotheses related to the positive effects of SMM on NB, NB on IBB, and SMM on IBB (both direct and indirect) are all supported, reinforcing the pivotal role of neuro-branding in translating social media marketing efforts into impulsive consumer behaviors.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of social media marketing (SMM) on impulsive buying behavior (IBB) with neuro-branding (NB) as a mediating construct. The results confirm that SMM has a significant positive effect on NB, highlighting the role of digital marketing in shaping consumers' subconscious brand associations. Furthermore, NB was found to exert a strong influence on IBB, demonstrating that neurological and emotional connections with brands are powerful drivers of impulsive purchasing. While SMM directly affects IBB to a modest extent, the mediation analysis revealed that its indirect effect through NB is much stronger, confirming the central role of NB as a psychological bridge between marketing efforts and consumer behavior.

Theoretically, the findings contribute to consumer psychology and neuromarketing literature by integrating the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework to explain how marketing stimuli translate into behavioral outcomes through subconscious processing. Managerially, the results suggest that firms should go beyond surface-level social media promotions and invest in strategies that foster deeper emotional and neurological brand connections, such as storytelling, immersive experiences, and influencer engagement. By doing so, brands can amplify the impact of social media marketing and effectively stimulate impulsive buying tendencies.

Overall, this research underscores the importance of neuro-branding in the digital era and demonstrates that the effectiveness of social media marketing lies not only in visibility or engagement but also in its ability to build lasting emotional and subconscious ties with consumers

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