

The Impact of Short-Form Social Media on Spending Preferences and Instant Gratification Tendencies Among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of short-form social media platforms has transformed the way young adults engage with digital content, advertisements, trends, and consumer-related information. The rapid and engaging nature of such platforms may influence psychological processes associated with instant gratification and purchasing behaviour. The present study examined the relationship between short-form social media engagement, instant gratification tendencies, and buying and preference patterns among young adults aged 19–23 years.

The study employed quantitative, correlational research design. Data was collected from 142 participants using a self-reported questionnaire comprising 30 items across three domains: Online Activity Patterns, Instant Gratification Tendencies, and Buying and Preference Patterns. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize participants' responses, and Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships among the study variables.

The findings indicated that Online Activity Patterns demonstrated the highest mean score ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.84$), followed by Buying and Preference Patterns ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.88$) and Instant Gratification Tendencies ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.96$). Significant positive correlations were observed among all three study variables. Online Activity Patterns showed positive associations with Instant Gratification Tendencies ($r = .681$, $p < .001$) and Buying and Preference Patterns ($r = .716$, $p < .001$). The strongest positive association was observed between Instant Gratification Tendencies and Buying and Preference Patterns ($r = .881$, $p < .001$).

The findings suggest that greater engagement with short-form social media may be associated with stronger instant gratification tendencies and buying and preference patterns among young adults. While the study does not establish causal relationships, it contributes to the growing understanding of how digital media environments may be associated with consumer-related psychological tendencies and decision-making behaviours.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of short-form social media platforms such as Instagram Reels, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts has significantly changed the way young adults consume digital content. Unlike traditional forms of social media, short-form platforms rely on continuous streams of brief, visually engaging, and algorithmically curated content that frequently expose users to advertisements, influencer recommendations, product demonstrations, shopping trends, and promotional content. Through personalized algorithms, embedded advertisements, influencer marketing, and easily accessible product-

related content, these platforms have created new ways for consumers to encounter and engage with brands and purchasing opportunities within their everyday digital experiences (Albari & Kusumojati, 2026). This constant exposure may influence consumer preferences, product awareness, and purchasing decisions.

Understanding these behavioural influences is particularly important among young adults aged 19–23 years. This age group represents a developmental stage often referred to as emerging adulthood, during which individuals experience increasing independence in financial decision-making, greater access to online shopping platforms, and increased autonomy in managing their digital consumption habits. During this period, individuals may develop personal spending patterns while simultaneously experiencing frequent exposure to digital marketing and social media-based consumer trends. Therefore, examining the relationship between short-form social media engagement, spending preferences, and instant gratification tendencies among young adults is increasingly relevant in the current digital environment.

Previous research shows that frequent use of digital media can be associated with higher impulsivity, weaker self-control, and steeper delay discounting. Neuroscientific studies have shown that adolescents and emerging adults are more sensitive to rewards because affect-related brain systems develop faster than executive control regions (Steinberg, 2008). Because of this, they often give greater importance to immediate rewards than long-term outcomes (Casey et al., 2008). Another study by Schulz van Endert and Mohr (2020) found that increased daily smartphone screen time was associated with steeper delay discounting and lower self-control, suggesting a preference for smaller and more immediate rewards. Research has also shown that the magnitude effect applies to social media rewards such as likes and followers (Schulz van Endert & Mohr, 2022). Studies have further reported that exposure to influencer content can increase impulsive purchase intentions by strengthening reward-related responses while reducing reflective control (Sherman et al., 2016). Additionally, active and passive social media use has been associated with impulse buying tendencies among young consumers, with emotional responses and self-control playing important roles in this relationship (Chen et al., 2022).

Although previous research has identified associations between digital media exposure and impulsive behaviour, most existing literature has focused on adolescents, monetary reward-based tasks, or general smartphone usage patterns. There remains limited research specifically examining the relationship between short-form video consumption, spending preferences, and instant gratification tendencies among young adults. Accordingly, the present study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the behavioural

relationship between short-form social media engagement, spending preferences, and tendencies towards instant gratification among individuals aged 19–23 years.

The study aims to examine the relationship between short-form social media engagement, spending preferences, and instant gratification tendencies among young adults aged 19–23 years. Specifically, it seeks to determine whether greater engagement with short-form social media is associated with stronger tendencies towards immediate rewards and more pronounced buying and preference patterns. The study is guided by Dual-Systems Theory, which proposes that behaviour is influenced by the interaction between rapid, reward-driven processes and slower, reflective cognitive control processes.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a quantitative correlational research design to analyse the relationship between short-form social media exposure, instant gratification tendencies, and spending preferences among young adults.

The complete questionnaire used for data collection is presented in Appendix A.

Hypothesis

It is expected that higher engagement with short-form social media content will be positively correlated with stronger instant gratification tendencies and stronger buying and preference patterns among young adults aged 19–23 years.

Participants

This study included 142 participants aged 19–23 years. The sample consisted of both male and female respondents, including students and working professionals. Participants were selected using convenience sampling through peer referrals and online social networks. The survey link was circulated among personal peer networks, including student and professional contacts, to reach individuals within the target age group.

Demographic characteristics of the participants, including age and gender distribution, are presented in Table 1.

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)
Age	19 years	35
	20 years	28
	21 years	28
	22 years	28
	23 years	23
Gender	Male	59
	Female	83

	Prefer not to say	0
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Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 142)

Instrument

Data was collected using a self-reported questionnaire developed by the student researcher following a review of relevant literature on short-form social media engagement, instant gratification tendencies, self-regulation, and impulsive buying behaviour. The questionnaire was designed to examine behavioural patterns associated with engagement with short-form social media and its relationship with spending preferences and tendencies towards instant gratification among young adults.

The items were developed by reviewing existing literature related to digital media usage, reward-seeking behaviour, self-control, and consumer decision-making. Since the study aimed to examine the combined behavioural relationship between these constructs specifically within the context of short-form social media platforms, the items were adapted and contextualized to reflect contemporary digital consumption behaviours.

The questionnaire was developed to align with the objectives of the study and was organized into three conceptual domains. Prior to administration, the questionnaire was reviewed by the faculty mentor, a faculty member holding a Ph.D. in Psychology, to assess the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the items with the study objectives. Based on this review, minor modifications were made to improve the wording and clarity of selected items.

The questionnaire consisted of 30 items divided into three domains:

Domain 1 – Online Activity Patterns (Items 1–10)

Domain 2 – Instant Gratification Tendencies (Items 11–20)

Domain 3 – Buying and Preference Patterns (Items 21–30)

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

The complete questionnaire has been included as Appendix A.

Procedure

Data was collected through an online survey administered using Google Forms. The survey link was circulated through friends and peer referrals to individuals within the target age group.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Responses were collected anonymously, and the data was used only for academic research purposes. The survey took approximately 5–7 minutes to complete.

Aug 2026

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Ethical consideration

This study was conducted as a student research project under the academic supervision of a faculty member holding a Ph.D. in Psychology. As the institution did not have an established Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Institutional Ethics Committee for student-led research projects, prior IRB approval was not applicable.

The study nevertheless adhered to accepted ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, responses were collected anonymously, confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Scoring

Responses for each domain were scored by assigning numerical values from 1 to 5. The total score for each domain ranged from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 50.

To standardize responses, mean scores for each domain were calculated for every participant by dividing the total domain score by the number of items within that domain (10). This resulted in mean scores ranging from 1 to 5.

Higher mean scores reflected higher levels of the respective construct, including greater short-form social media engagement, stronger instant gratification tendencies, or stronger buying and preference patterns.

Group means and standard deviations were calculated for each domain to examine overall trends within the sample. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient (r) was used to examine the relationships between the three domains. Correlation coefficients were calculated using the mean scores obtained for each participant across the three domains. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Domain scores were calculated by averaging participants' responses across the ten items within each of the three domains: Online Activity Patterns (Items 1–10), Instant Gratification Tendencies (Items 11–20), and Buying and Preference Patterns (Items 21–30). Since each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), the resulting domain scores also ranged from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater levels of the respective construct.

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participants' responses across the three study variables.

Variable	Mean	SD
Online Activity Patterns	3.80	0.84
Instant Gratification Tendencies	3.17	0.96
Buying and Preference Patterns	3.23	0.88

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for the Three Study Variables

Note. Domain scores were calculated by averaging participants' responses across the ten items within each domain. Scores ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating greater levels of the respective construct.

As shown in Table 2, participants reported the highest mean score for Online Activity Patterns ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.84$), followed by Buying and Preference Patterns ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.88$) and Instant Gratification Tendencies ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.96$). These descriptive statistics provide an overview of participants' responses across the three study variables and served as the basis for the subsequent correlation analysis.

The descriptive statistics are further illustrated in Figure 1.

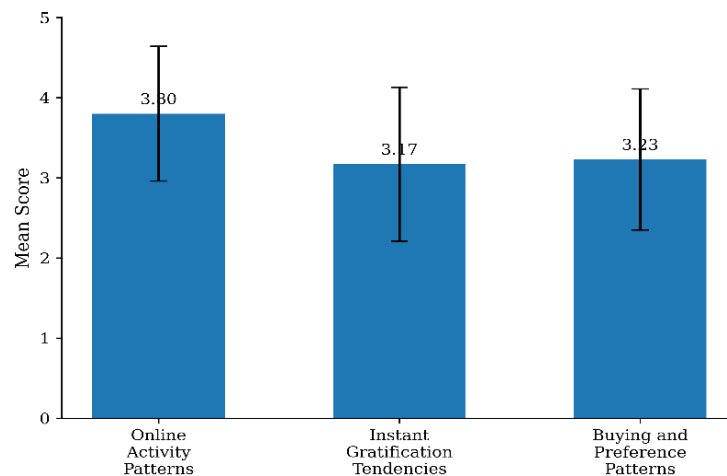


Figure 1: Mean Scores Across the Three Study Variables.

Note. Error bars represent ± 1 standard deviation.

Correlation Analysis

To examine the relationships among the study variables, Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted using the mean domain scores calculated for each participant. Correlation coefficients (r) were computed to assess the strength and direction of the relationships between Online Activity Patterns,

Instant Gratification Tendencies, and Buying and Preference Patterns. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level.

Variable	Online Activity Patterns	Instant Gratification Tendencies	Buying and Preference Patterns
Online Activity Patterns	—	.681***	.716***
Instant Gratification Tendencies	.681***	—	.881***
Buying and Preference Patterns	.716***	.881***	—

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix for the Three Study Variables

Note. Values represent Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients calculated using participants' mean domain scores. All correlations were statistically significant at $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

As shown in Table 3, statistically significant positive correlations were observed among all three study variables. Online Activity Patterns demonstrated a positive correlation with Instant Gratification Tendencies ($r = .681$, $p < .001$) and Buying and Preference Patterns ($r = .716$, $p < .001$). A positive correlation was also observed between Instant Gratification Tendencies and Buying and Preference Patterns ($r = .881$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that participants who reported greater engagement with short-form social media also tended to report stronger instant gratification tendencies and stronger buying and preference patterns.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between short-form social media engagement, instant gratification tendencies, and buying and preference patterns among young adults aged 19 - 23 years. The findings revealed significant positive associations among all three study variables. Pearson's correlation analysis indicated that greater engagement with short-form social media was associated with higher instant gratification tendencies and stronger buying and preference patterns. These findings suggest that greater engagement with short-form social media may be associated with stronger tendencies towards immediate rewards and consumer-related decision-making behaviours.

The positive association between short-form social media engagement and instant gratification tendencies is consistent with previous research suggesting that digital environments characterised by rapid content delivery, immediate feedback, and continuous reward cues may encourage preferences for immediate outcomes. Research on digital media use has highlighted that frequent exposure to reward-based online experiences may influence self-regulation processes and reward sensitivity (Schulz van Endert & Mohr, 2020; Schulz van Endert & Mohr, 2022). From a developmental perspective, young adults may be

particularly influenced by these digital reward structures due to the ongoing development of cognitive control and decision-making processes during emerging adulthood (Casey et al., 2008; Steinberg, 2008).

The relationship between short-form social media engagement and buying and preference patterns aligns with previous findings that digital platforms increasingly integrate advertising, influencer recommendations, and product-related content into everyday user experiences. Such exposure may increase awareness of products and influence consumer preferences by making purchasing opportunities more immediate and accessible. Previous studies have also indicated that social media engagement and emotionally appealing online content can contribute to impulsive purchasing tendencies among young consumers (Chen et al., 2022).

The strongest association in the present study was observed between instant gratification tendencies and buying and preference patterns. This finding suggests that individuals who demonstrate a stronger preference for immediate rewards may also show greater tendencies towards consumption-related decision-making behaviours. This is consistent with theoretical perspectives highlighting the role of reward sensitivity and self-control processes in influencing impulsive decision-making (Hofmann et al., 2009).

From a practical perspective, the findings contribute to understanding how digital media environments may be associated with consumer-related behaviours among young adults. Increased awareness of online consumption patterns, digital marketing strategies, and personal decision-making processes may support more mindful engagement with short-form social media platforms. These findings may have implications for educators, researchers, and professionals working towards promoting responsible digital consumption and improved self-regulation among young adults.

The present study has certain limitations. The findings were based on self-reported responses obtained through convenience sampling, which may limit the generalisability of the results. Additionally, the cross-sectional correlational design does not allow conclusions regarding causal relationships between short-form social media engagement, instant gratification tendencies, and buying behaviours. Future research may employ longitudinal or experimental designs to examine changes over time and further explore additional factors such as self-control, financial literacy, socioeconomic status, emotional regulation, and platform-specific usage patterns.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the relationship between short-form social media engagement, instant gratification tendencies, and buying and preference patterns among young adults aged 19–23 years. The findings revealed statistically significant positive associations among all three study variables, suggesting that greater engagement with short-form social media was associated with higher instant gratification tendencies and stronger buying and preference patterns.

The findings highlight the potential relationship between digital media engagement and consumer-related psychological tendencies among young adults. However, given the correlational nature of the study, the

findings do not establish causal relationships between short-form social media use, instant gratification tendencies, and spending-related behaviours. The study contributes to the growing understanding of how digital media environments may be associated with decision-making and consumer behaviour among young adults.

These findings provide a foundation for future research exploring the psychological and behavioural aspects of short-form social media engagement, including factors such as self-control, financial decision-making, and individual differences in digital consumption patterns.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) as an AI-assisted tool for language refinement and improving clarity of the manuscript. All AI-generated suggestions were critically reviewed, revised where necessary, and verified by the authors.

The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation, originality, and final content of the manuscript. ChatGPT was not used for data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation of results, or generation of scientific conclusions.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire: Digital Engagement & Lifestyle Habits Survey

Participant Instructions

The following questionnaire aims to understand patterns of short-form social media engagement, personal response tendencies, and buying preferences among young adults. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement based on your typical experiences and behaviours. There are no right or wrong answers. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used only for academic research purposes.

Response	Score
Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3
Agree	4
Strongly Agree	5

Domain 1: Online Activity Patterns

1. I use short-form content apps (Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, TikTok) frequently.
2. I spend long continuous stretches of time scrolling short-form content.
3. I come across lifestyle, product, trend, or "aesthetic" content while scrolling.
4. I see posts where people are buying, unboxing, or reviewing products.
5. I feel encouraged to explore products I see while scrolling.
6. I feel that short-form content exposes me to newer wants and desires.
7. I engage with influencer content (likes, comments, shares).
8. I am shown product recommendations that match my preferences.
9. I click on product links I see in short-form videos.
10. I feel that short-form content influences what I find "cool," "interesting," or "desirable."

Domain 2: Instant Gratification Tendencies

11. I prefer buying something immediately rather than waiting for a better deal.
12. I feel restless when I have to wait to buy something I want.
13. I feel more satisfied when I make quick purchases rather than planned ones.
14. I lose interest in items if I have to wait too long to buy them.
15. I get impatient when an item I want takes a long time to arrive.
16. I feel the need to buy trending items immediately when I see them online.
17. I skip comparing prices because I want to purchase things quickly.
18. I choose convenience even when it costs more.
19. I prefer getting something as soon as I want it.
20. I choose fast delivery options even if they cost more.

Domain 3: Buying and Preference Patterns

21. I make impulse purchases while scrolling short-form content.
22. I purchase items even when I had no prior intention of buying them.
23. I spend more on trend-based items I discover online than on essentials.
24. I feel that my spending is influenced by the lifestyle I see on short-form apps.
25. I sometimes buy things without comparing prices or alternatives.
26. I rarely think twice before making small purchases (under ₹500).
27. I regret some purchases made because of influencer recommendations.
28. I regret purchases I made because I acted too quickly.
29. I feel tempted to spend when I see hauls, recommendations, or “must-have” videos.
30. I frequently browse shopping apps after scrolling on social media.