

The Psychology of Instant Gratification: Consumer Purchase Behaviour in Quick Commerce Platforms.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer adoption of quick commerce (Q-commerce) platforms, the ten-to-thirty-minute delivery model exemplified by Blinkit, Zepto, and Swiggy Instamart in India and by comparable services such as Gopuff and Getir internationally, and the extent to which these platforms are reshaping impulse buying behavior. Drawing on behavioral economics, neuroscience of reward processing, and consumer psychology literature, the paper argues that Q-commerce platforms succeed commercially not primarily because of price or product selection but because they directly exploit the human preference for immediate over delayed reward, a tendency long documented in psychology as hyperbolic discounting. The study synthesizes recent primary and secondary research, including a 2025 mixed-method study on Q-commerce adoption in India, a Pearson correlation analysis linking delivery speed to impulse buying, and industry data on market growth and platform design, alongside foundational theory including the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework and dopamine-based reward models of decision making. Findings indicate that reduced delivery time is one of the strongest predictors of impulse purchase frequency, that Q-commerce platforms deliberately engineer urgency and low-friction checkout to compress the gap between desire and acquisition, and that this compression carries both commercial upside and consumer welfare risk, including overspending, regret, and susceptibility to manipulative interface design. The paper concludes with implications for platform designers, regulators, marketers, and consumers, and identifies directions for future research, particularly on long-term financial and psychological effects of habitual Q-commerce use....

Keywords: instant gratification, quick commerce, impulse buying, hyperbolic discounting, consumer psychology, dark patterns, reward system...

INTRODUCTION

Quick commerce has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of retail in the last five years. The global quick commerce sector generated \$184.55 billion in revenue in 2025 and is projected to reach \$199.92 billion by the end of 2026, up from an estimated \$142.40 billion in 2023, with growth expected to continue toward roughly \$385 billion by 2034. In India, the market most closely associated with the ten-minute delivery model, the sector grew at a compound annual growth rate of 71.2 percent between 2020 and 2024 and is expected to reach

\$6.78 billion by 2025, and the country now has 33 million quick commerce users as of early 2026, a figure projected to reach 65 million by 2030. This is not simply e-commerce delivered faster. It represents a distinct behavioral proposition: the near-total elimination of the waiting period between wanting something and having it. Mordor Intelligence + 2

This paper asks a specific psychological question that sits underneath the commercial success story: what is it about extremely fast delivery that changes how people decide to buy, how much they buy, and how often they buy on impulse rather than by plan? The premise explored here is

that Q-commerce platforms are not simply logistics companies but, in effect, behavioral engineering systems built around a well-documented feature of human psychology, the tendency to overvalue immediate rewards relative to delayed ones. Understanding this mechanism matters for at least three audiences: platform designers and marketers who want to understand what drives usage and retention, regulators and consumer advocates concerned about manipulative design and financial harm, and consumers themselves, who may benefit from understanding why they find it so hard to close the app without adding one more item to the cart.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations: Hyperbolic Discounting and the Reward System

The starting point for understanding instant gratification in consumer behavior is the concept of hyperbolic discounting, a term generally attributed to psychologist Richard Herrnstein and developed further in behavioral economics. Hyperbolic discounting describes the tendency of people to value a reward more highly the closer it is in time, with the perceived value of a reward decreasing non-linearly as delay increases, in contrast to the steady, linear discounting assumed by classical economic models. In practical terms, this means a smaller reward available now is frequently preferred over a larger reward available later, and this preference becomes sharper as the "now" option gets closer to the present moment.

The neurological basis of this bias lies substantially in the brain's dopaminergic reward system. Dopamine is released not only upon receiving a reward but in anticipation of one, reinforcing behaviors associated with quick payoff, and this anticipatory release tends to be stronger and faster for immediate rewards than for delayed ones, giving immediate options a built-in psychological advantage over deferred ones regardless of their objective value. Neuroeconomic research has further shown that this discounting process is well described mathematically by a hyperbolic rather than exponential function, meaning the drop-off in perceived value is especially steep for short delays, precisely the range in which a ten-minute delivery promise operates. This distinguishes hyperbolic discounting from a simple preference for speed; it is a systematic distortion in valuation that makes "now" disproportionately more attractive than "soon," which is itself more attractive than "later."

Delayed gratification research, most famously associated with Walter Mischel's marshmallow experiments, adds a developmental and individual-differences dimension: the capacity to resist an immediate reward in favor of a larger later one varies across individuals and has been linked to a range of downstream life outcomes, suggesting that instant gratification is not merely a marketing hook but taps into a stable psychological trait that differs in strength from person to person, meaning Q-commerce platforms may appeal disproportionately to consumers with lower baseline capacity for delayed gratification, or may gradually erode that capacity through repeated reinforcement.

2.2 The Stimulus-Organism-Response Framework in Digital Retail

A widely used framework for explaining how environmental cues translate into consumer behavior is the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, originally developed by Mehrabian and Russell in environmental psychology and subsequently adapted extensively to online and mobile retail contexts. The model proposes that external stimuli, such as interface design, promotional cues, and perceived scarcity, provoke internal affective and cognitive states in the consumer, commonly conceptualized as pleasure and arousal, which in turn drive approach or avoidance behavior, including the urge to buy impulsively. This framework has been applied specifically to online impulse buying and to live-streaming commerce, where empirical studies using structural equation modeling have found that perceived enjoyment and arousal significantly predict the urge to purchase impulsively, while showing that not all stimuli operate through the same pathway. Applied to Q-commerce, the relevant stimulus is not primarily visual richness or social presence but temporal compression itself: the promise of near-instant fulfillment functions as an arousal-inducing cue that shortens the cognitive distance between noticing a want and acting on it.

2.3 Empirical Evidence on Q-Commerce and Impulse Buying

Recent empirical work has begun to test these theoretical mechanisms directly in the Q-commerce context. A 2025 mixed-method study of Q-commerce adoption in India, focused specifically on the ten-minute delivery model, found that the need for instant gratification and the value placed on time-saving were the most significant predictors of Q-commerce usage, outweighing price sensitivity by a considerable margin, and identified a strong correlation between frequent Q-commerce use and an increase in unplanned, impulse-driven purchases. This finding is important because it directly challenges a purely economic account of Q-commerce adoption; consumers are not simply choosing the cheapest option, they are choosing the fastest one, and that choice appears to carry behavioral consequences beyond the individual transaction. ResearchGate

A separate study examining the relationship between delivery speed and impulsivity used a Pearson correlation analysis and found a strong positive relationship, r equal to 0.71, p less than 0.001, between fast delivery and increased impulse buying behavior, with customers who received orders within thirty minutes showing higher impulsivity than customers who waited longer. This provides a quantitative anchor for the qualitative and survey-based claims elsewhere in the literature and suggests the relationship is not merely correlational noise but a reasonably strong and statistically robust pattern. A recent narrative review on instant gratification and impulse buying in Q-commerce similarly concludes that a customer's desire for instant gratification is more likely to translate into impulse buying when platforms are emotionally engaging and require minimal effort to complete a purchase, reinforcing the idea that friction

reduction, not just speed, is a central mechanism. FasterCapital

Broader consumer psychology literature on e-commerce and instant gratification situates this within a wider digital pattern. One recent analysis argues that instant gratification in e-commerce is not an incidental side effect but a fundamental design objective deliberately built into digital platforms through push notifications, social media tactics, behavioral prediction, and user experience design, with hyper-personalized recommendation systems and one-click, saved-payment checkout flows specifically engineered to minimize the number of steps between desire and transaction and thereby reduce the likelihood of reconsideration or cart abandonment. Applied to Q-commerce, this suggests the psychological effect is compounded: the platform not only shortens the wait for delivery but also shortens the decision-making process itself.

2.4 Delivery Speed, Managerial Strategy, and the Instant Gratification Trap

Beyond individual-level psychology, recent scholarship has examined the managerial and structural implications of the shift toward ultra-fast delivery. One 2025 analysis frames this as an "instant gratification trap," arguing that the transition to ultra-fast delivery is reshaping not only consumer expectations but also the competitive basis of retail itself, with consumer loyalty becoming increasingly tied to logistical speed rather than to brand attachment or product quality. This has direct implications for how firms compete: rather than competing primarily on price or assortment, Q-commerce operators are effectively competing on how completely they can compress the gap between desire and fulfillment, which in turn requires continual investment in dark-store density, delivery-fleet optimization, and demand-prediction technology.

2.5 Market Structure and Platform Behavior

The competitive dynamics of Q-commerce provide important context for understanding why speed has become the central psychological lever these platforms pull. In India, the platform most associated with rapid growth is Blinkit, which by early 2026 held over 50 percent of the quick commerce market, up from approximately 40 percent in 2024, and received roughly six lakh (600,000) orders daily, compared to five lakh for Swiggy Instamart and three lakh for Zepto. Q-commerce companies use dark-store geographical mapping to deliver more than 60 percent of orders within 40 minutes, and most deliveries are completed within 10 to 30 minutes, with 77 percent of customers expecting fulfillment within two hours. This intense competitive focus on delivery time is not incidental; it reflects a shared industry belief, consistent with the psychological literature reviewed above, that speed itself, not merely convenience or price, is the primary driver of consumer engagement and repeat usage. Even amid heavy financial losses, such as Zepto's FY26 loss of roughly ₹5,905 crore against revenue of ₹22,623 crore, platforms continue to prioritize expansion of delivery infrastructure over near-term profitability, suggesting that speed-driven demand is viewed by operators as durable enough to justify sustained capital investment. DemandSage + 3

2.6 Dark Patterns and the Ethics of Engineered Urgency

A closely related literature examines how digital interfaces actively manufacture urgency to accelerate purchase decisions, a practice generally described as "dark patterns" in user experience design. Common tactics include artificial low-stock warnings, countdown timers, pre-selected add-ons, and checkout flows designed to minimize the number of steps between browsing and payment, all of which are documented across e-commerce broadly and have been specifically identified within Q-commerce apps. One industry analysis focused specifically on Indian Q-commerce platforms notes that dark patterns in this sector, including device-based pricing discrepancies, urgency cues, and basket sneaking, subtly influence spending, and that a significant share of surveyed users report encountering manipulative tactics that increase basket size and revenue. A dedicated 2025 study on dark patterns in Q-commerce further examines whether frequent exposure to such patterns erodes brand trust and whether digital literacy improves a consumer's ability to recognize urgency-based manipulation such as artificial scarcity or countdown-timer resets, indicating that this is now an active area of applied research rather than a purely theoretical concern. StanVision

These design choices matter because they interact directly with the hyperbolic discounting mechanism discussed above. Scarcity and countdown cues work by artificially shortening the perceived window in which a reward is available, which, given that discounting curves are steepest at short delays, produces a disproportionately large shift in perceived urgency for a relatively small change in actual time pressure. In effect, Q-commerce platforms do not need to change how quickly a product can physically be delivered in order to increase impulse purchases; they can achieve a similar behavioral effect simply by manipulating the consumer's perception of time pressure through interface design.

3. Research Objectives

This paper pursues four specific objectives:

To identify the psychological and neurological mechanisms that explain why extremely short delivery windows increase impulse purchasing behavior.

To synthesize recent empirical evidence quantifying the relationship between delivery speed and impulse buying in Q-commerce settings.

To examine how platform design choices, including dark patterns and checkout friction reduction, interact with and amplify these psychological mechanisms.

To assess the practical, ethical, and regulatory implications of a retail model built substantially around engineered instant gratification.

The overarching research question is: how does the compression of delivery time in quick commerce platforms alter consumer decision-making psychology, and what are the resulting implications for platform design, regulation, and consumer welfare.

4. Methodology

This study uses a narrative literature review combined with secondary data synthesis. Given that quick commerce is a recently emerged and rapidly evolving sector, the evidence base includes not only peer-reviewed academic literature but also recent industry market reports and applied research published in 2025 and 2026, since a substantial share of the most current empirical work on this specific topic has appeared in these outlets rather than in longer-cycle academic journals. Sources were identified through targeted searches combining terms such as quick commerce, instant gratification, impulse buying, hyperbolic discounting, dark patterns, and delivery speed, and were selected for relevance, recency, and either empirical substance or credible market data. Where figures from different sources varied, both figures are reported rather than presenting a single number as definitive. As with any secondary synthesis, the conclusions here are bounded by the scope and rigor of the underlying primary sources, several of which, particularly some of the newer Q-commerce-specific studies, are based on regional samples, primarily India, and may not generalize globally without further testing.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Speed Functions as the Primary Psychological Lever, Not Price

The clearest finding across the reviewed literature is that delivery speed, not price, is the dominant psychological driver of Q-commerce adoption and repeat use. This directly supports a hyperbolic discounting account of consumer behavior in this sector: because the perceived value of a reward decays steeply over short delays, a platform that compresses delivery time from same-day to ten minutes is not offering a marginal convenience improvement but is fundamentally altering the reward structure the consumer experiences. This explains why Q-commerce platforms can sustain premium delivery charges and still grow rapidly; consumers appear willing to pay a premium specifically to avoid the psychological discomfort of waiting, which is consistent with the finding that instant gratification and time-saving values outweighed price sensitivity as predictors of usage.

5.2 The Correlation Between Speed and Impulsivity Is Measurable and Meaningful

The r equal to 0.71 correlation between delivery speed and impulse buying is a moderately strong effect by conventional social science benchmarks and provides quantitative support for what has largely been discussed qualitatively elsewhere in the literature. This matters practically because it suggests the relationship is not simply a matter of consumer self-report or platform marketing narrative but is observable in actual purchasing patterns. It also suggests that as delivery times continue to compress industry-wide, and as competitive pressure pushes platforms toward ever-faster fulfillment, impulse buying behavior associated with these platforms is likely to intensify rather than plateau, absent some counteracting design or regulatory intervention.

5.3 Friction Reduction Compounds the Speed Effect

A recurring theme across the literature is that the psychological effect of Q-commerce is not attributable to

delivery speed in isolation but to the combination of fast fulfillment with minimal decision friction. One-click ordering, saved payment credentials, pre-populated carts based on purchase history, and simplified checkout screens all reduce the number of moments at which a consumer might pause and reconsider a purchase. This is consistent with the S-O-R framework's emphasis on the organism's affective and cognitive state as the mediating variable between stimulus and response; a platform that is both fast and frictionless maximizes the arousal-pleasure pathway associated with impulsive purchase urges, whereas a platform that is fast but cumbersome to check out with would likely see a weaker effect.

5.4 Dark Patterns Represent a Deliberate Amplification of Natural Cognitive Bias

The evidence on dark patterns indicates that at least some of the instant-gratification effect in Q-commerce is not an incidental byproduct of speed but a deliberately engineered outcome. Artificial urgency cues, countdown timers, and basket-sneaking tactics do not change the underlying delivery logistics; they change the consumer's perception of urgency and scarcity, exploiting the same steep, short-delay discounting curve that makes genuinely fast delivery so psychologically powerful. This raises a distinct ethical question separate from the speed question itself: even if fast delivery is a legitimate and welfare-enhancing convenience for many consumers, the layering of manufactured urgency on top of it moves the platform from serving a genuine consumer preference toward actively manipulating consumer judgment, a distinction that matters for how regulators and consumer advocates should approach this sector.

5.5 Market Incentives Favor Continued Escalation of Speed and Urgency

The competitive market data reviewed above shows an industry in which market share is closely tied to delivery speed and order volume, with leading platforms investing heavily in dark-store density despite substantial financial losses. This suggests that the psychological mechanisms explored in this paper are not a peripheral feature of Q-commerce business models but central to their competitive strategy. As long as speed and low-friction design continue to drive market share gains more reliably than price competition or product differentiation, firms have a strong commercial incentive to continue optimizing for instant gratification, even where doing so may not be in the long-term financial interest of consumers.

5.6 Integration Across the Dimensions

Read together, the theoretical, empirical, and market evidence converge on an integrated picture: Q-commerce platforms succeed by directly targeting a well-documented and biologically grounded feature of human decision-making, the steep discounting of value over short delays, and by layering additional design tactics on top of genuine speed improvements to further compress the psychological distance between want and acquisition. This is a more precise account than simply attributing Q-commerce growth to "convenience," since it explains both why speed outperforms price as a predictor of usage and why platforms continue to invest in interface tactics that

go beyond logistics improvements. It also clarifies that the consumer welfare question in this sector is not simply about whether fast delivery is good or bad, but about where the line falls between legitimately serving a genuine consumer preference for speed and actively engineering urgency that a consumer would not endorse on reflection.

6. Implications

For platform designers and product teams: firms should recognize that speed and friction reduction are doing most of the behavioral work already, meaning additional urgency tactics such as fake scarcity or aggressive countdown timers carry reputational and regulatory risk without necessarily adding proportional commercial benefit, particularly as consumer awareness of dark patterns grows.

For marketers: the finding that instant gratification and time-saving value outweigh price sensitivity suggests that marketing messaging built primarily around discounts or price comparisons may be less effective in this category than messaging that reinforces speed, reliability, and low-effort fulfillment.

For regulators and consumer protection bodies: the evidence that a meaningful share of Q-commerce users report encountering manipulative urgency and pricing tactics suggests a need for sector-specific guidance, similar to existing dark-pattern regulation applied to broader e-commerce, given that the underlying psychological vulnerability, steep short-delay discounting, is especially pronounced in a ten-minute delivery context.

For financial literacy and consumer education initiatives: because Q-commerce appears to measurably increase impulse purchase frequency, and because habitual impulse buying can accumulate into meaningful budgetary impact over time even when individual transactions are small, there is a case for consumer-facing tools, such as optional spending summaries, cooling-off prompts, or budget caps within the apps themselves, that help consumers counteract hyperbolic discounting rather than simply capitalize on it.

For future platform competition: given that speed advantages are becoming harder to differentiate as the entire sector converges on ten-to-thirty-minute delivery, firms may increasingly need to compete on trust and transparency rather than further compressing time, especially if regulatory or reputational pressure around dark patterns increases.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study's primary limitation is that it relies on secondary synthesis of a literature that is still young and geographically concentrated, with much of the most directly relevant empirical evidence drawn from the Indian market, the current global leader in Q-commerce adoption intensity. Generalizability to other markets, where delivery infrastructure, consumer income levels, and regulatory environments differ substantially, should be treated cautiously. The correlational evidence linking delivery speed to impulsivity, while statistically robust,

cannot establish causation on its own, and controlled experimental research manipulating delivery time directly while holding other platform variables constant would strengthen causal claims considerably. Future research should also examine longer-term outcomes of habitual Q-commerce use, including cumulative financial impact, changes in household budgeting behavior, and possible habituation or tolerance effects, whereby consumers may become desensitized to speed-based urgency over time in a manner similar to other reward-based behavioral patterns. Cross-cultural comparative research would also be valuable, given that susceptibility to hyperbolic discounting and dark-pattern manipulation may vary across cultural and demographic groups in ways this literature has not yet fully explored.

8. Conclusion

Quick commerce platforms have grown rapidly not primarily because they are cheaper or offer better product selection than conventional e-commerce, but because they directly target a well-established psychological bias toward immediate over delayed reward. The evidence reviewed here shows that delivery speed itself is one of the strongest predictors of both platform usage and impulse buying frequency, that this effect is measurable and statistically meaningful, and that platform design choices, including checkout friction reduction and, in some cases, manufactured urgency cues, actively compound this natural cognitive bias. This positions Q-commerce as a case study in how digital platforms can be engineered around known features of human psychology, with substantial commercial upside for firms but real questions about consumer welfare, financial wellbeing, and the ethics of engineered urgency. As the sector matures and delivery-time differentiation becomes harder to sustain, the central question for platforms, regulators, and consumers alike is likely to shift from how fast delivery can become to how much urgency a business should be permitted to manufacture on top of genuine speed, a question this paper suggests deserves far more direct empirical and regulatory attention than it has so far received.

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