

The Impact of Visual Merchandising on Impulse Buying Behavior: An Explanatory Study on Customers of Supermarket Chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Visual Merchandising is a modern-day technique used by retailers to attract customers by communicating through visual appeal in order to secure their market share amidst intense competition. Scholars have proved that visual merchandising is a powerful tool that can draw customers towards the store and entice impulse purchases. The current study aims to identify the impact of visual merchandising on impulse buying behavior with reference to customers of supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. The underlying concept was presented with a comprehensive review of literature. Primary data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire that was distributed among a sample of 250 respondents from Kandy, Matale and Nuwara-Eliya districts. The sample was formed using the convenience sampling method. The researcher used the SPSS software to analyze the collected data. At the data analysis phase, descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were analyzed and the hypotheses were tested using the correlation and regression analysis in which two hypotheses were accepted and two were rejected. The dependent variable of the study was customers' impulse buying behavior and the independent variable was visual merchandising. The independent variable consisted of four dimensions namely, window display, store layout, promotional signage and product display. The findings of the study revealed that out of the four dimensions, product display and window display have a significant and positive impact on impulse buying behavior. This study provides an understanding for retailers to focus on specific elements of visual merchandising in order to create a positive impact on customer's impulse buying behavior. The researcher recommends that the scope of this study could be expanded to investigate both internal and external factors that influence customers' impulse buying behavior with a combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches.

Keywords: Visual Merchandising, Impulse Buying Behavior, Product Display, Window Display, Store Layout, Promotional Signage.

I. Introduction

Visual merchandising is a retail tactic used to enhance the aesthetic appeal of a product to grab the attention of customers and it significantly influences impulse buying behavior of customers in retail environments. By strategically designing retail environments, retailers can evoke positive emotions to stimulate impulse purchases. Impulse buying behavior refers to a sudden unplanned purchase made by a consumer at a store because of an on-the-spot decision. Reference [21] emphasizes the importance of impulse buying behavior as it states that 90 percent of respondents in the study showed impulse buying behavior occasionally for grocery purchases while 30 percent – 50 percent of all purchases fell under the category of impulse purchases. Numerous studies have been performed in the field of consumer buying behavior, but in recent times, impulse buying behavior has grabbed the attention of many researchers. However, a substantial number of studies have been performed related to impulse buying behavior as it is instrumental in making decisions. In a study conducted on impulse buying behavior, availability of cash, mood of consumer, POS terminal/ATM facility, price, store layout, availability of time, product promotion, store environment, and reference groups were identified as significant for triggering impulse buying behavior [20]. Likewise, many researchers have identified various factors that influence impulse buying behavior out of which visual merchandising has taken a prominent place among most of the researches. Visual merchandising, being a silent communication tool, derives a huge number of benefits to organizations. Effective usage of visual merchandising techniques create awareness and attracts customers while enhancing brand loyalty. Entities that are yet stuck to conventional marketing and promotional techniques may experience such tactics becoming obsolete very soon with the introduction of modern techniques and tools. At present, organizations use the elements of visual merchandising in different facets and that has also been a reason for high competition.

Referring to the studies conducted in the field of visual merchandising, the researcher identified that most of the studies have been conducted in the apparel sector, taking store layout, in-store product display, mannequin display, window display, promotional signage, lighting, music and store smell as the main variables of visual merchandising. However, only a meager number of research

have been carried out with regard to supermarkets. Though similar researches regarding the impact of visual merchandising on impulse buying behavior have been conducted in both developing and developed countries, yet there are inconsistencies in the usage of variables and contradictions in the findings. Within the Sri Lankan context, a very few researchers have focused on this particular research area, while they too have carried out their research focusing on the apparel sector. Specifically, there is no research conducted with respect to the role of visual merchandising techniques in supermarkets in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. Therefore, the problem statement that was addressed in this study is the impact of visual merchandising on impulse buying behavior with reference to customers of supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka.

II. Literature Review

A. Visual Merchandising

Visual merchandising has become an imperative element of the retail store setting [30]. As stated in [15] visual merchandising refers to the way the product or brand is presented visually to the customer, ensuring that the message is accurately interpreted resulting in a favorable psychological and behavioral outcome ultimately compelling the customer to purchase the product. Visual merchandising can be defined as everything the customer sees both exterior and interior, that creates a positive image of a business and results in attention, interest, desire and action to buy [1]. As stated in [18], visual merchandising is the strategic presentation of the business entity and its offerings to attract customers towards the firm, facilitating customer purchases through the creation of a favorable impression. Visual merchandising refers to forming visual displays and arranging merchandise assortments within the store to advance the layout and presentation and to mount traffic and sales in the store [28]. At present, visual merchandising is being used as a communication instrument to attract, engage and stimulate customers to purchase products, which will ultimately result in increased sales. Retail display or visual merchandising is considered as an influential marketing tool as part of the Point of Purchase stimuli that encourages the customer to purchase the product as a result of impulsive drives [24]. A recent study stated that visual merchandising enhances brand attractiveness and highlights the store's distinguishing features [26]. Visual merchandising plays a major role in informing customers, creating wants and augmenting selling [19]. Visual merchandising techniques are implemented via creative practices that results in saving the time of the sales person and the shopper making shopping effortless [9]. Many scholars have identified store layout, in-store product display, mannequin display, promotional signage and window display as the sub elements of visual merchandising. Few scholars have considered lighting, music and store smell under the elements of visual merchandising. In the current study, the researcher contemplated window display, store layout, promotional signage and product display as the dimensions of visual merchandising.

B. Impulse Buying Behavior

Clover initiated the study of impulse buying mix [5]. Internal stimuli (impulsiveness, enjoyment, hedonism, fashion, emotions, normative evaluation, variety seeking, self-identity, product involvement), external stimuli (store characteristics, sales promotions, employee or attendants, peers and family, perceived crowding, sensory stimulation, shopping channel, self-service technology, retail merchandising), situational and product related factors (availability of time and money, product characteristics, new and fashion products, demographics and socio-cultural factors trigger impulse buying [4]. Impulse buying behavior excludes evaluation in terms of need, affordability, price and others [18]. Rook and Fisher put forwarded the concept of impulsive buying behavior as a personality attribute that leads the consumer to make spontaneous, non-reflective, immediate and kinetic purchases [23]. Further another study found that individuals who engage in impulse buying behavior are less likely to consider the implications of their actions [22]. Impulsive buying behavior is more unstructured [22]. Impulse buying is a sudden and instantaneous purchase with no pre-shopping intentions either to buy the specific product category or to fulfill a specific buying task [3]. Impulse buying behavior occurs after experiencing an urge to buy and has a tendency to be spontaneous [3]. Reference [10] shows that impulse buying is a reactive purchase in the face of strong-enough stimulation and motivation that can override limits. Impulse behavior has been given negative evaluations in psychological studies of impulsiveness and has characterized impulse behavior as a manifestation of immaturity and lack of behavioral control [25] or as irrational, risky or wasteful [2]. Impulse buying does not always result in satisfaction, at times consumers may regret the quick decisions taken and for wasting money. As mentioned in [22], 20 percent of respondents felt bad about their impulse purchases but around 41 percent of respondents felt good about their impulse purchases. After developing a scale to measure the propensities of impulse buying behavior, Rook and Fisher concluded that consumers will still view impulse buying behavior as bad but are unable to control their impulsive tendencies which is an innate behavioral attribute [23]. However, it has been proved with evidence that effective usage of visual merchandising increases the time spent at the outlet due to impulse buying behavior [14].

Based on the literature review the following conceptual framework was formulated.

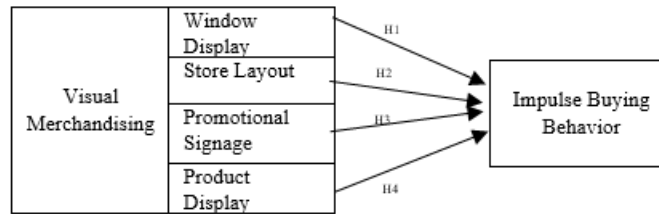


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework

Hypotheses of the study were as follows.

H1: Window display has a significant and positive impact on impulse buying behavior of the customers of supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka.

H2: Store layout has a significant and positive impact on impulse buying behavior of customers of supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka.

H3: Promotional signage has a significant and positive impact on impulse buying behavior of customers of supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka.

H4: Product display has a significant and positive impact on impulse buying behavior of customers of supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka.

III. Methodology

The main purpose of this study was to identify the impact of visual merchandising elements on impulse buying behavior of customers of supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. Central Province consists of three districts namely, Kandy, Matale and Nuwara-Eliya and has a diversified mix of ethnic groups in the respective province whose buying behavior may differ in terms of culture, family background and other societal factors. A higher number of purchases take place per day in supermarkets located in Central Province. According to the data available in the Fitch Ratings Special Report under Sri Lanka Modern Grocery Retail (2017), Central Province was considered as the second highest out of the 9 provinces as per the supermarket penetration per million population. Western Province was ranked as the first as it has the majority of supermarkets. However as per the convenience of the researcher the second highest ranked province which is the Central Province was selected to conduct the study. The target population was all the customers of supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka and the unit of analysis was individual. Since the researcher focused on the leading supermarket chains in the Central Province, the population was narrowed down to all the customers who shop at leading supermarket chains; Cargills Food City, Keells Super and Arpico Supercenter located in the Central Province, which together accounts a market share of more than 80 percent of the modern grocery retail sector in Sri Lanka. The population or the sampling frame couldn't be determined exactly hence, the population of Central Province which is 2,558,716 was taken into consideration. As per the Morgan table if the population is around 2,000,000, the sample size accounts to 384. But with the time constraint and resource constraints, the sample size was reduced to 250 customers. The researcher used convenience sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique as the sampling technique of the current study.

This research falls under the category of basic research because it intends to enhance the understanding of a common problem that exists in work settings and the findings of this study could also be generalized to various other settings. The purpose of this study is explanatory as it intends to investigate how variables come together, interact and form a causal relationship between each other. Even though there is sufficient knowledge in this particular field of study there were inconsistencies in the usage of variables, contradictions in findings and limitations in application. Therefore, even if well-developed theories exist in literature, a need arises to conduct this study to find out the exact relationship between the variables of interest. With regard to the nature of study, the current research is quantitative in nature and hence takes a deductive approach where rational conclusions are drawn by logical generalizations of a known fact.

A structured questionnaire was used to gather primary data and journal articles and books were used to collect secondary data. An online self-administered questionnaire was circulated among the potential respondents and the time horizon was cross-sectional. The structured questionnaire consisted of three parts; the demographic profile, questions related to the four dimensions of visual merchandising, which is the independent variable and questions related to impulse buying behavior, which is the dependent variable. The collected data was fed into the SPSS software and descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were analyzed at the data analysis phase. Data was tested using correlation and regression analysis.

IV. Results and Discussions

A. Demographic Analysis

The results of the demographic analysis showed that the majority of respondents were from the Matala District whereas the supermarket chain that the highest number of customers visit was found to be Keells Super. The sample of this research study comprised of 102 males at a percentage of 40.8 percent and 148 females at a percentage of 59.2 percent indicating that more females have responded to the survey compared to males. However, a percentage close to 50 percent can be identified in the frequencies of both male and female. Also, it was found that the sample comprised of 83 respondents in the age category less than 25 accounting to a percentage of 33.2 percent, 103 respondents in the age category between 26-39 accounting to a percentage of 41.2 percent, 50 respondents between the ages 40-59 accounting to 20 percent and 14 respondents in the age of 60 and above accounting to 5.6 percent of the sample. The marital status was also taken under demographics, and it was identified that 118 married respondents at a percentage of 47.2 percent and 132 unmarried respondents at a percentage of 52.8 percent comprised the sample. Further as per the level of education, the highest number of respondents were from the undergraduate level with a percentage of 37 percent and the lowest were from the doctorate level with a percentage of 0.4 percent. With regard to the occupation, the highest number of respondents were identified in the category of private sector employees at a percentage of 40.4 percent and the lowest percentage of 3.2 percent was identified in the category of entrepreneurs. As per the data collected, 103 respondents were in the monthly income level less than Rs. 25,000.00 accounting to a percentage of 41.2 percent which was the highest out of all the monthly income categories. Only 6 respondents earn more than Rs. 101,000 accounting to a percentage of 2.4 percent of the entire sample distribution.

B. Descriptive Analysis

Given below are the representations of the descriptive statistics that describe the behavior of the independent and dependent variables of the current study, indicated by measures of central tendency and dispersion.

Table I. Descriptive Analysis

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation
Window Display (WD)	3.755	0.704
Store Layout (SL)	4.209	0.485
Promotional Signage (PS)	4.096	0.564
Product Display (PD)	3.880	0.679
Impulse Buying Behavior (IBB)	3.648	0.810

C. Validity and Reliability of the Study

Reliability and validity are the two closely related measurements that qualify the research to yield useful results [27]. The validity was tested for the entire sample of 250 respondents. The sample adequacy was validated using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test. Further, the Bartlett's test of Sphericity was done to identify the appropriateness of the factor analysis. The data of the study had a KMO value of 0.925, which lies between 0.8 and 1 and hence assures that the data collected to test the behavior of variables is adequate. On the other hand, Bartlett's test of Sphericity had an approximate chi-square value of 3418.874 with a 231 degree of freedom. Also, the test of Sphericity indicated that the data is significant because it showed a significant value (p) of 0.000 which is less than 0.05. Further as the Cronbach's Alpha values of all the variables were greater than 0.70, it confirms that there is a good reliability in the current research.

Table II. Results Of the Validity and Reliability Tests

Variable	Dimensions	Validity			Reliability	
		KMO	BT		Cronbach's Alpha	NI
			CS	Sig		
Visual Merchandising	Window Display	0.804	322.694	0.000	0.811	4
	Store Layout	0.657	180.695	0.000	0.739	3
	Promotional Signage	0.662	176.451	0.000	0.740	3
	Product Display	0.812	407.921	0.000	0.842	4
Impulse Buying Behavior		0.934	1340.180	0.000	0.922	8

D. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficient is a common measure of strength and direction of association between two quantitative variables. It is an inferential statistic used to test statistical hypotheses developed in a study. The significance value (p) determines how certain is the relationship generated through the correlation analysis. Significance values less than 0.05 are acceptable. Given below is the correlation matrix of factors affecting impulse buying behavior.

Table III. Results Of the Pearson Correlation Analysis

Correlations						
		WD	SL	PS	PD	IB
WD	Pearson Correlation	1	.473**	.518**	.646**	.623**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	250	250	250	250	250
SL	Pearson Correlation	.473**	1	.476**	.533**	.482**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	250	250	250	250	250
PS	Pearson Correlation	.518**	.476**	1	.598**	.508**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	250	250	250	250	250
PD	Pearson Correlation	.646**	.533**	.598**	1	.767**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	250	250	250	250	250
IB	Pearson Correlation	.623**	.482**	.508**	.767**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	250	250	250	250	250

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As per the above correlation matrix, the dimensions of visual merchandising are statistically correlated with the dependent variable; impulse buying behavior with a significance value (p) less than 0.01. Certainly, all dimensions have a significance value of 0.000 which is less than 0.01 and that indicates that the null hypotheses could be rejected. Hence, it implies that with 99.99 percent of confidence each dimension is significantly correlated with impulse buying behavior. Further, all significant correlations were positive, meaning that an increase in the independent variable would result in an increase in the dependent variable. The strongest correlation was identified between product display and impulse buying behavior with a correlation of 0.767. The second strongest correlation was identified between window display and impulse buying behavior with a correlation of 0.623. A moderate correlation was identified between promotional signage and impulse buying behavior with a correlation of 0.508 and finally with a correlation of 0.482, store layout was correlated with impulse buying behavior.

E. Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to study the simultaneous effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The results of the multiple regression analysis are stated in the following table.

Table IV. Results Of the Multiple Regression Analysis

Impulse Buying Behavior						
R = 0.787		R ² = 0.619		Adjusted R ² = 0.613	Sig = 0.000	Durbin – Watson = 1.918
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	-.513	.302		-1.699	.091
	WD	.231	.062	.201	3.747	.000
	SL	.101	.081	.061	1.250	.213
	PS	.030	.074	.021	.410	.682
	PD	.707	.070	.592	10.172	.000

R square measures the percentage movement of the dependent variable: impulse buying behavior which is captured by the intercept and the independent variables. The results obtained from the multiple regression analysis indicates that 61.9 percent of the variation in impulse buying behavior is captured by the independent variables; window display, store layout, promotional signage and product display with a standard error of 0.50422. The adjusted R square provides a more honest value to estimate R-square for the population by accounting for the degree of freedom in the model. The value of adjusted R-square in this model was 61.3 percent. Therefore, it can be stated that there is a 0.6 percent difference between the R-square value and the adjusted R-square value.

The regression coefficient of window display indicates that it has a significant and positive impact on impulse buying behavior ($\beta=0.231$, $p<0.05$). This result further supports the first hypothesis (H1) of the study. Every unit increase in window display will result in an increase in impulse buying behavior by a total of 0.231, provided that other independent variables remain constant. Even though the Pearson correlation test showed a significant relationship between store layout and impulse buying behavior, the regression coefficient of store layout indicated that it has no significant influence on impulse buying behavior ($\beta=0.101$, $p>0.05$). As the p value was greater than 0.05, it was found that the directional relationship was not statistically significant hence, the second hypothesis (H2) of the study was rejected. Similarly, even if the Pearson correlation indicated a statistically significant relationship between promotional signage and impulse buying behavior, the regression coefficient of promotional signage ($\beta=0.030$, $p>0.05$) indicated that it has no significant influence on impulse buying behavior. Therefore, this result too rejects the third hypothesis (H3). The regression coefficient of product display indicated that it has a significant and positive impact on impulse buying behavior ($\beta=0.707$, $p<0.05$). This finding was not surprising because the result of the Pearson correlation test showed a much higher coefficient ($r=0.767$) for the relationship between product display and impulse buying behavior. This result supports the fourth hypothesis (H4) of the study. Every unit increase in product display will result in an increase in impulse buying behavior by a total of 0.707, provided that other independent variables remain constant.

By using the results of the multiple regression analysis, the multiple regression equation was derived as follows.

$$IB = \alpha + \beta_1WD + \beta_4PD$$

$$IB = \alpha + 0.231WD + 0.707PD$$

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

The current research was conducted to examine the impact of visual merchandising on impulse buying behavior of the customers of supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. To measure visual merchandising, four factors that determine visual merchandising were selected by referring to the available literature. They were namely, window display, store layout, promotional signage and product display. Underlying the general objective four specific objectives were developed as; to investigate the impact of window display on impulse buying behavior; impact of store layout on impulse buying behavior; impact of promotional signage on impulse buying behavior and the impact of product display on impulse buying behavior with reference to customers of supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. The target population was all the customers of leading supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. Convenience sampling was used as the sampling technique and the sample consisted of 250 customers of leading supermarket chains in Kandy, Matale and Nuwara-Eliya districts.

Through the comprehensive analysis conducted in order to fulfill the objectives of the study, the following findings were derived.

According to the correlation coefficients derived from the Pearson correlation analysis, it was found that all hypotheses were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) with 99.99 percent of confidence. The statistically significant correlations were positive reflecting a positive relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The strongest correlation of 0.767 was identified between product display and impulse buying behavior and the weakest correlation of 0.482 existed between store layout and impulse buying behavior.

As per the results generated through the regression analysis, it was found that impulse buying behavior had an impact of 61.9 percent from window display, store layout, promotional signage and product display with a standard error of 0.50422. Further the results of the regression analysis conducted to investigate the impact of window display on customer's impulse buying behavior, was consistent with the results of the study conducted by Khandai [16] and Yarahmadi (2011) cited in [29] indicating a significant and positive relationship between window display and impulse buying behavior. Correspondingly the results related to the impact of product display on customer's impulse buying behavior too was consistent with the results of the study conducted by Ko and Rhee (1994) cited in [7] and also as stated in [13] indicating a significant and positive relationship between product display and customer's impulse buying behavior. Therefore, it is evident that the current study followed the same results confirming the findings of previous scholars with regard to window display and product display reflecting a significant and strong positive relationship with impulse buying behavior. As far as store layout and promotional signage are concerned, the results of the current study revealed an insignificant relationship between store layout and impulse buying behavior and promotional signage and impulse buying behavior which was consistent with the findings in [17] and [12] which stated that the relationship between store layout and impulse buying behavior is insignificant and the findings in [11], which stated that the relationship between promotional signage and impulse buying behavior is insignificant. The insignificant relationship between the variables is contrary to the majority of findings in the existing literature which has documented more of a significant and positive relationship between store layout and impulse buying behavior [6] and promotional signage and impulse buying behavior [8]. Even though store layout and promotional signage did not appear to have a significant relationship with impulse buying behavior, the results still suggest that store layout and promotional signage are significantly correlated with impulse buying behavior. In conclusion, as per the findings of the study, only window display and product display had a significant relationship with impulse buying behavior. Product display was found to have the highest impact on impulse buying behavior and second in order was window display serving as strong stimuli towards making impulse purchases as customers step in to the store.

It is evident that elements of visual merchandising play a pivotal role in drawing customers towards the store and enticing impulse purchases especially in supermarkets. Hence, retailers must pay much attention in selecting the most appropriate tools of visual merchandising to gain favorable results such as increase in sales and profits. The current study was conducted to identify the impact of visual merchandising on impulse buying behavior with reference to customers of supermarket chains in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. Based on the findings of the study, the researcher was able to propose few recommendations.

When considering product displays, retailers must exert much effort in designing aesthetically pleasing product displays. The effect of product displays will be much effective if it fits well with the branding of the supermarket, creates a logical flow in the way in which products are displayed and ultimately it should be attractive and appealing to the target customers. Using vibrant colors and well lit-displays makes products stand out and especially employing seasonal or thematic decors create a visually appealing atmosphere that captures the customers' interest. Further products displayed at a place convenient for customers can also result in impulse purchases because if the products are kept at eye-level, they are easily observable and accessible for the customers and that

too could trigger impulse purchases. Displaying complementary products together and promoting bundle deals such as “buy one, get one free” are influential strategies that could entice impulse purchases. Arranging special product displays would not only create impulse purchases but also it can have lasting impacts on subsequent buying behaviors. Organizing attractive product displays at the billing counter is also an impactful strategy because customers spend a while at the billing counter until their turn comes to do the payments. Even though the time spent at a billing counter is very low yet it could trigger impulse purchases at the point of sale. Also, if the product displays are structured in a way in which prices and special offers are clearly visible, it too can attract the price conscious customers by amplifying effective communication.

Window display was the next variable that was found to have a significant and positive impact on impulse purchases. It is obvious because window display is the first point of contact of a customer who enters in to the supermarket and it contributes in building the first impression in a customer’s mind. Therefore, supermarkets must put much effort in creating an eye-catching window display that arouse the customer’s urge to buy products. Window display can be considered as a major aspect by which consumers choose to enter a supermarket based on the information available on its windows regarding the products available and the special offers. Hence retailers must make sure that the content displayed on their windows are easily identifiable and well organized to grab the attention of customers. Highlighting seasonal product offers and limited-time offers prominently in window displays, incorporating interactive elements such as touch screens or QR codes that provide additional product information or access to digital promotions and decorating window displays to align with seasonal events and cultural celebrations can create a sense of excitement and anticipation and ultimately trigger impulse purchases.

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