

WHY DO CONSUMERS PURCHASE FROM A CONTROVERSIAL ONLINE STORE? REASONS FOR PURCHASING FROM TEMU

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Chinese online retailers have recently received considerable media attention in Western countries, particularly regarding ethical concerns. These stores are often perceived as controversial and having a questionable reputation: while they offer many attractions and low prices, they also raise concerns about product quality and production practices, among other issues. This study examines the reasons for purchasing from online stores perceived as controversial or unethical, focusing on Temu, whose popularity has surged in recent years. The data was collected by interviewing seven Finnish Temu shoppers from the age range of 23-71 years. The findings suggest that controversial online stores' appeal cannot be explained by financial issues alone; rather, it emerges from the interplay of social validation, personal circumstances, experiential enjoyment, and well-designed platform features.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, Chinese online retailers have rapidly gained popularity worldwide, while simultaneously attracting increasing public debate concerning issues such as ethics, product quality, and production practices. Temu is a rapidly grown online store platform established in 2022, with extremely low prices that have been aggressively marketed to consumers globally (Backlinko, 2026). Despite being labeled an “evil platform” (Liu & Gómez-Cruz, 2025) and ranked among the most disreputable companies in Finland (Helsingin Sanomat, 2025), Temu continues to attract consumers. Temu generated 1.6–2.3 billion monthly site visits and had more than 140 million monthly active users in the European Union in October 2025 (Backlinko, 2026). The coexistence of widespread criticism and strong consumer adoption highlights the need to understand why consumers continue to purchase from online retailers perceived as controversial. This study develops in-depth understanding of this phenomenon. Specifically, it examines consumers’ reasons for purchasing from the Temu online store. Given the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative approach is adopted, consisting of seven in-depth interviews with Finnish Temu shoppers.

Prior research has examined online stores characterized as controversial or lacking reputable practices. For instance, studies have addressed topics such as online retailers’ ethics and repurchase intention (Yuniarti et al., 2022), fake reviews (Barbado et al., 2019), and fraudulent sellers and shill bidding (Fire et al., 2023). One prominent theme is the use of dark patterns (Voigt et al., 2021), which have been identified in online retail environments as mechanisms that may manipulate consumers through marketing strategies, interface design, informational transparency, and pricing (Brignull et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2025). However, irresponsible purchasing may also stem from consumers themselves, influenced by factors such as personal characteristics, limited knowledge, or attitudes (Kemppainen et al., 2021; Mayr et al., 2022; Nyrhinen et al., 2024). Previous research notes that engaging with a controversial marketplace may prompt customers to develop reasons that justify purchasing behaviour which can, in some instances, contradict their values. One way to explain controversial shopping is through the use of neutralization techniques (McGregor, 2008), whereby individuals justify ethically questionable behavior in order to maintain a positive self-concept (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Although Temu has been one of the most discussed controversial

online platforms in recent years, scholarly research on the platform remains limited. For example, Liu and Gómez-Cruz (2025) examined platform cynicism in the Temu application, focusing on user perceptions. Similarly, Roh and Jang (2025) investigated platform adoption in the context of Temu and AliExpress. In addition, Temu has been included in several studies as part of broader analyses of online platforms (Ding et al., 2026; Nielsen & Andersen, 2026).

2 Literature Background

To understand why consumers purchase from controversial online stores, it is necessary to examine the reasoning processes through which such behavior is justified. This study draws on Behavioral Reasoning Theory (BRT), which links beliefs, reasons, motives, intentions, and behaviour in explaining human decision-making (Westaby, 2005). Widely applied in marketing research, BRT emphasizes how individuals justify their actions through both *reasons for* and *reasons against* a particular behaviour (Sahu et al., 2020). According to the theory, beliefs and values shape reasons for or against a behaviour, which in turn influence attitudes or global motives, intentions, and ultimately behaviour (Sahu et al., 2020; Westaby, 2005). BRT's ability to explain reasons for and against certain behaviors has been applied in several studies, including those on remanufactured products (Belbag & Belbag, 2025), sustainable shopping (Habib et al., 2025), and mobile shopping adoption (Gupta & Arora, 2017). Prior research suggests that purchasing decisions are shaped by both enabling and inhibiting factors: while price savings strongly motivate shopping adoption (Gupta & Arora, 2017), financial constraints, social disapproval, personal compromises, and psychological barriers such as low motivation can act as reasons against purchasing (Habib et al., 2025). To conclude, Behavioral Reasoning Theory (BRT) helps explain consumers' reasons both for and against purchasing, which may stem from a wide range of life circumstances, personality-related factors, and situational influences. This study focuses specifically on the *reasons for* purchasing from a controversial online store.

Controversial online stores may contribute to facilitating purchases, yet consumers may also actively choose-or unintentionally gravitate toward-buying from questionable retailers. Companies may employ so-called 'dark online store' elements, where online platforms are designed to benefit the company rather than the user (Brignull et al., 2023). These design patterns may involve aggressive marketing and

emotionally charged cues, while exploiting user unawareness and cognitive biases to influence decision-making (Singh et al., 2025). These factors can lead to compulsive purchasing (Greenberg et al., 2021), impulsive shopping (Nyrhinen et al., 2024; Shahpasandi et al., 2020), or even shopping addiction (Nyrhinen et al., 2023; Zarate et al., 2023). Immersion in online shopping can even result in physical consequences, such as fatigue (Kaleton et al., 2026). Reasons for unethical customer behaviour have also been linked to personal attitudes, social influences, and egoistic motives (Mayr et al., 2022). Customers may exhibit self-indulgent consumption tendencies, resist certain stores or products, or experience trust issues and scepticism toward sustainable shopping (Kemppainen et al., 2021). In sum, reasons for purchasing from questionable retailers may originate from the company, the customer, or a combination of both.

3 Methodology

This study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of why consumers purchase from online stores perceived as controversial; therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted. Temu was selected as the target online store, as it is one of the most popular online stores in Europe. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews which took place between June 2024 and February 2025. Six participants were recruited from a Finnish Temu-related Facebook group consisting of more than 30,000 members, and one participant was recruited in person. The selection criteria included individuals who had made a purchase from the Temu online store or application within the past three months. Thus, the participants represented “knowledgeable agents” who know what they are doing and can explain what they are doing, intending, and thinking (Gioia et al., 2013). No compensation was provided to the volunteer interviewees. Five interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams video conferencing, while two were carried out by mobile phone due to technical issues experienced by the interviewees. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using the university’s AI-based transcription service, after which the transcripts were carefully reviewed. The quotations presented in this study have been translated from Finnish into English.

The themes discussed with the participants included participant’s online shopping habits, shopping experiences, the influence of others, and the visual and structural characteristics of the online store. The interview protocol was designed to elicit

detailed narratives through probing questions, encouraging participants to reflect on their interpretations in an iterative, dialogical format and thereby generating rich data on a sensitive phenomenon. In practice, the interviewer followed an interview guide and asked follow-up questions when appropriate. Issues such as child labor or product safety were addressed only if participants themselves raised them and wished to elaborate. The average length of the interviews was 71 minutes, which enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences in a rich and detailed manner. Participant and interview details are provided in Appendix 1. The data were analyzed using Atlas.TI qualitative analysis software. Behavioral reasoning theory by Westaby (2005) was guiding the analysis process by establishing focus on the reasons for Temu purchasing. The first step of analysis was careful familiarization of the collected data by reading it multiple times. In the first stage, reasons-related content was marked in the data, and after that, investigated again to find potential emerging patterns. After multiple rounds of analysis, the main themes describing the reasons for purchasing from a controversial store could be identified. These are explained in detail in the next section.

4 Findings

Our analysis identified five types of reasons that explain why consumers utilize contradictory online stores despite their negative reputation: 1) financial, 2) convenience-related, 3) hedonic, 4) social, and 5) platform-related reasons. These themes are discussed in detail below.

4.1 Financial reasons

Financial reasons were an important motivation for purchasing from Temu. These reasons related to financial considerations, including product prices, affordability, and participants' ability to meet their basic needs. The platform was perceived as offering significantly lower prices compared to domestic online and brick-and-mortar stores, making it highly desirable.

“The price was two or three euros. And if you think about buying the same products from X [a Finnish hypermarket chain], it would be like 20 or 30 euros [...] I can understand why people think, ‘well, I might as well buy everything from here since it’s cheaper.’” [P2]

Overall, affordable pricing emerged as a key enabler of consumption for individuals facing financial constraints, supporting both essential needs and occasional non-essential purchases associated with a better lifestyle. For example, Participant 7 explained: “It allows me to live a decent retiree life at affordable prices.”

4.2 Convenience-related reasons

Convenience-related factors were a key motivation for purchasing from Temu, highlighting the ease and low effort of online shopping. The ability to order from home and avoid physical stores was valued, particularly when crowd-related anxiety or physical limitations made in-store shopping burdensome.

“I honestly don’t like going to those big supermarkets. It makes me anxious—I’m kind of a weird person like that. [...] There’s a bit of a difference when compared to shopping on Temu.” [P7]

Temu was described as a good substitute for physical stores because it offers a wide range of products, including clothing, everyday items, home décor, and small electronics—all accessible from the comfort of home. While many products were seen as similar to those available in domestic retailers, trust in the platform remained conditional rather than absolute. Participants engaged in careful, product-specific evaluations, particularly avoiding items associated with potential health or safety risks. Purchases were justified through risk-minimizing reasoning, such as emphasizing limited exposure or indirect use. For example, participant 4 explained that dog nail clippers were acceptable to buy, as “the contact time is so short that it would not cause poisoning.” These findings suggest that purchasing from Temu is not entirely indiscriminate or impulsive; rather, it involves active boundary-setting and rationalization, allowing consumers to balance convenience and low prices with perceived safety and ethical considerations.

4.3 Hedonic reasons

Temu shopping was also associated with hedonic aspects. Hedonic reasons refer to pleasure and enjoyment derived from the shopping experience, including entertainment, excitement, and visually stimulating environments. Participants described browsing the store as entertaining and engaging, thanks to the visually

stimulating and attention-grabbing interface. The homepage was perceived as inspiring and encouraged exploration of new products.

“It feels like ‘Alice in Wonderland’ when you go there [...] I can spend even two hours just browsing everything they have. And all kinds of things might end up in the shopping cart [...] Time flies surprisingly fast. You go in to get something specific, but the homepage offers everything from one end to the other... you start looking at one thing, and then you always drift on to the next.” [P4]

“Temu is perhaps more captivating. First, there are more products, and the advertising is much flashier on the site—it’s not nearly as restrained as what you are used to.” [P3]

The anticipation associated with awaiting deliveries emerged as an affective component of the shopping experience, contributing to feeling of excitement. Temu shopping was likened to gambling, highlighting the uncertainty surrounding product quality and usability as a central element of enjoyment. As illustrated by Participant 3, receiving a usable product at a very low cost was experienced as a “win,” reinforcing positive emotions and encouraging continued engagement with the platform.

“It’s surprisingly exciting to wait and see what will actually arrive [...] It was a bit like gambling—whether the clothes would be wearable or not. And of course, the price is so much lower than anywhere else, so if it turns out to be something you can actually use, it feels a bit like winning at a slot machine.” [P3]

4.4 Social reasons

The social environment also played an important role in shaping purchasing decisions. Social factors included recommendations from friends and family, media exposure, and collective shopping experiences, all of which contributed to increased interest in and acceptance of Temu. However, a dual pattern emerged: while social influences often encouraged purchasing, they simultaneously imposed constraints on consumption. Social norms, expectations, and anticipated judgments prompted reflection and justification, at times limiting what or how much participants felt comfortable purchasing.

Recommendations and positive experiences shared by acquaintances encouraged initial engagement with Temu, occasionally transforming purchasing into a collective and socially enjoyable activity, such as group orders with family members. Positive peer experiences were particularly influential in counterbalancing the largely negative media coverage surrounding Chinese online stores. Such endorsements reduced suspicion and normalized purchasing by signaling that buying from Temu was common and acceptable. At the same time, participants questioned claims about unethical practices by comparatively evaluating Temu against other retailers, often concluding that there was insufficient evidence to justify avoiding the platform. Because Temu products were perceived as similar in origin to those sold by socially accepted outlets, purchasing from Temu was ultimately considered acceptable. Interestingly, ongoing media discussion and debate also appeared to spark curiosity about the platform, effectively functioning as “free advertising” for Temu.

“Well, the thing is, it’s the same product. Not a similar one-the same product. A Finnish online store has ordered those same compression gloves from Asia... If that’s how it is, then I’ll order it from Temu.” [P7]

“I started looking at something completely different there. And then, when I had heard the news that the clothes were produced cheaply using child labor, I became curious about what they were like.” [P3]

Purchases were justified by framing global inequality and unfairness as issues beyond individual control and by emphasizing that all consumption choices involve ethical trade-offs. In addition, buying from controversial retailers was rationalized through appeals to necessity: under financial constraints, purchasing only essential items was considered morally acceptable. However, participants also reported carrying a “cloak of shame” associated with purchasing from Temu, reflecting the stigmatization attached to buying from controversial retailers. Anticipated social disapproval and the risk of moral judgment led some to conceal their purchasing choices and avoid discussing them openly: “I don’t dare to mention the place I buy from, because the reaction might be that people start criticizing me” [P2].

4.5 Platform-related reasons

Platform-related factors also strongly attracted consumers to Temu. These included usability features, payment options, delivery practices, and policies that reduced the perceived risk of purchasing. The availability of the platform in the consumer's native language lowered barriers to use and was seen as a competitive advantage. Perceived risk was further mitigated by low prices, which limited potential financial loss, as well as by a 30-day payment term and trusted payment options such as Klarna. Free delivery functioned as a salient incentive, actively shaping purchasing behavior. Participants adjusted order sizes to reach the €25 delivery threshold, sometimes coordinating joint orders with family members. In addition, Temu's satisfaction guarantee-allowing refunds without returning products-was viewed as a significant advantage compared to other online shops, where returns are often cumbersome and costly.

"I have ordered a lot, and I am really satisfied. If there is something wrong with the delivery, I immediately receive a text message saying that I don't need to return the item—they will refund the purchase. I have been very pleased with that." [P1]

The Temu website and application were generally experienced as easy to use, with effective search functions reducing cognitive effort once users became familiar with the platform. In addition, frequent discounts, campaigns, and occasional free or promotional items enhanced the perceived value of shopping.

5 Discussion

This study examined consumers' reasons for purchasing from controversial online stores. The findings indicate that the reasons are multifaceted and can be broadly categorized into social, personal, and platform-related factors. An overview of these findings is presented in Figure 1.

Reasons related to the social environment	Reasons related to personal circumstances and individual motivations	Reasons related to the characteristics of the online store
Social reasons • Recommendations and positive experiences from acquaintances • Shared experience • Media exposure	Financial reasons • One's life situation, limited purchasing power Convenience-related reasons • Ability to purchase all needed items from a single platform, from the comfort of home • Quick and convenient delivery Hedonic reasons • Entertainment • Excitement related to the order	Platform-related reasons • Availability in the native language • Low perceived risk: A 30-day payment term, reliable payment options, easy refunds • Free delivery for purchases over €25 • Wide product selection • Effective search function • Well-functioning application

Figure 1: Summary of the findings

Source: Own

According to the findings, the social environment can encourage, but at the same time limit, purchases from controversial stores, reflecting the coexistence of reasons for and reasons against considerations as proposed by BRT (Westaby, 2005). Recommendations and positive experiences from acquaintances, shared shopping experiences, and media exposure encouraged Temu purchasing. These results align with previous research showing that peer influence and social proof can reduce hesitation when engaging retailers (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). On the other hand, shopping from controversial stores involves considerable reflection, with purchase decisions often requiring justification both internally and in social interactions. This process demonstrates the use of neutralization techniques, through which individuals rationalize ethically questionable behavior in order to maintain a positive self-concept (Sykes & Matza, 1957). For instance, purchasing was commonly legitimized through defence of necessity (McGregor, 2008), as financial constraints were used to justify purchases, and through condemnation of the condemners (McGregor, 2008), whereby criticism was deflected by emphasizing that many others shop from the platform and that identical products are sold by socially accepted domestic retailers at higher prices. Previous research suggests that consumers may face disapproval or criticism if they do not engage in conscious purchasing practices (Habib et al., 2025). Similar dynamics emerged in this study, where criticism and purchase-related shame were evident. However, these social pressures did not ultimately appear to influence or deter purchasing decisions, even though previous research suggests that exposing customers to feelings of guilt can sometimes encourage more responsible purchasing (Makkonen et al., 2023).

Previous research has also demonstrated that irresponsible purchasing is influenced by personal characteristics, limited knowledge, or attitudinal factors (Mayr et al., 2022; Kemppainen et al., 2021; Nyrhinen et al., 2024). The findings of this study support these suggestions. Individual circumstances and personal motivations were central for shopping in a controversial online store. Financial factors, such as limited purchasing power or budget constraints, make Temu's low prices particularly appealing. Similarly, Gupta and Arora (2017) identified potential cost savings as the primary driver of mobile shopping adoption. Convenience-related reasons further reinforce this behavior, as consumers value the ability to shop for all needed items from home with easy delivery. Additionally, hedonic factors—including entertainment and the excitement associated with a delivery—added an experiential dimension to the purchases, suggesting that online shopping can carry emotional rewards.

Finally, the store itself can also act as an attraction. Platform-related characteristics such as availability in the native language, reliable payment options, easy refunds, free delivery thresholds, a wide product selection, and a well-functioning search function enhanced the shopping experience. These findings do not reflect online stores' dark patterns, as defined in previous research (Singh et al., 2025; Voigt et al., 2021), per se. However, they may operate as boundary-blurring mechanisms that reduce perceived risk and ethical friction, thereby facilitating purchasing decisions. In particular, free delivery thresholds and refunds without return encouraged consumers to increase their purchase volume, suggesting that such design elements can assume dark pattern-like characteristics by subtly nudging users to spend more than they initially intended.

Together, the findings suggest that consumers' appeal to purchase from a controversial online store cannot be explained by pricing alone, nor by manipulative platform design. Instead, this attraction appears to emerge from an interplay of social validation, personal circumstances, experiential enjoyment, and well-designed platform features. Overall, the findings enhance understanding of how individuals justify their behavior and how moral ambivalence, everyday constraints, and enjoyment coexist in such purchasing decisions.

As this research is qualitative, the findings are descriptive and grounded in individual participants' experiences. Moreover, the study captures the perspectives of relatively informed and engaged users who appear to be positively disposed toward the platform, which may limit the diversity of viewpoints and underrepresent more critical or disengaged consumers. In addition, the focus of the study was on reasons for purchasing rather than reasons against it, reflecting only one side of the behavioral reasoning process (Westaby, 2005). Consequently, future research would benefit from a more balanced examination of both enabling and inhibiting reasons. In-depth investigation of guilt neutralization processes (Sykes & Matza, 1957) related to controversial purchasing would be a particularly valuable avenue for future research to better understand the underlying consumer behavior. Finally, further studies employing different methods, customer demographics, and cultural contexts are needed to deepen the understanding of the investigated phenomenon.

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Appendix 1: Overview of Participants and Interviews

	Age	Gender	Living environment	Purchased Temu product(s)	Transaction channel and device	Duration (min)
P1	71	Female	Rural	Jewellery, underwear, socks, clothing, dog toys, men's swimsuit	Application, mobile phone	56
P2	23	Non-binary	Urban	Eye eyebrow trimmer razors, hair bands, elastic hair bands	Application, mobile phone	82
P3	28	Male	Urban	Clothing, golf gear, socks, baseball caps, sunglasses	Online store, mobile phone	63
P4	54	Female	Urban	Clothing, crafting supplies, wall hook, wall stickers, bracelet beads, wall decoration, metallic toy cars, mug	Application, mobile phone	77
P5	54	Female	Rural	Vacuum spare parts, clothing, sandals, socks, essential oils, makeup, cat toys, make up sponges, solar cell lights, balloons	Application, mobile phone	70
P6	54	Female	Urban	Clothing, stickers, flashlights, pens, decorations, blankets, cat products, color catcher towels, smartwatch	Online store, laptop	63
P7	67	Female	Urban	Clothing, home items, decoration, health products, shoes, lamps, phone, headphones, kitchen products	Online store, laptop	87

