



Consuming Impulses

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[Order of authors was determined by a flip of a coin.]

ABSTRACT -

This paper offers a psychological model of consumer impulse buying episodes. It goes beyond the standard definition of impulse buying (i.e. unplanned purchases) by distinguishing five crucial elements: 1) a sudden and spontaneous desire to act; 2) a state of psychological disequilibrium; 3) the onset of psychological conflict and struggle; 4) a reduction in cognitive evaluation; 5) lack of awareness of the consequences of impulse buying. A study of 202 adults was conducted. A consumer impulsivity scale was developed to measure other consumer behaviors. Drawing upon depth interviews, we identified the distinctive elements that characterize the

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IMPULSE BUYING

Many consumer products typically are classified as "impulse" items. What is it about these products that evokes a clear prototype exists, but impulse products are commonly characterized as low-cost, frequently purchased with little cognitive effort from the consumer. The implication is that impulse items elicit immediate and "mindless" purchases (Blank & Chanowitz 1978; Langer & Imber 1980). Trade journals frequently note the spectacular sales results achieved by displays and promotions that are geared specifically to encourage impulse purchases. Two typical examples of supermarket marketing report a 400% increase in potato chip, cheese puff, and pretzel sales (Supermarketing Nov. 1977); and a 300% increase in sales (Supermarketing Jan. 1978).

A "product" orientation has dominated much of the discussion about impulsive consumption. The trade journals focus on arrangements and modifications that seem to boost buying levels: brighter colors, point-of-purchase displays, "companion" items, special premiums. This perspective often leads to classifying of products into those that are "impulsive" and those that are not; however, almost anything can be purchased impulsively. Expensive clothing, electronic equipment, and cars are considered non-impulse items, yet their purchase can involve impulsive behavior. Consumer impulse buying is widespread in the population and across product categories. Bellenger, Robertson and Hirschman (1977) found that almost 40% of all store purchases fell into the impulse category, ranging from 27% to 62% of all purchases for each line. Few products are immune to impulse buying.

Placing sole emphasis upon product type provides a limited perspective, since it is the individuals, not the products, that are impulsive to consume. What sparks an impulse in one person may not in another. For example, each day millions of people pass the National Enquirer as they file through supermarket checkout lines, but only a small percentage experience the urge to buy the energetically prurient headlines. Research needs to focus on the behavioral nature of these impulses to consume. We will examine existing conceptualizations of impulse buying, and then offer our own definition. Next we present the results of a study that examined impulse buying behavior in 202 adults using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

WHAT IS IMPULSE BUYING

Past efforts at defining impulse buying have suffered because they have not incorporated the psychology underlying the buying episodes. A theme dominating most of the work in marketing depicts impulse buying essentially as "unplanned" (Applebaum 1951; Bellenger et al. 1977; Kollat & Willet 1967; Stern 1962). This is an easily observable and operationally defined concept (Levy 1970). From this perspective, an impulse purchase could be construed as any purchase not written down on a list. This definition could be retouched in information processing terms as the difference between "top-down" (on the list) processing (Norman & Bobrow 1975). but this is where the idea of unplanned purchasing breaks down. Impulse buying involves both conceptually-driven and data-driven processing. It is not accurate or useful to consider all the "unplanned" purchases as impulsive behavior. Clearly consumers use score lists to aid so the fact that a purchase is unplanned is neither a sufficient nor necessary (as we shall show) condition for impulse purchase.

We have identified five crucial elements that distinguish impulsive from nonimpulsive consumer behavior. First is a sudden and spontaneous desire to act, representing a clear departure from the previous ongoing behavior. A sudden change in psychological states fits in well with neurophysiological representations, where an impulse is described as "a continuing along a nerve fiber" (Wolman 1977). In the same way that these neurological impulses trigger some biological responses, psychological impulses can be viewed as stimulation agents driven by conscious and unconscious mental processes. For example, that you are walking down the pickles and relishes aisle in the supermarket and notice a jar of marinated artichoke hearts, you feel an urgency to buy them and go right home and build a huge antipasto. It is important to understand the difference between buying milk and buying artichoke hearts. Both are unplanned purchases brought about by visual stimulation, yet seeing the milk provides a simple reminder while the artichoke hearts trigger a more complex response.

The sudden urge to buy on impulse can throw the consumer into a state of psychological disequilibrium. This self-impulsive buying can cause an individual to feel temporarily out-of-control. There is an extensive literature on the development of impulsivity and impulse control. The ability to voluntarily refuse immediate gratification, to tolerate self-imposed delay, is the core of most philosophical concepts, of "will power". The most fundamental steps in socialization require learning to control impulses and express them only under appropriate conditions, e.g. toilet training. The temptation to succumb to impulses may threaten a person's budget, diet, schedule, or reputation. In these situations the consumer's disequilibrium may be resolved. In other instances impulsive consumption may represent spontaneous and creative activity, and involve much less than a loss of control.

The third element of consumer impulsivity is the psychological conflict and struggle that may ensue (Thaler & Shefrin 1982). A consumer feels ambivalent toward the products that are impulse objects. Freud (1920/1956) saw impulses as involving two competing forces; the "pleasure and reality principles" (the id and the superego). The consumer is pulled in two directions: to weigh the benefits of immediate gratification against whatever long term consequences might result. Not all buying decisions involve conflict. The artichoke example could conceivably involve no conflict at all, but in many situations the "gratification" of satisfying the impulse must be balanced with some later felt "bad". (Marinated artichoke hearts are fattening, and high in sodium.) Many conflicts occur because current consumption impairs one's ability to consume in the future. Because consumers overvalue proximate satisfactions relative to more distant ones (Strotz 1956), the closer one is to being able to exercise self-control, the harder it is to resist (Ainslie 1975). To illustrate, consider the following two impulses. 1) You are rummaging through a grocery store for what groceries you need to buy and you get a craving for Famous Amos cookies. 2) You are walking through a store and are overcome by the aroma of freshly-baked Famous Amos Chocolate Chip Cookies. Suppose that you were trying to resist an impulse, which impulse would be the hardest to resist? Most likely it would be the latter impulse, because the urge can be satisfied immediately. We often feel that impulses need to be indulged either right now or never.

A fourth distinguishing aspect of impulse buying is that consumers will typically reduce their cognitive evaluation of the purchase. Weinberg and Gottwald (1982) believe that impulse buying involves distinctive transrational, affective states. Behavior is high in affective activation, and low in intellectual control of the buying decision. Impulsive consumption is the antithesis of "economic man" as a rational expected utility maximizer, yet impulse buying is not mindless, low involvement buying. Impulsive buying is a most involving purchase behavior, at least for the moments right after the impulse arises. Impulse buying requires the consumer's complete attention. Moreover, as conflict arises, cognitive activity may increase. The consumer's decision upon whether the consumer has the motivation or ammunition to fight off the impulse.

Finally, people often consume impulsively without regard to the consequences. Our framework must acknowledge the existence of impulsive consumption. Psychodynamic interpretations depict impulsivity as a form of neurotic behavior. But a more realistic model of civilization as based on impulse repression and sublimation, Reich describes impulsiveness as a "defective" behavior. Grabbing the check-out line candy bar, the pretty blouse on sale, or the friendly lady at the cocktail lounge, may be "normal" behavior, yet they could lead to bulimia, bankruptcy and herpes (or worse) respectively. Impulsiveness is a destructive character disorder (Kipnis 1977). Individuals with impulsive pathologies "seem to be living in a state of (with) little perspective about the future consequences of their current behavior" (Wishnie 1977).

It is puzzling why people engage in dysfunctional impulsiveness, i.e. opting for smaller short-term rewards instead of long-term rewards. Ainslie (1975) offers three possibilities: a) we succumb to an impulse because we do not understand the consequences of our behavior; b) we know the consequences are bad but we feel impelled by some "lower" principle ("the devil on our shoulder"); c) we understand the consequences but place too much weight upon satisfying present desires. Most people develop an elaborate system to control their impulses, ranging from placing the alarm clock across the room to opening non-interest bearing checking accounts. As we shall see, consumers also employ a variety of devices to control impulsive buying behavior. Even when the consequences does not involve easily seen long-term negative consequences, people will often want to fight the temptation as to be able to control themselves when it counts (Mischel 1971).

A STUDY OF IMPULSE BUYING

There were two purposes to this study. First, we wanted to explore the psychological content of consumer's self-reported impulsive buying episodes. We developed an open-ended, "depth" interview instrument designed to extensively probe individual's impulsive consumption. Second, we wanted to develop a scale of consumer impulsivity. Further, we wanted to investigate the relationship between

between impulsivity, general attitudes toward shopping, attitudes toward shopping for particular types of products, and personal characteristics such as age, sex, and income.

Two hundred two individuals, half male and half female, were interviewed in their homes. The interview began with a series of open-ended questions and probes. Interview subjects were encouraged to express their feelings freely to a series of open-ended questions and probes. Interview responses. After this phase, subjects filled out a series of scales. The questions ranged from Likert-type items about general attitudes toward shopping to more specific questions about impulsive shopping behavior. In addition, subjects were asked to rate their shopping behavior for various types of products, followed by a short series of demographics. Completion times ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, with an average around one hour. The interviews were conducted in the Chicago and Los Angeles metropolitan areas. Respondents were representative of the lower middle to upper middle classes, and were selected in equal proportion from late adolescent (18-24), young adult (25-35), and mature adult (over 35) populations.

THE SCALING OF CONSUMER IMPULSIVITY

Subjects rated 24 statements about shopping behavior according to how much each description applied to them. The statements were analyzed by principal components using an oblique rotation. Two clear factors emerged (48% of the variance). The first factor represented general attitudes toward shopping as an activity. (Representative items were "enjoy browsing", "enjoy shopping", "shopping is fun", "when depressed" and "don't consider shopping a chore".) The second factor focused on the impulsivity of a subject. ("Buy things spontaneously", "think credit cards are fun", "sudden urges to go out and buy something", and "often buy things not intended"). The 9-item SHOPPING scale and 8-item IMPULSE scale had reliability coefficients (alpha) of .899 and .877, respectively. The scales can be obtained from the authors.)

The correlation between the two scales was .51 ($p < .001$); impulsive shoppers tended to enjoy shopping more than cautious and Protestant in their buying styles. Individuals who scored high in impulsivity were more likely to: 1) like shopping (vs. dislike) ($r = .28, p < .001$), 2) enjoy shopping while "high" ($r = .28, p < .001$), and 3) like shopping by phone ($r = .21, p < .01$). These individuals were less likely to schedule shopping on specific days ($r = -.38, p < .001$) or write out shopping lists ($r = -.41, p < .001$). These individuals were more likely to be an impulsive consumer as a recreational shopper (Bellenger & Korgaonkar 1980) who shops when the mood strikes, shops for shopping activities, and often buys more than planned.

We also examined the relationship between these two scales and personal characteristics of the respondents. College students were more likely to be impulsive than non-college students ($t = 4.6, p < .001$); females enjoyed shopping more than males ($t = 4.6, p < .001$); they also were more impulsive, ($t = 2.29, p < .025$). Males considered "a waste of time" unless it was "functional", i.e. they actually purchased what they had set out to buy. Males considered "non-impulse, utilitarian" items like stereos, automobiles, appliances, and athletic equipment, ($t = 10.0, p < .001$), while females considered shopping for aesthetic goods like casual and dress clothing and grooming products ($t = 9.0, p < .001$). The sex difference in impulsivity could partly reflect the fact that men and women typically are shopping for different kinds of products. It was also found that younger people tended to be more impulsive in their shopping behavior than older people, ($r = .16, p < .05$). As congruent with developmental theories of impulsivity (Mischel 1971), it needs to be investigated more systematically whether other lifestyle and income (e.g. "empty-nesters", newly divorced) may influence this relationship.

EXPERIENCING IMPULSE BUYING EPISODES

From the depth interviews, we sought to develop a general model which could account for both the common patterns and the idiosyncrasy in consumers' impulsive episodes. Moreover, we wanted to relate this to previous research on impulsiveness and shopping behavior. The characteristics of impulse buying developed earlier. To accomplish this, the following discussion reports findings about consumer impulse buying episodes.

Product Emanations

An impulse buying episode begins with a consumer's sensation of some stimulus object, followed by a sudden urge to buy. When the impulse is aroused, all attentional resources are focused upon the product.

-- I have a real hard time in stores without things grabbing my attention. (F-28) [(Respondent gender identified with an M or F, followed by age.)]

-- I was in Field's and this blouse and skirt caught my eye. (F-22)

Respondents often depicted themselves as innocents, minding their own business; they had not intended to buy fell victim to "subliminal" product emanations.

-- I was in Beverly Hills just walking around not intending to buy when I saw some shoes on sale. I went inside and tried them on and they fit fine. At that time I thought about buying one pair, then I got overwhelmed and had to cry everything. They were just calling to me. (F-24)

-- I was standing in the grocery store checkout line, and the candy bar was staring there at me. (M-23)

-- The pants were shrieking 'buy me', so I knew right then that I better walk away and get something else. (F-35)

These anecdotes suggest that these consuming impulses originate within the products. Consumers hint about how they are animated by some products. Independent of the objective reality involved, consumers talk of products that somehow seem to have a life of their own. They purchase impulsively, almost a case of willing seduction. In a sense these beliefs provide a basis for consumers to justify their actions that society might construe as juvenile or lacking in self-control. Products are imbued with wills of their own. Consumers do not recognize the bad' involved in succumbing to an impulse to buy, but attributes this behavior to external forces (e.g., "the store made me do it syndrome"). Consumers talk of their powerlessness to avoid the temptation, as if they were possessed. An immediate purchase could complete the marketplace exorcism. This is only one of many different "psycho-logic" (Levy 1958) that people use to maintain some semblance of rationality, at least to themselves (Levy 1981).

Spontaneous Urges to Consume

Impulse buying usually begins without conscious planning, arising spontaneously and without warning. Respondents describe "suddenly overcome with a desire" to buy, coupled with intense urges to consume.

-- I passed by a case containing brownies. I am depressed to begin with, so I bought four and ate them. I was glad I did it - it made me feel better. (F-33)

This sudden desire to buy or consume is not casual; it moves quickly to center stage and demands immediate attention.

-- You suddenly feel compelled to buy something. It feels like getting an IDEA. (M-22)

-- I saw this wild Marimekko comforter and set of sheets. I saw how it could change my whole bedroom. It was like a "hot jungle". (M-29)

People may view their impulses as creative insights, or even spontaneous flashes of brilliance.

Impulses are action-oriented; they trigger responses, usually quite quickly. Some individuals report that impulse buying has a short duration.

-- It's a fast feeling, and if I don't get it right away, I'll think of reasons why I don't need it. (F-32)

-- It just happens very fast. If I like something that much, I will just buy it -- I don't need to think about it much. (F-21)

Many people expressed the feeling that their impulse purchases were unplanned. As mentioned earlier however, planning is a necessary condition for impulsiveness. In fact some people "plan on being impulsive.

-- I grabbed \$300 and went to Water Tower (Mall). I didn't really know what I was going to spend because I didn't want to plan it out, because the best part of shopping for me is seeing something and knowing that's what I want. (F-28)

By planning to be impulsive, people can enjoy the feeling of being overwhelmed by spontaneous urges and at the same time avoid the negative consequences of impulse control imposed by a budget.

The Inner Dialogue

Sometimes the impulse to buy stimulates the consumer to consider the pros and cons of a prospective purchase. In many situations, the consumer often engages in a serious inner dialogue. This section summarizes the cost-benefit analyses and strategies consumers employ in coping with their buying impulses. It also identifies the rationalizations and affective responses that often play a role.

Cost-Benefit Analyses. People have developed broad repertoires for maintaining self control; they do whatever it takes to resist shopping impulses. The most commonly mentioned means of impulse control involves reasoning with oneself, including weighing the negative consequences of the purchase (e.g., monetary constraints) or thinking about better ways to spend the money.

-- Can I afford it, will I regret it? Will I get my utility, or use it once and forget? Do I really need it or is there a better way to use the money? (M-28)

-- I think of other pleasurable things I could do if I could just hold off. (F-29)

-- I have to be able to see myself using the product. Otherwise I'll resist. (F-28)

Distancing Strategies. Although many respondents talked about the use of abbreviated cost-benefit analyses, it is clear that many people were in fact finding off their consumption urges. Jones and Gerard (1967) hypothesized that "time-binding" (a form of delay of gratification) hinges on self-instructional processes to increase the salience or dominance of the delay of gratification reinforcement induced by actively anticipating future positive consequences. However Mischel and Ebbesen (1982) found that for children, a better strategy was cognitive avoidance; children could wait longer by engaging in self-distraction. Some people do not think about it.

-- You've got to walk away as soon as I feel an impulse, I immediately leave the area. (M-31)

-- I try to distract myself by moving to another display. (F-41)

-- I have a rule about eating - once I finish what is on my plate, I make myself wait half an hour before buying about dessert. By that time, I'm usually doing something else or I'm not hungry anymore. I do this to avoid temptation when shopping. (M-34)

-- I steer clear of record stores when I can't afford it. (M-24)

-- Often five minutes cools me down. (F-35) People go to elaborate lengths to avoid tempting situations, often essentially by playing little tricks on themselves (Schelling 1978).

Small Rewards. Another means of impulse control involves placating oneself with a small purchase as a reward for resisting a costly impulse.

--I had money to buy myself a gold chain, but I decided to buy it later. I bought a half-dozen roses for my girlfriend instead. (M-25)

-- I almost bought this Gucci handbag, but I resisted. Later I bought some expensive chocolate, to reward myself for resisting the temptation to luxury. It was "affordable" self-indulgence. (F-27)

Precommitment. Respondents recognized that one of the problems with impulse buying is that what you want now is not what you want later. Tastes and preferences change over time.

-- I have a real hard time resisting clothes. My closet is filled with clothes I now regret buying. (M-26)

-- To stop myself, I recalled my last impulse purchase that I never ended up using. (M-29)

--I saw a pair of shoes I really liked, but I reminded myself I have many shoes I've never worn. (F-25)

To avoid these problems, people employ various precommitment strategies (Strotz 1956; Thaler & Shefrin 1981), Ulysses having himself bound to the mast so that he could listen to the Sirens while his crew sailed the boat with (Thaler & Shefrin 1977). People impose rationing devices upon their behavior to preclude impulsivity (e.g., budgets or the use of cash instead of credit cards).

-- How do I discipline myself? I don't carry credit cards. (F-25)

-- I bring little money with me. Going home for more cash gives me time to think. (F-26)

-- When I go into stores I make a pact to go straight to the department that carries the thing I'm interested in. (F-32)

-- I tell myself that I don't have the time to look at the product closely. (F-24)

-- I make my boyfriend go with me. (F-31)

Another precommitment technique involves the making of side-bets (Becker 1960), where future rewards are imposed to avoid more immediate rewards. Lack of self control in the short run would lead to immediate forfeiture of a larger reward. People are willing to place severe constraints on their immediate behavior (e.g. wiring one's jaws shut to lose weight). People cannot trust themselves in the short run.

Rationalizations. Another aspect of consumers' inner dialogues involves rationalizations of impulsive buying, the reclassification of an impulsive purchase as non-impulsive. People are especially adept at maintaining cognitive consistency (vis a vis their self-image).

-- Clinique make-up - you get a "free" gift if you buy over \$7 worth. I didn't need the product, but I used it. My friend bought it, so did I. (F -24)

-- Men's designer shirts at 40% off. I saw two I liked and charged them; it was hard to resist the good quality, and besides I didn't need the cash. (M-33)

-- I was out with some girlfriends; they were buying things and I felt deprived. So I bought nylon stockings in different colors. I just felt compelled to buy something, but they were inexpensive and needed. (F-25)

And sometimes the rationalizations do not even attempt to assume an air of rationality.

-- My mind quickly starts rationalizing how much I need that product, and all the pros and cons go through my mind, except the pros usually outweigh the cons. (M-24)

Guilt. Not all shopping impulses foment cognitive conflict, though many led to heated debates between the straight and crooked sides of a consumer. For some people the mere sensation of any impulse (shopping or not) is immediately met with an extreme form of the "Protestant Ethic", with its puritanical demands for self-restraint and its negative attitude toward indulgence (Thaler & Shefrin 1971). Spontaneous behavior is considered inherently bad and frivolous.

-- I'm not big on impulses, I watch my money real close. (F-45)

-- I'm from a conservative, rural background in which I was taught the value of a dollar. I don't spend money freely and always want the best value for my dollar. (M-31)

-- Implicitly I know that impulse buying is not good. (M-39)

-- I fear regretting the purchase later, and I think about what would happen if others found out how much it cost. (F-26)

Impulse Persistence and Power

Buying impulses add pressure to the inner dialogue because they are often persistent, and not easily dismissed by consumers.

-- I didn't feel I could leave the store without the shoes. I imagined myself leaving and it just didn't seem right. (F-20)

-- It gnaws at me until I buy it. If I want to get it I keep thinking about it. It won't get out of my mind. (F-26)

-- The feeling starts when I see something . . . it comes on very quickly and is a persistent nagging feeling.

Individuals describe removing themselves from the area of temptation to another part of the store, but the buying impulse still haunts them.

-- I saw this 14K gold ring on sale. Tried it on, took it off . . . tried it on, took it off. I left the store, I didn't buy it because all I could think about was how good it would look with painted nails, my white silk blouse, and high heels. (F-25)

At their strongest buying impulses are impossible to resist. Some respondents associate consumer-impulsiveness with hunger drives or states. One person describes his impulse buying urges as feeling like a "hunger"; another describes the same feeling for her. Another young man reflects that his impulse buying urges "seem almost physical". The urgency to act is quickly overcome by self-control. Respondents frequently use extreme terms to describe what it feels like when they experience the impulse: risky, a "surge", fun!, naughty, great, happy, exhilarating, satisfying, compelling.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have explored consumer's experiences with impulse buying. We have attempted to go beyond the traditional view of impulse buying as nothing more than "unplanned purchases". The results were consistent with psychological interpretations, and the psychodynamics that underlie impulse buying episodes. The current research is clearly exploratory but it has highlighted several factors that require further study: 1) how does mood influence impulse proclivity? 2) what situational factors stimulate impulse buying (e.g point-of-purchase)? 3) what resistance strategies are more or less effective and how can marketers use them to help consumers exercise impulse control to "push consumers over the edge"? we also need to understand more about the trait of consumer impulsiveness distributed across demographic and lifestyle segments; and how it is related to other forms of impulsive behavior.

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