CONSUMING IMPULSES

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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 regard for the consequences of impulse buying. A study of 202 adults was conducted. A consumer impulsivity scale was developed and related to other consumer behaviors. Drawing upon depth interviews, we identified the distinctive elements that characterize the psychological content of prototypic consumer buying episodes: product emanations, spontaneous urges to consume, the inner dialogue (cost-benefit analyses, resistance strategies, rationalization, guilt), and impulse persistence and power.

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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 the impulse label? It is not clear that a clear prototype exists, but impulse products are commonly characterized as low-cost, frequently purchased goods that demand little cognitive effort from the consumer. The implication is that impulse items elicit immediate and "mindless" behavior (Blank & Chanowitz 1978; Langer & Imber 1980). Trade journals frequently note the spectacular sales results achieved through product displays and promotions that are geared specifically to encourage impulse purchases. Two typical examples of successful impulse-oriented marketing report a 400% increase in potato chip, cheese puff, and pretzel sales (Supermarketing Nov. 1977); and a 250% jump in razor blade sales (Supermarketing Jan. 1978).

A "product" orientation has dominated much of the discussion about impulsive consumption. The trade journal 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 not; however, almost anything can be purchased impulsively. Expensive clothing, electronic equipment, considered non-impulse items, yet their purchase can involve impulsive behavior. Consumer impulse buying is widespread, both in population and across product categories. Bellenger, Robertson and Hirschman (1977) found that almost 40% of consumers' department store purchases fell into the impulse category, ranging from 27% to 62% of all purchases for each line. Few products are not impulse buying.

Placing sole emphasis upon product type provides a limited perspective, since it is the individuals, not the products, who experience the impulse to consume. What sparks an impulse in one person may not in another. For example, each day millions of people file through supermarket checkout lines, but only a small percentage experience the urge to delve beyond non-energetically prurient headlines. Research needs to focus on the behavioral nature of these impulses to consume, examine existing conceptualizations of impulse buying, and then offer our own definition. Next we present the results of an exploratory 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 underpinnings of the behavior. A theme dominating most of the work in marketing depicts impulse buying essentially as "unplanned" purchase behavior (Applebaum 1951; Bellenger et al. 1977; Kollat & Willet 1967; Stern 1962). This is an easily observable and operational limited (Levy 1970). From this perspective, an impulse purchase could be construed as any purchase not written down. 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; it involves both conceptually-driven and data-driven processing. It is not accurate or useful to consider all the "unplanned" purchases of a half-gallon of milk, a ten-pound bag of potatoes, or toilet paper as impulsive behavior. Clearly consumers use score cards so the fact that a purchase is unplanned is neither a sufficient nor necessary (as we shall show) condition for purchase.

We have identified five crucial elements that distinguish impulsive from nonimpulsive consumer behavior. First, sudden and spontaneous desire to act, representing a clear departure from the previous ongoing behavior stream in psychological states fits in well with neurophysiological representations, where an impulse is described as "a wave of active change continuing along a nerve fiber" (Wolman 1977). In the same way that these neurological impulses trigger some biological response, psychological impulses can be viewed as stimulation agents driven by conscious and unconscious mental processes. For example, imagine that you are walking down the pickles and relishes aisle in the supermarket and notice a jar of marinated artichoke hearts; you feel a sudden urgency to buy them and go right home and build a huge antipasto. It is important to understand the difference between buying milk. Both are unplanned purchases brought about by visual stimulation, yet seeing the milk provides a convenient 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 sudden urge to buy 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 delays, and to avoid impulses may threaten a person's budget, diet, schedule, or reputation. In these situations the consumer's disequilibrium may be large enough to throw him or her into a state where it is hard to control himself. In other instances impulsive consumption may represent spontaneous and creative activity, and involve much less psychological imbalance.

The third element of consumer impulsivity is the psychological conflict and struggle that may ensue (Thaler & Sloman 1986). The 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; he must weigh the benefits of immediate gratification against whatever long-term consequences might result. Not all buying involves conflict. The artichoke example could conceivably involve no conflict at all, but in many situations the "good" (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 overvalue proximate satisfactions relative to more distant ones (Strotz 1956), the closer one is to being able to enjoy the benefits of immediate gratification, the harder it is to resist (Ainslee 1975). To illustrate, consider the following two impulses. 1) You are rummaging through what groceries you need to buy and you get a craving for Famous Amos cookies. 2) You are walking through a mall and you have desire to buy and you get a craving for Famous Amos Chocolate Chip Cookies. Suppose that you were trying to overcome the aroma of freshly-baked Famous Amos cookies. Most likely it would be the latter impulse, because the urge can be satisfied more quickly. People 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 consequences of their current behavior. Weinberg and Gottwald (1982) believe that impulse buying involves distinctive transrational, affective states. Behavioral models of "economic man" as a rational expected utility maximizer, yet impulse buying is not mindless, low involvement behavior. In fact, we see impulse buying as a most involving purchase behavior, at least for the moments right after the impulse arises. Impulsive buying is not mindless, low involvement behavior. In fact, we see impulse buying as a most involving purchase behavior, at least for the moments right after the impulse arises.

Finally, people often consume impulsively without regard to the consequences. This reveals the limits of impulsive consumption. Psychodynamic interpretations depict impulsivity as a form of neurotic behavior. But the modern model of civilization as based on impulse repression and sublimation, Reich describes impulsiveness as a "defect in repression". Grabbing the check-out line candy bar, the pretty blouse on sale, or the friendly lady at the cocktail lounge, may represent perfectly "normal" behavior, yet they could lead to bulimia, bankruptcy and herpes (or worse) respectively. Impulsiveness may deteriorate into a destructive character disorder (Kipnis 1977). Individuals with impulsive pathologies seem to be living in a state of chronic conflict (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 larger long-term rewards. Ainslee (1975) offers three possibilities: a) we succumb to an impulse because we do not understand the consequences but place too much weight upon satisfying present desires. Most people develop an elaborate stockpile of devices to control their impulses, ranging from placing the alarm clock across the room to opening non-interest bearing Christmas Club Accounts. As we shall see, consumers also employ a variety of devices to control impulse buying behavior. Even when the impulse does not involve easily seen long-term negative consequences, people will often want to fight the temptation as they would 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-control. We developed an open-ended, "depth" interview instrument designed to extensively probe individual differences in impulsive consumption. Second, we wanted to develop a scale of consumer impulsivity. Further, we wanted to investigate the relationship between cognitive control and impulsive consumption.
between impulsivity, general attitudes toward shopping, attitudes toward shopping for particular types of products, and demographic 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 depth interviews: subjects were encouraged to express their feelings freely to a series of open-ended questions and probes. Intervi responses. After this phase, subjects filled out a series of scales. The questions ranged from Likert-type items about shopping to more specific questions about impulsive shopping behavior. In addition, subjects were asked to rate shopping for various types of products, followed by a short series of demographics. Completion times ranged from 3/4 to 1.5 hours, the average around one hour. The interviews were conducted in the Chicago and Los Angeles metropolitan areas. Respondents were broadly 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 responses were analyzed by principal components using an oblique rotation. Two clear factors emerged (48% of the variance). The first factor focused on general attitudes toward shopping as an activity. (Representative items were "enjoy browsing", "enjoy shopping when depressed" and "don't consider shopping a chore"). The second factor focused on the impulsivity of a subject's shopping behavior ("Buy things spontaneously", "think credit cards are fun", "sudden urges to go out and buy something", and "of intended"). The 9-item SHOPPING scale and 8-item IMPULSE scale had reliability coefficients (alpha) of .899 and .864 respectively on 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 at night (r=.33, p<.001), 2) enjoy shopping while "high" (r=.28, p<.001), and 3) like shopping by phone (r=.21, p<.01). These impulsive consumers were less likely to schedule shopping on specific days (r=-.38, p<.001) or write out shopping lists (r=-.41, p<.001). These results characterize the impulsive consumer as a recreational shopper (Bellenger & Korgaonkar 1980) who shops when the mood strikes, finds gratification in shopping activities, and often buys more than planned.

We also examined the relationship between these two scales and personal characteristics of the respondents. Consistent with earlier findings, females enjoyed shopping more than males, (t=4.6, p<.01); they also were more impulsive, (t=-2.29, p<.025). Males considered "non-impulse, utilitarian" items like stereos, automobiles, appliances, and athletic equipment, (t=10.5, p<.001). The sex difference in consumer impulsivity could partly reflect the fact that men and women typically are shopping for different kinds of products. One was that younger people tended to be more impulsive in their shopping behavior than older people, (r=.16, p=.0.02). Although this result is congruent with developmental theories of impulsivity (Mischel 1971), it needs to be investigated more systematically because changes in 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 process and content elements in consumers' impulsive episodes. Moreover, we wanted to relate this to previous research on impulsiveness and characteristics of impulse buying developed earlier. To accomplish this, the following discussion reports findings on 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 acquire it. Once an 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 is identified with an M or F, followed by age.)]
Respondents often depicted themselves as innocents, minding their own business; they had not intended to buy anything. They 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 the feeling I 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-26)

These anecdotes suggest that these consuming impulses originate within the products. Consumers hint about magical, fantastic forces that animate some products. Independent of the objective reality involved, consumers talk of products that somehow purchase impulsively, almost a case of willing seduction. In a sense these beliefs provide a basis for consumers to abrogate responsibility for actions that society might construe as juvenile or lacking in self-control. Products are imbued with wills of their own; consumers recognize the bad involved in succumbing to an impulse to buy, but attributes this behavior to external forces (an example of "the made me do it syndrome). Consumers talk of their powerlessness to avoid the temptation, as if they were possessed by products, where only an immediate purchase could complete the marketplace exorcism. This is only one of many different "psycho-logics" (Abelson & Rosenberg 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 being "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 there. 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 Marimeko comforter and set of sheets. I saw how it could change my whole bedroom into 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 episodes were of 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 chink much. (F-21)

Many people expressed the feeling that their impulse purchases were unplanned. As mentioned earlier however, "unplannedness" is not 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 it on --- 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 maintain some form of impulse control imposed by a budget.

The Inner Dialogue

Sometimes the impulse to buy stimulates the consumer to consider the probity of a prospective purchase. But even in apparently "mindless" situations, the consumer often engages in a serious inner dialogue. This section summarizes the cost-benefit analyses and various resistance strategies consumers employ in coping with their buying impulses. It also identifies the rationalizations and affective states that play.

Cost-Benefit Analyses. People have developed broad repertoires for maintaining self control; they do whatever is necessary to regulate their shopping impulses. The most commonly mentioned means of impulse control involves reasoning with oneself, i.e. increasing the saliency of 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 want it? 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 not clear how effective people were in fending off their consumption urges. Jones and Gerard (1967) hypothesized that "time-binding" (the capacity to bridge the delay of gratification) hinges on self-instructional processes to increase the salience or dominance of the delay object, a reinforcement induced by actively anticipating future positive consequences. However Mischel and Ebbesen (1970) found that, at least with children, a better strategy was cognitive avoidance children could wait longer by engaging in self-distraction. Sometimes it is best to simply 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 thinking about dessert. By that time, I'm usually doing something else or I'm not hungry anymore. I do the same thing 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, 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 bigger and more 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, treating myself 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 may not be 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-31)
-- 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-29)

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 1977). People impose rationing devices upon their behavior to preclude impulsivity (e.g., budgets or the use of chop sticks).

-- 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 irreversibly tied to one’s ability to avoid more immediate rewards. Lack of self control in the short run would lead to immediate forfeiture of a larger long-term reward.

People are willing to place severe constraints on their immediate behavior (e.g. wiring one’s jaws shut to lose weight) because they know they cannot trust themselves in the short run.

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

-- Clinique make-up - you get a "free" gift if you buy over $7 worth. I didn’t need the product, but I knew I’d use 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 price, high 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 nylons in various 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 wayward (impulsive) sides of a consumer. For some people the mere sensation of any impulse (shopping or not) is immediately met with guilt, an extreme form of the "Protestant Ethic", with its puritanical demands for self-restraint and its negative attitude to pleasure (Mischel 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)
Impulse Persistence and Power

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

-- I didn't feel I could leave the store without the shoes. I imagined myself leaving and it just didn't feel good. (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 until I buy it. (F-26)

-- The feeling starts when I see something... it comes on very quickly and is a persistent nagging. (M-28)

Individuals describe removing themselves from the area of temptation to another part of the store, but the buying impulse may continue to haunt 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, but returned because all I could think about was how good it would look with painted nails, my white silk blouse, black pants and high heels. (F-25)

At their strongest buying impulses are impossible to resist. Some respondents associate consumer-impulsiveness with pressing physiological drives or states. One person describes his impulse buying urges as feeling like a "hunger"; another describes them as "tingling" that comes over her. Another young man reflects that his impulse buying urges "seem almost physical". The urgency to act is quite powerful and difficult to control. Respondents frequently use extreme terms to describe what it feels like when they experience the impulse to consume: exciting, 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 view of impulse buying as nothing more than "unplanned purchases". The results were consistent with psychological interpretations, and reveal the complex 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 or discourage impulse buying (e.g. point-of-purchase)? 3) what resistance strategies are more or less effective and how can marketers use their knowledge of impulse control to "push consumers over the edge"? We also need to understand more about the trait of consumer impulsivity: how distributed across demographic and lifestyle segments; and how it is related to other forms of impulsive behavior.

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