

COMPREHENDING CONSUMER IMPULSE BUYING BEHAVIOUR: A QUALITATIVE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT:

Impulse buying behaviour commonly understood as unplanned, on-the-spot buying without much forethought of need/ consequences, is becoming more significant in present times with growing consumerism and rising disposable incomes. Research pertaining to impulse buying dates back over seven decades, even though many of its mysteries still remain undiscovered. This particular form of buying behaviour (as also other such excessive behaviours) cannot be understood using the existing models of consumer behaviour rooted in rational decision making. Thus, various researchers have tried to model impulse buying behaviour in an attempt to improve our understanding of the underlying factors that lead to such behaviour. In this paper, we attempt to review the various perspectives and models pertaining to impulse buying behaviour with the objective of offering an overview of how research has evolved in this regard. The insights offered in this paper will prove useful for marketers in enhancing their understanding of the phenomenon for improvising the marketing mix, planning retail operations, managing marketing communications and devising effective promotions, so as to induce impulsiveness in the target market, to encourage customers to buy more.

KEYWORDS

Impulse buying behaviour, Impulse buying models, excessive buying behaviours

INTRODUCTION

Impulse buying behaviour has received widespread research attention ever since Stern (1962) discussed its significance for retailers and consumer behaviour theorists. In-fact, researchers had started acknowledging its importance as a key focus area of consumer behaviour as early as 1950s (Du Pont Consumer Buying Habits studies, 1945-1965; Clover, 1950; Applebaum, 1951; West, 1951). Today the significance of this form of consumer behaviour has gained even greater proportions owing to mushrooming retail outlets giving fierce competition to each other in a bid to survive. The goal of each retailer is to maximise profit by increasing sales, by not only fulfilling customer needs and attracting new customers, but also by selling more and more to the existing customers. An important strategy towards this end is to encourage consumers to buy impulsively.

Even though, supported by seven decades of research, impulse buying remains an enigma to many academicians and practitioners who are still trying to uncover this complex buying process and its drivers. This paper is aimed at reviewing and summarising the past research and existing

literature on the nature, antecedents and process of impulse buying. As far as the factors affecting impulse buying are concerned, the past empirical research has focussed on a large number of factors that can be grouped into product characteristics, consumer characteristics, environmental factors and situational factors. Furthermore, impulse buying behaviour has been distinguished from impulse buying tendency and this distinction will be discussed in the paper. There is also a difference among scholars who treat impulse buying tendency as a unitary concept and others who delineate it into cognitive and affective aspects. These viewpoints affect the operationalisation of this variable and accordingly this paper offers a brief discussion about the different tools and techniques used in impulse buying research. The paper also offers a discussion about some oft-quoted models of impulse buying, though till date there is no consensus among academicians on the most comprehensive model explaining this behaviour.

EVOLUTION OF A DEFINITION

Initial research focusses on the planning (or the lack of planning) aspects of impulse buying and considers impulse buying to be synonymous with "unplanned buying" (Clover, 1950; West, 1951). Davidson and Doody (1966) (as cited by Kollat & Willet, 1969, p. 80) define impulse buying as "an unplanned, spur of the moment decision to purchase a product" (p. 180). Stern (1962) attempted to classify different kinds of impulse buying into four broad classifications: pure impulse buying (the novelty or escape purchase which breaks a normal buying pattern (p. 59)), reminder impulse buying (when a shopper sees a product in the store/ advertisement and is reminded to purchase it), suggestion impulse buying (when a shopper goes to the store with no previous knowledge of a product, sees it for the first time and recognises a need for it) and planned impulse buying (when the shopper enters the store with some specific purchases in mind but with the expectation and intention to make other purchases that depend on price specials, coupon offers and the like (p. 60)). In thus classifying impulse buying, Stern (1962) did refer to rational decisions (cognitive aspects) of impulse buying as also the emotional appeals (affective aspects) that trigger the urge to buy on impulse. Also, an important observation in these early researches was that impulse buying by a customer was recognised as an outcome/ response to exposure to in-store/ promotional stimuli (Applebaum, 1951; Kollat & Willet, 1969).

Some researchers took the product-centric research approach to impulse buying which held that certain products can be categorised into impulse products and non-impulse products (Bellenger, Robertson & Hirschman, 1978; Assael, 1985). Clover (1950) pointed out that certain items (books, gift items and knickknacks) had a greater propensity to be sold on impulse, leading to the belief that some products have a greater likelihood to be bought on impulse. However, this viewpoint is considered to be too narrow as it tends to overlook the fact that impulse buying is not restricted to particular product categories and retail settings (Kollat & Willet, 1969).

It was a significant research by Rook and Hoch (1985) in which it was pointed out that impulses were experienced by

customers and not by products, pointing to the crucial element of an impulse purchase: the customer. This led to a marked shift in the manner in which impulse buying was conceptualised and gave rise to the customer-centric orientation of impulse buying. Accordingly, the term impulse buying was reconceptualised by Rook (1987) who highlighted the hedonically complex psychological nature of the behaviour, and defined it as "Impulse buying occurs when a consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately. The impulse to buy is hedonically complex and may stimulate emotional conflict. Also, impulse buying is prone to occur with diminished regard for its consequences." (p. 191). This approach to impulse buying focussing on the customer gained a greater acceptance as compared to the earlier approach.

Piron (1991) found the earlier definitions to be inadequate and defined impulse purchase as "a purchase that is 1) unplanned, 2) the result of an exposure to stimulus, 3) decided "on-the-spot." (p. 512). He further elaborated that a consumer may experience ("experiential impulse purchase") or may not experience ("non-experiential impulse purchase") emotional and/or cognitive reactions while making the purchase.

Beatty and Ferrell (1998) further refined the definition put forth by Rook (1987) and stated that "Impulse buying is a sudden and immediate purchase with no pre-shopping intentions either to buy the specific product category or to fulfil a specific buying task. The behaviour occurs after experiencing an urge to buy and it tends to be spontaneous and without a lot of reflection (i.e. it is "impulsive"). It does not include the purchase of a simple reminder item, which is an item that is simply out-of-stock at home." (p. 171).

Madhavaram and Laverie (2004) broadened the definition further in light of online purchasing and improvised it to include the fact that impulse buying occurred as a result of exposure to stimuli. Their version of the definition of impulse buying was as follows: "Impulse buying is a result of a purchaser's immediate reaction to external stimuli that is often hedonically charged. An impulse episode signifies a change in purchaser's intention to purchase that particular product before and after the exposure to stimuli. The stimuli is not limited to just the product and change in purchaser's intention does not include a reminder item that is simply out of stock at home." (p. 60).

DISTINGUISHING IMPULSE BUYING FROM COMPULSIVE BUYING

Müller, Mitchell and de Zwaan (2015) state that "compulsive buying is defined by a preoccupation with buying and shopping, by frequent buying episodes, or overpowering urges to buy that are experienced as irresistible and senseless. The maladaptive spending behaviour is associated with serious psychological, social, occupational, and financial problems." (p. 132).

The common features of compulsive buying and impulse buying can be identified as: existence of a drive, impulse or urge to buy a product; denial of the negative consequences of the purchase; and an inability to resist/ control/ delay gratification when experiencing the impulse (Faber, O'Guinn

& Krych, 1987). In fact, Kwak, Zinkhan, DeLorme and Larsen (2006) suggest that impulsive buying behaviour might ultimately turn into compulsive buying behaviour. Parboteeah (2005) points out that excessive purchasing behaviours can be placed along a continuum, wherein one end represents impulsive purchasing and the other extremity represents compulsive purchasing.

However, there are certain inherent distinctions between both behaviours too. Compulsive buying is chronic and has been referred to as an addiction and an under-recognised disorder. (Sun, Wu & Youn, 2004; Workman & Paper, 2010). On the other hand, impulse buying may be referred to as occasional / episodic. It would be reasonable to believe that while all compulsive buyers are impulsive (in that they lack impulse control mechanisms), the reverse is not true (all impulsive shoppers are not compulsive). Also, while compulsive buying is caused by internal stimuli, impulsive buying is largely triggered by external stimuli. Sun et al. (2004) state that "the degree of loss of impulse control" is an important measure that can distinguish impulsive buying from compulsive buying. Furthermore, Workman and Paper (2010) note that "the number and quality of normative evaluations performed by highly compulsive consumers will be fewer and less detailed as compared to those performed by non-compulsive consumers" (p. 103).

IMPULSE BUYING TENDENCY

Gerbing, Ahadi and Patton (1987) define impulsivity, an important psychological construct, as "a tendency to respond quickly to a given stimulus, without deliberation and evaluation of consequences." (p. 357). Based on this general trait, Rook and Fisher (1995) conceptualised a consumer trait named buying impulsiveness (also known as impulse buying tendency) and defined it as "a consumer's tendency to buy spontaneously, unreflectively, immediately and kinetically." (p. 306). Rook and Fisher (1995) also highlighted the distinction between the buying impulsiveness trait and impulse buying behaviour. While impulse purchase behaviour refers to the *act* of attaining fulfilment of the sudden, spontaneous urge to buy, through the actual purchase of the product; buying impulsiveness (impulse buying tendency) refers to the consumer's propensity to make such purchases. They noted that higher levels of buying impulsiveness trait would result in the consumers experiencing stronger impulses and increase the likelihood of their responding to these impulses; but may or may not result in actual impulse buying behaviour depending on normative influences and/ or various other intervening factors.

MEASUREMENT OF IMPULSE BUYING

Various measurement techniques have been used to study the impulse buying phenomenon. These are used either independently or in combination with one another to increase their effectiveness. Some measurement methods include:

- **Observation-** Observing the customer's activities while in the store can offer useful insights about their impulse purchase behaviour. However, this is a costly and time consuming method and requires well-trained observers and carefully formulated, pre-

tested procedures. Detailed recording of the observed data is also needed (Applebaum, 1951).

- **Interviewing-** Pre and Post shopping interviews as well as follow up interviews regarding shopping lists, frequency of purchase, are another useful tool to measure impulse buying behaviour. However, the technique suffers from the limitations of over-dependence on spontaneous recall and inability to differentiate between various types of impulse purchases. (Applebaum 1951).
- **Self-report measures-** Self report methods measure impulse buying tendency and assume that customers who score high on this construct exhibit more frequent impulse buying behaviour than customers who score low. A variety of self-report measures of impulse buying tendency have been developed and popular ones include a nine item scale proposed by Rook and Fisher (1995) (unidimensional construct) and a twenty item scale developed by Verplanken and Herabadi (2001) (consists of cognitive aspects and affective aspects). Self-report measures offer the benefits of cost effectiveness, face validity and well-established psychometric properties; but also suffer from the limitation that they rely solely on customers' truthful insights and memory regarding their own complex behaviour patterns (Dougherty et al., 2004).
- **Laboratory behavioural methods-** Laboratory behavioural methods offer a more objective alternative to self-report measures as they overcome some of the limitations of self-report measures. Dougherty et al. (2004) suggest the use of various types of laboratory measures such as rapid-decision, reward-directed, and punishment and/ or extinction paradigms to study impulsive behaviour. However, these methods remain underutilised in the study of impulse buying behaviour.

FACTORS AFFECTING IMPULSE BUYING

Empirical research over the past several decades has revealed various factors that influence impulse buying behaviour. For ease of understanding these have been grouped into product characteristics, consumer characteristics, situational factors and environmental factors.

- **Product characteristics-** include factors such as product category (West, 1951), product appearance and new/ unique styles (Han, Morgan, Kotsiopulo & Kang-Park, 1991), packaging (Cahyorini & Rusfian, 2011), product involvement (Jones, Reynolds, Weun & Beatty, 2003), product price (Stern, 1962).
- **Consumer characteristics-** include factors such as consumer's age (Awan & Abbas, 2015), gender (Dittmar, Beattie & Friese, 1996), income (Awan & Abbas, 2015), culture (Kacen & Lee, 2002), personality (Youn & Faber, 2000), impulse buying tendency (Dholakia, 2000), moods (Ozer & Gultekin, 2015), emotions (Weinberg and Gottwald, 1982; Silvera, Lavack & Kropp, 2008), self-image

(Dittmar, et al., 1996), tendency for shopping enjoyment (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998), variety seeking behaviour (Sharma, Sivakumaran & Marshall, 2010).

- **Situational factors**- include factors such as time available (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998), money available (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998), presence of other people during shopping (Luo, 2005), proximity to product (Peck & Childers, 2006).
- **Environmental factors**- include factors such as point of purchase signs and displays (Peck & Childers, 2006), store environment (Mattila & Wirtz, 2008), visual merchandising (Mehta & Chugan, 2013).

IMPULSE BUYING BEHAVIOUR MODELS

Several researchers have attempted to model impulse buying behaviour in order to explain it. Some of these models are discussed:

A reference point model of desire (Hoch & Lowenstein, 1991)

Hoch & Lowenstein (1991) put forth a desire-willpower framework that is useful in understanding impulse buying behaviour. The researchers proposed an economic-psychological model which viewed consumer self-control as an outcome of the struggle between long-term rational (willpower) and short-term hedonic (desire) motives. The reference point model addresses how and why consumers experience a sudden and strong urge to buy a product, experiencing a desire so strong that it can result in the temporary overriding of their own better judgement, leading to time-inconsistent behaviour. The researchers also claimed that the conflicting psychological factors of desire and willpower were not independent of one another and that emotions had the ability to influence cognitive factors and vice-versa.

A model of impulse buying (Dittmar, Beattie & Friese, 1995)

Dittmar et al. (1995) proposed a model based on the social constructionist theory. The researchers postulated that consumers bought goods impulsively as an expression of their self-identity and these goods were a reflection of their major social roles. Their model thus, predicted that consumers belonging to different social categories would respond to stimuli pertaining to goods reflecting their specific self-identity. A key proposition of their model was that the high impulse goods are bought for their symbolic and/ or emotional benefits rather than their functional benefits.

The two-factor cost-benefit accessibility framework (Puri, 1996)

Puri (1996) proposed a two factor cognitive framework to explain consumer impulse buying. The framework explains that the decision of consumers to buy on impulse is a function of the relative accessibility (the ease with which they come to the consumer's mind) of costs and benefits of the purchase. Accessibility of costs and benefits depends upon the "individuals' chronic values regarding impulsiveness and the situational salience of the costs and benefits." (p. 87).

An integrated model of consumption impulse formation and enactment (CIFE) (Dholakia, 2000)

Dholakia (2000) presented the CIFE model explaining the process of formation of consumption impulses. Marketing stimuli, situational factors and/ or impulsivity trait acted as antecedents triggering consumption impulse formation. On experiencing a consumption impulse, the consumer evaluated the constraints to its enactment. In the absence of constraining factors, the consumer acts on his/ her consumption impulse. However, in the event that constraining factors are identified, consumer experiences conflict and ambivalence. This leads to a more thought-based evaluation of the consequences of enacting the consumption impulse, and based on cognitive evaluation the consumer decides whether the consumption impulse would be resisted or acted upon.

A model of impulse purchasing (Kim, 2003)

Kim (2003) attempted to explain the impulse buying process using a model adapted from Churchill and Peter's (1998) planned buying process model. According to this model, a customer while browsing a store is exposed to external and internal cues which trigger the customer's urge to buy on impulse. When such impulses arise, customers make a spontaneous purchase decision without seeking further information or evaluating all available alternatives. However, at the stage of post purchase evaluation, customers may experience certain positive or negative consequences.

A model of online impulse buying (Parboteeah, 2005)

Parboteeah (2005) proposed a model to explain and predict impulse buying in the online context. The stimuli were divided into low task-relevant cues and high task-relevant cues. The researcher proposed that since impulse buying behaviour is primarily a result of emotional reactions, it must be endeavoured by online retailers to maximise positive hedonic reactions to the interface (through provision of low task-relevant cues), and also to minimise negative cognitive reactions (through the provision of high task-relevant cues). These characteristics of the web interface would increase the perceived usefulness of the website and the enjoyment derived when browsing the website and would thus lead to online impulse buying.

Reflective Impulsive model of consumer behaviour (Strack, Werth & Deutsch, 2006)

A dual-system model of consumer behaviour was proposed by Strack et al. (2006). The model was based on the supposition that all human behaviours are a joint outcome of reflective and impulsive mechanisms. The researchers suggested that in the impulsive system "information is processed automatically through a fast and parallel spread of activation along the associative links between contents." (p. 208). On the other hand, the reflective system (which is prone to disruptions) processes information slowly through the "processes of rule-based reasoning and of symbol manipulation" (p. 208). The researchers suggested that the relative impact of the two systems was dependent upon the conditions under which the purchase behaviour was carried out.

Impulsive purchase model (Mattila & Wirtz, 2008)

According to the model proposed by Mattila and Wirtz (2008) over-stimulation (caused by highly stimulating and pleasant store environments) enhanced impulse buying among customers through a momentary loss of self-control. The researchers also indicated that social factors of employees' assistance and perceived crowding interacted with each other and jointly influenced impulse buying.

Impulse buying model (Lee & Yi, 2008)

Lee and Yi (2008) put forth a model of impulse buying that combined the affective and cognitive determinants and individual factors that influenced impulse buying behaviour and impulse buying intention. They proposed that customers' impulsive buying behaviour and impulse buying intention could be predicted from their shopping emotions (pleasure, arousal) and perceived risk. It was also suggested that buying impulsiveness trait moderates the relationship between pleasure and impulsive buying.

A model of impulse purchase of new products (Harmancioglu, Finney & Joseph, 2009)

Harmancioglu et al. (2009) proposed a model to explain consumers' cognitive processes and motivations in the impulse purchase behaviour pertaining to new products. The researchers suggested that consumer desire for excitement and need to satisfy their self-esteem influenced their impulse buying intention and impulse buying behaviour. Also, they claimed that social norms and word-of-mouth communications affected knowledge about the new products, which in turn influenced consumers' impulse buying intention and impulse buying behaviour.

TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF IMPULSE BUYING BEHAVIOUR

The above qualitative research has led us to recognise certain peculiarities regarding impulse buying behaviour (which differentiate it from rational consumer behaviour decisions) and these are summarised and detailed here:

- Impulse buying behaviour is an unplanned behaviour and is characterised by little or no cognitive deliberation. The decision to purchase is quick and made on-the-spot. (Rook, 1987; Piron, 1991).
- Typically, external stimuli trigger impulse buying episodes (Workman & Paper, 2010). These external stimuli may be in the form of in-store stimuli like attractive/ unique products, low prices, well-designed promotions, attractive displays, attractive packaging etc. In the online context, these cues may be low cost products, free shipping, attractive website design, attractive promotional offers etc.
- For individuals having higher tendency to buy on impulse, exposure to external stimuli leads to a sudden, strong and persistent urge to buy (Rook & Fisher, 1995). The desire to make the purchase may be so strong that it overcomes rational thoughts about delayed gratification.
- In order to overcome rational thoughts about delayed gratification and to justify the purchase to

themselves, customers may create needs/ recognise needs that were previously non-existent. They may also assess whether using the product will help them attain their ideal self-image and thus, may use impulse buying as a self-completion strategy (Dittmar et al., 1996). Thus, they try to account for their unpredictable, whimsical behaviour.

- The customers make quick mental assessments regarding normative evaluations and resources available for the purchase and if these aspects are favourable, they experience a loss of self-control and are led to act on their impulses, making the purchase (Rook & Fisher, 1995; Liu, Li & Hu, 2013).
- The impulse purchase is accompanied by an affective component and consumers experience positive emotions/ moods (or alleviation of negative emotions/ mood states) during the act of making the purchase. Verhagen and van Dolen (2011) point out that "emotions play a key role" in the impulse buying process (p. 321).

CONCLUSION

The present research has served three important functions. Firstly, it has been endeavoured to provide a clear and concise theoretical framework of impulse buying based on a qualitative review of past research undertaken in this field. This will help academicians and researchers in undertaking future research and marketing practitioners in formulating strategies by giving them a clear understanding of the subject. Secondly, this research describes the various factors that influence impulse buying behaviour and the existing models attempting to explain this behaviour. Since a comprehensive model of impulse buying is yet to evolve, this research may help consolidate past research findings so as to aid its development. Lastly, we identified certain research gaps and suggest future researchers to undertake cross-cultural comparisons of impulse buying behaviour, shed more light on the role played by personality in impulse buying episodes and compare impulse buying in offline and online stores. This will help us advance our knowledge of impulse buying even further.

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