



# A meta-analysis of consumer impulse buying

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 20 September 2012

Received in revised form

18 November 2013

Accepted 19 November 2013

Available online 14 December 2013

### Keywords:

Impulse buying

Meta-analysis

Impulsivity

Impulsive

Impulse buying trait

Impulse buying tendency

## ABSTRACT

This study provides a meta-analysis of the impulse buying literature and examines common antecedents for impulse buying behavior. An exploration of the impulse buying literature results in the establishment of three overarching constructs used as independent variables: dispositional, situational, and socio-demographic variables. The Kruskal–Wallis test was used to assess which variables are shown to have the strongest effect on impulse buying and suggest that the dispositional/situational interaction variables have the strongest relationship with impulse buying followed by dispositional, situational, and socio-demographic main effects, respectively. Specific dispositional, situational, and sociodemographic constructs are explored further along with moderating effects. Implications of the findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Retailers are delighted when a shopper feels a sudden impulse to buy a new blouse while browsing at a shopping mall or places a candy bar in their shopping cart while standing in the checkout line. Past research has shown that unplanned purchases account for up to 60% of all purchases (Inman and Winer, 1998; Mattila and Wirtz, 2008) and that impulse buys can account for anywhere from 40% to 80% of purchases depending on product category (e.g., Hausman, 2000; Kacen et al., 2012; NEFE, 2012; West, 1951). The fact that unplanned, and specifically, impulse buying, accounts for a sizable percentage of all purchases is supported by recent industry research. For instance, in a 2012 study by Point-of-Purchase Advertising International, it was reported that 76% of all purchase decisions are made in the store (POPPI, 2012) and according to the National Endowment for Financial Education, more than 87% of American adults admit to making impulse buys (NEFE, 2010). Research by Coca Cola has shown that impulse buying accounts for more than 50% of all grocery purchases (CNBC, 2009). In addition, recent research reports that the Millennial generation is 52% more likely to make an impulse purchase to pamper oneself than any other generation (Tuttle, 2012).

Retailers, armed with the knowledge that consumers frequently make impulse purchases, are interested in the impulse buying phenomenon because they hope to appeal to consumers' impulsive tendencies (e.g., Clover, 1950; Kacen et al., 2012; Pentecost and Andrews, 2010; Puri, 1996). Recently in an online context, researchers have examined how to better appeal to impulse buyers to take advantage of the behavior which has assisted brick-and-mortar retailers flourish for decades (Kervenoael et al., 2009; Park et al., 2012; Verhagen and van Dolen, 2011; Wells et al., 2011). Regardless of context, a primary objective in retailing is to increase impulse temptation to enhance sales (e.g., Beatty and Ferrell, 1998; Kacen et al., 2012; Puri, 1996). Due to the practical implications and pervasiveness of impulse buying, retailing has focused considerable efforts on facilitating the behavior (e.g., Dholakia, 2000; Kervenoael et al., 2009; Roberts and Manolis, 2012). Retailers are not the only group with interest; researchers have also been interested in impulse buying behavior, generating numerous studies in recent decades. Consumer organizations such as the National Consumers' League and American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) have exerted effort to inform consumers about marketers' desires to facilitate the behavior (National Consumers League, 2011; Yeager, 2012).

It is astonishing to note, with the high level of interest from retailers, consumer groups, and researchers, impulse buying is still considered to be a construct without a clear theoretical framework. The definition of impulse buying has evolved over time and there has been little effort to amalgamate the findings related to impulse buying antecedents. Studies have explored a great variety

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of situational, dispositional, and sociodemographic factors ranging from social influence, to consumer traits, to the effects that gender and age have on impulse buying. A recent effort to summarize the impulse buying literature through literature review exists (see Xiao and Nicholson, 2013). However, to our knowledge, no effort to conduct a meta-analysis and quantitatively integrate and empirically analyze relevant findings from the impulse buying literature has been undertaken.

This study's purpose is not to solely categorize the literature like that of a literature review, but also to provide a distinct contribution by quantitatively analyzing relevant findings and examining the relative impact of independent variables while also investigating methodological and substantive moderators. This study investigates impulse buying antecedents in academic literature to determine whether the existing body of literature can yield any theoretically and managerially relevant insights. More specifically, this paper reviews quantitative studies in the literature and documents the relationship between impulse buying behavior and the nature of the variables that influence this type of purchase while also examining any pertinent substantive and methodological moderators.

## 2. Impulse buying

Impulse buying has been recently defined “as a sudden, hedonically complex purchase behavior in which the rapidity of the impulse purchase precludes any thoughtful, deliberate consideration of alternative or future implications” (Sharma et al., 2010, p. 277). This definition has evolved from decades of research regarding impulse buying. In a seminal work, Rook (1987) defined impulse buying as a powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately. Early research sometimes conveyed impulse buying as an unplanned purchase and often used these terms synonymously in literature (Stern, 1962). Research findings suggest impulse buying behavior can typically be categorized as unplanned, but unplanned purchases cannot always be categorized as impulse buys (e.g., Kacen et al., 2012; Kollat and Willet, 1969; Verhagen and van Dolen, 2011; Zhang et al., 2010). The logic behind this distinction lies in the fact that an unplanned purchase may occur simply because a consumer has a need for the product but failed to place the item on a structured shopping list. Unplanned purchases may not be accompanied by a powerful urge or strong positive feelings usually associated with an impulse buy.

The decision time lapse, the time frame between desire to purchase and the actual purchase, appears short for an unplanned purchase (e.g., Kacen and Lee, 2002; D'Antoni and Shenson, 1973; Rook, 1987; Weun et al., 1998). Time that passes between desire to purchase and actual purchase for an impulse buy is also short but is primarily driven by strong hedonic temptations of immediate satisfaction and improved mood with little or no regard for consequences (Baun and Groeppel-Klein, 2003; Punj, 2011; Puri, 1996; Taute and McQuitty, 2004). Thus, the urge during an impulse buy is extremely powerful and difficult to resist (e.g., Hoch and Loewenstein, 1991; Park et al., 2012; Rook, 1987; Rook and Fisher, 1995). Often consumers describe the event of impulse buying as experiencing a strong temptation for an object of desire and having little behavioral constraint to resist this temptation (e.g., Dholakia, 2000; Khan and Dhar, 2004; Puri, 1996; Roberts and Manolis, 2012; Weinberg and Gottwald, 1982). In sum, impulse buying is typically categorized using three criteria. First, the act is spontaneous and is usually accompanied by a positive emotional charge. Second, the individual making an impulse buy shows a diminished regard for any costs or consequences. Third, the act usually involves a hedonic temptation for

immediate self-fulfillment through consumption (Babin and Harris, 2013; Dholakia, 2000; Sharma et al., 2010; Verhagen and van Dolen, 2011). Temptation associated with immediate gratification characterizes the impulse buying desire and is usually a temporary state (Dholakia, 2000; Puri, 1996; Rook, 1987; Vohs and Faber, 2007). However, the consumption impulse can still exist if the decision time lapse is extended. Time extension does permit consumers to better develop a cognitive evaluation of the impulse thus allowing consideration of constraining factors versus impulse enactment (e.g., Dholakia, 2000). This introduction of constraining factors paves the way for consumers to develop resistance strategies that may cause the consumption impulse to dissipate.

Consumers who do not effectively develop resistance strategies fall prey to the temptation (Baumeister, 2002; Dholakia, 2000; Puri, 1996; Roberts and Manolis, 2012; Sharma et al., 2010) resulting from the excitement and stimulation of an impulse buy and tend to place an emphasis on emotions and feeling during this experience (e.g., Beatty and Ferrell, 1998; Flight et al., 2012; Puri, 1996; Rook, 1987). The temptation that consumers feel stems from both the emotional attraction to the object of desire and the desire for immediate gratification (Hoch and Loewenstein, 1991; Kacen and Lee, 2002; Puri, 1996). Impulse buying temptation often occurs due to sensory contact (e.g., proximity of product or marketing stimuli) and can be augmented by situational (e.g., mood or environmental factors) and individual factors (e.g., impulse buying trait) [Adelaar et al. 2003; Dholakia, 2000; Sharma et al., 2010]. Hence, when people make an impulse buy they are often yielding to temptation (e.g., Baumeister, 2002; Dholakia, 2000; Puri, 1996).

While impulse buying stems from an emotional response and involves temptation it is distinct from compulsive buying (e.g., Babin and Harris, 2013; Flight et al., 2012; Kwak et al., 2006; Sneath et al., 2009). There is a lengthy stream of literature in psychiatry dedicated to compulsive buying which defines it as excessive, repetitive uncontrollable preoccupations, urges, or behaviors pertaining to shopping that lead to subjective distress and impaired functioning (Black, 2007). Individuals with compulsive buying disorder often engage in impulsive consumption, though the compulsive buying disorder phenomenon has a unique detrimental effect on an individual due to the repetitive, out of control nature of compulsive buying (Babin and Harris, 2013; Kukar-Kinney et al., 2009; Flight et al., 2012). Granting research has shown that both impulse buying and compulsive buying may result in the implementation of coping strategies (Yi and Baumgartner, 2011), research has empirically demonstrated the distinctness of the two constructs and that compulsive buying is a conspicuously different phenomenon (Flight et al., 2012; Wood, 1998; Xiao and Nicholson, 2013). For impulse buying, the behavior can be described as an experiential hierarchy of effects whereby the consumer first experiences strong affect for the product, immediately purchases the product, and finally may attempt to justify the act (e.g., Baumeister, 2002; Mowen and Minor, 2006; Puri, 1996). Justification is usually voiced in a set of beliefs the consumer may use to explain the purchase. To some, these beliefs are only used to make one feel better about making an impulse buy, not because of true remorse.

### 2.1. The establishment of impulse buying trait

Murray (1938) described impulsivity as when one responds quickly and without reflection. Impulsivity is relevant to a variety of social science disciplines (Dittmar et al., 1995; Dholakia, 2000; Puri, 1996) and is used interchangeably with impulsiveness (e.g., Johnson et al., 1993; Moeller et al., 2001; Puri, 1996) though the term impulsiveness is more frequently used when describing an individual's trait (e.g., Dholakia, 2000; Kacen et al., 2012; Jones et al.,

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