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The compelling urge to misbehave: Do impulse purchases instigate unethical consumer behavior?

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ABSTRACT

The present research explores the relationship between impulse buying and unethical consumer behavior. This work is based on the surprising results of an unrelated study, during which we observed that participants shopping for impulse products were more likely to cheat to obtain a more expensive product than participants shopping for regular products. Based on these findings and building on previous research on the relationship between impulsiveness and delinquency, three studies were set up to test the impact of impulse buying on different forms of unethical consumer behavior. The results confirmed that consumers making an impulse purchase were more likely to behave unethically than consumers making a regular purchase. These findings illustrate there is a dark side to impulse buying for retailers.

1. Introduction

Impulse buying is an important aspect of consumer behavior. It occurs when a consumer sees a product and feels a compelling need to buy it immediately (Rook, 1987). Impulse purchases are often unplanned and likely to cause a conflict between desire (short term temptations) and willpower (long term goals) (Baumeister, 2002; Beatty & Ferrell, 1998; Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; Rook, 1987; Yi & Baumgartner, 2011). For instance, a piece of chocolate provides benefits in the short run (delicious taste, good mood), but detriments in the long run (unhealthy body weight). Hence, consumers making an impulse purchase report both pleasurable feelings as well as negative emotions such as guilt or cognitive dissonance during the impulse buying process (Chatzidakis, Smith, & Hibbert, 2009; Rook, 1987). For retailers, however, impulse buying seems to be unambiguously positive. Impulse purchases are unplanned, additional purchases, which implies that they

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constitute an extra source of income for retailers. For instance, it is estimated that furniture giant IKEA derives 60% of its total sales volume from impulse purchases (Hill, 2011).

The present research explores whether there is a downside to impulse buying for retailers as well. More specifically, we investigate whether there is a relationship between impulse buying and unethical consumer behavior. Unethical consumer behavior is the generic term for immoral, norm-violating behavior posed in consumption situations (Fullerton & Punj, 1993, 2004; Vitell, Lumpkin, & Rawwas, 1991; Vitell & Muncy, 1992). This paper is inspired by the surprising results from an unrelated study during which we observed that participants shopping for products that are typically bought on impulse (i.e., fatty and sweet snacks) were significantly more likely to cheat to obtain a more expensive product than participants shopping for products that are typically *not* bought on impulse (i.e., plain, regular products). Although there is some evidence that engagement in norm-violating (criminal) behavior is correlated with an impulsive personality, there is currently no evidence of a causal relationship between impulsiveness and norm-violating behavior (Horvath & Zuckerman, 1993; Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Utset, 2007; White et al., 1994).

The present research sheds light on a dark side of impulse buying and deepens the insight into both impulse buying and the relationship between impulsivity and norm-violating behavior. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2.1 provides some theoretical background on the concept of impulse buying. Subsequently, Section 2.2 illustrates the set-up and results of the unrelated study that inspired the present research. Next, Section 2.3 illuminates the relationship between impulsiveness and norm-violating behavior. Sections 3 and 4 describe the set-up and results of three behavioral experiments that explore whether impulse buying leads to unethical consumer behavior. Finally, Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature background

2.1. Impulse buying

Impulse buying is an umbrella term for a variety of impulsive buying behaviors. Stern (1962) described four types of impulse buying: *pure impulse buying*, *reminder impulse buying*, *suggestion impulse buying*, and *planned impulse buying*. These four types differ with respect to the timing (before or after entering the store) and the emotional character of the purchase decision (Bellenger, Robertson, & Hirschman, 1978; Duarte, Raposo, & Ferraz, 2013; Kollat & Willett, 1967). In this research, we focus on *pure impulse buying*. In this type of impulse buying the purchase decision is made after entering the store, making it highly susceptible to in-store stimuli which trigger emotional appeal (Duarte et al., 2013; Kacen, Hess, & Walker, 2012; Stern, 1962). Many other, similar definitions of pure impulse buying exist, but in general Rook (1987, p. 191)'s definition is considered to be most complete:

> *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.*

Rook (1987)'s definition comprises two core components of impulse buying: The persistent urge to buy and the emotional conflict caused by this urge. Consumers making an impulse purchase feel the need to buy a product they know they should not buy for a variety of reasons: dietary constraints, financial restrictions, lack of available space to store the product and/or the opinion of others (Chatzidakis et al., 2009; Dholakia, 2000). In spite of knowing that this purchase may hinder the enactment of long-run goals (e.g., a healthy body weight, a healthy savings account, a clean house, and a good relationship), consumers sometimes seem to lack self-control to resist the urge to buy (Baumeister, 2002). This emotional conflict between desire and willpower has been identified by different authors as one of the key elements of the impulse buying process (Faber & Vohs, 2004; Strack, Werth, & Deutsch, 2006; Vohs & Faber, 2007).

The origin of the emotional conflict inherent to the impulse buying process lies in the interaction of two systems that guide human behavior: A fast, automatic, intuitive system (System 1) and a slow, effortful reasoned system (System 2) (Evans, 2003; Kahneman, 2011; Stanovich & West, 2000; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). Different authors applied this dual-system theory to impulse buying (Hofmann, Strack, & Deutsch, 2008; Strack et al., 2006). In particular, consumer behavior is determined by the joint contribution of an impulsive system (System 1) and a reflective system (System 2) (Hofmann et al., 2008; Strack & Deutsch, 2004; Strack et al., 2006). The impulsive system is evoked upon visual perception of a product and activates behavioral schemata that stimulate the consumer to purchase this product right now (i.e., immediate gratification) (Hofmann et al., 2008; Strack & Deutsch, 2004; Strack et al., 2006). The reflective system serves regulatory and representational goals and causes the consumer to think about the feasibility and desirability of the behavior (Hofmann et al., 2008; Strack & Deutsch, 2004; Strack et al., 2006). Both systems operate parallel, but one system may exert a greater influence over the purchase decision than the other (Hofmann et al., 2008; Strack & Deutsch, 2004; Strack et al., 2006). Hence, in the case of impulse buying, consumers seem to be mainly under the influence of the impulsive system and less influenced by the reflective system effectuating willpower.

The relative contribution of the impulsive and the reflective system depends on situational or personal characteristics (Strack et al., 2006). Situational characteristics comprise product and retailing variables. Product variables are among others the potential of a product to activate visceral influences (Lades, 2014), the physical and temporal proximity of the product (Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; Rook, 1987; Strack et al., 2006), and whether the product is easy and ready to use (Huber, 2004;