Impulse Purchase Varied by Products and Marketing Channels

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates impulse buying behaviors in both traditional store and online shopping contexts. The results show that impulsive buying tendency and involvement with clothing products is positively associated with impulse buying behavior of clothing in traditional store shopping, but not online. For computer peripherals, on the other hand, higher impulsive buying tendency and higher product involvement are positively associated with higher impulse buying online, but not in-store shopping. Furthermore, consumers holding hedonic attitudes toward clothing tend to buy more impulsively regardless of shopping channel. For computer peripherals, utilitarian attitudes are positively associated with impulse buying both in traditional and online shopping.

Keywords: *online impulse buying, product involvement, hedonic/utilitarian attitudes*

INTRODUCTION

People consume products not for their basic human needs only, but also for their psychological needs. People sometimes buy and consume things for their esthetic, symbolic meaning, or just for fun (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). In the highly competitive world of modern retailing, customers are highly valued and treated well, and shopping is anything but a tiresome task. In this enjoyable shopping environment and with increased disposal incomes, consumers tend to shop more impulsively (Beatty and Ferrell 1998). Thus, that impulse buying constitutes a great portion of total purchase volume should be of no surprise. Since impulse purchasing is so ubiquitous a phenomenon in consumer buying behavior, a closer look at why people buy certain products impulsively is necessary.

The Internet has becomes an ubiquitous medium both in the work place and at home, and so using the Internet as a retailing channel has become a reality. Online shopping volume has increased significantly in recent years. However, online impulse purchase behaviors have been seldom investigated. Some studies that have included online impulsive buying have regarded impulsivity as only one of the variables that can influence the online purchasing intention, while focusing study on online purchase behavior as a whole (Donthu and Garcia 1999, Zhang et al. 2006). To know if and why consumers buy impulsively online is of great importance. Comparing impulse purchases made online to those made in-store will also greatly enrich our knowledge of this essential element of consumer behavior.

Over the past 60 years of impulse purchase research, the focus of interest has shifted from calculating which products were bought unplanned after the customers visiting the store, to a consumer's emotional or psychological states in acting impulsively (Rook and Hoch 1985, Rook 1987). Impulsive buying tendency as a personality trait varied among people and will influence their degree of actual impulse buying behavior (Rook and Fisher 1995). Although "it is people, not products, who experience consuming impulses" (Rook and Hoch 1985), products are the most important market stimulus in consumer behavior and retain a decisive influence in impulse buying. Products like clothing and music that reflect self-identity score highly as goods bought on impulse, while "functional" goods are ranked among those least bought on impulse (Dittmar et al. 1995). In addition, products in which the consumer is highly personally involved (Jones et al. 2003) will be bought more impulsively.

However, it is worth noting that Impulsive buying behaviors can be influenced by other environmental stimuli (Eroglu and Machleit 1993, Youn and Faber 2000) and travel through a virtual mall is by no means a similar experience to visiting a department store. The Internet is rich in information such as product specifications, functioning and other relevant knowledge easily acquired by a few clicks. However, the product itself cannot be held or closely inspected in an online retailing environment. This is one of the major hurdles for certain products purchased online (Peck and Childers 2003, Forsythe et al. 2006). This study therefore discusses impulse buying in both traditional and online retailing channels.

As mentioned, impulsive buying is relative to product type. A product, which is highly related to consumers, has a higher chance of being bought impulsively. This pose another interesting question concerning consumer attitudes toward product types. A widely used taxonomy of products in marketing and consumer behavior studies is hedonic/utilitarian meaning, consumer attitude toward products or services can be hedonic or utilitarian (Batra and Ahtola 1991, Mano and Oliver 1993). In search of hedonic or utilitarian shopping value, Babin et al. (1994) speculates that impulse buying would make shopping trip more hedonic in value. This can be easily argued the other way around- that a product held high in hedonic value would elicit more emotional and affective responses and a subsequent impulse purchase by a particular consumer. It is easy to proof that ice cream will be bought more impulsively due to hedonic reason than, for example, books or gardening tools. However, shopping behavior in the virtual world could be different. Overby and Lee (2006) indicated that utilitarian value is more strongly related than hedonic value to preference towards a retailer and intentions to make a purchase online. Will hedonic/utilitarian value affect impulse purchases online? The second purpose of this study is to address this issue.

This research investigates actual impulse purchases in two different product categories- clothing and computer and peripherals - in the online and in-store shopping contexts. We use these two product types to test our hypothesis because consumers- especially younger generations- can be highly involved with and held strong positive attitudes to both product categories. On the other hand, they are very different in attributes and characteristics. Clothing has two functions: daily dress serves a basic human need, but "fashion" is bought in a large part impulsively because of its ever changing style. Computer peripherals are, on the contrary, a standardized product with worldwide specifications. These kinds of products "fit" well into an information rich and digitized world (Peterson et al. 1997).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Impulse purchase

Consumer researchers have for decades strived to find a better definition for impulse purchase. Earlier studies on impulse buying were from managerial and practitioner perspectives, focusing on consumers' purchasing decision after they entered the store. Researches in this vein therefore emphasized the classification of consumer products into impulse and non-impulse items, in order to facilitate marketing strategies such as point-of-purchase advertising and in-store promotions. The major defect of this line of research is confounding "unplanned" buying and "impulse" buying (Bellenger et al. 1978, Cobb and Hoyer 1986, Kollat and Willet 1967, Stem 1962).

In response to this deficiency, research was refocused on the internal psychological states underlying consumer impulse buying episodes. Impulse purchasing involves "a sudden and spontaneous desire to act" and the sudden "urge to buy on impulse can throw the consumer into a state of psychological disequilibrium" (Rook and Hoch 1985), "with diminished regard for its consequences" (Rook 1987). Compared to those who make a planned purchase, people who buy impulsively are more likely to be unreflective in their thinking, to be emotionally attracted to the object, and to desire immediate gratification (Loewenstein and Hoch 1991, Thompson et al. 1990). Many factors may influence this impulse behavior. In addition to the product's characteristics, the consumer's mood or emotional state (Rook 1987, Rook and Gardner 1993, Weinberg and Gottwald 1982), the shopping task, and the availability of time and money (Beatty and Ferrell 1998) would all affect impulse buying behavior.

Impulsive buying tendency

One major influence on an impulse purchase is the individual's internal differences with regard to impulsive acts. Impulsivity as a personality trait has been studied extensively by psychologists. Rook and Fisher (1995) therefore conceptualized an individual's impulse buying tendency as a consumer trait and defined buying impulsiveness as buying "spontaneously, unreflectively, immediately, and kinetically." Those with a higher impulsive buying tendency, tend to purchase more on impulse. Rook and Fisher have taken a more "neutral" stance toward impulse purchase, arguing that buying impulsively is not necessarily "irrational" or "risky," because in the time between the impulse to buy and the actual purchase, normative evaluations can play a moderating role. Hence, even if a person has a high tendency to impulsive buying, what he or she actually buy on impulse would still be greatly influenced by situational factors and social norms.

Involvement

Involvement was first conceptualized by Krugman in studying TV commercials and operationalized it as the number of "bridging experiences,"- connections or personal references- that the viewer makes between his or her own life and an advertisement (Krugman 1965). Since then, the construct of involvement has emerged as an important factor in studying the effectiveness of advertising, the relationship between a person and a product, and purchasing decisions (Zaichkowsky 1986). Several efforts have been made to develop scales measuring the involvement construct relating product categories. Involvement has been defined as "a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests" (Zaichkowsky 1985). Heightened involvement can result either from functional consequences or emotional consequences (Park and Mittal 1985), and therefore "importance" and "interest" are two aspects of the involvement response (McQuarrie and Munson 1992).

The emotional consequences- or "interest" aspects- of high level of product involvement are more likely to generate the emotion needed for an impulse purchase, as Jones et al. (2003) have argued, and higher levels of product involvement are associated with higher levels of product-specific impulse buying tendency, and in turn, are positively associated with impulse buying behavior. If individuals are interested in a product, they will want to know more about it, pay more attention to it during a shopping trip, compare different types or brands, and eventually purchase the product if they can affords it. Cognitive efforts invested by the individual will sometimes elicit a strong enough "urge" to purchase and consume immediately (Rook and Hoch 1985).

However, the product characteristics must be taken into consideration. Dittmar et al. (1995) studied thirteen consumer goods and found that music items and clothing are the most likely candidates for impulse buying, since both music items and clothing are "consumer goods which appear to have potential for self-presentation, self-expression, mood adjustment, diversion and entertainment." The least impulsive items in the study were highly functional or instrumental goods like furniture or car equipment. Since clothing is at the top of the list of items most likely to be bought on impulse, we can expect they will be bought even more impulsively for highly involved consumers. Computer peripherals are widely held as "functional" products, and therefore we would expect them to be bought less on impulse.

Thus, this study proposed the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 A greater tendency to impulsive buying will be positively associated with higher levels of impulse buying behavior for clothing in traditional store shopping.

Hypothesis 2 A higher level of clothing involvement will be positively associated with higher levels of impulse buying behavior for clothing in traditional store shopping.

Hypothesis 3 A greater tendency to impulsive buying and higher levels of clothing involvement will be positively associated with higher levels of impulse buying behavior for clothing in traditional store shopping.

The association between a greater tendency towards impulsive buying and the purchase of clothing does not mean that items will be purchased indiscretionary by people, who have a high level of impulse buying. Clothing in particular is a product type that often needs to be felt, touched, and subjected to closer inspection. Hence, the perceived risk involved in a purchasing decision for clothing is quite high online compared to an in-store purchase (Forsythe et al. 2006). Consumers may tend to evaluate more cautiously (Peterson et al. 1997, Vijayasarathy and Jones 2000). Thus, online impulse buying behaviors will not be as frequent for clothing purchases.

A more intriguing issue is online impulse buying behavior for computer peripherals. The functions and performance of computer products are basically the same in any given product sub-categories, and consumer buying decisions are large made on product's specifications. The Internet is rich in information and so this technological environment is especially "fit" for the purchase of technological products. "Pure" impulse buying may be low for consumers of computer products- even those who have a greater tendency to buy impulsively and who are highly involved in computer products. Nevertheless, a positive relationship is expected between a product-specific impulsive buying tendency and impulse buying for computer products online.

Therefore, this study proposed the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4 A greater tendency to impulse buying and higher levels of involvement with computer peripherals will be positively associated with higher levels of impulse buying behavior in online shopping for computer peripherals.

Hedonic/Utilitarian products attitude

An information processing model, which regards the consumer as a logical thinker who "solves problems" in order to make a purchase, is not enough to explain consumer purchasing decisions. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) have presented an "experiential view" that involving a steady flow of fantasies, feelings, and fun. This advocacy of an alternative approach to consumer behavior research has inspired marketing scholars to investigate the bidemensional attitudes of consumers (affect/hedonic gratification and instrumental/utilitarian usage) toward specific products (Batra and Ahtola 1991, Mano and Oliver 1993) and toward shopping experiences (Babin et al. 1994). A shopping trip or a product is high in hedonic value if the consumer experiences an emotional or affective involvement.

In investigating hedonic and utilitarian shopping value, Babin et al. (1994) indicated that impulsive purchase made shopping are more hedonic in value. Researchers in many studies seem to imply that impulse buying involves a hedonic component (Cobb and Hoyer 1986, Hausman 2000, Puri 1996, Rook 1987, Ramanathan and Menon 2006, Thompson et al 1990). However, we do not mean to imply that impulsive buying would necessarily relate to hedonic product purchases or consumption, as utilitarian products could be equally likely candidates. Moreover, the hedonic/utilitarian bidimensional conceptualization is not an "either/or" choice, as we could see some products high in both dimensions (Crowley et al. 1992, Voss et al. 2003). This would be especially true when we talk about broad product categories rather than specific brands.

Impulse buying is a more emotional and affective purchasing decision than a cognition effort (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991, Puri 1996, Rook 1987, Weinberg and Gottwald 1982). Shiv and Fedorikhin (1999) studied affective and cognitive interaction in consumer decision making. In their experiment, when processing resources were low, more impulsive students tended to choose a product associated with an intense positive affective aspect, but less favorable cognitive aspect; that is, hedonic chocolate cake over utilitarian fruit salad. Although this study tested two products, it can be reasoned that for a given product type high in both hedonic and utilitarian aspects, the more hedonic aspect will influence an impulse purchase in traditional store shopping.

Hypothesis 5 A higher hedonic attitude toward clothing will be associated with higher impulse purchasing behavior in traditional store shopping

On the Internet, however, the purchase pattern could be quite different from the real world. Symbolic presentation of the product, such as pictures or descriptions, may greatly reduced the affective alternative (Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999). Web stores can only present goods in this symbolic mode, and this means that for clothing purchases the perceived risk of purchase is high (Forsythe et al. 2006). More cognitive effort is needed by the shopper, which in turn is likely to result in choices being based less on affective aspects and more on cognitions. Moreover, a large portion of online shoppers turn to the Internet primarily for utilitarian reasons, such as price savings and convenience (Clawson 1993, Jarvenpaa and Todd 1997, Overby and Lee 2006). Therefore, contrary to traditional store shopping, impulsive purchase of clothing online may be based on utilitarian aspects.

Hypothesis 6 A higher utilitarian attitude toward clothing will be associated with higher impulse purchase behavior in online shopping

As stated earlier, the study by Dittmar et al. (1995) in impulse purchasing distinguished between the instrumental/functional uses and emotional/symbolic meanings of material objects. Instrumental/functional uses are similar to utilitarian attitudes. Therefore, computer peripherals are seen as more utilitarian in nature, and may be bought on impulse for utilitarian considerations both in traditional stores and online.

Hypothesis 7 A higher utilitarian attitude toward computer peripherals will be associated with higher impulse purchasing behavior in traditional store shopping

Hypothesis 8 A higher utilitarian attitude toward computer peripherals will be associated with higher impulse purchasing behavior in online shopping

METHOD

Self-report surveys were conducted in the fall of 2007 to collect the data for this study. A sample of 430 senior students and graduate students in management courses was selected from four universities in Taiwan. The questionnaire

was administered in class and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. We believe that students represent a reasonable population for this study as students are heavy users of the Internet and active online shoppers. Since both in-store and online impulse buying behaviors are being investigated, a comparison of students' shopping behaviors is more meaningful as a large portion of older generation may never use the Web.

Among the 430 responses received, 17 were discarded as incomplete, with 413 usable responses. Most the subjects ranged in age from 20 to 24 (mean = 21.9, standard deviation = 2.1) and were reasonably balanced along gender lines, with 195 males (47.2 percent) and 218 females (52.8 percent). The respondents surfed the Web on average 3.7 days a week, for 2.95 hours a day.

Measures

The survey was developed using existing scales. After translation into Chinese, a backward translation was used to ensure the semantic equivalence of questions. The impulse buying tendency scale was adopted from Rook and Fisher's (1995) 9-item scale on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Involvement with each product category was assessed using the Revised Product Involvement Inventory (RPII) (McQuarrie and Munson 1992), consisting of 10 semantic differential items. The hedonic/utilitarian scale for each product was adopted from Voss, Spangenberg, and Grohmann's (2003) 10-item semantic differential scale (HED/UT scale), including 5 items referring to the hedonic dimension and 5 items referring to the utilitarian dimension of consumer attitudes. Both scales were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Actual impulse buying behaviors for both product types in both retailing channels was measured with one item for each situation. After defining an impulse purchase as one in which the respondent "felt a sudden and powerful urge to buy something without deliberation", students were ask to fill out if they had made an impulsive purchase in the past 6 months using a 4-point scale ranging from "never" to "always".

Cronbach's alpha for the impulsiveness score was 0.86. For the RPII clothing, Cronbach's alpha score was 0.94, and for computer peripherals, 0.95. The HED/UT scales for clothing were 0.80 and 0.94, and for computer peripherals 0.82 and 0.95 respectively. All scales demonstrated high internal consistency and had acceptable Cronbach's alpha values (Nunnally 1967)

Results

Table 1 shows the general regression model of the relationships among impulse buying tendency, product involvements for clothing and computer peripherals, and impulse buying behaviors.

Table 1 Regression model of impulsive buying tendency, and product involvement, and impulse buying behavior

	Buying 1		Buying 2		Buying 3		Buying 4	
	Param.	*t*	Param.	*t*	Param.	*t*	Param.	*t*
Impl.	0.919	4.904**	0.006	0.025	0.036	0.160	-0.629	-2.749**
Invl.	0.369	2.574**	-0.013	-0.078	-0.089	-0.513	-0.441	-2.544*
Impl.*invl	-0.522	-2.069*	0.409	1.473	0.321	1.048	1.064	3.686**

N=377; Impl: impulsive buying tendency; Invl.: product involvement; buying 1: impulse buying of clothing in traditional stores; buying2: impulse buying of clothing online; buying 3: impulse buying of computer peripherals in traditional stores; buying4: impulse buying of computer peripherals online; ** $p<0.01$, *$p<0.05$

As predicted, the positive relationship between impulse buying tendency and actual impulse buying for clothing in traditional stores was significant at .01 level; higher clothing involvement, and greater tendency to impulsive buying with higher clothing involvement were both positively associated with higher traditional store impulse buying at .01 and .05 levels. H1, H2, and H3 are supported. Concerning computer peripherals, greater tendency to impulsive buying and higher product involvement was positively associated with online impulse buying, thus H4 is supported. To our surprise, the positive relationship between impulse buying tendency and impulse buying for computer peripherals and between products involvement with impulse buying online were also significant (as discussed later).

Table 2 shows the linear regression of hedonic and utilitarian attitudes toward clothing and computer peripherals and impulse buying of both product types in traditional stores and online.

Table 2 Regression model of hedonic/utilitarian attitude toward product and impulse buying behavior

	Buying 1		Buying 2		Buying 3		Buying 4	
	Param.	*t*	Param.	*t*	Param.	*t*	Param.	*t*
Hed.	0.199	3.080**	0.026	0.359	0.170	2.173*	0.030	0.402
Ut.	-0.056	-1.215	0.026	-2.885**	-0.091	-1.626	-0.120	-2.195*

N=377; Hed: hedonic attitude; Ut: utilitarian attitude; buying 1: impulse buying of clothing in traditional stores; buying2: impulse buying of clothing online; buying 3: impulse buying of computer peripherals in traditional stores; buying4: impulse buying of computer peripherals online; ** $p<0.01$, *$p<0.05$

The relationship between a more hedonic attitude toward clothing and impulse buying at traditional stores was significant at .05 level, so H5 is supported. It was also significant in the context of online shopping, H6 is therefore not supported. Furthermore, the results show that only the utilitarian attitude toward computer peripherals were significant for both online and traditional store impulse buying, thus H7 and H8 are supported.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrated the complex interactions at work among a consumer's impulsive buying tendency, involvement in and perception of products, and actual impulse buying behavior in different retailing channels. Product type plays a major role in impulse buying. Impulsive buying tendency and product involvement are good predictors of impulse purchase for clothing, but are not sufficient for computer peripherals in traditional store shopping. We see it as likely that the reason behind this particular purchasing behavior is that clothing, along with food and drink, is essential to people's daily life and hence, consumption pattern. Any trip to a mall or a department store exposes the consumer to such a variety of products and promotional stimuli, that it is hard to escape the urge to buy something, especially for those people who are high on impulse, or highly involved in these products. However, impulse buying behaviors can not be explained solely by consumer differences in personality and psychological inclinations, as some products are indeed low "impulse items" in traditional store shopping (Dittmar et al. 1995).

Another major implication of this study's finding is the emerging role of the Internet as a competing marketing channel, although online shopping may have its limitations, at least at present time. Products like clothing can not be tried on and can be presented only in pictures and words online, greatly inhibiting the likelihood of impulse buying compared to in-store shopping. However, this is not to say that the Internet serves only a secondary, marketplace. It has its own potential to be explored. We live in a more and more computerized and "wired" world, and a great many of the "old" products including music, movie, and photography are being converted to digitized format. At the same time, a great many "new" products such as computer hardware and software, digital TV and computer games are being born and are rapidly become an indispensable part of everyday life. All of these product types are, not only well suited to be bought online (Alba et al. 1997, Peterson et al. 1997, Vijayasarathy and Jones 2000), but also might be purchased impulsively by highly involved and/or impulsive consumers.

This study also examined the relationship between impulse buying and the widely used constructs of hedonic/utilitarian consumer attitudes toward the products. As predicted, different product types might be bought impulsively because of different consumers' attitudes in traditional store shopping, with clothing more hedonic, and computer peripherals more utilitarian. People tend to buy impulsively when the shopping trips are hedonic in value and subsequently are more open to environmental arousal, but what is purchased can still be highly utilitarian. Online purchasing, however, is a more complicated story.

Internet shopping is seen having more utilitarian value (Overby and Lee 2006), but of those products that are bought impulsively online, it seems they are bought for their utilitarian dimension. This was found for computer peripherals. However, this study has not proved this hypothesis concerning clothing. The positive association between a hedonic attitude to clothing and impulse buying online has some possible explanations. Firstly, clothing is high in both hedonic and utilitarian dimensions. It serves a dual purpose in online impulse purchasing, meaning a consumer may feel the urge to buy is justified by both dimensions of the product. Secondly, whereas some aspects of consumption such as fashionability are high in hedonic value, impulse purchase is context-free. The perceived risk of buying an ill-fitting

garment, and the symbolic presentation of the product that may curtail impulsivity could be compensated for by the ease of buying at home. Furthermore, as people have more experience with online shopping, less cognitive efforts will be needed, and hedonic products that are more affective tend to be bought more impulsively. More research on this subject is needed.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Though the purchase behavior patterns of the younger generation represent a more computer literate population in the changing retailing industry, the student sample limits the external validity. This said, computerization is becoming a way of life, and people are depending on the Internet more and more for work at the office and entertainment at home. As the older adult population is turning to the wired world, research of online impulse buying of the general public seems possible in the near future.

Another deficiency of this study is that the two products chosen are not "equivalent". Clothing is a broader product category compared to computer peripherals, and has more "diversified" sub-categories. From the consumption point of view, clothing is bought for many reasons, from the suits needed in the office to designer jeans that just "look great". Computer peripherals, on the other hand, are purchased mainly for their "functionality". Further research could focus on more hedonic clothing such as party clothing and/or hedonic computer products such as computer game, and be used to comparing the similarities and differences of impulse buying motives in-store and online. This would greatly enhance our understanding of the new retailing environment.

Nevertheless, this study has compared items considered among the most and least likely to be bought on impulse in different retailing channels, and the findings gives a more holistic and insightful picture of impulse buying behavior patterns today. Most research of impulse buying tends to focus on high impulse products such as clothing and music (see for e.g. Jones et al 2003), and the factors that influence impulse buying of utilitarian products would never be fully understood even in a traditional shopping context.

Rook and Fisher (1995) speculated that impulse buying would be higher online compared to store shopping because the normal evaluations of consumers are less of an inhibited factor. People "flow" in the Internet will tend to result in more impulse buys. Although this study found otherwise, that is not to say that these predictions are not valid. Online sales have increase exponentially in recent years, and the virtual world is a reality for the retailing industry. As more people adopted the Internet as an alternative retailing channel, impulse buying will no doubt also increase enormously. More intensive study of this development is needed. One research approach could be to investigate the association between purchase amount and/or purchase frequency with impulsive buying tendency online. Another approach could be to see if buying satisfaction influence the future tendency to buy impulsively. We expect positive associations between these variables. If so, it could be a blessing for marketers who do business online.

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