

The Psychology of Impulse Buying: An Integrative Self-Regulation Approach

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Abstract Impulsive buying grossly violates the assumptions of *homo economicus*. A variety of perspectives on impulse buying are presented, which have been put forward in consumer, economic, social, and clinical psychology. These include heuristic information processing, time-inconsistent preferences, personality traits and values, self-identity, emotions, conscious self-control, and compulsive buying. These perspectives may sometimes lead to contradictory or paradoxical findings. For instance, impulse buying is often associated with joy and pleasure but has also been found related to negative emotions and low self-esteem. Our argument is that impulsive buying can be understood in terms of psychological functioning, in particular as a form of self-regulation. Regulatory focus theory is then used to bring the various perspectives together by classifying each as a promotion focus strategy (e.g., seeking pleasure) or a prevention focus strategy (e.g., avoiding feelings of low self-esteem). Finally, the question is discussed whether consumers can and should be protected against impulsivity. Our assertion is that regulation against misleading practices that play on the vulnerabilities of impulsive buyers could be sharpened and that information provision to consumers and retailers aimed at strengthening consumers' self-regulatory capacities may mitigate adverse consequences of impulse buying.

Keywords Impulse buying · Compulsive buying · Self-regulation · Consumer policy

Most of us are familiar with returning home with products we never intended to buy in the first place. Impulsive buying has long been identified as a significant behaviour in retail business (e.g., Stern 1962). Impulsive buying is a universal phenomenon, although it may be manifested in different ways subject to individual differences such as gender (e.g., Dittmar et al. 1995, 1996; Verplanken and Herabadi 2001) or culture (Kacen and Lee 2002). Impulse buying is an interesting psychological phenomenon. This was unequivocally put forward by Rook (1987), who described

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impulse buying as a psychologically driven urge to buy. Since this seminal article, impulse buying has been approached from very different psychological perspectives, each of which highlights different constructs or mechanisms which might explain this behaviour, such as personality, emotions, identity concerns, cognitive processes, self-control, or psychopathology. While these perspectives together provide a rich account of the impulse buying phenomenon, they also lead to a degree of confusion, and produce inconsistencies and discrepancies in research findings. In this article we will first discuss the definition of impulse buying. We will then focus on the various perspectives on impulse buying as these have been put forward in consumer, economic, social, and clinical psychology. We continue by presenting an overarching framework of psychological functioning, which has the potential to reconcile some of the seemingly contradictory or paradoxical findings on impulse buying. Finally, we will discuss implications for policy and regulation.

Defining and Positioning Impulse Buying¹

Impulse buying is difficult to define. It is not merely doing “unplanned shopping” (Stern 1962). Purchases may be unplanned but not impulsive, such as habitual purchases, purchases that unexpectedly solve an existing problem, or purchases that are simply too unimportant to plan or think about. Purchases may also be impulsive, but planned, such as shopping to find someone a present, or using the retail environment as “shopping list,” for instance when finding ingredients for an Italian style meal. Taking the time or the location of the purchase as a criterion for impulse buying does not provide a satisfactory definition. For instance, Bellenger et al. (1978) considered impulse buying as a purchase decision made “after entering a store,” but this may then include the examples we just disqualified. Although certain products are more frequently bought on impulse than others, defining impulse buying according to a fixed set of designated impulse products is not a viable criterion either due to wide individual and cultural differences. Rook (1987) provided a comprehensive definition of impulse buying, which includes three key features, i.e., a purchase being unplanned, difficult to control, and accompanied by an emotional response: “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). We consider this as a useful definition for the purpose of this article.

Impulsive buying may not easily be described by the prevalent models of behaviour, most notably socio-cognitive models such as the theory of planned behaviour (e.g., Ajzen 1991). These models suggest that behaviour is inherently intentional and ultimately driven by perceived personal or social consequences. Although the variables included in these models may play a role in impulse buying, such as perceived costs and benefits (Puri 1996) or normative influences (Rook and Fisher 1995), socio-cognitive models suggest a degree of reflection which is typically absent in impulsive buying. Other models, in particular dual-process models of attitude-behaviour relations that posit a distinction between deliberate and more automatic processes (e.g., Fazio 1990; Petty and Wegener 1998; Strack and Deutsch 2004), may be more appropriate to describe impulsive buying.

¹ We use the terms “impulsive buying” and “impulse buying” interchangeably in this article.

Perspectives on Impulse Buying

Impulse buying has been approached from different angles in consumer, economic, social, and clinical psychology. In this section, we review these perspectives, each of which represents a different view on the consumer and on impulsive consumer behaviour.

The Limited Information Processor

Consumer decisions often violate the most fundamental principles of what might be considered as normative decision making, i.e., the view of the consumer as *homo economicus*. In this view, decision makers have full access to information and consider all relevant information in arriving at preferences and choices (e.g., Keeney and Raiffa 1976). Consumers typically engage in much simpler decision-making processes, if only because of the information overload and computational complexities which would be involved in normative models. Such observations led to terms such as “bounded” or “approximate” rationality (Simon 1955) and the “adaptive decision maker” (Payne et al. 1993). This culminated in a range of descriptive models of decision making, which all involve significantly reduced choice processes in terms of information processing and decision rules, such as the elimination-by-aspects rule (Tversky 1972), the lexicographic model, or the conjunctive model (Coombs 1964). Perhaps the simplest of all is Simon’s (1955) satisficing heuristic. According to this strategy, alternatives are considered one at a time in the order they occur to the decision maker. The value of each option is compared to a cut-off level, and the first option that meets the criterion is chosen. Impulsive choices may be considered as being driven by heuristic processes and probably by the most uncomplicated ones. For instance, an impulsive purchase may simply be based on the heuristic whether or not a product elicits a certain level of excitement, joy, and urge to buy.

Biased by Proximity

Why did Eve grab that apple in The Garden? Perhaps it looked particularly attractive because it was physically near to her. People’s judgments are strongly influenced by the proximity of the objects they consider (Trope and Liberman 2010). Things that are nearby may seem bigger, more important, or more attractive than things further away. Matters become more complicated when different response systems are in play, such as emotions versus reasoning (e.g., Breckler 1984; Verplanken and Herabadi 2001; Verplanken et al. 1998). Although consumers may be perfectly able to weigh short-term and long-term costs and benefits, the impulse buying phenomenon suggests that short-term emotions can have a relatively large impact on preferences at the expense of long-term rational concerns (Ainslie 1975; cf., Trope and Fishbach 2000).

Hoch and Loewenstein (1991) presented an explanation of impulsive purchases that goes beyond the notion of mere discounting of delayed rewards in favour of immediate ones. These authors proposed that time-inconsistent preferences such as impulsive purchases can be explained by a shift in the consumer’s reference point. Not being in possession of a product is a consumer’s default reference point, whereas being in possession of a product is his or her reference point after a purchase has been made. However, if a consumer has the sudden urge and feelings of excitement that are typical for an impulsive purchase, these feelings may shift the reference point to a position that normally is taken after the purchase. In other words, the consumer experiences “already possessing” the product before any purchase has been made. The consequence of a reference point shift is that when an

impulsive buyer walks away from the desired product, he or she experiences deprivation and loss.

Trope and Liberman's (2010) construal level theory of psychological distance provides a comprehensive account of effects of spatial, temporal, and social distance. Similarly to Hoch and Loewenstein (1991), these authors suggested that the underlying mechanism that drives distance effects is how individuals subjectively understand an object or event. Trope and Liberman (2010) argued that more distant objects are construed at a higher and more abstract level and than more proximal objects. This implies that certain responses are more likely to emerge as a function of distance. For instance, emotions such as anticipated regret require a relatively high level of construal, i.e., taking a more distant perspective. This may occur when someone merely thinks of an object but is difficult when he or she is physically near the object. Excitement, on the other hand, is typically triggered at lower levels of construal, such as when being directly confronted with an object. Fujita et al. (2006) demonstrated that the activation of high-level construals, rather than low-level construals, resulted in decreased preferences for immediate over delayed outcomes and promoted self-control. At higher construal levels, it is easier to associate tempting stimuli with both the (obvious) positive as well as negative features and thus to exert self-control in resisting the temptation.

The Impulse Buyer Personality

Some people are frequent impulse buyers and do this whenever an opportunity arises, whereas others seldom buy anything without thorough deliberation. There may be chronic individual differences in the tendency to buy on impulse (Verplanken and Herabadi 2001). If this is true, impulse buying tendency should correlate with other stable individual differences, such as long-term goals, personality traits, or adherence to particular values.

In the search of stable individual differences in impulse buying, it seems reasonable to start with impulsivity itself. Chronic individual differences in impulsivity are deeply rooted in our biological make-up. Gray (1975) postulated the existence of two systems in the brain. The first system is the behavioural activation system (BAS). This system is responsive to incentives and cues for reward, and regulates approach behaviour. The second system is the behavioural inhibition system (BIS), which is responsive to cues for punishment, frustration, and uncertainty, and regulates avoidance behaviour. Each of the two systems varies in sensitivity across individuals. People with a highly reactive BIS are vulnerable to stress and anxiety. People with a highly reactive BAS are prone to impulsivity, i.e., they are less able to resist stimuli that trigger approach behaviour. Impulsive individuals typically learn from rewards and much less from punishments. This may be the reason that impulsive buyers may find it difficult to quit their habit even when they have been confronted with adverse consequences, such as a depleted bank balance. The biological basis of impulsivity then provides the foundation for chronic individual differences in impulsive buying. Indeed, Ramanathan and Menon (2006) reported a correlation of .35 between scores on the BAS scale and impulse buying tendency.

Differences in impulsive buying between individuals may also stem from chronically held goals or values. For instance, it is not unreasonable to suggest that impulsive buying is associated with adhering to materialistic values (Kasser et al. 2007). This has indeed been strongly corroborated by empirical evidence. For instance, Dittmar and colleagues asserted that materialistic values are deeply ingrained drivers of impulse buying motives and behaviour (e.g., Dittmar 2005a, b; Dittmar and Bond 2010; Dittmar et al. 2007).

Ramanathan and Menon (2006) demonstrated that both impulsive and prudent participants may experience spontaneous desires when confronted with tempting stimuli. However, contrary to the impulsive participants, the prudent participants were able to mobilize avoidance defences and thus did not persist in indulging the temptations.

A straightforward demonstration of the relationship between the tendency to buy on impulse and chronic personality traits was provided in a study by Verplanken and Herabadi (2001). These authors found relatively strong correlations between impulse buying tendency and an assessment of the Big Five personality traits. The Big Five represent five basic personality dimensions, which have been found universal and relatively chronic over the life span: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and autonomy, or openness. Impulse buying tendency correlated positively with extravertedness ($r=.37$) and negatively with conscientiousness ($r=-.39$) and autonomy ($r=-.20$). These results suggested that impulsive buying has a chronic component which is rooted in personality.

Purchasing Symbols of Values and Identity

Products may serve purposes other than utilitarian or hedonistic goals; they may have symbolic meaning. For instance, products may symbolize life style, social groups, status, class, values, religion, regional identities, or political positions. Buying such products may thus be an act of reaching out to what these symbols stand for. Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) proposed a theory of symbolic self-completion. This theory argues that we have a need to define and confirm our identity, and do so through “symbols of completion,” i.e., symbols that represent a particular identity. Possessions and purchases of products may be a way to do so. This motivation to affirm one’s self-definition becomes especially salient when individuals feel uncertain or threatened, or when their identity is in any way compromised. Verplanken and Holland (2002) demonstrated that participants who had previously indicated that environmental values were part of their self-description and subsequently were made to act contrary to these values were more motivated to choose an environmentally friendly product later in the experiment. Impulsive purchases may thus also function to clarify, affirm, or express an aspect of a person’s identity, for instance because the product symbolizes an aspired social group or life style. As our self-concept consists of a multitude of identities, products may serve as different symbols of completion (cf., Verplanken et al. 2009).

The symbolic meaning of products has long been documented in consumer psychology (e.g., Dittmar 1992; Gutman 1982; Mick and DeMoss 1990; Richins 1994). The symbolic goals of impulsive purchases may be reflected in the type of products that are typically bought on impulse, such as jewelry, perfume, or particular sportswear (e.g., Dittmar et al. 1995, 1996; Verplanken and Herabadi 2001). The assumption that impulse buying may be driven by identity concerns was tested in a study by Dittmar et al. (1996). Drawing on Wicklund and Gollwitzer’s (1982) theory of symbolic self-completion, these authors assessed the discrepancy between what participants perceived as their actual self versus what they perceived as their ideal self. They found the highest levels of impulse buying tendency among those who endorsed materialistic values *and* had the highest actual-ideal self discrepancies.

Of course, identity considerations may enter consumer decisions in general and may thus, for instance, be responsible for brand loyalties such as subscribing to a particular newspaper or drinking a particular brand of whisky (Dijksterhuis 2008). However, the research reviewed above suggests that identity concerns may be involved in impulsive buying to a larger extent than in “ordinary” buying.

Hunting for Pleasure and Forgetting Your Sorrows

Impulse buying is fun. At least, pleasure is perhaps what most people associate with impulse buying. There are several ways such an association may occur. Positive emotions may lead to impulse buying. For instance, Rook and Gardner (1993) found that a positive mood was mentioned most when participants were asked which mood states encouraged them to make impulsive purchases. The act of buying on impulse may thus be an expression of feeling good. Impulse buying may also cause positive emotions. A basic tenet in all domains of psychology is that people are fundamentally motivated to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Impulse buying may fulfil these hedonistic motives. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) contrasted the information processing account of consumer behaviour, which prevailed at that time, with the view that consumers are often driven by the hedonistic and aesthetic nature of consuming. Pleasant feelings or a good mood may thus be an important goal of impulsive buying. Holbrook and Gardner (2000) presented a dynamic model in which mood is an outcome of a consumer experience. The model suggests that an initial mood combines with consumption experiences and thus produces an “updated” mood. Such a cycle may repeat over time and may induce variations in mood depending on the emotional tone of the consumption experience.

A closer observation of the impulse buying act is indeed revealing. Herabadi et al. (2009) observed shoppers in situ, i.e., in a large department store, which sold common impulse products such as clothes, hobby items, personal ornaments, and body care products. Participants were interviewed immediately after they had made a purchase. The researchers obtained emotion statements as well as an assessment of the customer’s impulse buying tendency and the self-reported impulsiveness of the purchase they had just made. The study revealed the emotional experiences that come with impulsive purchases, which were represented by emotions such as “excited,” “enthusiastic,” “feeling an urge,” and “happy.” The occurrence of these emotions correlated strongly with high scores on the impulse buying instrument ($r=.75$) and with the reported impulsiveness of the purchase ($r=.63$). The study thus demonstrated that impulsive shoppers do experience elated and positive emotions at the time and place of the actual purchase.

Impulsive purchases are not exclusively associated with positive emotions. Rook and Gardner’s (1993) also reported that a significant portion of participants mentioned negative moods as causing them to buy on impulse. Negative emotions may have many sources. Some of these are transient, such as experiencing an unexpected setback, while others are more chronic. Verplanken et al. (2005) documented how impulse buying tendency may be part of a complex of negative affective states. They found that general impulse buying tendency was correlated with long-term negative mood and low self-esteem on the one hand, and with habitual unhealthy snacking and eating disorder propensity on the other hand. That study suggested that impulse buying may be part of an unhealthy eating pattern and that both behaviours are driven by chronic negative feelings of low self-worth. The relationship between impulse buying tendency and low self-esteem has been found in other studies as well (e.g., Silvera et al. 2008).

Apparently, impulse buying can be elicited both by positive *and* negative emotions. However, the evidence thus far is correlational and does not allow strong conclusions about causality. Recently, Sato and Verplanken (2010, unpublished data) obtained experimental evidence of causal relations. Participants in the lab were given a mood induction task, which elicited either a negative, positive, or neutral mood. At the end of the experiment, they were given £5.00 for participation and were also provided with the opportunity to use (some of) this money to buy food products. Half of the products were unhealthy snacks, i.e.,

products that are typically bought on impulse. Participants in the neutral mood condition spent on average 37% of their money on these unhealthy products, whereas participants in the negative and positive mood conditions spent 49% and 59%, respectively on the unhealthy snacks. The differences between the neutral mood condition on the one hand and the negative and positive mood conditions on the other hand were statistically significant.

Conscious Self-Control or the Lack of It

Impulsive buying has been framed as a result from a lack of self-control (e.g., Baumeister 2002; Faber and Vohs 2004; Vohs et al. 2008a, b; Vohs and Faber 2007). According to these authors, the task at hand is to exert conscious self-control in resisting the temptations of buying desired products. Self-control may consist of actions such as thinking about spending the money, walking away from the displayed product, or down-regulating elated emotions. However, the task of exerting self-control may fail. Baumeister (2002) discussed three causes why this might happen. The first may be a conflict of goals, for instance saving money versus satisfying the desire to possess an item. Secondly, self-control may break down when people stop monitoring their behaviour. This is a well-known phenomenon in the realm of eating. For instance, once dieters feel they have broken their standard, they may stop monitoring food intake and overeat much more (e.g., Polivy et al. 1986). Finally, effective self-control requires a certain amount of mental resources, and sometimes people lack those resources, for instance due to mental exhaustion. This has been denoted as ego-depletion. For instance, Vohs and Faber (2007) tested this hypothesis by having participants to conduct a task that required either no or a certain amount of self-control (e.g., avoiding reading words on a screen), which was then followed by a task that assessed their tendency to buy on impulse. It was found that when participants had exerted self-control, they were less able to resist their impulses to buy, and spent more money compared to participants who did not exert self-control in the first task. Depletion of resources may occur for various reasons. One that is particularly ironic with respect to impulsive shopping is the very act of shopping itself. Vohs et al. (2008) demonstrated that making choices has the potential to deplete mental resources, which, when depleted, may result in less self-control and thus make customers on a shopping expedition even more vulnerable to impulsive buying.

Compulsive Buying

So far, we have addressed impulsive shopping as a relatively innocent consumer behaviour. However, impulsive shopping is less innocent if it takes the form of compulsive shopping (e.g., d'Astous 1990; DeSarbo and Edwards 1996; Dittmar 2005a, b; Dittmar and Drury 2000; Dittmar et al. 2007; Faber and O'Guinn 1992, 2008; Hanley and Wilhelm 1992; Kyrios et al. 2004; Mowen and Spears 1999; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Roberts 1998; Scherhorn 1990; Yurchisin and Johnson 2004). We are thus entering the arena of psychopathology, where this form of consumer behaviour is known as compulsive buying disorder (e.g., Black 2007). Compulsive buying may lead to extreme suffering in the form of financial debt and the disruption of family life and personal relationships.

O'Guinn and Faber (1989) defined compulsive buying as "(...) chronic, repetitive purchasing that occurs as a response to negative events or feelings. The alleviation of these negative feelings is the primary motivation for engaging in the behaviour. Buying should provide the individual with short-term positive rewards, but result in long-term negative consequences. Once developed, the individual should face great difficulty in controlling buying even after its detrimental effects are recognized" (p. 149). Compulsive buying is

typically associated with the darker sides of psychological functioning such as low self-esteem and negative affect (d'Astous 1990; DeSarbo and Edwards 1996; Hanley and Wilhelm 1992; Kyrios et al. 2004; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Roberts 1998), high but unstable self-esteem, such as the narcissist personality (Rose 2007), deep-seated pathological conditions such as mood and anxiety disorders and disorders of impulse control such as those related to substance use and eating (e.g., Black 2007). At first glance, compulsive buying may seem an extreme form of impulse buying. Compulsive buying is linked to factors that also drive impulsive purchases, such as materialistic values and identity concerns (DeSarbo and Edwards 1996; Dittmar 2005a; Dittmar et al. 2007; Hanley and Wilhelm 1992; Mowen and Spears 1999; Yurchisin and Johnson 2004). Vice versa, impulsive buying tendency has been found related to low self-esteem and negative affect (Rook and Gardner 1993; Silvera et al. 2008; Verplanken et al. 2005). Both compulsive and impulsive buying have been found related to lack of conscientiousness and openness to change (Mowen and Spears 1999; Verplanken and Herabadi 2001). However, Mowen and Spears (1999) found compulsive buying related to emotional instability, whereas this was not the case for impulsive buying in the Verplanken and Herabadi (2001) study, and the latter found a relationship with extravertedness, which was not found in the former. These differences between impulsive and compulsive buying support the argument that the two phenomena should be classified as being qualitatively distinct (Faber and O'Guinn 2008).

A Self-Regulation Perspective on Impulse Buying

Why is impulse buying associated with positive *and* negative emotions? Why is it linked to low self-esteem, but also with hedonistic values, extravertedness, narcissism, and symbols of identity? Considering this wide variety of factors, and some seemingly inconsistent findings, the conclusion must be that there is no simple model of antecedents that could explain this type of consumer behaviour. Rather, impulse buying is part of complex and dynamic psychological functioning and can be considered as a form of psychological self-regulation (Vohs and Faber 2007). Self-regulation refers to the ability to regulate thoughts, feelings, and behaviours such that the outcome is in line with a standard (e.g., Baumeister and Vohs 2004; Gross 2007; Vohs et al. 2008a, b).² Many of the problems some people experience, such as overeating, addictions, aggression, breakdown of relationships, or burnout can be traced back to failures to self-regulate.

Self-regulation theories represent a system approach (e.g., Carver and Scheier 1998). Key features of system models are the presence of a standard, the monitoring of the current status of the system, a comparison of the current status with the standard, and the potential for action to balance out discrepancies. A simple example of a system is the heating of a house, which has a standard (desired temperature), a monitoring and comparison device (thermostat), and a machine to restore the balance (heater). Such feedback systems not only govern much of our biology but are also essential in our psychological functioning, where it is known as self-regulation. In line with a system approach, self-regulation implies standards, monitoring, and action. Standards can be held in the form of goals, norms, rules,

² Self-regulation is sometimes equated with self-control (e.g., Baumeister 2002). Although exerting self-control may often be an important tool for self-regulation, self-control refers to conscious and deliberate processes, whereas self-regulation may also encompass automatic and nonconscious processes (e.g., Dijksterhuis and Aarts 2010; Vohs and Baumeister 2004).

ideals, or values, i.e., a certain state an individual aspires to accomplish or acquire. Monitoring occurs through our perceptions, which include not only the world around us but also our internal world, such as bodily sensations, emotional states, and thinking. “Action” may involve overt behaviour but may also imply shifts of attention, attempts to change emotional states, or reviewing perceptions and standards.

It makes much sense to apply the self-regulation perspective on impulse buying. Our view aims at integrating not only the battle between hedonistic urges and self-control but also the wider spectrum of factors that have been found related to impulse buying, including the seemingly contradictory findings such as the associations of impulse buying with both positive and negative feelings. We do this by drawing on regulatory focus theory proposed by Higgins (1997, 1998, 2002). This theory proposes two distinct basic motives, each of which is associated with a different self-regulation strategy. The first motive is based on the desire to reach out for good things. This motive makes a person focus on accomplishments, growth, hopes, wishes, or aspirations and is referred to as a *promotion focus*. A promotion focus induces a state of eagerness to attain advancement and gains and thus regulates the presence or absence of rewards and positive outcomes. The second motive is based on the need to avoid bad things. This motive makes us focus on duties, obligations, or responsibilities and is referred to as a *prevention focus*. A prevention focus induces a state of vigilance so as to avoid pain and losses and thus regulates the presence or absence of punishments and negative outcomes.

A particular self-regulatory focus may be elicited by external demands. For instance, buying a lottery ticket implies a promotion focus, whereas taking out an insurance implies a prevention focus. But a self-regulation strategy may also be induced by internal forces. For instance, activating hedonistic values may elicit a promotion strategy, such as looking for opportunities or bargains that fulfil such desires. On the other hand, feeling anxious may elicit a prevention strategy, such as looking for opportunities to avoid fear and feel safe. One of the reasons why impulsive buying has been found associated with such a diversity of antecedents and perspectives may be that this behaviour may serve different self-regulatory functions, according to which type of self-regulation strategy is in place. The perspectives on impulse buying which we sketched in this article may thus fit in either a promotion or a prevention self-regulation strategy. We summarize this in Table 1.

Promotion Strategies

Accounts of impulsive buying as reaching out for positive experiences, fulfilling hedonistic urges and meeting materialistic values are most prominent as promotion strategies. Impulsive purchases thus serve as vehicles to accomplish promotion-focused goals. We also

Table 1 Classifying perspectives on impulsive buying as promotion-focused versus prevention-focused self-regulation strategies

Promotion-focused strategies	Prevention-focused strategies
Proximity bias	Limited information processing
Seeking pleasure, hedonistic values	Alleviating negative affect and mood repair
Fulfilling materialistic values	Dealing with low self-esteem
Purchasing symbols of identity	Personality traits: emotional instability
Personality traits: extravertedness, autonomy	Exerting conscious self-control
	Compulsive buying

consider identity-driven impulse buying as being a promotion strategy. Closing the gap between one's actual self and ideal self is at the heart of promotion-oriented self-regulation (Higgins 1998). There is also an argument for associating extraverted personalities with a promotion strategy; as impulse buying episodes are often experienced in the presence of others, these may set a stage for extraverts to thrive. A similar reasoning holds for those who score high on autonomy, who may use impulse buying as a way to fulfil such aspirations. Finally, impulse buying was described as a form of proximity bias. As immediate rewards constitute the dominant force behind this bias, this may thus be classified as promotion-oriented self-regulation.

Prevention Strategies

Impulse buying may function as a prevention-oriented self-regulation strategy. Cutting down on information processing may be classified as such a strategy; impulse buyers typically avoid information overload and eschew deep information processing, such as comparing products and evaluating whether or not a product provides good value for money. The most prominent prevention strategy is represented by the relationship between impulsive buying and negative affect and low self-esteem. In these contexts, impulsive purchases may function as attempts to repair or distract from low moods. Such self-regulation strategies may, at least temporarily, be successful. However, they may also backfire, especially if the strategy involves active attempts to suppress unwanted thoughts or feelings, which has been found to lead to rebound effects (Wegner 1994). Emotional instability may instigate prevention-oriented self-regulation in which impulsive buying is used as an attempt to repair emotional imbalance. The view of impulsive buying as failed self-control should also be classified as prevention-oriented, as impulse control is aimed at stopping uncontrolled behaviour. Finally, compulsive buying is typically a prevention-oriented strategy, as it may be an attempt to deal with psychological distress or psychopathological conditions (e.g., Black 2007).

Consumer Self-Regulation or Regulation of Consumers?

As this article is part of a special issue on behavioural economics, consumer policy, and consumer law, we wish to add a few comments on implications of our review for consumer policy. In particular, the question arises whether consumers should be protected against detrimental consequences of impulsivity. Most countries have extensive legal regulation in place regulating the sale and use of alcohol and tobacco or gambling. Behaviours in these domains are prone to being impulse-driven and may have detrimental personal and social consequences if consumers fail to self-regulate. Impulsive buying usually will not lead to consequences of that level of severity. However, exceptions may be found amongst compulsive buyers and consumers for whom impulsive buying serves as a way to deal with severe psychological problems. In terms of our promotion–prevention self-regulation framework, these individuals typically suffer from extreme forms of prevention-focused self-regulation failure. They may benefit from information on where to find help, for instance regular mental health services or self-help groups (e.g., Dittmar and Drury 2000).

In many countries, consumers enjoy at least some protection against negative consequences of impulsive purchases. For instance, in the UK, the Sale of Goods Act 1979 requires that goods meet a standard that reasonably can be regarded as satisfactory given the price, are fit for purpose, and are as described by the seller. Consumers are

entitled to a full refund if the product bought does not meet these criteria. However, consumer protection laws do not protect consumers from making impulsive purchases in the first place. An exception is when one buys goods or services from a catalogue, on the internet, or by any other form of distance selling. In these cases, consumers often have the right to a “cool-off” period, during which an order can be cancelled without any reason and a full refund made.

Consumer self-regulation is often difficult to exercise. There are many reasons why this is the case, such as the lack of insight in internal processes (Nisbett and Wilson 1977), information overload, the suggestive power of advertising, or ironic processes such as shopping resulting in decreased control (Vohs et al. 2008a, b). Consumers are particularly vulnerable to the range of tricks which play on their desire for immediate rewards, often by trying to conceal costs. Such dubious practices include tactics such as drip pricing, complex pricing, reference pricing, high-low pricing, artificial bargains, supply restriction, baiting sales, and time-limited offers. Stricter regulation against such practices can certainly be argued for, which would undoubtedly benefit the impulsive consumer.

Finally, information provision may be a positive step toward mitigating adverse consequences of this consumer style. Such information may aim at strengthening consumers’ self-regulation capacities, such as campaigns focusing on monetary prudence, prefactual thinking, or anticipated regret. Initiatives may also be taken to promote information search and product comparison. This has been made much easier nowadays by the increasing availability of websites set up for that purpose, and such enterprises can even be made profitable. Information provision may also be directed at retailers. In many branches, retailers do not necessarily wish consumers to make impulsive purchases, such as when selling durables or high quality products, while in some retailers actively dissuade consumers from doing so, such as in the funeral industry (Bailey 2010). However, in many other contexts, retailers may be made more aware of the benefits of customers making more balanced and deliberate purchase decisions.

Conclusion

Impulse buying is an interesting phenomenon; it grossly violates the assumptions represented by the notion of *homo economicus*. As we have summarized in this article, there are many views on impulse buying, none of which is true or false; each perspective reflects a different slice of reality and highlights different psychological mechanisms. Taken together, these different perspectives can lead to seemingly contradictory or paradoxical findings. We argued that impulsive buying occurs as part of wider psychological functioning, in particular in the form of self-regulatory behaviour. Self-regulation may take various forms, and we used Higgins’ (1997, 1998, 2002) theory of self-regulatory focus to categorize the various perspectives on impulse buying as either a promotion or a prevention focus. While Higgins’ theory is applicable to consumer behaviour in general, it seems particularly useful for bringing together the perspectives on impulsive buying. Although we acknowledge that the mapping of the impulsive buying perspectives onto the two self-regulatory foci may not be 100% waterproof, we believe it has the potential to provide a deeper understanding of this ubiquitous form of consumption. Finally, we discussed the question whether consumers should be protected against impulsivity. We contended that regulation against misleading practices that play on the vulnerabilities of impulsive buyers could be sharpened and that information provision to consumers and

retailers aimed at strengthening consumers' self-regulatory capacities may mitigate adverse consequences of impulse buying.

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