

## Impulse Buying: What Instills This Desire to Indulge?

*Internal Motivating Factors of Impulse Buying: A Qualitative Study in the Indian Context*

Supriya M. Kalla

International Management Institute  
New Delhi, India

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### Key words

Impulse, impulse buying, narcissism, novelty, freedom

### Abstract

**Purpose** -This study explores various internal motivating factors of impulse buying phenomenon in Indian context. This study is aimed at obtaining consumer insights, so as to provide an inclusive conceptualization of this marketing phenomenon.

**Design/methodology/approach** -Data for this research was obtained through in-depth interviews. Since, the purpose of these interviews was exploration, the researcher collected data till it reached saturation (point beyond which further research was not adding any new insights) and so there was no fixed sample size. Sampling technique used in this case is purposive sampling. A total of 56 in-depth interviews were conducted with men and women (age group 25-40 & residing or working close to malls and markets in the region). The analysis of these interviews was done using Open analysis<sup>1</sup>. These interviews were able to provide fresh, non-obvious ways of understanding the internal motivations of an impulse buyer.

**Research implications** -This study extends the existing knowledge base by establishing the significance of internal motivating factors of 'impulse buying' - happiness, narcissism, freedom and novelty. Earlier studies on 'impulse buying' have focused on external motivating factors and internal motivating factors have largely remained unresolved.

**Practical implications** -This paper provides interesting insights for retail marketers to further enhance the possibilities of impulse buying.

**Originality/Value** - Notwithstanding the addition to the knowledge base, this study is extremely significant in view of the important retail context of India. With an ever growing relevance of Indian market in liberalized global scenario coupled with predicted future of an expanding retail sector, this study suggests motivators and improved understanding of this intriguing phenomenon - impulsive buying.

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### Introduction

This research paper deals with an interesting and fascinating human phenomenon that has remained a mystery in the marketing world for long - Impulse Buying. Through many discussions with consumers, there was enough evidence for the fact that there is more to 'impulse buying' than what is currently being documented. Although retail acknowledges the pervasiveness of 'impulse buying' but the phenomenon has remained relatively less explored. This study deals with this topic in the context of Indian market. In India and in many such developing economies, today's marketing context is characterized by ever increasing aspirations and a visible willingness to spend. This is accompanied with a young consumer base, rising affluence and a burgeoning middle class. All these developments are leading to eagerness to use consumption as an expression of being. This is further fueled by the availability of products, newer retail formats like supermarkets and hypermarkets that provide much higher impetus to

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<sup>1</sup> McKeone, 1995

experiential marketing (Wu & Lee, 2015) and so impulse buying. All the preceding reasons suggest that marketers and retailers are looking for several ways to trigger (Wu & Lee, 2015) and many opportunities to cash in on impulse buying. This has been accompanied with the effort of researchers to understand this phenomenon to the core. However, the research work till now has been able to explain only certain specific aspects of the phenomenon. To the best of researcher's knowledge, no research work this far has given a comprehensive picture of motivators of the phenomenon. Many studies have discussed external motivators of the phenomenon (Rook, 1987; Liang & Meng, 2008; Bloch et al. 1991; Valdez et al., 1994 & Mattila et al., 2008). Internal motivators like self-esteem (Verplanken et al., 2005), autistic stimuli (Piron, 1991; Silvera et al., 2008), excitement (Hirschman, 1985) & a way to relieve unpleasant mood (Elliott, 1994) have also been discussed. However, this research takes it a step further by looking into the deep seated internal drivers of 'impulse buying', which have more relevance in today's time when Indian society is set to demand a 'rethink' on individualism vs. collectivism.

Hence, this research seeks to obtain an insightful understanding of complex issues, which may not be otherwise apparent. Further, owing to significant cultural, social and economic differences from the west (Ramachandran, 1980; Kaur and Singh, 2007), it became imperative to identify factors that have a bearing on 'impulse buying' in Indian context.

Inspired by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in-depth qualitative study (Malhotra, 2004) was carried out to understand 'impulse buying' process, uncover motivations for indulging in impulse buying and gratifications sought therein.

In the current case, the philosophical assumption is "knowledge is in the meanings people make of it; knowledge is gained through people talking about their meanings" (Creswell, 1998). Based in psychology, such qualitative studies focus on individual's understanding and his/her experiences. Further, the use of open-ended questions and probing gave participants the opportunity to respond in their own words. This also helped them give their own description of the phenomenon in question. In addition, this study was grounded in reality so that factors come from individual's conscious (Sayre, 2001) and subconscious thinking.

Extensive literature review was the starting point of this study and was done to delve into the existing discussions and motivating factors that are associated with impulse buying. This was followed by in-depth interviews that further unveiled myriad motivating factors (internal) associated with impulse buying.

### **Literature Review**

The 'negative' and 'bad' associations with 'impulsive' aspect of consumer behavior (Terry, 1988) make this research even more captivating. This phenomenon of 'impulse buying' generates a lot of interest among retailers, consumer groups and researchers but it still remains a concept without clear theoretical construction. This section explores various literary discussions and research on impulse buying. This part of research paper begins with revisiting the idea of 'impulse', so that it provides an interesting prelude to the discussion on 'impulse buying'.

#### **Impulse**

The core meaning of impulse is 'akrasia' or 'weakness of will', for which, there is rich philosophical literature, beginning with Plato and Aristotle. This akrasia is "free, intentional action contrary to the agent's better judgment" (Owens, 2002). However, this qualification of 'contrary to better judgment' needs a deeper probing as many research studies discuss the 'rational' aspect of impulse buying (Sneath et al., 2008; Rook et al., 1995; Iyer, 1989). Impulsive behavior has been a target of philosophical discussion for many years now and is a central theme of the legend of Adam and Eve (Ainslee, 1975), and the focal point of fables such as "The Grasshopper and the Ant" (Rook, 1987). Freud's pleasure principle (Freud, 1950) has a distinct

approach, which provides a clear understanding of 'impulse'. He interpreted impulses as products of two competing forces, the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The pleasure principle encourages immediate gratification but is compromised in so far as a person responds to reality principle's tendency towards rational deliberation. These two forces often compete, because impulses encourage action without careful consideration about the objective environment, and with little or no regard for potential realistic consequences.

With this understanding of 'impulse' as the backdrop, the forthcoming section discusses the quest of this research - impulse buying.

### Impulse Buying

Although impulsive behavior can occur in any setting, consumer impulse buying is an extensive everyday context for it. In the modern marketplace, spontaneous urges to buy and consume often compete with the practical necessity to delay the immediate gratification that buying provides. The documented research on impulse buying dates back to 1950s, wherein, initial explanation of the phenomenon was provided by Strotz (1956) in his 'discounting model'. He suggested that impulse buyers discount the future at too rapid a rate. Thus, the benefits of the desired object at the point of imminent purchase outweigh the future problem of paying the bill. After this, many definitions of the phenomenon have been proposed and discussed. Rook's (1987) definition of impulse buying provided a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon and was inclusive of quite a few discussions on the topic till then - "when a consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately". This definition provided a thorough picture of impulse buying and more recently Clinton et al. (2013) took it a step forward and suggested that impulse buying is "a sudden, hedonically complex purchase behavior in which the rapidity of the impulse purchase precludes any thoughtful, deliberate considerations of alternative or future implications". These definitions provide an extensive picture of 'impulse buying', but the role of motivating factors, both internal and external, need to be researched more to make the definitions more elaborate.

The forthcoming portion of this review deals with various internal motivating factors associated with impulse purchase.

### Internal motivating factors

These are factors that relate to internal thought processes of the shopper. People can suddenly experience the urge to go out and buy something, with no direct visual confrontation (Verplanken & Herabadi, 2001). This sudden urge to buy something can emanate from various thoughts such as self-discrepancy (Verplanken & Sato, 2011), defined as a difference between actual self and ideal self (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1981) or a strong urge to bolster self-image (Dittmar, 2005; Sharma et al., 1997). As a result of this strong internal urge, people did more impulse buying and they regretted it more. This suggests that there is a continuum from ordinary to excessive impulse buying, with 'need to bolster self-image' being one of the major underlying motivators of this behavior. The existing studies do not explore it fully and this needs to be delved in detail.

There is an interesting perspective of unplanned shopping in past research. It also suggests that people buy products not only for what they can do but also for what they mean (Levy 1959). This aspect of considering products as 'symbols' of being and consumption as an indicator of being, took on a new facet wherein researchers started studying 'hedonic consumption'. This perspective of 'hedonic consumption' has been linked with impulse buying by many researchers (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Herabadi, 2009). However, the perspective of 'hedonic consumption' stays incomplete till the deep seated internal motivators stemming from hedonic desires are delved further.

Interestingly, as a type of internal stimuli, Piron (1991) recognized the role and importance of autistic stimuli in motivating impulse purchases. Autistic thoughts can possess great evocative power (Hirschman 1985) and can possibly lead to impulse buying. The power of this specific kind of stimuli has not been discussed much but it merits a stronger research. Another factor that has been found to influence impulse buying is 'affect' (Silvera et al., 2008). When asked to name the single mood that most often preceded an impulse purchase, respondents most frequently mentioned "pleasure" followed by "carefree" and "excited" (Hirschman 1985). In particular, people who feel happy may be disposed to reward themselves generously and to feel as if they have freedom to act (Rook and Gardner, 1993; Kalla and Goyal, 2010). It can also be seen as behavior often motivated by attempts to cheer up self or be nice to self (Mick and Demos, 1990). This behavior emanating out of wish to gratify self seems to have a stronger underlying motivation that needs to be explored further. Self-regulatory resource (Muraven et al., 1998) availability is considered an important element in determining when and why people engage in impulsive spending. Self-regulatory resources are conceptualized as a generalized pool of energy that allows people to overcome incipient urges and substitute a desirable behavior for an undesirable one (Baumeister and Vohs, 2004).

In the present context, with the increasing popularity of online buying, time and distance do not remain barriers anymore, the perspective of 'self-regulatory' resources gain more importance and need to be relooked at in the sight of massive retail proliferation and online buying.

This part of the research paper provided literary coverage of the topic this far and author's views on the gaps in existing literature. This provided necessary background for discussion with consumers, as discussed in the following sections of the paper.

### **Research Methodology**

The exploration into this phenomenon was achieved through Consumer Depth Interviews. Initial interactions with consumers and literature indicated that impulse buying was considered normatively wrong (Rook & Hoch, 1995). So, the researcher was concerned not to pre-empt the content of the research and wanted to facilitate respondents' ability to be reflective and open in expressing their feelings and emotions without self-censure or inhibition about how others may perceive them. This was done in an effort to minimize socially desirable responses. Keeping the above in view, accompanied shopping, shop exit interviews and group discussions were considered and ruled out. The first two techniques seemed likely to encourage posturing and post-rationalization respectively as it would be difficult and time consuming to build up the necessary rapport and trust to overcome such behaviors. Since the purpose was to encourage disclosure of behaviors, in-depth interviews, in a setting that encourages consumer's psychological comfort, seemed appropriate. The interview is a uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subject's everyday world. In addition, these interviews aimed at understanding the meaning of central themes of the subject's lived world, along with words, interviewer also paid attention to facial expressions and bodily gestures. The researcher guarded against direct cuing in of the phenomenon of impulse buying (Sarkar, 2014). This increased the duration of interview and average duration of depth interviews was about one hour and ten minutes.

These depth interviews were conducted in consumer homes at the time that seemed appropriate for a thorough and uninterrupted discussion. In this case, the interview was not strictly structured and nor was it completely non-directive. Respondents were probed by a highly skilled interviewer to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, and feelings on the topic.

### **Sampling**

As suggested earlier, there was no fixed sample size and the researcher continued expanding the sample size until data collection revealed no new data (Douglas, 2003).

The sampling decision was made with an explicit purpose of obtaining a rich source of information. Variation at this stage of research was ensured through purposive sampling, to get viewpoints of people with varied characteristics (Riffe et al., 1998). The power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information rich-cases for in-depth analysis related to the central issues being studied. Purposive sampling is particularly relevant when research is concerned with exploring the universe and understanding the audience. Hence, the purposive sample for this study was drawn from individuals and settings that are 'naturally' involved in the process of 'impulse buying'. Criterion sampling, a specific form of purposive sampling, which involves searching for cases or individuals who meet a certain criterion (Palys & Atchison, 2008), was used. The sample composition was men and women, age group 25-40, proximity (< 5 kms) to malls and markets in the region. Fifty-five interviews were done in national capital region of India.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. This helped in analyzing the tone and pauses of respondents. Rigor and discipline was applied in data analysis without necessarily transforming the data into quantitative expressions.

Open analysis (Mc Keone, 1995) was used for analysis of qualitative data. The purpose was to understand meaning of the text through interpretive procedures. Traditional content analysis (e.g., Belk) and template-based analysis (Crabtree and Miller, 1992) were excluded. Open analysis is a form of content analysis, which aims to identify the messages and subject matter within the text. It is different from prescriptive analysis wherein the context is a closely defined set of communication parameters (e.g. specific messages, subject matter). With this perspective, statements made by respondents were analyzed for their significance with respect to their role in the act of impulse buying. This process of open analysis followed a procedure similar to the one discussed by Strauss & Corbin (1990) for open coding. Conceptual labels were placed on actions and emotions expressed in words and other instances of phenomena.

### **Results and Discussion**

The presentation of interpretation of the qualitative data will, where appropriate, make reference to the earlier literature. The themes that emerged out of this research will be discussed in the following paragraphs

#### **Inherent motivators of impulse purchase**

There is a certain sense of urgency that precedes the act of impulse buying and this unthoughtfulness is usually characteristic of situations where a person anticipates distraction or gratification in the form of excitement or pleasure. This perspective of 'impulse buying' preceding intellect was observed based on rasion d'être that consumers suggested as their motives to indulge in impulse buying. The following part of the research paper gives a thorough interpretation of consumer interviews.

#### **Celebrating self**

There are moments in one's life that are characterized by wish to be pleased about one's own existence. This, sometimes, is due to certain long awaited achievements, a sudden sense of victory and sometimes there are no specific reasons. These are moments of overpowering urge wherein the phase of planned thinking is taken over by a wish to gratify oneself. Impulse buying 'for self' becomes a solution in these situations and post purchase justification stands on

the premise of 'treat' for self. This self-gratifying behavior is linked to self gifts (Mick & Demoss, 1995), goods that a person buys to tell oneself that 'one is special'.

### *A more 'playful' consumer now*

Positive changes in the domains of economy and rising upper middle class (in India) have had a bearing on the consumer who is more playful than ever. Consumer in India, is now tasting abundance in resources as well as choices, and as a result, consumption is the new language of expressions that one is learning and this has led to shedding of many inhibitions that were earlier holding her back from exercising her 'free will' in the scenario of buying. Therefore, this destabilized sense of formality is making him/her more prone to impulse buying and consumption paradigm is increasingly becoming 'why not' instead of 'why'.

This phenomenon of consumer's playfulness in the context of consumption has been accompanied by changing 'spending' paradigms. Compared to the past where it was all about limited resources, uncertainties of future earnings due to changing government policies and limited opportunities, today the consumer is more confident wherein the consumer sentiment now is "I can, so I choose to" and changing paradigms of spending can be described through - *"Every time you spend, you grow compared to past where every time you spent, you shrank"* (M, 38)

The playfulness of consumer with respect to consumption can be further described in terms of much lower sense of time and consequences wherein life is thought of in terms of flow and not stock. This fluidity has a bearing on consumer's decision-making style, and in many respects, it is becoming a life of 'here and now' rather than that of 'tomorrow will be better'. This gets a further support from the changing Indian view of wealth wherein agendas 'live for today' and 'save for tomorrow' coexist. This view has led to much reduced 'consumer guilt' that had made impulse normatively wrong for a very long time in the past.

### *Treat for the narcissist*

Narcissism (Freud, 1911) is a set of character traits concerned with self admiration, self-centeredness and self-regard. Narcissism is different from other major defensive strategies or solutions in that it is not compensatory and unlike self-idealization, it tends to be a product of indulgence rather than that of deprivation (Bernard, 1988). While virtually everyone can be claimed to possess some degree of narcissistic traits, but some people are more likely to exhibit this trait (Sturrock et al., 1998).

This research took it a step further and after certain discussions, this link between narcissism and impulse buying was probed. In some consumers, it came through that there is a certain sense of belief that one has grown up and has become a 'special' person. The ability to buy something without much planning, is soon becoming affirmation of the 'special me'. This 'special me' tends to become a strong motivation for impulsive action in the buying scenario. These narcissistic desires tend to guide thoughts and actions of a person who is persistently in search of reassurance through self-enhancement.

### *Consumer Confidence - a strong factor that makes an allowance for impulse in buying scenario*

Consumer confidence is on rise and is much higher compared to the century that has gone by. This rise in consumer confidence and so a positive view of the future, has manifested itself in ways that have led to an upsurge in many facets of modern living and consumption is certainly one of them.

With a strong and supporting economy, impulse is no longer seen as a leakage in the control. In addition, it is also not seen as a lapse in regulatory mechanisms of self. Hence, it can be said that impulse in buying scenario is becoming more legitimized now.

### **In-control vs. surprise**

There is paradox between working towards being 'in control' & increasingly strong desire to be 'surprised'. However, both co-exist. As we are working towards seeking more control over our world, subconsciously we are always waiting for pleasant surprises. This tension between control and surprise sometimes gives way to impulsive action. Hence, the tendency to seek surprises automatically bends him/her towards novelty and makes him/her a novelty-seeker.

### **Shopping now is not considered a chore**

With enticing new age retail; shopping is becoming more of a pleasurable activity. There are many mentions of it being seen as a 'break' that is welcome in the busy lives. This 'relaxing' break (Park, E.J., et al., 2006) becomes a motivation for stepping out and 'shopping'. It tends to provide a self-justifiable stance to the need for respite from routine or more bothering acts and situations of daily life.

### **Momentary fulfillment of unconstrained self - Freedom**

The work, family and other life requirements tend to weigh down on people, giving them a feeling of constrained existence. However, the strong internal motivation of being 'free' tends to show up in many day-to-day activities and interestingly shopping is one of them. Earlier research studies have mentioned that impulse buying comes through as an act of freedom within a restricted situation (Thomson et al., 1990). This research corroborates this finding and extends it further in light of modern retail setups with seamless displays, trial rooms, non-interrupting sales people, and self-service that tend to give a feeling of free access to the best in life. There are times when one wants to invest in and nurture a sense of an independent and experimental self, free from obligations to others and given roles. Impulsiveness plays that nurturing role in such situations. To capture and recapture these emotions, people make these visits to shopping malls and other markets which may culminate into impulse buying.

### **Exclusivity - a strong driver of impulse**

Exhibitions and similar display of exclusive products generate a sense of 'be the first one to own' (Aruna et al., 2015) and this leads to unplanned buying decisions. His/her novelty-seeking behavior tends to drive him further towards 'new and different'.

### **Conclusion and Future Research Directions**

This research paper extends the existing knowledge base by introducing the relevance of newer motivating factors associated with impulse buying phenomenon. This becomes important because the published research work on 'impulse buying' does not discuss internal motivating factors of impulse buying. Hence, this paper introduces and discusses the internal motivating factors viz. 'happiness', 'narcissism', 'freedom', and 'novelty' that are felt and experienced internally. These factors have not been researched in the context of impulse buying till now and this paper is the first attempt to suggest a possibility of a link between these factors with the same. This research also supports and extends the findings of Rook (1987), Goldenson (1984), Mele (1987), Stephen & Loewenstein (1991), Kivetz & Simonson (2002), Ramanathan & Menon (2006), Kalla & Arora (2011), and Kchaou & Amara (2014).

This research, essentially qualitative in nature, proposes these internal motivating factors of impulse buying. There is a need for quantitative verification of these proposed links. In addition, this research does not take into account, the opinions of people who heavily focus on online buying. An exploration into online platform, especially where many limitations of offline

retail with respect to impulse buying viz., time and distance, critics and co-shoppers and physical sense of parting with money are not there.

In addition, the incidence of impulse buying in 'haats and bazaars'<sup>2</sup> is there and with increasing earnings in rural India, this trend of impulse buying is on rise. This research does not cover these areas and shopping formats. It will be an interesting contribution if these are explored further.

With increasing shopping freedom among teens and pre-teens, the possibility of 'impulse buying' stands expanded and needs to be explored in-depth from the perspective of above suggested age groups.

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<sup>2</sup> Indigenous shopping formats in India

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