

Can Search for Happiness Lead to Impulse Buying ?

A Multi-method Investigation of Happiness' as an Internal Motivator to Impulse Buying

First and corresponding author

Supriya M.Kalla

Doctoral Candidate, Management Development Institute

Second author

Anita Goyal

Associate Professor, Indian Institute of Management

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Abstract

Purpose: *Ephemeral positive emotions like fun, excitement and pleasure have been associated with the phenomenon of impulse buying in previous studies. However, most of the studies in the past have looked at emotions which are momentary or short lived. This study extends the literature further by establishing a link between a more enduring positive emotion called 'happiness' and impulse buying.*

Design/ Methodology/ Approach: *In the endeavour to understand various facets of 'happiness' in shopping and 'impulse buying', a qualitative study was undertaken. These findings were used to develop scales pertaining to the constructs. A grounded theory approach was used to develop hypothesis from in-depth interviews. The hypothesis was tested by collection and analysis of survey data.*

Findings: *Results support the hypothesis and indicate that happiness and impulse buying are positively and significantly related. Regression analysis further established causal relationship between 'happiness' and 'impulse buying'.*

Originality/ Value: *This study makes a two-fold contribution to literature as well as practice through creating and validating instrument for measuring 'shopping happiness', and by establishing a causal relationship between happiness and impulse buying. This validation of 'happiness' as an internal motivator to impulse buying has several important implications for retail outlets and have been discussed at the end of this paper.*

Introduction

Impulse buying is a pervasive aspect in consumer buying behaviour and focal point for considerable marketing activity (Rook, 1987; Beatty and Ferrell, 1998). The role of 'pleasure' as an impulse initiator has been established by Freud (1911). Despite extensive studies, most research on 'impulse buying' has focused on negative psychological states (Verplanken et al., 2005) as antecedents to impulse buying. While fun, pleasure and excitement appear to be related with impulse buying (Rook, 1987); they are seen more as gratifications sought from this indulgence. The existing studies do not explore the role of these positive emotions as antecedents to impulse buying phenomenon (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998).

Taking forward the role of 'pleasure' in inducing impulsive action (Freud, 1911; Verplanken and Herabadi., 2001), this research attempts to explore the role of pleasure and a more lasting positive emotion of 'happiness', in the context of impulse buying. The role of 'happiness' in impulse buying was evident in consumer interviews. The same is discussed in greater detail in later part of this document.

Based on conceptual understanding of the phenomenon obtained from literature review and consumer interviews, this study conjectures that 'happiness' is an internal motivator of impulse buying. Happiness, for the purpose of this study, is understood as a conglomerate of positive emotions and is seen as a more lasting state of mind compared to ephemeral emotions like pleasure and excitement (O'Shaughnessy, 2003).

This research first understood 'happiness' and 'impulse' in the shopping context through qualitative interviews of buyers. This understanding contributed to the development of measurement scales for both the variables. These measurement scales are validated, and are then used for testing the hypothesis pertaining to the relation between happiness and impulse buying on a larger, statistically significant sample (n= 284).

Results indicate that 'happiness' is a strong internal motivator to the act of impulse buying. More specifically, this paper attempts to present a rich understanding of the role of 'happiness' in driving impulse in shopping scenario.

Authors believe that, beyond contributing to an understanding of what leads to impulse buying, this study provides insights to retailers about the premise from which an impulse shopper may come from, his/her expectations and how the shopping set-up can channelize his/her quest for happiness into impulse buying.

Theoretical Background: Literature Review

Impulse

The core meaning of 'impulse' has been expressed as 'akrasia' or "weakness of will", for which there is a rich philosophical literature, beginning with Plato and Aristotle (Mele, 1987, Audi. R., 1989). This 'weakness of will' has been interpreted as being tied to forceful urges (James, 1890). For Freud (1911), impulses are manifestations of the id that conscious censorship could not suppress. The id that is regulated by pleasure principle cannot tolerate any delay in gratification and demands immediate tension reduction. In other words, it is about instant pleasure and no pain. The priorities of the id are well captured by the phrase "I want what I want- and I want it NOW!" In contrast to the id's pleasure principle, the ego is governed by the reality principle, which postpones the discharge of energy until an appropriate situation in the real world appears. The ego temporarily suspends pleasure for the sake of realistic constraints (Liebert and Liebert 1998). Hence, it was claimed that 'impulses' are products of two competing forces- pleasure principle and reality principle. In the occasions when pleasure principle wins over reality principle, action on impulse takes place. Both the definitions discussed above, add an element of impending action to the impulsive thought and this action in buying situation leads to impulse buying.

Happiness

'Happiness' is the most sought after state of mind and has many definitions that range from it being an internal state to an external manifestation of conglomerate of positive emotions. Happiness researchers (Michalos, A. see in Reich, J & Diener, E, 1994) have defined it as a portfolio of desires and interests – some short range goals and some long

range goals. The short ones pertain to the small pleasures of life which can be obtained on a fairly routine basis and the longer ones are more about having something to look forward to and to go after in life. Also, there is a general consensus among happiness researches (Reich, J. & Diener, E., 1994) that happiness is greatest when frequent numbers of good experiences are combined with a few very intense ones. In addition, if pleasure is seen as contributing to the long term goal of happiness, Freud (1911) talked about saliency of pleasure principle in human life which emphasizes a person's effort to maximize pleasure in any given situation.

Impulse Buying

In simple words, impulse buying can be defined as an immediate purchase with no pre-shopping intentions (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998). Hoch and Loewenstein (1991), talked about impulse buying being a reactive purchase in the context of strong enough stimulation and motivation that can override restraints. They also talked about it being interplay of internal and external triggers. External triggers refer to marketer controlled or sensory stimuli emanating from the marketing system, for example, the product itself or atmospherics. The internal triggers refer to cravings, overwhelming desires to buy, and internal thoughts.

This paper focuses on short range goals and those frequent numbers of good experiences that contribute to overall portfolio of happiness. In doing so, this paper explores the relation between the pursuit of happiness as a motivation and the act of impulse buying.

Impulse Buying and Happiness

Previous research indicates that impulse buying serves the function of alleviating unpleasant psychological states. For example, Mick and DeMoss (1990) found that people sometimes reward themselves with self-gifts as a means of elevating a sulking mood. Baumeister (2002) suggests that people choose to sacrifice self-control and allow themselves to make impulsive purchases if they think such purchases might make them feel better. Verplanken et al. (2005) proposed that the primary function of impulse buying might be "a self-regulatory mechanism" aimed at reducing negative feelings, especially when these feelings have a structural basis such as a failure to live up to valued standards or low self-esteem. Sneath et al. (2007) discussed the role of 'impulse buying' in relieving depression caused to Katrina victims in US. All these studies focus on negative psychological states, but go on to prove the mood-uplifting role of impulse buying. These studies have focused on the reactive nature (Hoch and Lowenstein, 1991) of impulse buying. Keeping the above in view, 'Happiness' for the purpose of this study is considered to be **a conglomerate of positive and uplifting emotions**. Hence it is also the kineticity induced by positive emotions that leads to impulsive action in the retail scenario.

Research Gap

As discussed earlier, the research on impulse buying has looked at hedonic associations of impulse buying, and pleasure and excitement have been found to be strong reasons that drive impulse buying. However, role of 'happiness' in the same has not been studied. This study attempts to fill this gap by exploring and verifying the role of 'expected happiness' (not 'resultant happiness' that is result of an event) as an internal motivator to the act of impulse buying.

Methodology

Objective of this study was to undertake a thorough exploration of the phenomenon followed by measurement of the same. To achieve above stated objective, this study was conducted in three stages. Due to exploratory nature of our initial propositions stage I

included framing of the topic, identification of questions for the semi-structured interviews and implementation of the same, Stage II included pilot study, which was done on a convenient sample of respondents. This stage was also used for initial scale development and refinement of the questionnaire for final survey. The idea here was to develop a sound measurement instrument that provides a foundation for future research as well. This stage also gave pointers for managing social desirability bias that is implicit in a topic like 'impulse buying' (Cobb and Hoyer, 1986) and also helped seek clarity on how to get the responses that were beyond rational assessment of the situation i.e. emotional content of the impulse buying episodes. Stage III consisted of the final survey that was conducted on a statistically significant sample.

Suitable statistical techniques, the details of which are provided in the later part of the document, were used to analyze the data.

Stage I

Qualitative study

In order to gain a better understanding of the way consumers viewed their impulse buying behaviour, 55 semi-structured interviews were conducted. To avoid contamination of the data by attempts to portray actions in socially desirable light, the term 'impulse buying' was not directly used and instead the researcher kept implying it through the descriptions of shopping acts and experiences. Rather, the initial few minutes were spent on building the context. Respondents were told to think about shopping in stores and malls, and not consider on-line/ television shopping. Researcher was particularly conscious of the responses that seemed to reflect posturing and post-rationalization. Informants consisted of equal representation of both genders and various income and age brackets. On an average, interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were recorded and later transcribed.

Analysis of the interviews was done using the techniques for theory development suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This method of theory generation is based upon a range of qualitative research methods that uses a systematic set of procedure of data collection and analysis, to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). It involves a rigorous process of evaluation whereby the data are analyzed iteratively to identify categories, code incidents, and organize the data through theoretical memos. As the categories began to emerge, constant comparison is employed until theoretical saturation is achieved (Hausman, 2000). This methodology yields hypotheses empirically grounded in the data. A grounded theory approach was used because the concept proposed in the study has less a-priori understanding. In addition, this was also because grounded theory is rooted in the reality of experience (Charmaz, 2000). Hence grounded theory has helped develop the concept further through socially constructed knowledge of participants (Daengbuppha, 2006).

Use of this approach has helped this research to obtain a deeper understanding of internal processes that appear to motivate consumers' impulse buying behaviour.

Qualitative interviews threw light on a range of emotions than can be clubbed under the paradigm of happiness. Our endeavour included identification and understanding of various facets of 'happiness' associated with shopping, and this was followed by understanding of 'impulse buying' phenomenon.

In the following part of this document, excerpts from consumer interviews have been discussed alongside their contribution to the understanding of 'happiness with specific reference to impulse buying'.

Impulse buying, sometimes, provides a form of **pleasure that a hunter experiences** on spotting just the right target. It is thrill and excitement that can initiate an impulsive action in the buying scenario and alter shopping plans.

"Suddenly finding something exciting it's a great feeling to pick it up without a plan" (male 28)

*"Red sandals, did not plan to buy footwear, but **spotting these** meant a big deal that could not be avoided" (female, 32)*

The role of impulse buying in mood upliftment (Bayley and Nancarrow, 1998), relief from negative psychological states (Sneath et al., 2008; Verplanken et. al, 2005) and ameliorative effects on negative mood states (Rook et al., 1988) has been discussed by many researchers. These interviews also threw light on situations that demand an emotional upliftment.

*"When **feeling low you think of ways to cheer up**, shopping something for self or for children usually helps" (female, 34)*

*"When I am really **bored with life**, a trip to mall, those sounds and seeing happy people makes me feel fresh once again"(female, 29)*

*" It may not be the right place or right time but sometimes I am so frustrated with 24X7 work life that I get into a shopping mall and splurge on myself, **it relieves tension and feels good"** (male,31)*

Cathartic effect of impulse (Aristotle, see in Mele 1987) and impulse buying (Rook and Gardner, 1988) has been discussed in various researches. A similar gratification has been discussed in these consumer interviews and is more to do with novelty meaning a newness and excitement, at least, for sometime.

"Getting into a designer studio without much plan and picking up designer clothes feels like a new beginning" (female, 34)

"That new phone in my hand, which I bought without a plan, makes me feel like a new me" (male, 32)

Escape, get-away from a bothering routine is another experience that impulse buying provides to some.

*"Sometimes shopping is my way of **getting away** from routine" (female, 36)*

My children are only fighting on weekends, but stepping out alone and splurging on self felt like I am away on a holiday" (Female, 37)

"Bothering boss and boring office, need a break, I step into the mall close by and feel like I am away from all worries" (male, 33)

"When one goes to a mall looking for some change and sometimes ends up in long cues. This is most frustrating because you get time to think that it is going to be a wasteful expenditure" (female, 31)

Long cues, sweaty crowds and slow counter people are few of things that, people feel are likely to work against their impulse to buy.

“On a hot Saturday afternoon, when you want to do something exciting, there is nowhere to go, only in malls where have nice ambience and chilled out atmosphere makes you feel good and you feel like being there or buying something (male, 36)

New age shopping destinations have a special way of engaging people. Air conditioned environment with sights and sounds, that **celebrate consumption**, become compelling reasons to shop.

As discussed earlier these excerpts suggest that consumers also shop in search of happiness. Various expressions of the same and also deeper discussions with consumers further reveal that at times the specific products acquired during these excursions is secondary to the act of shopping. This specifically re-emphasizes the strength of ‘seeking happiness’ as a strong internal motivator to the act of impulse buying.

Stage II

Based on stage I and literature review, items for both the scales – shopping happiness and impulse buying were generated. These were pilot tested. The pilot study was conducted in a manner similar to final study, showed no major problems in the method and minor problems were corrected by changes in instructions. This pilot study was performed on a convenience sample of respondents (n= 79). The pilot check helped in deleting those scale items that were not contributing to the reliability and validity of the proposed scales. Factor loadings were interpreted in light of theory, and the ones lower than 0.4 (Hair et al., 1998) were considered low and deleted and the revised scales were tested on a small convenience sample to check the understanding of each statement and to check whether any remodification of statements was required. Expert views on the scales were also obtained. There were no modifications required at this stage and scales (appendix I) were finalized for the larger and final survey.

Stage III

Final survey was conducted on statistically determined sample (n=284). The demographic composition of the same is mentioned in Table 1. As used successfully in prior research (Bittner et al., 1990; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991), respondents were contacted face to face and questionnaire was administered by the researcher.

Sampling & Data Collection

Stratified random sampling was used and stratification was done basis age-group and gender. A total of 298 questionnaires were filled. 14 questionnaires were judged unusable, leaving a final sample size of 284. The sample (n=284) had nearly equal representation of male and female respondents. And sample chosen had nearly equal representation of all the age groups between 25-40 years (25-30; 31-35; 36-40). Details of the same are given in Table 1.

The mode of data collection was questionnaire and respondents were selected on the basis of, whether they have shopped in past one week. The place of interviewing was shopping malls, which had many residential complexes in the close vicinity (5-7 km) radius. This criterion for data collection was decided on the basis of the consumer interviews which

mentioned that distance to malls is an important consideration and a limiting factor in unplanned shopping trips. Long distance is seen as an obstruction to unplanned shopping trips. The data was collected over a 12 day period that included two weekends, during the month of November. The location of interviews, time of the day and days of the week were rotated in accordance with recommendations of Bush and Hair (1985) to make the final sample representative of the population who shops in these malls.

Measures

For the purpose of this study, the stress was laid on creating sound measurement properties that can yield insight into the structure of the variables. 'Shopping happiness' was measured using a 10 item likert scale. This scale tapped into the quest for 'happiness as a motivation' to indulge in impulse buying. Data generated by the pilot study was used to purify the scale, based on recommendations of Churchill (1979). This resulted in a unidimensional, likert scale. Unidimensionality states that a single construct underlies a set of scale items. Implication of the same is that the computation of a composite score is meaningful only if each of the items is acceptably unidimensional (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988; Hattie, 1985). Similar procedure was followed for impulse buying scale.

In addition to the tests of face validity conducted earlier, the reliability of the scales was evaluated by calculating chronbach's alpha (Table II). Coefficient alpha (Chronbach, 1951) is perhaps the most widely used metric for gauging the reliability of scale items (Peter, 1979). Reliability is classically defined as the ratio of true score variance to the observed score variance. Accordingly, the less error inherent within the scale, more likely the measure will yield consistent results across observations and research settings (Segars, 1997). The factor structure of items was assessed using exploratory factor analysis (Table III). Exploratory factor analysis is a useful technique for reducing a large set of indicators into a more manageable subset. A typical use of EFA in the development of scales is to factor an overall set of items and the construct scales based on the result of factor loadings. Items, which load high on a particular factor, but low on other factors, are combined to form composite construct measures.

Results indicate acceptable reliability for all measured constructs and construct validity (based on factor analysis). In addition, the pattern of correlations supports nomological validity to the extent that they correspond with theory. All factor analysis was conducted using maximum likelihood method and rotated using varimax rotation.

'Shopping Happiness' Scale

Assessment of happiness scale developed for this study indicated that seven items emerged from the initial pool. The first (which accounted for 56.5% of the variance) came through as the key aspect of shopping happiness scale. In addition to good face validity, this unidimensional scale provided good reliability, convergent, discriminant and nomological validity. Factor loadings of various items on happiness scale are given in Table IIIa.

Final scale items of shopping happiness scale are-

- Shopping makes me happy
- Shopping lifts me up on a dull day
- I feel in top of the world when I shop
- Shopping makes me feel positive towards myself
- Shopping helps me in getting away from day to day worries
- Shopping is boredom (r)
- Shopping makes me forget some of my problems

'Impulse Buying' Scale

Assessment of impulse buying scale developed for this study indicated that two items emerged from the initial pool. The first item accounted for 69.3% of total variance explained. The scale showed good face validity and this unidimensional scale provided good convergent, discriminant and nomological validity. Reliability of the scale, though acceptable, is not very high. The use of this scale for the study is still justified because of the exploratory nature of this work, where greater flexibility is permitted and relatively lower levels of reliability and validity are to be expected (Bollen, 1989; Nunnally, 1978).

Final scale items of 'Impulse Buying' scale are-

- I enjoy shopping when it is spontaneous
- I tend to make buying decisions instantly

Analysis and Results

Since both, dependent and independent variables are metric in nature, multiple regression analysis was used to check for the causal relationship between dependent variable and independent variable. The assumptions of regression analysis, i.e. linearity, normality and independence were checked and supported (Wonnacott and Winacott, 1981).

Happiness and impulse buying were significantly correlated, and causal relationship between happiness and impulse buying was hypothesized basis consumer interviews. Regression analysis on happiness and impulse buying scales was performed. Results established a robust causal relationship between happiness and impulse buying (standardized beta coefficient of 0.698, $p < 0.000$). The details of regression model are given in Table IV.

Discussion and Implications

Findings of this study make a twofold contribution to impulse buying literature. First, our results indicate that expectation of happiness in the act of shopping acts a strong internal motivator to impulse buying. Second, the scales for shopping happiness and impulse buying, created for the study, will help in assessing the expected 'shopping happiness' of people visiting a shopping set-up. Given these results, there is evidence that this understanding will help create and maintain nuances in retail set-up (ambience, display and retail employees) that give happiness cues to the people visiting the malls and thereby increasing their chances of indulging in impulse buying.

Implications for theory

The results of this study suggest that 'shopping happiness' works as a strong internal motivator to the act of impulse buying. Self-reported impulse buying (measured through the impulse buying scale proposed in this study) was maximized when expected 'happiness' implicit in the act of impulse buying was highest. This positive effect of 'happiness' is consistent with studies that have proposed and measured various hedonic gratifications that are sought from impulse buying (Baumeister et al., 2002; Ramanathan et al., 2006). Interestingly, the premise with which this research was initiated was based on literature, which proposed that 'happiness' is a more lasting emotion compared to pleasure. This proposition is proven to be true because consumer interviews thoroughly highlighted that this positive feeling about impulse buying continues beyond ephemeral moments of pleasure experienced while indulging in the same.

Managerial implications

This research shows that 'happiness' works as an internal motivator, but the shopping environment still plays a vital role in maintaining this tempo which can lead to possibility of impulse buying. In line with the same, this research makes following suggestions for retail managers:-

Researchers feel that it is important for the retailers to keep in mind that shopper may have entered the store wherein the intangible experience of 'happiness' outweighs his tangible expectations. This may have implications for his entire shopping experience wherein a seamless interaction with shopping environment (this includes convenient display and sales people) is likely to support the happiness induced impulse buying. Some specific areas that were discussed in consumer interviews done for this study are -

- Giving 'happiness reminders' to the customers that walk in without much planning. These cues include music (Holbrook and Anand, 1990), colours (Valdez and Mehrabian, 1994) and advertisements that remind and re-enforce the purpose for which the customer is in the shopping set-up - 'fun, pleasure, excitement and happiness'.
- A shopper is likely to get frustrated at many points in the store. These include unavailability of some designs and some sizes, unorganized display, uninformed and inattentive retail employees, mismanaged crowds and long billing cues. This frustration is likely to kill the quest for happiness with which the shopper may have entered the shopping set-up. Retailers must pay special attention to these hygiene factors because an absence of these may frustrate an impulse buyer and so is avoidable.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This research has traditional limitations associated with survey research such as selection error, measurement error and interviewer effects. Another limitation was faced in terms of time pressure that the venue of interviews (shopping set-up) was creating. We attempted to carefully guard against these time pressures and tiresome nature of the shopping activity, but this is likely that these effects might have seeped in somewhere in the responses. Also, some of the variables that are linked with our current exploration could not be measured. For example, understanding and measuring pre-shopping moods would have helped draw an informative parallel with the post shopping mood (and upliftment, if any). In addition, a limitation that is inherent in study of 'impulse buying' behaviour that is 'social desirability biases.

The idea of 'Happiness' as a composite of pleasure, fun and excitement of shopping and yet a longer lasting emotion, is relatively new and hence the scale development for measurement of this construct may need further modifications. The operationalization of 'impulse buying' did not take into account psychological notion of impulsivity and so modification in the 'impulse buying' scale would enhance its efficacy.

Appendix

Table I: Demographics of the sample

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male - 140	49.2
	Female- 144	50.8
Age	21-24	28.8
	25-30	25.7
	31-35	23.2
	36-40	22.1
Marital status	Married	68
	Unmarried	32
Income	< 2 lacs	..

	2-4 lacs	22
	4-6 lacs	38
	> 6 lacs	40

Table II: Scales (Chronbach alpha and total variance explained)

Scale	Chronbach alpha	Total variance explained
Shopping happiness	.868	57%
Impulse buying	.584	69.5%

Table IIIa: Happiness scale (Component Matrix)

happy	.821
lifts	.762
top	.795
positive	.766
worries	.796
boredom	.615
forget	.687
Enjoy	.833
Buy instantly	.833

Extraction method: principal component analysis

Table IIIb: Impulse scale (Component Matrix)

Extraction method: principal component analysis

Table IV: Model Summary

R	R Square	Adjusted R sq.	Std. beta	Std. error of estimate	P value
.698	.487	.485	.698	.706	< .000

- a. predictor : happiness
- b. dependent: impulse

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