

# Vicious circle of impulsive buying and consumer well-being

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## **Vicious circle of impulsive buying and consumer well-being**

Impulsive buying behavior (IBB) has been a matter of interest of marketers for several decades. The importance of studying the phenomenon has increased during the last few months due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in an increased need for many consumers to cope with stress and boredom. The vast majority of previous studies focused on the IBB antecedents, while just a few of them described customer's post-purchase well-being or the emotional consequences of IBB and coping with its negative outcomes. However, the full picture of the post-purchase customers' well-being remains blurred. The current study aims to address this gap using a systematic literature review. The findings of the study bring new insight into impulsive buying behavior: we propose that coping with the main negative consequences of impulsive buying such as guilt, shame, and regret, may improve customer's well-being and enhance his or her intentions to reengage in impulsive buying.

*Keywords: impulsive buying, emotional outcomes, coping strategies*

*Intended track: Transformative Consumer Research*

## 1. Introduction

Researchers defined impulsive buying behavior (IBB) as a relevant topic in marketing several decades ago (Stern 1962). Impulsive buying is affected not only by the personal characteristics of customers (Khan et al. 2015; Rook and Fisher 1995) but also by situational features (Y. Chen et al. 2019), and has its positive and negative outcomes (Hausman 2000; Haws, Bearden, and Nenkov 2012; Rook 1987; Rook and Fisher 1995). Furthermore, IBB may lead to coping with its negative consequences, for instance, avoidance (mental disengagement, resignation, and blaming others) and rationalization (Ünal and Aydin 2015) as the ways of coping with post-purchase shame; problem-focused strategies (planning to reduce impulse buying and planning to make up for the monetary loss) (Yi and Baumgartner 2011) and hidden owning (Bayley and Nancarrow 1998) as the strategies of coping with post-purchase guilt; and positive reinterpretation and acceptance (Yi and Baumgartner 2004) as the methods of coping with post-purchase regrets.

There are several reviews and meta-analysis which provide comprehensive view of the impulsive buying process. However, for most of them the impulsive purchase is the final point of the process (Amos, Holmes, and Keneson 2014; Bhakat and Muruganatham 2013; Chan, Cheung, and Lee 2017; Iyer et al. 2020), while just a few of them considered the consequences of impulsive buying (Santini et al. 2019) and none of them studied the whole process with antecedents, consequences and coping strategies. Meanwhile, customers' well-being is affected by post-purchase emotions, and the ways of dealing with post-purchase negative emotions may lead to improved emotional well-being, yet at the same time they can be a reason of IBB reengagement. We aim to address this gap and answer the following questions: What are the consequences and coping strategies related to impulsive buying behavior? How does the IBB process unfold? The current paper is a part of a comprehensive literature analysis focused on the main components of impulse buying and their relationships. We propose that impulsive buying process contains four main components: relatively permanent antecedents of impulsive buying or personal attributes, temporal triggers (situational internal and external factors), outcomes (emotional consequences of IBB), and coping strategies (actions toward decreasing negative consequences). Moreover, we propose that passing the coping stage, customers may be reengaged in impulsive buying activities (Bearden and Teel 1983; Spiteri Cornish 2020). Therefore, we conclude that impulsive buying might be presented as a circular process where stages follow one another.

## **2. Methodology**

The current conceptual study is based on a systematic literature review. Upon conducting the systematic literature review we have adopted the methodology presented by Kraus et al. (2020): Primary selection of the most related articles using common search engines and online libraries such as Science Direct, Google scholar, EBSCO Business search, etc., applying the following keyword patterns: impulse buying, impulsive buying, unplanned buying, unplanned purchasing, unplanned shopping, impulsive decisions, spontaneous buying, urge to buy impulsively. The initial search resulted in 137 papers. Secondary selection of articles from the top marketing journals, such as Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Consumer Research, etc., practicing the same keyword patterns (see step 1); during this stage, eight additional articles were included in the review. Finally, adopting inclusion criteria: a narrative of an article is strongly related to the topic of impulse buying behavior, and exclusion criteria: an article is related to a cross-area (e.g. compulsive buying). As the result, 27 articles were excluded as not relevant to our aim. Finally, 118 papers were selected and included in the systematic literature review. This paper contains a short list of references, and the full version is available upon the request.

## **3. Impulse Buying Cycle**

Impulsive buying behavior started to be widely explored in the middle of the previous century (Stern 1962) and maintains the interest of marketing researchers up to these days. Though the existing theories align with our proposed process of impulse buying, each of them describes different parts of this phenomenon. For example, the reflective-impulsive theory posits that impulsive buying is not described by purely situational factors. Customers may refer to their memories, needs, and beliefs to create an associative link before an impulsive choice (Strack et al. 2006), and the theory refers to individual motives or personality traits. Meanwhile, the stimulus-organism-response model mostly emphasizes the importance of the in-store stimulus and triggers or customer's emotional state during the purchase act. In the impulsive buying context, the model is widely used, for instance, to explain consumer impulsive behavior in mobile auctions (C. C. Chen and Yao 2018). At the same time, the cognitive dissonance theory provides a theoretical framework for exploring impulse buying consequences such as cognitive dissonance or ego depletion. The theory postulates that a person who experiences inner dissonance tends to feel uncomfortable

mentally and aims to decrease cognitive dissonance, for instance, due to differences between pre-purchase expectations and post-purchase evaluation (Chang and Tseng 2014).

Furthermore, there is another part of the impulse buying process – coping with the negative emotional consequences of impulsive purchasing, while the self-affirmation theory (Hoshino-Browne et al. 2005) is one of the theoretical foundations for this part of the process. This theory posits that individuals tend to adapt practices of reestablishing their positive self-concept. Ultimately, basing on the theories overview, we can determine four main components of the impulsive buying process:

1. Personality traits: individual characteristics which affect customers' impulsive buying and exist relatively permanently with the customer (P1: here and further, we indicate the relationships between components in the IBB conceptual model (Figure 1), where P1 is Proposition #1). These factors include, for instance, age and gender (Khan et al. 2015), normative judgments/social acceptance, or impulsivity trait (Rook and Fisher 1995).

2. Temporal triggers: various factors and characteristics which appear at the moment of the purchase or some time before but disappear after the act of buying. These triggers also motivate customers to buy without prior planning (P1). This group includes two main sub-categories: internal triggers (personal, emotional or habitual) such as customer's emotional state (Wood 1998) or income (Santini et al. 2019), and external triggers (situational, marketing, social, and others) such as various promotions (e.g. discount, special offer, cashback) (Y. Chen et al. 2019).

3. Emotional outcomes: positive and negative emotions which arise after the customer's impulse decision to buy (P2). Customers experience various positive emotions (Hausman 2000; Rook 1987), and negative consequences like regret (Bearden and Haws 2012), guilt (Yi and Baumgartner 2011), or stress (Haws, Bearden, and Nenkov 2012).

4. Coping strategies: customer's actions toward decreasing negative emotional outcomes of IBB (P3). Among coping strategies, previous research highlighted avoidance (Ünal and Aydin 2015), problem-focused strategies (planning to reduce impulse buying and planning to make up for the monetary loss) (Yi and Baumgartner 2011), and positive reinterpretation (Yi and Baumgartner 2004). In the existing literature the consequences and coping mechanisms are understood and reviewed to a lesser extent than other parts of IBB process. We intend to address this gap and show a full picture of the IBB process.

#### **4. Emotional Outcomes and Coping Strategies**

According to the theories overview, impulsive purchasing has four main components, namely, relatively permanent and temporal triggers of IBB, outcomes, and coping strategies. Next, we investigate the outcomes and coping strategies of IBB. This investigation will help us to shed light on our proposed conceptual model of IBB.

#### *4.1 Emotional outcomes of impulsive buying decisions*

A customer's emotional well-being after the unplanned purchase depends on the reaction to impulsive buying represented the outcomes of the IBB process. These outcomes may differ in valence (positive or negative) and speed (immediate or delayed). We found from previous studies that positive emotions as outcomes of the IBB process tend to appear immediately, while negative emotions may arise with a delay (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Ramanathan and Menon 2006). Furthermore, previous research found that if impulsive buying has a hedonic nature and aims toward enjoyment, the positive outcomes of IBB are likely to rapidly disappear (Ramanathan and Menon 2006). Ozer & Gultekin (2015) concluded that in the short perspective most customers are satisfied with their impulsive choices, however, it is necessary to investigate consumer satisfaction in more delayed way. A customer's emotional state is an important element of the impulsive buying process (Wood 1998). Even though it was found that the IBB process is accompanied with various positive emotions (Hausman 2000; Rook 1987), only few researchers studied the role of positive emotions as outcomes of impulsive buying. Rook (1987) indicated that unplanned purchasing may result in a range of positive emotions such as happiness, satisfaction, and feeling good. Another study found that buying on impulse changes bad mood into good mood, and that post-purchase mood improves after unplanned shopping (Ozer and Gultekin 2015; Rook 1987).

Despite some positive emotional outcomes, marketing researchers found that IBB is mostly harmful to consumers. For instance, Rook (1987) indicated that more than 80% customers reported negative psychological outcomes of impulsive purchases. Along all the history of exploring impulsive buying, researchers have been investigating its linkage with negative post-purchase emotions (Rook and Fisher 1995; Santini et al. 2019). For instance, impulsive customers who experience the outcomes of unsteady but controllable factors (e.g., "I've purchased it because of a special offer") are likely to encounter guilt (P1.2), though those who experience it due to steady but uncontrollable factors (e.g., "My impulsivity trait is out of my control") are likely to encounter shame (P1.1) (Niedenthal, Tangney, and Gavanski 1994). Hausman (2000) found that studies which explore positive emotions as result of impulse buying likely contain self-esteem and self-realization.

Among the negative emotions of impulsive consumers are regret (Bearden and Haws 2012), guilt (Yi and Baumgartner 2011), shame (Haws, Bearden, and Nenkov 2012; Yi and Baumgartner 2011) and stress (Haws, Bearden, and Nenkov 2012). Rook (1987) found that customers may experience disappointment and disapproval, while Baumeister (2002) indicated the role of ego depletion as a reason as well as a consequence of impulsive purchasing. Moreover, differences between pre-purchase expectations and perceptions and post-purchase evaluations lead to post-purchase cognitive dissonance (Chang and Tseng 2014).

#### *4.2 Coping strategies related to impulsive buying*

As far as customers mostly experience negative emotions as a result of post-purchase evaluation, coping with the negative consequences of impulsive buying is one of the stages of the impulsive buying process. Coping is defined as efforts to regulate stressful events. Nevertheless, in the following we are going to present a comprehensive view of coping specifically in impulsive buying context.

Coping with post-purchase shame: Yi & Baumgartner (2011) investigated coping strategies in case of experiencing post-purchase shame. They found that avoidant coping strategies are mainly related to shame, including mental disengagement, resignation, and blaming others. Seeking social support is positively related to coping with shame, as impulsive customers tend to share their buying experience with peers and find understanding of their actions from the same behavioral actors. Furthermore, Ünal & Aydin (2015) found that rationalization is positively associated with shame coping. Moreover, they tested the influence of the mentioned strategies on repurchase intention and found that social support and rationalization neglect the negative consequences of impulsive buying and lead to further shopping.

Coping with post-purchase guilt: coping with guilt requires different strategies than coping with shame. Yi & Baumgartner (2011) indicated that customers choose problem-focused strategies such as planning to reduce impulse buying and planning to make up for the monetary loss. Mental undoing was positively related to guilt and has been admitted as the most frequently used coping strategy. Consistently, Ünal & Aydin (2015) concluded that none of these strategies leads to repurchase intentions. Moreover, Bayley & Nancarrow (1998) found that customers may decrease perceived guilt by practicing over-buying (e.g. possibility of return), hidden owning (e.g. hiding new goods in wardrobe), comparative expenditure (e.g. hidden comparison of spending with friends), and self-gifting (e.g. feeling of award need).

Coping with post-purchase regrets: post-purchase regrets originate from possessing the unnecessary goods. Coping strategies with regrets were previously examined (Yi and Baumgartner 2004). The authors found that there are two main strategies involved: positive reinterpretation (e.g., creating the reasons of the purchase) and acceptance (the situation cannot be changed and there is nobody else to blame). Spiteri Cornish (2020) found that customers who practice positive reinterpretation as a coping strategy, most likely experience repurchase intentions as positive reinterpretation reinforces impulsive buying.

## 5. Circular Nature of Impulse Buying

Comprehensive analysis of the IBB process attributes helped us to propose that impulsive buying behavior might be considered as a dynamic circular process. Even though several previous studies highlighted the endless nature of impulsive buying, none of the previous literature analyses or meta-analyses contributed and developed this idea (Amos, Holmes, and Keneson 2014; Iyer et al. 2020; Santini et al. 2019). For instance, Spiteri Cornish (2020) suggested that a positive consuming experience may reinforce unplanned purchasing as satisfactory consumption provokes repeating buying (Bearden and Teel 1983). Therefore, practicing coping strategies for diminishing negative emotional outcomes may bring a sense of control over the buying behavior and lead to repeating acts of IBB (Spiteri Cornish 2020). Handling post-purchase regrets may bring temporal relief but also carry the potential risk of being locked in a vicious circle of impulsive buying (P4). Thereby, we present a conceptual model of a full cycle of impulsive buying process below (Figure 1):

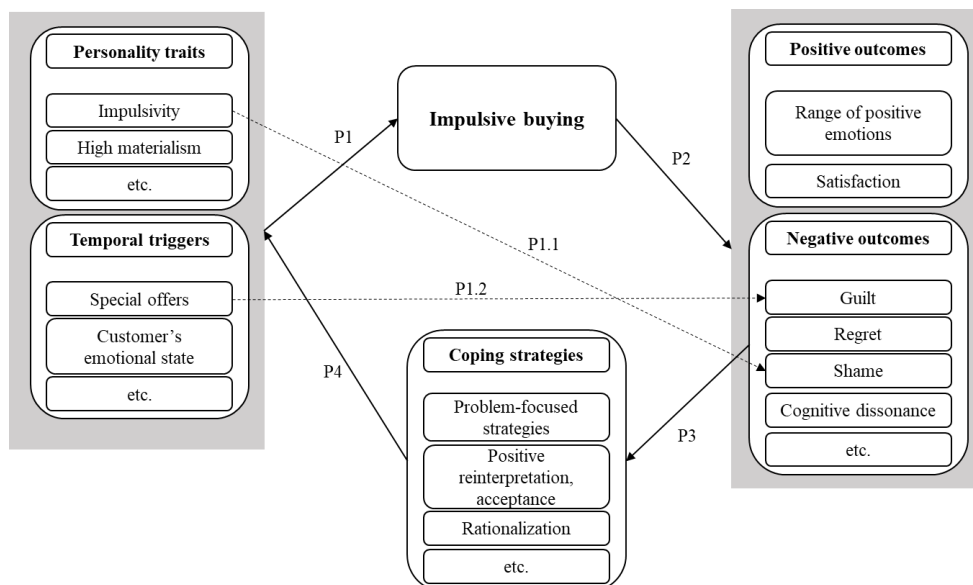


Fig.1 The circular model of impulsive buying behavior



## 6. Discussion and Future Research

Impulsive buying research has been expanding exponentially over time, and researchers have continuously been curious about why individuals engage in this behavior despite its potentially negative consequences. Our research gave a fresh view on the impulsive buying process, focusing on its emotional outcomes and coping strategies, as the antecedents of IBB have already been more widely studied. Our study helps to understand what keeps customers engaged in impulsive shopping despite of their negative experiences, well-being degradation, and emotional decline. Therefore, we have found several promising gaps for future research. *First*, the dynamic nature of IBB was not described in previous studies and consumer behavior was not studied from this perspective. Exploring the whole chain of the impulsive buying process is a challenging but interesting task. *Second*, we found several studies which pay attention to the origin of IBB outcomes or in other words, examine which antecedents provoke which outcomes. We suppose that an investigation of the linkage between antecedents and outcomes is a promising topic for future research. *Third*, the area of coping strategies is studied least of all. Coping with ambivalent emotions is a promising direction for future studies as some negative outcomes (such as disappointment, disapproval, consequent cognitive dissonance) and their coping strategies were not considered precisely. *Finally*, we find curious the question of how to break the vicious circle of impulsive buying and which measures might prevent customers from new impulsive purchases.

In summary, our literature review examines the existing theories on IBB, customer characteristics, motives, and resources and marketing stimuli on impulse buying, along with the positive and negative emotional outcomes and coping strategies. Our revision of IBB components presents a conceptually new structure of IBB as a dynamic circular process. This analysis gives a broad summary of the literature on impulsive buying behavior and provides some insights for future studies which can develop our knowledge on this phenomenon.

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