

An empirical investigation into the influence of Emotional Intelligence on Consumer Behavior

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Abstract:

Two surveys used self-reported scales to investigate a) the main effects of Emotional Intelligence (henceforth EI) on impulsive and ethical consumption, and b) the mediating role of the self-regulatory focus (i.e. prevention/promotion). Survey 1 indicates that EI reduces impulsive consumption. Survey 2 suggests that EI reduces impulsive and elevates ethical consumption. It has also been shown that the prevention and the promotion focus mediate the relationship between EI and ethical consumption. The findings allow us to make an important theoretical and empirical contribution by presenting the first research that brings together these key features that have been under-researched.

Keywords: EI, Impulsive Consumption, Ethical Consumption

1. Introduction and theoretical underpinnings

Over the last two decades, an increasing body of consumer behavior literature has focused on the key construct of individuals' EI. From a psychological perspective, Mayer and Salovey (1990) introduced the notion of EI and described it as a skill set reflecting humans' ability to recognize, express, and regulate emotions in the self and others (Mayer and Salovey, 1990). In the domain of consumer behavior, EI enhances behavioral intentions, improves decision-making quality, and amplifies customer satisfaction. Such outcomes are accomplished through individuals' ability to perceive, facilitate, understand and effectively manage emotional information (Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers, 2007; Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers, 2008; Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, and Sheng, 2011; Gabbott, Tsarenko, and Mok, 2011; Kidwell, Hasford, and Hardesty, 2015).

Emotional ability training may regulate such irrational habits as impulsive consumption (Kidwell et al., 2007; Kidwell et al., 2008; Kidwell et al., 2015). Impulsive consumption reflects an unplanned behavior occurring after a frivolous decision-making process and subjective bias in support of a reflexive acquisition (Kacen and Lee, 2002). Emotional ability training counteracts impulsive consumption by helping people effectively use emotional cues to accomplish an ideal consumption outcome through goal-relevant emotional thoughts. These thoughts assist emotionally intelligent individuals in cognitively recognizing which emotions are favorable for a quality decision, and how these emotions can be combined into the decision-making process to refine wellness. A prime example is that emotionally intelligent individuals avoid high-calorie intake and prefer a healthier diet (Kidwell et al., 2007; Kidwell et al., 2008; Kidwell et al., 2015). The above findings are important as the depletion of self-control can positively influence the unplanned consumption because individuals have restricted cognitive resources to effectively cope with the tempting stimuli (Baumeister, 2002; Strack and Deutsch, 2006; Tsukayama and Duckworth, 2012).

Consumer research suggests that not only EI, but also the self-regulatory focus (i.e. promotion/prevention) affects impulsive consumption (Florack, Friese, and Scarabis, 2010; Sengupta and Zou, 2007). This occurs since the self-regulatory focus influences the way that individuals interpret and react to various situations. According to the regulatory focus theory, two distinct cognitive mechanisms guide individuals' thoughts and reactions: promotion and prevention. A promotion focus is founded on situational or chronic aspirations and motivates individuals to adopt a heuristic way of thinking. A prevention focus is founded on situational or chronic responsibilities and motivates individuals to adopt an analytical way of thinking. Consequently, these cognitive processes set off different strategies for goal attainment. Individuals driven by promotion focus goals tend to pursue strategies that maximize pleasure and lead to positive outcomes. Individuals driven by prevention focus goals tend to pursue strategies that minimize pain and ensure protection from negative outcomes (Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 2002; Aaker and Lee, 2001; Arnold and Reynolds, 2012; Dholakia, Gopinath, Bagozzi, and Natarajan, 2006; Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan, 2007; Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan, 2013). As a result, compared to promotion-focused individuals, prevention-focused individuals are less likely to approach unplanned consumption. In this vein, the promotion focus boosts impulsive consumption whereas the prevention focus reduces impulsive consumption (Florack et al., 2010; Sengupta and Zou, 2007).

Parallel to impulsive consumption, the self-regulatory focus is also associated with ethical consumption (De Bock and Van Kenhove, 2010; Monin, Pizzaro, and Beer, 2007). As discussed previously, there is a rife agreement in the literature that individuals aiming to achieve their goals adopt either promotion or prevention-focus partners (Higgins, 1997;

Higgins, 2002; Aaker and Lee, 2001; Arnold and Reynolds, 2012; Dholakia, Gopinath, Bagozzi, and Natarajan, 2006; Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan, 2007; Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan, 2013). The promotion focus is positively related to unethical consumption, as individuals are motivated to follow their personal goals irrespective of the consequences. The prevention focus is positively related to ethical consumption as individuals follow established norms and duties in any consumption context. Accordingly, while the promotion focus undercuts ethical consumer practices through the arousal of positive hedonic emotion of pleasure, the prevention focus facilitates ethical consumer practices through the arousal of negative self-conscious emotion of shame (De Bock and Van Kenhove, 2010; Monin et al., 2007). In any case, ego-control (i.e. the regulation of arousal emotions) becomes a major issue in the consumer ethics domain because it positively affects ethical behavior (Eisenberg, 2000; Monin et al., 2007). Individuals embed self-control in order to behave morally when confronting obstacles and eschew behaving unfairly when facing a temptation with respect to the binding values of authority, loyalty, and purity (Mooijman et al., 2017). Since the emotion regulation is a defining attribute of EI (Kidwell et al., 2007; Kidwell et al., 2008; Kidwell et al., 2015), it is implied that EI may drive high levels of ethical consumption. Extending the findings in marketing exchanges, individuals who control their emotions, can improve their moral-self by interpreting ethical consumption as a search for a meaning in life. The morality of actions then is associated with the acceptance or rejection of brands and other consumption practices in brand communities that reflect consumer normative beliefs (Coskuner-Balli, 2013).

2. Conceptualization and hypotheses

While EI, consumer ethics, impulsive behavior, and the self-regulatory focus are independently important, to our best knowledge there is a lacuna of empirically-based knowledge regarding their combinatorial role in consumer behavior. The present research proposes that a) EI affects impulsive and ethical consumption, and b) the effects of EI on impulsive and ethical consumption are mediated by the promotion (prevention) focus. Figures 1a and 1b illustrate the proposed associations.

Drawing on the above theoretical and literature background, our two central hypotheses posit that EI exerts a negative and a positive main effect on impulsive and on ethical consumption respectively (e.g. De Bock and Van Kenhove, 2010; Kidwell et al., 2007; Kidwell et al., 2008; Kidwell et al., 2015). But we also propose that such effects are filtered through the two components of the regulatory focus theory, namely promotion, and prevention (e.g. Higgins, 2002). In particular, EI should a) foster a prevention focus (i.e. a focus that reduces impulsive consumption and enables ethical consumption) and b) cause a departure from a promotion focus (i.e. a focus that drives impulsive consumption and adversely affects ethical consumption). More formally:

H1. EI has a negative effect on impulsive consumption.

H2. The total negative effect of EI on impulsive consumption is mediated by a) a prevention focus and b) a promotion focus.

H3. EI has a positive effect on ethical consumption.

H4. The total positive effect of EI on ethical consumption is mediated by a) a prevention focus and b) a promotion focus.

Finally, previous research indicates that consumer demographics shape impulsive consumption and ethical consumption (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, and Salovey, 2006; Joseph and Newman, 2010; Kacen and Lee, 2002; Kidwell et al., 2011; Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, 2004; Mooijman et al., 2017; Vitell and Paolillo, 2003). Therefore, on top of the above main-and mediating-effect associations, our conceptualization controls for age, gender and income

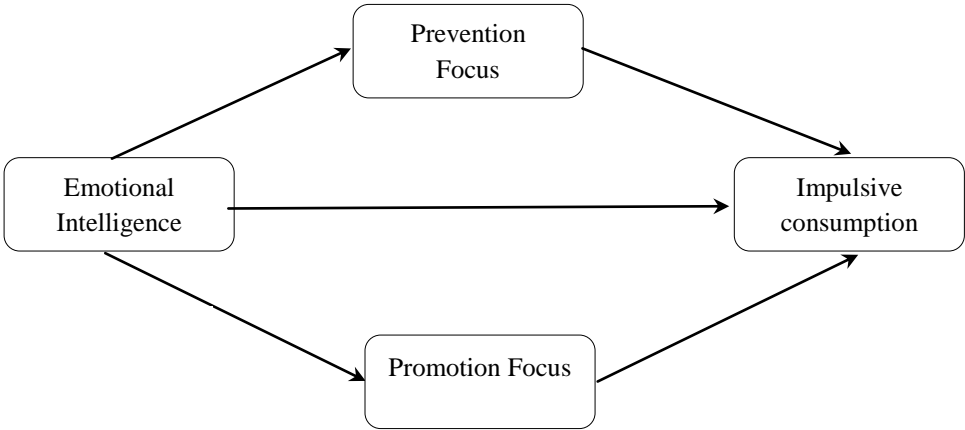


Figure 1a. EI and impulsive consumption

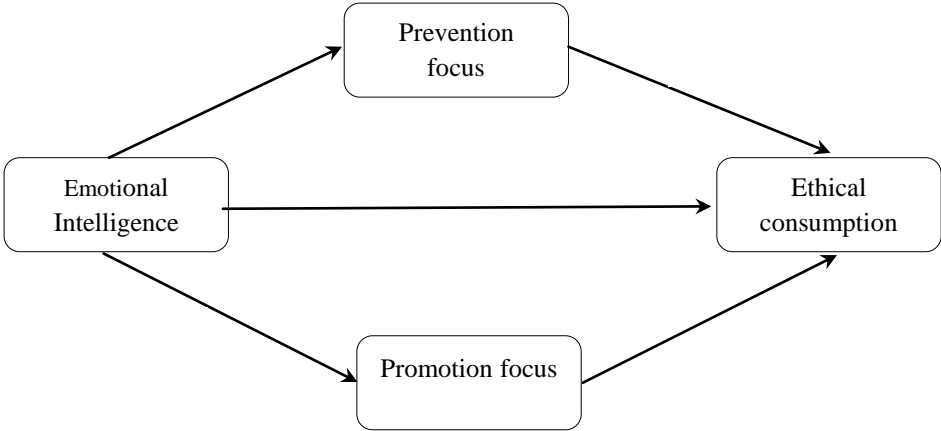


Figure 1b. EI and ethical consumption

3. Data analysis

3.1. Survey 1

Survey 1 tested the main effects of EI on impulsive and ethical consumption (i.e. H1 and H3).

Two hundred undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Athens University of Economics and Business participated in the survey (56.5% female). The mean age was 28.7 (*SD* = 6.7). Participants were first asked to complete an EI scale. Once they had answered, participants rated the extent to which they engage in impulsive consumption. They then indicated their

attitude toward ethical consumption terms. Finally, respondents filled out their age, gender, and income.

EI was measured using the 19-item Self-Related EI Scale (SREIS) (Brackett et al., 2006) ($\alpha = 0.757$). Impulsive consumption was assessed using the 9-item Self-Related Buying Impulsiveness Scale (BIS) (Rook and Fisher, 1995) ($\alpha = 0.931$). Ethical consumption was operationalized using the 31-item Self-Related Consumer Ethics Scale (CES) (Vitell and Muncy, 2005) ($\alpha = 0.866$). All measures used a 7-point Likert scale with endpoints labeled 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree).

Separate linear regression analyses were conducted with EI as the independent variable and impulsive and ethical consumption as the dependent variables. The statistical results indicated that the effect of EI on impulsive consumption had the expected negative sign but did not reach significance ($\beta = -0.06$, $t = -0.89$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, H1 was not supported. But in line with H3, EI had a positive and significant effect on ethical consumption ($\beta = 0.23$, $t = 3.25$, $p = 0.01$). Table 1 shows the results. The association between EI and ethical consumption held after controlling for age, gender, and income.

Model	β	t
Constant		5.496
Total EI	0.225	3.253*

Note: Dependent Variable: Total_EthicScale

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 1. Regression analysis for EI and Ethical Consumption

3.2. Survey 2

Survey 2 aimed at a) re-testing the effects of EI on the two outcome variables (i.e. H1 and H3) and b) addressing the mediating roles of a prevention/promotion focus (i.e. H2 and H4).

A total of two hundred and forty undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Athens University of Economics and Business participated in the study (51.7% female). The mean age was 25.6 ($SD = 6.75$). Participants were first asked to indicate their agreement/disagreement with an EI scale. They then answered several questions designed to assess prevention and promotion focus respectively. Afterwards, participants filled out an impulsive consumption scale, followed by an ethical consumption scale. At the end of the survey, respondents completed the demographic characteristics described in survey 1.

To measure EI, impulsive, and ethical consumption, we employed the same constructs as in survey 1. Specifically, we operationalized EI using the 19-item Self-Related EI Scale (SREIS) (Brackett et al., 2006) ($\alpha = 0.890$), tested impulsive consumption using the 9-item Self-Related Buying Impulsiveness Scale (BIS) (Rook and Fisher, 1995) ($\alpha = 0.970$), and assessed ethical consumption with the 31-item Self-Related Consumer Ethics Scale (CES) (Vitell and Muncy, 2005) ($\alpha = 0.860$). We also operationalized prevention focus using the 7-item Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) scale (Carver and White, 1994) ($\alpha = 0.826$) and promotion focus using the 13-item Behavioral Activation System (BAS) scale (Carver and

White, 1994) ($\alpha = 0.886$). All items were responded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

Similar to survey 1, recurrent linear regression analyses were conducted with EI as the independent variable and impulsive and ethical consumption as the dependent variables. In line with H1, EI had a negative and significant effect on impulsive consumption ($\beta = -0.273$, $t = -4.380$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 2). The predicted effect remained significant even when age, gender, and income were controlled. Table 2 presents the results.

Model	β	t
Constant		5.496
Total EI	-0.273	-4.380***

Note: Dependent Variable: Totalimpulsive

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2. Regression analysis for EI and Impulsive Consumption

The statistical results also provided support for H3. EI had a positive and significant effect on ethical consumption ($\beta = 0.481$, $t = 8.466$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 3). The direct effect of EI on ethical consumption existed even when controlling for age, gender, and income.

Model	β	t
Constant		5.496
Total EI	0.481	8.466***

Note: Dependent Variable: TotalEthics

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Regression analysis for EI and Ethical Consumption

Furthermore, to test the mediating roles of a prevention vs. a promotion focus, we followed the steps suggested by Hayes (2017). Specifically, for each of the two main effects of figures 1 and 2, we estimated separate mediation models with EI as the independent variable, impulsive and ethical consumption as the outcome variables (one at a time) and prevention/promotion as the mediators (one at a time). In each mediation model, we observed the significance of the total effect, of the effect of the independent variable on the mediator, of the effect of the mediator on the outcome variable controlling for the independent variable and of the independent-to-outcome variable mediation pathway with a confidence interval that excludes zero (indirect effect). Using the PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2017) we found that the indirect effect of EI on impulsive consumption through a prevention focus was negative ($a = 0.188$, $b = -0.095$, $a \times b = -0.018$) but the corresponding 95% confidence interval included zero (95% CI [-0.075, 0.037]). As such, the predicted mediation effect of the prevention focus on the relationship between EI and impulsive consumption was not supported (H2a). Table 4 demonstrates the results.

DV: Impulsive consumption (IC)ⁱ				
Variable	B	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Effect of EI on the prevention focus	0.188	0.003	5.566	0.000***
Effect of the prevention focus on IC	-0.095	0.142	-0.671	0.503
	Effect	SE	L95%CI	U95%CI
Total effect of EI on IC	-0.298	0.073	-0.443	-0.154
Indirect effect of EI on IC	-0.018	0.028	-0.075	0.037

Table 4. The mediating effect of the prevention focus on EI-impulsive consumption association

In addition, as depicted in Table 5, the indirect effect of EI on impulsive consumption through a promotion focus was negative ($a = 0.367$, $b = -0.014$, $a \times b = -0.005$), with a confidence interval that included zero (95% CI [-0.075, 0.055]). Therefore, the promotion focus did not mediate the relationship between EI and impulsive consumption. H2b was rejected.

DV: Impulsive consumption (IC)ⁱⁱ				
Variable	B	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Effect of EI on the promotion focus	0.367	0.065	5.603	0.000***
Effect of the promotion focus on IC	-0.014	0.087	-0.164	0.869
	Effect	SE	L95%CI	U95%CI
Total effect of EI on IC	-0.183	0.086	-0.354	-0.013
Indirect effect of EI on IC	-0.005	0.032	-0.075	0.055

Table 5. The mediating effect of the promotion focus on EI-impulsive consumption association

The statistical analysis also showed that EI had a positive indirect effect on ethical consumption through the prevention focus ($a = 0.188$, $b = 0.502$, $a \times b = 0.094$) with a 95% confidence interval that excluded zero (95% CI [0.039, 0.175]). Consistent with H4a, the prevention focus partially mediated the relationship between EI and ethical consumption. The significance of the effects remained after controlling for age, gender, and income. Table 6 illustrates the results.

DV: Ethical consumption (EC)ⁱⁱⁱ				
Variable	B	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Effect of EI on the prevention focus	0.188	0.003	5.566	0.000***
Effect of the prevention focus on EC	0.502	0.128	3.911	0.001**
	Effect	SE	L95%CI	U95%CI
Total effect of EI on EC	0.568	0.068	0.432	0.702
Indirect effect of EI on EC	0.094	0.035	0.039	0.175

Table 6. The mediating effect of the prevention focus on EI-ethical consumption association

Finally, the results indicated that the promotion focus partially mediated the relationship between EI and ethical consumption. Specifically, EI had a negative indirect effect on ethical

^{iii ii} Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients reported. Bootstrap sample size 5000. L = lower limit; U = upper limit; CI = confidence interval. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

consumption ($a = 0.367$, $b = -0.331$, $a \times b = -0.121$) that the 95% confidence interval denoted it is statistically significant excluding zero (95% CI [-0.235, -0.028]). H4b was accepted. All these associations held after controlling for age, gender, and income. Table 7 presents the results.

DV: Ethical consumption (EC)^{iv}				
Variable	B	SE	t	p
Effect of EI on the promotion focus	0.367	0.065	5.603	0.000***
Effect of the promotion focus on EC	-0.331	0.131	-2.521	0.012*
	Effect	SE	L95%CI	U95%CI
Total effect of EI on EC	0.628	0.133	0.366	0.890
Indirect effect of EI on EC	-0.121	0.052	-0.235	-0.028

Table 7. The mediating effect of the promotion focus on EI-ethical consumption association

4. Discussion and concluding remarks

Despite the fact that the results reported here did not support all the hypotheses that we proposed, we believe that the statistically significant associations make a useful addition to an understanding of the extent to which individuals' cognition, emotions, and values influence consumption decisions. First, EI reduces impulsive consumption (Survey 2) and boosts ethical consumption (Surveys 1 and 2). These associations are in line with our reasoning and the corresponding theoretical underpinnings. Second, the effects of EI on ethical consumption are driven by the prevention and the promotion focus. Of primary interest was the fact that the indirect effect of EI on ethical consumption through the prevention focus was positive. On the contrary, the indirect effect of EI on ethical consumption through the promotion focus was negative (Survey 2). The findings concerning the mediating role of the two components of the self-regulatory theory (i.e. prevention and promotion focus) suggest that there exists promising room for further investigation into the boundary conditions that determine the power of EI to cause certain consumption behaviors. As this study progresses, we will enrich the conceptual framework presented here and we will complement the empirical legs with additional primary data.

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^{iv} Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients reported. Bootstrap sample size 5000. L = lower limit; U = upper limit; CI = confidence interval. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

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