

Investigating Impulse Buying and Variety Seeking: Towards a General Theory of Hedonic Purchase Behaviors

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INTRODUCTION

Impulse buying (IB) and variety seeking (VS) are classified as hedonic purchase behaviors associated with feelings and psychosocial motivations rather than thinking and functional benefits (Baumgartner 2002) and shown as examples of low-effort feeling-based decision-making, associated more with feelings rather than cognitive processing and with a strong affective component (Hoyer and Macinnis 2001). However, despite these motivational and behavioral similarities, there is no common conceptual framework or general theory to explain the socio-psychological processes underlying these two behaviors. This paper addressed this gap by exploring similarities and differences between these behaviors using a conceptual framework incorporating three relevant consumer traits—consumer impulsiveness, optimum stimulation level and self-monitoring.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Most of the consumer traits associated with IB and VS can be traced back to a single personality measure, namely trait impulsivity in the Psychology literature (Eysenck and Eysenck 1977; 1978; Zuckerman 1979; Cloninger et al. 1991; Eysenck 1993; Zuckerman et al. 1993; Zuckerman 2000; Whiteside and Lynam 2001). Individuals with high optimum stimulation level (OSL) are chronically lower in their arousal level making them indulge in sensation seeking activities to achieve their desired (optimum) stimulation level (Raju 1980; Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1992). Such individuals are also more likely to indulge in IB and VS behaviors to reach their optimum stimulation level. On the other hand, high self-monitors are expected to be more motivated to control their impulses (or, urges) due to their desire to appear rational and prudent (Becherer and Richard 1978; Rook and Fisher 1995; Dholakia 2000).

In this paper, it is specifically argued that consumer impulsiveness and optimum stimulation level influence both IB and VS behaviors positively, whereas self-monitoring influences IB negatively and VS positively. Moreover, self-monitoring is also hypothesized to moderate the influence of consumer impulsiveness and optimum stimulation level on purchase decisions, negatively for IB and positively for VS. Specifically, high impulsives who were high self-monitors indulged in less IB compared to low self-monitors and low variety-seekers sought more variety if they were high self-monitors.

METHODOLOGY

Two studies were conducted to test these hypotheses, one with 160 undergraduate students and the other with 309 retail shoppers. Questionnaires were developed using established scales to measure the consumer traits and level of impulsiveness/variety seeking in purchase decisions. In the first study, participants were exposed to two different purchase scenarios and their purchase intentions were recorded using single-item five-point scales (adapted from Rook and Fisher 1995). To improve the generalizability, retail shoppers were intercepted and interviewed about the items bought by them. Levels of impulse buying/variety seeking were estimated based on

their actual purchase decisions. Only pure impulse and variety seeking purchases were considered and the others were discarded (e.g. reminder impulse etc.).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using multiple moderated regression analysis, it was found in both the studies that consumers with high scores on CI and OSL indulged in more IB as well as VS compared to those with low scores on these two traits. High self-monitors indulged in less IB but more VS. Moreover, self-monitoring moderated the relationship between CI and OSL with level of impulsiveness or variety seeking in purchase decisions.

In this paper, IB and VS are shown to be similar to each other for the first time empirically based on a common conceptual framework incorporating three relevant consumer traits. It also highlights some key differences in the normative aspects of these two behaviors by showing the opposite influence of trait self-monitoring on these two behaviors. High self-monitors are shown to indulge in less IB but more VS. Moreover, the association of the other two traits i.e. consumer impulsiveness and OSL with VS is shown to be moderated positively by self-monitoring but negatively for IB. The conceptual framework used in this research paves the way for a better understanding of these two common but complex consumer behaviors.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

However, this research also has a few limitations. It explored only the influence of consumer traits on both the behaviors. Future research may include some relevant situational factors such as mood, time and money availability and involvement level. It also used only one scenario for each behavior in the first study (i.e. using jacket and ice-cream). However, there could be a significant difference between the involvement level in the two scenarios used by us e.g. price difference between the jacket (IB) and the ice-cream (VS). Future research may use different scenarios to study these behaviors. Finally, future researchers could test more complex conceptual models by including some possible mediators for these behaviors such as browsing, impulsive urge, attitude towards impulse purchase, cognitive evaluation and resistance strategies.

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