The psychology of impulse buying

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Introduction

Impulse buying is seen as an enigma in the marketing world and it accounts for a large number of goods sold each year across a wide range of products. In the U.S.A alone over $4 billion in annual sales was created as a result of impulse buying. One study showed that about 40% of consumers consider themselves impulse buyers. (Merima Cinjarevic, 2011) Some psychology studies show that impulse buying is an indication of irresponsibility and a lack of behavioral control. Impulse buyers have low levels of will power and a lack of control and this is perceived to be a possible contributing factor to impulse buying. (Hausman, 2000)

Impulse buying is a spur of the moment decision to buy, made just before the purchase. Study’s finds that feelings and emotions play a vital role in impulse purchasing. It can be classified in to four categories, pure, suggestion, reminder and planned. In this essay I am going to mainly focus on pure impulse buying and this is when a purchase is out of the normal and breaks a buying pattern and it is normally initiated by emotions. (RAO, 2012)

It is very hard to find or even explain why consumers engage in impulse buying. It is proposed that they are obliged by an unknown force to purchase an item even though they understand the consequences but they are more intent on fulfilling the present satisfaction. One study shows that impulse buying is an active approach for breaking out of an unwanted mood or a state of depression, frustration or boredom. (JALAN, 2006)

Some people see impulse buying as a mood manager and therefore they engage in impulse buying to relieve a painful or negative feeling. Some recent research has shown that a substantial number of people report feeling good after an impulse purchase. (Seounmi Youn, 2000). Impulse buying can be influenced by several factors like emotions, motivation, perception and self-actualization. Low levels of impulse buying can be pleasurable and driven by the quest for hedonistic goals. (Merima Cinjarevic, 2011)
Motivation is the procedure that enables people to react and behave as they do. A motive is an underlying reason for behaviors. It is not something that can be easily measured. Some motives have direction as well as strength and these motives are goal-orientated. (Solomon M. R., 1992) When a need is aroused, the consumer wishes to satisfy this need. The arousal of a need is called a drive. If the need is a hedonic need it is usually a need to improve one’s humor, emotional state or the consumer wants to reach self-actualization. (Solomon M. R., 1992)

There are two types of needs: utilitarian needs and hedonic needs. Hedonic needs are subjective and experimental. Consumers purchase a product on impulse to satisfy the need for excitement, social-class, self-confidence and so on. (Consumer Behaviour, 1992) Some people may do things to subconsciously satisfy a motive.

Researchers say that Freud’s theory highlights the potential importance of unconscious motives consumers feel when making a purchase. (Solomon, 1992) Sigmund Freud and the Freudian theory has helped with understanding assumptions on human behaviors. Freud developed an idea that a lot of human behaviors come from a fundamental conflict between the persons’ desire to gratify ones’ physical needs. (Solomon, 1992) In this theory, Freud implies that the id, ego and superego are the three elements that make up the personality. Freud also suggests that each element works together to create human behavior that is very complex. (Cherry, 2012)

The id is the element that is present when impulse buying. Freud suggests that the id is the only element that we are born with. The id is driven by the pleasure principal which seeks instant gratification (Cherry, 2012) This basically means that the id is the “party animal” of the mind and its primary objective is to maximize pleasure and eliminate pain. The id is seen as selfish and irrational. It directs ones psychic energy towards acts that will make them feel good without any regard for the consequences. (Solomon, 1992)

Arnold and Reynolds identified 6 categories of hedonic shopping motivation. One of these categories is gratification shopping. (Merima Cinjarevic, 2011) This is generally used to relieve stress, to alleviate a negative mood and as a special treat to one’s self. If you purchase something on impulse, the likelihood is that one of the elements listed above played a very important role. This all suggests that people “buy so they can shop and not shop so they can buy” (Merima Cinjarevic, 2011)

Once an impulse is trigged it seeks instant gratification and more often than not the impulse proves irresistible. When consumers are in the process of impulse buying there are generally two rival forces at work. These consist of the pleasure principal and the reality
principal. The pleasure principal seeks immediate gratification but this principal is compromised because the reality principal is all about rational thinking and deliberations.

Impulse buying is otherwise known as unplanned purchasing and it is seen as irrational. Impulse buying behavior is a phenomenon that has captured researchers’ attention for more than fifty years. At the beginning researchers were more focused on distinguishing impulse buying from non-impulse buying and they attempted to categories impulse buying into several sub categories. (Merima Cinjarevic, 2011)

In 1985, Rook and Hooch attempted to focus the research on the cognitive and emotional responses that consumers may or may not experience while engaging in impulse buying. Rook and Hoch identified five distinctive elements that helps you determine if your purchase was a planned purchase or simply an impulse buy. (Merima Cinjarevic, 2011) These five elements are:

1. A sudden desire to act. (An urge to buy)
2. Temporarily loss of control
3. Psychological conflict and struggle
4. There is a reduction in cognitive assessment
5. Spending regardless of the consequences. (We give in to our impulses because we do not understand the consequences.) (Dennis W. Rook, 2012)

These five elements are driven by the pleasure principal and it is very hard to ignore the urge to satisfy the need of hedonistic goals.

Going shopping is perceived as a lot of fun and people who like to shop for fun are more than likely impulse buyers. Once you experience the pleasure that comes with buying a product, we are more likely to impulse buy again to recapture that feeling. Many of us would see impulse buying as a guilty pleasure or a character flaw. The idea of buying lots of products you do not need can be very damaging. Impulse buying can be very addictive and you become used to the “high” you get when you engage in impulse buying. (Loewen)

Impulse buying is typically found to satisfy the need for fun, social interaction and gratification rather than utilitarian needs. These needs are commonly known as hedonic or emotional needs. Generally, the reasons for shopping are branded in to two separate aspects: utilitarian and hedonism. Utilitarian shopping is task-orientated, rational, and cognitive with the desire to purchase a product efficiently and rationally. (Merima Cinjarevic, 2011)

A typical utilitarian shopper would shop around from shop to shop to try and find a good quality product for the cheapest price. This is the rational way of shopping but a hedonic
shopper is more likely to purchase the product in the first shop they enter. This is generally down to the atmosphere. (Merima Cinjarevic, 2011) Hedonic shoppers also wish to obtain a product and satisfy a motive that may exist.

Some studies show that you are more likely to buy on impulse again because you liked the experience. Hedonism shopping is about the fun and play of shopping arising from the shopping experience itself and not the fact that you achieved a specific goal. Some characteristics of hedonism are fantasy fulfillment, a sense of freedom, increased arousal, self-indulgence and escapism. (Merima Cinjarevic, 2011) As I have mentioned earlier impulse buying is categorised into four sub-categories. These are: pure, suggestion, reminder and planned. For this essay I will look at pure impulse buying. This is the act of breaking a normal buying habit to break out of an unwanted mood. (Rao, 2012)

Mehrabian and Russell (1974) argue that environmental factors may alter an individual’s emotional response. They proposed a framework where emotional states fall into three categories, namely (pleasure), arousal (inspired to take action) and dominance (ability to control a situation). (Lan-Ying Huang Y.-J. H.) Pure impulse buying and the namely emotional state go hand-in-hand when it comes to impulse buying. The namely emotional state is driven by the pleasure principal. It seeks instant gratification. The pure impulse buying is breaking a normal buying habit to satisfy a need that exists at an unconscious level.

Many different factors have been suggested as triggering impulsive buying. These factors are divided into two types: internal and external. I am going to focus on internal cues. These include moods and emotional factors. It is perceived that people who are highly stressed look for a way to escape from an unwanted negative mood. They tend to do this by engaging in impulse purchasing and his helps the person to reach self-fulfillment. This is an act to help the person reach self-actualization. Another potential trigger is the consumer’s emotions. It is reported that consumers are more likely to cave in to their emotional conditions.

Some individuals have a personality trait called impulse tendency. There are a number of actions that go hand-in-hand with this trait. People who possess this trait are more likely to be more social, status conscious people and image concerned. (Zimmerman, 2012) Impulse buying is a pure lack of control. Impulsive people are very spontaneous and have very low levels of willpower. Decisions are made quite quickly and the consumer wants to satisfy a need almost instantly because the need seeks instant gratification. (Seounmi Youn, 2000)

Stress is how an individual reacts to situational cues with negative emotional sates. Some of these negative states are anxiety, guilt and anger. Stress can be caused by a number of factors of everyday life. People feel vulnerable and aggressive when stressed. Individuals react to stress in different ways. The negative emotion that people experience while stressed may
lead to engaging in impulse buying. (Seounmi Youn, 2000) After a person has engaged in the act stress levels are reduced because the consumer gave in to the urge and the need received instant gratification.

Emotions and stress are two main contributing factors to impulse buying. Research shows that over 75% of people felt better after impulse buying. It also suggests that stressed individuals may engage in impulse buying simply to relieve themselves of the negative feeling/emotion associated with stress. Emotion plays a big part in stress and also impulse buying. For example if you are having a bad day and are feeling sad or upset you obviously want to get rid of the negative feelings and one way to do this is impulse buying. It does not have to be on such a large scale like buying a new outfit but it can be as simple as buying a bar of chocolate or a drink. You feel a sudden desire to go out and buy something nice to make yourself feel better and to lower stress levels.

Stress is the body’s reaction to a sudden change that requires an emotional, physical or mental adjustment. Deliberate emotion regulation is the process of consciously trying to control one’s emotions and because we have a limited amount of self-control we are almost certain to engage in impulse buying (Sullivan, 2008). More often than not when you are stressed you will find yourself in a bad mood and in a namely emotional state. The most effective way to break out of this mood is to give in and before you know it you have engaged in impulse buying.
Conclusio

Research and experiments have been carried out for over fifty years to try understand consumer’s behavior and impulse buying. There are numerous elements and factors that cause people to engage in impulse buying when shopping. People partake in the act of impulse buying to eliminate a negative mood in their life. The negative mood can be caused by stress or emotion and a hedonic need is aroused when you find yourself in a bad mood. A hedonic need is one that is based on the pleasure principal and if the need is a hedonic need it is usually a need to improve one’s emotional state or humor.

Freud’s theory has helped researchers understand human behavior for a long time. The Id, just like a hedonic need is driven by the pleasure principal and it seeks instant gratification. People engage in Impulse buying because it is exciting and spontainious. The urge to buy are often forceful and the act of impulse buying is a fast experience. This is not always the case as the consumer may experience the urge at any time of day no matter where the consumer may be. (Rook, 1987)

In summary, impulse buying can be broken down into two main categories: utilitarian and hedonic. Both categories drive emotional need to purchase goods to improve mood and self-actualise(something important to improving the human condition.). Emotion and stress are two of the main contributing factors to impulse buying. The subconscious mind also plays a vital role in impulse buying and gratification shopping is an attempt to regulate the mind. Impulse buying is still a mystery and researchers will continue to try and understand the psychological process that consumers go through while engaging in impulse buying for many more years.