The Role of Subjective Well-Being, Positive and Negative Affect, and Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence in Predicting Impulse Buying Tendencies

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Although moderate levels of impulse buying can be pleasant and gratifying, recent theoretical work suggests that chronic, high frequency impulse buying has a compulsive element and can function as a form of escape from negative affective states, depression, and low self-esteem. The present research empirically examines this theoretical approach to impulse buying. In the present study, 277 Canadian participants completed measures of chronic impulse buying tendencies, subjective well-being, affect, susceptibility to interpersonal influence, and self-esteem. Results were consistent with the proposition that impulse buying tendencies are linked to affect, and particularly to negative affect.

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THE ROLE OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING, POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE AFFECT, AND CONSUMER SUSCEPTIBILITY TO INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCE IN PREDICTING IMPULSE BUYING TENDENCIES

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Impulse buying involves making spontaneous purchases, is frequently based on the presence of an immediate stimulus object, and is often accompanied by feelings of excitement and pleasure and/or a powerful urge to buy (Rook 1987). Although impulse buying is most often measured behaviourally in the context of a shopping environment (Rook and Gardner, 1993), there is also strong evidence for chronic individual differences in consumers’ propensity to buy on impulse (Verplanken and Herabadi 2001). Similar to other types of self-indulgent behavior such as alcohol consumption and smoking, it is likely that impulse buying at low to moderate levels can be an enjoyable pastime driven by the pursuit of hedonistic goals. However, high levels of these behaviors can be harmful and are potentially self-destructive. Moreover, these behaviors can be driven by avoidance of negative psychological states such as dispositional negative affect and/or low self-esteem (Verplanken et al. 2005). This potential “dark side” of impulse buying makes it a particularly interesting phenomenon, and the relative absence of work examining impulse buying from a psychological perspective suggests the need for further research in this area. The primary objective of the present article is to evaluate and extend Verplanken et al.’s (2005) theoretical model postulating negative affect as a driving force behind impulse buying. To achieve this objective, chronic impulse buying tendencies were measured in conjunction with measures of subjective well-being, positive and negative affect, social influence, and self-esteem.

A survey containing questionnaires measuring the variables of interest was administered to 277 students at a major English-speaking Canadian university. Impulse buying tendency was measured using the Impulse Buying Tendency Scale (IBTS) developed by Verplanken and Herabadi (2001). The IBTS contains two subscales: the cognitive subscale contains items related to a lack of planning and deliberation in association with purchase decisions, and the affective subscale contains items related to feelings of excitement, lack of control, and the urge to buy. Subjective well-being was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al. 1985). The SWLS is unidimensional and contains items measuring a person’s cognitive assessment of global life satisfaction. Affect was measured using the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark & Tellegen 1988). The PANAS contains 2 subscales: the positive affect subscale measures the degree to which individuals experience positive emotional states, and the negative affect subscale measures the degree to which individuals experience negative emotional states. The degree to which consumers are influenced by others was measured using the Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (CSII) scale (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989). The CSII contains two subscales: the informational influence subscale measures the degree to which individuals seek information related to purchases from their social environment, and the normative influence subscale measures the degree to which consumers gain approval or affirmation from their social environment. Self-esteem was measured using the Self-Liking and Competence Scale-Revised (SLCS-R; Tafarodi & Swann 2001). The SLCS-R contains two subscales: the self-like subscale measures feelings of social worth, and the self-competence subscale measures feelings of efficacy and control.

Correlational results from this study were consistent with all of the hypotheses. The cognitive subscale of the IBTS is negatively related to the SWLS, positively related to the negative affect subscale of the PANAS, and negatively related to the informational subscale of the CSII. The affective subscale of the IBTS is positively related to the negative affect subscale of the PANAS, negatively related to the normative subscale of the CSII, and negatively related to both subscales of the SLCS-R.

Similar results were obtained using regression analyses. In a regression analysis predicting the cognitive subscale of the IBTS, SWLS and informational CSII were negatively related to cognitive IBTS, whereas the PANAS negative affect scale was positively related to cognitive IBTS; however, the relationships between cognitive IBTS and both SWLS and negative affect only achieved marginal significance. In the regression analysis predicting the affective subscale of the IBTS, self-liking was not a significant predictor. Self-competence was negatively associated with the affective subscale of the IBTS, whereas PANAS negative affect and normative CSII were both positively associated with the affective subscale of the IBTS. The relationship between self-competence and affective IBTS only achieved marginal significance. With the exception of the lack of a relationship between self-liking and affective IBTS, all of these regression results are consistent with the hypotheses.

The present study makes two primary contributions. First, this study supports the need to differentiate between cognitive and affective facets of impulse buying tendencies. The fact that the cognitive and affective facets of impulse buying tendencies were differentially associated with the psychological constructs used in the present study suggests that greater efforts should be made to separate these two facets of impulse buying in future research. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the present study provides empirical support for Verplanken et al.’s (2005) proposition that impulse buying is closely linked to escape from negative affective states. In particular, the fact that negative affect (but not positive affect) was related to both the cognitive and affective facets of impulse buying tendencies, provides strong support for this proposition. Although further research is needed in this area, these findings suggest that impulse buying should perhaps no longer be viewed simply as “harmless fun.”
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