Group Dynamics of Impulse Buying: an Extended Social Facilitation Perspective
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - While impulsive buying has attracted researchers' attention for more than one and a half centuries (e.g., Mill 1848; Baumeister 2002), most existing theory and research are limited to investigate it at the intrapersonal level. Although the individual level conceptualization of impulse buying is definitely not incorrect, it may be incomplete in that it excludes the potential interpersonal influence at the group level. Given the fact that most consumers shop not alone but with a group of people such as family members or friends, and that a large amount of impulse purchases are decided and made in the presence of friend and/or family groups, it seems rather logic to conceive the potential influence of group situations on one's impulse behavior. More important, according to social facilitation theory in social psychology (Triplett 1897; Zajonc 1965), an individual consumer's learning, motivation, and behavior may be facilitated by the presence of a group of people. In particular, consumers may engage in impulsive buying in a group situation that others are buying for five different reasons; (1) they are facilitated simply due to the mere presence of others, (2) they think others' opinions and behaviors are credible under the informative influence, (3) they may use others' behavior and their purchase as socially approved and desirable in general under the normative influence, (4) they want to compete when others are buying, not missing out on having products that others have, and (5) they may have released the inhibition in buying products they don't need but want to do so, taking others' buying behavior as a reasonable justification. Therefore, this research theorizes that the social presence and interactions with a group of people in shopping may influence the individual's felt impulse and resulting impulsive behavior.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While impulsive buying has attracted researchers’ attention for more than one and a half centuries (e.g., Mill 1848; Baumeister 2002), most existing theory and research are limited to investigate it at the intrapersonal level. Although the individual level conceptualization of impulse buying is definitely not incorrect, it may be incomplete in that it excludes the potential interpersonal influence at the group level. Given the fact that most consumers shop not alone but with a group of people such as family members or friends, and that a large amount of impulse purchases are decided and made in the presence of friends and/or family groups, it seems rather logic to conceive the potential influence of group situations on one’s impulse behavior. More important, according to social facilitation theory in social psychology (Triplett 1897; Zajonc 1965), an individual consumer’s learning, motivation, and behavior may be facilitated by the presence of a group of people. In particular, consumers may engage in impulsive buying in a group situation that others are buying for five different reasons; (1) they are facilitated simply due to the mere presence of others, (2) they think others’ opinions and behaviors are credible under the informative influence, (3) they may use others’ behavior and their purchase as socially approved and desirable in general under the normative influence, (4) they want to compete when others are buying, not missing out on having products that others have, and (5) they may have released the inhibition in buying products they don’t need but want to do so, taking others’ buying behavior as a reasonable justification. Therefore, this research theorizes that the social presence and interactions with a group of people in shopping may influence the individual’s felt impulse and resulting impulsive behavior.

Surprisingly, the academic and trade press has paid less attention to the existence and potential of the group influences on impulse buying beyond the individual level perspective. This research attempts to alleviate this deficiency in this research. An examination of impulse buying at the social group level is desired and important because Rook (1987, p.196) calls for future research on investigating impulse purchase from “a social environment (group versus solo buying) context”, after a classical and comprehensive review of impulsive buying concepts. In addition, such an investigation at the group level may in general contribute to the consumer literature in that the existing literature is unbalanced and lacking studies of “groups of consumers such as two-person dyads, families, peer or friendship groups” at the interpersonal level (Bagozzi 2000, p388). Accordingly, this paper is to mainly explore group influences and their implications for individual impulse buying behavior.

Two experiments were conducted to test the influences of group type and group cohesiveness on impulse buying. The results of study 1 with a 2 (group shopping vs. solo shopping) x 2 (family members vs. peer friends) x 2 (high cohesive group vs. low cohesive group) mixed-factorial design support the ideal that group influence may induce more or less impulse buying than solo shopping without group influence. In particular, the more cohesive is the shopping group of peer friends, the more buying impulsiveness and impulsive purchase behavior would be reported. In contrast, the more cohesive is the shopping group of family members, the less buying impulsiveness and impulsive purchase behavior would be recorded. Study 2 used a 2 (high vs. low susceptibility to group influence) x 2 (group shopping vs. solo shopping) x 2 (family members vs. peer friends) x 2 (high cohesive group vs. low cohesive group) mixed-factorial design. The results support the premise that the interpersonal antecedents’ influences on consumer impulsive behaviors are moderated by susceptibility to group influence.

Three potential contributions of this paper are noteworthy. First, it extends the impulse buying literature from the intrapersonal trait perspective to interpersonal group dynamics perspective. It theorizes that group influence may induce more or less (than solo shopping) impulse buying depending on the cohesiveness of the shopping group and the member type of group (friends or family members). Second, it tests and finds initial evidence of the potential interpersonal antecedents of impulsive buying such as group type and group cohesiveness. Third, it lends some support that the interpersonal antecedent influences may be contingent upon individual traits such as susceptibility to group influence. Thus, both interpersonal antecedents and individual traits are important determinants of impulse buying and, thus, ought to be considered simultaneously in future research on impulse buying behavior.

References


Zajonc, RB (1965), Social Facilitation, Science, 149, 269-274.