“…Do I Need It, Do I, Do I Really Need This?”: Exploring the Role of Rationalization in Impulse Buying Episodes

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ABSTRACT

The paper complements existing research regarding the interplay between impulsive and deliberative processes in consumer decision making, by examining how cognition (in the form of rationalizations or motivated judgements) enables people to proceed with (rather than control) their impulses. It applies the concept of neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1957), in the manner of a theory of motivated cognition and as a taxonomy of pre- and post-behavioral rationalizations; and presents findings from a preliminary study which suggests that neutralization theory can be applied to accounts of impulse buying episodes.

INTRODUCTION

The negative externalities of consumption are often rehearsed (e.g. environmental impact); whereas the personal negative consequences of consumption are often neglected in the policy domain (with the possible exception of debt). Likewise impulse buying is often represented as a benign activity in many forums. However, it can have negative consequences for the participant, particularly if the consumer succumbs to impulses on a regular basis or has limited financial means. Consumer debt in developed economies is excessive (e.g. Brown et al. 2005) and causes concern for policy makers, debt related charities and consumer interest groups. Household bankruptcy rates are increasing, and this appears to be attributable to excessive spending on consumer durables and services rather than more run of the mill household expenses. Indeed, there is an established empirical link between indebtedness and bankruptcy and the propensity to succumb to Akratic repeated ‘excessive’ impulse purchase (Wood 1998). Research has also shown that impulse purchases can have negative psychological consequences for the participants (Wood 1998; Green and Smith 2002) as well as lead to domestic conflict and other negative social consequences (Green and Smith 2002). Repeat impulse purchase can be a problematic form of buying behavior whatever the financial resources of the consumer. Even those who can afford it may experience the negative familial and psychological consequences (the research reported here does not explore impulse buying which is attributable to an impulse disorder—Lejoyeux et al. 1996).

Research into impulse buying has provided many insights, which are explored below, however there is still some ambiguity about a) the exact role of cognition on impulse restraint and enactment and b) how consumers deal with impulses that carry negative consequences both in post-behavioral (i.e. as a result of an impulsive purchase) and pre-behavioral stages (i.e. at the time of purchase) of the impulse formation and enactment process (Dholakia 2000). Indeed, the consumers’ cognitive ability to cope with any doubts or internal conflicts should be a key facilitatory factor of repeated impulsive behavior. In an attempt to redress this issue, the current paper advances the concept of neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957) and explores its applicability in twenty consumer accounts of impulse buying episodes.

CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT

Impulsiveness in any context is a difficult construct, and one that can be defined in many ways (Coscina 1997, Webster and Jackson 1997a, 1997b), nonetheless the basic elements of these generic psychological definitions are evident in most existing definitions of impulse buying, such as that offered by Rook and Hoch (1985): 1. Sudden and spontaneous desire to act; 2. Temporary loss of control; 3. Psychological conflict and struggle; 4. Reduction of cognitive evaluation; 5. Disregard for consequences. This perspective is reflected in Rook’s (1987) definition of impulse purchasing as “a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately” (Rook 1987, 191). Vohs and Faber (2007) note that recent research continues to reflect this viewpoint, by for example, distinguishing between people that are impulsive and those that are not. They caution, however, that this distinction overlooks the fact that nearly everyone occasionally engages in impulse purchases and even the most impulsive people sometimes do manage to control their impulses.

Impulse buying has been consistently linked with mood states (e.g. Hill and Ward 1989, Rook and Gardner 1993). Interestingly Rook and Gardner (1993) found that positive mood states are more favorable to impulse buying than negative ones, but also suggested that consumers may use impulse purchasing to extend or alter mood states, for example people might buy on impulse in negative moods, that is, as a “therapeutic mood alteration tactic” (Rook and Gardner 1993, 19). Luomala (1998) provides support for this in a study of self-gift behavior, arguing that the self-regulation of negative moods through consumption related activities was a “common and integral part of consumers’ lives” (Luomala 1998, 109). Other studies of self-gift behavior and compensatory consumption have also shown that consumption can be used as a device for mood repair (Mick, DeMoss and Faber 1992, Woodruffe 1997a, Woodruffe-Burton 1998a). The link between these forms of consumption and impulse buying remains largely unexplored however. Moreover as Rook and Gardner (1993) postulate it is a not only negative mood that may encourage impulse buying, Youn and Faber (2000) investigated cues that might trigger impulse buying and found that both negative and positive moods or feeling states might prompt impulse buying. It should also be remembered that mood is both an ‘input’ and an ‘output’ to impulse buying.

Several studies have emphasized the influence of external situational and environmental factors on impulse buying; including atmospherics, exciting shopping environments, in-store promotions, point of purchase stimuli, physical proximity, layout and space allocation of products within the store (Bellenger and Korgaonkar 1980; Desmet and Renaudin 1998; Faber and Vohs 2004; Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Kollat and Willett 1967; Peck and Childers, 2006). However their exact effect on the process of impulse buying is still under-investigated. There is also a dearth of research into the effect of companion shoppers and other social effects (for exceptions see Green and Smith 2002; Luo 2005).

Studies into impulse buying have been criticized for focusing mostly on the emotional and situational elements of the phenomenon, as opposed to adequately considering the potential of the cognitive perspective (Burroughs 1996; Piron 1991). Burroughs

1The authors would like to acknowledge Sarah Green for collecting the data.
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(1996) argued that the cognitive processes of impulse buying were particularly important when one considers how consumers map the symbolic meaning of objects onto conceptions of the self. Moreover, Rook and Hoch (1985) suggest that even at the height of impulse buying episodes, customers often engage in ‘inner dialogue’. Additionally some studies have examined how consumers may reject the impulse to buy something and exert self-control when negative normative evaluations reach some critical level (Rook and Fisher 1995). Other consumers may actively employ strategies to prevent impulse buying. For example, people may attempt to regulate their own behavior through willpower, not going shopping or leaving credit cards at home (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991, Lehtonen 2000).

Related to the above, the perceived and actual consequences of impulse buying and their exact role on impulse restriction or enactment remain a neglected area of study. Although many definitions of impulse buying suggest that it occurs with a disregard for consequences (Rook 1985), impulse is typically perceived as having negative psychological consequences that trigger internal conflict (Emmons et al. 1993). For example, impulsive persons often exhibit a sense of guilt (Wisniew 1977) and regret (Sears 2006). Research on compulsive buying and addictive consumption has explored negative consequences of consumer behavior that might be relevant to impulse buying. For example addictive consumption is viewed as having long-term and serious negative consequences, not least guilt, self-loathing and debt (Elliot, Eccles and Gournay 1996; Friese 1999; Green and Smith 2002; O’Guinn and Faber 1989).

Recent research into impulse buying (and consumer behavior more broadly) has re-emphasized the interplay of impulsive (affective) and cognitive (deliberative) processes (Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999; Strack, Werth, and Deutsch 2006). In the context of consuming candies, Hofmann, Rauch, and Gavronski (2007) found that under conditions of high cognitive capacity, dietary restraint standards were more influential on behavior than implicit attitudes, however, this trend was reversed under conditions of low cognitive capacity. Similarly, in a series of experiments Vohs and Faber (2007) showed that depletion of self-regulatory (primarily cognitive) resources in preceding tasks leads to increased willingness to behave impulsively in subsequent tasks. From this perspective, consumer decisions can be viewed as ongoing conflicts between desires, triggered for example by mood states and environmental stimuli, and willpower; or more reflective, cognitive attempts to exercise control over these impulses (Hoch and Lowenstein 1991). Nonetheless, desires can affect cognitive processes in more perplexing ways (e.g. Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). For example, under a “motivated reasoning” perspective, (Baumeister 1996; Ditto et al. 1998; Kunda 1990), urges, desires and similar motivational states “may affect reasoning through reliance on a biased set of cognitive processes: strategies for accessing, constructing and evaluating beliefs” (Kunda 1990, 480). Cognition, in the form of biased judgments or rationalizations, may therefore facilitate rather than inhibit impulse enactment. In this respect, the exact role of “inner dialogue” (Rook and Hoch, 1985) on impulse buying episodes remains unexplored.

THE ROLE OF NEUTRALIZATION

In an attempt to understand the Consumption Impulse Formation and Enactment process (CIFE) holistically, Dholakia (2000) distinguishes between consonant (harmonious) and dissonant (conflicting) impulses. Consistent with the above, he notes that while cases of consonant impulses (no perceived constraints from impulse formation to enactment) are theoretically possible, most often, consumers experience psychological conflict or dissonance, arising from incongruence between their emotional (desires) and cognitive preferences (Emmons et al. 1993; Rook 1987). Importantly, this results in a more thought-based evaluation of the consequences of impulse enactment. If they are evaluated negatively, the consumer’s cognitive system is activated, to employ a variety of resistance strategies, such as self-control, selective attention to information and control of emotions (Dholakia 2000). Cognition, however, in the form of rationalizations or motivated judgments may also play a facilitatory role on impulse enactment. Whereas the impulse buying literature have so far considered only the post-behavioral role of rationalizations (Rook 1987; Sparks 2006), they represent generic mechanisms of adding consonant cognitions, (versus changing existing cognitions or behavior; Beauvois and Joule 1996), that should be equally applicable when the purpose is to alleviate feelings of anticipated (pre-behavioral) as opposed to post-behavioral dissonance (Baumeister and Newman 1994; Tsang 2002). Indeed, the importance of rationalization has been highlighted in recent social psychological research concluding that most claims of irresistible impulses are a matter of rationalization rather than of genuinely being helpless against strong desires (Baumeister 2002; Baumeister et al. 1994). Nonetheless, even the broader cognitive dissonance/social psychological literature has largely focused on the post-behavioral role of rationalizations (see e.g. Beauvois and Joule 1993, 1996). Inevitably, this stream of research has lacked a comprehensive theory of pre- and post-behavioral rationalizing strategies: “although many different examples of self-justification have been documented in the psychological literature, this has not produced a comprehensive taxonomy of self-justification strategies” (Holland et al. 2002, 1714). Originally applied in the context of norm-violating behaviors, neutralization is both a theory of motivated cognition and a taxonomy of pre- and post-behavioral rationalizations that has been widely applied as a way to advance understanding of these processes (Bersoff 1999; Fritsche 2005; Hazani 1991).

In 1957, Sykes and Matza published their seminal article on juvenile delinquency criticizing the predominant theoretical viewpoint that delinquency is a form of behavior based on the values and norms of a deviant sub-culture in the same way as law-abiding behavior is based on the norms and values of the larger society. These authors suggested that rather than learning moral imperatives, values or attitudes standing in a complete opposition to those of his/her society, the delinquent learns a set of justifications or rationalizations, that is the techniques of neutralization, which can insulate him/her from self-blame and the blame of others. Furthermore, while these patterns of thought can be viewed as following delinquent behavior, ultimately they can precede it, and make dissonant behavior possible. That is, once successfully internalized, they can truly become neutralizing devices as opposed to post behavioral rationalizations (Grove et al. 1989). Existing longitudinal (Agnew 1994; Minor 1981, 1993; Shields and Whitehall 1994) and experimental studies (Bersoff 1999; Bohner et al. 1998; Fritsche, 2003) have generally found support for this etiological assumption.

Sykes and Matza (1957) originally identified five major categories-labelled ‘neutralization techniques’-that describe the rationalizations that people apply to their problematic behaviors. Later applications have identified additional ones which are arguably more applicable in specific contexts (Fritsche 2005; Maruna and Copes 2005). The original five techniques, are listed below (as adapted in a consumer context by Strutton et al. 2004, 254) along with illustrative examples in the context of impulse purchasing:

1) Denial of responsibility: A circumstance in which one argues that one is not personally accountable for the behavior because factors beyond one’s control are operating; e.g. “Was such a one-off bargain and my friends insisted that I buy it”.

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2) Denial of Injury: A circumstance in which one contends that the consequences of the behavior are not really serious e.g. “What’s the big deal, it was such a small purchase anyway”.

3) Denial of Victim: A circumstance in which one counters the blame for personal actions by arguing that somebody else is the victimizer; e.g. “It’s the retailer’s fault; the way they promote these things, it’s like you buy them before you realize it”.

4) Condemning the condemners: A circumstance in which one deflects guilt by pointing out that those who would condemn engage in similar activities; e.g. “Nowadays, everybody indulges him/herself by buying something absolutely unnecessary once in a while”.

5) Appeal to higher loyalties: A circumstance in which one argues that behavior is the result of an attempt to actualize some higher order ideal or value; e.g. “I was so tired and frustrated, and I really needed something to lift my mood so I just had to do it”.

Since its formulation by Sykes and Matza, neutralization theory has been one of the most widely known and frequently cited theories in the sociology of deviance and beyond (for recent reviews see Fritsche 2005; Manura and Copes 2005). Furthermore, neutralization theory has been the subject of more intuitive applications, both within and beyond the boundaries of what is typically labelled as deviant behavior. Examples include bingo playing (King 1990), organizational rule enforcing (Fershing 2003), religious dissonance (Dunford and Kunz, 1973), mothers entering preteen daughters into beauty contests (Heltsley and Calhoun 2003) and eating unhealthily during pregnancy (Copelton 2007).

Neutralization theory has been successfully applied in consumer contexts but research in this domain remains limited (Chatzidakis et al. 2004, 2006; Mitchell and Chan 2002; Rosenbaum and Kuntze 2003; Strutton et al. 1994, 1997). It has not been applied to impulse purchasing, although the importance of social norms underlying this context has often been highlighted in the literature (e.g. Cobb and Hoyer 1986; Bayley and Nancarrow 1998; Peck and Childers 2006; Rook and Fisher 1995). For example, Rook and Fisher (1995) mention how impulsive behavior has traditionally been associated with immaturity, weakness or lack of intelligence and therefore classified as “bad”. Accordingly, impulse purchasing is often cited as an example of the so-called “dark side of consumer behavior” (Hirschman 1991). Consumers who violate these norms may need to neutralize in order to alleviate any feelings of guilt or dissonance they could otherwise experience when acting on their impulses.

Nonetheless, it is not only the existence of social norms against impulse purchasing that suggests applicability of the concept of neutralization in this domain. As mentioned earlier, within the consumer impulse formation and enactment process, dissonance might arise after the consideration of various negative consequences, which may relate to societal but also more personal concerns (e.g. monetary waste, weight gain, domestic conflict, anticipatory emotions of guilt and regret; Dholakia 2000; Green and Smith 2002). Within a cognitive dissonance framework, once a specific behavior is perceived as problematic, neutralization, as a generic strategy of adding consonant cognitions, should be more widely applicable to impulsive episodes. Lastly, it is important to note that neutralizing processes neither assume nor require extensive cognitive processing prior to impulse enactment. On the contrary, the techniques represent readily available patterns of thought or “cognitive heuristics” (Chatzidakis et al. 2006) that are compatible with both reflective and impulsive modes of decision-making (Strack et al. 2006); such as peripheral versus central ( Petty and Cacioppo 1986) or heuristic as opposed to systematic (Chaiken, Liberman and Eagly 1989 ) modes of processing. Accordingly, the aim of the preliminary study reported below, was to identify the types of neutralizations that may be employed in impulse buying contexts and to gain an indication of their cognitive accessibility both at pre- and post-behavioral stages of impulse formation and enactment.

**METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative method of data capture was deemed appropriate in order to gain preliminary insights on the applicability of neutralization to the impulse buying domain. The study was in the main deductive because the codes were predetermined, that is the ‘neutralization techniques’. Nonetheless, additional techniques, sub-themes and issues relating to the process of neutralization emerged in the interviews. The twenty participants were female, aged 18-51, and had varied backgrounds. They were recruited through targeted publicity at community resource centres. All had got into debt at some point directly as a result of their impulse purchasing. The study focussed specifically on women, as previous research has shown that overall women buy proportionately more on impulse than men (Dittmar, Beattie and Friese 1995). Clothes were the primary focus of the study, because women often impulsively buy goods that are symbolic and express their self-image (Dittmar et al. 1995; Rook and Hoch 1985; Cria 1994). Nonetheless, some participants moved on to mention additional impulse buying experiences.

The interviews were humanistic in nature (see Chamaz 1997), and were designed to give respondents the opportunity to tell their own story and fully discuss their own feelings and behaviors (Elliott, Eccles and Gourlay 1996; O’Guinn and Faber 1989). A general structure and interview schedule was established before the interviews but the guide was designed to be flexible (Kvale 1983; O’Guinn and Faber 1989; Willis 1990). This inductive element of the study helped illuminate the accessibility of neutralization-type of arguments in the consumers’ minds (and therefore their compatibility with both reflective and impulsive modes of processing), and is a key characteristic for successful neutralization (Fritsche 2003). Accordingly, the interplay of deductive and inductive principles has been widely adopted for exploratory inquiries into other applications of neutralization theory (e.g. Byers et al. 1999; Chatzidakis et al. 2004; Ferraro and Johnson 1983; Gauthier 2000; Hazani 1991). The interviews began by asking respondents to describe their most recent impulse buying episode, similar to the strategies adopted by Gardner and Rook (1988) and O’Guinn and Faber (1989). Further questions and the direction of the conversation were based on respondents’ comments, in order to explore their experiences (Ritson, Elliott and Eccles 1996). All respondents were fully de-briefed and offered counselling services and the annotated transcripts were cross-referenced.

“Theoretical thematic analysis” was used in order to systematically code and analyse the data with the aim of identifying common patterns, salient themes and sub-themes, which were then contrasted with the pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun and Clarke 2006; Fereday and Muir-Cohrane 2006). Initially, data were coded separately by each of the authors of this paper and then findings were compared to ensure inter-coder agreement and validity (Braun and Clarke 2006). During the coding process it was evident that different neutralization techniques were often used in combination to justify impulsive behavior, which reflects what researchers have remarked in other contexts (e.g. Forsyth and Evans 1998; Hazani 1991). In such instances, data were allocated multiple category codes to indicate the interrelationships between themes. Coding also highlighted that the semantic borders between...
single techniques were on few occasions fuzzier (Fritsche 2002). In these cases, the broader context and framing of the statement was an important determinant of how the data were coded. The findings reported below include verbatim extracts and some commentary to give a flavor of the overall nature and recurrent themes from the interviews.

**FINDINGS**

There was ample evidence to suggest that respondents were readily employing neutralizing techniques to alleviate feelings of dissonant impulses. Indeed, none of the participants was challenged to rationalize their impulses, but all of them did so at various stages in the interviews. In many instances, respondents moved on to explicitly acknowledge the importance of rationalization on the impulse formation and enactment process:

“You’ve always got to justify yourself and think well yeah I really needed that cardie, and I really needed that pair of pants even though I’ve got ten others, and I will use them, and I will wear it and if I’m going wear it and they feel comfortable, that’s all that matters, it was a bargain so think how much I’ve saved.”

However, in line with previous consumer applications (Grove et al. 1989) not all five techniques were equally represented in the impulse buying context. The most popular techniques proved to be denial of responsibility, denial of injury and appealing to higher loyalties whilst there was only tenuous reference to denial of victim and condemnation of the condemners. Furthermore, two additional techniques were identified, and seemed to resemble what has been identified in previous research as “metaphor of the ledger” (Klockars 1974) and “defence of necessity” (Minor 1981).

Denial of responsibility centers on notions of control or the extent to which the consumers view themselves as “acted upon” rather than “acting” (Sykes and Matza 1957). This theme of attribution was evident in several consumer accounts and was perhaps not surprising given the documented evidence on the importance of “self-control” in the impulse formation and enactment process (Dholakia 2000; Vohns and Faber 2007). For example, some participants suggested that it was their friends or partners who were in effect responsible for their impulsive behavior:

“We went into, erm, a shop once to buy a fridge freezer and I came out with a television and a video as well (laughs) but that’s really...that’s more my husband than me...he’s quite bad at things like that, he’s like just get it, he sort of encourages me, I try and...not to, he is sort of quite a big influence on me, makes me do things like that, spend extra, six hundred quid on something when it was only going to be three or something.”

Other participants denied responsibility on the grounds that they were influenced by atmospherics or other environmental and situational characteristics, somewhat implying their function at levels beyond their conscious control:

“Well if, its nice discreet lighting, subtle and the mirror makes you look good, yes it will certainly encourage you...”

“Alright, because sometimes when you’re on holiday you buy things and because you’re in a hot country, it’s all flowery or whatever, brighter colours, because you’re in, I don’t know what the heat does to you...”

Denial of injury was primarily based on financial considerations, especially for products that were considered to be within a very affordable range and hence unproblematic purchases:

“I thought, they’re cheap, I’ll buy them.”

A different version was based not on the absolute monetary value of the product, but relative to longer term considerations, such as frequency and occasions of usage:

“…this was fifty quid, and I was with my friend when I bought it and I went but I really like it, and she went yeah but you know its fifty pounds, and I said I know but I could wear it to work and I would wear it outside of work and she went oh well if you’re going to wear it for both then perhaps you will get your moneys worth out of it.”

Interestingly, few participants felt the need to justify potential injuries to their household as opposed to personal finances (e.g. the fact that the family might have to forgo other consumption events such as vacations because of any spending was hardly ever alluded to). Likewise, broader negative consequences for the environment (e.g. waste of resources) or society (e.g. fair trade clothing), were rarely mentioned, but this could be because ethical clothes shopping is still a trend in its infancy (Shaw et al. 2006).

Appeal to higher loyalties can be perceived as the technique which comes closer to a situation of a behavioral dilemma, whereby the “negative (unintended) consequences of one action are logically implied in positive (intended) consequences of the other action and vice versa” (Villenave-Cremer and Eckensberger 1986 in Marks and Mayo 1991, 720). In line with the existing impulse buying literature, the higher loyalties served by the (impulsive) behavior mostly related to personal desires and self-gratification:

“…erm I just thought it’ll really cheer me up if I get something new for the weekend, you know if I go out at the weekend I’ve got something new to wear and er, I just kind of felt a bit better about myself.”

“…well, sometimes I try things on but sometimes I’m just so happy that I’ve found something I like I just take them to the till there and then and buy it.”

Other frequently mentioned higher-ordered values, related to notions of deservedness or the existence of an opportunity:

“Erm, cos you think well, I’ve worked for this money, I’ve worked to buy this...”

“Sometimes you think oh well I’ll get it before somebody else gets it, yet everybody else is seen in it, or you think well maybe if I come back and it’s really popular, there’ll be none left, you know what I mean, like your size and none’ll be left and they won’t be able to order you another one, and its frustrating then. (AdHL)

Additional Techniques: Some additional themes were also identified in the interviews, which seemed to relate to techniques that have been previously identified in neutralization research as “metaphor of the ledger” (Klockars 1974) and “defence of necessity” (Minor 1981). The metaphor of the ledger refers to circumstances in which individuals justify their behavior in question based on other activities which have led to credits they can somewhat “cash in” (Hollinger 1991; Minor 1981). In the context of impulse buying this was often translated into excuses for self-giving, such
as having accomplished certain ends or having done more than what is required for one’s friends or family:

“…the children have far more clothes than I do really, they get far more presents and I think as they get older you realize that you can’t spend your whole life spending all your pay on them, you’ve got to have a life yourself, so maybe as they get older it gets far easier to spend money on me (laughs)”.  

Lastly, defences of necessity were based on reasons such as special occasions and circumstances, urgency of satisfying specific emotional or functional needs and which somewhat rendered the impulsive purchase prudent, if not necessary:

“…we’d got all the kids presents which were quite a lot, and then this computer came up at a good price, so I bought it. And I justified it by saying that my daughter, being in the new school now needed a computer, would help her and also her brother with their schoolwork.”

“Yeah, I usually try and justify them as a necessity. Cos I don’t usually, if it’s Christmas or birthdays and things I don’t tend to ask for clothes cos, they’re a necessity.”

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Given that most consumers engage in inner dialogue even at the peak of impulse buying episodes (Rook and Hoch 1985), it is imperative that theories of impulse buying evolve to explain the multiplicity of roles that cognition may play on the impulse formation and enactment process (Dholakia 2000). Accordingly, this paper advances the concept of neutralization in an attempt to illustrate how (motivated) cognition, in the form of pre- and post-behavioral rationalizations may also facilitate rather than inhibit impulse enactment; and ultimately sustain repeated impulsive behavior. An exploratory study probed the applicability of the concept and identified the types of neutralizing arguments that consumers may use in relation to impulsive purchases.

The findings from the present study are mostly illustrative however, because the sample was restricted in terms of size, demographic and psychographic profile and, of course, it could not demonstrate causation and therefore confirm that the arguments are used as neutralizing devices. However, the study did shed some light on the chronological ordering question because the need to justify even at the point of purchase was very commonly cited by almost all the respondents (as was the experience of guilt in the post-purchase phase). Furthermore, it provided strong indication that consumers have a sufficient range of accessible neutralization techniques to alleviate feelings of dissonant impulses. This is particularly important in the context of impulse formation and enactment, as it implies that neutralizing processes should not necessarily require extensive cognitive effort. As such, they are also compatible with impulsive modes of processing (Strack et al. 2006). Future research could benefit from studies that probe the applicability of the concept in more diverse contexts of impulsive buying, with different sample profiles and methods that may help better understand contemporaneous cognitive processes such as “shopping with consumers” (Lowrey et al. 2005; Otnes et al. 2005). At a second stage of research, experimental approaches would be needed, in order to directly address the causal ordering issue as well as specify conditions and moderating variables that affect the influence of neutralization on enactment and persistence of consumer impulses. For example, intervening variables could relate to anticipated or post-purchase guilt, mood state and adjustment, and deprivation of a need (see e.g. Strack et al. 2006).

Such a research endeavor could have important implications for marketing communications and public policy initiatives against impulsive behaviors that carry negative personal, broader societal and environmental consequences. For example, marketing campaigns could challenge specific neutralizing arguments by pointing to their logical fallacy or dangerously prevailing nature. Furthermore, creative attempts to counter the employment of neutralization techniques can even be found in cognitive-behavioral treatments and therapeutic communities such as narcotic and alcoholic anonymous (Maruna and Copes 2005). This is of increasing relevance given the emergence of specialist anti-impulse buying programmes.²

**REFERENCES**


²See e.g. http://www.stoppingovershopping.com/
³Due to space constraints, the full list of references is available from the first author upon request.


