Merry Impulsivity: Belief Systems About the Dark and Bright Sides of Being Bad Consumers

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Impulsivity is typically considered as a negative behaviour that should be avoided at any cost. Despite this common approach to impulsive behaviors as self-control failures that are regretted latter, we propose that impulsivity may have a bright side. Findings from two studies show that low self-regulators, compared with high self-regulators, are considered to possess a set of positive personal characteristics, to have a more positive attitude towards life and, importantly, to be happier. Results add to the self-control literature by offering a possible explanation why consumers frequently seem to “fail”, persistently engaging in non self-regulatory activities.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Impulsivity is typically considered as a negative behaviour that should be avoided at any cost. Despite this common approach to impulsive behaviors as self-control failures that are regretted latter, we propose that impulsivity may have a bright side that may explain why consumers persistently seem to not pay attention to the constant reminders from various governmental and health-care organizations to perform the adequate and right goal-pursuit activities, and to even consciously act on impulse (Baumeister et al. 1994). The present research analyzes this phenomenon, examining consumers’ beliefs on the consequences of acting on impulse and its impact on consumers’ happiness/well-being.

Most of the research conducted on the self-control topic implicitly assumes that if somehow consumers would be able to increase their self-regulatory ability, many social problems as obesity and impulsive behavior, would be solved, contributing to a “better world” (Baumeister 2002; Faber and Vohs 2004; Sayette 2004). The offer of self-help books, websites and courses, supposedly to help consumers to become better self-regulators, is soaring. And consumers are systematically confronted with numerous “reminders” of their ongoing pursuits. However, to our knowledge, there are no studies focused in analyzing the possible bright side of impulsivity on consumers’ happiness. This is relevant if one considers that a significant percentage of consumers’ daily decisions appear to comprise impulsive decisions (Rook, 1987; Rook and Fisher, 1995; Hausman 2000) and that impulsive purchases are considered to represent about 70% of the consumer decisions (Bellenger, Robertson and Hirschman 1978). Moreover, since 38 percent of the adults in an annual national survey responded affirmatively to the statement: “I am an impulse buyer” (Rook and Fisher 1995), makes such phenomenon even more interesting.

Although impulsive behaviors may impair the likelihood of long-term conscious goals’ attainment, they also contribute to immediate pleasurable experiences that elicit joy and satisfaction, which may fulfill other high-order and less conscious long-term goals (e.g., to be happy), strengthening the belief that impulsive behaviors build consumers’ well-being. Therefore, we suggest that one of the reasons why consumers may persistently seem to fall into temptations with disregard for its long-term consequences may be due to the fact that consumers believe they will benefit from desirable short-term and long-term outcomes by doing so.

Our main hypothesis is that impulsive consumers (low self-regulators) will be considered to be happier and will be associated with a set of higher positive personal characteristics, compared with non-impulsive consumers (high self-regulators). This Merry Impulsivity hypothesis is based on three underlying processes. First, we predict that low self-regulators, compared with high self-regulators, are considered to experience higher positive affect and lower negative affect, typically approached as an indication of happiness (Ryan and Deci 2001). Second, we also predict that low self-regulators to focus more on the short-term experiences and therefore to be considered to have a more positive attitude towards uncertainty of future events than high self-regulators, indicating a more general positive attitude towards life, positively influencing consumers’ subjective well-being/happiness (Diener et al. 1997; Scheier and Carver 1993). Third, we predict that low self-regulators will be considered to better develop social skills than high self-regulators and to more easily create and nurture interpersonal relationships, a basic human need essential for well-being/happiness (Ryan and Deci 2001).

Support to our predictions offer a possible explanation why consumers pervasively tend to engage in impulsive acts. If consumers believe that impulsive acts contribute positively to a set of positive characteristics, they may engage in those acts in an attempt to enhance their well-being.

Our predictions were tested in two studies. Study 1 analyzed to what extent low self-regulators are considered to be happier and to experience more positive affect than high self-regulators. Study 2 included measures for goal-pursuit attainment as achievements in life and hard-working constructs, as also assessed consumers’ beliefs in terms of sociability skills, sensation-seeking tendency, desire for control, and attitude towards life. In addition, it examined the influence of consumers’ actual impulsivity (self-assessed) on their beliefs about the dark and bright sides of impulsive consumer behavior.

Findings from study 1 (n=44) showed that consumers who frequently engage in impulsive behaviors are indeed considered to be happier and to more likely experience positive affect than consumers that typically try to refrain impulses in order to pursue overarching goals. In addition, findings from study 2, which re-tested our predictions using 438 randomly selected members of a household panel, showed that impulsive behaviors, despite leading to fewer achievements in life, are considered to contribute to a set of personal characteristics that raise consumers’ happiness.

This set of studies addressed an understudied aspect of self-regulation failure: the one of consumers willingly failing to exert self-control, amending the so far universal belief that self-control is the ultimate goal to consumers’ well-being. Despite this common idea, impulsive behaviors may actually positively influence consumers’ well-being, due to consumers’ belief systems about the correlates of impulsivity. Our research demonstrates that consumers who tend to engage in immediate pleasurable experiences with disregard for its long-term consequences are generally believed to be happier, more social, with a more positive attitude towards life, and to experience higher positive affect than consumers who have high consumption/behavioral self-regulatory concerns. Therefore, and as outlined by Baumeister and colleagues (1994), the phenomenon of acquiescence with failure may explain a significant portion of self-control failures. To our knowledge, the present research is the first to address empirically this phenomenon, shedding some light on belief systems that are conducive to consumers persistently engaging in non self-regulatory activities.

REFERENCES


