Coping With Guilt and Shame in the Impulse Buying Context

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In this study we studied how consumers cope with negative emotions in the impulse buying context. We posited that consumers with strong impulse buying tendency would experience more intense guilt and shame. Furthermore, based on recent psychological research on guilt and shame, we proposed the hypothesis that the intensity of shame experienced after buying on impulse would be positively associated with avoidant coping strategies; in contrast, the intensity of guilt would be positively associated with problem-focused coping strategies and non-avoidant emotion-focused coping strategies. These hypotheses were generally supported with our survey data.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In this study we studied how consumers cope with guilt and shame in the impulse buying context. As with other instances of self-regulation failure, buying on impulse against one’s intention to reduce impulse buying brings about aversive self-awareness, which, in turn, is likely to evoke negative self-conscious emotions, namely, guilt and shame. Even though often used interchangeably, guilt and shame are considered distinct emotions with different antecedents and motivational tendencies (Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Guilt is a feeling of remorse or regret which involves preoccupation with a particular transgression. Guilt arises when people “wish they had behaved differently or could somehow undo the bad deed that was done” (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). In other words, guilt involves mentally undoing some aspect of the transgression. Unlike guilt, shame is a more intense and enduring experience and is felt when people perceive that their “deep-seated flaws are revealed to oneself and to others” (Miller & Tangney 1994). As such, shame is tied to the attribution of a certain event to perceived deficiencies of one’s core self (Klass, 1990). According to Hoblitzelle (1987), shame differs from guilt in that the former is associated with internal, stable, and global attributions, whereas the latter is associated with internal, specific, and temporary attributions.

Further, guilt and shame are associated with distinct action tendencies and motivation. Since the experience of guilt involves a mental undoing of the transgression rather than self, guilt evokes the motivation or desire to confess, apologize, and repair the harm (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In contrast, as shame arises from global devaluation of the self, it evokes the motivation or desire to hide, escape, and even strike back. Furthermore, people who are prone to shame use tend to act defensively, such as rage, contempt, transfer of blame, and denial (Kaufman, 1996) and engage in dysfunctional behavior, such as withdrawal, avoidance, attacking self and others (Fattison, 2000).

The primary goal of this paper is to investigate restorative coping strategies consumers use in order to cope with discrete self-conscious emotions, specifically, shame and guilt, in the impulse buying context. Based on psychological research on distinction between guilt and shame, we propose a set of four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Compared to ordinary consumers, consumers with strong impulse buying tendency will experience more intense guilt and shame in the wake of impulse buying.

Hypothesis 2: Consumers’ impulse buying tendency will be positively associated with the frequency with which they use avoidant coping strategies, such as denial, distraction, non-disclosure and blaming others.

Hypothesis 3: The intensity of shame experienced after impulse buying will be positively associated with avoidant coping strategies, such as denial, distraction, resignation and blaming others.

Hypothesis 4: The intensity of guilt experienced after impulse buying will be positively associated with problem-focused coping and non-avoidant coping strategies.

Survey methodology was used in order to formally test the hypotheses and develop the coping instrument. We conducted a retrospective approach, in which participants recalled a recent impulse buying and reported the emotions and coping strategies they used. Two thousand and one hundred sixteen individuals logged into our online survey, but three hundred and ten people qualified for the study. Thirty-six participants did not answer a substantial number of questions and had to be removed from analysis; therefore, the remaining 274 participants’ data were used in the analysis. Upon completing the consent form, participants were asked to think back to the last time they went shopping and bought something on a sudden rush of desire, without thinking about whether making that purchase fits with their budget, their long term goals or plans. Furthermore, in order to qualify, participants had to spend at least $80 on a single item for themselves within the last two months. We assessed guilt and shame items by adapting State Shame and Guilt Scale (Marshall, Sanftner, & Tangney, 1994). Next, participants’ coping efforts were assessed with the 76-item coping scale specifically intended to assess consumers’ coping efforts to deal with negative emotions in the impulse buying context. Participants’ impulse buying tendency was assessed with Rook and Fisher’s (1992) Buying Impulse Scale. We measured chronic shame and guilt disposition with the TOSCA scale (Tangney et al., 2002). Further, the questionnaire included Rosenberg’s (1965) self-esteem scale, Ross & Mirosvsky’s (1984) depression scale (CES-D), and Faber & O’Guinn’s (1993) compulsive buying scale. Lastly, participants were asked to indicate their annual income, disposable monthly income, the amount of savings, credit card debt, the balance on their credit cards in the previous month, and the amount they did not pay towards the balance on credit cards last month. Participants exited the survey after providing demographic data (i.e., age and gender).

Our hypotheses were generally consistent with our survey data. First, consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants with strong impulsive tendency reported experiencing more intense guilt and shame in the event of impulse buying. Even though the effect of impulse buying on both guilt and shame was positive, the path coefficient from impulse buying to shame was higher than the coefficient to guilt. Further, consistent with Hypothesis 2, our data showed that the effect of buying impulsiveness on avoidant coping strategies was significantly positive. Specifically, as buying impulsiveness increased, the frequency of using avoidant coping strategies, such as denial/distraction, rationalization, wishful thinking and resignation, significantly increased. In contrast, the relations between buying impulsiveness and non-avoidant coping strategies were either negative or minimal. Moreover, our data provided support for the hypothesis that the intensity of shame would be positively associated with avoidant coping strategies, whereas the intensity of guilt would be positively associated with non-avoidant coping strategies (i.e., Hypotheses 3 and 4). Specifically, our path analysis showed that the intensity of shame positively influenced denial/distraction, resignation and blaming others, whereas the intensity of guilt positively influenced planning to reduce impulse buying and to make up for monitory loss as well as wishful thinking. This structural model showed a very good fit to the model. This finding that guilt and shame are accompanied by unique coping strategies is even more interesting given that the intensity of guilt and shame is highly correlated in our data. This finding suggests that even though guilt and shame are related emotions, the acute
experience of shame is more frequently accompanied by maladaptive coping strategies than guilt.

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