Shop Different: Impulsivity, Sequential Decision Making, and Motivations For Unplanned Purchases

Jacob Suher, University of Texas at Austin, USA
Wayne Hoyer, University of Texas at Austin, USA

Over 50% of purchases are unplanned, yet shoppers’ motivations for unplanned purchases are poorly understood. To address this research gap, we propose a model of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to make unplanned purchases. Three studies support our framework and its implications for the shopper marketing and sequential decision making literature.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Unplanned purchasing accounts for over 50% of consumer decisions and recent papers have investigated the factors that influence unplanned purchasing (e.g., Hui et al. 2013). Despite the increasing attention to unplanned purchasing, many important issues merit investigation. First, we need to develop a better understanding of the underlying reasons that shoppers make unplanned purchases. Second, more research needs to investigate unplanned purchasing within the context of a complete shopping trip (Hui et al. 2013). We address these research gaps by developing and testing a model of shoppers’ motivations to make unplanned purchases within a sequential decision making framework.

The primary distinction between the sources of motivation for action is between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985). In the context of buying behavior, intrinsic motivation refers to a purchase that is internally controlled and rewarding in itself irrespective of external influences (Van Trijp, Hoyer, and Inman 1996). On the other hand, extrinsically motivated purchases are externally controlled and perceived as instrumental in the attainment or avoidance of separable goals. For example, intrinsic motivations for unplanned purchases include “wanting” or “liking” a product whereas extrinsic motivations include choosing a product because it is the cheapest, most practical, or decided by a significant other (Hoyer 1984).

We propose that impulsive, as opposed to prudent, shoppers are more likely to have intrinsic motivations for unplanned purchases when they begin shopping (Rook and Fisher 1995). Then, building on the literature on motivation balancing, we predict that shoppers’ motivations change as they spend more time in store, or as trip progress increases. We expect impulsive shoppers’ intrinsic motivations to decrease over time, whereas prudent shoppers’ intrinsic motivations will increase over time. Finally, we expect that this balancing pattern will be strongest when shoppers have larger shopping budgets because financial constraints might undermine intrinsic motivations (Dhar and Simonson 1999).

The main dependent variable in our studies are shoppers’ self-reported motivations for their unplanned purchases. The motivations were coded for intrinsic (0/1) and extrinsic (0/1) motivations by trained coders. Inter-coder agreement scores were above 90%. Since our dependent variables are binary and there can be multiple observations per participants, all analyses use a logistic regression and treat the participant as a repeated variable. In addition, we include category hedonicity (Wakefield and Inman 2003) as a covariate. The analyses with intrinsic motivation are presented here; the results with extrinsic motivation are significant and substantially unchanged.

Study one tests our hypotheses in a real grocery shopping setting. Two-hundred and fifty shoppers at a medium-sized grocery store completed an entrance and exit survey and wore a portable video camera while shopping. Our dataset is comprised of the 355 unplanned purchases for which participants indicated a reason for purchase in the exit survey. We regressed intrinsic motivation on impulsivity, trip progress, shopping budget, and all interactions between these variables. Trip progress was operationalized as the time at which the unplanned purchase occurred. Shopping budget is the dollar value of the participant’s mental budget from the entrance survey. Consistent with our hypotheses, the three-way interaction between impulsivity, trip progress, and shopping budget is significant ($\beta = -0.002$, $Z(266) = -2.27, p = .02$) and strongest when participants have a large budget ($\beta = -0.12$, $Z(266) = -2.65, p = .01$) as opposed to when they have a small budget ($\beta = 0.02$, $Z(266) = 0.55, p = .58$). Overall, impulsive shoppers initially have strong intrinsic motivations that decrease with trip progress and the opposite pattern for prudent shoppers. As expected, shopping budget is a boundary condition for the balancing pattern.

Study two addresses issues of internal validity and tests our theory in an ecommerce setting. Seventy-five undergraduate participants were provided with a shopping budget (small vs. large) and a short shopping list. The store mimicked popular online grocery retailers (e.g., www.instacart.com). Participants saw one category at a time and were free to navigate between 19 pretested categories. After shopping, participants reported their motivations for the non-list purchases and their buying impulsivity. Category presentation order and motivation solicitation order were randomized. Trip progress was the order that the categories appeared to the participant. The study was incentive aligned using a random lottery to win the baskets. Consistent with our hypotheses, the three-way interaction between impulsivity, trip progress, and shopping budget is significant ($\beta = -1.85$, $Z(174) = -2.51, p = .01$). The directions of the effects were identical to study one.

Study three was conducted to better understand the effect of impulsivity. We manipulated whether the shopping task was presented as fun or work (Laran and Janiszewski 2011). The expectation is that participants in the fun condition will behave similarly to highly impulsive shoppers. The only other differences from study two were that all participants were in the high budget condition and the study was not incentive aligned. We recruited sixty-seven participants with Amazon Mechanical Turk. The interaction between impulsivity and trip progress was significant ($\beta = -1.92$, $Z(250) = -2.24, p = .03$). Within the fun condition, there was a significant negative effect of trip progress on intrinsic motivations ($\beta = -0.93$, $Z(250) = -1.97, p = .05$). Within the work condition, there was a moderately significant positive effect of trip progress on intrinsic motivations ($\beta = -1.92$, $Z(250) = -2.24, p = .06$). This study provides evidence the construal of shopping as fun might underlie the effect of impulsivity on motivations.

Our research contributes to our knowledge of unplanned purchasing and builds new connections between literatures on motivation, self-control, and multiple goal pursuit. Discriminating between types of unplanned purchases uncovered the relationship between impulsivity and intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, shoppers’ tendency to balance motivations would never have been discovered if we had aggregated across all types of unplanned purchases. From a consumer welfare standpoint, shoppers’ motivations for unplanned purchases have implications for self-regulation and purchase satisfaction. Practically, the burgeoning industries of shopper marketing, mobile marketing, and ecommerce can use our framework to better understand the in-store path-to-purchase.

REFERENCES


