

Effect of Stress, Materialism and External Stimuli on Online Impulse Buying

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of stress, materialism, and external stimuli on impulsive online buying. A total of 156 usable surveys were collected online. Stress was manipulated by presenting participants with solvable and unsolvable anagram tests. The study's results indicated that consumers under stress displayed a higher online impulse-buying tendency after viewing the second image relative to those consumers under no stress regardless of stimuli presented. This implies that there was a delay in participants' reaction to the stress. This suggests that the first image likely served as a primer. In addition, there was a positive correlation between materialism and the impulse tendency, and that external stimuli did not influence online impulse-buying tendencies. This study provides better understanding of impulsive shopping manifested by dejection-related emotions.

KEY WORDS:

Impulse Buying, Stress, Materialism, External Stimuli

Impulse buying has become a prominent part of consumer behaviour and influences marketing strategies. Impulse buying refers to a sudden urge to buy something without planning and deliberating on all information, and is motivated by immediate gratification. Impulse buying mainly focuses on hedonic and spontaneous desire for immediate self-fulfilment. This study proposes that consumers cope with and alleviate stress by indulging in impulse purchases, which is associated with consumers' self-discrepancies. A self-discrepancy occurs when an individual observes a difference between the ideal self and the actual self in their self-concept. Several investigations in material consumption support the proposition that impulse buying alleviates stress and negative emotions (Atalay and Meloy 2011), elevates excitement and pleasure (Verplanken and Sato 2011), and evokes hedonistic high-arousal emotions (Ramanathan and Menon 2006). Individuals substitute material objects to compensate for an unstable self-concept. Materialistic individuals believe that object acquisition will help them establish a sense of security and enhance their well-being. A central belief of materialism is that contentment can be achieved through possessions (Kasser 2002). Materialism encourages consumers to be conscious of their status and invest a disproportionate amount of their resources into acquiring goods.

Online consumers tend to be more impulsive than other shoppers, and impulsive purchases account for at least a quarter of online transactions. As more individuals rely on the internet to navigate their lives, marketers invest to reach digitally connected consumers. Marketers incorporate specific external stimuli in an online context including promotions

and suggestion cues. Promotion stimuli may consist of buy one-get one free deals, coupons, free shipping, and a lower price than initially suggested. Suggestion stimuli include new styles, featured items, and suggested items that a customer may like to acquire along with the original item. These external triggers catalyse an impulse-buying decision (Jones et al. 2003; Madhavaram and Laverie 2004). Based on previous literature, this study proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Consumers under stress will have a higher online impulse-buying tendency than those under no stress.

H2: Highly materialistic consumers will have a higher tendency of impulse buying compared to their counterparts.

H3: Consumers who are exposed to external impulse stimuli will have higher online impulse-buying tendencies than those that are unexposed.

In order to examine the hypotheses, a total of 156 usable surveys were collected online. Stress was manipulated by presenting participants with solvable and unsolvable anagram tests. The study's results indicated that consumers under stress displayed a higher online impulse-buying tendency. The study also found a positive correlation between materialism and impulse buying. However, external stimuli did not influence online impulse-buying tendency. These results indicated that the degree of materialism is positively related to both the average impulse tendency and the impulse tendency after viewing the

suggestion stimuli. This correlation suggests that participants who value material objects respond well to suggestion stimuli. An example of a suggestion stimuli consisted of one article of clothing shown with another product that a consumer may like if they bought them together. Materialism played an important role in excessive buying especially among younger consumers, who have a larger gap between their real and ideal selves and are more inclined to buy in order to validate their self-concept (Dittmar 2005; Richins 2013).

A limitation of the study is that it recruited only female shoppers; additional research is recommended to examine a gender effect on online impulse shopping. Regarding effective online shopping features, previous research stated that each gender has different expectations. Despite its limitations, this is possibly the first study to examine the effect of stress, materialism and external stimuli on online impulse purchases within a single study. Here, consumers' situational inner state (stress) and their personal traits (materialism) had stronger effects on impulsive buying tendencies compared to external stimuli. In this study, alleviation of discrepancies and dejection-related emotions was manifested by impulsive shopping.

Marketers often try to influence consumers' behaviour by using stimuli, such as website ambience and coupons. The current study only used two types of external stimuli (i.e., promotions and suggestion stimuli). Further research examining other types of external stimuli including graphics, text, pop-up windows, audio, and streaming video is warranted.

Investigation on these areas will yield valuable insight into whether other types of external stimuli would affect impulsive buying tendencies.

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