TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF IMPULSIVENESS IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Eric Van Steenburg, University of North Texas, Denton
Iman Naderi, University of North Texas, Denton
Aditi Pramod Chandra, University of North Texas, Denton

SUMMARY

Some individuals are more prone to impulsivity than others, which, in a consumer context, can translate into making impulse purchase decisions. Impulsive buying is "a predisposition to make choices favoring immediate, hedonic benefits over rewards that are more desirable but somewhat remote" (Rook and Fisher 1995). Impulsivity is also described as "a struggle between the two psychological forces of desire and willpower" (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991). When consumers consider extenuating circumstances, such as individual economic conditions or time burdens, their propensity to make a purchase must be influenced by their level of impulsiveness.

Early work on consumer impulsiveness (e.g., Applebaum 1951; Kollat and Willett 1969) focused on products that had a propensity to generate impulsive purchasing, considering only low-priced, low-involvement goods. Rook (1987) dismissed that by saying impulse buying's product dimensions extended beyond snack items and magazines to TV sets, furniture, or vacations. Rook and Hoch (1985) were among the first to posit that impulsiveness reflected the consumers' rather than the products' traits in most cases. For researchers, that means exploring the confluence of rational and hedonic behaviors – a merging of cognitive and emotional responses toward a stimulus – in an effort to determine what makes consumers lean one way or the other.

Impulse buyers are more stimulus driven and are more likely to experience spontaneous buying stimuli (Rook and Fisher 1995). Impulse buyers are also more prone to buy when experiencing either positive or negative mood states (Youn and Faber 2000). And impulse buying has been linked to product disappointment, feelings of guilt, and social disapproval (Rook 1987). Most marketing tactics used to pray on the affective responses of high impulsive consumers leverage in-store promotions and merchandise displays. However, most consumers make purchase decisions based on existing information.

In an environment where the stimulus is subtle, such as an advertisement, rather than overt, such as an in-store display, will a high impulsive consumers respond by making a purchase if other factors, such as a time boundary or financial limitations, are taken into consideration. Also, will pressures force low impulsive consumers to behave more like their high impulsive cousins?

Methodology

Two experimental design studies were implemented, with the first to determine if time boundaries affect high impulsive and low impulsive consumers differently. We proposed to participants that they had just seen an advertisement that appealed to them. Our dependent variable was "intent to purchase" with impulsiveness as an independent variable. We wanted to know if low impulsive consumers would respond in a similar manner as high impulsive consumers when time pressures increases. In a second study, our focus shifted to financial pressures. This time we asked if high impulsive consumers would respond in a similar manner as low impulsive consumers when financial pressures increases.

Results

High impulsive participants showed higher purchase intention (M = 4.654) than low impulsive participants (M = 3.903; $F(1, 82) = 8.960$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, there was a significant interaction between impulsivity and time pressure on purchase intention ($F(1, 82) = 5.828$, $p < .05$). In the low time pressure condition, high impulsive participants indicated significantly higher purchase intention (M = 4.691) than low impulsive participants (M = 3.256; $F(1, 37) = 12.654$, $p < .01$). In the high time pressure condition, however, there was no difference in purchase intention across high and low impulsive groups (M_{high} = 4.539 vs. M_{low} = 4.385; $F(1, 43) = .194$, $p > .5$). Time pressure plays a role in consumer purchase decision making. And, contrary to what other research has shown, low impulsive consumers make an impulsive purchase almost as frequently as high impulsive consumers when time pressure is high.

In the second study, participants with higher scores on impulsivity showed significantly higher purchase intention (M = 4.292) than did low impulsive participants (M = 3.593; $F(1, 80) = 6.365$, $p < .05$). In addition, the main effect of financial pressure was significant ($F(1, 80) = 82.160$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, there was a significant interaction between impulsivity and financial pressure on purchase intention ($F(1, 80) = 7.224$, $p < .01$). When

financial pressure is high, participants who were high impulsive indicated significantly higher purchase intention ($M = 3.408$) than low impulsive participants ($M = 1.965$; $F(1, 39) = 11.965$, $p < .01$). The study showed that one's personal financial situation has an effect on the purchase decision making process. Both high impulsive and low impulsive consumers exercised some self-control when it came to making impulse purchases under increased financial burdens. However, high impulsive consumers still purchased the product more frequently than low impulsive consumers.

Discussion

This research has implications for sales promotions, services marketing and advertising. Our results suggest that targeting impulsivity could result in higher consumer purchase intention thereby increasing profitability. Marketers could identify the motivational needs of consumer impulsiveness and devise messages that are designed to place products in consumers' hands that fulfill these needs.

For further information, contact:
Eric Van Steenburg
College of Business
University of North Texas
1155 Union Circle #311396
Denton, TX 76201
Phone: 214.334.4813
E-Mail: eric.vansteenburg@unt.edu