Impulse Buying on the Internet: Encouraging and Discouraging Factors

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Abstract

The phenomenon of impulse purchasing has been studied in consumer research as well as for example in psychology and economics since the 1950s. In brick-and-mortar retailing, impulse purchases have been an important source of revenue for retailers. Nowadays consumers buy an increasing amount of purchases on the Internet. Almost all research relating to impulse buying has been, however, conducted in the context of brick-and-mortar retailing. As a result, several researchers have suggested that the phenomenon of impulse purchasing should be examined also in the context of online shopping environment. This article aims to reduce that research gap by analyzing which features of the Internet as a shopping environment encourage and discourage impulse buying. Anonymity, easy access, greater variety of goods available, marketing promotions and direct marketing, as well as use of credit cards were found to be the factors encouraging impulse buying on the Internet. On the other hand, delayed gratification, easy access, increased consumer control, perceptually poor environment, and price and product comparisons were suggested as factors discouraging impulse buying on the Internet.

Keywords

e-commerce, consumer behavior, impulse buying

Introduction

Although the most optimistic forecasts for the development of Internet retailing have not been met, an ever-increasing amount of purchases is made nowadays online. For example, in 2003 the growth rate for online B2C retail sales in the United States was 26% (The Economist 2004, 3), and in the UK 44% (IMRG 2004). As more and more consumers shop nowadays online, understanding consumer behavior in the online shopping environment becomes increasingly important for retailers.

Consumer buying behavior on the Internet is often seen as being rational with price comparisons, information search etc., thus expecting consumers to make logical and well-grounded purchase decisions. However, the consumer does not always act so rationally even when buying online. Thus, alongside this rational view, a more hedonistic and experiential view on online consumer behavior has emerged, which sees consumer online behavior as less goal-directed. One example of this experiential online buying behavior is impulse buying.

The phenomenon of impulse purchasing has been studied in consumer research since the 1950s. Impulse buying is an important source of revenue for retailing – 30-50 % of all purchases (in brick-and-mortar retailing) can be classified as impulse purchases (Hausman

2000). Almost all research on impulse buying has been so far conducted in the context of brick-and-mortar retailing. However, the Internet as a shopping environment and as a shopping experience differs from offline environment in many aspects, e.g. the entire store is reduced to a computer screen. Therefore, several researchers have suggested that the phenomenon of impulse purchasing should be examined also in the context of online shopping environment (Arnould et al. 2002, 350; Beatty & Ferrell 1998; Burton 2002; Koufaris et al. 2002; Rook & Fisher 1995).

Purpose and structure

Despite the increasing interest towards consumer behavior on the Internet, it is surprising that relatively little research has been conducted on impulse or other types of unplanned purchases on the web (see Adelaar et al. 2003; Costa & Laran 2003; LaRose & Eastin 2002 for exceptions). *The purpose of this article is to analyze factors that, on the other hand, encourage, and, on the other hand, discourage impulse buying on the Internet.* In other words, how does online shopping environment encourage and discourage impulse buying? What features does Internet as a shopping environment have that encourage impulse purchasing? What feature does it have that discourage impulse buying? Previous research on unregulated buying on the Internet (including impulse buying) has looked at features of an webstore that encourage unregulated buying (LaRose 2001). However, this research examines the features of Internet in general as a shopping environment rather than going into detailed features of a website.

This article is part of a larger research project concentrating on similarities and differences of impulse buying behavior in online and offline shopping environments. In this paper, a shopping environmental aspect is bought into impulse buying research by analyzing literature on impulse buying in the light of the distinguishing features of online shopping environment. Later on, the research proceeds by gathering empirical material (both qualitative and quantitative) on consumers' experiences on impulse buying on the Internet.

The article is structured as follows. First, literature on impulse buying behavior is reviewed to explain what is meant by impulse buying as well as what can cause an impulse purchase to occur. Then, research on consumer online behavior, especially on experiential versus goal-directed behavior is examined. Thirdly, the factors that encourage and discourage impulse buying on the Internet are presented, followed by conclusions.

A look into impulse buying

What is impulse buying?

Despite the long tradition of research into impulse buying, there still seems to be some controversy over what impulse buying conceptually is. For example, Piron (1991, 511) has identified altogether 13 different dimensions or definitional elements of impulse purchase definitions, adding one dimension ("on-the-spot") to the list (see table 1 below). These dimensions are more or less present in impulse purchase studies conducted in 1945-1987.

Definitional elements	Explanation
1	Unplanned purchase
2	Response to stimulus
3	Deliberately planned to benefit from special offers
4	Thrill seeking
5	Decision made on the spur of the moment
6	Result of a deliberation process
7	Not in response to a previously recognized problem
8	No buying intentions formed prior to entering the store
9	Sudden and spontaneous desire to act
10	State of psychological disequilibrium
11	Psychological conflict and struggle
12	Reduction of cognitive evaluation
13	No evaluation of consequences
(14	"On-the-spot")

Table 1. Dimensions of the impulse purchase definition (see Piron 1991)

No matter how defined, impulse buying refers to a distinctive type of an unplanned purchase, and the fact that impulse purchase is unplanned is central to all definitions of impulse buying (see Piron 1991, 512). Therefore, all impulse purchases can be categorized as unplanned purchases, but not all unplanned purchases can be labelled as impulse purchases.

In this research, three features drawn from previous and recent research are used to characterize impulse purchases. When buying on impulse, the consumer makes an
1) unintended,
2) unreflective, and
3) immediate purchase (see Jones et al. 2003).

In other words, the decision to buy the product is made inside the store, with no preshopping plans to buy the item (and with no shopping tasks for that type of product, either), and immediately after seeing the product or the stimulus representing the product. The consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy the product immediately, and usually does not reflect much on the consequences of buying the product (Beatty & Ferrell 1998, 170; Rook 1987, 191). In addition to these features, impulse buying is usually associated with varying kinds of emotions, such as excitement or regret, but as these emotions can be also part of planned purchases, they do not, as such, distinguish impulse purchases from other types of purchases (Piron 1991). In fact, Piron (1991) distinguishes between experiential and non-experiential impulse purchasing depending on whether the impulse purchase is accompanied with emotional and/or cognitive reactions.

What triggers an impulse purchase?

Many studies on impulse buying more or less directly concern causes or antecedents of an impulse purchase. Based on previous research, variables that cause an impulse purchase can be categorized to person-related, product-related, shopping-environment related, and situational (cf. Dholakia 2000; Verplanken & Herabadi 2001, 72).

Person-related causes

Impulsiveness as a trait has gained a lot of attention in impulse buying research. The origins of this thinking are in psychology, as a person's general impulsivity is seen as affecting also impulse purchases. The basic assumption behind these studies is that individuals vary in their proclivity to buy on impulse (see e.g. Jones et al. 2003; Weun et al. 1998). This impulse buying tendency, measured usually using a quantitative scale, has been seen as one factor in triggering consumers into impulse buying (see e.g. Beatty & Ferrell 1998). The higher the consumer's impulse buying tendency, the more likely an impulse purchase will be.

Less fixed person-related causes concern affective states before, during and after an impulse purchase. Both positive, such as excitement and pleasure, and negative affective states, such as anxiety and guilt, have been studied (see Beatty & Ferrell 1998; Gardner & Rook 1988; Piron 1993). For example, Beatty & Ferrell (1998) suggest that positive affect while shopping increases the felt urge to buy impulsively, while negative affect does not seem to influence impulse buying urges.

Product-related causes

Some products or product categories have been found to be more susceptible to an impulse purchase. Already in 1962 Stern suggested that those products with a low price or a short product life will be more likely to be bought on impulse. Also Bellenger et al. (1978) proposed that impulse buying varies by product. This view, suggesting that product-inherent attributes as such would encourage impulse buying, has been later criticized, and currently it has been presented that it is the consumer-product links that are more important than the product itself. According to a social psychological viewpoint, those goods that project a person's self-image are especially likely to be bought on impulse (Dittmar & Beattie 1998, 129). In addition, the consumer's impulse buying tendency has been found to vary according to different product categories (Jones et al. 2003). In this model, also consumer's involvement with the product category affects impulse buying tendency.

Shopping environment-related causes

There are many ways an impulse purchase can be induced by the factors in the shopping environment. In general, in-store browsing increases the likelihood of an impulse purchase, i.e. the longer the consumers browse the store, the more likely it is that they end up buying on impulse (see e.g. Beatty & Ferrell 1998). Therefore, the so-called atmospherics of a store are important in attracting consumers to stay in longer. When inside the store, consumers confront many marketing stimuli that are used to encourage impulse buying. For example, product presentation aspects such as special displays, end-of aisles displays, shelf signs, tempting graphics or copy, or sales promotions can affect impulse buying (see e.g. Abratt & Goodey 1990). When applied to an online shopping environment, for example the media format used to present the product information may have an affect on impulse purchase intentions (Adelaar et al. 2003).

Situational causes

Also many situational factors seem to have an effect on the occurrence of an impulse purchase. For example, the more perceived money and time available consumer has, the more likely an impulse purchase is (Beatty & Ferrell 1998). Also other situational variables such the availability of credit or the consumer being confronted with a too good a bargain to pass up have been described as part of the impulse buying experience (Dittmar & Drury 2000).

Consumer online behavior

Goal-directed versus experiential online behavior

Traditionally, online shopping has been seen as a rational behavior, where efficiency, price comparisons and information search play a significant role (see e.g. Jayawardhena et al. 2003; Koufaris 2002; LaRose & Eastin 2002; Parsons 2002; Wolfinbarger & Gilly 2001). However, currently it is acknowledged that consumer online behavior is much more versatile than the rational approach assumes. Therefore, a more experiential side to online behavior has been introduced (see e.g. Childers et al. 2001; Hoffman & Novak 1996; Novak et al. 2003). The main differences between an experiential and goal-directed behavior are depicted in table 2 below.

Goal-directed	Experiential
Extrinsic motivation	Intrinsic motivation
Instrumental motivation	Ritualized orientation
Situational involvement	Enduring involvement
Utilitarian benefits / value	Hedonic benefits / value
Directed (prepurchase) search	Nondirected (ongoing) search; browsing
Goal-directed choice	Navigational choice
Cognitive	Affective
Work	Fun
Planned purchases; repurchasing	Compulsive shopping; impulse buys

Table 2. Distinctions between goal-directed and experiential behavior (Novak et al. 2003, 4)

It can be seen in table 2 that impulse buying has been seen as one manifestation of experiential consumer online behavior (Novak et al. 2003). According to Mathwick et al.'s (2002) data, majority (64 %) of Internet shoppers were more goal-directed, with an intention to purchase a general category of product or a specific brand, whereas 36 % of shoppers were categorized as more experiential – they were browsing either without an intent to purchase or with a general intent to purchase but without any specific product in mind.

Online shopping strategies

When analyzing consumer in-store online behavior and especially shopping strategies using navigational clickstream, Moe (2003) proposed that impulse buys may occur as part of so-called hedonic browsing shopping strategy. The different shopping strategies suggested by Moe (2003) are presented in table 3 below.

Search behavior		
Purchasing horizon	Directed	Exploratory
Immediate	DIRECTED BUYING	HEDONIC BROWSING
Future	SEARCH/DELIBERATION	KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

Table 3. Typology of shopping strategies (Moe 2003, 30)

According to Moe (2003), hedonic browsing consists of exploratory search behavior and of an immediate purchasing horizon. In exploratory search behavior, consumer is less deliberate and focused as compared to a directed search, in which the consumer has a specific purchase in mind. The search process is more stimulus-driven than goal-driven. Therefore, if confronted with a right type of stimuli, the consumer might end up doing an impulse purchase. As opposed to knowledge building strategy, in which the purchase is postponed to the future, in hedonic browsing the possible purchase is made immediately. In addition, according to Moe (2003), navigational clickstream data indicated that shoppers with hedonic browsing strategy were seeking new stimuli to view, as majority of pages viewed by them were unique.

Research on impulse buying on the Internet

Only a few researches have dealt with impulse buying on the Internet. Firstly, online shoppers have been found to be more impulsive than non-shoppers (Donthu & Garcia 1999). Secondly, LaRose (2001) has identified several features in Internet stores that encourage unregulated (including impulse) buying. For example, product recommendations and suggestions, point programs, on sale notices, and repeat purchase reminders, among others, were suggested to decrease consumer self-regulation while in an online store, and increase unregulated buying. According to LaRose and Eastin (2002), forms of unregulated consumer behavior, including impulsive, compulsive, and addictive buying, are present on the Internet, at least among college students. In addition, Costa and Laran (2003) have modeled quantitatively the antecedents and consequences of Internet impulse buying, suggesting that online environment affects the level of impulsivity, in-store browsing and the occurrence of impulse purchases, as well as a relationship between impulse purchases and positive emotions. Also, Adelaar et al. (2003) made an experiment on the effect of different media formats on an Internet site (text, pictures, video) on impulse purchase intentions.

Internet - encouraging or discouraging impulse buying?

Factors encouraging impulse buying on the Internet

As a result of analyzing the literature on impulse buying, five features of the Internet as a shopping environment were identified that encourage impulse buying – anonymity, easy access, greater variety of goods available, marketing promotions and direct marketing, and use of credit cards. Factors and their explanations are presented in table 4 below.

Factor	Explained	See e.g.
Anonymity	The shopper can buy impulsively without embarrassment.	Koufaris 2002, 210; Rook & Fisher 1995, 312
Easy access	The Internet is available as the shopping urge comes. Also the purchase of an item is just a few mouse clicks away.	Burton 2002, 804; Koufaris 2002, 210; Moe & Fader 2004; Rook & Fisher 1995, 312
Greater variety of goods available	Greater variety resulting in complex information load may encourage impulse purchases.	Chen-Yu & Seock 2002, 74; Huang 2000, 344
Marketing promotions and direct marketing	Increased possibilities for directing and personalizing marketing messages.	Koufaris 2002, 210; Koufaris et al. 2002, 117
Use of credit cards	Most often the products bought on the Internet are paid with a credit card, which encourage impulse buying.	Dittmar & Drury 2000, 131; Rook & Fisher 1995, 312

Table 4. Factors encouraging impulse buying on the Internet

Anonymity

The Internet offers more privacy and anonymity in shopping than traditional, offline shopping environments do (see e.g. Wolfinbarger & Gilly 2001). Therefore, consumers have also the anonymity to visit stores or buy items they might be embarrassed of when shopping offline. According to some researchers (Koufaris 2002, 210; Rook & Fisher 1995, 312) this availability of anonymity influences also impulse buying. Due to the social anonymity on the Internet, consumers can indulge in such impulse buying that otherwise would be considered embarrassing offline. Hence, the privacy and anonymity offered by the Internet can be considered as a factor encouraging impulse purchases.

Easy access

When compared to the brick-and-mortar shopping environment, Internet offers relatively easy access for the consumer to buy products. As shopping in the offline environment is constrained by time (opening hours) and geographical location, on the Web consumer can buy at any time from almost anywhere in the world. As a result, the consumer can buy when the shopping urge comes. This has been seen as possibly increasing the amount of impulse purchases (Burton 2002, 804; Koufaris 2002, 210).

In addition, the easiness of access is related to the relative cost of visiting a store. In the physical shopping environment, visiting a store requires the costs of getting to the store, including costs for using the car or other types of transport, costs of parking etc. However, it is usually costless or nearly costless for the consumer to visit an online store site (Moe & Fader 2004). Therefore, it may be more likely that consumers visit an online store without any intention of buying (Moe & Fader 2004), thus encouraging impulse buying. Moreover, the actual purchase process on the Internet is fairly simple, only a few mouse clicks away. On the

other hand, easy access makes it also easy for consumers to return to the online store, therefore discouraging impulse buying (see discouraging factors below).

Greater variety of goods available

Internet stores offer a greater variety of products for the consumer than is possible to offer in an offline store. According to a study on impulsiveness and clothing purchases, a greater variety of products seems to be an important factor for impulse purchasers (Chen-Yu & Seock 2002, 74). In addition, it has been suggested that the complexity dimension of information load has the potential to induce an impulse purchase on the Internet (Huang 2000, 344). It can be expected that a larger variety of products creates a more complex information load for the consumer, therefore encouraging impulse buying. However, greater variety of goods might also encourage comparison shopping, thus discouraging impulse buying (see discouraging factors below).

Marketing promotions and direct marketing

The Internet offers more opportunities for the retailer to target more specifically certain customers with direct marketing and with more personalized promotions (e.g. by sending an e-mail suggesting to buy certain new items based on the purchase history of the customer). In addition, the consumer can face a banner ad and be immediately transported to the site selling the product. It has been suggested that this might increase impulse buying (Koufaris 2002, 210; Koufaris et al. 2002, 117). However, at the same time consumers are more in control of what marketing messages they see (see discouraging factors below), so the effect of the increased possibilities of marketing promotions and direct marketing on impulse buying remains somewhat controversial.

Use of credit cards

In the online shopping environment the payment is usually made with non-cash, i.e. with a credit or debit card or money transfer. In research on impulse buying, the availability and use of credit cards has been seen as encouraging impulse buying. As Dittmar & Drury (2000, 131) point out, payments by credit card do not really feel like spending money. Therefore, the large ratio of credit card purchases made online can be considered as a factor increasing susceptibility to impulse buying on the Internet.

Factors discouraging impulse buying on the Internet

Five features of online shopping environment were identified as discouraging impulse buying – delayed gratification, easy access, increased consumer control, perceptually poor environment, and price and product comparisons. Factors and their explanations are listed in table 5 below.

Factor	Explained	See e.g.
Delayed gratification	Except for downloadable products, consumers cannot get the product immediately after buying it.	Bailey & Nancarrow 1998, 107; Hoch & Loewenstein 1991, 497; Wolfinbarger & Gilly 2001, 39.
Easy access	Consumer can think about the purchase for a while and easily return to the store.	Moe & Fader 2004; Wolfinbarger & Gilly 2001, 39
Increased consumer control	Consumers are more in control of what they see and do.	Koufaris et al. 2002, 117; Rook 1987, 191; Thompson et al. 1990, 354; Wolfinbarger & Gilly 2001
Perceptually poor environment	Limits the type of possible impulses in the shopping environment.	Citrin et al. 2003, 921; Hoch & Loewenstein 1991, 497; Koufaris et al. 2002, 117; Thompson et al. 1990, 357
Price & product comparisons	Encourages rational thinking and longer decision times.	Koufaris et al. 2002, 117

Table 5. Factors discouraging impulse buying on the Internet

Delayed gratification

Except for downloadable electronic products, consumers will have to wait for the delivery of their purchases when buying online. In other words, the products are less temporally proximate to the consumer than in the offline shopping environment. However, the more immediately available the reward is, the more desire consumers have for it (Hoch & Loewenstein 1991, 497). Therefore, it has been suggested that the time lapse in buying and receiving the product may discourage impulse buying in shopping channels such as the Internet (see e.g. Bayley & Nancarrow 1998, 107).

On the other hand, it still remains somewhat unclear which is more rewarding in impulse purchasing - the acquisition of the actual product or the shopping process. In clinical psychological view, it is more the shopping process and spending money than products that create thrills for the compulsive and addictive shoppers (see e.g. O'Guinn & Faber 1989). According to Dittmar & Drury (2000), also impulse shoppers can value the purchase process along with products purchased. Therefore, also online impulse buying can give immediate gratification if the consumer receives satisfaction from the purchase process itself.

Easy access

As already mentioned, easy access can be both an encouraging and a discouraging factor. The cost of visiting an online store is low, and therefore also returning to the store is easy. This encourages the consumer to delay the purchase decision, resulting in making multiple visits to the same store for a single purchasing decision (Moe & Fader 2004). In other words, it is easy for consumers to come back to the webstore and to complete the transaction after they have had time to think about it (Wolfinbarger & Gilly 2001, 39). If the consumer has delayed the purchasing decision and considered whether or not to buy, the possible purchase made can no longer be classified as an impulse purchase.

Increased consumer control

It has been suggested that when online, consumers have more control than when offline (see e.g. Koufaris et al. 2002, 117; Weinberg 2001, 228; Wolfinbarger & Gilly 2001). According to Koufaris et al. (2002, 117) "on-line customers have unprecedented control over what they see and do". For example, in a webstore, consumers can select which product information to view, and as a result, control what information they receive. Also the exposure to advertising and marketing communications can be controlled to some extent (e.g. filtering advertisements as junk mail when receiving e-mail). Impulse buying, on the other hand, has been presented as an exemplary case of being out of control (Rook 1987, 191; Thompson et al. 1990, 354) and being a result of consumer self-control failure (Baumeister 2002). Therefore, the increased consumer control online may have a discouraging effect on impulse buying on the Internet.

Perceptually poor environment

Internet as a shopping environment is perceptually poorer environment than traditional, offline environments. Internet can appeal to only two of our senses, that is, on sight and on hearing, whereas the physical shopping environment can stimulate all five senses. As a result, consumers cannot fully inspect the merchandise as marketing stimuli are more or less in the form of text, pictures and sounds. As impulse buying has been associated with strong perceptual attraction, being "captivated by the product" (see e.g. Thompson et al. 1990, 357), it has been suggested that Internet as a shopping environment cannot trigger impulse purchases in the same extent as offline shopping environment (Citrin et al. 2003, 921; Koufaris et al. 2002, 117). For example, consumer's autotelic need for touch, i.e. involving touch as a hedonic-oriented response with no purchase goal, is suggested to be related to buying impulsiveness (Peck & Childers 2003, 434). Therefore, the fact that consumers cannot touch the products online reduces the likelihood of impulse purchases on the Internet.

However, the effect of this factor on impulse purchasing may depend both on the individual characteristics of the consumer as well as the product on sale. According to Citrin et al. (2003) and Peck and Childers (2003), consumers differ in their need for tactile input, i.e. need for touch. Therefore, e.g. those consumers who are low in their need for touch are not necessarily so affected by the absence of touch on the Internet. In addition, McCabe and Nowlis (2003) suggested that remote shopping environments such as the Internet are less suitable for products with material properties (such as clothing) that require physical inspection by the consumer. However, according to McCabe & Nowlis (2003), if retailers describe how the product feels, this reluctance to remote purchasing of products with material properties could be reduced.

Price & product comparisons

It is relatively easier for the consumers to do price and product comparisons online than when shopping offline. Therefore, there is a temptation for the consumer to do comparison shopping and information searches before making the final purchasing decision, especially due to easy access to the store. This ability created by the Internet – to search more products, services and information – may lead to longer purchasing decisions and rational thinking, thus discouraging impulse purchases (Koufaris et al. 2002, 117).

Conclusions and implications

It seems that Internet as a shopping environment contains elements that both encourage and discourage impulse buying. Interestingly, some features of the Internet, such as easy access, can be considered as both an encouraging and a discouraging factor. As a result, it is still unclear how suitable shopping environment the Internet is for impulse buying behavior. Nothing can be claimed about the relative importance of these factors on consumer shopping experience, either. As this article lacks empirical support, in the future, it would be fruitful to explore how consumers experience impulse buying on the Internet and what is the relevance of these factors on their impulse buying behavior.

Based on the results of this article, e-retailers can try to increase the factors that encourage impulse buying, while decreasing the factors that discourage impulse buying. For example, marketing promotions can be tailored to induce impulse purchases, e.g. by offering products on the basis of the customer's purchase history. Secondly, the urgency of closing the deal can be increased e.g. by offering a limited availability of certain products or by offering a possibility for purchasing with only one mouseclick. In addition, the effect of delayed gratification can be diminished by offering shorter delivery times, while perceptually poor shopping environment can be compensated by creating innovative ways to display product information.

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