

Why did I buy this? Consumers' post-impulse-consumption experience and its impact on the propensity for future impulse buying behaviour

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Why Did I Buy This? Consumers' Post-Impulse-Consumption Experience and its Impact on the Propensity for Future Impulse Buying Behaviour

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Abstract

This paper advances research into impulse buying by examining how this behaviour is reinforced/curtailed, highlighting the primary role of the post-purchase experience in encouraging future impulse buying behaviour. Extant research emphasizes the role of the purchase experience, i.e. psychological benefits attained from the impulse purchase experience itself, as a reinforcer of impulse buying. Conversely, this paper uses experiments to demonstrate that it is the post-purchase experience, not the purchase experience, which reinforces or curtails future impulse buying. Indeed, irrespective of the valence of the purchase experience, a negative post-purchase experience (whereby a product or service is found to have limited use / does not deliver expected benefits) results in post-purchase regret, which in turn curtails future impulse buying. In contrast, a positive post-purchase experience reinforces impulse buying. This research also demonstrates that consumers utilize three types of coping mechanisms to mitigate post-

purchase regret, i.e. planful problem solving, positive reinterpretation or mental disengagement. However, while the use of planful problem solving curtails future impulse buying, use of the other two mechanisms results in behaviour reinforcement. These findings have several important implications for both marketers and consumers which the authors discuss in detail.

Keywords: Impulse Buying; Post-Purchase Regret; Coping Mechanisms; Consumption Behaviour reinforcers

Introduction

Impulse buying is defined as a hedonically complex behaviour that stems from a sudden, powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately and may stimulate emotional conflict (Rook 1987). It is estimated that as much as ninety percent of all consumers make impulse purchases and two fifths describe themselves as impulse buyers (Credit Action, 2016). The high incidence of impulse buying behaviour is good news for retailers but can have negative consequences for consumers in the form of increased personal debt (Credit Action 2016), long-term negative mood and low self-esteem (e.g. Verplanken et al.; Silvera et al. 2008) and feelings of shame, guilt and low self-worth (Yi 2012; Yi & Baumgartner 2011).

Negative consequences are not usually the result of a single occurrence of impulse buying (Rook and Fisher 1995) but of repeated engagement in this type of shopping behaviour, yet research focusing on what reinforces this behaviour is limited. Indeed, while the body of research on impulse buying is extensive, work that focuses on post-impulse purchase psychological processes and behaviour is lacking. Consumers' post impulse-purchase emotions, deliberations and behaviour influence their future buying behaviour, including their decision to re-engage in impulse buying (Westbrook 1987; Beatty and Ferrell 1998), and are therefore of great interest,

both theoretically, practically and from a public policy perspective. This research attempts to address the gap in impulse purchasing literature with regards to post impulse-purchase psychological processes and behaviour and their impact on future impulse buying behaviour.

There have been conjectures regarding the impact of initial impulse buying on subsequent buying behaviour. For example, some researchers have proposed that impulse purchasing puts people in a good mood, which should reinforce future impulse purchasing behaviour (e.g., Beatty & Ferrell, 1998; Gardner & Rook 1988; Hausmann 2002). Others have pointed to the negative consequences of impulse buying, e.g., financial difficulties, which suggest a negative reinforcement of the behaviour, which should lead to the attenuation of later impulse purchase behaviour (Dittmar and Drury 2000; LaRose 2001; Rook & Fisher 1995). These contradictory claims are further confounded when trying to untangle how and why repeat impulse buying takes place. Regret research (e.g. Zeelenberg 1999) suggests that if a particular behaviour is followed by regret, consumers are unlikely repeat the same behaviour. Yet, work in the area of impulse buying advocates that this is not always the case, such that many consumers feel post-impulse purchase regret, yet re-engage in this buying behaviour. What is unclear is why this happens, which is an issue considered in this paper.

Finally, a conspicuous omission in extant research is the post-impulse consumption experience (i.e., consumption of the product purchased on impulse). Indeed, impulse buying research is primarily motivated by a desire to understand why people buy on impulse and thus focuses on the purchase experience of impulse buying, at the expense of the product consumption experience that follows. This emphasis on the purchase experience (Hausman 2000, O'Guinn and Faber 1989, LaRose 2001) suggests that the item purchased is unimportant, merely a by-product of the entire impulse buying episode. However, Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard's (1986) seminal decision-making model clearly indicates post-purchase evaluation as an intricate part of

the purchase experience which suggests that in impulse buying the experience of consuming/possessing products, or alternatively buying products that are never consumed (see LaRose 2001), would also influence future purchase behaviour. Thus, this research considers the consumption of products purchased on impulse to be central to the overarching impulse buying experience and examines its impact on future impulse buying behaviour.

This paper addresses the above-mentioned gaps in the literature and investigates how consumers' post impulse-purchase emotions, deliberations and behaviour influence subsequent impulse buying (reinforcement or hindrance) by examining 1) the role of post-impulse consumption regret on the propensity for future impulse buying; 2) the impact of coping skills on post-impulse consumption regret and 3) the impact of *different* coping skills on the propensity of future impulse buying behaviour.

Conceptual Framework

According to Gardarsdottir, Dittmar and Aspinall (2007), consumers often engage in impulse buying for mood-repair and mood-enhancement. However, this enhanced mood is transient and consumers do not end up being happier beyond the momentary feelings associated with the purchasing experience. Similarly, Bayley and Nancarrow (1998, p.257) note the elation that accompanies the impulse buying "is likely to be partially deflated as the functional/economic model kicks in once back home," suggesting a shift in focus to the product and product consumption (Faber and Christenson 1996). Dittmar and Drury (2000) also reveal that consumers experience regret regarding items purchased that are low quality, bad value for money or unsuited and Sudgen (1985) reports that respondents experience regret arising from self-recrimination when the buying decision was unreasonable or indefensible. LaRose's (2001)

respondents express post-purchase regret resulting from owning products which are not needed and remain unused while Rook and Fisher (1995) find that impulsive behaviour is often linked to negative consequences with regards to post-purchase satisfaction. This suggests that over time consumers shift their focus and attention from the purchase experience to the consumption experience, and as a result may experience negative reactions based on the consumption of the product bought on impulse. Yet research on the post-impulse consumption experience - both psychological processes and behaviour - and its impact on future impulse buying behaviour is overlooked, an issue which this paper remedies.

The literature on time discounting suggests that people tend to focus on and value the present and discount that which is temporally distant (Ainslie 1975; Hoch and Lowenstein 1991). Applying this to impulse buying, people are likely to focus on the enjoyment of the purchase experience at the time of making the purchase, but these positive feelings are likely to fade, usually rapidly, as affective reactions tend to be short lived (Kivetz and Keinan 2004; Hoch and Lowenstein 1991; Loewenstein 1996; Gilbert et al 1998; Ramanathan and Menon 2006). With the passage of time, the affective experience associated with the act of impulse purchasing is likely to diminish while the affective experience associated with the consumption of the product acquires more salience. This is both due to the temporal proximity of the consumption experience, and because of the tangible product that serves as a reminder of purchase and associated feelings. Thus, the impulse purchase of an item might bring about mood repair at the time of purchase but might result in post-purchase regret if this product is perceived to be unnecessary or unsuitable at a later stage. This negative affect then causes a reversal of preferences, whereby consumers wish they had behaved more responsibly (Kivetz and Keinan 2006). The psychological pain caused by a suboptimal consumption experience is therefore likely to be a primary driver of future self-control. It makes salient the costs of satisfying myopic

desires and motivates consumers to give up the pleasure associated with indulgence in deference to their long term goals (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Ramanathan and Williams 2007) hence curtailing future impulse buying behaviour.

While a negative consumption experience highlights suboptimal buying behaviour, the impulse purchase of a product that is useful or suitable is likely to reassure consumers of their ability to make optimal decisions when they purchase on impulse (Cardozo 1965). Indeed, satisfaction resultant from a particular consumption behaviour encourages repeat behaviour (Bearden and Teel 1983; Fornell 1992; Oliver and Swan 1989) which suggests that a positive post-impulse consumption experience might reinforce future impulse buying. Contrary to extant literature that emphasizes the reinforcing effect of the purchase experience and drawing from time discounting theory, this paper hypothesises:

H1: The regret experienced from *the post-impulse consumption experience* influences future impulse buying behaviour more strongly than the regret experienced from the impulse purchasing experience itself.

Coping with post-purchase regret

So far this paper has discussed the importance of post-impulse consumption experience in reinforcing or curtailing impulse buying behaviour, attesting that a negative consumption experience is likely to be effective in curtailing impulse buying. However, the ubiquity of impulse purchasing suggests that regret resultant from a negative consumption experience does not always curtail future buying behaviour. This leads us to postulate that people somehow deal with their regret in ways that may fail to curtail or even encourage future impulse buying.

Literature suggests that regret brings about emotional conflict, which consumers strive to attenuate (Lazarus 1991 and Luce 1998). Self-affirmation theory proposes that people are motivated to maintain an image of self-integrity and when a decision is made which is later believed to be less than optimal, such as the impulsive purchase of an unsuitable product, consumers engage in coping behaviours that help them restore their positive self images (Hoshino-Browne et al 2005). Coping is defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141).

Extant research identifies three main restorative coping strategies which consumers use after engaging in impulse buying (Yi and Baumgartner 2004; Dahl et al. 2003; Yi and Baumgartner 2004; Yi 2012) These are planful problem solving (e.g., behaviours like returning the item purchased on impulse to the store, giving it away, or selling it on an auction site), positive reinterpretation (e.g., coming up with new justifications for it), and mental disengagement (e.g., trying to forget about the event or refusing to believe there is a problem) (Dahl et al. 2003; Yi and Baumgartner 2004; Okada 2005; Luce 1998; Lazarus and Folkman 1987; Lazarus et al 1985). LaRose (2001) and Bayley and Nancarrow's (1998) report that hiding, returning, giving away, or selling unwanted purchases are ways in which consumers avoid the realisation that their impulsive behaviour has resulted in a multitude of products that are unnecessary and/or unaffordable when compared to their true needs or budget. The authors add that consumers might also make use of purchase justification techniques to alleviate regret, such as the use of comparative expenditures (where their level of consumption is compared to that of their partner or peer) or the attribution of purchases to self-indulgences or rewards. Dahl, Honea and Manchanda (2003) also suggest that some consumers deal with their regret by simply denying the problem itself and trying hard not to think about it.

By applying coping literature to impulse buying, this paper offers a much more nuanced understanding of why people re-engage in impulse buying even if they experience regret or if they suffer from negative consequences such as debt. It argues that

H2: Planful problem solving, positive reinterpretation and mental disengagement significantly reduce post-impulse consumption regret.

The significant reduction in regret is important because this negative affect has a positive adaptive function in that it informs of an event contrary to personal goals and highlights a situation that needs to be acted upon or changed (Dahl et al 2003). According to Lascu (1991), regret weighs heavily on one's mind and stimulates one's preoccupation with the transgression and with schemes for setting things right. Indeed regret is often associated with active attempts to undo the unpleasant effects of the decisions that went wrong (Zeelenberg et al 2000; Baumeister et al 1995). Yet if regret is attenuated, people are much more likely to re-engage in the particular behaviour - in this case impulse buying - even in light of negative consequences.

However, the type of coping mechanism used to mitigate regret might also impact the adaptive function of this negative affect. While some coping mechanisms result in boosting consumer motivation for self-control and reducing the likelihood of future indulgence (Kivetz and Keinan 2006; Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Ramanathan and Williams 2007), other coping mechanisms encourage consumers to rewrite past scripts in order to portray their suboptimal behaviour in a positive light hence discouraging behavioural change (Paulhus 1984).

Emotion-focused coping such as avoidance/denial strategies or justification/reinterpretation strategies are used to retreat from distress and act defensively, hence they are unlikely to curtail future impulse buying. Dahl et al (2003) attest that when consumers

use mental disengagement as a coping mechanism, they attempt to forget the unfavorable experience by trying to take their mind off the problem or even refusing to believe that there is a problem. These consumers actively undertake denial to deal with their regret and some go to the extent of hiding the evidence of their transgressions (Dahl et al 2003). The authors see such behaviours as “escapism” or a way that consumers use to postpone thinking about the consequences of their actions. Since one consequence of not dealing with the problem is failure to learn from it, this coping strategy is unlikely to curtail future impulse buying behaviour.

H3a: When mental disengagement is used to cope with consumers’ post-impulse consumption regret the future propensity of impulse purchasing is not significantly reduced.

In positive reinterpretation, consumers reduce the regret experienced by supplying justifications to their behaviour (Simonson 1992). This cognitive reconstrual allows the impulse purchase behaviour to be looked at more positively (Connolly and Zeelenberg’s 2002; Roese, Summerville, and Fessel 2007). In fact, as Kivetz (1999, p.18) notes, when reasons are constructed to justify decisions, it helps “consumers realise their hedonic wants even when these are undeserved.” Use of post-purchase justification not only reduces the experience of regret, but by shifting the consumer perception of their decision from suboptimal to justifiable, it also diminishes their perceived need to engage in reparative action. Thus, this type of coping mechanism is likely to increase the likelihood of re-engaging in the behaviour (Cohen and Goldberg 1970; Okada 2005). Therefore, this research hypothesizes:

H3b: When positive reinterpretation is used to cope with consumers' post-impulse consumption regret the future propensity of impulse purchasing is not significantly reduced.

Conversely to the emotion-focused coping strategies discussed above, planful problem solving involves consumers proactively managing the transgression and attempting to make amends (Yi and Baumgartner 2011; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and as such is more likely to curtail future impulse buying behaviour. This coping strategy entails behavioural responses (Roese and Olson 2006) which in impulse buying might include returning the item purchased on impulse to the store, giving it away, or selling it on an auction site. Here the consumer does not deny or justify the problem but acknowledges it and actively takes the steps necessary to resolve it. This proactive response to experienced regret is likely to not only undo the unpleasant effects of the suboptimal decisions but also to encourage future behaviour that minimize potential regret (Zeelenberg et al 2000). Thus this paper argues:

H4: The use of planful problem solving as a means to cope with post-impulse consumption regret significantly reduces the propensity for future impulse buying behaviour.

Methodology

Two experiments are used to test the hypotheses. Experiment 1 examines the role of purchase experience vs. consumption experience of an impulse purchase on future impulse purchasing, and the mediating effect of regret on this relationship. This provides a test of hypothesis 1. Experiment 2 examines the impact of coping strategies following an impulse purchase on subsequent impulse purchasing and provides a test for hypotheses 2-4. Scenario-

based experiments are common in research on regret (e.g. Inman and Zeelenberg 2002; Tsiros and Mittal 2000; Carmon, Wertenbroch and Zeelenberg 2003) and impulse buying (e.g. Rook and Fisher 1995; Dholakia 2000).

Experiment 1: The impact of post-purchase regret on future impulse buying behaviour

The experiment used a 2x2x2 between participants design. The independent variables were the valence of the purchase experience, valence of the consumption experience, and product category (whether the second impulse purchase occasion was from the same or different product category as the first impulse purchase).

Participants. 160 undergraduate and postgraduate students (92 female) at a large UK university

Independent Variables. Three factors, purchase experience (positive or negative), consumption experience (positive or negative) and product category (same or different product categories in the 2 impulse purchase scenarios) were manipulated between participants using scenarios. Purchase experience was manipulated by describing how the participant felt following the purchase. In the positive purchase experience condition participants read that their feelings had been enhanced by the purchase experience, but not so in the negative purchase experience condition. Participants read the following scenario “*You need to buy some warm socks to prepare for the harsh winter. After class, you go to the city centre and purchase the socks. On your way to the bus stop you spot a great-looking sweater priced at £50. You really like it, and decide to buy it on the spot.*” In the positive purchase experience condition this was followed by “*Buying the sweater improves your mood.*” In the negative purchase experience condition

participants learn that *“Buying the sweater does not improve your mood”*. This manipulation is based on Dittmar et al.’s (1995; 1996) and Dittmar and Drury’s (2000) work.

Research shows that consumers' repurchase intention is determined by satisfaction and perceived usefulness, yet satisfaction itself is also influenced by perceived usefulness (Naidoo and Leonard 2007; Liao and Cheung 2008). The theory of perceived usefulness has to date been applied to e-commerce, yet the concept that usefulness of a product or behaviour has a direct effect on behavioural intention, repeat behaviour and satisfaction (e.g. Ramayah et al., 2003; Pikkarainen, et al., 2004) can also be applied to other consumer behaviours, including impulse buying behaviour. Based on this, consumption experience is conceptualised as the "perceived usefulness" of the product purchased on impulse and manipulated by describing the extent to which the product was used subsequent to purchase. Participants in the positive consumption experience read *“You wear your new sweater the following weekend, and again frequently in the following weeks”* while those in the negative consumption experience condition read *“Weeks pass but you never wear your new sweater. Once or twice you decide to wear it, but you always end up wearing something else.”*

Pre-tests of the scenario segments designed to elicit either purchase or consumption were undertaken with 65 undergraduate students. These revealed that regret was higher for those exposed to the negative purchase experience scenario, compared to those exposed to the positive one ($p < .01$) (M_{Regret} for the positive purchase experience = 1.89, M_{Regret} for the negative purchase experience = 3.5—higher means indicate greater regret). Likewise, regret was greater following the negative consumption scenario, compared to the positive consumption scenario ($p < .01$) (M_{Regret} for the positive post-purchase experience = 1.60; M_{Regret} for the negative post-purchase experience = 4).

Procedure. On arriving at the lab, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. First, participants were asked to read the impulse purchase occasion scenario appropriate for their particular condition. They then completed a four-item scale measuring feelings of goodness versus regret (O'Connor 1996) (4-item measure, Cronbach's Alpha .860): "You feel that buying the sweater was the right decision." "The purchasing decision was a wise one." "If you had to do it over again, you would make the same buying decision." "You regret your decision." (reverse-scored on a five-point likert scale anchored by strongly agree (5) and strongly disagree (1)).

Following these questions, participants read about the second impulse purchase opportunity. For half the participants this was a potential for purchasing again from the same category, i.e., clothing, while for the other half of the participants the potential purchase category was different from the first impulse purchase episode—DVD box-set. A DVD box-set was chosen as Dittmar et al. (1995) show that like clothing, videos are a category from which consumers are highly likely to make impulse purchases. As well, a shirt and DVD box-set are similar in price. Thus participants read that "*A few weeks later you decide to go window shopping. As you walk round the stores, you see a lovely jacket that you really fancy (you come across a DVD box-set that grabs your interest). You stop to look at it better.*" Participants were then asked to rate "How likely are you to make the purchase?" on a five-point likert scale, anchored by not at all likely (1) to very likely (5). Future impulse buying is an area that has been largely overlooked in impulse buying literature and thus there are currently no scales that measure this variable. However other areas of literature, such as those dealing with future intentions, are appropriate sources of measurement instruments since they deal with the same underlying construct, i.e. the "subjective probability that... (a person) will perform a particular behaviour in the future". Soderlund and Ohman (2003) believe that the "individual's assessment

of (this probability) ...is measured with...items such as ‘the probability that I will do A is...’.”. This forms the basis of the above single-item measure which has also been selected in order to reduce complexity and not be “too exhaustive from a cognitive point of view” (Soderlund and Ohman 2005) while still determining the likelihood of future behaviour. Similar scales are used repeatedly in studies on future intentions (Soderlund and Ohman 2005; Boulding, Kalra, Staelin and Zeithaml 1993; Gotlieb, Grewal and Brown 1994; Brady, Cronin and Brand 2002; Patterson, Johnson and Spreng 1997; Cronin, Brady and Hult 2000; Shim, Eastlick, Lotz and Warrington 2001). Another example can be found in Soderlund and Ohman’s (2005) work, where they measure future intentions by asking participants to rate the statement “I will have lunch at the restaurant during the coming month” on a ten-point scale (anchored by very unlikely (1) and very likely (10)). While some researchers argue that a one-item measure invites problems with reliability since a measure of internal consistency cannot be computed (Peter 1979), others suggest that multiple-item measures invite the possibility of a confounded measurement. Drolet and Morrison (2001) attest that when researchers increase the number of synonymous-answer items in an attempt to transform a single-item measure, such as a measure of future intentions, into a multiple-one, there is a likelihood of including items that are not proper synonyms of the “original attribute descriptor”. Not only are such items often not detected, but Bergkvist and Rossiter (2007) also state that the “addition of good items” often “hides the presence of bad items”. Furthermore if the “bad items are positively correlated with the good items, coefficient alpha increases, an outcome that usually forestalls the researcher from searching for bad items.” Drolet and Morrison (2001) mathematically demonstrate that one or two good items can outperform a multiple-item scale and recommend the use of single-item measures. Bergkvist and Rossiter (2007) propose another empirical argument for single-item measure relating to common methods bias, where the correlation between two or more constructs is inflated because they are

measured in the same way. Such bias, according to the authors, can also occur within the multiple items of a multiple-item measure, which would subsequently inflate its coefficient alpha. Rossiter (2002) strongly claims that intentions should not be captured with multiple-item scales. The author evaluates the three-item measure of buying intention used in a study by Taylor and Baker (1994) and argues that the multiple items serve to detract rather than add to the reliability and validity of the scale. He attests that to measure future intentions one item is sufficient, a notion also supported by other researchers (Rossiter and Eagleson 1994; Urban and Hauser 1993).

At the end of the experiment participants were asked what they thought was the purpose of the study, to enable us to determine if any participants had become aware of the hypotheses. This open-ended probe revealed that none of the participants had guessed the hypothesis.

Results

Post-purchase feelings. The mean score on the 4-item scale of feelings of regret, after reverse scoring one item, served as the operational measure. A score of 1 indicated strong positive feelings while a score of 5, strong feelings of regret. Results show significant main effect of purchase experience $F(1, 152) = 53.902, p < .001$ such that participants in the negative purchase experience groups demonstrated significantly higher levels of post-purchase regret ($M_{\text{PositivePurExp}} = 2.70, M_{\text{NegativePurExp}} = 3.86$) than those in the positive purchase conditions. Similarly, the consumption experience of an impulse buying situation also significantly affects the level of post-purchase regret experienced $F(1, 152) = 39.745, p < .001$ ($M_{\text{PositiveConsExp}} = 2.78, M_{\text{NegativeConsExp}} = 3.77$).

The Purchase Experience x Consumption experience interaction was also significant $F(1, 152) = 15.5, p < .001, \eta^2 = .092$. The relatively small effect size of this interaction is likely to be an outcome of the small sample size (Huberty, 2002; Richardson, 2011). However, further research with larger and more heterogeneous samples should be undertaken to corroborate this finding.

As would be expected, those in the positive purchase and positive consumption experience condition experienced the least regret compared to each of the other three groups ($p < .01$), while those who experienced both a negative purchase and consumption experience had the highest level of regret and differed from each of the other three groups ($p < .05$). The group that experienced a positive purchase experience but a negative consumption experience and that which experienced a negative purchase experience but a positive consumption experience did not differ from each other in terms of elicited regret ($p > .15$). None of the other main or interaction effects reached statistical significance ($p > .15$). Taken together, these results suggest that both purchase and post-purchase experiences influence experienced regret.

Future impulse buying. The single-item scale of propensity for future impulse buying served as the operational measure (a score of 1 indicated a weak propensity for future impulse buying whereas a score of 5 indicated a high likelihood for future impulse buying). The ANOVA revealed that the only effect to reach significance was that of consumption experience $F(1, 152) = 51.09, p < .001, (\eta^2 = .252)$ ($M_{\text{PosConsExp}} = 3.49, M_{\text{NegConsExp}} = 2.51$). *This indicates that consumers experiencing a negative consumption experience are likely to reduce their propensity for future impulse buying.* Importantly, however, *consumers who experience a negative purchase experience appear to be unlikely to attenuate subsequent impulse purchasing, even though they reported experiencing significantly higher regret, as noted above.* As well, the findings appear to be robust across both subsequent impulse purchases from within the same as

well as different categories, as none of the effects involving category of subsequent impulse purchase were significant ($p > .15$). Experiment 1 thus provides support for hypothesis 1 and suggests that the consumption experience has a much stronger impact on the propensity future impulse buying behaviour than the purchase experience, i.e., the regret emergent from consumption has a stronger impact than that emergent from the purchase itself. This contests the over-focus on the purchase experience in impulse buying literature, advocating that to better understand why consumers engage in repeat impulse buying behaviour, it is the consumption experience that must be considered.

Experiment 2: The impact of coping strategies on post-purchase regret and future impulse buying.

Participants. 157 undergraduate students at a large university (82 female) participated in this experiment.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the 4 experimental groups (control; planful problems solving; positive reinterpretation and mental disengagement groups). All participants read the following scenario “*Imagine you work part-time to support yourself while studying at University and it is two weeks before your next paycheck. You have £40 left for necessities. In addition to food, you need to buy some warm socks to prepare for the harsh UK winter. After class, you go to the city centre and purchase the socks. On your way to the bus stop you spot a great-looking jacket priced at £55. You really like it and use a credit card to buy it on the spot. Weeks pass but you never wear your new jacket. Once or twice you decide to wear it, but you always end up wearing something else. Sometime later you are doing some laundry, come across the jacket and realize that you have never worn it.*” In the control condition, subjects respond to the dependent measures at this point. In the planful problem solving condition

this was followed by “*so you decide to return it to the store for a full refund*”. In the mental disengagement condition it was followed by “*You hide it at the back of the wardrobe and you don’t think about it again.*” In the positive reinterpretation condition it was followed by “*you manage to justify your purchase by remembering that buying the jacket had been a well-deserved indulgence that had made you feel great at the time.*” These participants then respond to a single item measure of regret on a five-point likert scale anchored by not regretful at all (1) to very regretful (5).

Next, a second scenario was presented to the participants: “*A few weeks later you decide to go window shopping. As you walk round the stores you see a lovely sweater that you really fancy. You stop to look at it better.*” A measure of future impulse buying was then taken: “How likely are you to make the purchase?” on a five-point likert scale anchored by not likely at all (1) to very likely (5). Finally, participants completed a question asking them to tell us what they thought was the purpose of the study, to enable us to determine if subjects had guessed the hypotheses. None of the subjects had guessed the hypotheses.

Results

An ANOVA performed on the measure of regret revealed that compared to the control group, regret is reduced in all experimental groups, $F(1, 90) = 23.856, p < .001$. Planned contrasts reveal that these reductions are all significant ($t_{\text{MentDis}} = 3.053$; $t_{\text{PlanProb}} = 5.219$; $t_{\text{PosRein}} = 10.164$) (all $ps < .01$, 2-tailed). These results are consistent with H6.

TABLE 1 HERE

FIGURE 1 HERE

Interestingly the data also showed that while regret is significantly reduced in all the experimental groups, there is also a significant difference between the level of regret experienced by the participants in the mental disengagement group and those in the other experimental groups. While regret in the mental disengagement group is significantly lower when compared to that in the control group, it does emerge that it is also significantly greater than that experienced by the participants in the other experimental groups ($t_{\text{regret}} \text{ planful problem solving} = 2.436$ $p < 0.02$, 2-tailed; $t_{\text{regret}} \text{ positive reinterpretation} = 5.676$ $p < 0.001$, 2-tailed).

Furthermore, the data shows a significant difference between the regret experienced by the planful problem solving group and that experienced by the positive reinterpretation group, whereby regret is significantly lower in the positive reinterpretation group ($t_{\text{regret}} \text{ planful problem solving} = 2.560$ $p < 0.02$, 2-tailed). Thus, positive reinterpretation appears to be the strongest coping skill with respect to regret reduction, followed by planful problem solving, and finally mental disengagement. This does suggest that *acting* on the experience of regret in an attempt to reduce it, whether via justification or the more practical actions of *returning to the store* provides better relief from the experience of regret than *inaction* such as denial. The single-item scale of propensity for future impulse buying served as the operational measure. A score of 1 indicated a weak propensity for future impulse buying while a score of 5 indicated a strong propensity for future impulse buying.

TABLE 2 HERE

FIGURE 2 HERE

An ANOVA performed on the measure of future impulse buying revealed that the likelihood of indulging in future impulse buying varied significantly across the groups, $F(1, 90) = 29.660$ $p < .001$. Planned contrasts revealed a significantly higher likelihood of future impulse buying for those using mental disengagement ($t_{\text{future impulse buying}} = -7.529$ $p < 0.001$, 2-tailed) and positive reinterpretation ($t_{\text{future impulse buying}} = -6.094$ $p < 0.001$, 2-tailed) as coping mechanisms, providing support for hypothesis 7. There was no significant difference in the propensity for future impulse buying between the control group and the group that used planful problem solving to deal with regret ($t_{\text{future impulse buying planful problem solving}} = -1.535$ $p > 0.1$, 2-tailed). Thus it appears that physically acting on the experience of regret by attempting to reverse the situation is effective in regulating buying behaviour by reducing the propensity for future impulse buying.

Interestingly the data also indicates that there is a significant difference between the propensity for future impulse buying between the mental disengagement group and the positive reinterpretation group, whereby the participants in the mental disengagement groups are more likely to engage in future impulse buying than the positive reinterpretation group ($t_{\text{future impulse buying}} = 2.535$ $p < 0.02$, 2-tailed). Interestingly, mental disengagement as a coping skill causes the least reduction in regret but the highest propensity for future impulse buying. Yet again it seems that not acting on the experience of regret brings about the least amount of consumer learning, and hence higher propensity for future impulse buying behaviour.

General Discussion

This research makes several important theoretical contributions. It fills an important void in the area of impulse buying behaviour. It focuses exclusively on post-impulse purchase affect,

behaviour and psychological processes and their influence on future impulse buying behaviour, an area which has been heavily under-researched. Impulse buying has been increasing exponentially over time, and researchers have always been interested in why people keep engaging in this type of shopping behaviour irrespective of its consequences. Most of the work looking at this problem however has focused on the purchase experience of the consumer, with particular emphasis on the psychological benefits that can be attained, at the expense of the consumption experience (Baumeister 2002; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Dittmar, Long and Bond 2005; Rook 1987; Gardner and Rook 1988). This research extends current literature by examining how consumers feel after the psychological high of the impulse buying episode dissipates (Faber and Christenson 1996; Kivetz and Keinan 2006; Loewenstein 1996), how they handle their post-purchase affect and how this in turn influences the propensity for future impulse buying. This work also attests that the over-focus on the impulse buying purchase experience gives a limited picture of the impact of impulse buying and shows that the consumption experience is pivotal in the reinforcement of future impulse buying behaviour. It

Finding reveal that the valence of the consumption experience, irrespective of that of the purchase experience, is what influences future impulse buying behaviour. Thus, if a consumer has a positive purchase experience, in the form of mood-repair or a psychological high, but then goes through a negative consumption experience, in the form of a product that is not useful, impulse buying behaviour is likely to be negatively reinforced. Thus, to break the impulse buying cycle, it is important to shift the focus from the purchase experience to the consumption experience. If consumers want to stop engaging in impulse buying they must stop focusing on the positive affect or psychological high attained during the purchase and analyze the consumption experience. This should give a more realistic view of whether the purchase decision was effective and can be translated into a more savvy shopping behaviour.

This research examines the impact of consumption regret on future impulse buying by drawing on coping literature (e.g. Duhachek 2003; Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Moschis 2007; Luce, Bettman and Payne 2001; Yi and Baumgartner 2004). It proposes that consumers use several coping skills to deal with negative affect which can effectively reduce its impact on the propensity for future impulse buying. The second study examines the three coping mechanisms that are generally used by impulse buyers to alleviate feelings of regret, i.e., planful problem solving, mental disengagement and positive reinterpretation. It attests that the type of coping skill the consumers use to deal with their experience of regret will determine whether their future behaviour will be reinforced or curtailed. This paper thus tackles an important gap in impulse buying literature by offering a more nuanced understanding of post-impulse purchase psychological processes and behaviour and how these impacts repeat impulse buying.

The experiment shows that all three coping mechanisms are effective in reducing the influence of post-purchase regret on future impulse buying, with positive reinterpretation being the strongest, followed by planful problem solving and finally mental disengagement. However, of these coping skills only planful problem solving, which attempts to reverse the negative purchase situation and therefore brings about consumer learning, is successful at curtailing future impulse buying behaviour. Mental disengagement and positive reinterpretation both reinforce impulse buying behaviour which results from a lack of consumer learning. Mental disengagement, which involves shying away from the problem instead of trying to resolve it, brings about the least amount of learning and is hence the strongest reinforcer of this behaviour. This offers a new and important understanding of the role of coping mechanisms in impulse buying behaviour, more specially, in terms of re-engagement in this behaviour in spite of potentially negative consequences.

The implication here is that an impulse buying scenario with a negative consumption experience or negative consequences is still able to positively reinforce this type of behaviour. Thus, breaking the impulse buying cycle depends on the type of coping mechanism used by consumers to quash their feelings of regret. Consumers must be made aware that the way in which they handle their regret might keep them locked in a vicious circle of buying behaviour that can potentially result in lower self-esteem and financial difficulties. By focusing on the consumption experience of the impulse buying scenario and utilizing planful problem solving as a means of dealing with any ensuing regret, consumers are more able to establish effective shopping behaviour.

From a practical or managerial perspective, this study ascertains that consumption regret is pivotal in curtailing future impulse buying behaviour. Therefore, retailers should be aware that simply ensuring that the purchase experience is positive for consumers is not enough. If they are to enjoy repeat impulse buying, they must also ensure a positive consumption experience by providing good value for money, products that are of good quality and effective post-purchase customer care. This research is unique in that it breaks away from past theories attesting that offering a simple returns policy is a good way for retailers to reinforce impulse buying behaviour. While such policies might encourage a sale, if the consumer returns the product their future impulse buying behaviour might be curtailed. Instead marketers should encourage consumers to exchange their products with more desirable ones or provide vouchers which might be utilized at a later date. In this way, consumers can be left with a product that provides a positive consumption experience and thereby their impulse buying behaviour is positively reinforced.

This study also has important policy and consumer welfare implications. The United Kingdom is characterized by high levels of spending and consumer debt far outweighing that of neighboring European countries (Credit Action 2018) resulting in practical and psychological

consequences. A percentage of this debt is a direct result of impulse buying (Parsons 2005; Mabels 2007) and this indicates that consumers should be more conscious of their spending patterns and try to contain their impulse buying. This research suggests that consumers need to be made aware that using impulsive purchase as a way to feel better is not effective, as the feeling dissipates rapidly. Consumers should also be informed of the effectiveness of planful problem solving as a strategy for managing felt regret and reducing the propensity for future impulse buying, as well as guarding against the tendency to use denial or justification as a means of dealing with post-purchase regret. It is essential for consumers to become aware that the way in which they handle their regret might keep them locked in a vicious cycle of buying behaviour that can potentially result in lower self-esteem and financial difficulties. It is also important to note that because impulse buying is reinforced across product/service categories, keeping away from stores selling products/services deemed to inspire impulse buying is not an effective way of curbing this buying behaviour. Consumers must instead focus on the post-purchase experience of the impulse buying scenario, being careful not to generalize one good impulse buying experience to impulse buying in general. Finally, in light of the negative financial and psychological impact of repeat impulse buying on consumers, retailers must be encouraged to be more responsible in the strategies they use to encourage impulse buying. Research clearly shows that impulse buying behaviour is essential for the long-term success of many retailers. However, companies should be held accountable for influencing a buying behaviour which can be detrimental to consumer wellbeing. Policy-makers need to work closely with retailers and monitor strategies used to coax consumers into buying impulsively. In addition, as this research demonstrates, returning unwanted products can help mitigate against future impulse buying. As such, companies should be encouraged to develop policies that make returning unwanted

products as effortless and straightforward as possible to ensure that consumers who are unhappy with their impulse purchases find it easy to engage in this type of behavioural coping mechanism.

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