

Decoding the Impulsive Behavior: Why We Buy on a Whim

A review of research methods, interviews, and theory in consumer behavior research.

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The Core Mystery of Impulse Buying

The Paradox

Society labels impulse buying as "wrong", a sign of immaturity, irrationality, and a lack of self-control.

The Reality

Despite negative stereotypes, roughly 90% of people engage in impulse buying, and it accounts for up to 50% of all consumer purchases.

The Research Goal

Understanding the underlying motives driving this behavior, moving beyond product classifications to uncover the human "why."

The Missing Piece: What Previous Research Overlooked

1

The Product Trap

Early literature focused on defining the act or blaming inexpensive products for "triggering" impulses.

2

The Hidden Gap

Since impulse buying occurs with expensive items as well, researchers realized inherent consumer motivations hadn't been studied.

3

A Shift in Focus

New evidence suggests buying involves a "hedonic" or emotional component, it's not just about the item; it's about how the act makes you feel.

A Two-Step Strategy: The Multi-Method Approach

Why two methods? The study combines qualitative and quantitative data to first discover and then verify why we shop impulsively.



Phase 1: Qualitative

Semi-structured interviews explore emotions behind actual buying decision processes.



Phase 2: Quantitative

Survey data from larger sample tests specific hypotheses and verifies statistical patterns.

Step 1: Listening to Shoppers

The Interview Method

- **60 semi-structured interviews** conducted with diverse demographic sample.
- **Strategic deception:** Participants told study was about general shopping, not impulse buying, to avoid socially desirable responses.
- **Surprise finding:** Many reported shopping acts as a "pick-me-up" or "therapy", countering guilt assumptions.

The Role of Theory: Building from the Ground Up

01

Grounded Theory Approach

Authors allowed theory to emerge directly from interview data rather than starting with rigid hypotheses.

02

Constant Comparison

Researchers iteratively evaluated data to identify categories and compared with existing theories until "theoretical saturation" was reached.

03

Empirical Grounding

Final hypotheses firmly rooted in real consumer experiences, not researcher assumptions.

The Hypotheses: What Are They Testing?

Research questions naturally emerged from interviews and were shaped into six testable hypotheses:

1

Hedonic Needs

Individual consumers' impulse buying is correlated with their desires to fulfil hedonic needs, such as for fun, novelty, and surprise.

2

Social Needs

Individual consumer impulse buying behavior is correlated with desires to satisfy social needs.

3

Esteem & Style

Individual consumer impulse buying behavior is correlated with desires to satisfy esteem, as measured by style consciousness.

4

Decision Accuracy

A shopper's concern about being "right" (accurate) about a purchase changes how they act on their impulsive urges.

5

Decision Effort

The more effort a consumer puts into a decision, the more accurate they would perceive that decision to be.

6

Effort Moderation

A person's innate level of impulsiveness changes how much effort they feel they are putting into a decision.

Step 2: Proving the Pattern

The Survey Phase

75

Survey Items

Comprehensive questionnaire
administered

272

Final Sample

Consumers across different
demographics

13

Initial Hedonic Scale

Later refined to 7 items

Analysis Method: ANOVAs (Analysis of Variance) compared three different levels of impulse buyers to verify motivation differences.

The "Quality Control" Math

Ensuring the survey measures what it claims to measure.



Cronbach's α (Reliability)

Test ensures survey consistency.

If a person says they shop for "fun," they should also say they shop for "entertainment."



Exploratory Factor Analysis (Validity)

Ensures survey actually measures claimed constructs.

Clumps answers into factors like novelty and emotional lift.



Refinement Process

Confusing items or those fitting two categories were removed to keep the scale clean and accurate.

What the Data Revealed

Findings & Implications



H1 & H3 Supported

Strong proof ($p=0.001$) impulse buying tied to **fun** and **style consciousness**.



H2 Mixed Results

Interviews supported social needs, but social scale too weak for quantitative proof.



H4 Supported

People who are either very impulsive or very careful feel most confident in their accuracy, while those in the middle often doubt their choices more.



Demographics Irrelevant

No significant effects based on age, gender, or income, anyone can be an impulse buyer.

The Effort Paradox

H5a Refuted: Spending more mental energy comparing products does not necessarily make a shopper feel they made a better/accurate choice.

H5b Supported: Highly impulsive people find decisions laborious.

Finding: Impulse buying is a rational shortcut to avoid mental exhaustion!

Shopping as a Personal Reward

Their findings redefine impulse buying not as a flaw, but as a strategic consumer choice driven by deeply personal, non-economic motives.

A New Perspective

Impulse buying isn't inherently "bad", it serves as a rational, efficient alternative to time-consuming searches when the primary goal is emotional satisfaction.

Non-Economic Rewards

Purchases on a whim often satisfy needs for fun, fantasy, and social gratification, aspects that traditional, purely economic models ignore.

The Bottom Line

Consumers use impulse buying to manage complex decisions, opting for a fast, "hedonically satisfying" acquisition over a potentially stressful, lengthy planned one.