

Online Impulse Buying and Product Involvement

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Abstract

Do consumers behavior different on the Internet from other marketing channels? This study investigates impulse buying behaviors in both traditional store and online shopping contexts. The results show that impulsive buying tendency and involvement with clothing products is positively associated with impulse buying behavior of clothing in traditional store shopping, but not online. For computer peripherals, on the other hand, higher impulsive buying tendency and higher product involvement are positively associated with higher impulse buying online, but not in-store shopping.

Introduction

The Internet has become an ubiquitous medium both in the work place and at home, and so using the Internet as a retailing channel has become a reality. Online shopping volume has increased significantly in recent years. As forecast by Forrester Research, online retailing is likely to reach US\$329 billion by 2010 and account for 13 percent of total retail sales in the United States. The skyrocketing expansion of online retailing is also a global phenomenon. In Taiwan, for example, of the 65% of the population who have accessed the Internet, almost half of these Web users have some experience shopping online [20]. Its potential to compete with traditional retailing is hard to ignore.

However, online impulse purchase behaviors have been seldom investigated. Impulse buying constitutes a great portion of total purchase volume. Therefore,

to know if and why consumers buy impulsively online is of great importance. Comparing impulse purchases made online to those made in-store will also greatly enrich our knowledge of this essential element of consumer behavior.

Over the past 60 years of impulse purchase research, the focus of interest has shifted from calculating which products were bought unplanned after the customers visiting the store, to a consumer's emotional or psychological states in acting impulsively [22][24]. Impulsive buying tendency as a personality trait varied among people and will influence their degree of actual impulse buying behavior [23]. Although "it is people, not products, who experience consuming impulses" [24], products are the most important market stimulus in consumer behavior and retain a decisive influence in impulse buying. Products like clothing and music that reflect self-identity score highly as goods bought on impulse, while "functional" goods are ranked among those least bought on impulse [5]. In addition, products in which the consumer is highly personally involved [10] will be bought more impulsively.

However, it is worth noting that Impulsive buying behaviors can be influenced by other environmental stimuli [7][29] and travel through a virtual mall is by no means a similar experience to visiting a department store. The Internet is rich in information such as product specifications, functioning and other relevant knowledge easily acquired by a few clicks. However, the product itself cannot be held or closely inspected in an online retailing environment. This is

one of the major hurdles for certain products purchased online [9][17]. This study therefore discusses impulse buying in both traditional and online retailing channels.

This research investigates actual impulse purchases in two different product categories- clothing and computer and peripherals - in the online and in-store shopping contexts. We use these two product types to test our hypothesis because consumers- especially younger generations- can be highly involved with and held strong positive attitudes to both product categories. On the other hand, they are very different in attributes and characteristics. Clothing has two functions: daily dress serves a basic human need, but “fashion” is bought in a large part impulsively because of its ever changing style. Computer peripherals are, on the contrary, a standardized product with worldwide specifications. These kinds of products “fit” well into an information rich and digitized world [18].

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Impulse purchase

Consumer researchers have for decades strived to find a better definition for impulse purchase. Earlier studies on impulse buying were from managerial and practitioner perspectives, focusing on consumers’ purchasing decision after they entered the store. Researches in this vein therefore emphasized the classification of consumer products into impulse and non-impulse items, in order to facilitate marketing strategies such as point-of-purchase advertising and in-store promotions. The major defect of this line of research is confounding “unplanned” buying and “impulse” buying [3][4][12][25].

In response to this deficiency, research was refocused on the internal psychological states underlying consumer impulse buying episodes. Impulse purchasing involves “a sudden and spontaneous desire to act” and the sudden “urge to buy on impulse can throw the consumer into a state of psychological disequilibrium” [24], “with diminished regard for its consequences” [14]. Compared to those who make a planned purchase, people who buy impulsively are more likely to be unreflective in their thinking, to be emotionally attracted to the object, and to desire immediate gratification [10][26]. Many factors may influence this impulse behavior. In addition to the product’s characteristics, the consumer’s mood or emotional state [21][22][28], the shopping task, and the availability of time and money [2] would all affect impulse buying behavior.

Impulsive buying tendency

One major influence on an impulse purchase is the individual’s internal differences with regard to impulsive acts. Impulsivity as a personality trait has been studied extensively by psychologists. Rook and Fisher [23] therefore conceptualized an individual’s impulse buying tendency as a consumer trait and defined buying impulsiveness as buying “spontaneously, unreflectively, immediately, and kinetically.” Those with a higher impulsive buying tendency, tend to purchase more on impulse. Rook and Fisher have taken a more “neutral” stance toward impulse purchase, arguing that buying impulsively is not necessarily “irrational” or “risky,” because in the time between the impulse to buy and the actual purchase, normative evaluations can play a moderating role. Hence, even if a person has a high tendency to impulsive buying, what he or she actually buy on impulse would still be greatly influenced by

situational factors and social norms.

Involvement

Involvement was first conceptualized by Krugman in studying TV commercials and operationalized it as the number of “bridging experiences,”- connections or personal references- that the viewer makes between his or her own life and an advertisement [13]. Since then, the construct of involvement has emerged as an important factor in studying the effectiveness of advertising, the relationship between a person and a product, and purchasing decisions [31]. Several efforts have been made to develop scales measuring the involvement construct relating product categories. Involvement has been defined as “a person’s perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests” [30]. Heightened involvement can result either from functional consequences or emotional consequences [16], and therefore “importance” and “interest” are two aspects of the involvement response [14].

The emotional consequences- or “interest” aspects- of high level of product involvement are more likely to generate the emotion needed for an impulse purchase, and higher levels of product involvement are associated with higher levels of product-specific impulse buying tendency, and in turn, are positively associated with impulse buying behavior. If individuals are interested in a product, they will want to know more about it, pay more attention to it during a shopping trip, compare different types or brands, and eventually purchase the product if they can afford it. Cognitive efforts invested by the individual will sometimes elicit a strong enough “urge” to purchase and consume immediately. Jones et al. [24] delineated the viewpoint rather clearly.

“Individual who have a high level of involvement...are more likely to generate the emotions needed for an impulsive purchase. In addition, consumers who are involved with a particular product category are more likely to browse stores carrying such products, making an impulsive purchase more probable given the increased frequency of shopping or browsing (p.508).”

However, the product characteristics must be taken into consideration. Dittmar et al. [5] studied thirteen consumer goods and found that music items and clothing are the most likely candidates for impulse buying, since both music items and clothing are “consumer goods which appear to have potential for self-presentation, self-expression, mood adjustment, diversion and entertainment.” The least impulsive items in the study were highly functional or instrumental goods like furniture or car equipment. Since clothing is at the top of the list of items most likely to be bought on impulse, we can expect they will be bought even more impulsively for highly involved consumers. Computer peripherals are widely held as “functional” products, and therefore we would expect them to be bought less on impulse.

The association between a greater tendency towards impulsive buying and the purchase of clothing does not mean that items will be purchased indiscretionary by people, who have a high level of impulse buying. Clothing in particular is a product type that often needs to be felt, touched, and subjected to closer inspection. Hence, the perceived risk involved in a purchasing decision for clothing is quite high online compared to an in-store purchase [9]. Consumers may tend to evaluate more cautiously [18][27]. Thus, online impulse buying behaviors will not be as

frequent for clothing purchases.

A more intriguing issue is online impulse buying behavior for computer peripherals. The functions and performance of computer products are basically the same in any given product sub-categories, product's specifications are thus the major consideration of consumer's buying decision. The Internet is rich in information and so this technological environment is especially "fit" for the purchase of technological products. "Pure" impulse buying may be low for consumers of computer products- even those who have a greater tendency to buy impulsively and who are highly involved in computer products. Nevertheless, a positive relationship is expected between a product-specific impulsive buying tendency and impulse buying for computer products online (see Figure 1).

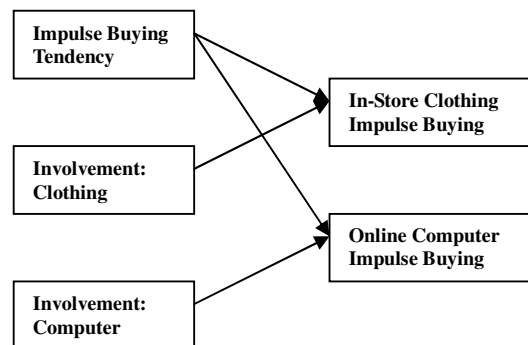


Figure 1 Research Framework

Thus, this study proposed the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 A greater tendency to impulsive buying will be positively associated with higher levels of impulse buying behavior for clothing in traditional store shopping.

Hypothesis 2 A higher level of clothing involvement will be positively associated with higher levels of impulse buying behavior for clothing in traditional store shopping.

Hypothesis 3 A greater tendency to impulsive buying and higher levels of clothing involvement will be positively associated with higher levels of impulse buying behavior for clothing in traditional store shopping.

Hypothesis 4 A greater tendency to impulsive buying and higher levels of involvement with computer peripherals will be positively associated with higher levels of impulse buying behavior in online shopping for computer peripherals.

Method

Self-report surveys were conducted in the fall of 2007 to collect the data for this study. A sample of 430 senior students and graduate students in management courses was selected from four universities in Taiwan. The questionnaire was administered in class and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. We believe that students represent a reasonable population for this study as students are heavy users of the Internet and active online shoppers. Since both in-store and online impulse buying behaviors are being investigated, a comparison of students' shopping behaviors is more meaningful as a large portion of older generation may never use the Web.

Among the 430 responses received, 17 were discarded as incomplete, with 413 usable responses. Most the subjects ranged in age from 20 to 24 (mean = 21.9, standard deviation = 2.1) and were reasonably balanced along gender lines, with 195 males (47.2 percent) and 218 females (52.8 percent). The respondents surfed the Web on average 3.7 days a week, for 2.95 hours a day.

Measures

The survey was developed using existing scales. After translation into Chinese, a backward translation was used to ensure the semantic equivalence of questions. The impulse buying tendency scale was adopted from Rook and Fisher's [23] 9-item scale on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Involvement with each product category was assessed using the Revised Product Involvement Inventory

(RPII) [14], consisting of 10 semantic differential items. Scale was measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Actual impulse buying behaviors for both product types in both retailing channels was measured with one item for each situation. After defining an impulse purchase as one in which the respondent "felt a sudden and powerful urge to buy something without deliberation", students were asked to fill out if they had made an impulsive purchase in the past 6 months using a 4-point scale ranging from "never" to "always".

Cronbach's alpha for the impulsiveness score was 0.86. For the RPII clothing, Cronbach's alpha score was 0.94, and for computer peripherals, 0.95. All scales demonstrated high internal consistency and had acceptable Cronbach's alpha values [15]

Table 1 Regression model of impulsive buying tendency, product involvement, and impulse buying behavior

	Buying 1		Buying 2		Buying 3		Buying 4	
	Param.	t	Param.	t	Param.	t	Param.	t
Impl.	0.919	4.904**	0.006	0.025	0.036	0.160	-0.629	-2.749**
Invl.	0.369	2.574**	-0.013	-0.078	-0.089	-0.513	-0.441	-2.544*
Impl.*invl	-0.522	-2.069*	0.409	1.473	0.321	1.048	1.064	3.686**

N=377; Impl: impulsive buying tendency; Invl.: product involvement; buying 1: impulse buying of clothing in traditional stores; buying2: impulse buying of clothing online; buying 3: impulse buying of computer peripherals in traditional stores; buying4: impulse buying of computer peripherals online; ** p<0.01, *p<0.05

Results

Table 1 shows the general regression model of the relationships among impulse buying tendency, product involvements for clothing and computer peripherals, and impulse buying behaviors. Buying 1 represents impulse buying behavior of clothing in

traditional store; Buying 2 is impulse buying behavior of computer peripherals in traditional store; while Buying 3 reports impulse buying behavior of clothing in the Internet context, Buying 4 represents impulse buying of computer peripherals online.

As predicted, the positive relationship between

impulse buying tendency and actual impulse buying for clothing in traditional stores was significant at .01 level; higher clothing involvement, and greater tendency to impulsive buying with higher clothing involvement were both positively associated with higher traditional store impulse buying at .01 and .05 levels. H1, H2, and H3 are supported. Concerning computer peripherals, greater tendency to impulsive buying and higher product involvement was positively associated with online impulse buying, thus H4 is supported. To our surprise, the positive relationship between impulse buying tendency and impulse buying for computer peripherals and between products involvement with impulse buying online were also significant. Even for the functional, low impulse items, a “fit” between product characteristics and marketing channel would elicit impulse purchase.

Discussion

This study demonstrated the complex interactions at work among a consumer’s impulsive buying tendency, involvement in products, and actual impulse buying behavior in different retailing channels. Product type plays a major role in impulse buying. Impulsive buying tendency and product involvement are good predictors of impulse purchase for clothing, but are not sufficient for computer peripherals in traditional store shopping. We see it as likely that the reason behind this particular purchasing behavior is that clothing, along with food and drink, is essential to people’s daily life and hence, consumption pattern. Any trip to a mall or a department store exposes the consumer to such a variety of products and promotional stimuli, that it is hard to escape the urge to buy something, especially for those people who are high on impulse, or highly involved in these products. However, impulse buying behaviors can not be

explained solely by consumer differences in personality and psychological inclinations, as some products are indeed low “impulse items” in traditional store shopping [5].

Another major implication of this study’s finding is the emerging role of the Internet as a competing marketing channel. Products like clothing can not be tried on and can be presented only in pictures and words online, greatly inhibiting the likelihood of impulse buying compared to in-store shopping. However, for computer peripherals, it is a totally different story. As Jones et al. [11] empirically tested product involvement as one of antecedents of impulsive buying, this study further demonstrated that different marketing channels also have major influences on consumer’s purchase impulsiveness.

Moreover, this study has compared items considered among the most and least likely to be bought on impulse in different retailing channels, and the findings give a more holistic and insightful picture of impulse buying behavior patterns today. Most research of impulse buying tends to focus on high impulse products such as clothing and music, and the factors that influence impulse buying of utilitarian products would never be fully understood even in a traditional shopping context.

Limitation and Future Research

Though the purchase behavior patterns of the younger generation represent a more computer literate population in the changing retailing industry, the student sample limits the external validity. This said, computerization is becoming a way of life, and people are depending on the Internet more and more for work at the office and entertainment at home. As

the older adult population is turning to the wired world, research of online impulse buying of the general public seems possible in the near future.

Only two product categories were tested posed another limitation of this study. Computerized and digitized product types are assumed well suited to be bought online [1][18][27], will they also be purchased impulsively by highly involved and/or impulsive consumers like computer peripherals? Conceptual as well as empirical researches are needed.

Rook and Fisher [23] speculated that impulse buying would be higher online compared to store shopping because the normal evaluations of consumers are less of an inhibited factor. Although this study found otherwise, that is not to say that these predictions are not valid. Online sales have increased exponentially in recent years, and the virtual world is a reality for the retailing industry. As more people adopt the Internet as an alternative retailing channel, impulse buying will no doubt also increase enormously. More intensive study of this development is needed. One research approach could be to investigate the association between purchase amount and/or purchase frequency with impulsive buying tendency online. Another approach could be to see if buying satisfaction influence the future tendency to buy impulsively. We expect positive associations between these variables. If so, it could be a blessing for marketers who do business online.

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