

Impulse buying: the role of affect, social influence, and subjective wellbeing

David H. Silvera

University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas, USA

Anne M. Lavack

University of Regina, Regina, Canada, and

Fredric Kropp

Monterey Institute of International Studies, Monterey, California, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to examine predictors of impulse buying. Although moderate levels of impulse buying can be pleasant and gratifying, recent theoretical work suggests that chronic, high frequency impulse buying has a compulsive element and can function as a form of escape from negative affective states, depression, and low self-esteem.

Design/methodology/approach – The present research empirically tests a theoretical model of impulse buying by examining the associations between chronic impulse buying tendencies and subjective wellbeing, affect, susceptibility to interpersonal influence, and self-esteem.

Findings – Results indicate that the cognitive facet of impulse buying, associated with a lack of planning in relation to purchase decisions, is negatively associated with subjective wellbeing. The affective facet of impulse buying, associated with feelings of excitement and an overpowering urge to buy, is linked to negative affect and susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

Practical implications – Given the link to negative emotions and potentially harmful consequences, impulse buying may be viewed as problematic consumer behavior. Reductions in problematic impulse buying could be addressed through public policy or social marketing.

Originality/value – This study validates and extends the Verplanken *et al.* model by examining the relationship between impulse buying and other psychological constructs (i.e. subjective wellbeing, positive and negative affect, social influence, and self-esteem).

Keywords Buying behaviour, Self esteem, Cognition

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Impulse buying refers to making unplanned and sudden purchases (Rook, 1987). Impulse buying behavior is frequently based on the presence of an immediate stimulus object and is often accompanied by feelings of excitement and pleasure and/or a powerful urge to buy (Rook, 1987). Similar to other types of self-indulgent behavior such as alcohol consumption, impulse buying at low to moderate levels can be an enjoyable pastime driven by the pursuit of hedonistic goals. However, high levels of these behaviors can be harmful and are potentially self-destructive. These behaviors can be driven by avoidance of negative psychological states such as low self-esteem and/or dispositional negative affect (Verplanken *et al.*, 2005). This potential “dark side” of impulse buying makes it a particularly interesting phenomenon that is worthy of further investigation (Hirschman, 1991).

Unfortunately, impulse buying does not fit neatly into existing models of behavior (Verplanken *et al.*, 2005). Impulse

buying is inconsistent with rational choice models and is difficult to fit within frameworks based on subjective expected utility models such as the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Impulse buying is also difficult to classify according to popular dichotomies in consumer behavior such as analytic versus heuristic processing (Sujan, 1985) and high versus low involvement purchases (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Impulse buying is neither a high involvement behavior nor based on an analytic process. In addition, the presence and power of emotional responses that are often associated with impulse buying are inconsistent with heuristic-based or low involvement purchases (Verplanken and Herabadi, 2001).

The poor fit of impulse buying with existing taxonomies is paralleled by a lack of understanding concerning psychological mechanisms and constructs underlying impulse buying behavior. Relatively little work has examined impulse buying from a psychological perspective. The one notable exception is Verplanken *et al.* (2005), which proposes a theoretical model postulating negative psychological states as the dominant driving force behind impulse buying. Although this model provides a valuable link between psychological variables and impulse buying behavior, it has

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some important limitations. First, the only negative psychological states actually tested in this model were self-liking (Tafarodi and Swann, 1995) and negative mood (Huelsman *et al.*, 1998). Second, the model was not designed to predict impulse buying tendencies – chronic impulse buying tendencies merely served as a mediating factor between negative psychological states and disturbed eating patterns. Furthermore, Verplanken *et al.* (2005) described their model as preliminary and in need of further validation.

The primary goal of our study is to validate and extend the Verplanken *et al.* (2005) model. We examine the relationship between impulse buying and other psychological constructs: subjective wellbeing, positive and negative affect, social influence, and self-esteem. Research in psychology shows that self-esteem, mood, and subjective well-being are closely related constructs (e.g. DeNeve and Cooper, 1998). Exploration of these constructs provides additional support for Verplanken *et al.*'s (2005) model and allows us to identify which negative psychological states are most strongly associated with impulse buying tendencies.

Impulse buying

As impulse buying behavior consists of unplanned and sudden purchases, the cognitive and affective forces guiding the purchase are typically initiated at the time and place of purchase (Rook, 1987). Impulse buying is often accompanied by strong affective reactions such as a powerful urge to buy or feelings of pleasure and excitement (Rook, 1987). Superficially at least, impulse buying seems to serve hedonic motives. Compared to non-impulsive buyers, impulse buyers exhibit hedonic rather than utilitarian considerations for their purchases, and the shopping experiences of impulse buyers tend to be driven by high-arousal emotions such as excitement and pleasure (Verplanken *et al.*, 2005).

Although previous research indicates that there is an element of fun involved in impulse buying, there is also evidence suggesting that impulse buying serves the function of alleviating unpleasant psychological states. For example, Mick and DeMoss (1990) found that people sometimes reward themselves with “self-gifts” as a means of elevating a negative mood. Baumeister (2002) suggests that people choose to sacrifice self-control and allow themselves to make impulsive purchases if they think such purchases might make them feel better. Rook and Gardner (1993) found relationships between impulsive buying and both positive and negative mood states. Based on these results, Verplanken *et al.* (2005) proposed that the primary function of impulse buying might be as “a self-regulatory mechanism aimed at reducing negative feelings, especially when these feelings have a structural basis such as a failure to live up to valued standards or low self-esteem” (pp. 430–431).

Although impulse buying is most often measured in the context of a shopping environment (Rook and Gardner, 1993), there is also strong evidence for chronic individual differences in consumers' propensity to buy on impulse (Dittmar and Drury, 2000; Hausman, 2000; Verplanken and Herabadi, 2001). Verplanken and Herabadi (2001) developed the impulse buying tendency scale (IBTS) to measure two aspects of general impulse buying tendencies: a cognitive facet related to lack of planning in association with purchase decisions, and an affective facet associated with feelings of excitement and overpowering urges to buy. These researchers also demonstrated that chronic

impulse buying tendencies are related to a number of personality dimensions: individuals who have strong impulse buying tendencies are low in conscientiousness, autonomy, personal need for structure, and need to evaluate, but are high on extraversion and action orientation.

Subjective wellbeing

Subjective wellbeing is a broad construct that includes aspects of individuals' positive and negative affective responses, their satisfaction with specific aspects of their lives (e.g. work and family), and global judgments of life satisfaction (Diener *et al.*, 1999). Although the components of subjective wellbeing are frequently strongly correlated with each other (DeNeve and Cooper, 1998) and thus often examined as a single higher-order construct, research shows that the components of subjective wellbeing are separable constructs (Lucas *et al.*, 1996).

With this background in mind, the satisfaction with life scale (SWLS) (Diener *et al.*, 1985) was developed to measure a person's cognitive assessment of global life satisfaction without tapping into related constructs such as loneliness or positive/negative affect. This instrument is among the most commonly used measures of subjective wellbeing, and has shown good psychometric properties, including high internal consistency, reliability over time (Diener *et al.*, 1985), and strong predictive validity (Pavot *et al.*, 1991).

Previous research (e.g. DeNeve and Cooper, 1998) shows that life satisfaction is directly related to positive affect and inversely related to negative affect. Life satisfaction is negatively associated with neuroticism from the big five and positively associated with extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience (DeNeve and Cooper, 1998). Hayes and Joseph (2003) found the relationships between life satisfaction and neuroticism and conscientiousness to be the strongest. Considering the theoretical links between subjective well-being and other positive beliefs (Scheier and Carver, 1985; Taylor and Brown, 1988), it is not surprising that subjective wellbeing is positively associated with optimism (Chang, 1998) and self-esteem (Lucas *et al.*, 1996), and negatively associated with depression (Dorahy *et al.*, 1996).

Although subjective wellbeing has been widely studied in psychology, there is relatively little marketing research on subjective wellbeing. The research in marketing focuses on how the acquisition of material goods is related to satisfaction with life, with the conclusion being that increases in material wealth have a weak positive association with life satisfaction (Oropesa, 1995). Argyle (1999) concluded that external factors, including demographic factors such as education and socioeconomic status, collectively account for about 15 percent of the variance in subjective wellbeing. Although having material wealth seems to be slightly beneficial for life satisfaction, wanting material wealth is not – strong materialistic values tend to be negatively related to life satisfaction (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002).

Based on the premise that impulse buying functions primarily as a means of avoiding negative psychological states, impulse buying tendencies should be negatively associated with subjective wellbeing. Because the satisfaction with life scale (SWLS) focuses on cognitive rather than affective aspects of global life satisfaction, it is expected that

this association will result in a positive relationship between SWLS and cognitive impulse buying tendencies. Therefore:

- H1a.* SWLS is negatively related to the cognitive component of impulse buying tendencies.
H1b. SWLS is unrelated to the affective component of impulse buying tendencies.

Affect

Although cognitive models often have significant explanatory power, they are inadequate in fully explaining many consumer behaviors or purchase decisions (Erevelles, 1998). Affect may be a primary motivator of consumer behavior (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982) and it may also exert indirect effects on consumer behavior by shaping cognition (Cacioppo and Gardner, 1999). Whether its effects are direct or indirect, affect can play a significant role in consumer behavior.

Although a significant amount of existing research has focused on affect as a state variable rather than a trait variable (Erevelles, 1998), the present research conceptualizes affect as a trait or chronic disposition. The positive affect and negative affect scale (PANAS) (Watson *et al.*, 1988) was used as a measure of affect in this study for several reasons. First, consistent with recent theoretical work on emotions, the PANAS explicitly treats positive and negative affect as separate dimensions rather than opposite poles of the same dimension. Second, the PANAS is a well-established instrument with strong psychometric properties, and is probably the most commonly used measure of affect in psychological research. Finally, the PANAS has a history of successful application in marketing, including the domains of product and service satisfaction, negative affect in advertising, and post-purchase behavior (Huang, 2001).

PANAS includes ten items measuring positive affect (e.g. “enthusiastic”) and ten items measuring negative affect (e.g. “distressed”). Watson *et al.* (1988) found that “trait PA and NA roughly correspond to the dominant personality factors of extraversion and anxiety/neuroticism, respectively” (p. 1063). High levels of negative affect are viewed as psychologically unhealthy, but low levels of positive affect are not necessarily viewed as unhealthy.

One of the central hypotheses advocated in Verplanken *et al.*'s (2005) model is that impulse buying functions as a means of reducing negative feelings. This hypothesis actually contains two propositions: impulse buying behavior should be more frequent in people who experience chronic negative emotions; and impulse buying improves mood. The second of these propositions is supported by the existing research literature – impulse buying has indeed been shown to elevate mood (e.g. Mick and DeMoss, 1990). The first proposition, however, lacks substantial empirical support. One of the goals of the present research is to further investigate the relationship between impulse buying and chronic negative emotions. The perspective that impulse buying is “fun” and tends to elevate mood suggests that impulse buying might be primarily associated with positive affect. In contrast, Verplanken *et al.* (2005) propose that negative rather than positive affect is the driving force behind chronic impulse buying. To the extent that the primary function of impulse buying is as a mechanism for escaping negative psychological states, the presence of negative affect should be associated with chronic impulse buying tendencies. Therefore:

- H2a.* Negative affect is positively related to the cognitive component of impulse buying.
H2b. Negative affect is positively related to the affective component of impulse buying.
H2c. Positive affect is not related to either component of impulse buying.

Social influence

Social influence has been examined in the context of consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (CSII) (Bearden *et al.*, 1989), where CSII is the extent to which an individual's consumer choices are influenced by other people. CSII is associated with a variety of consumer behaviors, and in particular with behaviors that combine lack of impulse control with relief from negative emotions, such as smoking (Kropp *et al.*, 1999) and drinking (Kropp *et al.*, 2004).

The CSII scale contains two dimensions: an informational component and a normative component. The informational component measures an individual's tendency to obtain information about products or services by observing or directly seeking information from other people. This tendency to actively seek information about potential purchases is conceptually opposite to the cognitive aspect of impulse buying, which involves purchasing without seeking or even considering information relevant to the purchase. The normative component of CSII measures an individual's need to use purchases to identify with, or enhance, his or her image in the eyes of significant others and a willingness to conform to the expectations of others in making purchase decisions. Thus, high levels of Normative CSII indicate a willingness to submit to forces within the social environment when making purchase decisions. This submission to external forces could be viewed as similar to the affective component of impulse buying, which involves submission to the demands of the immediate purchase context. Therefore:

- H3a.* Normative CSII is positively related to the affective component of impulse buying.
H3b. Informational CSII is negatively related to the cognitive component of impulse buying.

Self-esteem

Traditionally, self-esteem has been defined as a global, personal judgment of one's own worth (e.g. Rosenberg, 1965), and has been defined as a unidimensional construct. Recent research has challenged this traditional notion of self-esteem, in particular proposing that there are two correlated but distinct factors within the global self-esteem construct (e.g. Owens, 1993). Perhaps the best explanation for self-esteem's apparent two-dimensional nature is based on the theoretical distinction between self-esteem derived from positive regard from one's social environment, and self-esteem derived from assessment of one's own abilities (e.g., Harter, 1990). This explanation suggests that these two distinct sources of self-esteem result in two distinct dimensions of self-esteem. Tafarodi and Swann (1995) developed the self liking and competence scale (SLCS) to measure these two self-esteem dimensions: self-liking, which they defined as “the evaluative experience of the self as a social object” (p. 655), and self-competence, defined as “the evaluative experience of oneself as a causal agent, an intentional being that can bring about desired outcomes” (Tafarodi and

Swann, 2001, p. 654). These researchers demonstrated that a two-factor model fit participants' responses to the SLCS better than the single-factor model suggested by a unidimensional view of self-esteem (Tafarodi and Swann, 1995). Subsequent research demonstrates the practical utility of the distinction between self-liking and self-competence by showing that these two dimensions of self-esteem are differentially related to other psychological constructs (e.g. Silvera *et al.*, 1998; Tafarodi and Milne, 2002).

Although the original version of the SLCS demonstrated adequate psychometric properties, there were a few minor problems with this scale. First, the self-liking and self-competence subscales were highly intercorrelated, with observed correlations often reaching 0.70 or higher (Tafarodi and Swann, 1995; Silvera *et al.*, 2001). Despite the fact that discriminant validity has been demonstrated for the two SLCS subscales, the high correlation between the two subscales limits the amount of unique variance each subscale can account for in outcome variables. Second, like many self-esteem measures (Taylor and Brown, 1988), scores on the SLCS were highly skewed such that most individuals had very high scores on both subscales. This prompted the development of the self-liking and competence scale-revised version (SLCS-R) (Tafarodi and Swann, 2001), which is used in the present research.

A substantial body of research has shown that self-esteem is related to numerous psychological constructs, including depression (Dori and Overholser, 1999), emotional reactions to success and failure (Dutton and Brown, 1997), and adult attachment (Roberts *et al.*, 1996). Research also shows that low self-esteem is generally associated with increased susceptibility to influence from others (Cox and Bauer, 1964) and specifically with scores on both the normative and informational components of the CSII scale (Bearden *et al.*, 1989). In the marketing literature, the need to maintain or augment self-esteem has been associated with materialism, with purchases in specific esteem-enhancing product categories such as those that enhance physical appearance (Arndt *et al.*, 2004), and with the degree of satisfaction people have with their material possessions (Jackson, 1979).

O'Guinn and Faber (1989) found that self-esteem is negatively related to compulsive buying behavior. Despite the fact that there are important differences between compulsive buying and impulse buying (Rook, 1987), these two phenomena share the central feature of losing impulse control while shopping. Thus, O'Guinn and Faber's (1989) results are consistent with the proposition that impulse buying might serve as an escape from negative psychological states such as low self-esteem. Moreover, Verplanken *et al.* (2005) argue that low self-esteem is likely to be a particularly powerful source of the types of negative psychological states that result in the use of impulse buying as a means of psychological relief. Previous research using the SLCS indicates that both the self-liking and self-competence subscales are most strongly associated with affective rather than cognitive measures (e.g. Tafarodi and Swann, 1995; Silvera *et al.*, 2001). Therefore:

H4a. Self-liking is negatively related to the affective component of impulse buying.

H4b. Self-competence is negatively related to the affective component of impulse buying.

H4b. Self-liking and self-competence are unrelated to the cognitive component of impulse buying.

Methodology

Participants

A questionnaire containing all of the measures used in the present study was administered to 277 students (135 male, 133 female, nine not reported) at a major English-speaking Canadian university. The average age of respondents was 23.00 (SD = 5.02) years.

Measures

Impulse buying

Impulse buying tendencies were measured using the 20-item impulse buying tendency scale (IBTS) (Verplanken and Herabadi, 2001). The IBTS contains two subscales, each of which is measured by ten items. The cognitive subscale contains items related to a lack of planning and deliberation in association with purchase decisions (e.g. "I usually think carefully before I buy something"). The affective subscale contains items related to feelings of excitement, lack of control, and the urge to buy (e.g. "I'm not the kind of person who 'falls in love at first sight' with things I see in shops"). Responses on all items are given using five-point Likert scales, and items are coded such that high scores indicate a strong impulse buying tendency. Both the cognitive ($\alpha = 0.89$) and affective ($\alpha = 0.84$) subscales of the IBTS showed good internal reliability.

Subjective wellbeing

Subjective wellbeing was measured using the five-item satisfaction with life scale (SWLS) (Diener *et al.*, 1985). The SWLS is unidimensional and contains items measuring a person's cognitive assessment of global life satisfaction (e.g. "I am satisfied with my life"). Responses on all items are given using seven-point Likert scales, and items are coded such that high scores indicate higher life satisfaction. The SWLS ($\alpha = 0.86$) showed good internal reliability.

Affect

Affect was measured using the 20-item positive affect and negative affect scale (PANAS) (Watson *et al.*, 1988). The PANAS contains two subscales, each of which is measured by ten items. The positive affect subscale measures the degree to which individuals experience positive emotional states (interested, excited, strong, enthusiastic, proud, alert, inspired, determined, attentive, and active) and the negative affect subscale measures the degree to which individuals experience negative emotional states (distressed, upset, guilty, scared, hostile, irritable, ashamed, nervous, jittery, and afraid). Participants were given the following instructions with regard to evaluating each of the 20 items: "indicate the extent to which you generally feel this way, that is, how you feel on the average." This phrasing was used in an attempt to obtain responses indicating traits rather than momentary states. Responses to all items used five-point scales with the following semantic labels: 1 = very slightly or not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = moderately, 4 = quite a bit, and 5 = extremely. Both the positive affect ($\alpha = 0.82$) and negative affect ($\alpha = 0.84$) subscales of the PANAS showed good internal reliability.

Social influence

The degree to which consumers are influenced by others was measured using the 12-item consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (CSII) scale (Bearden *et al.*, 1989). The CSII contains two subscales. The informational influence subscale includes three items measuring the degree to which individuals seek information related to purchases from their social environment (e.g. “I frequently gather information from friends or family about a product before I buy”). The normative influence subscale includes nine items measuring the degree to which consumers gain approval or affirmation from their social environment (e.g. “It is important that others like the products and brands I buy”). Responses on all items are given using seven-point Likert scales, and items are coded such that high scores indicate increased reliance on the social environment to determine purchase decisions. The normative subscale ($\alpha = 0.83$) of the CSII showed good internal reliability, and the informational subscale ($\alpha = 0.66$) showed acceptable internal reliability.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem was measured using the 16-item self-liking and competence scale-revised (SLCS-R) (Tafarodi and Swann, 2001). The SLCS-R contains two subscales, each of which is measured by eight items. The self-liking subscale measures feelings of social worth (e.g. “I feel great about who I am”), and the self-competence subscale measures feelings of efficacy and control (e.g. “I am almost always able to accomplish what I try for”). Responses on all items are given using five-point Likert scales, and items are coded such that high scores indicate positive self-esteem. Both the self-liking ($\alpha = 0.87$) and self-competence ($\alpha = 0.77$) subscales of the SLCS-R showed good internal reliability.

Results

Demographic variables

Based on previous research demonstrating stronger impulse buying tendencies in women than men (Dittmar, 2005) and a negative relationship between age and impulse buying (Wood, 1998; Kacen and Lee, 2002), preliminary analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between the two IBTS subscales and the gender and age of participants. T-tests indicate that women score significantly higher than men on both the cognitive (women: $M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.76$; men: $M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.84$; $t(264) = 3.24$, $p < 0.01$) and affective (women: $M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.71$; men: $M = 2.61$, $SD = 0.67$; $t(264) = 3.94$, $p < 0.001$) subscales of the IBTS. Age is negatively correlated with the affective subscale of the IBTS ($r(264) = -0.12$, $p < 0.05$) and uncorrelated with the cognitive subscale ($r(264) = 0.00$, *ns*).

Associations between psychological variables

Pearson correlations between the variables of interest in the present study are shown in Table I. The results shown in the first two rows of Table I and summarized in Table II are consistent with all hypotheses. The cognitive subscale of the IBTS is positively related to negative affect, negatively related to satisfaction with life and informational CSII, and unrelated to positive affect, normative CSII, and the two SLCS-R subscales. The affective subscale of the IBTS is positively related to negative affect and normative CSII, negatively related to both SLCS-R subscales, and unrelated to satisfaction with life, positive affect, and Informational CSII.

Regression models

The three psychological constructs that were significantly correlated with the cognitive subscale of the IBTS (SWLS, PANAS negative, and CSII informational) were included in a regression model to predict cognitive impulse buying tendencies. Gender was also included in this model because of its significant association with cognitive IBTS in the preliminary analyses. Consistent with *H1a* and *H3b*, SWLS ($\beta = -0.12$, $t(261) = -2.00$, $p < 0.05$) and informational CSII ($\beta = -0.12$, $t(261) = -2.03$, $p < 0.05$) are negatively associated with cognitive IBTS. Women also score significantly higher than men on cognitive IBTS ($\beta = 0.20$, $t(261) = 3.35$, $p < 0.01$). *H2a* is not supported, as PANAS negative affect is not significantly related to cognitive IBTS. The regression model as a whole showed significant prediction of cognitive IBTS ($F(4, 261) = 5.76$, $p < 0.001$) and low to moderate predictive power ($R^2 = 0.081$).

The four psychological constructs that were significantly correlated with the affective subscale of the IBTS (PANAS negative, CSII normative, and both SLCS-R subscales) were included in a regression analysis to predict affective IBTS. Gender and age were also included in this model because of their significant association with affective IBTS in the preliminary analyses. Consistent with *H2b* and *H3a*, both PANAS negative affect ($\beta = 0.21$, $t(257) = 3.29$, $p < 0.01$) and normative CSII ($\beta = 0.25$, $t(257) = 4.18$, $p < 0.001$) have significant positive relationships with affective IBTS. Women also have higher affective IBTS scores than men ($\beta = 0.28$, $t(257) = 4.95$, $p < 0.001$). *H4a* and *H4b* are not supported, as neither of the SLCS subscales is significantly related to affective IBTS. Age is also unrelated to affective IBTS. The regression model as a whole showed significant prediction of affective IBTS ($F(6, 257) = 11.54$, $p < 0.001$) and moderate predictive power ($R^2 = 0.212$).

General discussion

The correlational results from this study are fully consistent with our hypotheses (see Table II). Looking only at these first-order relationships, the present study appears to provide unilateral support for Verplanken *et al.*'s (2005) proposition that chronic impulse buying tendencies are associated with affect, and particularly with negative affect. However, the regression results paint a somewhat different picture. When other predictive factors are taken into account, negative affect is no longer significantly related to the cognitive IBTS and neither self-liking nor self-competence is significantly related to the affective IBTS.

In light of these results, it appears that Verplanken *et al.*'s (2005) model may need to be re-evaluated. Perhaps the first step in this re-evaluation derives from the need to differentiate between cognitive and affective components of impulse buying tendencies. Although this division of the impulse buying construct is relatively new, the cognitive and affective components show very different patterns of association with the psychological constructs used in the present study. The regression model predicting cognitive IBTS shows relatively weak power overall, and cognitive IBTS is unrelated to any of the measures in this study that focus on affective (rather than cognitive) evaluations. The only measure of a negative psychological state that is associated with cognitive IBTS in the regression model is the SWLS, which is specifically designed as a cognitive measure of global life satisfaction.

Table I Correlation matrix

	IBTS affective	SWLS	PANAS positive	PANAS negative	CSII normative	CSII informational	SLCS-R liking	SLCS-R competence
IBTS cognitive	0.53***	-0.15*	-0.06	0.13*	0.05	-0.12*	-0.07	-0.06
IBTS affective	-	-0.08	-0.05	0.025***	0.23***	0.05	-0.15*	-0.20**
SWLS	-	-	0.31***	-0.27***	-0.12*	0.04	0.52***	0.42***
PANAS positive	-	-	-	-0.17**	-0.10	0.14*	0.43***	0.48***
PANAS negative	-	-	-	-	0.29***	0.03	-0.47***	-0.35***
CSII normative	-	-	-	-	-	0.38***	-0.20**	-0.26***
CSII informational	-	-	-	-	-	-	-0.05	-0.09
SLCS-R liking	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.57***

Notes: *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); ***Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

Table II Summary of hypotheses

Hypothesis	Result
H1a. SWLS is negatively related to cognitive IBTS	Supported
H1b. SWLS is unrelated to affective IBTS	Supported
H2a. Negative affect is positively related to cognitive IBTS	Partially supported*
H2b. Negative affect is positively related to affective IBTS	Supported
H2c. Positive affect is unrelated to IBTS	Supported
H3a. Normative CSII is positively related to affective IBTS	Supported
H3b. Informational CSII is negatively related to cognitive IBTS	Supported
H4a. Self-liking is negatively related to affective IBTS	Partially supported*
H4b. Self-competence is negatively related to affective IBTS	Partially supported*
H4c. Self-liking and self-competence are unrelated to cognitive IBTS	Supported

Note: *Supported in correlation analysis but not in regression analysis

Affective IBTS shows a pattern of associations more consistent with Verplanken *et al.*'s (2005) model. In the regression analyses, affective IBTS is associated both with negative affect and with susceptibility to normative interpersonal influence. Although neither self-liking nor self-competence is significantly related to affective IBTS in the regression model, this might simply be the result of the conceptual similarity of these self-esteem measures to the other measures used in this study. With the PANAS capturing negative mood and unhappiness and normative CSII capturing a lack of self-confidence that leads to reliance on others to decide what is "right" or "best," there might be little variance remaining to be explained by self-liking and self-competence. Furthermore, despite the fact that the SLCS subscales fell out of the regression model, the overall predictive power of the regression model for affective IBTS is substantially stronger than the model for cognitive IBTS. The negative psychological constructs used in the present study also generally show stronger associations with affective than with cognitive IBTS. The differential results between the two IBTS subscales suggest both that Verplanken *et al.*'s model is more relevant to affective than cognitive impulse buying tendencies and that researchers in general should make greater efforts to separate the two facets of impulse buying. Although such efforts might provide a practical challenge in terms of identifying behavioral manifestations of cognitive vs. affective impulse buying tendencies in certain types of research (e.g. field studies), it might be possible to

identify distinct behavioral manifestations based on a theoretical analysis of the mechanisms underlying impulse buying.

For example, escape theory (Duval and Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund, 1975) proposes that people sometimes find it aversive to be self-aware and thus seek means by which to avoid self-awareness. Moreover, this avoidance of self-awareness involves both affective elements such as anxiety and guilt, and cognitive elements such as narrowing the cognitive/perceptual field (e.g. only thinking about the immediate purchase context) to avoid global thoughts associated with aversive self-awareness (Heatherton and Baumeister, 1991). Avoidance of aversive self-awareness is conceptually similar to the avoidance of negative psychological states that the present research has used as a basis for predicting impulse buying tendencies, and the affective and cognitive antecedents postulated by escape theory have distinct behavioral consequences. For example, feelings of guilt are likely to be associated with a higher likelihood of returning the product, whereas a narrowed cognitive/perceptual field might limit the products considered for impulse purchases, both in terms of physical layout and in terms of variety (i.e. a narrow cognitive field should be associated with a tendency to impulse buy the same type of product rather than a variety of different product types).

Despite the fact that the results differ for affective vs cognitive impulse buying tendencies, this study still provides empirical support for Verplanken *et al.*'s (2005) general

proposition that impulse buying is linked to negative psychological states. Conversely, there is no support whatsoever for the idea that impulse buying is associated with chronic positive psychological states. These findings, together with Verplanken *et al.*'s (2005) finding that impulse buying and excessive snacking are associated behaviors, suggest that impulse buying should perhaps no longer be viewed as "harmless fun." Considering the link between impulse buying and negative emotions, as well as the occasionally compulsive nature of impulse buying and the harmful consequences of excessive impulse buying, this "harmless" behavior might more appropriately be viewed as a potential problem that needs to be controlled.

Managerial implications

This research has important implications for public policy, which has thus far been focused on behaviors with more obvious harmful implications like smoking, drinking, and gambling, but has generally treated impulse buying as non-problematic. A detailed analysis of how to control impulse buying is beyond the scope of this paper, but the relationships with existing constructs suggest some possibilities. For example, the positive association between normative CSII and the affective facet of impulse buying tendencies suggests at least two possibilities: efforts to convince individuals who engage in chronic impulse buying to resist social pressures to buy could potentially reduce normative CSII and have carryover effects in the form of reductions in affective impulse buying tendencies; and efforts to convince people who are high in normative CSII that impulse buying is less socially desirable than they believe could reduce impulse buying in this target group.

Similarly, social marketing campaigns can be developed that consider the relationship between negative affect and impulse buying. While mild levels of impulse purchasing may be relatively harmless, chronic impulse purchasing can have serious consequences. Messages targeted to chronic impulse buyers could stress that "you don't have to buy something to feel good about yourself," or "feeling blue, resist the impulse to buy."

Manufacturers of alcohol products, bars, and beer/liquor retailers have long had programs and campaigns to encourage patrons to drink responsibly. Many casinos have programs to encourage their patrons to gamble responsibly, and to educate staff to recognize patrons with potential gambling addictions. These programs represent ways in which the alcohol and gambling industries have embraced social responsibility by preventing possible negative consequences for the consumers, and, at the same time, protecting their reputations.

In the future, retailers may be ready for similar programs to recognize and limit the negative impacts of impulse buying. Again, this may have positive social impacts, and, at the same time, positive bottom line impacts for the retailer. While encouraging impulse buying can have a short-term positive effect on the retail bottom line, a socially responsible retailer should be alert to the significant potential for negative ramifications resulting from impulse buying. Retailers could win positive public support for implementing programs aimed at curbing excessive impulse buying. In addition, chronic or excessive impulse buyers may often spend above their means, making them poor credit risks, both for retailers and credit card companies. A better understanding of the linkages

between chronic impulse buying and other psychological constructs may help retailers and credit card companies identify potentially poor credit risks.

Limitations/future research

One possible concern with the present study might be the question of generalizability, due to the use of a student sample. A number of researchers have suggested that the lack of external validity inherent in using a student sample limits the generalizability of results (e.g. Lynch, 1982). This is particularly a concern when research results are focused on average evaluations or normative responses to stimuli (e.g. student evaluations of rap music probably would not generalize to an elderly population). However, this particular study focuses primarily on relationships between several psychological constructs, which are substantially less vulnerable to generalizability concerns (e.g. Kardes, 1996). Furthermore, student samples are fairly representative of the increasingly important young adult market segment. Nevertheless, especially considering the fact that relatively little previous research exists in this domain, it might be desirable to replicate the present findings in a representative sample of adult consumers.

Another possible concern with the present study is the use of a survey rather than an experimental methodology. We agree that an experimental approach is ideal for examining the impact of impulse purchases on short-term mood states. Previous research has used such an approach to demonstrate that impulse purchases, on average, have a positive short-term emotional impact on the consumer. In contrast, the goal of the present research was to examine associations between chronic dispositions – traits rather than states – a goal best achieved through the use of a survey approach. The present finding that chronic impulse buying tendencies tend to be associated with chronic negative affect suggest that the short-term benefits of impulse buying might have serious long-term costs to the individual. Future research, preferably longitudinal, should investigate this concern. Future research should also examine additional psychological correlates of impulse buying tendencies, both to gain a more complete understanding of this phenomenon and to determine ways to keep impulse buying from taking on its compulsive darker aspect.

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About the authors

David H. Silvera is Associate Professor in the College of Business at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He has

published in journals such as *Journal of Business Research*, *International Marketing Review*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, and *European Journal of Marketing*. His research interests focus on consumer behavior and self-esteem.

Anne M. Lavack is Director of the Kenneth Levene Graduate School of Business, as well as Professor and Associate Dean in the Faculty of Business Administration at the University of Regina. She has published in a variety of journals including *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, and *Journal of Product and Brand Management*. Her research interests focus on social marketing. Anne M. Lavack is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: anne.lavack@uregina.ca

Fredric Kropp is a Professor in the Fisher Graduate School of International Business at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. He has written articles for a wide variety of journals including *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of Euromarketing*, and *International Marketing Review*. His research interests focus on how values relate to consumer behaviour and entrepreneurial behaviour.

Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

It has been put forward that modest levels of impulse buying (IB) can be gratifying and therapeutic. But recent research suggests links between recurrent IB and the more pernicious compulsive buying. The premise here is that IB can also become harmful and self-destructive.

What is impulse buying?

IB is difficult to classify as a behavior type as it is not founded on diagnostic process, rational choice or high involvement. Likewise, the powerful emotional element associated with IB does not correlate with low involvement purchases.

Typically, IB:

- involves unplanned and sudden purchases;
- is driven by cognitive and affective forces. The cognitive aspect relates to the lack of planning and the affective aspect involves overpowering urges and strong sensations of pleasure or exhilaration; and
- is driven by hedonistic rather than practical considerations.

Another perception has IB as a "self-regulatory mechanism aimed at reducing negative emotions" that derive from such as low-esteem. Research has also indicated that individuals revealing IB tendencies can lack such as autonomy, structure and conscientiousness.

Few researchers have explored IB from a psychological perspective. However, one key study concluded that impulse buying tendencies are the product of negative psychological states. Silvera *et al.* point to limitations in the earlier work and set out to build on its findings by examining the relationship

between IB and a wider range of psychological constructs. The aim is to identify the negative psychological states most closely associated with IB tendencies.

Psychological constructs and IB

Subjective well being (SWB)

This is regarded as a broad construct that incorporates elements of an individual's positive and negative affective responses and their satisfaction with general and specific aspects of life. Family and work are examples of the latter. Previously, life satisfaction has been directly related to positive affect and inversely related to negative affect. It is also thought that the construct may be positively associated with optimism and self-esteem and negatively associated with depression. There are suggestions of weak positive correlation between increases in material wealth and SWB. Some studies have indicated demographic factors such as education and socio-economic status as influential factors.

Affect

A key tenet is that cognitive models alone are not able to fully explain purchase decision making. Some researchers believe that affect is the main driver of consumer behavior and that the construct may also exert indirect impact by influencing cognition. Affect has been previously considered a state variable but in the present study is conceived as a trait or chronic predilection. Positive and negative affect are considered as separate dimensions rather than polar opposites of the same dimension. Consequently, high levels of negative affect are perceived as "psychologically unhealthy" though it is not necessarily the case that low readings of positive affect are viewed likewise. Previous research has corroborated this and has indicated negative rather than positive affect as providing the impetus behind IB.

Social influence

The premise here is that consumer choice can be influenced by other people. Susceptibility to social influence is related to other behaviors such as lack of impulse control and seeking respite from negative feelings. Social influence is regarded as being composed of two elements: informational and normative. The informational element concerns the propensity to seek information about potential purchases through observation of or contact with other people. It is pointed out by the authors that such behavioral tendencies conflict with the cognitive aspect of IB. Conformity is the basis of the normative element, relating as it does to an individual's desire to make purchases that identify with or meet the approval of others.

Self-esteem

It has been defined as a multidimensional construct containing two distinct yet interrelated factors: self-liking and self-competence. These factors respectively derive from "positive regard from one's social environment" and from "assessment of one's own abilities". One notion is that these two dimensions of self-esteem relate differently to other psychological structures. Previous research has linked self-esteem to many other psychological states such as depression and emotional response to success and failure. Individuals with low self-esteem are thought to be more susceptible to influence from others in both informational and normative terms. Marketing research has indicated links between materialism and self-esteem. For instance, evidence suggests that individuals purchase products to improve personal

appearance in order to raise self-esteem levels. Similar claims have been made in relation to the satisfaction gained from having other material possessions. A previous investigation found self-esteem to be negatively related to compulsive buying behavior. Silvera *et al.* assume that similar links will exist to IB because of the core feature it shares with its more harmful relation. They also predict low self-esteem to be one of the negative psychological states most strongly linked to IB.

Study and findings

A questionnaire relating to IB and the different psychological constructs was administered to 277 students at a major English-speaking university in Canada. Respondents were almost equally divided by gender and the mean age was 23 years. Recognized scales were employed to measure responses, using five and seven-point scales as required. Different hypotheses were formed and tested.

Previous studies found stronger IB tendencies in women than men and negative correlation between age and IB. Findings here mirrored this earlier work.

The present study also indicated that the cognitive aspect of IB is:

- positively related to negative affect;
- negatively related to satisfaction with life and informational social influence; and
- unrelated to positive affect, normative social influence and both of the self-esteem dimensions.

And the affective aspect of IB is:

- positively related to negative affect and normative social influence;
- negatively related to both dimensions of self-esteem; and
- unrelated to life satisfaction, positive affect and informational social influence.

However, when taking predictive factors into account negative affect was no longer significantly related to the cognitive aspect of IB.

Overall, the authors believe there is greater predictive power for affective IB than for cognitive IB and feel that researchers should aim to divide these two facets of the behavior. However, there are inherent difficulties in doing so given that IB can contain both cognitive and affective elements.

But despite the differing indications for cognitive and affective impulse buying tendencies, the study still provides support for the notion that IB is closely associated with negative psychological states.

Recommendations and further research

The seemingly more potent affective aspect of IB is related to negative affect and social influence. Silvera *et al.* therefore suggest that public policy makers should attempt to persuade people with a strong penchant for IB that such behavior may be less attractive than they assume. Sending out messages that feeling positive about one-self does not depend on making purchases is another potential way of addressing the link between negative affect and IB.

Retailers may also be well advised to follow suit in promoting responsible consumer behavior, even though IB may be good for profits in the short term. However, as the authors point out, such consumers soon become poor credit risks for both retailer and finance company alike. Social acclaim is one reward for retailers that adopt such strategies.

Further studies using a more representative sample of the population would be useful, as would longitudinal research into the potentially serious longer-term implications for the impulsive consumer. Any investigation into short-term effects on mood may be best served through experiment rather than survey. Silvera *et al.* also suggest that

examination of other psychological states may further the understanding of IB.

(A précis of the article “Impulse buying: the role of affect, social influence, and subjective well-being”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)