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# The Buying Impulse

DENNIS W. ROOK\*

What is impulse buying? Despite the marketing and lifestyle factors that encourage it today, impulse buying is not yet well understood. This is due in part to the long-standing absence of a compelling conceptualization of this distinctive type of purchasing behavior. This article reviews extant research on impulsive behavior and then introduces a new interpretation of impulse buying. Following this are the results of an exploratory study that investigates the phenomenology of consumers' impulse buying episodes. The research identifies: (1) the subjective experiences that distinguish the onset of the buying impulse, (2) how consumers cope with their impulsive urges to buy, and (3) the types of negative consequences they incur as a result of their impulsive buying.

Impulse buying is a pervasive and distinctive aspect of American consumers' lifestyles and also a focal point of considerable marketing management activity. Research dating back over 35 years reports impulse purchasing to be widespread among the consumer population and across numerous product categories (Applebaum 1951; Clover 1950; Katona and Mueller 1955; West 1951). More recently, one study found that between 27 and 62 percent of consumers' department store purchases fell into the impulse category and that few product lines were unaffected by impulse buying (Bellenger, Robertson, and Hirschman 1978). Marketing innovations such as credit cards, cash machines, "instant credit," 24-hour retailing, home shopping networks, and telemarketing now make it easier than ever before for consumers to purchase things on impulse. Also, there is some evidence that the Calvinistic sense of sin about spending is less severe today than it has been in the past (Albee 1977; Longman 1985; Meninger 1973).

Despite all of this, there has been little consensus about what impulse buying actually is (Kollat and Willett 1969; Rook and Hoch 1985). Consequently, we know surprisingly little about the contents and dynamics of consumers' buying impulses. This article addresses these unresolved issues by providing: (1) a discussion of select social science interpretations of impulsive human behavior, (2) a critical review of previous impulse buying research, (3) a psychological definition of im-

pulse buying, and (4) a report of the findings from an exploratory study of consumers' self-reported impulse buying episodes.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPULSES AND IMPULSIVE BEHAVIOR

Much human activity is driven by impulses that are biochemically and psychologically stimulated. The former function neurophysiologically as waves of active change that continue along a nerve fiber and trigger a particular somatic or mental response. The latter function as psychologically stimulating and motivating agents that originate from both conscious and unconscious activity (Wolman 1973). One authoritative and comprehensive definition of a psychological impulse describes it as: "a strong, sometimes irresistible urge; a sudden inclination to act without deliberation" (Goldenson 1984, p. 37). An impulse is not consciously planned, but arises immediately upon confrontation with a certain stimulus (Wolman 1973). The onset of a psychological impulse occurs suddenly and spontaneously. Once triggered, an impulse encourages immediate action, and the urge may be powerful and persistent. Impulses sometimes prove irresistible. However, a behavior is not impulsive simply because it occurs swiftly. Habitual behavior, for example, is relatively automatic but not necessarily impulsive. Also, in emergencies individuals are apt to act immediately, but this may be more an instinctive than an impulsive response.

In a general sense, impulsive behavior has been a target of philosophical discussion for many years. It is a central theme of the legend of Adam and Eve (Ainslee 1975), and the focal point of fables such as "The Grasshopper and the Ant." From a more formal perspective, economists have long observed people who sharply and foolishly discount the future (Jevons 1871/1911; Mill

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1848/1909; Samuelson 1937; Strotz 1956). More recent economic analyses focus on the psychological conflict that sometimes arises from consumers' choices between saving and impulsive spending (Thaler and Shefrin 1981).

For some time sociologists have studied patterns of "deferred gratification" (Schneider and Lysgaard 1953), "impulse renunciation" (Davis and Havinghurst 1946), and "instrumental orientation" (Parsons 1951) that are learned and developed in childhood. Some early sociological analyses concluded that the failure to learn effective impulse control is more prevalent among the lower classes (Hollingshead 1949; Whyte 1943), but the findings are inconclusive (Phypers 1970; Strauss 1962). Several studies suggest that adolescents with histories of impulsive behavior have a defective conception of future time (Barndt and Johnson 1955; Davids 1969; Davids, Kidder, and Reich 1962; Stein, Sarbin, and Kulik 1968).

Social psychologists have also studied impulsiveness through experimental research on the capacity for delaying gratification and have found it to correlate positively with age, intelligence, social responsibility, and the presence of a father in the home. The ability to delay gratification has also been found to correlate negatively with an acquiescent personality, a disadvantaged family, and the length of the delay interval (Melikian 1959; Mischel 1966; Walls and Smith 1970). Research also showed that gratification delay is more prevalent among people who are high in need for achievement (Atkinson and Feather 1966; Mischel and Gilligan 1964).

Psychoanalytic psychology also depicts impulse control as socially necessary. Freud (1911/1956) claims that human civilization is based on individuals' development of internalized impulse controls. He interprets impulses as products of two competing forces: the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The pleasure principle encourages immediate gratification but is compromised insofar as a person responds to the reality principle's tendency toward rational deliberation. These two forces often compete, because impulses encourage action without careful consideration about the objective environment, and with little or no regard for potential realistic consequences. If an individual lacks sufficient impulse control, it represents a defect of repression that may lead to severe psychosocial problems (Kipnis 1971; Reich 1925; Winshie 1977).

Impulses may be difficult to resist because they often involve anticipated pleasurable experiences. The reality principle ultimately pursues personal gratification; the crucial difference is that the reality principle's orientation is more long-term and goal-oriented, which tends to encourage delayed over immediate gratification. In human development the transition in dominance from the pleasure principle to the reality principle is one of the most important advances in the development of the ego (Freud 1920/1949). The transition is rarely a

smooth one, however, and can generate intrapersonal conflict and ambivalence.

## CONSUMERS' BUYING IMPULSES

Although impulsive behavior can occur in any setting, consumer impulse buying is an extensive everyday context for it. In the modern marketplace, spontaneous urges to buy and consume often compete with the practical necessity to delay the immediate gratification that buying provides. Market researchers have had a long-standing interest in this pervasive phenomenon, but many questions about impulsive purchase behavior still remain unanswered.

### A Critical Review of Impulse Buying Research

Extensive research on impulse buying began in the early 1950s and sought to investigate those purchase decisions that are made *after* the consumer enters a retail environment. The DuPont *Consumer Buying Habits Studies* (1948–1965), and also studies sponsored by the Point-of-Purchase Advertising Institute (e.g., Patterson 1963), gave an impetus to impulse buying research during this period. The DuPont studies provided the paradigm for most early research and defined impulse buying as an "unplanned" purchase. This definition was typically operationalized as the difference between a consumer's total purchases at the completion of a shopping trip, and those that were listed as intended purchases prior to entering a store. Numerous studies subsequently investigated the frequencies of unplanned "impulse" buying across various product categories (Applebaum 1951; Clover 1950; Katona and Mueller 1955; West 1951), and in different retail settings (Clover 1950; *Consumer Buying Habits Studies* 1965).

Impulse buying research proliferated and extended to investigations of how merchandising stimuli such as retail shelf location (Patterson 1963) and amount of shelf space (Cox 1964) affected impulse buying. Other studies discovered the types of circumstances in which consumers buy things without prior planning (Stern 1962) and examined the relationships between consumers' demographic and lifestyle characteristics and their impulse buying susceptibility (Kollat and Willett 1967).

As impulse buying research grew more extensive, it also came under widespread theoretical and methodological attacks. Two problems emerged to cloud the findings of these earlier studies. First, the taxonomical research approach that classified products into impulse and nonimpulse categories tends to obscure the fact that almost anything can be purchased on impulse (Kollat and Willett 1969; Shapiro 1973; Stern 1962). Today, impulse buying is still widely discussed in terms of which products are and are not impulse items (Assael

1985; Bellenger et al. 1978). A taxonomical approach can be useful, but it tends to divert attention from the internal motivation and its expression that are crucial to the impulsive purchase. It is people, not products, who experience consuming impulses (Rook and Hoch 1985). Also, the taxonomical orientation commonly conceives of impulse buying as involving only the purchase of low-priced, low-involvement goods (Assael 1985). Impulse buying's product dimensions extend well beyond snack items and gossip magazines to the outer limits of one's cash and credit. An extra TV set, a VCR, a larger microwave oven, an important piece of furniture, and a vacation cruise can all be impulse purchases as can a package of potato chips or a candy bar.

A second problem afflicting impulse buying research is the absence of an adequate theoretical framework to guide empirical work. Some time ago Nesbitt (1959) argued that some shopping behavior that is characterized as unplanned, or impulse buying, may actually be a form of in-store planning that a shopper uses to finalize his/her intentions. Planning is a relative term; consumers' plans are sometimes contingent and altered by environmental circumstance. Stern (1962) and Kollat and Willett (1969) both criticized the "unplanned purchase" definition as too vague and as encompassing too many different types of behavior. The operational procedures used to measure "unplanned" impulse buying are also problematic (Pollay 1968). When defined as the difference between actually concluded and previously planned acquisitions, impulse buying is difficult to measure accurately because consumers may be unable or unwilling to fully articulate their prepurchase intentions (Kollat and Willett 1969). Estimates of impulse purchases are likely to be exaggerated when a particular shopper uses the retail store itself as a memory cue. Remembering that one needs a gallon of milk or some toilet paper does not commonly involve truly impulsive behavior (Stern 1962). Not all unplanned purchases are impulsively decided. On the other hand, impulse purchase estimates will be attenuated when a product item is on the planning list, but the actual brand purchase was made on impulse.

Despite all of this criticism, impulse buying is still widely characterized as "unplanned" purchase behavior (Bellenger et al. 1978; Cobb and Hoyer 1986; Engel, Blackwell, and Kollat 1978), although there have been some recent attempts to reexamine the impulse buying concept (Kroeber-Riel 1980; Rook and Hoch 1985; Weinberg and Gottwald 1982). Discussion has not yet offered a behavioral model that explains impulse buying by linking it to other types of impulsive behavior. Nor has the extant research provided a comprehensive, descriptive account of impulse buying's psychological contents. Most research has been conducted without the theoretical grounding that descriptive, phenomenological analyses often yield (Anderson 1983; Deshpande 1983; Glaser and Strauss 1967). As a result, we

really know very little about what happens when consumers experience the impulse to buy.

In a general sense, most large-scale models of consumer behavior have failed to account explicitly for impulse buying behavior. Impulse buying is reactive behavior and often involves an immediate action response to a stimulus (Kroeber-Riel 1980). In most models, arousal and purchase are linked indirectly and depicted as mediated by "perceptual bias," "information recalled," and "intention" (Howard and Sheth 1969) or by "overt search" and "long-term memory" (Howard 1977). These models do not explain situations where arousal leads directly to action. Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1968) depict this as occurring as a result of "unanticipated circumstances," but this category is too broad.

## A Reconceptualization of Impulse Buying

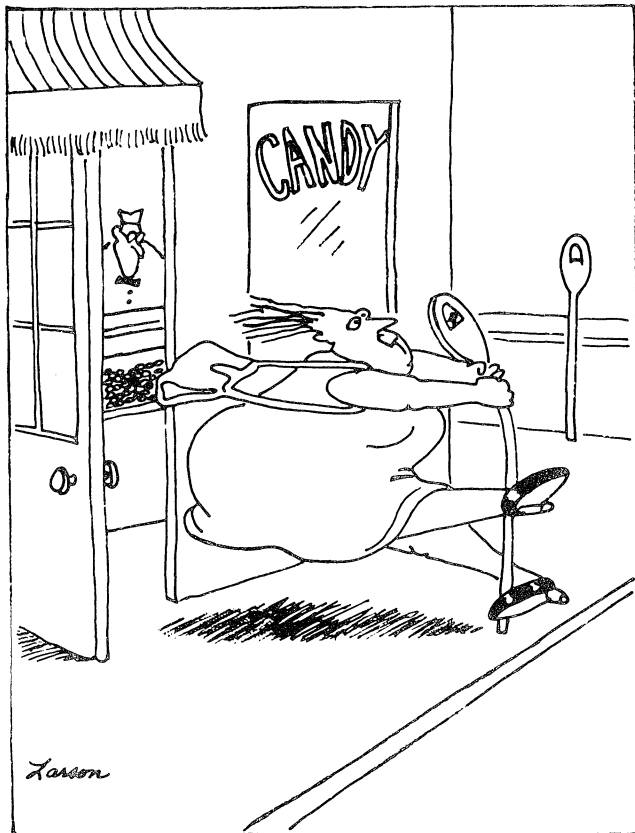
The term "impulse buying" refers to a narrower and more specific range of phenomena than "unplanned purchasing" does. More importantly, it identifies a psychologically distinctive type of behavior that differs dramatically from contemplative modes of consumer choice. This article defines impulse buying in the following way:

Impulse buying occurs when a consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately. The impulse to buy is hedonically complex and may stimulate emotional conflict. Also, impulse buying is prone to occur with diminished regard for its consequences.

Impulse buying is relatively extraordinary and exciting; contemplative buying is more ordinary and tranquil (Weinberg and Gottwald 1982). Buying impulses are often forceful and urgent; contemplative purchasing is less so. Also, impulse buying is a fast experience, not a slow one. It is more likely to involve grabbing a product than choosing one. Impulsive behavior is more spontaneous than cautious. A buying impulse tends to disrupt the consumer's behavior stream, while a contemplative purchase is more likely to be a part of one's regular routine. Impulse buying is more emotional than rational, and it is more likely to be perceived as "bad" than "good." Finally, the consumer is more likely to feel out-of-control when buying impulsively than when making contemplative purchases.

This interpretation is close in spirit to the "pure impulse" behavior that Stern (1962) identified but failed to elaborate with much detail, and it is consistent with most behavioral science approaches to explaining impulsive human behavior. Also, it corresponds with popular everyday characterizations of impulsive urges to buy and consume, such as the imaginary one depicted in Gary Larsen's cartoon (see the Figure).

FIGURE



"The Far Side" cartoon by Gary Larson is reprinted by permission of Chronicle Features, San Francisco, CA.

## AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF CONSUMERS' IMPULSE BUYING EPISODES

To date almost no published research has examined the behavioral content of individuals' impulse buying episodes. Earlier conceptualizations of impulse buying correctly identified the absence of forethought as a distinguishing feature. However, these definitions emphasize behavior that is *not* occurring, and research that relies on them has generally failed to illuminate what actually transpires during an impulse buying episode. Consequently, we know relatively little about how consumers experience the impulse to buy things. This state of affairs suggests the appropriateness of an exploratory research design that prioritizes discovery over confirmation (Deshpande 1983; Kaplan 1964).

The study reported here is also sympathetic to the epistemological call for more naturalistic and experiential research approaches (Belk 1982, 1986; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Levy 1978, 1982, 1986; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Rook 1985; Sherry 1984). The research seeks to generate a "thicker description" (Geertz 1973) of the buying impulse than currently exists by exploring

the phenomenology of impulsive shopping behavior through consumers' verbatim self-reports, with a minimum of formal structure. The methodological approach taken is sympathetic to phenomenological psychologists' criticism of excessive reductionism in behavioral research (Bolton 1982; Merleau-Ponty 1962) and seeks to provide a comprehensive account of consumers' impulse buying episodes.

The study's primary objectives are to identify impulse buying's behavioral components and to observe the extent to which consumers' subjective experiences correspond to the concept of impulse buying developed earlier in this article. The study focuses on these central aspects of conventional, everyday consumer impulse buying: (1) the experiential features that distinguish its onset and resolution, and (2) consumers' experiences with negative consequences following impulsive purchases.

### Instrument, Sample, and Data Collection

The data reported here were collected using a questionnaire that asked respondents these three (paraphrased) open-ended questions about their impulse buying:

1. How did your most recent sudden urge to buy something come about? What happened first? Next?
2. What kind of feeling is it when you experience the sudden urge to buy something?
3. What kinds of negative consequences have you incurred as a result of your impulse shopping?

Approximately one-half page was allocated as response space for each question, and respondents were encouraged to provide complete and detailed answers, using the full space provided. Following this were several demographic questions. Compared to data elicited through fixed-format surveys on the one hand and that from intensive depth interviews on the other, the quantity of data obtained represents a midrange of response depth. The average number of words provided for each of the three questions was 86, 43, and 52, respectively.

The questionnaires were completed using both personal interview and self-completion approaches, with each accounting for approximately half the total. Usable data were collected from a sample of 133 respondents (65 males and 68 females) who were selected from college classrooms and off-campus field settings in the southwestern United States. Respondents were selected using quota sampling procedures that were designed to guarantee approximately equal representation between the sexes and also across age groups. Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 89 ( $m = 38.7$ ;  $sd = 14.5$ ). Sixty-six were married; 67 were single. Finally, the sample's social status was generally representative of the lower middle to upper middle class groups.

## Data Analysis

Respondents' verbal protocols were analyzed using content analytic procedures. This is an appropriate mechanism for quantifying qualitative data (Kassarjian 1977). Some coding categories were derived a priori; others were constructed inductively from a representative subsample of 20 respondents. For example, this approach was used to define a manageable number of categories that account for the types of negative consequences that were reported to occur as a result of impulse buying.

*Category Reliability.* Relying on procedures outlined by Kassarjian (1977, 1983), 14 coding categories were defined for analyzing respondents' descriptions of their impulse buying experiences. Some categories were more or less self-defining, while more abstract categories required explicit written definitions. Two trained judges (both graduate students) conducted the content analysis. The categories and coding instructions were pretested using a representative subsample of 20 questionnaires. Following this, some category definitions were revised. No coding categories had to be discarded due to the judges' inability to reach reasonable levels of reliability.

*Interjudge and Intrajudge Reliability.* The content analysis involved a total of 1,862 separate judgments; there were 75 interjudge disagreements. This resulted in an overall interjudge reliability figure of 96 percent, which conforms to conventional acceptance criteria (Kassarjian 1977). Individual category reliabilities ranged from a low of 84 up to 100 percent, with most well beyond the conventional minimum of 80 percent (Kassarjian 1977). Consistent with Kassarjian's (1977) observation, coding disagreements tended to cluster around the more abstract categories. All disagreements between the judges were discussed, and the reported research results reflect a 100 percent resolution. Intra-judge reliability, based on a reanalysis of the data two months after the initial coding, was 94 percent.

## EXPERIENCING THE IMPULSE TO BUY

After receiving some preliminary instructions, respondents were provided with a simple definition of impulse buying ("a sudden urge to buy something"). They were then asked to recall the last time they had experienced something like this and to describe it in detail. Respondents were asked specifically to tell how it came about, where they were when it happened, and how it seized them. Beyond this they were allowed considerable freedom in answering these initial and subsequent questions.

Respondents' anecdotes provide vivid pictures of typical and more unusual impulse buying episodes. Eight distinctive behavioral features emerged from respondents' descriptions of their impulse buying expe-

riences. Although each element was not found in every protocol, most appeared relatively often and two are conceptually important despite lower reported frequencies. Because respondents were not asked specifically about each of these impulse buying features, their self-reports represent a type of unaided recall. Consequently, it is likely that some features occurred more frequently than they were reported. Selections from respondents' anecdotes are presented verbatim, with identifying age and sex information indicated in parentheses following each quotation.

### Spontaneous Urges to Buy

The buying impulse is unexpected; it arises spontaneously and urges the consumer to "BUY NOW!" Almost one third (32 percent) of the sample mentioned this aspect explicitly. Respondents described "all of a sudden" being hit with urges to buy something:

I saw the ice cream and immediately wanted some. (male-45)

I was in the Pottery Barn browsing, and saw this crystal candle holder. It came over me instantly. (male-34)

The sudden urge to buy is likely to be triggered by a visual confrontation with a product or by some promotional stimulus, but the buying impulse does not always depend on direct visual stimulation. Some respondents described sitting at home and suddenly experiencing the urge to go out and buy something, with no apparent external visual encouragement.

### Power and Compulsion: Intensity and Force

Psychological impulses stimulate a desire to act immediately, and the inclination may be urgent and intense (Goldenson 1984). Respondents often described the feeling of having to possess or to buy something instantly. Almost a third of the sample (31 percent) volunteered that the buying impulse made them feel compelled to purchase something:

It's the feeling of "I want that, and by God I'm gonna get it!" (female-48-describing a dress)

It becomes almost an obsession. I start looking for ways to get it. Somehow I feel I can't wait. (male-19-describing a motor scooter)

Buying impulses are likely to occupy center stage quickly and become intensely preoccupying. These recollections illustrate how totally involving the buying impulse can become:

For me it was a total mind filling experience. I could only think of one thing, and that was where I was going to put it when I got home. (male-68-describing a painting)

Once I can see it in my mind, it won't go away until I buy it. If I can see it, that's it. (female-55-describing a piece of jewelry)

Some respondents described the force behind their buying impulses as being "like a hunger," even "animal-like." They spoke forcefully about their "NEEDS" and "WANTS", and their sudden determination to gratify them. Some confessed to feeling compelled, obsessed, and desperate. These descriptions reflect contemporary folk conceptions about products' impulsive allures.

### Excitement and Stimulation

Respondents varied in the degree to which they portrayed the buying impulse as a source of personal excitement. In describing how it feels when an impulse to buy something comes over them, a few said that it was "no big deal:"

It's nothing unusual—either you want it or you don't. (female-70)

It isn't anything spectacular. I guess you could say it is a little exciting. (female-44)

Many more described the impulse to buy as being very stimulating. Almost one fifth (19 percent) of the sample mentioned this aspect, depicting the sudden urge to buy something as "exciting," "thrilling," or "wild."

The variety and high levels of excitement that are attributed to impulse buying distinguish it from more calm and rational consumer decision making. One respondent said the onset of a buying impulse feels "like turning up the excitement volume." It comes on as a surprise and provides novelty and spontaneity. The buying impulse tends to disrupt an individual's ongoing behavior stream. This may cause it to be frightening, too; the extraordinary stimulation can induce feelings of being out-of-control. One respondent said the excitement is "like falling in love with a product." Some even reported experiencing feeling quasi-physiological symptoms, as the following anecdote illustrates:

The item you are sucked into stands out from the rest. As soon as you see it you stop walking and stare at it for a few minutes, then it suddenly strikes your head and gives you goosebumps. (male-27)

Other respondents described feeling a "tingling sensation," a "warm feeling," "hot flashes," or a "surge of energy" when struck by the impulse to buy. These data conflict with characterizations of impulse buying as a type of low-involvement purchasing (Assael 1985). Impulse buying can be highly involving.

### Synchronicity

Adding to this excitement is a perceived sense of synchronicity. This theme appeared in only a handful (5 percent) of the stories and involves the magic of the happening, combining forces perceived as both internal and external. Individuals who reported this type of experience said they felt that they were in the right place at the right time, the beneficiaries of a unique and for-

titous convergence of events. They described feeling things suddenly and synchronically fall into place:

It felt like something that you had been looking for for a long time had appeared before your eyes, and if you don't buy it now you won't have another chance. It is just the right place and time. (female-37-describing a pair of shoes)

The impulse objects were interpreted as meant personally, or even preordained, for them. Running into the product just serendipitously happened to them, and recognition of its appropriateness came with the speed of light. This likely involves some displacement of blame upon the object ("the devil made me do it"), with an implicit abdication of personal responsibility. Despite its relative infrequency, the synchronicity theme points to a rationalized decision-process element that may be latent in larger numbers.

### Product Animation: Fantastic Forces

Several respondents invested buying impulses with quasi-mystical properties. Some said they felt "hypnotized" or "mesmerized" by the experience and found themselves mindlessly moving toward a cashier, as if in a dream. A few others animated the objects of their desires. Their stories involved products that are not inert but are empowered with motility and a will. The impulse object demands attention, directs the consumer's activity, and ultimately determines the outcome, as these typical protocols illustrate:

I was standing in the grocery store checkout line, and the candy bar was staring there at me. (male-26)

The pants were shrieking "buy me," so I knew right then that I better walk away and get something else done. (female-35)

I had gone on to a different department, but the sweater was following me. I felt like it was pulling me back to the men's department, where I finally bought it. (male-38)

Respondents not only animate these impulse items, they sometimes imbue them with magical ectoplasm. Mysterious forces are described as traveling between person and object and triggering impulsive purchases.

Whether individuals are expressing superstitions or creative metaphors is difficult to determine. Both situations probably involve some transference of guilt about buying, or even about having the impulse, onto the product itself. It may have been a case of willing seduction, but it is psychologically relieving to blame the product as the aggressor. Only a few (6 percent) of the stories contained product animation themes, yet this figure should be interpreted cautiously because respondents were not explicitly asked to consider this topic. Recent observations of the functionings of superstition (Sherry 1984), myths (Levy 1981), and ritual

magic (Erikson 1977; Rook 1985) in everyday life suggest that such themes are pervasive.

### Hedonic Elements: Feeling Good and Bad

The buying impulse is often accompanied by intense feeling states. Consumers' hedonic experiences have not been extensively researched (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Levy 1978), and impulse buying provides a rich opportunity to observe both the everyday pleasures and pains of buying behavior. In describing the kinds of feelings that accompanied their most recent buying impulse, 41 percent of the respondents reported that hedonic elements were involved. Many of these indicated that the impulse to buy makes them feel "good," "happy," "satisfied," "light," "wonderful," or "high." Some who had been feeling "down" added that it would make them feel better. Others described feeling self-indulgent, as though giving themselves a special treat or reward, and this could make them feel "frivolous," "naughty," or "devilish." Some expressed how impulse buying helps gratify their acquisitiveness:

What's really fun is imagining looking at my shoes. I see them all lined up in my closet, and then I just look at them. (female-32)

In contrast to these generally pleasurable features, respondents also spoke about the painful elements that accompany the impulse to buy something. Some said that the feeling was strange, or "blank," but others were more specifically negative:

The feeling I get when I suddenly have the urge to buy something is PANIC—rushing to get to a checkout stand before I change my mind. (female-30)

Sometimes I get sick to my stomach. (male-29)

Others described themselves as becoming "restless" and "nervous." A few said they feel guilty merely for having a buying impulse and some recalled feeling "distressed," "out-of-control," or "helpless." These extremes of pleasure and pain suggest that impulse buying is hedonically quite complex.

### Conflict: Good Versus Bad; Control Versus Indulgence

The interplay between the pleasure and reality principles is another significant impulse buying theme and was reported by 29 percent of those sampled. Their forceful energy and complex hedonics make buying impulses a source of emotional conflict and ambivalence. Respondents often described how the impulse to buy arouses both pleasure and guilt. Because impulse buying might involve breaking budgetary or dietary rules, consumers may feel guilty about being tempted to be "bad." To buy or not to buy is often a nagging question and involves the everyday struggle between relative good and evil. Sometimes the struggle seems

one-sided; quite a few respondents reported having difficulty in getting control over their buying impulses. Some said the only way to relieve the tension was to give in and buy. More than a few reported feeling utterly helpless against the dictates of their impulses:

There is no stopping me. The urge just comes over me all at once and seems to take control. It is such an overwhelming feeling that I just have to go along with it. (male-52)

It feels like a disease when you get it, because you can't stop or control it. (female-24)

A wave of irrationality comes over you. (male-22)

Several confessed they simply couldn't resist certain buying impulses and felt quite "out-of-control."

### Disregard for Consequences

An impulse's urge toward immediate action discourages consideration of the behavior's potential consequences. A powerful urge to buy may prove irresistible; some consumers reported succumbing to their buying impulses despite an awareness of potentially negative consequences:

I feel like I'm doing something I'm not supposed to be doing, but am doing it anyway. What the heck! (male-54)

To hell with everything else. I want it and I'm going to get it. (male-34)

You know you shouldn't buy it, but it doesn't matter. (female-27)

To the extent that they ignore realistic, potentially undesirable results of impulsive purchasing, they are likely to experience them.

## IMPULSE BUYING'S NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

The postindustrial world enjoys a relative affluence amidst a dizzying abundance of goods and services, and marketing innovations have now made it easier than ever before for individuals to buy things on whim. The consumption fantasy is further stoked by a mass media that splash before us golden images of how a more abundant life can be lived (Levy 1978). Individuals muddle through, trying to be good, but are frequently tempted by seductive products. Everyday consumer experience often involves coping with impulses to buy and to consume, to "have it all now."

Recently, both popular journalism and clinical studies have brought considerable attention to impulse control disorders (Polivy and Herman 1985). Several growth industries have emerged in response to the pervasive problems with chemical substance abuse, binge-purge eating behavior, spending sprees, and sexual compulsiveness. These represent extraordinary defi-



ciencies in impulse control (Kipnis 1971; Winshie 1977), but normal, everyday impulsive behavior can also result in unambiguously negative consequences.

Respondents were asked whether they had ever incurred any negative experiences as a result of their impulse buying. If they had, they were asked to explain this in detail. Over 80 percent of the sample indicated that they had incurred some kind of problem, while 19 percent said they had never run into any kind of trouble following an impulse purchase. When answering this question, respondents' tone and affect varied considerably. Some, particularly those who reported no problems, disparaged those with less impulse control. Others simply indicated that they had experienced a problem once or twice but that it was "no big deal." Still others reacted as if they had been harboring pent-up desires to confess their impulse buying transgressions. These individuals emphatically admitted to being "bad" and letting their buying impulses get them in considerable trouble.

Fifty-six percent of those respondents who reported negative consequences said they had experienced financial problems as a result of their impulse buying. Thirty-seven percent said they suffered a disappointment with an impulsively purchased product; twenty percent reported having felt guilty; and almost as many (19 percent) had been the target of someone else's disapproval. Finally, only a few (8 percent) said that an impulse purchase had spoiled their (nonfinancial) plans, such as a diet. Although some respondents reported experiencing various financial hardships or emotional trauma, none indicated they sought professional counseling with this as the presenting symptom, nor did any in this sample report participation in support groups for compulsive buyers, such as Spendermenders.

## DISCUSSION

Previous impulse buying research suffered from a phenomenological failure to identify what a buying impulse actually is. The research presented here has discovered the buying impulse to be a distinctive type of consumer buying behavior. These findings are consistent with earlier psychological interpretations of impulsive human behavior, and they serve to narrow the concept of impulse buying and distinguish it from other types of unplanned shopping. On the other hand, these findings are tentative and limited by the composition of the respondent sample and by methodological constraints. This study was exploratory and descriptive, and its results pose several issues for continuing research.

We still have a lot more to learn about impulsive buying behavior *per se*. One limitation of this study may be that the respondents, when asked to recall a recent impulse buying episode, retrieved a particularly memorable impulse purchase. This would presumably encourage them to select more expensive and involving

purchases. However, the data obtained do suggest that buying impulses vary in perceived intensity and that consumers vary in their ability to control these impulses. Extensive postpurchase (shopping bag) interviews with consumers while they sort their purchases into categories ranging from the regular and planned to the uncontrollable and urgent should help map a more finely grained continuum of impulse buying.

It will also be productive to investigate impulse buying's dynamics more directly and in depth. This study identified the prominent self-reported experiential features that distinguish the impulse to buy, but the findings do not allow generalization about their relative frequencies. Research also needs to investigate directly the situational factors that are involved: the social environment (group versus solo buying); the purchase occasion, or task environment (gift versus nongift buying); temporal variables (evening versus daytime purchases); and physical environment variables (retail atmospherics). Impulse buying is presumably sensitive to consumers' mood states, and further research promises to discover how variation in mood stimulates consumer impulsivity, and more generally, will enhance understanding of the broad impact of moods on consumers' behaviors (Gardner 1985). Finally, another issue that needs attention is how consumers cope with the impulse to buy and which strategies they rely on to resist their consuming urges.

The data from this study suggest that people vary in their impulse buying proclivities. It is useful to think of consumer impulsivity as a lifestyle trait; Heslin and Johnson (1985) have done so and developed an instrument to measure it. Work in this vein will lead to profiling high-, medium- and low-impulse consumers. This will build upon previous social psychological studies to help improve understanding of how impulsive behavior varies with select demographic and lifestyle factors and is associated with particular shopping behaviors. Consumer impulsiveness is probably related to various aspects of general acquisitiveness and materialism (Belk 1982, 1984, 1985), to personality traits such as variety and sensation seeking (Hirschman 1980; Raju 1980), and to risk aversion and parsimony. Recreational shopping (Bellenger and Korgaonkar 1980; Tauber 1972) is also presumably correlated positively with impulse buying frequencies.

The marketing factors that facilitate and encourage impulse buying also need renewed attention. As earlier discussion indicated, it is now easier than ever before for the American consumer to buy impulsively, and it would be useful to investigate in detail how various marketing factors (e.g., credit cards, 24-hour retailing) support impulsive purchasing and which ones exert the strongest influences. Finally, future research needs to take a cross-cultural perspective to observe how impulse buying occurs in different cultural contexts. Although buying impulses are presumed to be largely universal in nature, local market conditions, exchange paradigms,

and various cultural forces should impact how consumers operate on impulse.

Finally, methodological variations will enhance our understanding of impulse buying phenomena. Most subjects in this study appeared to be quite familiar with impulse buying, and their response styles were generally forthright, involved, and animated. Still, the data from the study need to be interpreted with caution. Impulse buying is psychologically complex and often associated with sensitive emotional states. It is reasonable to assume that some respondents may be either unable or unwilling to recall or sort out their feelings. Consequently, it may prove useful to employ projective techniques in tandem with more common interview or experimental designs. This would be consistent with recent consumer studies that have relied on such a multiple methods approach (Belk 1985; Levy 1986; Rook 1985).

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