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The Phenomenon of Impulse Buying

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For many people, impulsiveness can be intuitive by nature. Impulsiveness can be related to their personality, low-inhibitions, external factors or all of the above. To an extent, this can be common and not harmful, but there comes a point when the individual has lost control of his or her impulsive behaviors. This is visible in common realms such as shopping. Rook (1987) indicated that over the past 35 years, research has shown that impulse buying existed across numerous consumer markets.

Wood (1998) defined impulse buying as a purchase that was unplanned. Wood suggested that there would be minimal effort in deciding whether or not to make the purchase, and that the purchase would generally conflict with the impulse buyer's better judgment. Impulse buying is a behavior that has swept over America. Not only can this be attributed to individuals' impulsive behaviors, but also to the marketing strategies of many corporations. Rook (1987) claimed that marketing researchers have found ways to bolster impulsive spending. In today's world, many products are marketed toward impulse buyers through a variety of techniques.

These techniques are effective and increase sales, even though the buyer might not have needed to make the purchase. Marketers know where to place products for sale, and how to make them visually enticing to an impulse buyer. Just about every American has made an impulse purchase, but the psychological profile of individuals who commonly make impulse purchases can be broken down into three main categories: Their desire for pleasure, lack of self-control, and need to impress others. Not only do these three attributes affect impulse buyers, but advertisers may use social influence techniques to stimulate impulse buying. Advertisers utilize sources such as online shopping and product placement in order to manipulate impulse buyers. All in all, this paper will take a look at impulse buyers and analyze why they make impulse purchases and how advertisers manipulate them.

Impulsive vs. Compulsive

First of all, it is important to establish that impulsive individuals are different from compulsive individuals. Black (2001) defined compulsive buying as irresistible behaviors or desires to shop and spend money on products that lead to bad consequences. This is different from impulse buying in that it suggests the individual has a desire to buy, rather than to actually own the particular product. Impulsive buyers tend to find more reward in the product and a desire for the product itself.

Profile of the Impulse Buyer

There are many characteristics that contribute to the definition of an impulse buyer. Ridgeway, Kukar-Kinney, and Monroe (2006) suggested that impulse buyers seek novelty items and are hyperactive. They suggest that impulse buyers have positive feelings that lead them to buy products. Rook and Hoch (1985) claimed that intense urges occur when making impulsive purchases, and that these urges may overrule one's will power. Furthermore, there tends to be evidence of three main ingredients that an impulse buyer may have: Their desire for pleasure, lack of self-control, and need to impress others.

Many impulse buyers seek pleasure in their unplanned purchases. They may get enjoyment out of the product that they have just purchased, or perhaps an elated mood. Li (2011) conducted a study that focused on consumers' experiences as they were impulse buying. He found that impulsive buyers did in fact experience pleasure, but this came along with guilt. Impulse buyers tended to experience guilt because they believed that they had lost self-control when they were impulse buying. However, they would continue to shop because the pleasure was rewarding.

Lack of self-control is a characteristic also commonly found in impulse buyers.

Roberts and Manolis (2012) found that self-control was negatively correlated with impulse buying. That means that as self-control increased, impulse buying decreased. Their research also suggested that marketers and advertisers would work at breaking down one's self-control in order to make the individual more vulnerable to impulsive urges. Sultan, Joireman, and Sprott (2012) conducted a study on self-control practices and impulse buying, and found that those who practiced self-control tasks were less likely to make impulse purchases. All in all, as self-control becomes inhibited or ignored, the likelihood of making an impulse purchase increases.

Finally, another strong characteristic of impulse buyers is their need to impress others. Impulse buyers may feel that they need to purchase a certain product in order to fit in with their peers, or perhaps for social status at the workplace. Roberts and Manolis (2012) concluded that some consumer purchases occur due to the need to impress others. Their study suggested that just the mere thought that a product will impress someone else could result in an impulse buy. In other words, the desire for high social status may increase the tendency to make impulse purchases. Based on Dittmar (2001), impulse purchases are likely to occur when the impulse buyer has a concern for his or her self-image. Dittmar claimed that impulse buyers who are indulged in their external image might have a stronger urge to make impulse purchases.

The Role of Advertisers

Advertisers are always looking for a way to make a sale. Advertisers are fully aware of the characteristics of impulse buyers, and therefore exploit these weaknesses in order to encourage impulse purchases. Advertisers have found the means to elicit impulse buys through online shopping and product placement in the environment.

Advertisers use online shopping as a mechanism to encourage impulse purchases. Online shopping delivers instant gratification for impulse buyers. This positive reinforcement strengthens the urge to

impulse buy. Parboteeah, Valacich, and Wells (2009) found that the design of a company's website can increase the desire to impulse buy. Their study concluded that swift navigation and user-friendly websites encouraged more impulse purchases than websites that were more complicated to use. A study conducted by Rook (1987) concluded that impulsive buying is now easier in today's world than it has ever been in the past. While this conclusion was promulgated before the rise of e-commerce. Parboteeah et al's (2009) findings reinforce its validity and, also, illustrate the role advertisers play in impulse buying: They will make their company's website visually appealing in order to encourage an impulse buy and instant gratification.

Another technique advertisers use is the placement of their product in the environment. Similar to online shopping, advertisers will make products physically and conveniently available to promote an impulse purchase. Mohan, Sivakumaran, and Sharma (2013) found that the friendliness of employees, lighting conditions, and appropriate background music all affect impulse buyers. Mohan et al. (2013) conducted a study that suggested these factors manipulate the urges of impulse buyers. If these factors are employed appropriately, then impulse purchases may increase.

Medford (2008) also established that environments can deliver instant gratification for impulse buyers. Medford noted that programs such as TiVo are now giving users the options to buy commercial products directly from Amazon. He claimed this directly influences impulse buyers by encouraging them to make a purchase just after seeing a commercial for a particular product.

Conclusion

Impulse buyers have certain characteristics that drive them to make impulse purchases, and advertisers play on these tendencies. Impulse buyers generally seek pleasure in the products that they purchase, even when the purchase is unplanned or brings guilt (Li, 2011). Furthermore, Manolis (2012) and Sultan et al. (2012) claimed impulse buyers might lack self-control when making purchases, resulting in more and more impulse buys.

Also, the studies from Roberts and Manolis (2012) and Dittmar (2001) illustrated that impulse buyers also have a need to impress others, ranging from peers to acquaintances, which may explain why many impulse purchases are made. Not only are advertisers aware of these characteristics, but they also know how to exploit them. Advertisers have mastered the art of providing instant gratification to impulse buyers. Advertisers will manipulate the virtual shopping environment to facilitate impulse purchases (Parboteeah et al., 2009).

Advertisers also have manipulated the physical environment that their products are sold in so that they can increase the likelihood of impulse purchases (Mohan et al., 2013). These techniques have been effective and shown to increase impulse purchases. On a brighter note, while impulse buyers have specific characteristics that lead them to make impulse purchases and face techniques employed by advertisers that tap into the impulsive urges they experience, as they learn about the research on impulse buying they might be able to combat the urges that cause them to make impulsive purchases.

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