

Normative Influences on Impulsive Buying Behavior

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Although consumer researchers have investigated impulse buying for nearly 50 years, almost no research has empirically examined its normative aspects. This article presents conceptual and empirical evidence that consumers' normative evaluations (i.e., judgments about the appropriateness of engaging in impulse buying behavior) moderate the relationship between the impulse buying trait and consumers' buying behaviors. Specifically, the relationship between the buying impulsiveness trait and related buying behaviors is significant only when consumers believe that acting on impulse is appropriate. The findings from two studies across student and retail customer samples converge and support the hypothesized moderating role of consumers' normative evaluations.

Impulsive behavior has a long history of being associated with immaturity, primitivism, foolishness, "defects of the will," lower intelligence, and even social deviance and criminality (Böhm-Bawerk [1898] 1959; Freud [1896] 1911; Mill [1848] 1909). More recently, impulsive behavior has been characterized as specious thinking (Ainslie 1975), which leads to myopic and inconsistent behavior (Stigler and Becker 1977; Strotz 1956). In the consumption realm, impulsive behavior has been linked with "being bad," and with negative consequences in the areas of personal finance, post-purchase satisfaction, social reactions, and overall self-esteem (Rook 1987; Rook and Hoch 1985). Yet, it is possible to conceive of consumption situations in which impulse buying would be viewed as normatively neutral, or even positively sanctioned behavior. For example, a spontaneous gift for an ill friend, a sudden decision to pick up the tab for a meal, or simply taking advantage of a two-for-one in-store special are impulse buying instances that may represent, respectively, kind, generous, and practical activities. When impulse buying is more virtuously motivated, it is likely to elicit more positive normative evaluations.

This diversity of normative views, accompanied by the likelihood that they loom large around spontaneous spending, suggest that consumers' normative evaluations have the potential to influence their buying behavior. The probability that consumers actually engage in impulse buying presumably depends both on the de-

gree to which they possess impulsive buying trait tendencies and on their normative judgments that may proscribe or permit a particular impulsive purchase. In theory, when a generally impulsive consumer experiences an impulse buying stimulus, and subsequently evaluates the prospective purchase as appropriate, both trait and normative influences are harmonious, thereby making an impulsive purchase likely. On the other hand, if negative normative evaluations arise in a purchase situation, the consumer's trait tendencies may be thwarted, and even a highly impulsive buyer will be less likely to act on his or her buying impulses.

In order to examine the hypothesized relationship between the trait and normative aspects of impulse buying, we first review the theoretical bases for conceptualizing and operationalizing these variables. We then present two studies that evaluate the moderating role of normative evaluations in the relationship between the buying impulsiveness trait and subsequent buying behavior.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Trait Aspects of Buying Impulsiveness

The general trait of impulsiveness, or impulsivity (the terms are used interchangeably), has been studied extensively by clinical and developmental psychologists, education researchers, and criminologists (e.g., Eysenck et al. 1985; Hilgard 1962). Presently, over a dozen psychological measures of general impulsiveness exist (see Gerbing, Ahadi, and Patton [1987] for a review), yet there is no current theory-driven and validated measure of *buying* impulsiveness. This is despite evidence that a considerable number of consumers think of them-

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selves as "impulse buyers": between 1975 and 1992, an average of 38 percent of the adults in an annual national survey responded affirmatively to the statement: "I am an impulse buyer" (*DDB Needham Annual Lifestyle Survey 1974-1993*). This finding, accompanied by psychologists' enduring treatment of impulsiveness as a basic human trait, encourages our belief that individuals' impulse buying tendencies can be conceptualized as a consumer trait that we label *buying impulsiveness*.

We hypothesize that buying impulsiveness is a unidimensional construct that embodies consumers' tendencies both to think and to act in identifiable and distinctive ways. Specifically, we define buying impulsiveness as a consumer's tendency to buy spontaneously, unreflectively, immediately, and kinetically. Highly impulsive buyers are more likely to experience spontaneous buying stimuli; their shopping lists are more "open" and receptive to sudden, unexpected buying ideas. Also, their thinking is likely to be relatively unreflective, prompted by physical proximity to a desired product, dominated by emotional attraction to it, and absorbed by the promise of immediate gratification (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990). As a result, impulsive buyers are more likely to act on whim and to respond affirmatively and immediately to their buying impulses. In extreme cases, impulsive behavior is almost entirely stimulus driven; a buying impulse translates directly into an immediate, yielding, and physical response, or as Levy (1987) describes it, a consumer "spasm." Moreover, impulsive buyers are likely to experience buying impulses more frequently and strongly than other consumers.

To have an impulse, however, is not necessarily to act on it, as various factors may intervene between the impetus and the action. Even highly impulsive buyers do not give in to every spontaneous buying demand, as a variety of factors may alert consumers to the need for immediate deliberation and consequently "interrupt" the transition from impulsive feeling to impulsive action (Bettman 1979). Factors such as a consumer's economic position, time pressure, social visibility, and perhaps even the buying impulse itself can trigger the need to evaluate a prospective impulsive purchase quickly (cf. Hoch and Loewenstein 1991). We propose that one likely intervening factor arises from consumers' subjective, normative evaluations of acting on their buying impulses. Specifically, we hypothesize that normative influences operate as a moderator of consumers' impulse buying trait tendencies.

Normative Evaluations of Buying Impulsiveness

We define normative evaluations as consumers' judgments about the appropriateness of making an impulsive purchase in a particular buying situation. After selectively reviewing the relevant literature in clinical and developmental psychology, economics, criminol-

ogy, and consumer research, we sought to identify the normative dimensions that seem most likely to influence consumers' impulse buying behaviors. One central aspect derives from clinical psychologists' distinctions between rational and impulsive behavior. According to Freud and his later interpreters, two basic human thought processes, primary and secondary, differ in the degree to which they encourage impulsive behavior (Freud 1911; Hilgard 1962). While secondary thought processes tend toward the rational and socialized, primary mental processes pull in the opposite direction and encourage uninhibited, impulsive behavior that is likely viewed as irrational.

Some developmental psychologists elaborate on this thinking by associating impulsive with immature behavior. Because primary mental processes generate impulses that demand immediate gratification of basic, presocialized needs (e.g., a toddler's candy tantrum), impulsive buying behavior among adults is likely to be evaluated as immature and self-centered. Much economic analysis agrees with this perspective, but emphasizes the fiscal improvidence of impulsive spending. Such views characterize impulsive purchases as behavioral choices that would not have been made had they been considered in terms of their long-term consequences rather than their immediate, gratifying benefits (Stigler and Becker 1977; Strotz 1956). This perspective frequently leads to evaluations of impulse buying as shortsighted and wasteful.

Finally, both the clinical and consumer literatures draw attention to linkages between impulsive acts and negative outcomes. When individuals act on impulse, they tend to do so quickly and nonreflectively, which increases the likelihood of unintended and undesirable outcomes such as unwed adolescent pregnancy (Jones and Philliber 1983), drug and alcohol addiction (Ainslie 1975; Hirschman 1992), eating disorders (Steiger, Leung, and Puentes 1992), and criminal delinquency (Eysenck and McGurk 1980). Impulse buying specifically has been linked to postpurchase financial problems, product disappointment, guilt feelings, and social disapproval (Rook 1987).

As this discussion suggests, there is an enduring and pervasive tendency to interpret impulsive behavior as irrational, immature, wasteful, and risky. To some extent, negative views about impulsive behavior derive from interests in exceptional cases that involve significant departures from existing social behavior norms. However, the motives for and consequences of impulse buying for many individuals are less problematic. And much impulse buying arguably involves only minor inflections of relevant norms. In other hypothetical situations, normative influences might even encourage acting on impulse as the right thing to do.

The Moderating Role of Normative Evaluations

Normative perspectives on individual behavior provide both general and specific social guidelines for ac-

ceptable conduct in particular situations (Birenbaum and Sagarin 1976). This emphasis on the situational dimension is critical because even if consumers have generalized normative views about impulse buying, the most consequential influences are likely those that emerge when a consumer experiences a buying impulse in a particular situation. Moreover, different impulse buying situations tend to evoke varying normative evaluations. For example, impulse buying may be viewed as a socially acceptable way to spend \$50 in lottery winnings, but as a bad way to dispose of one's rent money. Even the most impulsive buyer probably will resist making an impulsive purchase that would cause him or her to be labeled as foolish, crazy, wasteful, or immature.

Once normative forces become salient, how do they interact with consumers' impulse buying tendencies and behaviors? Much research on normative factors in consumer decision making relies on the perspective taken by Fishbein's theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein 1977), in which subjective norms arise from individuals' predictions about how salient social referents will react to a considered behavior, coupled with individuals' motivation to comply with these normative expectations. However, the effect of subjective norms on behavior is viewed as mediated by individuals' behavioral intentions, which is incompatible with the spontaneity and immediacy of impulse buying transactions that transpire, by definition, without prior intention.¹

As an alternative to the subjective norm component of the Fishbein model, we propose that the relationship between the buying impulsiveness trait and the act of buying something on impulse is moderated by consumers' normative evaluations of making an impulsive purchase. At first glance, it might seem that normative evaluations are incompatible with impulsive behavior. Yet there is typically some temporal delay between a buying impulse and an impulsive purchase, and the rapidity with which such transactions typically occur does not preclude the likelihood that consumers are still thinking, feeling, and evaluating various retail stimuli, if only for a few seconds. Even consumers who rank high in buying impulsiveness may experience normative encouragement or discouragement when the urge to buy something on impulse strikes.

Specifically, when a consumer feels that impulse buying is acceptable in a particular context, a positive relationship should exist between the buying impul-

siveness trait and subsequent behavior. Because normative constraints are absent, the consumer is free to act on his or her impulsive buying tendencies. Conversely, in situations where consumers believe it is unacceptable to buy something on impulse, they will be constrained by norms that discourage or proscribe the contemplated behavior. This results in a blocking of the impulse; the consumers' trait tendencies are restrained, which dilutes their impact on buying behavior. We examine this hypothesis in two studies.

STUDY 1: NORMATIVE MODERATORS OF BUYING IMPULSIVENESS

This study investigates the relationship between buying impulsiveness and consumers' buying behaviors. Although we assume that consumers who rank high on this trait buy things on impulse more frequently than do others, we hypothesize a moderating effect in which consumers' impulsive buying tendencies are filtered by their normative evaluations about acting on impulse in particular situations.

Method

Sample and Data Collection. This study used a convenience sample of 212 undergraduate business students. Respondents were asked to select one of a set of purchase alternatives in a hypothetical buying scenario. We conducted this task before administering the items designed to measure buying impulsiveness in order to disguise our research agenda from respondents and to avoid response biases that might have arisen if we had reversed the procedures.

Measurement of Buying Impulsiveness. Thirty-five items measuring buying impulsiveness were generated from a review of prior research of impulse buying phenomenology (e.g., Rook 1987) and from extant literature on general measures of impulsiveness (e.g., Eysenck et al. 1985). These items were pretested on a convenience sample of 281 undergraduate business students. Exploratory factor analysis, correlational tests, and confirmatory factor analysis were used to purify the measures across the pretest and study 1 samples.² A confirmatory factor analysis on our final nine-item measure of buying impulsiveness suggests an acceptable model, with a chi-square statistic of 49.45 ($df = 27$; $p < .01$); an adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) of .92; a comparative fit index (CFI) of .97; and a normed fit index (NFI) of .94. All lambda coefficients are large and significant, and all t -values exceed 9.0 ($p < .001$). The scale's mean = 25.1, SD = 7.4, and Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$.

¹Also, normative evaluations of impulse buying do not necessarily arise only from consumers' social referents, as the Fishbein model implies. For example, consumers' own prior impulse buying experiences may serve as a basis for independent, internalized evaluations of impulse buying as either bad or good. Finally, because it is often difficult or impossible knowingly to observe someone buying on impulse, a consumer's motivation to comply with others' expectations may be low or nonexistent when his or her actions are relatively invisible.

²Only a brief overview of the procedures used to develop and validate our buying impulsiveness scale is reported here because of space limitations. A complete description of the origin of the scale items, the exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses employed, and tests of convergent and discriminant validity are available from the authors.

The nine items that make up our buying impulsiveness scale are identified in Table 1, along with their factor loadings, means, and standard deviations.

Measurement of Impulsive Purchase Decision. Our dependent variable relies on a single-item measure that forces respondents to choose what the consumer described in the following imaginary shopping situation would do: "Mary is a 21-year-old college student with a part-time job. It is two days before Mary gets her next paycheck and she has only \$25 left for necessities. In addition to food, Mary needs to buy a pair of warm socks for an outdoor party this weekend. After work, she goes with her friend Susan to the mall to purchase the socks. As they are walking through Bullock's, Mary sees a great looking sweater on sale for \$75." After reading this scenario, respondents were instructed to select which one of five purchase decision alternatives Mary would make. These choice alternatives were designed to represent varying levels of buying impulsiveness. From low to high impulsiveness, these alternatives were: (1) buying the socks only, (2) wanting the sweater but not buying it, (3) deciding not to buy the socks, (4) buying both the socks and sweater with a credit card, and (5) buying these plus matching slacks and a shirt, also with a credit card.³

Our use of this imaginary stimulus situation assumes that respondents will project themselves into the shopping scenario presented and that the impulsive buyers among the respondents will be more likely to elect an impulsive purchase choice. Also, an indirect questioning approach should reduce the likelihood that social desirability biases will encourage "correct" but dishonest responses (Fisher 1993). To control for possible gender effects of the stimulus, half of the sample was exposed to an identical scenario that included a male imaginary character, Bob. An ANOVA was run on character gender as an independent variable. Because no significant gender effects were found, data from the two conditions were pooled.

Normative Evaluation. Hypothetically, this buying situation invites either negative or positive normative evaluations. Mary is low on cash and should be practical and frugal, but the upcoming party may encourage an impulsive splurge. Although impulse buying transpires quickly and without extensive deliberation, this does not preclude the possibility that consumers make on-the-spot evaluations of a prospective purchase. Our normative evaluation measure assumes that consumers may assess the appropriateness of buying something on

³The impulsiveness of each purchase alternative was validated with an independent sample of undergraduate students. They were asked to rate the impulsiveness of each purchase alternative on a seven-point scale. Counter to our expectation, not buying the socks was viewed as more impulsive than either buying them only or wanting the sweater but not buying it. Because Mary was described as planning to buy the socks, some respondents appeared to view her change of plans as impulsive.

TABLE 1
BUYING IMPULSIVENESS SCALE: STUDY 1

Item	Factor loading	Mean	SD
1. I often buy things spontaneously.	.81	3.08	1.18
2. "Just do it" describes the way I buy things.	.75	2.65	1.17
3. I often buy things without thinking.	.73	2.33	1.19
4. "I see it, I buy it" describes me.	.71	2.36	1.15
5. "Buy now, think about it later" describes me.	.65	2.25	1.20
6. Sometimes I feel like buying things on the spur-of-the-moment.	.64	3.40	1.04
7. I buy things according to how I feel at the moment.	.63	3.17	1.19
8. I carefully plan most of my purchases. ^a	.62	2.81	1.16
9. Sometimes I am a bit reckless about what I buy.	.60	2.99	1.08

NOTE.— $n = 212$. Possible range for scale: 9–45; observed scale range: 9–43; $\bar{X} = 25.1$; $SD = 7.4$; $\alpha = .88$. Response format: 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.

^aReverse-coded item.

impulse along a continuum that ranges from relative neutrality to either strong disapproval or encouragement.

After the respondents indicated which purchase decision they believed that Mary would make, they were instructed to imagine that she actually bought both the unplanned \$75 sweater and the planned socks. Respondents' normative evaluations of this relatively impulsive purchase decision were gathered from a semantic differential scale that operationalizes the normative dimensions we discussed earlier. The ensuing scale included these 10 bipolar adjective pairs: good-bad, rational-crazy, wasteful-productive, attractive-unattractive, smart-stupid, acceptable-unacceptable, generous-selfish, sober-silly, mature-childish, and right-wrong. The mean of the normative evaluation scale = 30.4, $SD = 6.3$, and Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$.

Results

We hypothesize that consumers' normative evaluations moderate the degree or strength of relationship between the buying impulsiveness trait and impulse buying behavior.⁴ The appropriate test of differences in the trait-behavior relationship across different norma-

⁴Moderator regression analysis is inappropriate here because it examines whether the *form* of the trait-behavior relationship is affected by normative evaluations. That is, it answers the question, Do changes in consumers' levels of buying impulsiveness account for identical changes in their buying behaviors, in different normative conditions? A comparison of product moment correlations across subgroups answers the question, Does the buying impulsiveness trait explain as much of the variation in buying behavior in each normative subgroup?

tive conditions is a comparison of product-moment correlations across normative subgroups (Arnold 1982). Another reason for using subgroup analysis is our hypothesis that the effect of consumers' impulse buying norms as a trait-behavior moderator is not likely a continuous one. By nature, normative evaluations tend to be dichotomous, and their behavioral influence often communicates either a summary yes or no to some anticipated action. In the context of impulse buying, this idea suggests that normative influences operate as a behavioral "gate" that is either open or closed, with little or no middle ground. Thus, the relationship between consumers' impulse buying tendencies and their impulse buying behavior should be strong when normative evaluations are approving but weaker when some negative normative threshold is reached, which mutes consumers' trait tendencies. Given this hypothesis, it is appropriate to split the sample into subgroups (Baron and Kenny 1986).

We used a median split on respondents' normative evaluations of the impulsive sweater purchase to divide the sample into favorable ($n = 110$) and unfavorable ($n = 102$) subgroups. Respondents' own buying impulsiveness and the impulsiveness of their hypothetical purchase decision were significantly related in the favorable norm group ($r = .33, t = 3.47, p < .01$). In other words, impulsive respondents who evaluated Mary's unplanned sweater purchase positively were also likely to have projected an impulsive purchase decision for her. In the unfavorable norm group, however, the trait-behavior relationship was not significant ($r = -.002, t = -.02, p > .10$).⁵ When the sweater purchase was evaluated negatively, the respondents' buying impulsiveness had no effect on the purchase decisions they made for Mary. A Fisher's z -transformation revealed that the two correlations differed significantly ($z = 2.45, p < .01$, one-tailed). These results support our hypothesis that consumers' normative evaluations moderate the link between the trait and behavioral aspects of impulse buying.

To examine the robustness of the findings with a different basis for defining normative subgroups, the sample was divided into three groups and the within-group correlations were computed. A similar pattern of results occurred. The correlation between buying impulsiveness and the projective measure of impulse buying was significant only within the most favorable group ($r(\text{favorable}) = .36, t = 3.11, p < .01, n = 69$; $r(\text{neutral}) = .10, t = .82, p > .10, n = 69$; $r(\text{unfavorable}) = .08, t = .72, p > .10, n = 74$). This supports the idea that

the effect of consumers' impulse buying norms as a trait-behavior moderator is not linear. Consumers' impulse buying tendencies may be most likely to express themselves in actual impulsive purchases only when some normative threshold is reached.

Discussion

The results in the favorable norm group support the view that consumers with positive normative evaluations are more likely to act in a way that is consistent with the degree to which they possess the buying impulsiveness trait. The lack of a significant association between the trait and behavior in the unfavorable norm group is also as hypothesized, but the reasons for this finding appear more complex. Individuals who have low impulsive tendencies and who also judge a possible impulse purchase negatively are unlikely to act on their buying impulses in such situations. However, when more impulsive consumers view a purchase as bad, they are likely to feel varying degrees of ambivalence. These individuals feel almost simultaneously an arousing and spontaneous impetus to buy and a strong normative warning against acting on impulse. In some situations, individuals may feel deserving and frustrated, yet resist the urge to buy. In other instances, the buying impulse may "win out" when consumers ignore or rationalize exceptions to normative considerations. The very sense of violating prevalent norms may generate additional hedonic arousal and increase the likelihood of a purchase. Because of the possible variation in consumers' normative responses, the buying impulsiveness trait was less likely to predict (projective) behaviors when normative evaluations were unfavorable.

The results of this phase of study 1 suggest that consumers' normative evaluations can moderate the link between the trait and behavioral aspects of impulse buying. The overall correlation between respondents' buying impulsiveness and their projected purchase decision for Bob or Mary was significant, but not particularly strong ($r = .16, t = 2.40, p < .01$). However, this relationship is clarified by including normative components as trait-behavior moderators. Indeed, the association between buying impulsiveness and impulsive buying is considerably weaker when the anticipated behavior is perceived to be inappropriate, and considerably stronger when a prospective purchase is evaluated positively. These findings provide some support for the moderating role of normative evaluations in the relationship between buying impulsiveness and impulse buying. Additional evidence about these dynamics will be offered from a second study that draws on a nonstudent sample gathered in an actual retail setting.

STUDY 2: TRAIT-BEHAVIOR RELATIONSHIPS IN A RETAIL SETTING

This study was undertaken for three purposes. First, we sought to examine the relationship between buying

⁵A possible explanation for this near-zero correlation is that there was inadequate variance in the trait within the unfavorable norm group. However, the difference in variation between the unfavorable and favorable groups is nonsignificant according to a Levene test ($p > .30$; the Levene test performs a one-factor ANOVA). Similarly, in study 2, between-group differences in trait variation were small and nonsignificant.

impulsiveness and impulse buying among a more diverse sample of nonstudent respondents. Second, we sought to do so in situ with actual retail customers in a shopping environment. This not only provides a more naturalistic setting, but also allows us to examine impulsive buying behaviors soon after they occur. Third, we wanted to study actual shopping behaviors as a way of corroborating the results obtained with our projective purchase method. By varying the sample, setting, and method, we hoped to gain additional insight into the trait and normative aspects of impulse buying.

Method

Sample and Data Collection. A field study was conducted at a record store located in a regional mall in a large metropolitan area in the southwestern United States. As patrons over the age of 14 exited the store, they were asked to participate in a compact disc (CD) shopping study. Shoppers were recruited whether or not they had purchased anything, which reduced the likelihood that nonimpulsive buyers would be excluded from the sample. The respondents were asked to complete a six-page "consumer buying survey," which took approximately 10 minutes.

A total of 104 respondents were surveyed during a single business day, between 11:00 A.M. and 6:30 P.M. The response rate was 48 percent, and refusals tended to be highest among single males over the age of 25. Five surveys were not included in the analysis because of missing data. Sixty-nine percent of respondents were 21 or younger, and the sample was evenly divided between males (49 percent) and females (51 percent). Fifty-three percent of respondents purchased one or more CDs while shopping in the store.

Five key measures were gathered; the first three, described below, replicate the consumer trait, purchase decision, and normative evaluation measures we used in study 1. Two additional measures were collected for this study in order to examine the same variables in our retail field setting.

Measurement of Buying Impulsiveness. Buying impulsiveness was measured with the nine-item scale that was developed in study 1. Although the student respondents from study 1 scored somewhat higher on the buying impulsiveness scale than did the participants from this study, a comparison of scale means ($\bar{X}_{\text{study 1}} = 25.1$, $\bar{X}_{\text{study 2}} = 21.5$), ranges (range_{study 1} = 9–43; range_{study 2} = 10–43; SD_{study 1} = 7.4; SD_{study 2} = 7.1), and coefficient alphas ($\alpha_{\text{study 1}} = .88$; $\alpha_{\text{study 2}} = .82$), revealed largely similar results across samples. Also, a confirmatory factor analysis of the scale produced an acceptable chi-square statistic of 44.88 ($df = 27$, $p = .02$), an AGFI of .86, a CFI of .93, and an NFI of .84. As in study 1, the results support a unidimensional conception of buying impulsiveness.

Measurement of Impulsive Purchase Decision. The measure of the impulsiveness of the purchase decision

was taken through a replication of the projective purchase decision from study 1. As before, the respondents were asked to indicate the choice that a hypothetical consumer (Mary) would make among five purchase alternatives that represent varying levels of impulsive buying.

Measurement of Normative Evaluation (Sweater Purchase). The measure of normative evaluation for the sweater purchase also replicates procedures that were used in study 1, wherein the respondents were asked to imagine that Mary actually bought the planned socks and the unplanned \$75 sweater. Then they were asked to evaluate this purchase decision with the same semantic differential scale we employed in study 1. Two adjective-pair items from the original 10-item scale (attractive-unattractive, rational-crazy) exhibited item-to-total correlations below .20 and were removed from subsequent analyses. The mean of this eight-item scale = 28.1, SD = 7.4, and $\alpha = .90$.

Measurement of Normative Evaluation (CD Purchase). In addition to replicating the projective choice task in study 1, we sought to examine the role of norms as a trait-behavior moderator in the context of shoppers' own consumer behavior. Because our sample was composed entirely of record store customers, we wanted to obtain a measure of normative evaluations about buying records on impulse. The respondents were asked to consider the following situation: "You came here planning to buy one specific tape or CD, and you ended up buying four." Then they were asked to indicate how this would make them feel, using the same set of scale items that we employed to measure normative evaluations in our earlier projective choice task. The mean of the resulting 10-item scale = 28.7, SD = 7.1, and $\alpha = .81$.

Measurement of Impulsive Record Buying. Consumers' actual in-store impulse buying was assessed with multiple measures that represent a continuum ranging from perfectly planned to impulsive buying. Based on a pretest of consumers buying musical recordings, three dimensions of purchase planning were identified and incorporated into the study: planning to buy within a general musical category (e.g., rock, country, classical), planning to purchase something by a particular artist or group (e.g., Bob Dylan, En Vogue), and planning to buy a specific musical recording (e.g., Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*). Our premise is that the most impulsive purchases are those that are unplanned along all three dimensions. Respondents were asked to characterize each of their purchases on all three planning dimensions, using a zero-to-four scale (0 = completely planned; 4 = completely unplanned). Operationally, if no purchases were made, or if a purchase was completely planned on all three dimensions, the purchase was scored as zero on impulsiveness. If a purchase was unplanned on all three dimensions, the purchase was

scored as 12. Within the sample, the degree of planning for up to three CDs was recorded, and an average impulse buying score was computed for each respondent. The mean for the three-item scale = 1.8, SD = 3.3, and $\alpha = .93$. The correlations among study variables are summarized in Table 2.

Results

Projective Buying Behavior. As in study 1, we tested our hypothesis regarding the moderating role of normative evaluations with subgroup analysis. By a median split, the sample was divided into groups holding favorable ($n = 43$) and unfavorable ($n = 56$) normative views about the hypothetical sweater purchase, and two sets of correlation coefficients were calculated. As in study 1, the correlation between buying impulsiveness and impulsive purchase behavior is stronger in the favorable ($r = .64, t = 5.87, p < .001$) than in the unfavorable ($r = .33, t = 2.43, p < .01$) normative group.⁶ The difference between groups is significant ($z = 2.03, p < .05$). Thus, findings from a sample of retail shoppers support the belief that situational norms moderate the extent to which consumers act on their buying impulses. Further, as before, the sample was divided into thirds to examine the robustness of the results. The correlation between buying impulsiveness and impulsive purchase behavior decreases systematically as situational norms become less favorable ($r(\text{favorable}) = .71, t = 5.55, p < .001, n = 34$; $r(\text{neutral}) = .46, t = 2.88, p < .01, n = 33$; $r(\text{unfavorable}) = .27, t = 1.56, p > .05, n = 33$), which replicates the pattern discovered in study 1.

Record Buying Behavior. As in previous analyses, the relationship between buying impulsiveness and impulsive purchase behavior was calculated for each normative subgroup, based on a median split. As predicted, significant differences were found between the two normative subgroups ($z = 1.74, p < .05$). Again, the relationship between respondents' buying impulsiveness and the impulsiveness of their actual purchase behavior was significant in the favorable norm group ($r = .36, t = 2.60, p < .01, n = 52$), but not in the unfavorable norm group ($r = -.02, t = -.15, p > .10, n = 48$). Moreover, we again divided the sample into thirds and calculated correlation coefficients for each subgroup. A significant relationship emerged only in the most favorable norm group ($r(\text{favorable}) = .58, t = 3.92, p < .001, n = 33$; $r(\text{neutral}) = .03, t = .19, p > .10, n = 33$; $r(\text{unfavorable}) = .07, t = .42, p > .10, n = 35$). In accordance with our findings in study 1, impulsive buyers are more likely to buy on impulse when they evaluate a particular behavior as normatively appro-

TABLE 2

CORRELATION MATRIX: STUDY 2

	Buying impulsiveness (TRAIT)	Projective purchase replication		In-store study	
		Normative evaluation (NORM1)	Impulse buying (BUY1)	Normative evaluation (NORM2)	Impulse buying (BUY2)
TRAIT	1.00				
NORM1	.21*	1.00			
BUY1	.53**	.40**	1.00		
NORM2	.10	.26**	-.05	1.00	
BUY2	.21*	.28**	.20*	.14	1.00

NOTE.— $n = 99$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

priate. However, when norms proscribe an impulsive purchase, the impact of the trait on buying behavior is muted. These findings provide further evidence that the relationship between buying impulsiveness and impulse buying is moderated by consumers' normative evaluations of the behavior.

DISCUSSION

Impulse buying behavior represents a long-standing puzzle for consumer and marketing researchers, and many efforts to conceptualize and measure it have been thwarted (Kollat and Willett 1969; Rook 1987). The results from the two studies reported here provide some insights into the social psychology that underlies the trait and behavioral aspects of impulsive buying behavior. Although, as expected, we observed a general tendency for impulsive buyers to make more impulsive purchases, we found that normative evaluations moderate the relationship between this trait and subsequent buying behavior. Overall, our findings converge across student and in-store samples, classroom and retail settings, and both projected and actual shopping behaviors.

By including consumers' normative evaluations in the equation, we were able to gain clearer insights about the conditions under which the trait of buying impulsiveness would translate into actual impulsive buying behavior. We also gathered evidence about the possible threshold nature of normative effects. Even impulsive buyers seem able to reject making an impulsive purchase when negative normative evaluations reach some critical level. However, more research is needed to fully understand how, when, and to what extent normative evaluations actually occur. For example, we have assumed that the most salient normative evaluations occur at the point of purchase, yet the present studies did not examine this. Although we discovered that consumers variously evaluated different impulse buying situations when asked to do so, we do not know how often such behavior occurs naturally.

⁶It is interesting to note that the trait-behavior correlation is significant in the unfavorable norm group in the projective task in study 2. We speculate that those in the retail sample were more likely to ignore their normative evaluations because they were in a highly stimulating shopping environment.

While we believe our findings support the idea that normative influences moderate the effects of consumers' impulsive trait tendencies, we need a better understanding of various contextual factors that are also likely to contribute to this relationship. Thus, future research might examine more broadly the social ecology in which these constructs interact. One interesting issue is how the social visibility of a prospective impulse purchase affects consumers' buying behavior (cf. Fisher and Price 1992). In theory, consumers will be less inclined to engage in impulse buying that is socially visible, either at the point of purchase or afterward. Analogously, impulsive purchases should materialize in contexts that provide relative social anonymity, such as in telemarketing, internet, and direct mail ordering. The effects of social visibility are also likely to vary according to the social composition of a particular shopping trip. When a consumer is shopping alone, he or she may feel less socially visible, which should lower one's inhibitions about acting on impulse. The effects of shopping with others are probably more diverse and dependent on others' assigned or enacted social roles.

Within consumers' social networks, other sources of influence include the social control mechanisms that translate general impulse buying norms into more specific rules that define which product categories are permissible, who may participate, how much can be spent, and what sanctions arise when rules are violated. A related concern centers around what types of situations allow consumers to bend or break their impulse buying rules. Although we found that negative normative evaluations suppress consumers' impulse buying tendencies, social norms are not perfect filters between impulsive proclivities and impulse buying. Hypothetically, a consumer who is struck by a buying impulse may react to it as a terrible idea, as something he or she should not do, yet still go ahead and make the purchase. Who has not heard someone characterize a shopping episode with the confession: "I was bad today?" Sometimes consumers want to be bad.

On the other hand, as we discussed earlier, impulse buying is not always normatively proscribed, as various situations may encourage it as practical, mature, appropriate, or merely as innocuous wickedness. Some arenas emphatically promote spontaneous consumption behaviors—for example, amusement parks, vacation venues, sales events, gaming casinos, craft fairs and swap meets. In these settings, consumers are invited and encouraged to act on their impulses and, accordingly, their impulsive trait tendencies are likely to be good predictors of their buying behavior. These situations, however, tend to be exceptional circumstances. On an everyday basis, consumers are more likely to experience and evaluate buying impulses in the grocery store or the local mall.

By definition, even everyday impulses are "sometimes irresistible" (Goldenson 1984), and many marketplace structures both increase the level of temptation

and remove resistance barriers—for example, the availability of credit, automatic teller machines, telemarketing, 24-hour retailing, and price and money-back guarantees. Yet, consumers presumably do resist many buying impulses, and yield to others. In addition to obvious economic factors that affect consumers' responses to their buying impulses, trait and normative elements are also involved. This interplay of consuming impulses, consumers' impulsive trait tendencies, and the normative influences that moderate their expression constitutes a complex and intriguing behavioral landscape that merits continued study.

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