

Exploring Impulse Buying in Services vs. Products – Towards a Common Conceptual Framework

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INTRODUCTION

Impulse buying has been studied extensively but mostly in the products context, despite the prevalence of services in modern consumers' lives. We address this gap with a conceptual framework incorporating several relevant constructs such as consumer impulsiveness (CI), optimum stimulation level (OSL), and self-monitoring (SM), based on which we develop several hypotheses for some differences between impulse buying in services vs. products. We tested these hypotheses using an empirical study with 200 undergraduate students.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Impulse buying is an important phenomenon but it has been investigated mostly in the context of product purchases and it is shown that most consumers buy impulsively at one time or another (Kacen and Lee 2002; Rook and Fisher 1995). On the other hand, services are shown to be associated with higher perceived risk and variability, which may suggest a lower probability of impulse buying in services compared to products (Murray and Schlacter 1990). Services have also been associated with smaller choice sets and hence less likely to see exploratory behavior such as brand switching compared to goods (Brand and Cronin 1997). Consumers also have more post-purchase than pre-purchase evaluation, smaller evoked set and less brand switching for services compared to products (Friedman and Smith 1993).

In this research, we modified a conceptual framework used in prior research to study impulse buying in the products context, to use it for both products and services (Sharma, Sivakumaran, and Marshall 2005). Based on this, we hypothesize that consumer impulsiveness is more strongly associated with level of impulsiveness in purchase decisions for products compared to services, whereas optimum stimulation level and self-monitoring are more strongly associated with level of impulsiveness in purchase decisions for services compared to products. Finally, we also hypothesize that the association of consumer impulsiveness and optimum stimulation level with impulse buying is stronger for low versus high self-monitors, for both products and services.

METHODOLOGY

We used a between-subjects experimental design with a convenience sample of 200 undergraduate business students in exchange for 5% course credit. Each participant read an imaginary scenario involving a product (t-shirt) or a service (foot massage) and responded to questions about their behavioral intentions. We measured their traits including consumer impulsiveness, OSL and self-monitoring as the independent variables using well-established reliable scales for each of these. Finally, we measured the level of impulsiveness in the participants' behavioral intentions as the dependent variable.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We used moderated multiple regression analysis to test our hypotheses. The regression coefficients for the product and service context were compared using the Chow test for the significance of difference (Chow 1960). All our hypotheses were supported. Specifically, we found that consumer impulsiveness is more strongly associated with level of impulsiveness in purchase decisions for products vs. services. On the other hand, OSL and self-monitoring are more strongly associated with level of impulsiveness in purchase decisions for services vs. products. We also found that the association of CI and OSL with impulse buying is stronger for low versus high self-monitors, for both products and services.

DISCUSSION

Our findings have several significant implications. First, our study is one of the few efforts to empirically investigate impulse buying in the services context. Second, we used a conceptual framework developed and tested in the products context to explore impulse buying in both products and services context. Using a common conceptual framework helped us to identify several important similarities and differences between impulse buying in products vs. services. We hope this research will pave the way for a more comprehensive conceptual framework for impulse buying in general, encompassing both products and services.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our research makes several important conceptual and empirical contributions. However, there are also some weaknesses in this research such as its reliance on student participants and purchase scenarios. Future researchers may address this by using other methods such as shopping simulations, to explore if the findings of this study can be generalized across different situations using participants with different profiles e.g., retail shoppers etc. Moreover, prior research has investigated the influence of several situational factors such as time and money availability, in-store browsing, mood and involvement level (Beatty and Ferrell 1998). Future research could explore if there are any differences in their influence in the services context.

Finally, future research could build a more comprehensive theoretical model for impulse buying in general, which can conceptually incorporate the relevant demographic (age, gender, education level, occupation and socio-economic category), psychographic (life-style, consumer impulsiveness, need for variety and self-monitoring) and situational factors (time and money availability, in-store browsing, shopping enjoyment, mood, involvement level) that may have a direct or indirect influence on impulse buying in both, products and services contexts.