

Impulse buying and Variety Seeking: Two faces of the same coin? Or, maybe not!

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INTRODUCTION

Impulse buying (IB) and variety seeking (VS) are both classified as spontaneous hedonic purchase behaviors influenced by feelings rather than logical thinking (Baumgartner 2002). However, there is little empirical research into their similarities and differences. We address this gap by investigating the association of both these behaviors with relevant consumer traits (consumer impulsiveness, optimum stimulation level and self-monitoring) and situational factors (involvement, product type, time availability and mood).

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN IB & VS

Consumer Impulsiveness (CI) and Optimum Stimulation Level (OSL): IB is a spontaneous purchase behavior without any deliberate consideration of alternatives/future implications (Rook and Fisher 1995), somewhat similar to the definition of VS, an urge to seek change for the sake of pleasure drawn from the process of seeking change and not for any rational benefit (Van Trijp et al 1996). Traditionally, CI trait is associated with IB and OSL with VS (Puri 1996, Baumgartner and Steenkamp 1996). However, based on the above similarities in their motivations we hypothesized a positive association between these traits and both IB and VS.

Time Availability and Mood: Greater time availability leads to more in-store browsing and hence, more IB (Beatty and Ferrell 1998). We suggest a similar association for VS because of the inherent similarity between their motivations. Similarly, positive mood leads to more IB and VS (Rook and Gardner 1993; Kahn and Isen 1993). Hence, more IB and VS under higher time availability and positive mood.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN IB & VS

Self-Monitoring: High self-monitors seek more variety in public to appear as interesting and creative people (Ratner and Kahn 2002), but they also try to appear rational when their decisions may be scrutinized by others (Lerner and Tetlock 1999). IB is commonly associated with post-purchase negative affect and guilt, which may make high self-monitors less impulsive in their purchase decisions. Therefore, more VS (IB) for high (low) self-monitors.

Involvement: Consumers indulge in more VS for low involvement products (Van Trijp et al 1996) but high involvement coupled with greater argument quality also leads to increase in persuasion (Petty et al 1983). We suggest that under high involvement consumers may develop better quality arguments supporting their impulsive decisions and hence, more VS (IB) under low (high) involvement.

Product Type (Utilitarian vs. Hedonic): Consumers seek more variety in hedonic products (Van Trijp et al. 1996) but they guard against impulsive urges and develop strategies to resist these (Dholakia 2000). Therefore, faced with an impulsive urge for a hedonic product, they may be more cautious and less impulsive but for utilitarian products they may discount the

negative normative associations and be more impulsive. Hence, more IB (VS) in utilitarian (hedonic) products.

MODERATING ROLE OF SELF-MONITORING

Consumer traits have a greater influence on behavior among low versus high self-monitors. Hence, we expected self-monitoring to moderate the influence of impulsiveness and OSL traits on level of impulsiveness and variety seeking in purchase decisions, but because of their opposite normative associations we hypothesized a positive (negative) moderation for VS (IB).

METHODOLOGY

We used an experimental approach with 160 undergraduate student subjects. We first administered a questionnaire with all the trait scales, then exposed the subjects to different shopping scenarios (adapted from Rook and Fisher 1995) and finally measured our dependent variables i.e. level of impulsiveness and variety seeking in the purchase decisions. Each subject was exposed to four different scenarios, two each for IB and VS, covering all four situational factors (counterbalanced).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

All scales used in our study showed high reliability and all manipulations worked. Subjects' age and gender had no significant impact on the findings. We used multiple regression analysis and mean comparison using T-test. Regression models represented a good fit for both, IB ($R^2_{adj} = 0.279$, $F(5,155) = 20.563$, $p < 0.001$) and VS ($R^2_{adj} = 0.215$, $F(5,155) = 12.397$, $p < 0.001$). Most hypotheses were supported with significant beta-coefficients and mean differences ($p < 0.01$).

Our research makes several important contributions. First, we empirically demonstrate the similarities and differences between IB and VS, in their associations with relevant consumer traits and situational factors. Second, we show the opposite moderating influence of self-monitoring on these two behaviors. Thus, our conceptual framework may lead to a better understanding of the general category of hedonic purchase behaviors.

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