

Self-Indulgence or Loss of Self-Control? Or, is it a Bit of Both? Investigating Cross-cultural Aspects of Impulse Buying Behavior

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

Impulse buying is considered an important and widespread phenomenon by consumer researchers as well as marketing practitioners in the US and other western countries and it has been considered largely universal in nature (Beatty and Ferrell 1998; Hausman 2000; Rook and Fisher 1995). However, recent research has highlighted the need to explore the cultural context of consumer behavior to help the marketers understand and capitalize on cross-cultural differences in an increasingly globalized marketplace (Maheswaran and Shiv 2000). In this context, some researchers have begun to investigate impulse buying behavior in other countries besides US such as Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam (Kacen and Lee 2002; Nguyen et al. 2003).

On the other hand, there is also a growing demand to establish measurement equivalence for scales developed with the US consumers before using these in countries outside the US (Sharma and Weathers 2003; Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998). Unfortunately, most cross-cultural studies into impulse buying used scales did not adhere to the suggested methods to demonstrate measurement equivalence, despite using scales developed in the US among their non-US subjects. Hence, there is still no conclusive evidence to support the assumption that impulse buying has the same meaning and implications across cultures.

In this research, we address this gap with three studies. In our first study, we used an existing scale to measure consumer impulsiveness construct, which is defined as a combination of two components – prudence and hedonism each of which along with the situational factors may influence the accessibility of the costs and benefits leading to either resistance or enactment of the buying impulse (Puri 1996). These two components of consumer impulsiveness are expected to be independent of each other and opposite in terms of their association with impulse buying behavior i.e. negative for prudence and positive for hedonism.

METHODOLOGY – STUDY 1

Based on this conceptual framework, we investigated the consumer impulsiveness trait using an experimental approach as a part of another larger study with 204 Singaporean undergraduate student subjects, adapted from Rook and Fisher (1995). We were unable to establish measurement equivalence for the consumer impulsiveness scale wherein our Singaporean sample displayed a significantly different factor structure compared to the US subjects in prior studies, with three-components instead of the two we expected. Specifically, six out of the seven items related to the original “prudence” component loading as expected on one single component, but the five items of “hedonism” component and item 7 from “prudence” component loaded on two different components, which we named “impulsivity” and “self-indulgence” based on the description of all these items.

STUDY 2

These findings prompted us to conduct another study to explore the possibility that the consumer impulsiveness construct may actually have different meaning in different cultures and also rule out other explanations like chance factor or idiosyncrasies of the sample in our first study. In our second study, we again used a similar experimental approach with 648 Singaporean undergraduate subjects and then we ran exploratory factor analysis to demonstrate if consumer impulsiveness did indeed have an extra “self-indulgence” dimension for our Singaporean subjects. We once again discovered a three-dimensional structure. We used this study to develop a revised three-dimensional scale to capture the consumer impulsiveness construct and in our third study with 160 Singaporean student subjects, we ran confirmatory factor analysis on this new scale using a Structural Equation Modeling approach with LISREL 8.54 and our analysis did show that the three-dimensional measurement model provided a better fit compared to one or two dimensional alternative models.

DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTION

Our research represents one of the first few conceptual efforts to acknowledge and explore the cross-cultural differences in impulse buying behavior. Using a series of three experimental studies among Singaporean subjects we were able to demonstrate that the consumer impulsiveness construct for them does indeed have a different underlying structure compared to its traditional interpretation for US subjects. This is the most important contribution of our research and it merits attention from consumer researchers, especially in countries and cultures outside the United States.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

However, we do have a few limitations. We compared the results of factor analysis of our data with factor structures reported for US subjects in prior research, used only student subjects and the same experimental approach in all our studies and explored only the trait aspects of impulse buying behavior. In future, we would replicate our study with both US and non-US subjects, to even more clearly demonstrate the differences between the factor-structure of consumer impulsiveness construct across different cultures, using cross-group comparison with an SEM approach. Future research should also replicate our studies with non-student subjects using other research methods such as surveys, to eliminate the possibility of common method variance and explore the possibility of cross-cultural differences in the influence of relevant situational factors such as time and money availability, mood and involvement level.

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