

# Atlantic Marketing Journal

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Volume 2 | Number 2

Article 4

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December 2013

## Shopping Context and the Impulsive and Compulsive Buyer

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### Recommended Citation

Flight, Richard L. and Scherle, Jarrod (2013) "Shopping Context and the Impulsive and Compulsive Buyer," *Atlantic Marketing Journal*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/vol2/iss2/4>

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# Shopping Context and the Impulsive and Compulsive Buyer

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**Abstract** - Impulsive and compulsive buying are behaviors with unique antecedents and consequences. Each has been studied at length but not in the dual context of offline and online retail environments. This current research examines the interaction of shopping context (online or offline) in relation to impulsive and compulsive buying behaviors. We find evidence that compulsive buying tendency is positively associated with online shopping, while impulse buying tendency is positively associated with offline shopping. The implications of this research suggest that purchasing as a result of compulsive and impulsive buying tendencies vary as a result of the shopping context which includes physical proximity to product and store atmospherics. This study reports the behavior of 353 young adults who provide a survey and shopping diary data over a two-week period during the U.S. holiday of Thanksgiving.

**Keywords** - impulsive buying, compulsive buying, internet, online, retail

## ***Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners -***

The study of impulsive and compulsive buying has been limited by study method and situation under which the shopper is observed. Researchers and retailers alike can benefit by better knowing the conditions under which abnormal buying (compulsive and impulsive buying) is more likely to take place. This too may aid policy makers as the social concern for abnormal buying grows especially over the internet.

## **Introduction**

Sheth and Sisodia (1999, p. 72) state “more than most other fields of scientific inquiry, marketing is context dependent...” while doing so they recall Zinkhan, and Hirschheim (1992) who suggest “the objects marketers attempt to understand are in a constant state of flux...” When taken together we are

presented with both an academic and practitioner focused challenge. How do we address our subject matter when it's a moving target? In addressing this question our challenge lies not only in developing theory to explain a given phenomenon, but also in identifying the contextual bounds for which the phenomenon in question holds. Further, this is complicated when we realize that contextual bounds drift. With this in mind we are motivated to revisit well-known theory especially when the context in which we base our theoretical boundaries have shifted.

The consumer's approach to shopping has changed dramatically over the past 15 years. Consumer access to the internet has grown and firms have developed on-line retail options (clicks) which complement existing offline (bricks) stores. Since the dawn of internet shopping the internet consumer market has exploded in developed economies and now continues to grow especially in emerging markets. In 2009 online sales in the U.S. exceeded \$145.2 billion (U.S. Census Bureau, Table 1055). By 2011 sales have grown to over \$262 billion (Interactive Media) representing an 80% increase over just 3 years. In the U.K., Europe's leading electronic retail economy, online sales are estimated to exceed £68 billion (US\$ 106 billion) in 2011 (Interactive Media). Meanwhile, online retail sales in emerging economies are beginning to gain traction as well. In China an estimated ¥ 99 billion (US\$ 15 billion) in sales are recorded for 2011 (Interactive Media).

In light of the now mainstream reality of online commerce our theoretical constructs have a new frontier upon which to be applied. This current research examines the established behavioral traits of impulsive and compulsive buying as buying context differs. With this in mind the purpose of this current research is to describe a theoretical base for investigating shopping behavior under dynamic consumer environments.

## **Literature Review**

Most consumers buy spontaneously, at least some of the time (Kwak, Zinkhan, DeLorme, and Larsen, 2006; Punj, 2010). However, some consumers appear to do so more often than others. To understand this phenomenon, researchers focus on two types of trait-like characteristics individuals possess that trigger a tendency to engage in spontaneous and unplanned buying. These impulsive and compulsive buying behaviors are the focus of the current research (Flight, Rountree and Beatty, 2012).

Compulsive buying is a darkly complex personality trait that is born out of negative affect. To temporarily alleviate feelings of depression, inferiority, and self-doubt individuals purchase goods without regard of long-term cost. Eventually, this chronic behavior results in severe debt, prolonged depression and social alienation. Impulsive buying is typically viewed as an acute behavior

associated with a positive affective state and while the incidence of compulsive buyers range from 2%-8% (Faber and O'Guinn, 1992; Koran, et al., 2006), most people occasionally make impulsive purchases.

Early research on impulsive buying describes it in its simplest terms as “unplanned buying” (Stern, 1962, p. 59). More recently, researchers address impulsive buying as a stimulating and emotionally charged experience (Rook, 1987; Jones, Reynolds, Weun and Beatty, 2003) and drawing from Jones, et al.'s (2003, p.506) definition, impulsive buying is the “degree to which an individual is likely to make unintended, immediate [or spontaneous], and unreflective purchases.”

The impact and importance of research on impulsive buying is seen in the breadth of consumer behavior categories in which is studied, such as variety seeking (Sharma, Sivakumaran, and Marshall, 2010), atmospherics and environmental stimulation (Mattila and Wirtz, 2008), consumer decision-making (Martin and Potts, 2009), social interactions (Lou, 2004), and the ability to self-monitor (Sharma, Sivakumaran, and Marchall, 2010) to name a few. Impulsive buying has also been linked to a variety of personality factors and can be exacerbated using specific marketing channels such as the internet (Lin and Lin, 2005; Zhang and Shrum, 2009; Sun and Wu, 2011).

Kwak et al. (2006) similarly discuss the importance of studying compulsive buying, noting the strong growth of this tendency in the past twenty years. The behaviors associated with impulsive buying tend to be acute, outcome-oriented, and product or situation-focused, while the behaviors associated with compulsive buying are typically, repetitive and problematic, often made in response to negative events or feelings. Therefore, it is possible that both tendencies can exist simultaneously in the same individual, even though the emotional triggers associated with each are different (Flight, et al., 2012).

Meanwhile, compulsive buying is likened to an addiction in the sense that an emotional imbalance leads to an “internal psychological imbalance” (DeSarbo and Edwards, 1996, pg. 232). Emotionally such an imbalance is brought on by anxiety, stress or some other emotional trigger. The compulsive buyer then seeks to fill an emotional void (Hirschman, 1992) through the physical act of buying. This remedy however provides only a short-term ‘high’, temporarily elevating the buyer’s affective state. For the compulsive buyer relief is a temporary escape. The compulsive buyer may employ avoidance coping techniques, preferring to escape from their current mental state even if it’s a temporary reprieve (Lazarus, 1966; DeSarbo and Edwards, 1996; Kyrios, Frost and Steketee, 2004).

This idea that buying serves a “psychological purpose” has been deemed “the self-medication hypothesis” by Dittmar, Long and Bond (2007), and is consistent across the vast majority of compulsive buying accounts (Faber and Vohs, 2004; Miltenberger et al., 2003; Kellett and Bolton, 2009). The driving factor for compulsive buying therefore appears to be this emotional cycle of mood

alteration where compulsive buying is “driven by negative affectivity, but maintained by the positive emotions experiences at the point of purchase” (Kellett and Bolton, 2009, pg. 89).

In light of the abnormal shopping behaviors compulsive and impulsive buyers demonstrate, we now examine shopping context as a means to amplify the motivation of both the impulsive and compulsive buyer. Stern (1962, pg. 60) describes the role context or environment plays in individual buying behavior by describing day-to-day convenience good shoppers as “realistic and efficient.” Conversely, these same shoppers may demonstrate less than optimal shopping patterns when with friends or in other environments laden with strong social cues. Tauber (1972) for example suggests that various social shopping motives contribute to abnormal shopping behavior while supported by Holbrook and Hirschman’s (1982) call for greater study focused on sensory pleasures and the like (d’Astous, 1990).

## **Study**

The data collection includes two complementary online methods that helped to facilitate the timely collection of information. The first is a survey, with the second a diary filled out by the respondents after a buying episode (defined as any time a purchase was made). The survey gathered data on trait elements, including impulsive and compulsive buying tendency, as well as demographic variables. The shopping diaries provided data on the situational elements. Respondent data from each method were subsequently combined to provide an understanding of trait, situation and behavior in purchasing contexts for each respondent.

## **Sample**

Prior research relating to trait-like characteristics and abnormal buying suggests that habits specifically related to impulsive and compulsive behaviors form at a young age and are well established in college-aged samples (Rindfleish, Burroughs and Denton, 1997; Roberts and Jones, 2001; Joireman, Kees and Sprott, 2010). Therefore, young adults in several upper-division undergraduate classes at a large university in the southern region of the United States serve as participants for this study. Marketing professors and lecturers using in-class and electronic announcements recruited research participants for this study. Respondents were incentivized by a small (\$50) monetary reward awarded to a randomly selected participant.

As with all survey-driven research, non-response bias is an artifact that may lead to lost statistical power and biased relationships (Schwab, 2007). This bias is addressed in three ways in this research. First, all students received incentives in the form of class extra credit to encourage full participation at both

the survey and diary stages of data collection. Second, follow-up e-mails sent to non-respondents increased participation levels (Truell, 2003). Finally, a comparison of early and late respondents assessed potential response bias, yielding no differences at  $p < .05$  (Armstrong and Overton, 1977).

Six hundred and twenty-one students received the survey, with 469 completing the instrument—a response rate of 75.5%. All 469 respondents then received a link to the online shopping diary where they submitted an entry for every shopping experience over the following two-week period. Participants that completed the initial survey but did not complete at least one diary entry are not included, as well as those whose shopping venue was not a retail store. Also removed were surveys with significant missing data. Thus, the attrition rate due to incomplete diary responses, data related problems, or due to the reporting of shopping venues other than retail store was 24.7%, producing a final sample size of 353. Of these a total of 1191 shopping diaries were completed. Thus, the typical respondent completed 3 surveys (mode).

Just over half the respondents are female (53.4%) and currently employed (47.9%). The respondents were between the ages of 19 and 42 ( $\mu = 21.22$  yrs.) and Caucasian (85%), African American (11.9%), or Asian (1.4%).

## Measures

Scale items are drawn from established scales and chosen for their representativeness of the constructs defined in this research (see, Table 1). After the initial EFA, minor modifications were made resulting in 18 items representing IBT, CBT, positive affect, negative affect, The EFA performed well; loadings and coefficient alphas ranging from .76 to .85 indicate acceptable reliability for all constructs of interest (Churchill, 1979) and appear in Table 1 along with all items and sources. Survey items are measured on five-point Likert scales, anchored by strongly disagree to strongly agree.

**Table 1: Scale Item: Sources and Factor Loadings**

Factor and Item ( $\alpha$ )	EFA Factor Loadings	Source
<b>Impulsive buying tendency (.76)</b>		
1. It is fun to buy spontaneously.	0.83	Weun et al. (1998)
2. I often buy things without thinking	0.72	Rook and Fisher (1995)
3. Sometimes I feel like buying things on the spur-of-the-moment.	0.89	“ ”
4. “Buy now, think about it later,” describes me.	0.52	“ ”
<b>Compulsive buying tendency (.85)</b>		
1. I think others would be horrified if they they knew of my store or catalog spending habits.	0.70	Faber and O’Guinn (1992)
2. I write checks or use a debit card even when I know I don’t have enough money in the bank to cover it.	0.83	“ ”
3. I feel anxious or nervous on days I don’t go go shopping in stores or from catalogs.	0.73	“ ”
4. I buy things even though I can’t afford them.	0.70	Edwards (1992, 1993)
5. I feel driven to shop and spend, even when I don’t have the time or money.	0.81	“ ”
6. I go on buying binges.	0.78	“ ”
<b>Positive affect (.78)</b>		
1. I was feeling happy.	0.77	O’Guinn and Faber (1989)
2. Overall, I was feeling pretty positive.	0.78	Frost et al. (2001)
3. I was feeling very confident.	0.77	“ ”
<b>Negative affect (.82)</b>		
1. My self-esteem was lower than normal.	0.75	O’Guinn and Faber (1989)
2. I was feeling sad or depressed.	0.78	“ ”
3. I was experiencing some anxiety or apprehension.	0.66	Frost et al. (2001)
4. I was feeling a lot of tension and stress.	0.69	“ ”
5. Overall I was feeling pretty negative.	0.81	“ ”

Additional questions asked if the shopping trip had been planned or if it was spontaneous, whether the respondent shopped online or offline, as well as the name of the store and what they purchased. To identify a store and product type we assigned each an appropriate category in accordance to the following: discount (Walmart, Target, Kmart, Dollar Tree, Dollar General, Outlets, TJ Maxx, etc.); specialty (Guitar Gallery, Delilas Boutique, Sanddollar Shoes,

Perfect Touch, Oz Music, K&G, The Wharf, Gamestop, Icing Jewelry, Candy Connection, etc.); convenience/pharmacy (Airport, gas station, drug stores like CVS, Rite-Aid); department (Saks, Dillards, Parisian, Nordstrom, JC Penny, etc.); big box/big specialty (Home Depot, Circuit City, Bed Bath and Beyond, Linens and Things, Books-a-Million, etc.); and branded specialty chain (Limited, Gap, Express, Forever 21, Victoria's Secret, Lane Bryant, NY and Co., Wet Seal, Guess, etc.). Products types ranged from entertainment to household to electronics and are identified in Table 2.

**Table 2: Shopping Context Frequencies**

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	<b>Frequency (percent)</b>
<b>Store Type</b>	
Discount	275 (23.1 %)
Specialty	226 (19 %)
Convenience	23 (1.9 %)
Department	162 (13.6 %)
Big Box/Specialty	177 (14.9 %)
Branded Specialty	190 (16 %)
<b>Product Type</b>	
Entertainment	142 (11.9 %)
Apparel	431 (36.2 %)
Shoes	101 (8.6 %)
Jewelry	29 (2.4 %)
Accessories	51 (4.3 %)
Food/Drink	23 (1.9 %)
Household	70 (5.9 %)
Gift/Novelty/Toy	31 (2.6 %)
Holiday/Seasonal	31 (2.6 %)
Sports and Recreation	71 (6 %)
Home Improvement	28 (2.4 %)
Personal Care	72 (6 %)
Electronics	72 (6 %)
<b>Shopping Location</b>	
Offline	981 (82.4 %)
Online	209 (17.5 %)
<b>Shopping Trip Planning</b>	
Planned	836 (70.2 %)
Spontaneous	353 (29.6 %)

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## Method and Results

To examine the roll context plays on impulsive and compulsive buying we performed two calculations. First, for each categorical variable (store type, product type, planned/spontaneous trip, and off versus online shopping) we compared means using ANOVA (see, Table 3-5). For metric data (positive and negative affect) we compared correlation coefficients by impulsive and compulsive buying and affect (see, Table 6)

Upon first review it is important to note that impulsive buying scores are routinely higher than compulsive buying scores for two reasons. First, the prevalence of impulsive buying is greater, that is more people demonstrate the traits of an impulsive buying than they do of a compulsive buyer. Second, most people will more strongly identify with the items used to measure impulsive buying, while simultaneously identify less with the items used to measure compulsive buying.

Regarding store type Table 2 provides the frequency distribution of diaries by the type of store frequented and product purchased. Table 3a reports the average compulsive buying score for those that shop in each store environment while Table 3b does the same for impulsive buying scores. Not surprisingly individuals shopping in high sensory-laden atmospheres (specialty, branded specialty and department store) demonstrate greater tendencies toward compulsive buying when compared to less stimulating shopping environments (e.g., convenience stores) ( $F=2.78$ ,  $p=.005$ ). Interestingly, when compared to average impulse buying scores, these same stores rank lower relative to discount and big box specialty stores. Illustrated in Figure 1 one can see that impulsive buying and compulsive buying tendencies manifest themselves differently to those who shopped in diverse store type contexts.

**Table 3a-b: Mean Compulsive and Impulsive Buying Scores by Store-type**

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**Table 3a: Compulsive Buying (CB)**

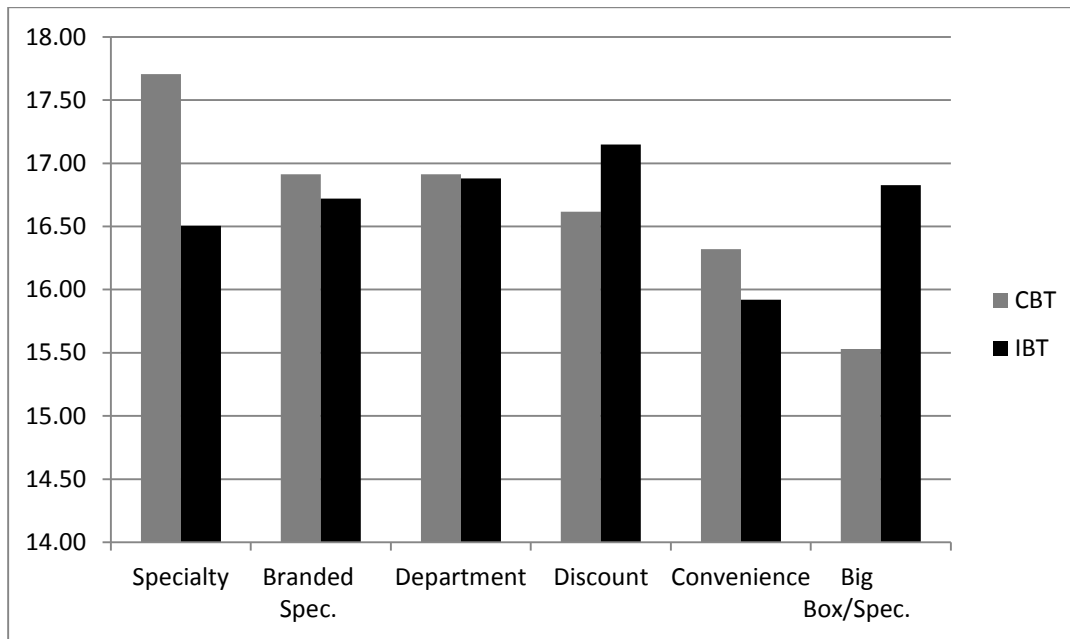
<u>Store-type</u>	<u>CB average</u>
Specialty	1.79
Branded Spec.	1.71
Department	1.71
Discount	1.68
Convenience	1.65
Big Box/Spec.	1.57

**Table 3b: Impulsive Buying (IB)**

<u>Store-type</u>	<u>IB average</u>
Discount	3.21
Department	3.16
Big Box/Spec.	3.15
Branded Spec.	3.13
Specialty	3.09
Convenience	2.98

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**Figure 1: Mean Compulsive and Impulsive Buying Scores\* by Store-type**



\* Scores were standardized to illustrate differences on a comparative scale.

Next, product type by buying trait is examined similarly and reported in Tables 4a-b. As prior literature reports, this study finds traditional image-related items such as jewelry and clothes are purchased by those scoring high on compulsive buying when compared to purchases found in other product categories ( $F=2.98$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Again however, when compared to the average impulsive buying score an apparent inverse relationship is observed (see, Tables 4a and b; Figure 2). It is suggested that jewelry, shoes, apparel and accessories are prototypical “feel good” items that people who are medicating a hurt psychosis will buy. By purchasing these items they gain instant external affirmation which they then use to elevate negative affect. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, products that are thoughtfully planned and ones that achieve utilitarian goals (gift giving, house repairs, etc.) were more likely to be purchased by someone scoring higher on the impulsive buying scale. Figure 2 illustrates the apparent inverse relationship noting that when each product type is compared impulsive and compulsive buying traits vary greatly especially at the high and low extremes.

**Table 4a-b: Mean Compulsive and Impulsive Buying Scores by Product-type**

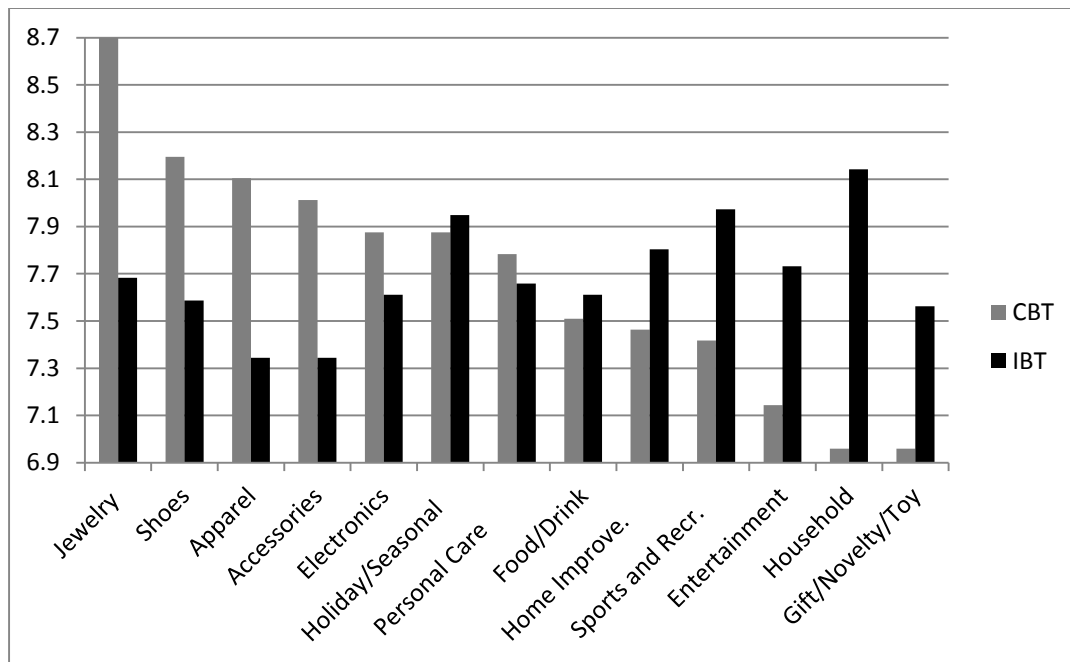
**Table 4a: Compulsive Buying (CB)**

<u>Product-type</u>	<u>CB average</u>
Jewelry	1.90
Shoes	1.79
Apparel	1.77
Accessories	1.75
Electronics	1.72
Holiday/Seasonal	1.72
Personal Care	1.70
Food/Drink	1.64
Home Improve.	1.63
Sports and Recr.	1.62
Entertainment	1.56
Household	1.52
Gift/Novelty/Toy	1.52

**Table 4b: Impulsive Buying (IB)**

<u>Product-type</u>	<u>IB average</u>
Household	3.37
Sports and Recr.	3.30
Holiday/Seasonal	3.29
Home Improve.	3.23
Entertainment	3.20
Jewelry	3.18
Personal Care	3.17
Food/Drink	3.15
Electronics	3.15
Shoes	3.14
Gift/Novelty/Toy	3.13
Apparel	3.04
Accessories	3.04

**Figure 2: Mean Compulsive and Impulsive Buying Scores\* by Product-type**



\* Scores were standardized to illustrate differences on a comparative scale.

Concerning offline and online shopping the average respondent that shopped online had a significantly higher compulsive buying score (1.80 compared to 1.66, sign. = .005) (see, Table 5). Meanwhile there was no statistical difference in the impulsive buying mean between these two groups (3.09 compared to 3.17, sign. = .210). Planned versus spontaneous shopping had a similar outcome where spontaneous shopping was performed by individuals with significantly higher compulsive buying score (1.75 compared to 1.67, sign. = .038). Meanwhile, difference in the impulsive buying mean between these two groups was also significant (3.04 compared to 3.21, sign. = .003).

**Table 5: Mean Compulsive and Impulsive Buying Scores by Shopping location and trip planning**

	<b>Compulsive Buying Average</b>	<b>Impulsive Buying Average</b>
<b>Shopping Location</b>		
Offline	1.66	3.17
Online	1.80	3.09
<b>Shopping Trip Planning</b>		
Planned	1.67	3.21
Spontaneous	1.75	3.04

Finally, we compare positive and negative affect by compulsive and impulsive buying score (see, Table 4). The data suggests that compulsive buying is negatively associated with feeling good (positive affect, sign. = .001) and positively associated with feeling bad (negative affect, sign. = .000). While these relationships are significant, the data suggests that impulsive buying and feeling bad (negative affect) is negatively related (sign. = .003).

**Table 6: Correlation of Respondent Affect and Buying Trait**

	<b>Compulsive Buying</b>	<b>Impulsive Buying</b>
Positive Affect	-.103 (.001)	-.050 (.118)
Negative Affect	.266 (.000)	-.096 (.003)

## Discussion

The purpose of this study is to identify and quantify context specific elements where impulsive and compulsive buying traits manifest themselves. As we have found these traits are found to vary significantly across store and product type, shopping intent (planned or spontaneous), affective state, and store location (online versus offline). As academicians we seek to verify theory by establishing conditions upon which theory holds. In this case we confirm that compulsive buyers tend to favor spontaneous shopping at highly charged, exciting store atmospheres for products that are hedonic in nature. Meanwhile, and perhaps due to their embarrassing shopping behavior and low self-image they prefer shopping on-line, and while in a predictably negative mood. Conversely, impulsive buyers seek shopping opportunities while in a positive mood, they tend to plan more and seek utilitarian-like products.

Like all research this study suffers from potential limitations. First, the sample is primarily made up of university upperclassmen. While student samples have been used successfully in the past additional research should include a broader sample that represents a greater spectrum of consumers. Second, even though the evidence is strong this research does not promote a behavioral model that suggests context causes a purchase decision. This shortcoming may be dealt with in future research however it is not the intent of this current study to identify a causal relationship among these variables. Third, the measures used produced acceptable, but not perfect psychometric statistics. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis would aid in verifying the voracity of the instrument used to test the higher order constructs.

Together, these data suggest that these impulsive and compulsive buying traits manifest themselves in predictable behaviors. As such, public policy makers and retail managers may work together to identify and limit situations that may exasperate the compulsive buyer while motivating the impulsive buyer. This current research provides an important step as we continue to better understand the role shopping context plays in triggering the abnormal buying habits of seemingly average consumers. Future research may continue to find the boundary conditions which encourage an impulsive buyer to make a harmlessly benign purchase yet discourage a compulsive buyer from making a potentially painful purchase they will eventually regret.

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