

Analysis of the stimuli of londoners' fashion-oriented impulse buying behaviour*

Los estímulos del comportamiento de los londinenses en sus compras impulsivas de productos de moda

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Abstract

This paper explores the stimuli behind fashion-oriented impulse purchases within physical shopping environments. The main focus of the study is the stimuli behind 'emotional' and 'rational' consumer's responses. The primary qualitative data was collected by in-depth interview methodology in a sample of 10 workingwomen from London aged between 25 and 35 years. Findings mainly suggest that fashion-oriented impulse purchases, especially for clothing, are influenced by a wide variety of stimuli/responses in a similar way as planned purchases. However, there are specific stimuli/responses that trigger impulse buying in a higher degree for the studied sample.

Key words

Impulse Buying, Unplanned Purchases, Fashion, Consumer, Stimuli.

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Resumen

Este documento explora los estímulos involucrados en las compras impulsivas de productos de moda dentro de ambientes físicos de compra. El principal foco de este estudio son los estímulos que generan respuestas 'emocionales' y 'racionales' en el consumidor. Los datos cualitativos primarios fueron recolectados utilizando la metodología de entrevistas a profundidad en una muestra de 10 mujeres trabajadoras en Londres con edades entre 25 y 35 años. Los resultados principalmente sugieren que las compras impulsivas de productos relacionados con moda, especialmente vestuario, pueden ser influenciadas por una gran variedad de estímulos/respuesta de manera similar a las compras planeadas. Sin embargo, se encontraron específicos estímulos/respuesta que estimulan las compras impulsivas en un mayor nivel para la muestra estudiada.

Key Words

Compras Impulsivas, Compras no Planeadas, Moda, Consumidor, Estímulo.

Introduction

The idea behind this fashion marketing research project emerged from two newspaper articles that motivated me to do further reading about the subject. The first article, by Moussa (2007), reports that a rising number of shopaholics in Britain, especially women, have become slaves to fashion and debt. The second article, by Glackin (2007), reveals how cheap clothes have become a new addiction in London.

Most of us have experienced an impulse that has led us into unplanned shopping. What, then, makes us purchase products we did not intend to buy, we did not need or we did not have in our shopping list? Studies show that seven out of ten purchases at the grocery shop are unplanned (Budgets Can Take a Beating, 2007). Bayley and Nancarrow (1998) suggest that most shoppers buy on impulse at least occasionally. This implies that impulse buying is an important area of study that affects most of us.

Shopping has evolved, and today's consumers shop for reasons other than mere physical needs. People shop to indulge themselves, to satisfy psychological needs, to make themselves feel good, to make a statement, to add excitement to their life, to show their personality, or to boost their self-esteem, among other reasons (Pooler, 2003). Additionally, 'more and more shopping decisions are being made in the premises of the store itself' (Underhill, 2000, p.62). Consequently, '...construction of symbolic environments makes visual consumption critically important for understanding contemporary consumers' (Schroeder, 2005, p.5).

The ultimate purpose of this research is to explore the stimuli behind fashion-oriented impulse purchases within a physical shopping experience. The focus is the analysis of the stimuli leading to 'emotional' and/or 'rational' consumer's responses. Since one of the purposes of marketing is to increase sales by making the shopping experience more enjoyable and unforgettable, the conclusions of this study could be useful for fashion marketers and merchandisers for improving shop layouts and product positioning and displays. However, studies such as that from Shohamand Brenčič's (2003) state that we should consider the ethics behind some marketing activities aiming at encouraging impulse buying because it might lead to compulsiveness.

Impulse Buying

Impulsiveness could be defined as 'a consumer's tendency to buy spontaneously, unreflectively, immediately, and kinetically' (Rokk and Fisher, 1995, p. 306 cited on Phauand Lo, 2004, p. 403). The American Marketing Association defines impulse buying as 'a purchase made without planning.' Frequently, the purchase is an emotional reaction to a marketing stimulus (Compulsive Shoppers' Binges Can Lead to Mental Budget Meltdown, 2006). Furthermore, compulsive buying is different from impulse buying. The latter centres the impulse on a specific product in a particular moment and it is temporary, while compulsive buying is an enduring behaviour that centres on the process of buying and not on the purchases themselves (Salomon, 2004 cited in Park and Burns, 2005, p. 136).

According to The Oxford Dictionary for International Business (1998), the word 'stimulus' means 'thing that rouses to activity... or incites.' Chaudhuri's (2006, p. 2) model shows how the 'stimuli' result in consumer's 'responses' leading to a particular 'behaviour' such as impulse buying. Stimuli lead to emotional and/or rational responses and the nature of these responses is influenced by various factors such as 'individual characteristics', 'environment' and 'genetics'.

An emotional response is the '...holistic and synthetic integration of sensory data from the external and internal bodily environment' (Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 3). These immediate responses could be physiological, such as heart rate changes, spontaneous and expressive, such as facial expressions; or affective responses or subjective feelings, such as joy (p. 4). In terms of a product, response results in a sensation of pleasure (p. 64). The other type of consumer response is the rational response that involves judgment, and is the '...sequential and analytical processing of information based on an appraisal of the environment' (p. 3). Some of these responses relate to the product's analytical value by judging the merchandise value or its differentiation value (p. 64).

Many authors address impulse buying (Chaudhuri, 2006; Pooler, 2003; Underhill, 2000; Park, Kim and Forney, 2006; Phau and Lo, 2004; Bayle and Nancarrow, 1998; Coley and Burgess, 2003). Some impulse buying studies have analyzed the phenomenon by quantitative (Park, Kim and Forney, 2006; Phau and Lo, 2004; Coley and Burgess 2003) as well as qualitative approaches (Bayle and Nancarrow, 1998). Few studies (Park, Kim and Forney, 2006; Phau and Lo, 2004; Park and Burns, 2005) have specifically focused on fashion-oriented impulse or compulsive buying, and others, such as that from Coley and Burgess (2003), have partially included fashion products.

Underhill (2000) suggests that all unplanned purchases are a result of the shopper seeing, touching, wearing, smelling or tasting something that promises pleasure and fulfilment. Regarding clothing sales, the author states that the shopper conversion rate is increased by staff contact and a positive experience while using the fitting rooms. Park, Kim and Forney's quantitative study (2006) examines American college students by revealing that degrees of fashion involvement, positive shopping emotions and a hedonistic consumption tendency have positive effects on impulse buying.

Another study of American students (Coley and Burgess, 2003) presents the shopping experience atmosphere as the key factor for triggering impulse buying behaviour by attracting and keeping the consumer excited about buying. Phau and Lo's Australian survey (2004) discovered fashion innovators as generally exhibiting impulse behaviour. In England, Bayle and Nancarrow's qualitative research (1998) reviewed unplanned purchasing on retail and direct buying contexts by focusing on the individual's responses and consequences. This study identified typical elements of an impulse purchase such as object fixation, urgency, an adrenaline rush, lift of self-esteem or mood, and guilt.

Shopping Behaviour

Several authors (Kerfoot, Davies and Ward, 2003; Curry and Moutinho, 1993; Munger and Grewal, 2001; Soars, 2003; Paulins and Geisfeld, 2003; Dias, 2003) have addressed consumer's shopping behaviour by suggesting multiple perspectives on the subject. This constitutes the basis of impulse buying behaviour analysis.

Paulins and Geisfeld's quantitative study in America (2003) identified a diverse set of apparel store attributes affecting store preference. Additional variables such as store type, education and age have significant influence in the consumer's perceptions. In contrast, another study in America (Dias, 2003) presented Generation X as caring less about the store environment than the actual merchandise being sold; wanting comfortable clothing that matches their personal style. In the UK, Kerfoot, Davies and Ward (2003) studied the

effects of visual merchandising in purchase behaviour by focusing on female fashion. Their examination proposed that every person has a different degree of environmental stimuli assimilation and that and that positive perception of a display has a strong influence on the purchase decision.

Soars (2003) provided insight into certain stimuli/responses related to the shopper's psychology. Relevant elements are mentioned, such as environmental influences, impact of emotions, symbols, moods, etc.; and satisfying consumer needs and desires. Moreover, Munger and Grewal (2001) examined the effects of promotional methods on consumer's perceptions, providing evidence that discounts impact consumer perceptions and, also, subsequent purchase intentions. Lastly, Underhill (2000, p. 62) defined a shop as a 'great big three-dimensional walk-in TV commercial'. Curry and Moutinho (1993) reported different stimuli that enhance consumer information processing when advertising exposure is present. This suggests that understanding the influence of advertising stimuli on consumers is also relevant to this paper.

Research Methodology

This research carried on semi-structured in-depth interviews by undertaking a careful examination of the interviewee's behaviours, opinions and perceptions in order to recognize the experienced stimuli/responses that have led to unplanned fashion-related purchases in the past. Recalling previous episodes of fashion-related shopping experiences provided the research with stimuli/responses that made a memorable impact on the respondents.

Bayley and Nancarrow's 1998 study applies 'friendship-pair' interviews as an effective method of studying impulse purchasing. This research initially proposed using the same methodology; however, a contingency plan was implemented due to lack of friendship pair volunteers that had experienced impulse buying while being shopping together. Since Kerfoot, Davies and Ward's (2003) exploratory research on fashion-oriented purchase behaviour successfully utilises semi-structured interviews, this project decided to implement this method instead of friendship-pair interviews for data collection.

Sample determination

The sample consisted of 10 working women from London aged between 25 and 35 years. This paper concentrates on women's behaviour since studies such as that from Coley and Burgess' (2003), demonstrated that women are more likely to exhibit impulse behaviour than men. No screening test was necessary to select the interviewees given that the main research objective is focused on impulse rather than compulsive buying.

Data presentation and classification

Interview scripts were documented and analysed line-by-line. Relevant stimuli and related responses per interview were identified and classified by association (Gallo, 2000). Relationships between stimuli and responses were also suggested and classified by categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Examples of purchases given by the interviewees that did not provide enough information or could not be considered impulse purchases were disregarded for this examination.

Findings and Analysis

Impulse buying general analysis

Most interviewees declared having several impulse buying experiences. Only a few admitted to avoiding this type of behaviour. Interviewees commented on null, low or high levels of impulse buying. In regards to the relation between stimuli and responses, analyses suggest that every stimulus can lead to any or even various 'emotional' and/or 'rational' responses. In relation to lifestyle, most women claimed they do the majority of their shopping alone because of lack of available time.

Based on Bayle and Nancarrow (1998), interviewees usually make impulse purchases to 1) feel good, 2) make a statement and/or 3) to stockpile/advance purchases. In the first category, some interviewees make powerful remarks such as feeling "high" after an impulse purchase. In the second category, respondents want to make statements such as "I have money", and for the last category, respondents admit buying things they do not need with affirmations such as "...I realized that I had what I just bought..."

Certain interviewees' tendency to impulsively buy could be so strong that sometimes their desire to buy could be triggered by any stimulus related to a specific product/shop, or even by no stimulus at all. These are the episodes when the buying process becomes the fixation instead of the purchase itself.

The majority of interviewees provided sensitive personal information. They appeared relaxed, honest, and not just wanting to make the right responses. Surprisingly, some respondents even seemed excited and relieved to be able to talk about their impulse purchases since they could not mention these events with their partners or friends, who usually criticize this type of behaviour.

Stimuli analysis

There were considerably more comments regarding stimuli than responses. The identified stimuli could be classified as being an attribute of the 'product' or the 'environment'.

Comments on sensorial stimuli support the fact that merchandise colour and colour coordination across merchandise assortment (Soars, 2003; Kerfoot, Davies and Ward, 2003), lighting (Kerfoot, Davies and Ward, 2003, p.150), music and aroma (Soars, 2003 p.631) influenced purchase decisions.

'Price' observations can be sorted within three groups. Firstly, women who pay no attention to price and even see expensiveness as a desirable attribute. Secondly, interviewees that see price discounts as the main stimuli in their impulse purchases. Thirdly, women who find affordable prices extremely attractive. This study additionally suggests that negative stimuli/responses do not necessarily interrupt an impulse purchase. For example, "Queues of 1,000 people, people stepping on the clothes, it was a mess. I stayed just because of the sales." This remark supports Paulins and Geisfeld's (2003 p.383) statement 'Customers are willing to sacrifice some store attributes as long as they receive lower prices.'

Interviewees seemed to buy on impulse when they found products that complement other personal items or that were similar to what they initially intended to buy. 'Approval' or complements from others, a positive experience in 'customer service' and an attractive window display, as well as finding the right product and material, also have positive influences in this type of behaviour. Moreover, there are additional factors such as the right fitting of a garment, mirrors, style, fitting rooms, among others.

Responses analysis

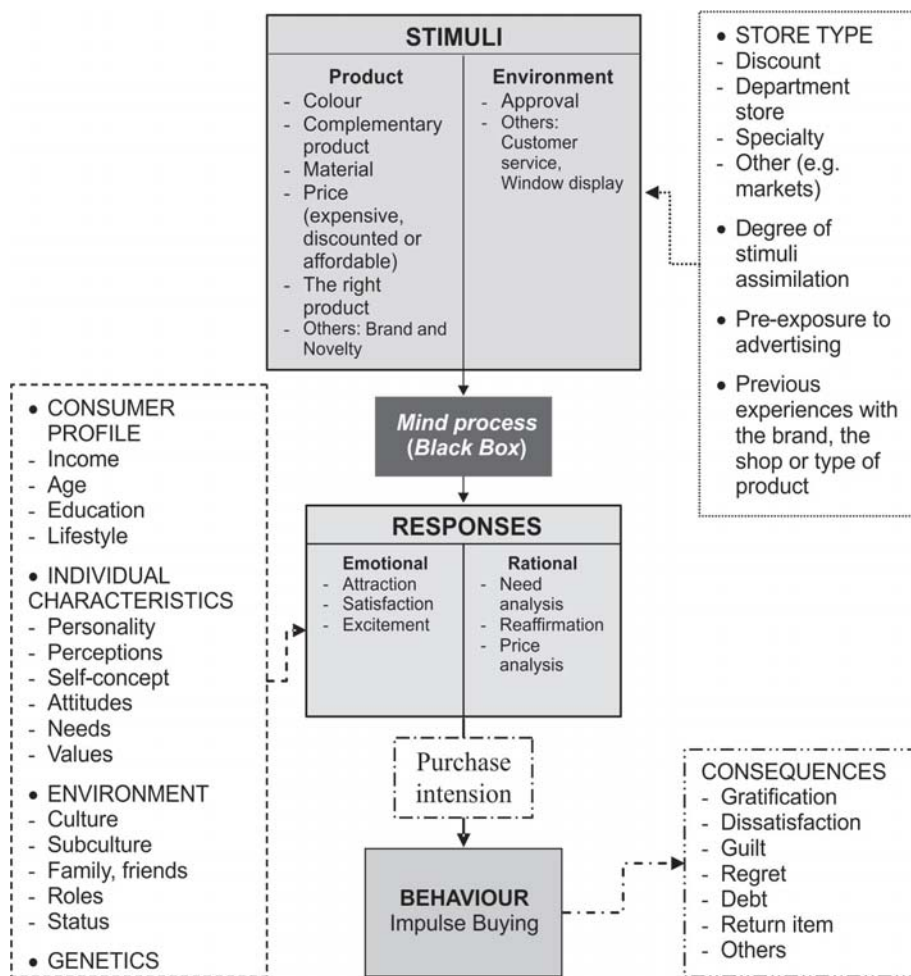
For some interviewees, the main identified responses were 'emotional'. These responses have to do with affective responses such as 'attraction' to the object, a sense of 'satisfaction' when thinking about purchasing the item, and an overwhelming 'excitement'. Other emotional responses were predominantly feelings of confidence and relaxation.

The rest of interviewees' most common responses could be classified as 'rational'. These responses involved an analysis on 'price', 'need' and/or 'reaffirmation'. The latter means that individuals are looking for a second opinion from others or themselves to reaffirm they are making the right choice. Regarding 'need', some interviewees made a rational analysis by identifying a 'real' need that could justify the unplanned purchase. Additional rational responses were related to analysis of comfort and materials, thinking if the item would match other products, comparisons of quality and attributes against other products or brands, among others.

Model of consumer fashion-related impulse buying behaviour

Based on Chaudhuri's model (2006, p. 2), and the literature review and results of this research, a model is proposed in figure 1.

Figure 1. Model of consumer fashion-related impulse buying behaviour



Source: Based on Chaudhuri's model (2006, p. 2)

Conclusions

Fashion-oriented impulse purchases can be influenced by a wide variety of stimuli/responses in a similar way as planned purchases. However, there are certain stimuli/responses that trigger impulse buying in a higher degree.

The most important stimuli associated with fashion-oriented impulse purchases are colour, complementary products, material, price (expensive, discounted or affordable), finding the right product, and approval received by others.

In relation to responses, the sample presented two main types of individuals. The first kind exhibits a larger number of rational responses by tending to leave their emotions behind and support their purchases on reasoning and/or justifications. The second type tends to be more emotional by generally letting their feelings rule the buying event. Some women even declared that shopping, especially for bargains, could become an addictive drug by describing feeling 'high' after an impulse purchase.

In regards to the relation between stimuli and responses, findings suggest that every stimulus can lead to any or even various 'emotional' and/or 'rational' responses. Furthermore, negative stimuli/responses do not necessarily interrupt an impulse purchase.

The implemented methodology provided high-quality personal information. Certain interviewee's statements suggest that individual interviews allowed a deeper insight, not achievable if other people were present.

Further research

Related themes of study that could be important topics for future research: a) Observation method could be applied for reporting physical responses during in-shop fashion-related impulse purchases in real-time. Hidden cameras may be necessary for filming these events without influencing customer's behaviours; b) Practical techniques for teaching teenagers and adults how to avoid excessive impulse buying.

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