

Chapter 10

Strategies for Reducing the Environmental Impact of Impulse Buying

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ABSTRACT

This book chapter discusses the impulse buying of sustainably motivated consumers (i.e., sustainable consumers). The authors empirically investigate cases when sustainable consumers buy things impulsively and deal with the negative outcomes of such behaviour. Analysis of qualitative interview data reveals insights on five main themes, namely, sustainable consumption; cases of impulse buying, its antecedents and outcomes; coping with the outcomes of impulse buying; understanding the environmental impact of coping; and preventing future impulse buying. Based on the findings, various strategies for reducing the environmental impact of impulse buying are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development attracts research attention due to the global sustainable development agenda (United Nations, 2023). This agenda has affected not only businesses and policymakers but also individuals. Nowadays, more and more consumers are shifting toward a more sustainable lifestyle and responsible consumption (Wijekoon & Sabri, 2021). Sustainable consumption aims to control excessive desires by avoiding unnecessary purchases and satisfying basic needs through rational choices (Quoquab et al., 2019). Green buying is a subcategory of sustainable consumption related to shopping activities. Green

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buying involves purchasing eco-friendly, recyclable, or biodegradable products, and avoiding products that are detrimental to the environment or society (Zheng et al., 2021). The perceived costs or sacrifices related to sustainable consumption and green buying are often higher when compared to conventional consumption, while the sustainability outcomes are distant and vague (Reczek et al., 2018). Therefore, while choosing between sustainable and conventional consumption, consumers frequently face a social dilemma or a choice between benefits or losses for themselves or society (Dunn et al., 2011). Thus, sustainable consumption and, especially, green buying behaviour, is often a process that requires significant consideration and balancing of costs and benefits.

On the contrary, impulse buying is an unplanned buying process without a pre-shopping objective and consideration of alternative choices (Bayley & Nancarrow, 1998), or a ‘sudden and immediate purchase with no pre-shopping intentions which occurs after experiencing an urge to buy, and it tends to be spontaneous and without a lot of reflection’ (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998, p. 170). The importance of impulse buying significantly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic when panic buying turned into more general impulsive shopping due to increased financial confidence¹. In addition, recent statistics show that despite the global sustainability agenda and promotion of sustainable consumption, the share of impulse purchases online remains steady at 86%². Over half of our daily shopping involves impulse buying (Redine et al., 2023). Along with some positive outcomes (e.g., satisfaction and joy) (Bayley & Nancarrow, 1998), impulse buying has negative outcomes for consumers (e.g., negative post-purchase emotions, familial and financial issues) (Rook, 1987) and society in general (e.g., ecological harm) (Chen et al., 2020). Thus, consumers often try to cope with negative impulse buying outcomes, i.e., they attempt to control burdening demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When consumers cope with negative impulse buying outcomes, they aim to address their own issues such as financial losses (i.e., self-related outcomes) or social issues such as ecological harm (i.e., society-related outcomes). For instance, if consumers experience self-related guilt, they try to justify their impulse buying or discreetly possess purchased products (Dahl et al., 2003) or, if an impulsive purchase proves regrettable, consumers may simply return it (Bayley & Nancarrow, 1998). From the perspective of sustainability, such coping harms the environment as it significantly increases one’s carbon footprint (Chen et al., 2020). In contrast, when guilt is society-related, consumers perform compensatory actions such as recycling (Dahl et al., 2003). However, sometimes consumers just promise to perform such actions; thus, the positive effect on the environment is uncertain (Dahl et al., 2003).

At the same time, impulse buying can be influenced by the sustainability of products or sellers. For instance, factors such as buyer-seller personality similarity (Wang et al., 2020) or corporate social responsibility (Hayat et al., 2022) may affect impulse buying of environmentally friendly products. In addition, product sustainability may enhance the urge to buy impulsively (Obukhovich et al., 2021). These findings are paradoxical as they show that the intention of being sustainable may not lead to consuming less but quite the opposite – overconsuming due to impulse buying.

Thus, the emerging question that this chapter aims to answer is: are sustainably motivated consumers (hereby referred to as “sustainable consumers”) involved in impulse buying and what is their understanding of the outcomes of such buying decisions? To extend the existing literature on sustainable consumption as well as to address the research question, we conduct an explorative qualitative study (N=37) and investigate whether sustainable consumers are involved in impulse buying and how they deal with the negative outcomes of impulse buying. In the hope of sparking academic debate, the results of this chapter aim to give a new perspective and initiate a discussion around sustainable consumption and the

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