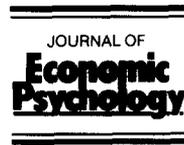




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## Gender identity and material symbols: Objects and decision considerations in impulse purchases

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### Abstract

We present a new model of impulse buying, based on a social constructionist theory, which addresses some of the short-comings of previous models from economics, consumer behaviour, and psychology. Our model predicts that products are impulsively bought to reflect self-identity. Thus gender, as a major social category, should influence both the products bought impulsively and the buying considerations used. We investigate these aspects of impulse buying in a mature student population through individual interviews employing a mixture of quantitative and open-ended measures. As predicted, men tend to impulsively buy instrumental and leisure items projecting independence and activity, while women tend to buy symbolic and self-expressive goods concerned with appearance and emotional aspects of self. Finally, we consider the implications of our findings, and discuss possible extensions of the research to the area of compulsive buying.

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### 1. Introduction

Impulse buying has been of theoretical and practical significance to economics, consumer behaviour, and psychology. Yet many aspects of

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impulse buying remain largely unexplored: for example, which kinds of products tend to be purchased impulsively, and why. In this paper we review previous attempts to understand impulse buying, and then present our own approach, which is based on a social constructionist theory, and leads to different kinds of questions from previous models. We present an empirical test of our model below.

The term “impulse buying” has had different meanings to different theoretical perspectives. It is important to disentangle these before attempting to model a series of behaviours which may have quite different underlying motivations (Stern, 1962). For example, presumably there is a considerable difference between “reminder impulse buying” (in which a shopper remembers the need for an essential item on seeing it in the shop), and “pure impulse buying” (a novelty or escape purchase which breaks the normal buying pattern). Consumer behaviourists have tended to regard any unplanned purchase as impulse buying, while economists and psychologists have generally studied the (possibly irrational) aspects of “pure impulse buying”. At the outset we note that *none* of these traditions has investigated why some items (e.g., fashionable clothes) appear more susceptible to impulse buying than others (e.g., basic kitchen equipment), or the underlying reasons for impulse buying (see, e.g., Bellenger et al., 1978).

## 2. Explanatory models of impulse buying

### 2.1. *Economic models*

The backbone of standard microeconomic theory is the assumption that economic agents have well-articulated, internally consistent preferences. Pure impulse buying presents a problem for this rational choice model because such purchases may be associated with a high degree of post-purchase regret (Hoch and Loewenstein, 1991; Rook, 1987).<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the preference at the point of purchase (to buy the object) is inconsistent with the later preference (regret at having bought it). This leaves open the possibility of the buyer being exploited by more sophisticated agents through money pumps,<sup>2</sup> potentially leading to bankruptcy.

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<sup>1</sup> We note, however, that there is rather little compelling empirical evidence that pure impulse buys are particularly susceptible to post-purchase regret.

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