



Coping with guilt and shame in the impulse buying context

Sunghwan Yi^{a,*}, Hans Baumgartner^b

^a Department of Marketing & Consumer Studies, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

^b Department of Marketing, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, United States

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ABSTRACT

In this study we investigate how consumers cope with guilt and shame in the impulse buying context. Based on recent psychological research on guilt and shame, we posit that the intensity of shame experienced after buying on impulse will be positively associated with the use of avoidant coping strategies, whereas the intensity of guilt experienced will be positively associated with the use of problem-focused coping strategies. Furthermore, we predict that the use of avoidant coping strategies will be linked with more frequent depressive symptoms and worse financial well-being. These hypotheses were generally supported in an on-line survey of 274 respondents who had recently made an impulse purchase and reported the emotions and coping strategies associated with the event.

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1. Introduction

Impulse buying is a pervasive phenomenon in many consumers' lives in industrialized countries. According to one study, impulse purchases account for \$4.2 billion in retail store sales in North America (Mogelonsky, 1998). Early research defined impulse buying as any unplanned purchase (Kollat & Willett, 1969), but contemporary researchers have stressed the following characteristics of impulse buying: (1) impulse buying occurs in response to a strong urge to buy; (2) impulse buying is accompanied by a conflict between desire and control; (3) the decision to buy is rapid rather than contemplated; and (4) there is diminished concern for the consequences of one's action (Rook, 1987). Impulse buying is distinct from compulsive buying in that the former typically occurs in response to an external trigger, whereas the latter is predominantly motivated by an internal trigger (e.g., the motivation to reduce chronic anxiety and depression) (DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996).

Previous research on impulse buying has focused primarily on the antecedents of impulse buying. For example, in a study of emotional antecedents of impulse buying, Rook and Gardner (1993) explored whether impulse buying was more frequent in a good versus bad mood. In a more recent study, Vohs and Faber (2007) investigated situational antecedents of giving in to the urge to buy on impulse based on Baumeister's theory of ego depletion (e.g., Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Vohs and Faber showed that consumers were highly susceptible to impulse buying after having spent self-regulatory resources on

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 519 824 4120x52416; fax: +1 519 823 1964.

E-mail address: syi@uoguelph.ca (S. Yi).

other activities. Another approach has investigated consumers' anticipatory strategies of resisting the urge to buy on impulse in upcoming shopping trips (e.g., Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; Rook & Hoch, 1985). For example, Hoch and Loewenstein (1991) identified two general classes of self-control strategies that consumers use either in anticipation of or at the moment of the risk of impulse buying: desire reduction and willpower. A third stream of research has explored the symbolic meanings and self-identity concerns associated with impulsively purchased items among habitual impulse buyers (e.g., Dittmar, Beattie, & Friese, 1995; Dittmar & Drury, 2000).

Given that impulse buying is a persistent issue for many consumers, it is intriguing that little research has investigated the consequences of impulse buying. Although it is generally acknowledged that feelings of excitement and stimulation experienced at the moment of impulse buying are subsequently replaced by feelings of remorse and ambivalence (Rook, 1987), little attention has been paid to the particular discrete emotions experienced following impulse buying episodes. In this study, we try to fill this gap by viewing impulse buying as an instance of self-regulation failure and investigating two discrete self-conscious emotions that arise from impulse buying, namely, guilt and shame. Similar to other impulse control behaviors, attempts to exert control over an impulse to buy often result in lapses. In this sense, impulse buying can be construed as an instance of self-regulation failure, which is broadly defined as "problems that arise when one intentionally tries to initiate, alter, or inhibit a specific response or behavior and fails to do so because one does not put in sufficient effort or because one's active efforts are ineffective or counterproductive" (Heatherton & Baumeister, 1996, p. 92). Since self-regulation failure is essentially a failure to reach a self-relevant goal, one may expect that impulse buying will elicit negative self-conscious feelings such as guilt and shame.

Although negative emotions such as distress have been implicated in self-regulation failure, this research has not clearly distinguished between guilt and shame. For example, addiction researchers have found that abstinent drinkers and smokers who commit initial lapses experience feelings of failure and distress (Schiffman, Paty, Gnys, Kassel, & Hickcox, 1996). Similarly, research on the limit violation effect indicates that drinkers who have stringent alcohol restraints tend to experience a great deal of distress following the violation of an alcohol limit (Collins, Lapp, & Izzo, 1994; Muraven, Collins, Morsheimer, Schiffman, & Paty, 2005). In a critical-incident study, Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda (2003) found that about 52% of guilt-inducing situations were related to the failure to regulate one's behavior or reach standards one had set for oneself, but these authors did not explore shame. The lack of explicit assessment of guilt and shame in previous research on self-regulation failure is unfortunate, in that shame and guilt are increasingly considered distinct emotions with different antecedents and consequences (e.g., Tangney & Fisher, 1995; Tracy, Robins, & Tangney, 2007). In this paper, we try to fill this gap by proposing that the experience of guilt and shame following an impulse buying episode is likely to lead to the use of different coping strategies. In addition, we examine the effects of different coping strategies on psychological and financial well-being.

In the following sections, we review theories and findings on self-conscious emotions, focusing on the differences between guilt and shame in terms of antecedents and consequences. Then we will apply the concept of coping to the study of guilt and shame experienced in the impulse buying context. This will be followed by a set of hypotheses regarding the relationship between guilt versus shame and coping strategies.

2. Theory development

2.1. Guilt versus shame

Even though often used interchangeably, guilt and shame are considered distinct emotions with different antecedents and motivational tendencies (Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Guilt is a feeling of remorse or regret which involves pre-occupation with a *particular* transgression. Guilt arises when people "wish they had behaved differently or could somehow undo the bad deed that was done" (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). In other words, guilt involves mentally undoing some aspect of the transgression. Unlike guilt, shame is a more debilitating and enduring experience and is felt when people perceive that their "deep-seated flaws are revealed to oneself and to others" (Miller & Tangney, 1994). As such, shame is tied to the attribution of a certain event to perceived deficiencies of one's *core* self (Klass, 1990). According to Hoblitzelle (1987), shame differs from guilt in that the former is associated with stable and global internal attributions, whereas the latter is associated with specific and temporary internal attributions. Further, Niedenthal, Tangney, and Gavanski (1994) theorize that shame is accompanied by counterfactuals about the self, or mentally undoing aspects of the self (e.g., "If only I were not a person of weak will"), whereas guilt involves mentally undoing certain aspects of the particular episode ("If only I had paid more attention"). As such, impulse shoppers who attribute the outcome to unstable, controllable aspects (e.g., "I got carried away temporarily by the deep discount") are likely to experience guilt, whereas those who attribute it to stable, uncontrollable aspects (e.g., "My impulse buying reflects my weak self") are likely to experience shame.

In addition, guilt and shame are associated with distinct motivations and action tendencies. Since the experience of guilt involves the mental undoing of a transgression rather than the self, guilt evokes the desire to confess, apologize, and repair the harm (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In contrast, as shame arises from global devaluation of the self, it evokes the desire to hide, escape, and even strike back. Furthermore, people who are prone to shame tend to act defensively, experiencing rage, contempt, transfer of blame, and denial (Kaufman, 1996), and engage in dysfunctional behavior, such as withdrawal, avoidance, and attacking the self and others (Pattison, 2000). Consumers' conciliatory responses to guilt (e.g., reparative actions)

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