

Objects, Decision Considerations and Self-Image in Men's and Women's Impulse Purchases

Helga Dittmar

Lecturer in Psychology, Sociology and Social Psychology Group, Social Sciences

Jane Beattie

Lecturer in Experimental Psychology, Laboratory of Experimental Psychology

Susanne Friese

Research Fellow, Laboratory of Experimental Psychology

1995 Helga Dittmar, Jane Beattie and Susanne Friese. Do not quote without permission.

Correspondence address

Dr. Helga Dittmar
Sociology and Social Psychology Group
School of Social Sciences, Arts E
University of Sussex
Brighton, Falmer, BN1 9QN
East Sussex, England

Tel: +44-273-678938

Fax: +44-273-678466

E-mail: H.E.DITTMAR@SUSSEX.AC.UK

* This research is supported by ESRC grant No. L122251012, as part of the Economic Beliefs and Behaviour Programme.

Abstract

In this paper, we propose and examine a social psychological model of impulse buying, which predicts that people intend to acquire material symbols of personal and social identity. Current theories in economics (e.g., discounting models), marketing (e.g., information-processing models) and psychology (e.g., addiction models) fail to explain underlying reasons for impulse buying and, crucially, why particular goods (e.g., clothes) are bought impulsively more than others (e.g., tools). If impulse purchases are attempts to bolster self-image, then consumers should differ systematically in the goods they impulse-buy, and their reasons for doing so, along important social categories, such as gender. Specifically, our theoretical model - drawing on a social constructionist model of material possessions (e.g., Dittmar, 1992) and symbolic self-completion (e.g. Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982) - leads to three sets of hypotheses: (i) some consumer durables are more likely to be bought on impulse than others, and there may be gender differences in object choices, (ii) gender differences will emerge in the buying considerations they use (e.g., functional, emotional, symbolic), and (iii) impulse-buy objects and decision considerations will be related systematically to (actual and ideal) self-perception. In addition, we expect that all three sets of hypotheses hold more strongly for individuals with greater tendencies towards compulsive shopping habits. These predictions are examined in a preliminary questionnaire study with a sample of British consumers (n=61), who attended an Open University residential summer school in Southern England. The results from diverse multivariate statistical analyses (MANOVA, multiple regression) support all three sets of

hypotheses to a considerable extent. The implications of these findings are discussed with respect to economic and consumer theory, and the treatment offered to the increasing number of "addicted" shoppers.

1. Consumer goods and self-image

In developed techno-industrial countries, the consumption of material goods has changed radically in nature, particularly during the last century. A focus on buying provisions to satisfy the physical needs of self and one's immediate network of people has increasingly shifted towards using goods as modern - or postmodern - means of acquiring and expressing a sense of self-identity (e.g., Dittmar, 1992; Lunt and Livingstone, 1992). Material goods are consumed not only for their functional benefits, but also as symbolic signifiers of taste, lifestyle and identity (Bourdieu, 1979; Featherstone, 1991). Thus, the central assumption of this paper is that consumers buy, and relate to, sets of products in a way that fits their preferred self-image. We see material consumption as involving a lot more than the rational cost-benefit concerns of 'economic man' as assumed by orthodox economics or the detailed information-processing about single goods and brands by the 'purchase decision-maker' in mainstream marketing and consumer research.

Shopping as a major leisure and lifestyle activity suggests the increasing importance and frequency of unplanned, non-necessity purchases. Indeed, there is emerging evidence that impulse buying constitutes a substantial 'non-rational' segment of purchasing behaviour, which is present in 'normal' consumer behaviour, but which can assume such excessive proportions that individuals find themselves in considerable financial debt and psychological distress. Empirical studies on 'shopping addiction' or 'compulsive buying' have been carried out recently in the United States (e.g., Friese and Koenig, 1993; O'Guinn and Faber, 1989; Hanley and Wilhelm, 1992), Canada (e.g., Valence, d'Astous, and Fortier, 1988), Germany (e.g., Scherhorn, Reisch and Raab, 1990; Reisch and Scherhorn, 1994) and the United Kingdom (e.g., Elliott, 1994). All suggest that extreme impulse (compulsive) buying is on the increase, affecting an estimated 5% to 10% of the adult population, and that at least occasional bouts of impulse buying are much more common than that. Scherhorn, et al. (1990) describe 25% of German adults as showing some mild compulsive shopping tendencies.

Fairly recent developments in consumer psychology and cultural studies in particular, but also in social psychology, emphasise the importance of 'symbolic consumption' for understanding the ways in which consumers construct, maintain and express their self-identity. In contrast to mainstream consumer research (c.f. Tybout and Artz, 1994), the 'symbolic consumption' perspective proposes that consumers do not just consume *actual* products, but also - or even instead - consume the symbolic meanings of those products. Purchasing consumer goods is thus a significant element in the construction and maintenance of consumers' self-identities, in the attainment of social status, and in attempts to make oneself "feel better" (e.g., Elliott, 1994; Friese and Koenig, 1993).

Social psychological studies demonstrate empirically that, in addition to the functional and use-related benefits they offer, material possessions are used to express and communicate personal and social aspects of identity (c.f., Dittmar, 1992). In addition, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) demonstrate that people acquire and display material symbols - amongst other strategies - to compensate for perceived inadequacies in certain dimensions of their self-concept: a process they term *symbolic self-completion*.

This literature shows that consumer goods and material possessions have become important symbols of identity: both in the way we see ourselves, and in the way we perceive the identity of others. If we accept that extended self-definition (c.f., Belk, 1988) is linked to the meanings of consumer goods, we might expect from this that gender, as a major social category, would exert a strong influence on either the items bought, or the reasons for buying them, or both.

2. Gender and consumption

Consistent evidence has emerged in previous British and American studies that women and men relate differently to their material possessions (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1982; Kamptner, 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Dittmar (1989, 1991) classified lists of subjects' favourite possessions into different categories of material objects, and found some gender differences in choices: women listed more objects of sentimental value, while men chose more items relating to leisure and finances. However, gender differences were pronounced in orientations towards sets of material goods: by comparison, women saw their possessions as important because of the emotional comfort they provide and the relationships with others they symbolise, while, men referred more to use-related, activity-related and self-expressive features of possessions. These differences can be interpreted as reflecting male and female gender identity, because they echo the distinction between male self-oriented, activity-centred identity construction and female other-oriented, relationship-centred identity construction described in both the sociological (e.g., Parsons and Bales, 1956) and social psychological (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Williams, 1984) literature.

More research is still needed to investigate whether different types of objects and different types of considerations are important to women and men at the point of *purchase*, but a recent study with compulsive shoppers suggests that clothes, jewellery, and cosmetics were bought more by women, and high-tech, electronic and sports equipment more by men (Scherhorn et al., 1990). Our previous study on gender identity and impulse buying showed in a 'normal' consumer sample that 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 (Dittmar, Beattie, and Friese, 1995).

3. Explanatory models of impulse buying

Impulse buying has been of theoretical and practical significance to economics, consumer behaviour, and psychology. Yet, many aspects of impulse buying remain largely unexplored, specifically which kinds of products tend to be purchased impulsively, and why. We propose that a social psychological model is needed to address these questions, which remain unanswered by previous explanatory models.

The term 'impulse buying' has had different meanings to different theoretical perspectives. It is important to disentangle these before attempting to examine 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) are more susceptible to impulse buying than others (e.g., basic kitchen equipment), or the underlying reasons for impulse buying.

Informed by the still predominant rational choice perspective on economic agents, the standard *economic* explanation of impulse buying has been the discounting model (e.g., Strotz, 1956), which assumes that impulse buyers discount the future at too rapid a rate. Thus, the benefits of the desired object at the point of imminent purchase outweigh the (future) problem of paying the bill. However, these preferences switch later, when the buyer comes to pay the bill and regrets the purchase. A similar model is Winston's (1980) stochastic preference model, in which people are assumed to randomly switch between two sets of different preferences: a myopic set which pushes the shopper towards the purchase, and a far-sighted set which remembers that the bill must be paid. In both models, no explanation is given of why myopic preferences exist, or of why certain objects are more susceptible to impulse buying than others. The mainstream *consumer behaviour and marketing* approach has produced atheoretical lists of those goods that are likely to be bought impulsively (e.g.,

Bellenger, Robertson and Hirschman, 1978). This information may be useful for choosing goods for sales promotions (e.g., end-of-shelf displays), and is also unusual in recognising that certain goods have a greater potential to be bought on impulse than others. However, it does not explain why, nor predict beyond the particular goods studied. Moreover, these studies tend to use purely behavioural definitions of impulse buying, such as regarding a purchase as impulsive if it was not on the buyer's original shopping list (e.g., Kollat and Willet, 1967).

Psychological approaches have fallen into two types: cognitive and clinical. The cognitive approach places impulsive shopping within the framework of impulse control in general (e.g., Mischel, 1961). This work has shown that impulse control improves with developmental stage, and can be used as an individual difference parameter to predict performance on certain cognitive tasks (e.g., Baron, Badgio and Gaskins, 1986). Like the economic and consumer behaviour approaches, the cognitive literature assumes a rational decision maker. In contrast, the clinical psychological literature has been concerned with the excessive buying of compulsive shoppers. This approach treats compulsive shopping as similar to other types of impulsive, addictive or obsessive-compulsive disorders (e.g., Schlosser, Black, Repertinger and Freet, 1994), and therefore cannot explain 'normal' impulsive buying, which some have argued lies on a continuum with compulsive buying (e.g., d'Astous, 1990). Again, all psychological approaches fail to explain why only certain goods are bought impulsively.

4. Our approach and the present study

Based on the social psychological literature on material possessions and our previous study (Dittmar et al., 1995), we begin with the assumption that consumer durables bought on impulse are especially likely to be those goods that project a person's self-image. The two corollaries of this are that some goods are more likely impulse buys than others, particularly those which have stronger symbolic and emotional meanings (such as clothes or jewellery) and that impulse-buying is affected by gender as a major social category important in the construction of a person's sense of self.

The proposal that consumer goods express personal and social aspects of a person's identity tells us little in itself about the dynamics of when and why people might purchase particular kinds of goods on impulse. For this dynamic element, we draw on symbolic self-completion theory and extend it in the context of recent social psychological work on self. The notion that we use symbols to establish and bolster aspects of our identity led Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982, 1985) to propose that people make use of material possessions, amongst other strategies, to compensate for perceived inadequacies in certain dimensions of their self-concept. For instance, by displaying a recognised masculine symbol, such as strutting around in a black leather motorbike suit, a young man can compensate for not feeling 'masculine' enough by using the object to tell both himself and others that he is indeed 'masculine'. This compensatory function of material objects obviously entails that the 'symbols' have to fit in with a person's gender (amongst other social categories) to provide a potential bridge for closing perceived discrepancies between actual and ideal dimensions of self.

Despite its intuitive appeal, a continuing short-coming of this approach is that 'identity deficits' or self-discrepancies have not been measured directly (instead they have been inferred; e.g., Braun and Wicklund, 1989), nor has it offered a theoretical conceptualisation advanced enough to make self-discrepancies amenable for empirical research. Drawing on Higgins (1987), we propose that discrepancies between actual self and ideal self play an important role in impulse purchases, such that their quality and magnitude are related to the extent of impulse buying. Finally, this process is dependent on an individual using shopping and acquiring consumer goods as a symbolic self-completion strategy, rather than sports or artistic achievements, for instance.

Thus, the following three set of hypotheses can be derived from the considerations discussed above:

- **Types of consumer goods**

Some categories of consumer goods are bought on impulse more frequently than others, and

there are some gender differences in impulse purchases. Individuals with relatively higher compulsive shopping tendencies (high CS) buy on impulse more frequently than those low in compulsive shopping tendencies (low CS).

- **Buying considerations**

Reasons for purchasing are different for types of goods bought frequently and infrequently on impulse, with self-image and mood-related reasons particularly important for high impulse goods. There are gender differences in buying considerations, with women focusing more on mood-related concerns than men, and men being more concerned with economic reasons. High CS individuals will place more emphasis on self-image and mood-related reasons than individuals low in CS.

- **Self-image and symbolic self-completion through shopping**

Quality and magnitude of self-discrepancies are linked systematically to both impulse-purchasing frequency of different consumer goods and the buying considerations an individual considers important in impulse buys. These links may be influenced by gender, and they are limited by the extent to which a person uses the acquisition of consumer goods as a prominent symbolic self-completion strategy (i.e. materialism functions as a moderator variable).

5. Method

Respondents: Sixty-one Open University students (34 women and 27 men) participated in this study for a payment of £3.00 (roughly \$4.50) while attending a residential Summer School held at the University of Sussex (South England). Their mean age was 34.2 years (range 21 to 54, no gender differences). Their occupational backgrounds were diverse, but skewed towards non-manual and professional jobs:

Occupational category - Percentage of sample

Managerial, high income (e.g., company director) - 3.3

Professional (e.g., lawyer) - 31.1

Non-manual skilled (e.g., office clerk) - 36.1

Manual skilled (e.g., electrician) - 6.6

Partly skilled and unskilled (e.g., cleaner) - 6.6

Non-classifiable (e.g., housewife) - 16.4

Questionnaire, procedure and coding: Respondents were asked if they were willing to participate in a study on 'how you feel about shopping and the things that you buy'. They then filled in a questionnaire which consisted of five main sections and took about 45 minutes to complete. All ratings were made on 6-point Likert-type scales. The first section was a scale to measure compulsive shopping tendencies (d'Astous, Maltais and Roberge, 1990). In the second section, they were asked to indicate how often they buy nine types of consumer goods as a *planned* purchase (defined as 'you decided to buy the item before you went shopping'), and then to rate how true for them personally are six different buying considerations when they buy these goods as *planned* purchases.

Respondents were asked to give the same responses in the fourth section of the questionnaire, but this time with respect to buying the same nine types of goods *on impulse* (defined as 'you don't plan on buying the item before you see it in the shop'). The following nine categories of goods had been selected on the basis of previous studies (c.f., Dittmar et al., 1995) to include items often bought on impulse and items hardly bought on impulse:

Body care items (e.g. shampoo, lotion, make-up, after-shave, perfume)

Sports equipment (e.g. rackets, balls, Frisbee, golf clubs)

Kitchen items (e.g. glasses, knives, pots & pans)

Clothes (e.g. t-shirts, trousers/jeans, evening wear, dressing gowns)

Music items (e.g. pre-recorded audio tapes, records, CDs)

Jewellery (e.g. rings, earrings, watches, necklaces)

Books (e.g. paperbacks, magazines, coffee-table books)

Electronic leisure items (e.g. pre-recorded videos, computer games)
Footwear (e.g. trainers, boots, dress-shoes).

For each type of item, respondents rated the importance of the following six purchase reasons, again selected on the basis of previous studies, which measure economic, mood and self-image- related buying considerations:

Economic

Good value (money)
Useful and practical

Mood

Puts me in a better mood

Self-image

Makes me feel more like the person I want to be
Expresses what is unique about me
Improves my social standing

The third section, interspersed between the sections on planned and impulse buying, was concerned with discrepancies in a person's self-image (c.f., Higgins, 1987). Respondents were first asked to think about things they would like to change about themselves, and then to complete the self-discrepancy measure we developed for the present study. For its qualitative component, they completed the sentence 'I am, but I would like to be' seven times, and for its quantitative component they rated how *far* they felt their actual self was from their ideal self (ranging from 'Ideally, I would like to be a little bit different' to 'Ideally, I would like to be exactly the opposite') as well as how *important* this gap was to them (ranging from 'I never worry about it' to 'I worry about this so much that it is ruining my life'). The open-ended self-discrepancy descriptions were coded according to the following system:

Social self (e.g. roles, status, personal qualities in social interaction, family)

Individual self (e.g., preferences, wishes, personality traits, attributes, uniqueness, habits, activities)

Physical self (e.g., blond haired, tall, overweight)

Material self (e.g., poor, house owner)

Other

The final section of the questionnaire consisted of Richins' and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale, which measures the extent to which an individual views the acquisition of material goods as a central life goal, key to happiness and well-being, and prime indicator of success.

6. Findings and discussion

Types of consumer goods

In order to divide respondents into two shopper groups - those with relatively high and low compulsive shopping habits - their average score on d'Astous's et al. (1990) compulsive shopping scale was used to perform a median split within each gender, although it has to be mentioned that scores were low across the sample, i.e. variability with respect to compulsive shopping habits was restricted. In order to be able to measure impulse buying, it is important to take into account how often a good is bought not only on impulse, but also as a planned purchase. For instance, if a good is purchased very frequently - but even more so as a planned than as an impulse purchase - taking only the raw impulse buying frequency would be misleading. We therefore constructed a measure, P, of the proportion of impulse purchasing to total purchasing of an item:

$$P(I,N)=I-N/N_{max}-1,$$

where I represents how often the type of consumer good is bought on impulse (rating on a six- point scale, ranging from 'never' to 'at least once a week'), and N represents how often it is bought in a

planned fashion. The division by $N-1$ means that P can vary between -1 (which indicates that the good is always bought in a planned fashion and never on impulse) and $+1$ (which indicates that the good is exclusively bought on impulse and never planned). If a good is bought equally frequently on impulse and planned, $P=0$, independently of the absolute buying frequencies.

The first hypothesis that there will be systematic gender and shopper group differences in impulse buying behaviour, as well as the expectation that some goods are bought more often on impulse than others, was examined through a 2 (gender) x 2 (shopper group) x 9 (type of consumer good) MANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor, using the proportional impulse-buy scores P . In terms of multivariate effects, women buy proportionately more on impulse than men overall, $F_{1,57}=5.23$; $p<.05$, and - as expected - some goods are bought highly significantly more often on impulse than others, $F_{8,50}=8.30$; $p<.0001$. A follow-up contrast revealed that jewellery and sports equipment are relatively higher impulse goods than body care items and footwear, $F_{1,57}=52.67$; $p<.0001$ (see Table 1).

Table 1: Men's and women's impulse purchase proportion for nine types of goods

	Men	Women
Jewel	-0.1	-0.001
Sport	-0.1	-0.08
Clothes	-0.15	-0.1
Music	-0.16	-0.09
Books	-0.11	-0.13
Electronic	-0.16	-0.11
Kitchen	-0.19	-0.09
Foot	-0.19	-0.13
Body	-0.41	-0.28

Although the multivariate interactions between type of good and gender, type of good and shopper group, and type of good, gender and shopper group all proved non-significant, separate analyses for each type of consumer good showed that women buy jewellery proportionately more on impulse than men, $F_{1,57}=7.37$; $p<.01$, and that they have also a tendency to buy body care items more on impulse than men, $F_{1,57}=3.32$; $p<.10$. The P -means for women and men per consumer good category are displayed in Table 1 below. Goods are ordered in terms of their proportional 'impulsivity', running from highest on the left to lowest on the right. All the means are negative, however, showing that all the items are somewhat more likely to be bought as a planned purchase than an impulse buy.

Overall then, support for the first set of hypotheses was mixed. The expectation that some goods are more likely impulse-buys than others was strongly confirmed, but gender differences were subtle, and compulsive shopping habits did not appear to affect impulse buying behaviour.

Buying considerations

Respondents' ratings of how important six different reasons are when they buy different types of consumer goods planned and on impulse were averaged for the two highest impulse-buy goods (i.e. jewellery and sports equipment) and the two lowest impulse-buy goods (i.e. body care items and footwear). A 2 (gender) x 2 (shopper group) x 6 (consideration) x 2 (high/low impulse good) MANOVA with repeated measures on the last two factors showed, at the multivariate level, that some considerations are more important than others (independent of the type of good), $F_{5,53}=27.88$; $p<.0001$, with usefulness heading the list (Mean 4.11), followed by price (Mean 3.49), mood (Mean 3.08), ideal self (Mean 2.95), uniqueness (Mean 2.76), and last social standing (Mean 2.09). As expected, there are significant multivariate differences in purchase reasons between women and men, $F_{5,53}=3.54$; $p<.01$, between the two shopper groups, $F_{5,53}=3.12$; $p<.05$, and the multivariate

interaction between gender and shopper group also proved significant, $F_{5,53}=3.49$; $p<.01$. Two planned follow-up contrasts showed, firstly, that women place more emphasis on personal self-image reasons (feeling more like the person one wants to be and expressing uniqueness, Mean 3.00) than men (Mean 2.65), whilst there is little difference for social standing (Meanwomen 2.06, Meanmen 2.14). The second contrast demonstrated that women are equally concerned with expressing their uniqueness (Mean 3.04) and striving towards their ideal self (Mean 2.95), whilst men are more concerned with ideal self (Mean 2.88) than uniqueness (Mean 2.41). In terms of shopper groups, those with low compulsive buying tendencies place a much greater emphasis on economic reasons (Mean 4.01) than mood- or self- image-related ones (Mean 2.43), whilst those with greater compulsive buying tendencies place only slightly more emphasis on economic (Mean 3.85) than mood/self-image considerations (Mean 3.01).

Even more interesting are findings where the type of consumer good - i.e. high or low impulse goods - is also taken into account, which show strongly that high impulse goods are bought for different reasons than low impulse goods, $F_{5,53}=20.16$; $p<.0001$. Means are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Importance ratings of six buying considerations for high and low impulse goods (means)

	High impulse	Low impulse
Value	3.33	3.86
Use	3.17	4.99
Mood	3.3	3.33
Ideal self	2.85	3.04
Uniqueness	2.73	2.73
Social Standing	2.09	2.11

It seems that economic considerations - the price of the good and its usefulness - are much more important concerns for goods mostly bought as planned purchases than mood- or self-image- related reasons, whereas the spread is much more even for goods which are bought more often on impulse. A planned contrast between the two economic reasons taken together vs. the mood and self-related reasons taken together proved highly significant, $F_{1,57}=38.72$; $p<.0001$, showing that economic concerns are rather more important (Mean 4.43) than the others (Mean 2.80) for planned purchases, whilst the difference is rather smaller for impulse purchases (Means 3.25 and 2.74). Gender, but not shopper group, interacted significantly with reasons for buying high and low impulse goods, $F_{5,53}=2.65$; $p<.05$. A follow-up contrast showed that - for high impulse items - economic and psychological reasons are fairly equally weighted by women and that economic reasons are only slightly more important for men. For low impulse items, economic reasons are clearly more salient than psychological ones, and this difference is even more pronounced for women than for men (see Table 3 for means).

Table 3: Men's and women's reasons for buying high and low impulse goods (means)

	Economic reasons	Psychological reasons
Men		
- high impulse	3.46	2.57
- low impulse	4.35	2.75
Women		
- high impulse	3.09	2.92
- low impulse	4.98	2.85

Thus, the second set of hypotheses was strongly supported, with the exception that people's shopping habits and compulsive buying tendencies were only tentatively linked with the reported reasons for planned and impulse purchases.

Self-image and symbolic self-completion through shopping

The third set of hypotheses focuses on the discrepancies individuals perceive between their actual and their ideal self, and asks whether self-discrepancies "drive" object choices and decision considerations in impulse purchases. This should only be the case if the person concerned believes that acquiring consumer goods is an important strategy to "make up for" or "improve" perceived inadequacies in one's self-image, operationalised in our study through using a median split on materialism scores in each gender group to classify individuals as either high or low in materialism. In order to assess links between self-discrepancies and impulse buying, two multiple regression analyses were run, one with the R-scores for the nine types of consumer goods as dependent variables and one with the six buying consideration ratings for impulse purchases averaged across all nine goods.

Three sets of independent variables were entered as predictors: (a) gender, high/low materialism and the interaction between the two (social group variables); (b) the interaction between level of materialism and the following measures of self-discrepancies: the four qualitative categories of social self, individual self, physical self and material self discrepancies, and a quantitative measure of self-discrepancies, SD, calculated by summing the products of the actual-ideal distance and importance ratings for each self-discrepancy and dividing the sum by the number of self-discrepancies listed (materialism is used as a moderator variable); and (c) the five self-discrepancy measure (individual-level variables). A low level of materialism was coded 0, and a high level 1. Men were coded 0, and women 1.

Impulse-buying frequencies for consumer goods could be predicted only for two types of objects - clothes and jewellery (see Table 4). Yet, interestingly, both these goods could be considered very intimate and psychologically salient self-extensions (see also Cox and Dittmar, 1995), because they are directly carried on the body - like an outer skin - and because they are highly visible to others for that reason. For clothes, the more an individual lists self-discrepancies in terms of social roles and social interaction the more likely they are to buy this type of good on impulse, although the amount of variance in impulse-buying accounted for by social self- discrepancies is moderate at best. The results for jewellery are much stronger, where a full 22% of variance in impulse-buying frequency was predictable from a person's gender (women buy more jewellery than men), from a greater concern with social self-discrepancies making impulse- buying more likely, as with clothes, and, finally, from social self-discrepancies in conjunction with materialism, but here the pattern reverses such that a person buys more jewellery on impulse the *less* discrepancies they perceive in their social self, but only if they are high in materialism.

Table 4: Links between self-discrepancies and impulse-buy frequencies for different goods (OLS regression)

Type of good:	Clothes	Gender	Jewellery	Social self
Self-discrepancy:	Social self		Social self (materialism)	Social self
Multiple r:	0.27	0.33	0.45	0.51
Adjusted r squared:	0.06	0.09	0.18	0.22
B:	0.01	0.11	-0.03	0.01
Beta:	0.27	0.39	-0.47	0.29
P:	<.05	<.005	<.005	<.05

The regression analysis on buying considerations yielded much stronger findings, where the extent to which a person impulse-buys for a particular reason is predictable for all six considerations, with between 6% and 27% of variance in ratings accounted for by self-discrepancies, often in conjunction with materialism, as predicted (see Table 5).

Table 5: Links between self-discrepancies and buying

considerations for impulse purchases (OLS regression)

Buying consideration:	Price/value	Utility	Mood
Self-discrepancy:	Individual Materialism self	Physical self /materialism	SD/materialism

Multiple r:	0.28	0.37	0.33	0.27
Adjusted r squared:	0.06	0.10	0.10	0.06
B:	0.06	-0.45	-0.01	0.03
Beta:	0.28	-0.25	-0.33	0.27
P:	<.05	<.05	<.01	<.05

Buying consideration:	Ideal self	Uniqueness
Self-discrepancy:	SD Material self	Gender /materialism Social self Material self

Multiple r:	0.31	0.40	0.39	0.49	0.55
Adjusted r squared:	0.08	0.13	0.14	0.22	0.27
B:	0.05	-0.03	0.86	0.08	-0.03
Beta:	0.33	-0.25	0.44	0.32	-0.26
P:	<.01	<.05	<.0005	<.01	<.05

Buying consideration:	Social standing
Self-discrepancy:	Social self/materialism Material self

Multiple r:	0.35	0.46
Adjusted r squared:	0.11	0.18
B:	0.15	-0.04
Beta:	0.35	-0.30
P:	<.005	<.05

If an individual is low in materialism and concerned with individual aspects of self (personality, preferences), they are more likely to be concerned with whether an object is *good value for money* when they impulse-buy. A greater emphasis on the *usefulness* of goods is linked with low materialism and a lack of concern with body- and appearance-related (physical) self-discrepancies. The extent to which a person engages in impulse-buying to improve their *mood* is, at least in part, a function of the magnitude and importance of their self- discrepancies, but only if they are high in materialism. Buying goods on impulse in order to *feel more like the person one's want to be* is predictable directly from the amount of self- discrepancies, and is also associated with being less likely to list material self-discrepancies (e.g., feeling too poor, too badly paid). Women are more concerned with *expressing what is unique* about them when they are low, rather than high, in materialism, whereas there is little difference for men. Also, the more a person is concerned with discrepancies in social roles and social interaction, and the less they are concerned with material shortcomings, the more they impulse-buy in order to express something that is unique about them. Finally, for those high in materialism, a concern with social self-discrepancies, as well as a lesser emphasis on material aspects of self, expresses itself in buying goods to *improve one's social standing*. What is striking about is that not only statistically significant, but *meaningful* links emerged between buying considerations and self-image, in some cases predicting a quarter or more of the variance in how important a particular buying consideration is for an individual. Buying considerations are therefore more closely linked to self-discrepancies than object-buying frequencies. Also noteworthy is that the qualitative self-discrepancy categories seem to be better predictors than the quantitative measure of the magnitude and importance of self-discrepancies. Materialism emerged as a fairly powerful moderator variable, lending support to our hypothesis that self-image predicts impulse-buying to the extent that a person uses shopping and acquiring goods as a prominent symbolic self-completion strategy.

7. Conclusions

Overall, the support for the three sets of hypotheses is considerable, but also mixed in some respects.

Gender differences in impulse-buy objects and decision considerations were rather more subtle than expected, and the extent of a person's compulsive shopping habits appeared to be of little importance for predicting impulse-buying, contrary to our expectations. However, this last finding is most likely to be due to sample characteristics, given that we found a very low variability in compulsive shopping scores, with even the high CS group scoring just under 'slightly true of me' on average. Later research will contrast 'normal' and 'compulsive' shoppers to address this issue. Nevertheless, there was strong support for our object-specificity hypothesis - i.e. that some goods are more likely to be bought on impulse than others - as well as for the expectation that mood- and self-image-related concerns are important in impulse buying behaviour. Lastly, in support of the core proposal of our model, perceived self-discrepancies are important determinants of impulse buying, as long as a person views the acquisition of consumer goods as a personally salient symbolic self-completion strategy.

In relation to economic theory, our model provides a reason *why* people buy impulsively at a particular time. It predicts that people are particularly likely to impulse buy if they perceive aspects of their self as discrepant from their ideal. Various studies suggest that shoppers try to counteract their feelings of depression and low self-esteem through the emotional 'lift' and momentary euphoria provided by impulse shopping (e.g., Faber and O'Guinn, 1989). Our approach also offers insights to marketers. Unlike the traditional taxonomic approach, our model is predictive of which goods are likely to be impulsively bought, and hence are likely to benefit from promotions such as end-of-aisle displays. Based on our theory, those goods which relate to self-image concerns (e.g., make-up, magazines) would be much better candidates than simple utility items (e.g., cutlery). Note also that our theory predicts that the success of the promotion will depend on the social categories to which the store customers belong (as self-image will depend in part on social category).

We believe that our social constructionist approach offers an integrative model of impulse buying which (a) can be applied to both normal and 'pathological' consumption and (b) provides a fresh approach to the motivations underlying impulse purchases that has relevance in the three domains of micro-economics, psychology (theory and treatment of shopping 'addiction') and consumer behaviour. In terms of applications, our model would suggest a theoretical basis for therapeutic intervention. If compulsive buying is based on self-discrepancies, then an obvious prediction of the theory is that tackling the basis of the discrepancy will alleviate the compulsion to shop. This kind of therapy would tackle the root cause of the disorder, rather than e.g. drug therapy which may just act on overt symptoms.

8. References

- Baron, J., Badgio, P. and I. W. Gaskins (1986). "Cognitive style and its improvement: A normative approach." in *Advances in the Psychology of Human Intelligence*, Vol. 3, ed. R. J. Sternberg, Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- Belk, Russell. W. (1988). "Possessions and the extended self." *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15, 139-168.
- Bellenger, Danny N., Dan H. Robertson, and Elizabeth C. Hirschman (1978). "Impulse buying varies by product." *Journal of Advertising Research*, 18, 15-18.
- Bourdieu, P. (1979). *La distinction*. Paris: Editions de minuit.
- Braun, O. L. and R. A. Wicklund (1989). "Psychological antecedents of conspicuous consumption." *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 10, 161-187.
- Cox, J. and Helga Dittmar (1995). "The functions of favourite clothes and clothing (dis)satisfaction: A gender analysis among British students." *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 18.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. and E. Rochberg-Halton (1981). *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- d'Astous, Alain (1990). "An inquiry into the compulsive side of "normal" consumers." *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 13, 15-31.
- d'Astous, Alain, J. Maltais, and C. Roberge (1990). "Compulsive buying tendencies of adolescent

- consumers." *Advances in Consumer Research*, 17, 306-313.
- Dittmar, Helga, (1989). "Gender identity-related meanings of personal possessions." *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 28, 159-171.
- Dittmar, Helga, (1991). "Meanings of material possessions as reflections of identity: Gender and social-material position in society," in *To Have Possessions: A Handbook on Ownership and Property*, ed. F. W. Rudmin, Special Issue of the Journal of Social Behaviour and Personality, 6.
- Dittmar, Helga. (1992). *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions: To Have is To Be*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf and New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Dittmar, Helga, Jane Beattie, and Susanne Friese (1995). "Gender identity and material symbols: Objects and decision considerations in impulse purchases." *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 15, 391-511.
- Elliott, Richard. (1994). "Addictive consumption: Function and fragmentation in postmodernity." *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 17, 159-179.
- Featherstone, M. (1991). *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage.
- Friese, Susanne and Hal Koenig (1993). Shopping for trouble. *Advancing the Consumer Interest*, 5, 24-29.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Hanley, A. and I. W. Wilhelm (1992). "Compulsive buying: An exploration into self-esteem and money attitudes." *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 13, 5-18.
- Higgins, T. (1987). "Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self to affect." *Psychological Review*, 94, 319-340.
- Kamptner, N. L. (1991). "Personal possessions and their meanings: A life-span perspective," in *To Have Possessions: A Handbook on Ownership and Property*, ed., F. W. Rudmin, Special Issue of the Journal of Social Behaviour and Personality, 6.
- Kollat, David T. and Ronal P. Willet (1967). "Customer Impulse Purchasing Behavior," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 4 (February), 21-31.
- Lunt, Peter K. and S. M. Livingstone (1992). *Mass Consumption and Personal Identity*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Mischel, W. (1961). "Preference for delayed reinforcement and social responsibility." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 62, 1-7.
- O'Guinn, Thomas C. and Ronald J. Faber (1989). Compulsive buying: A phenomenological exploration. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16 (June), 147-157.
- Parsons, T. and R. F. Bales (1956). *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Richins, Martha and S. Dawson (1992). "Materialism as a consumer value: Measure development and validation." *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19, 303-316.
- Scherhorn, Gerhard, Reisch, Lucia A. and Gerhard Raab (1990). "Addictive buying in West Germany: An empirical investigation." *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 13, 155-189.
- Schlosser, Steven, Donald W. Black, Susan Repertinger and Daniel Freet (1994). "Compulsive Buying: Demography, Phenomenology, and Comorbidity in 46 Subject." *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 16, 205-212.
- Stern, A. (1962). "The significance of impulse buying today." *Journal of Marketing*, 26, 59-62.
- Strotz, R. H. (1956). "Myopia and inconsistency in dynamic utility maximization." *Review of Economic Studies*, 23, 165-180.
- Tybout, A. M. and N. Artz (1994). "Consumer psychology." *Annual Review of Psychology*, 45, 131-169.
- Valence, Gilles A. Alain d'Astous, and Louis Fortier (1988). "Compulsive buying: Concept and measurement." *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 11, 419-433.
- Wallendorf, Melanie. and E. J. Arnould (1988). My favourite things: A cross-cultural inquiry into object attachment, possessiveness and social linkage. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14, 531-547.
- Williams, J. A. (1984). "Gender and intergroup behaviour: Towards an integration." *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 23, 311-316.
- Winston, G. C. (1980). "Addiction and backsliding: A theory of compulsive consumption." *Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organization*, 1, 295-324.

Wicklund, R. A. and P. M. Gollwitzer (1982). *Symbolic Self-Completion*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

→