



A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON CONSUMERS IMPULSIVENESS DURING COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC

K.Aruna¹ and Dr.Jublee²

¹Research Scholar, Management Studies, Mother Teresa Women's University, Attuvampatti, Kodaikanal, Dindigul District, Tamil Nadu 624 101 India

ORCID ID:ORCID ID: 00000002-4519-7236

²Professor, Department of Management Studies, Sree Saraswathi Thyagaraja College, Pollachi, Tamil Nadu 642107 India

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Impulsive buying is believed as an impromptu purchase which is distinct during the shopping experience from an internal or external trigger. Many researchers tried to explain the significance and root cause of impulse buying behavior. The focus of this article is to realize the impact of the global pandemic overconsumers impulsive buying behavior in Chennai and to inspect the factors that may influence the behavior. Since lockdown strategies have been implemented to reduce the risks of the pandemic, it had shown a contrasting sequel on the end user buying behavior. This study explores how the global pandemic crisis had affected impulse buying behavior with respect to emotional state of the consumer, positioning and characteristics of the product. To know about the relationship between the elements, interviews were conducted among the consumers to have a better insight about their shopping behavior on impulse. The data was collected through interviews from 33 respondents. The interview were recorded, transcribed and analyzed for identifying themes evolved from the study. The study revealed that the consumers invested less money on goods and services because of reduced public and social gatherings. Hence consumers tend to save money rather than purchasing goods or services. The consumers intention on medium of purchasing had also changed drastically from in-store purchase to online purchasing to avoid exposure and consumers follow a structured form of planned shopping to save better. The managerial issues, suggestions and implications are also discussed in the study for the future researchers. The outcome of study will be helpful for the academicians and marketers to have a better understanding of consumers shopping behavior.

Keywords: Impulse, Buying, Behavior, Global Pandemic, Consumer Decision Making Process, Emotional Traits, Situational Factors

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INTRODUCTION

The world is facing a high economic crisis due to global pandemic. The corona virus first diagnosed in the Wuhan, China officially announced on 31st Dec 2019 (TheWHO2020). The effect of virus causes dreadful respiratory infection that extend from mild cold to death. It was announced that virus has been spreading world wide through human physical contact. To reduce the spread, many governments in the countries have initiated lockdown and enforced their people to be in quarantine.

The global pandemic has negatively influenced the usage of luxury goods, whereas buying the essentials is less. Due to crisis, shoppers were less profane, changing from familiar brands to non specific brands and buying in bulk (Ang, Leong & Kotler 2000), as well as people reuse and recycle old commodities on their own rather than purchasing new products (Milanova, 1999). According to Sneath and Lacey (2012) studies contributing to know about consumers reaction during the pandemic situation is comparatively less. The modern life



style had made impulse buying as a major leisure activity in the retail environment (Virvilaitė&Saladienė 2012). Initially, buying in impulse was generally compatible with the concept of sudden purchases (Brici, Hodkinson & Sullivan-Mort 2013). It was stated states that an unplanned purchase happens when a shopper experiences a sudden urge to purchase, due to an emotional feeling that is powerful with several emotions. According to the author, the emotional feeling that occurs during these situations is hedonic and often triggers emotional conflicts whereby the situation may reduce senses of self-control. Nordfält (2007) found that criteria for doing impulse purchase differ among situations and individuals. Shoppers have varied patterns of purchasing because they tend to react differently to the situations.

Roughly, 45 percent of the participants stated that they purchase impulsively to manage their emotions and anxiety towards the pandemic situation. It showed, that social pressure was the major factor that influence impulse purchase, particularly among respondents of ages 18-29 years. Many respondents stated that they felt a need to buy, to manage boredom. However, Dittmar (2005), Dey and Srivastava (2017) argue that impulsivity among younger respondents have increased significantly, which rises their expenditures. Dittmar (2005) explains that the symbolic values like ideal identity of materialistic persons lead to emotional bliss, thereby it leads to impromptu buying, and in turn their debts. Lacy and Kenneth-Hensel (2008) show a good relationship between stress and level of impulse purchase, hence this phenomenon can be well related and can be further studied during a global pandemic situation like corona virus.

PROBLEM DISCUSSED

According to a report by World Bank Group (2020), the corona virus exposes risk to reduce the global economy by three percent during 2020 or even more in China and other developing countries. It is forecasted that due to the global pandemic there is a downfall in economic growth and a rise in unemployment that is due to employees cut back or due to permanent shut down of company (Svenskt Näringsliv 2020). Svensk Handel (2020) indicates that the most negatively affected sectors in the global pandemic are retail shopping and service sector. This is due to reduce the risk of exposure and to stay safely at homes and so resulting in less spending on goods and services. The supply chains are broken in many countries so delivery failure led to production of on-time finished final products (Gothenburg Research Institute 2020). Majority of the people preferred online shopping than in-store shopping therefore the sales of retailing has been reduced drastically.

During the pandemic, people are not willing to do physical shopping, which slowed down the growth of retail business, that in turn led to weakened revenues and ultimate reduction in jobs. Though, Aftonbladet (2020) shows a similar scenario, in pandemic where the usage of cheap “unwanted” products has hiked, due to less consumption, which is stimulated by a willingness to entertain by purchases that are cost affordable. This trend is more evident in countries where lockdowns were instructed. Therefore the offline retailers have to survive in this pandemic period competitively to strive with the online retailers

Therefore, to retain competitive advantage, the offline retailers have to be more tactical to compete with well positioned online retailing platforms during this unique period (Gothenburg Research Institute 2020). Since the situation is totally unpredictable and



new to the human race, an unique strategy has to be framed by the economical experts to handle the situation (SvensktNäringsliv 2020; Realtid 2020). The gap for research is identified based on the case that the earlier studies were based upon the natural disasters and covid-19 is totally a new situation to people, therefore no previous studies are available in this topic.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study explores the effect of pandemic situation on consumer impulse purchase attitude.

1. To know the impact of pandemic on consumers shopping behavior relating to impulsiveness.
2. To identify the factors that strongly influence impulse buying decision.
3. To know the product category and preferred medium of purchase among online and offline.
4. To know how consumers perceive the impulse buying activity.
5. To study about the impulse purchases before and after global pandemic.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The focus of the study is to have an in-depth understanding of how consumers shop during a global pandemic hence qualitative method is chosen for data collection to have more personal response (Bryman & Bell 2017). From the past studies it is proved that qualitative studies create space to investigate and familiarize the actual position of respondent while doing an impulse purchase. The data collection is done through interviews and the responses were recorded. The recorded responses were transcribed for better analysis and theme identification. For collecting data, even though face to face interviews were more effective for an qualitative study, due to pandemic situation and to reduce the risk of exposing to corona virus, telephonic interviews

were used. Majority of the respondents were interviewed through video call and it was recorded.

Implementation of Interview Guide

The interview process initiated by preparing an interview guide relating to the objective of the study. Initially, the common open ended questions were asked and the questions were narrowed down in further questions. The respondents were motivated to express their thoughts without any hesitation and buying patterns were discussed wherever needed. The respondents were interviewed in a family setting and in home environment. The demographic details were collected from the respondents through a questionnaire and was used for grouping and specific theme identification. To avoid misinterpretation or ambiguity the interview guide was verified through a pilot study and hence some minor changes have been made to avoid mistakes and to increase validity. The duration of the interview lasted from minimum of 30 minutes to 1 hour. A total of 3 families were invited in advance with an average of 3 to 5 respondents in a family in a home based environment. Before beginning the interview the respondents were informed that they can stop the interview anytime if they feel any discomfort and the recording will be kept anonymous and confidential. Every interview was transcribed and analyzed simultaneously to have a better improvement in interviewing the next set of respondents.

Questions used for collecting responses are as follows:

- 1) Over the last month, Is there any change in your pattern of buying? If yes, then how?
- 2) Tell about your recent purchase in a retail outlet.
- 3) What was the mode of purchase? Why?



4) Did you plan before your recent shopping?

5) What did you feel during the purchase?

Sampling and Data Collection

The purposive sampling or selective sampling is used for the study. The non probability sample is used as a sampling technique depending upon the population characteristics and the purpose of the study. The respondents also asked their friends to participate in the study. A total of 36 respondents were interviewed in home environment online.

To arrive at a decision, in depth semi structured telephonic interviews were conducted and it was recorded. Then the recordings were themed on the base of Transcriptions and analysis. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2013) the interview should be decisive, organized and apprehensible to have a better outcome of semi structured interviews. An informal and casual way of interviewing should be followed to avoid stress over the respondent during the time of interview.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

FACTORS AFFECTING IMPULSE BUYING

The themes evolved with respect to the factors that stimulate impulse buying during COVID-19 global pandemic from the analysis of collected data were tabulated in the table below:

FACTORS	MEANING
Fear of lockdown	The anxiety people feel due to the state of isolation or restricted access to public places other than home.
Psychological wellbeing	A positive functioning along with ones relatedness with others and self referent attitudes in Inter and intra-individual levels.
Peer buying	The pressure a shopper feels when some person purchases a potential goods

	or service.
Scarcity	A fear of consumer towards unavailability of the product on the time of need.
Fake news on social media	A rumor or unofficial myth released on social platform without any verification of the news.
Boredom	Emotionally and occasionally psychological state experienced when an a person is left without anything in particular to do.
Offers and discounts	Discount is the reduction in price and offer is the special benefit a consumer is offered to grab special attention and increase the conversion rate.

Fear of lockdown

In the initial months of lockdown implementation, respondents had faced fear and frustration to handle the crisis both economically and mentally. Majority of the respondents feared total lockdown and was unable to plan for stability in maintaining daily life.

“I shop every essential products I see online I don’t want to miss anything during lockdown” – IBM17

“I can’t access any shops in case of emergency so I plan more to face total lockdown” – IBM22
Psychological wellbeing

In this global pandemic situation, consumers shop to make them emotionally stable and to handle anxiety of the crisis. Most of the respondents did impulse buying to make them feel positive and happy.

“I shop some games to keep my family engaged and happy. I don’t know what to do”
“most of the lockdown days we ate ice cream to feel pleased and stress free”- IBF29



“When I shop I felt happy and when I get the delivery package ... I spend the whole day to try it on” – IBF21

Peer buying

Most of the respondents decide which product to buy depending upon the peer purchasing items. The respondents felt an urge to buy and they had a thought that it will be needed in the upcoming days. The push factor of the neighboring shopper made the respondents to buy impulsively.

“when I see the next man to shop something I too shop the same” – IBM25

“I cannot control myself and I will be in doubt if I shop with some of my neighbors” – IBM20

Scarcity

The lockdown had increased the fear of scarcity of food and fear of loosing essential on shelf products. The time and units available on store confuses the shopper to take decision of what to buy, when to buy and how many to buy.

“I felt some essentials will not be available in future days so I usually stock up” – IBF21

“I felt at some point of time stores will also don’t have stocks to deliver or to sell so I buy whatever I see” – IBM26

Fake news in social media

The respondents were not sure of the news or information shared on social media like whatsapp, facebook and twitter so to keep them safe and sufficient in home, consumers tend to shop impulsively without verifying.

“I get tensed if I receive messages about lockdown so I shop immediately to handle. Then I will came to know it is a fake news”– IBF13

“when I browse more, I get stressed and I end up in online shopping items like groceries” – IBF21

Boredom

The respondents during lockdown was unable to meet in social activities or meeting friends and everything was online. The respondents

was mostly unable to manage kids in home due to work schedule and classes. Some of the respondents had also started playing more board games to keep them entertained and to handle boredom.

“can’t play outside so I bought some board games in online we played with our mom and dad and it was fun in times other than sessions” – IBM10

Offers and Discounts

The consumers are conscious in shopping best deal products in order to have better savings. The online retailers competitively had pricing strategies to attract shoppers impulsively hence increasing the unplanned buying behavior.

“When I browse I come across notifications of offers or discounts in online application stores so I just stock up fashion products because now I cannot spend more on those products but I love to get dressed up” – IBF21

“Many online grocery stores also gave me good cash backs on essentials so I don’t have to think more about bulk buying”. – IBF30

CONSUMERS PERCEPTION ON IMPULSE BUYING

Most of the respondents perceive that impulse buying is an unplanned activity. It is the consumers response on spot to the experienced shopping experience.

“I do unplanned purchase in less time than planned shopping. I don’t have to think a lot I go with my intuition”. – IBM1

“if it happens too often then I feel it as a lack of self control”. – IBF2

Some of the respondents feel impulse buying as a negative effect in the aspect of post purchase feeling and satisfaction.

“I feel happy when I shop but after I come home I hate what I did.I must control while I shop” – IBF9

“majority of those purchases will be expensive and the shopper will end up in regret”– IBF4

PRODUCT CATEGORY



Majority of the respondents were buying essentials at first phase of lockdown and when they were able to comfortably stabilize themselves with the restrictions that were imposed, the second set of categories purchased impulsively was apparels and fashion retailing. Some of the respondents had also shared that they updated the home furniture's in the time of second phase of lockdown to make them feel comfortable when they work from home or when their kids attend the classes from home.

"in the initial stages of lockdown I was continuously buying groceries whenever possible but in the later stages I didn't do that. I learned to handle those". – IBM2

"to make my son feel he is at school I purchased good set of study furniture to his room" – IBM3

"I need privacy when I work from home so I updated my room like an office with official work based furniture" –IBF21

"I didn't want to miss my daughters first birthday so I purchased all the materials, accessories and dresses that will be needed for celebration in online store to make the moment". – IBF33

IMPULSE BUYING - BEFORE AND AFTER PANDEMIC

The respondents felt a drastic change in the way they shop before and after the lockdown. The preference of purchase medium had also changed to have comfort and to avoid risk while shopping.

"I usually prefer in store shopping but I avoided to stay safe in home" – IBF6

"Most of the time I do not plan my shopping but now I do to avoid unwanted purchase of products. When I see some attractive products I often lack control." – IBM12

The medium of purchase mostly preferred was offline before pandemic for touch and feel satisfaction but now a days after implementing

lockdown most of the respondents changed to online shopping. Majority of the respondents had started a planned well structured shopping to do smart shopping.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study shown results regarding the product category preferred for impulse buying and the purchase medium used mostly during the global pandemic period. Most of the respondents had changed their purchase pattern and most of the respondents were stocking up essentials rather than materialistic goods. Most of the respondents had changed from using offline stores to online applications or some had also used combination of both online and offline stores. Therefore marketers had to communicate and remind the customers about the brands to increase impulse buying. The in-store merchandising options, ambience and the store displays influence most of the consumers to shop impulsively in the period of pandemic. If the marketers were able to attract the senses of the consumers in-store, then the shopper can be easily stimulated to buy unplanned Verplanken (2001). Mood influences more when shopping in retail Rook (1987). Hence it reduces materialism and influences overall spending pattern.

Implications to Manager

The study stipulates that shoppers buy more impulsively in offline stores than when compared to online. It is mostly stimulated by the factor of "physical context" like when the consumers visit a store, more senses are triggered, and a large number of products were taken on board when compared to the online shopping experience. During the global pandemic, when individuals are mostly spending time at home, the impulsivity is considered to reduce. This helps the retailers to identify how the consumers can be attracted



easily by increasing the appeal of the products. The situation had made consumers to adapt themselves to new crisis techniques. So competitive techniques should be used to attract new customers and to influence their buying patterns. Moreover, high endshopping that will raise a feeling of self- esteem are the factors considered with high importance to impulse buying. If these attributes were used in the early stages of the in-store experience, it will create positive connections to the products and that will encourage the consumers to do impulsive buying.

FUTURE STUDY

The study was limited to Chennai during the Covid-19 lockdown. Hence the area of the study can be focused in other cities or states to have a better insight of the consumers impulse buying behavior. The study is a qualitative research and hence only in depth semi structured interviews were used for the data collection so to prove the outcome of the study, a quantitative study can be done in the same area. The post purchase feeling of the consumer was not studied in depth to know how the consumers impulse buying had made them felt about the purchase of the unplanned product or service. It is known that some respondents had felt guilty due to the unplanned purchase and some had regretted the decision of impulse buying but the reasons behind the guilt and the regret was not identified hence it can also be a good scope for the future research both qualitatively or quantitatively.

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