



Research Note

Impulse buying behaviour in tourism: A new perspective

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Travel decisions differ from everyday purchase of tangible products in that they are predominantly experience-focused and pleasure-driven (Kock et al., 2018). Pedestrian constraints usually associated with everyday decision-making are likely to diminish and, with an inevitable delay between deciding on and experiencing travel, certain temptations become more difficult to resist. This research note critically evaluates how tourist's impulse buying behaviour has been conceptualised and examined, discusses the field's progress, and sets out a research agenda investigating the nexus between impulse buying and travel decision-making.

Past investigations into impulse buying in tourism

Impulse buying refers to spontaneous, unreflective, and hedonically-driven behaviour activated upon exposure to a pleasurable consumption situation (Kacen & Lee, 2002). It is characterised by rapid decision-making and a compelling urge for immediate possession resulting from the conflict between an individual's pleasure-seeking desire and willpower to resist it (Kacen & Lee, 2002). Whilst most tourism research follows this conventional theorising to investigate impulse purchase (e.g., Li et al., 2015), Laesser and Dolnicar (2012) argued that because travel is assumed to be a high-involvement activity, impulse buying in tourism can also be considered a planned behaviour to some degree, typified by individuals planning to travel but without specific products in mind. In other words, an impulse purchase may be nested in a premeditated action.

Given the nature of travel decision-making, which can sometimes be last-minute or evolve as experiences unfold, a distinction between purchase behaviours that are spontaneous and uncontrolled, and those that are deliberate and reflective must be made (McCabe et al., 2016). We therefore conceptualise impulse buying in tourism as a situation where individuals

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may enter a travel decision process without specific items to purchase but with an impetus to be impulsive (Rook & Hoch, 1985).

Conceptually, impulse buying differs from excessive consumption or compulsive action (Wood, 1998). The conflation of these psychological processes may generate misleading findings or implications (e.g., Ahn et al., 2020). Researchers have identified factors associated with the urge to possess in tourism retail settings, although investigations remain piecemeal and retail-focused. These range from socio-demographics (e.g., Hanks & Mattila, 2014) to constructs such as trait impulsiveness (e.g., Meng et al., 2019), mood (e.g., Miao, 2011), experiences (e.g., Li et al., 2015), self-identity (e.g., Crawford & Melewar, 2003), and cultural orientation (e.g., Yeung & Yee, 2010). These findings offer contextualised empirical insights without contributing to our understanding of underlying psychological mechanisms.

Impulse buying associated with tourist's decision-making goes beyond retail purchases (Laesser & Dolnicar, 2012). It can include the trip itself (Chih et al., 2012) or the activities undertaken at the destination (March & Woodside, 2005). The act can therefore occur along a travel planning trajectory. Some studies posit a theoretical framework to explain tourist's impulse buying (e.g., stimulus-organism-response models; Meng et al., 2019), but the processes per se have not been investigated. Another commonly used approach is the theory of planned behaviour (e.g., Fowler et al., 2012). This seems counterintuitive as impulse purchase is a spontaneous action (Rook & Hoch, 1985). Consequently, the lack of explanatory theoretical frameworks contributes little to our knowledge of psychological processes around impulse buying.

Proposed re-conceptualisation of impulse buying behaviour

We draw on the principles of *intertemporal decision-making* to explain the unique characteristics of impulse buying behaviour in tourism. Essentially, tourists make decisions based on expected future consequences (e.g., rewards or costs) with varying temporal distances and subjective values.

Impulse buying occurs when a tourist needs to evaluate uncertain alternatives against future consequences (e.g., booking the flight now while the seats are available or waiting for a possible fare sale with limited seats), and thus make a trade-off between the quality of a reward and the time at which that reward is received (Dshemuchadse et al., 2013). Smaller-but-sooner rewards (e.g., last-minute deal for a weekend getaway) are preferred over larger-but-delayed ones (e.g., saving money for a round-the-world trip), because the subjective value and certainty of the reward fall as the temporal distance to that reward lengthens (Bulley & Schacter, 2020).

Whether a tourist will act upon the reward presented depends on the activation and relative strengths of two jointly-operating systems of decision-making: impulsive (affect-driven and automatic) and reflective (rational calibration) (Strack et al., 2006). The systems' interactions will vary with the travel planning settings, such as the traveller's novelty-seeking propensity or motives to evade harm (Kock et al., 2018), which then direct behaviours that range from pure impulse purchase (dominated by the impulsive system) to planned purchases (dominated by the reflective system). In intertemporal decisions, two potential mechanisms may underlie the interplay of these systems: affect anticipation and self-regulation.

When making a travel decision (e.g., browsing holiday information online), people often simulate the future and pre-experience the event in their mind (Bulley & Schacter, 2020). They even predict their future emotions to guide decision-making, a mechanism called *affect anticipation* (Bagozzi et al., 2016). Since decisions are mainly driven by a pursuit of happiness or avoidance of unhappiness, anticipated emotions associated with envisioning the pleasure of a future vacation can activate the impulsive system (Strack et al., 2006), triggering an urge to act without systematic analysis of future consequences (i.e., focus on immediate reward). Additionally, the memory of similar positive experiences can also elicit positive affect, which enhances anticipated emotional response for the future experience (Baumeister et al., 2007), and this has been recently tested in tourism (Li et al., 2021). The strengths of these anticipated affects then direct which system (i.e., impulsive or reflective) is applied for decision-making.

An individual's *self-regulation* (Baumeister, 2002) represents attempts to curb desires driven by immediate rewards and change how one thinks, feels or acts. However, conflicting goals, prior restraints, and reduction in self-monitoring may lower people's ability to self-regulate (Baumeister, 2002). Travelling, its associated fatigue, and the desire for enjoyment and relaxation during a holiday can diminish tourists' intrapsychic resources and reduce their ability to self-regulate. Under conditions where the reflective system is suppressed, tourists may become less capable of envisioning delayed consequences of their decisions and, consequently, resisting temptation (e.g., purchasing immoral tourism experiences or products; Fennell, 2015). People may also experience guilt when they become aware that they will engage in an indulgent behaviour, like a premeditated impulse purchase, and will be compelled to stop such behaviour (Duke & Amir, 2019). A temporal separation between one's initial decision about the guilt-inducing behaviour and the eventual behaviour, however, can disrupt self-regulation to attenuate the overall guilt, leading people to indulge more while decreasing post-behaviour atonement (Duke & Amir, 2019). This suggests that the decision-enactment gap often associated with the intertemporal nature of travel decision-making helps decouple decision guilt and action guilt, enabling impulse purchase.

Future research

While this research note is by no means a complete review of the literature, it identifies a paucity of investigation on psychological processes underlying impulse buying in tourism. We encourage future studies to employ intertemporal decision-making as an overarching framework to further examine impulse buying of tourism products. To this end, researchers will need to consider

the temporally stretched nature of impulse (Baumeister et al., 2007) and measure how it interplays with the cognitive processing systems (McCabe et al., 2016). The travel disruption consequent to COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity to test this framework because the increased longing for travel may give rise to impulse buying. Studies can explore how affect anticipation influences demand for tourism experiences, which can inform the design of destination marketing campaigns. Additional studies building on self-regulation can track and identify when tourists' self-control resources are likely to be depleted, allowing the impulsive system to dominate. Opportunities exist to examine if self-control can be strengthened by external stimuli that change the temporal focus towards delayed rewards (Bulley & Schacter, 2020).

Impulse buying decisions made at one point in time may carry over to influence subsequent decisions: Prior restraints increase the desire to indulge at a later time as people pre-commit to consumption (Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009). Research needs to move beyond the use of one-off surveys to consider the downstream consequences on other choices along the travel planning trajectory. Experiments simulating travel decision situations can be used to examine the trade-offs people are willing to make regarding the quality versus timing of rewards, building on Li et al.'s (2019) work. Studies can also combine psychophysiological measures with simulated choice surveys to better understand tourists' information processing leading to impulse travel decisions. Fieldwork that employs the qualitative think-aloud approach (Charters, 2003) as tourists plan and complete travel decisions can reveal how and when impulsive and reflective systems interact.

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Declaration of competing interest

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Marion Karl combines geographic and psychological theories to study cognitive processes of travel decision-making.

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