

# Impulse buying and cognitive dissonance: a study conducted among the spring break student shoppers

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to examine certain aspects of the relationship between impulse buying and resulting cognitive dissonance in the context of spring break student shopping.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The paper employs exploratory analysis utilizing a quantitative approach. The sample population was drawn from college students who went on shopping trips during their spring break. The survey instrument measures the cognitive dissonance construct and the impulsive trait, among other things. Because spring break shopping by students differs from typical adult shopping, some context specific nuances are also explored.*

**Findings** – *The first hypothesis tested was that the level of cognitive dissonance resulting from impulsive buying would be significantly greater than that which occurred after a planned purchase. Additionally, informed by prior theory, it was expected that more impulsive individuals would experience a higher level of cognitive dissonance after an unplanned purchase than less impulsive individuals. However, the empirical data were found to directly contradict these hypotheses. Impulsive buyers seem to experience rather lower levels of cognitive dissonance than planned buyers. Likewise, when a typically non-impulsive buyer makes an impulsive purchase, the cognitive dissonance experienced by him is seen to be significantly higher than when a typically impulsive buyer makes such a purchase. These findings lead to a new theory, according to which, impulse buying behavior may be a coping strategy used to avoid discomfort associated with the possible disconfirmation of expectations.*

**Originality/value** – *Understanding present generation college students' consumption-related behavior may give vital clues about the changing nature of consumption, as well as offering predictors for the consumption behavior of the adult population in the near future. In addition, by testing certain so far unexplored aspects of the relationship between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance, the paper enriches consumer research literature.*

**Keywords** Purchasing, Buying behaviour, Students, Shopping

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The growth of shopping has been tremendous since the second half of the twentieth century, evidenced by the mushrooming of shopping hubs, known variedly as shopping malls, town squares, flea markets, and bazaars, even in small towns (Dommermuth and Cundiff, 1967). Especially in the USA, spending has far exceeded disposable income and replaced saving as a revered value (Zuckerman, 2000).

Shopping, traditionally defined as the act of examining of goods or services from shops and gathering purchase-related information with or without the intent to purchase, has become a characteristic feature of the present day society (Buttle, 1992). With a blend of hedonic and utilitarian values, it is simultaneously a leisure activity and an economic activity. Shopping is a social event and is one of the major triggers of the current consumer culture (Belk, 1988). For many individuals, shopping is a means to gain membership in an aspired social class and hence shopping reflects more of the nuances of contemporary social relationships than the utility of the products purchased (Miller, 1998). Thus, shopping is both descriptive and

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ascriptive. Arnold and Reynolds (2003) unearthed the following six shopping related motivations and associated behaviors: adventure shopping, social shopping, gratification shopping, idea shopping, role shopping, and value shopping.

In the context of student shopping, the present researchers propose some relationships so far unnoticed by consumer researchers: it is hypothesized that the level of cognitive dissonance in the aftermath of impulsive buying is significantly greater than the same after a planned purchase and that individuals with higher impulsiveness trait experience a higher level of cognitive dissonance than their counterparts with lower impulsiveness trait. Taking in to account the nuances of spring break shopping, the researchers also explore a few other important issues about shopping behavior among college students such as the preference for national versus foreign brands, media influence, the impact of the current economic downturn, and student spending across the academic levels.

Empirically verifying the relationships proposed in this paper will give vital clues to marketers: for instance, if impulse buying is capable of generating more cognitive dissonance, the same calls for post-purchase dissonance reducing marketing interventions. If marketers do not actively intervene in the dissonance resolution process and channelize its direction, the post-purchase regret could make the customer a defector forever. Alternatively, looking from the point of a competitive-reactive marketing paradigm, a customer undergoing dissonance is an easy target for a competitor: the effort it takes for a competitor to make the customer switch loyalty is likely to be much less at this stage. Similarly, the proposed relationship between the impulsiveness trait and cognitive dissonance is also important from a marketing managerial standpoint: if this relationship holds, psychographic segmentation of customers based on their impulsiveness will give anticipatory information about their possible post-purchase regret scenario. If highly impulsive buyers are more "vulnerable" customers and if we know them in advance based on statistical profiles, dissonance reducing interventions may be begun even at the stage of product advertising. During the sales stage, such customers may be provided with more purchase reinforcing information. Also, in the post-purchase situation, customer services agents can become more proactive and contact these customers to assist them navigate the dissonance crisis.

## Theoretical background

### *Previous research on shopping behavior*

Shopping related issues have claimed a great deal of academic attention. Woodruffe-Burton *et al.* (2002) comment that the theory of shopping is already subsumed in the consumer behavior literature and the major task remaining is to separate its strands. Consumers expect shopping experiences to be "frictionless", defined as their perceived ease of the overall shopping process, especially with regard to the availability, competence, and friendliness of store (Wagner, 2007). According to this author, in addition to the perceived ease, shoppers rate shopping experiences based on pleasure, value, and quality as well. They balance the costs of time spent commuting to the store and in the store with storage costs and other non-time costs of shopping in order to minimize their overall costs (Umesh *et al.*, 1989). Hui *et al.* (2009) empirically verified the popular wisdom that consumers become more purposeful when they spend more time in a shopping environment.

A study conducted by Amanor-Boadu (2009) indicates that locations closest to the consumer's residence offer the highest shopping value for groceries and other low-order goods and that increasing gasoline prices favor local retailers. Arnold and Reynolds (2003) observed that shoppers focused on promotions modulated their moods better than their counterparts. While one purchase leads to another purchase by means of what is called "the shopping momentum", consumers do not do this with conscious awareness (Dhar *et al.*, 2007).

Kwon *et al.* (2010) investigated how the expectation of a deeper discount in the future affected the evaluation of the present discount and concluded that the negative effect of the future discount could substantially offset the positive perception toward the present deal.

Bava *et al.* (2009) explored how different product placement related cues in the shopping environment affect shoppers' behavior. Kaltcheva and Weitz (2006) found that shopping motivation (utilitarian versus hedonic) moderates the relationship between arousal and shoppers' behavior in the store environment. Quite interestingly, those driven by utilitarian motivational orientation were suspicious of arousal and they deliberately kept themselves away from shopping environments offering arousal. In a similar study, Eroglu *et al.* (2005) found that shopping values mediated the relationship between perceived retail crowding and shopping satisfaction. However, this relationship was moderated by factors such as personal tolerance for crowding, time spent shopping, shopping intention, and whether a purchase was made.

In the context of tourist shopping, Yüksel and Yüksel (2007) highlighted the role of perceived risk in affecting tourists' emotions, satisfaction and future shopping intentions. Along with quality and attractiveness, safety of the shopping environment too is vital in attracting shoppers. A straightforward consequence in an unsafe shopping environment is that the shopper reduces the time he or she will spend for shopping, resulting in lower spending. It may also lead to negative word of mouth and result in lack of interest to come back.

Shopping is an integral part of leisure and has got four leisure related aspects (Jackson, 1991). According to this author, these are: independence (shopping as purchasing); shopping for leisure (the purchase of goods for use in subsequent leisure time); shopping and leisure (when shops and leisure facilities are juxtaposed in a single place); and shopping as leisure (when shopping begins to take on the attributes of leisure as an experience). Qualitative insights from the present study makes us think that spring break students' shopping behavior may be seen mostly as a combination of shopping as leisure and independence.

Seven shopping oriented constructs have been identified by Seock and Bailey (2008) as defining the student shopping spectrum: these are; shopping enjoyment, brand/fashion consciousness, price consciousness, shopping confidence, convenience/time consciousness, in-home shopping tendency, and brand/store loyalty. Research by Lester *et al.* (2005) indicates that motivating factors vary by product and generation when it comes to student shopping. Customer appearance through dress influences customer service quality in retail stores (Paulins, 2005) in another study conducted on student shoppers.

Student shoppers with a tendency towards compulsive buying are more likely and those with greater social support are less likely to hold credit card debts (Wang and Xiao, 2009). Ying and Davidson (2008) identified natural scenery/attractions and agreeable environment/climate as contributing to the idea of a favorable shopping destination for student travelers. The intention to use multiple channels for shopping is high among students though it reduces with age (Lu and Rucker, 2006). Research by Lammers *et al.* (2003) reveals that online student shoppers are considered by others to be more trustworthy, attractive, successful, and smart. Questions such as which factors of social culture and subculture have affected the consumption behavior of university students, as well as the consumption pattern and trend among them, are addressed in the study by Lieh-Ching (2005). Students whose behavior is rooted in consumerism might be contributing significantly to the deterioration of natural environment in many places (Roberts and Jones, 2001).

#### ***Cognitive dissonance: the shopper's regret***

Post-purchase review about the merits and demerits of purchase is a natural human response. This review results in cognitive dissonance, which is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when there exists a discrepancy between what a person believes and information that calls this into question (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance is some conscious way of rationalizing or articulating the dissonance reduction or attempts at dissonance reduction which itself is a consequence of the level of cognitive dissonance which itself is caused by conflicts between thoughts/beliefs and action.

The reason underlying cognitive dissonance is that it is psychologically uncomfortable to hold contradictory cognitions. This psychological discomfort triggers a mental recovery process in the affected individual that can lead to (Festinger, 1957): search for information supportive of the held belief coupled with constant attempts to downplay the cognition that resulted in the phenomenon of dissonance, or to a change in belief reflective of the new condition. Egan *et al.* (2007) suggest that the mechanisms underlying cognitive-dissonance reduction in human adults may have originated earlier than previously thought: both by evolution over the course of human history and developmentally over the life course.

After a purchase, most purchasers tend to think that their cognitive consistency has been compromised to the various marketing interventions made by the seller (Cummings and Venkatesan, 1976). However, according to Sweeney *et al.* (2000), people have different thresholds for dissonance and it is not necessary that all purchases should lead to cognitive dissonance. Elliot and Devine (1994) notes that cognitive dissonance, even though cognitive, is experienced more than anything through psychological discomfort. Thus, it has got an emotional dimension, too.

Cognitive dissonance has the power to generate illusions (Balcetis and Dunning, 2007). The motivation to overcome cognitive dissonance makes the human brain visually distort the natural environment, according to these researchers. This is an important insight of marketing practitioners, especially when it comes to how customers develop distorted views of the service-scape. Matz and Wood (2005) observed that individuals in a group experience higher cognitive dissonance when a large number of other members in the group hold an opposing view.

One reason why cognitive dissonance in the original form has lost some of its charm could be the introduction of alternative explanations such as self-perception theory (Bem, 1965), impression management theory (Tedeschi *et al.*, 1971), attribution theory (Weiner, 1980), etc. While these theories explain particular aspects of the dissonance phenomenon better, none of them is as comprehensive in approach as the theory of cognitive dissonance. Some of the later researchers of cognitive dissonance took leads from the original work by Festinger (1957) and proposed more sophisticated dissonance models: self-consistency model (Aronson, 1992), self-affirmation model (Steele, 1988), and, the new look perspective (Cooper and Russell, 1984), are noteworthy among them. Although cognitive dissonance has had a long tradition in marketing theory, interest dedicated to empirical research involving cognitive dissonance has been fluctuating (Koller and Salzberger, 2007). In fact, it is likely that in the recent past this area of study has generated more attention among biologists and neuroscientists than among applied psychologists or marketing theorists. In a seminal work, the neural basis of cognitive dissonance and the neural prediction of attitude change have been investigated by van Veen *et al.* (2009): this study helped to reveal the neural representation of cognitive dissonance and supported the role of the anterior cingulate cortex in detecting cognitive conflict.

### ***Impulse buying***

Impulse buying is the act of making unplanned or otherwise spontaneous purchases (Rook and Fisher, 1995). According to Engel *et al.* (1982), impulse buying is a buying action undertaken without a problem previously having been recognized or buying intention having been formed before entering the store. It has got cognitive aspects such as lack of planning and deliberation, and affective aspects such as feelings of pleasure, excitement, compulsion, lack of control, and the probable regret (Verplanken and Herabadi, 2001).

Impulse buying gratifies intense hedonistic feelings (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). The trait of impulsiveness is strong in certain individuals because, for them, it gives pleasure and arousal that planned buying cannot give (Lee and Yi, 2008). O'Guinn and Faber (1989) note that impulse buyers purchase not so much to obtain utility or service from a purchased commodity as to achieve gratification through the buying process itself (i.e. consumption as a self-completion strategy). In some cases, impulsive buying is a symptom of a deeper mental condition called "oniomania", the uncontrollable addictive desire to shop (Black,

2007). Roberts (1998) identified the presence of elevated levels of compulsive buying among college students based in the USA.

A study by Rook and Fisher (1995) highlights that different individuals under the same situational conditions do not show the same degree of impulsiveness: this means that impulse buying behavior is at least partially a psychological trait. Baumeister (2002) argues that impulse buying is rather a self concept and not an environmental concept since it is about the capacity of the human self to change its states. An additional boost to this line of thinking comes from the research conducted by Narasimhan *et al.* (1996) who disproved the traditionally held idea that certain types of products are more likely to be purchased impulsively. Dittmar *et al.* (1995) also note that impulsiveness is a way by which the selves of certain individuals identify with themselves.

Finally, some scholars are of the opinion that the so-called impulsive purchases are not really impulsive: consumers might not always be able to articulate their purchase selection process but the same does not mean a selection process is not happening (Bayley and Nancarrow, 1998). These complex intangible selection processes happen in the span of a subjectively felt non-linear time.

### Linking impulse buying with cognitive dissonance: the proposed model

The present researchers propose that impulse buying leads to higher cognitive dissonance than more planned purchases. The rationale for such an assumption comes from the literature on involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Involvement refers to the study of how much time, thought, energy, and other resources people devote to the purchase process (Beatty and Kahle, 1988). Involvement is a cognitive response to overcome uncertainty. The involved customer searches for information from within, from personal sources, and from media sources like catalogs, consumer reports, consultants, etc., within the situational constraints, before making a purchase (Beharrell and Denison, 1995).

Highly involved individuals, just because of their high involvement in the purchase decision, are likely to be more stable in their preconceived cognitions that led to the purchase (Mittal, 1989). They might believe that their pre-purchase cognitions are well founded on intensive information search, collection, and analysis (Smith and Bristor, 2006). Highly involved customers have a greater ability to handle risks, notes Venkatraman (2006). This also means that they will likely hold on to their pre-conceived position even if the same might be perceived to be a risky position by others.

The preceding discussion on involvement suggests that impulse buyers may be less involved in their purchase decision-making process than those who make planned purchases. Less involvement presents a problem for rational choice model and is translated into less informed purchases. Given lack of proper information in product selection, impulse purchases are more likely to go wrong (Rook and Fisher, 1995). Once the product is purchased, this will cause impulse purchasers to re-think more about their purchase decision. In other words, it is possible that this very same pleasure and arousal associated with impulse buying is also associated with high cognitive dissonance in the post purchase situation. However, there is a strong counter-point to this view: impulse purchasers might be more risk tolerant (or else, they would have planned more!) and consequently they might take any disconfirmation of expectations more lightly. Given these contradictory possibilities, we consider it worthwhile to empirically examine the following relationship:

- H1.* The level of cognitive dissonance in the aftermath of impulsive buying is significantly greater than the same in the aftermath of planned buying.

Impulse buying trait and impulse buying behavior have to be distinguished: impulse buying trait refers to the attribute of certain individuals to be generally impulsive in their purchase behavior (Frieze and Hofmann, 2009). However, impulsive buying as a behavior may occasionally be exhibited by even those who do not have high impulsiveness trait scores. The relatively higher levels of arousal and pleasure felt by those who have higher impulsiveness trait scores might enhance their post purchase contrast propensity as well.

Consequently they are more likely to regret more about the purchase decision than others. It is interesting to note that, in consumer research, repentance frequently emerges as an important characteristic of impulsive buying trait (Wood, 1998).

Again, according to the reflective-impulsive model (RIM), impulsiveness trait is preceded by lack of self control (Strack and Deutsch, 2004). This condition may prolong to post-purchase scenario as well. If so, individuals scoring high on impulsiveness trait might turn out to be a segment that is more prone to cognitive dissonance. In other words, more impulsive individuals might feel a higher degree of cognitive dissonance than others:

- H2.* Individuals with higher impulsiveness trait experience a higher level of cognitive dissonance than individuals with lower impulsiveness trait.

A model depicting the hypothesized relationships is presented in Figure 1.

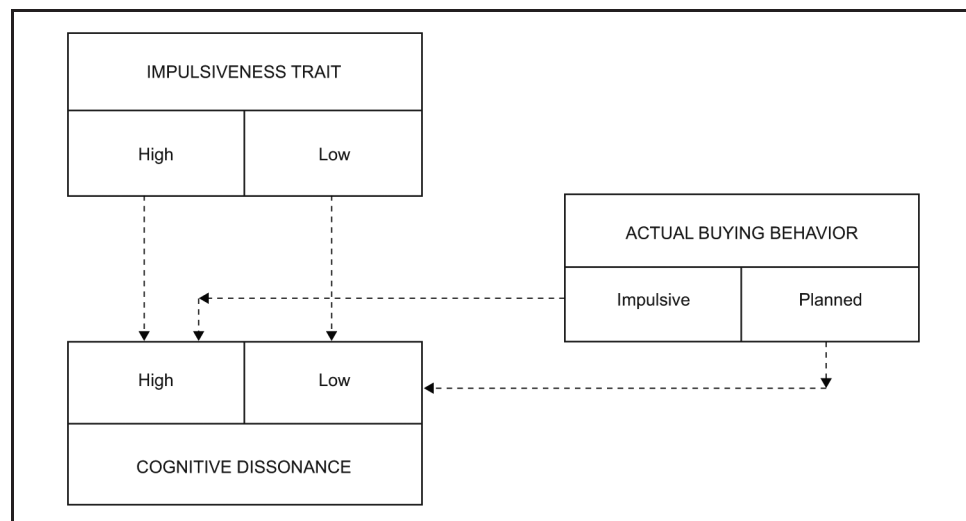
## The study

Spring break is a major season of shopping trips for US students. College students are attractive targets for travel-related consumption for a number of reasons (Hsu and Sung, 1997). Unlike employees, semester breaks give them weeks with nothing else to do other than to travel and have fun. According to Hobson and Josiam (1992), student travel contributes billions of dollars to the shopping industry every year. In addition to domestic students, international students also travel during the breaks: spring break gives international students a unique opportunity to see the varied cultural and natural landscapes of their educational destination country (Babin and Kim, 2001). Also, international students find spring break as the time to shop for items to take back home and to buy gifts for their family and relations. Given all these, spring breaks provide researchers a unique opportunity to understand the behavior of young consumers.

## Sample characteristics

A total of 105 individuals responded to the survey posted online using a proprietary survey instrument during April-May 2009. Out of them, only 58 did actually take a spring vacation during 2008-2009. For most of the questions in the survey instrument, these 58 respondents constituted the sample size. The various responses given by the excluded 47 respondents to a question on why they did not go on a spring break holiday were: working during the spring break (19), going back home (11), financial difficulty (9), need some rest rather than

**Figure 1** The proposed model



travel (3), not feeling well (2), have already taken another vacation recently (2), and last minute cancellation (1).

The respondents were from the following ethnic groups: Caucasians (53 percent), African Americans (27 percent), Asians (13 percent), Hispanics (4 percent), and miscellaneous others (3 percent). There was no respondent from the Pacific Islander ethnic group, which has a significant percentage of members in the US population. Around 78 percent of the respondents were either born or naturalized US citizens and the remaining 22 percent were foreign nationals. The gender distribution was not equal: a vast majority of the respondents were females (78 percent). The respondent age varied from 17 to 35, median age being 21. Of the total number of respondents who initially agreed to participate in the survey, 37 were married and 21 had at least one child.

The researchers hope the traditional criticism about student samples (Wells, 1993) does not wholly apply to this study since one of the purposes of this study itself was to examine spring break shopping among college students. Again, despite the bias in the sample towards generations X and Y, a positive way of looking at it is the opportunity that such a sample might render in terms of clarifying our understanding the consumer behavior of an important section of society: the college students. Understanding present generation college students' consumption related behavior may give vital clues about the changing nature of consumption and how the consumption of the adult population is likely to be in the near future.

### ***Measurement instruments***

Measurement of the cognitive dissonance construct was achieved by employing the 22 item scale developed by Sweeney *et al.* (2000). These researchers have established the scale's sound psychometric properties. Analysis conducted using the data collected for the present study re-confirmed the scale's reliability and factor structure. The reliability for the overall scale was found to be 7.8 and that for the dimensions were 8.7 (cognitive: necessity of purchase), 8.3 (cognitive: rightness of the choice), 7.8 (cognitive: rightness of the encounter with sales personnel), and 8.6 (emotional response).

To measure the impulsiveness trait, a slightly modified version of the Likert scale developed by Rook and Fisher (1995) was employed. Face validity of these cosmetic changes was found appropriate by three faculty colleagues. A factor analysis confirmed the scale's unidimensionality and the item statements were averaged to form an overall evaluation. The modified scale had an alpha reliability of 0.82.

The direct importance ratings method was used to understand how respondents felt about the influence of different media attributes upon their shopping destination decisions. On a five point scale from "least important" to "most important", respondents were asked to rate the importance of various media attributes such as print media, electronic media, expert opinions, personal recommendations, etc. While the direct importance ratings method is not considered as sophisticated as conjoint analysis in revealing attribute preference, it has the advantage that respondents are not forced to make tradeoffs between features.

### **Data analysis and discussion**

In this section, outcomes of the statistical tests performed as part of the study are reported. In addition, the various findings and their possible consequences are discussed in detail.

#### ***Impulsive versus planned buying – cognitive dissonance relationship***

A paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the cognitive dissonance arising in the aftermath of an impulse purchase versus a planned purchase. The test results are summarized in Tables I to III.

The paired samples descriptive statistics given in Table I reveal that there exists a difference in the scores for cognitive dissonance in the aftermath of an impulse purchase ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) and the same in the aftermath of a planned purchase ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).

Table I Paired samples statistics					
		Mean	n	Std deviation	Std error mean
Pair 1	CD: Impulsive	2.3621	58	1.05462	0.13848
	CD: Planned	2.8793	58	1.12511	0.14773

Table II Paired samples test									
		Mean	Std deviation	Std error mean	Paired differences 95 percent confidence interval of the difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	CD: impulse CD: planned	−0.51724	1.30103	0.17083	−0.85933	−0.17515	−3.028	57	0.004

Table III Paired samples correlation				
		n	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	CD: impulse and CD: planned	58	0.289	0.028

However, what is interesting are the relative mean values of the two variables: the mean value of cognitive dissonance in the planned purchase scenario is more than the same in the impulse purchase scenario.

Table II reports the statistical significance of the difference in the mean values seen above. It reveals that there exists a significant difference in the scores for cognitive dissonance in the two scenarios under study ( $t = -3.028$ ,  $df = 57$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Thus, the paired sample  $t$ -test helps us to conclude that the cognitive dissonance felt in the aftermath of an impulse purchase is significantly less than that felt in the aftermath of a planned purchase.

Table III reports the correlation between the cognitive dissonance values felt by individuals when they made a planned purchase as opposed to an impulse purchase. A significant correlation here ( $r = 0.289$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) implies that some individuals are likely to experience higher levels of cognitive dissonance than the others.

The empirical result is the opposite of the theoretically expected result. However, it is possible to bring in a different line of reasoning to make sense of it, employing the theories of involvement and attribution: low involvement typically associated with impulse buying increases the chance of self-attribution in the event of any perceived post-purchase discrepancy (Miller and Ross, 1975). When the cause of a failure is attributed to self, the degree of resultant cognitive dissonance will be lower than when it is attributed to an external agent (Stone and Cooper, 2003). Thus, if an individual knows that his thoughtlessness is the source of a failed purchase, his natural resistive tendency to protect his self awakens. In this context, it is interesting to take note of a study by Rook and Fisher (1995): only 20 percent of the respondents in their study felt any significant guilt about their impulse purchase

#### *Impulsiveness trait – proneness to cognitive dissonance relationship*

To test the second hypothesis, a multiple regression analysis with the impulsiveness trait as the independent variable and cognitive dissonance as the dependent variable was carried out. The results are presented in Tables IV to VI.

Table IV Regression model summary				
Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std error of the estimate
1	0.408 <sup>a</sup>	0.166	0.151	0.80624
Note: <sup>a</sup> Predictors: (constant), impulsiveness trait				

Table V ANOVA analysis						
Model		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	7.254	1	7.254	11.159	0.001 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	36.401	56	0.650		
	Total	43.655	57			
Note: <sup>a</sup> Predictors: (constant), impulsiveness trait; <sup>b</sup> Dependent variable: cognitive dissonance						

Table VI Coefficients in regression analysis						
Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
		B	Std error			
1	(Constant)	3.373	0.249		13.550	0.000
	Impulsiveness trait	−0.265	0.079	−0.408	−3.341	0.001
Note: <sup>a</sup> Dependent variable: cognitive dissonance						

The model summary reveals that impulsive purchase trait predicts around 15 percent of the variation in cognitive dissonance. The table of ANOVA implies that the prediction is statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

However, Table VI shows that the sign of the coefficient for impulsiveness is negative. This means, while cognitive dissonance is significantly predicted by impulsiveness, the relationship is the opposite from that hypothesized. The regression analysis implies that those who are high on impulsiveness trait get relatively less cognitive dissonance in the post-purchase scenario.

One possible reason for this result could be that those with a high impulsiveness trait, based on their previous experiences and based on the awareness that their purchase is not backed by sound calculations, keep in their minds the high probability for a failed purchase decision. This makes them look on failure as natural and they play these failures down, resulting in lowered levels of cognitive dissonance (Simon *et al.*, 1995). This is a coping strategy that can be stated as: avoid planning to avoid surprises. The surprising failure resulting from an impulse purchase is not really surprising for the buyer since he anticipated some kind of surprise. Such an interpretation can also be used to understand why impulsiveness becomes an “addiction” for some individuals: impulse purchase fends off a significant portion of the post-purchase regret about the rightness of a purchase decision! It need not be further stressed that one creative way to avoid regret is to ask oneself “what regret?” However, as noted before, these are, although highly plausible, untested speculations.

#### *Brands: domestic or foreign?*

A study conducted by Bergeron and Carver (2007) did not find that students, despite their concern for the domestic textile and apparel industries, held any special preference for domestic brands. This could be partly explained by the American ideal of a free boundary-less world. Generally, “buy local” tendencies are more pronounced in countries

with high degree of nationalism than in others (Mayda and Rodrik, 2005) and the USA is not one of those nationalistic countries.

Yet, the aforesaid argument holds good only during normal times. Due to the unprecedented economic crisis, the “buy local” rhetoric has reached a new high in many parts of the world. It will be interesting to see how such campaigns have influenced the purchase behavior of students during their spring shopping trips. However, in the present study, foreign students seemed to exhibit a higher preference for American brands than domestic students. While the exact causes are unknown, the greater preference for American brands among the international students could be due to the exoticism attached to those in their native societies: some of the international students with whom we discussed about this later told us that American brands are considered to be coveted possessions in their countries and are difficult to obtain there. They wanted to present these products as gifts to their family and relatives back home. In this context, it is appropriate to note the observation by Batra *et al.* (2000) that consumers from developing and underdeveloped countries prefer to consume products made in the developed countries.

Batra *et al.* (2000) anticipated a higher level of ethnocentrism among consumers from the developed world. Generally, an American would prefer an American brand in comparison with a Chinese one owing to the influence of variables such as perceived inferior quality and perceived attribution of a low social status. However, in the present study, a relatively greater preference among the American students for foreign made products could at least partially be due to their lower price tags, reflective of the motivation to save more in the difficult economic times. The cross tabulation output is presented in Table VII.

The null hypothesis cannot be rejected with confidence from the chi-square analysis, as chi-square has got a two-sided asymptotic significance value of 0.054, closely bordering 0.05. However, although there is the possibility of type 1 error here, we can surmise that international students prefer American brands significantly more than their domestic counterparts. The chi-square test result is presented in Table VIII.

#### *Income, propensity for purchases, and the economic downturn*

The survey instrument revealed a few other relationships worthy of note including the relationship between income and the propensity for impulsive purchase. The regression analysis implied a positive relationship ( $R^2=0.34$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In terms of the destination

**Table VII** Cross tabulation between respondent nationality and brand preference

		Brand preference		Total
		American	Foreign	
Nationality	International	10	3	13
	Domestic	21	24	45
	Total	31	27	58

**Table VIII** Chi-square test of association between nationality and brand preference

	Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)	Exact sig. (2-sided)	Exact sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-square	3.711E0	1	0.054		
Continuity correction <sup>b</sup>	2.595	1	0.107		
Likelihood ratio	3.901	1	0.048		
Fisher's exact test				0.066	0.052
Linear-by-linear association	3.647	1	0.056		
Number of valid cases	58				

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>0 cells (0.0 percent) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.05;

<sup>b</sup>computed only for a 2 × 2 table

chosen, around three quarter of the students chose destinations that are drivable by road (less than a thousand miles). Some chose to visit relatively farther places, among whom only a handful chose to fly to a foreign destination. To a question about the persons accompanied, the responses were as follows: friends (31), boyfriend/girlfriend (17), family (4), sorority/fraternity (3), and alone (3).

But, to a qualitative question on whether the recent economic downturn has affected the respondent's shopping behavior during the spring break, respondents across the board felt that it was important to be cautious in the matter of spending. Many said that it did not, since they are on a fixed payroll. In fact, they increased the size of their shopping basket since they found better deals than in the past. But, some of them added that they have become more cautious than ever before when it came to spending. A few disclosed that they already lost their jobs but still took a spring break, holidaying with a portion of the money saved so far, with the aim of forgetting everything for a while. Those who did not have jobs but depended upon their parents (who had "recession-proof jobs") responded that they have not changed their shopping habits. On the other hand, student shoppers who had children responded that they became doubly frugal in their spending decisions.

### Directions for future research

An issue worth discussing is whether group affiliations influence the tendency to impulse buy. According to the theory of reasoned action, if individuals evaluate the suggested behavior as positive and if they think their significant others want them to perform that behavior (impulse buying behavior, in this case), the intention to buy is likely to be stronger and subsequent behavior in the direction of the intention is significantly more likely (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2000).

Impulsive buying connotes novelty, vibrancy, and risk taking. These are also some of the characteristics that define present-day youth. When students are in a group of their peers, they might use impulse purchase as a means of defining their identity. Consequently, students in a group of peers might exhibit a higher propensity to impulse buy than when they are alone. We could not test this relationship statistically since only three of our 58 respondents traveled alone.

There are many drives that lead to impulse buying (Hausman, 2000). Another interesting area of inquiry could be the linkage between belief in destiny (external locus of control) and the propensity for impulse buying. If you believe that you have a destiny and you cannot do much about changing it, you may not involve too much in your purchase decision but rather would buy things impulsively.

We have not specifically investigated the case of individuals with high impulsiveness trait engaging in planned behavior, or the case of individuals with low impulsiveness trait engaging in impulsive behavior: in these scenarios, the relationships are likely to be quite different. For instance, for someone with high impulsiveness trait, engaging in planned behavior might reduce the consequences of impulsiveness.

Another issue worth exploring is the role of time: the duration for which cognitive dissonance will remain active might be different for individuals having different degrees of impulsiveness. Another study being carried out by the present researchers implies that the propensity of a dissonant individual to accept the new cognition increases with the elapse of time from the time of occurrence of cognitive dissonance. Also, the propensity of a dissonant individual to seek information supportive of the old cognition decreases with the elapse of time from the time of occurrence of cognitive dissonance. Putting all these together, future researchers might want to illuminate the relationship between cognitive dissonance and impulsiveness, with special focus on the role of time in that relationship.

It may be recalled that we discussed the possibility of certain individuals employing impulse buying as a strategy to bypass post-purchase regret. Along with this possibility, another associated possibility too is worth examining: the possibility of "puritanical" individuals using impulse buying as a means to underplay any pride or self-acclaim that is likely to arise

from the positively surprising outcome a planned and information driven purchase might yield. This is because, as Berkman and Gilson (1976) note, puritans tend to give credit for every good thing to the divine source and consider claiming credit for the positive results of their action to be unholy. Note also that puritans are one among the five or six distinct social strata in the US society (Berkman and Gilson, 1976).

### Concluding remarks

This study explored the important theoretical relationship between impulse buying and cognitive dissonance generated in its aftermath. Based on prior theory, the researchers began with the assumption that the level of cognitive dissonance in the aftermath of impulsive buying is significantly greater than the same after a planned purchase. The researchers also argued that individuals with higher impulsiveness trait ought to be experiencing a higher level of cognitive dissonance than their counterparts with lower impulsiveness trait.

While the empirical results did not support these relationships, the researchers were able to unravel something that is at least equally interesting: the empirical analysis points to the likelihood that impulse purchasers experience relatively less cognitive dissonance and that impulse purchase is a coping strategy used to avoid surprises arising out of possible disconfirmation of expectations. Impulse shopping could indeed be a great emotional release for many students.

Besides empirically verifying the proposed relationships among some of the important constructs, we also explored a few issues associated with college students' shopping behavior during the spring break. The researchers attempted to answer a range of questions such as: why some students do not go on vacation during the spring break; who they go with when they actually go; and their preference for domestic versus foreign brands.

Finally, if impulsiveness is a defining characteristic of youth, the sample chosen for the study is prone to that bias: by the mere fact that we have chosen a student sample, the researchers must have got a pool of respondents who score relatively higher on impulsiveness than the average population. They are unlikely to have to worry about encumbrances such as dependants to care, making them more liberal in their spending habits. However because of the limitations of the sample, we could not do certain important analyses such as how income or social class would affect impulse buying or the development and resolution of cognitive dissonance. Also, researchers must keep in mind that students as a class belong to a more restrictive demographic and social status distribution: this restricts the generalizability of the conclusions of this study to the wider population of all consumers.

Um and Crompton (1992) observed that travel related behavior is a resultant of an individual's disposition and the important attributes of the destination he or she visits. Shopping behavior of the same individual is unlikely to be similar in two destinations and two shopping contexts. Due to the complexity of this interaction, understanding the individual's psycho-demographic profile alone is not sufficient to understand his or her actual behavior. At the same time, grasping the relationships among the relevant socio-psychographic variables in the travel shopping context is an important first step.

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