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**Kemp, L., Mai, L.W. and Konstantoulaki, K.**

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# **Female Self-gifts Buying Behaviour: Impulse Purchase and Product Involvement**

## **Abstract**

This research examines the effect of product involvement on impulse buying behaviour for self-gifts. An experiment based on a factorial design was conducted among 152 females. Product involvement and self-gift giving context were manipulated by using two scenarios. The dependent variable of impulse buying behaviour was measured with a 6-item impulsivity scale. Results indicate that impulse self-gifting is likely to happen when consumers want to reward themselves after a success. Impulse buying tendency is found to be the best predictor for impulse self-gifting. The higher the level of product involvement is the more impulsive the purchase of a self-gift.

**Keywords:** Self-gifting, product involvement, impulse purchase, experiment design

**Track:** *Consumer Behaviour Track*

## **1. Introduction**

Using consumption as a way to deal with feelings is becoming a way of life (Kalla and Arora, 2011). Consumers purchase products when they want to reward themselves, celebrate an accomplishment, relieve stress or cheer ourselves up (Mick and DeMoss, 1990a). Such special indulgences have been named as self-gifts in consumer behaviour research. It is most often assumed that self-gifts are premeditated, and consumers might plan in advance to buy themselves something special (Mick and DeMoss, 1990b). However, the actual purchase process can be of a highly impulsive nature (Luomala and Laaksonen, 1999). The concept of self-gift giving has been linked to impulse buying, even though there is a lack of empirical research on the relationship between the two concepts (Silvera *et al.*, 2008). Product involvement refers to a consumer's long-term attachment to a specific object and has a significant impact on his or her decision-making process (Bauer *et al.*, 2006). Academic literature on the topic has been relatively scarce (Ward and Tran, 2008; Heath *et al.*, 2011). Mick, DeMoss and Faber (1992) called for quantitative research approaches in self-gifting behaviour. Knowing to what extent potential self-gift buyers act impulsively in-store can help practitioners to use meaningful and effective self-gift themes in their communication.

The aim of this research is to examine two different self-gifting behaviour contexts, namely reward and therapy, the levels of product involvement with a specific self-gift scenario and the relation to impulse buying.

## **2. Literature Review**

Current research on self-gifts is generally pre-theoretical (Mick and Faure, 1998). Much of the research is contributed by Mick, DeMoss, Faure, McKeage and Luomala. The link between involvement and impulsive buying of a self-gift has not yet been examined by academic research.

### **2.1 Self-gift giving**

Self-gifts were first discussed by Mick and DeMoss (1990a) who defined them as personally symbolic self-communication through special indulgences that “tend to be previously planned and highly related to different contexts” (p.328). They are clearly distinct from ordinary personal acquisitions (Mick and DeMoss, 1990a) and can be distinguished by a particular motivation and context (Heath *et al.*, 2011). Self-gifts constitute a hedonic form of consumption rather than a utilitarian one (Mick and DeMoss, 1990b). Self-gift giving is fairly common among Western societies (Faure and Mick, 1993) with advertising and promotion using self-gift themes such as 'you deserve it' or 'give yourself a treat'. 'Self-love' seems to be a commonly used theme while reward, escape and compensation were found less often in the recent study (Heath, *et al.*, 2011).

Women are more likely to buy themselves gifts than men (Ward and Tran, 2008). Age and the likelihood of self-gift is negatively related while living alone increases the probability of engaging in self-gift giving (Mick *et al.*, 1992). The common contexts for self-gifting are: 'to reward yourself for an accomplishment', 'to cheer yourself up because you are feeling down', 'when a holiday arrives' and 'because you have some extra money to spend', 'to be nice to oneself', 'to relieve stress' or 'to provide an incentive towards a goal' (Mick and DeMoss, 1990a; 1990b; Mick *et al.*, 1992); 'when a holiday arrives' was later replaced by 'for your birthday' (Mick *et al.*, 1992). The two underlying contexts for a self-gift are: reward: 'a reward for having accomplished personal goal', and; therapeutic: a purchase 'to cheer yourself up because you are feeling down' (Mick and DeMoss, 1990a; Mick and Faure, 1998; Luomala and Laaksonen 1999; Heath *et al.* 2011).

## **2.2 Reward and Therapeutic Self-gifts**

Reward self-gifts are indulgences following an achievement thanks to an effort and the feeling of deserving a gift and a certain feeling of deservedness is often associated with the end or the completion of a task (Heath *et al.*, 2011). Achievements that trigger a reward self-gift are mostly work-related (Mick and Faure, 1998; Tynan *et al.*, 2010). Therapeutic self-gifts on the other hand can serve as a way to temporarily escape negative emotions (Mick and DeMoss, 1990a; Heath *et al.*, 2011). Such emotions can be triggered by external events such as a break-up, a dismissal or an accident. Consumers engage in therapeutic self-gift giving if they fail (Mick and Faure, 1998). The failure can be of a private or professional nature (Heath *et al.*, 2011). Consumers engage in therapeutic self-gift giving 'to raise their spirits', 'when they feel low or depressed' or 'when they need their self-esteem to be raised' (Sherry *et al.*, 1995). Therapeutic self-gifts are considered as a way to escape problems, to deal with loneliness, abandonment or loss (Sherry *et al.*, 1995; Heath *et al.*, 2011).

## **2.3 Product Involvement**

Product involvement can be considered as a type of enduring involvement for which the object of concern is a particular product category. If a consumer is uninvolved with a product, it means that he or she does not care about it and is indifferent towards it (Mittal, 1995). High involvement products tend to be relatively expensive, long-lasting goods while low involvement products are mostly cheap and of limited durability (Laurent and Kapferer, 1985). Moreover, products of a hedonic, self-expressive, or symbolic nature, such as jewellery or designer clothes, are likely to show higher levels of product involvement than largely functional products (Mittal, 1989). Self-gifts can vary in terms of price, ranging from cheap convenience products to expensive, high involvement products (Mick and Faure, 1998). They do not necessarily have to be physical products. The reward self-gifts tend to be associated with clothing, restaurant food and travel; in contrast, therapeutic self-gifts are more likely to involve food, music products and personal care (Mick and DeMoss, 1992).

## **3.4 Impulse Purchase and Self-gifts**

Impulse buying fulfils a sudden urge to purchase a certain product and entails feelings of pleasure and excitement (Rook, 1987; Verplanken *et al.*, 2005). Impulse purchases are made fast and spontaneously without considering or evaluating the possible consequences (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998; Rook, 1987). Fun plays an important role within impulse buying (Verplanken *et al.*, 2005). Consumers engage in impulse buying to satisfy their wish to indulge (Kalla and Arora, 2011). Impulse buying is driven by hedonic, pleasure-seeking goals that cause a consumer to experience the desire for a product (Silvera *et al.*, 2008). Similar to self-gifting, impulse buying behaviour is often motivated by the desire to escape negative feelings or prolong positive ones (Youn and Faber, 2000). Some individuals use impulse buying as a self-regulatory mechanism to reduce negative emotions or to repair an unpleasant mood, to 'cheer themselves up' (Verplanken *et al.*, 2005). This behaviour can be seen as a form of escape from negative affective states (Silvera *et al.*, 2008). On the other hand, impulsive purchases are often triggered by positive emotions such as pleasure, carelessness or excitement (Hirschmann, 1991). Impulse buying can be considered as a manifestation of a consumer's wish to indulge, to give oneself a treat (Kalla and Arora, 2011). Consumers may consciously plan to engage in self-gift giving to reward or console themselves, while the actual purchase may be determined impulsively and extraneously (1993; Luomala and Laaksonen, 1999). The link between impulse buying and self-gift giving has been established by academic research, although there is clearly a lack of empirical analysis into how exactly the two concepts are related (Silvera *et al.*, 2008; Kalla and Arora, 2011). Previous research

provide insufficient explanations on how consumers purchase self-gifts impulsively in various, positively or negatively connoted contexts and this research attempts to fill to this gap.

## 2.5 Impulse Buying Tendency and Materialism

Impulse buying tendency was originally defined as “the degree to which an individual is likely to make unintended, immediate, and unreflective purchases” (Jones, 2003, p. 506), a definition which has also been used in more recent studies (Filght *et al.*, 2012). Although consumers with a highly impulsive nature have a tendency to buy items of different product categories on impulse (Jones *et al.*, 2003), the relationship between buying impulsiveness and actual impulse buying behaviour is only significant when consumers believe that the impulse purchase is appropriate (Rook and Fisher, 1995). Women tend to be more impulsive in their purchase behaviour than men (Coley and Burges, 2003; Tifferet and Herstein, 2012). Women are more likely to engage in hedonic consumption, which is closely linked to impulse buying, and their behaviour is more emotional and psychologically rooted than men’s resulting in women being more susceptible to impulse buying (Tifferet and Herstein, 2012).

There is a significant association between impulse buying tendency and materialism (Watson, 2003; Podoshen and Andrzejewski, 2012). Highly materialistic people tend to be impulsive buyers. Highly materialistic people have a higher propensity to spend money, and they are likely to view themselves as spenders a desire to show off possessions (Watson, 2003). There are three categories of materialism: success, centrality and happiness (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Materialists judge their own and other’s success by considering the value and quantity of material possessions; they place possessions and their acquisitions at the centre of their lives and they see consumption as essential to their satisfaction and well-being (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Podoshen and Andrzejewski (2012) suggest the implications of materialism should be considered by researchers.

## 3. Research Hypotheses

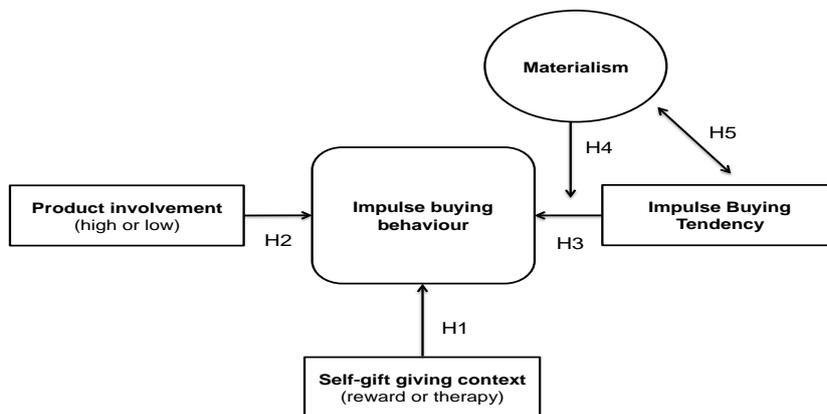


Figure1: Research Framework

Research hypotheses were developed after a review of literature. The relationships between the hypotheses’ statements are shown in Figure 1:

- H1:** Reward self-gifts are associated with higher levels of impulse buying behaviour than therapeutic self-gifts.
- H2:** Higher levels of product involvement will lead to higher levels of impulse buying behaviour.
- H3:** Higher levels of impulse buying tendency will lead to higher levels of impulse buying behaviour.
- H4:** Differences in the level of materialism positively moderates the effect of product involvement on impulse buying behaviour.

**H5:** Materialistic consumers tend to be impulse buyers.

#### 4. Data Collection

A factorial experiment design was used to study causal relationships between the independent variables, i.e. self-gifting contexts (Scenario A: Therapeutic: failing an exam or Scenario B: Reward: passing an exam, and level of product involvement: high or low) (see Figure 2). A self-administered questionnaire containing one of the two possible self-gifting contexts with stimuli and measures was delivered to participants via email or social media. The final sample comprised of 152 females aged 18 - 40. The moderating effects of materialism and impulse buying tendency were measured using established scales; ‘impulsivity (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998), ‘impulse buying tendencies’ (Rook and Fishers, 1995), ‘materialism (Kilbourne and Pickett, 2008). Subjects were asked to rate the believability and the level of difficulty in imagining the situation on a 7-point scale (Dholakia, 2001; Mick and Faure, 1998).

Between-participant Variables	With-participants Variables	
	Low Product Involvement (	High Product Involvement
<b>Reward</b>	P1	P1
	P2	P2
<b>Therapeutic</b>	P3	P3
	P4	P4

Figure 2 : Factorial Design: Self-gift giving context and level of product involvement, adapted from Christensen *et al.*, (2011), p.25

A pre-test (n=18) was conducted in order to identify two product categories with a difference in the level of product involvement. Amongst a range of common self-gifting product categories, two products, i.e. a chocolate bar and a pair of shoes, show significant different levels of product involvement. A manipulation of these two products was used to evaluate the effect of product involvement (Mittal, 1995).

#### 5. Data Analysis and Hypotheses Testing

A total of 152 valid responses of female students was collected. There were no significant differences between age groups in terms of level of materialism. A reliability test was used to test the multiple-item scales for internal consistency and reliability, and the items show very good fit and internal consistency ( $\alpha > 0.70$ ). The manipulation of product involvement was effective. A paired samples t-test revealed a significant difference in the levels of involvement for chocolate and shoes (p=0).

Table 1 : Realism of the Scenarios

Self-gifting Context	n	Believability of Scenario		Ease of Imagining oneself in Scenario	
		Chocolate	Shoes	Chocolate	Shoes
<b>Therapeutic</b>	78	5.10	5.26	4.82	5.00
<b>Reward</b>	74	4.93	5.97	4.97	5.96
<b>Total</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>5.02</b>	<b>5.61</b>	<b>4.89</b>	<b>5.47</b>

In testing the hypotheses, the significance is set at 1%: (1) Although the result shows impulse buying behaviour scores are lower for a therapeutic than for a reward self-gift, the difference is not statistically significant. H<sub>1</sub> is rejected. (2) Pearson’s product-moment correlation coefficient is used to assess the strength of the relationship between product involvement and impulse buying behaviour. The result shows impulse buying behaviour and product involvement are positively correlated within both product categories. The findings suggest that higher levels of product involvement are associated with higher levels of impulse buying behaviour across different product categories. H<sub>2</sub> is accepted. (3) Correlation analysis is used

to test the relationship between impulse buying tendency and actual impulse buying behaviour. There is a significant positive correlation between impulse buying tendency and actual impulse buying behaviour in both product categories. H3 is accepted and is true for both involvement product categories. (4) A moderated regression was used to test the individual difference variable of materialism. Materialism has no significant moderating effect on both product categories. H4 is therefore rejected. (5) The analysis shows there is a significant positive correlation between impulse buying tendency and materialism ( $r = .475$ ;  $p = 0$ ) indicates that highly materialistic people tend to be impulse buyers. H5 is accepted.

## 6. Conclusions and Limitations

High realism scores on the experiment scenarios indicate consumers engage in impulse buying behaviour both therapeutically in mood lifting and to reward themselves. The results show reward self-gifts are not associated with higher levels of impulse buying behaviour than therapeutic self-gifts. When purchasing a self-gift, a higher level of product involvement is likely to lead to higher levels of impulse buying behaviour. Higher levels of impulse buying tendency are likely to lead to higher levels of impulse buying behaviour. The personality trait of impulse buying tendency has a positive influence on actual impulse buying behaviour. This study provides support to previous findings showing that the greater the level of buying impulsiveness, the greater the frequency of feeling urges to buy on impulse (Beatty and Ferrel, 1998; Verplanken and Herabadi, 2001). Finally, in the context of self-gifting, materialism has a positive moderating effect of product involvement on impulse buying behaviour but materialistic consumers can not be labelled as impulse buyers.

The use of convenience sampling is a limitation of this study. The other limitation is that only two possible contexts for self-gift giving are analysed in this research; there are other possible scenarios that have not been tested in this study, e.g. 'feeling stressed', 'to be nice to oneself' or 'to provide an incentive toward a goal' (Mick and DeMoss, 1990b). For future research, the influence of situational factors such as store environment, money availability or sales staff, should be considered. Research can be strengthened by adding the variables with moderating effects and using a good combination of self-gifting scenarios.

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