
Institute for Research in Marketing

Press Release

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PROFESSOR KATHLEEN D. VOHS FINDS LINK BETWEEN IMPULSIVE BUYING AND SELF-CONTROL

MINNEAPOLIS, MN – Americans seem to be spending more and saving less, with some of this spending driven by impulse buying. Recent research by Kathleen D. Vohs, assistant professor of marketing at the Carlson School of Management, suggests that a reduced ability to “regulate” oneself is linked to impulsive spending.

In the forthcoming paper “Spent Resources: Self-Regulatory Resource Availability Affects Impulse Buying,” in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vohs and Ronald Faber show that people are more susceptible to impulse buying after they have done something that has taxed their emotional resources. People whose resources have not been taxed are able to resist impulse buying.

“After people have used up their self-control – in situations such as forcing oneself to devote all of their energy to paying attention to the road while driving in a snowstorm – they are vulnerable to overspending,” says Vohs.

Vohs’s research showed that participants felt stronger urges to buy, were willing to spend more, and actually did spend more money in unanticipated buying situations after they had engaged in behaviors that demanded self-control. Three experiments demonstrated the effect. In one experiment, participants were asked to write down any thoughts that popped into their heads. Half of the participants were given a caveat: they could think of anything they wanted, *except* for a white bear – a difficult exercise akin to trying *not* to think about a secret lover or a tempting piece of chocolate cake. Afterward, all participants were given a list of 22 items and asked what they would pay for each item. The group of participants that experienced a loss of self regulatory resources (i.e., those who were not allowed to think of a white bear), said they would be willing to pay higher prices for the products as compared to participants who did not control their thoughts earlier.

The marketplace is filled with impulsive spending opportunities. The checkout aisle in grocery stores and pop-up ads that beckon consumers to buy now and pay later are some of the many opportunities for people to spend impulsively. These situations have predictable consequences for consumers, including a higher likelihood of accumulating large amounts of debt. Professor Vohs’s research is of particular interest to consumers who wish to overcome the temptation of impulsive spending.

“A word to the wise,” cautions Vohs, “When you have a sense you have been suppressing your emotions, trying to avoid having unwanted thoughts, or are attempting to diet, the smartest choice you can make for your pocketbook is to avoid situations in which you can easily spend money. Your defenses will be down and you will be more likely to overspend.”

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