

## Discretionary unplanned buying in consumer society

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### Michael Wood

teaches consumer behavior and research methods in the Department of Sociology and the MS in Applied Social Research Program at Hunter College, of the City University of New York. He has published papers in the Journal of Economic Psychology, International Journal of Market Research, Social Science Research, and American Sociological Review. His current research interests include social change and consumers, survey item nonresponse, and research design.

### Abstract

*This paper addresses a disjunction between consumer behaviour discourse about 'impulse buying' and the reality of shopper behaviour in contemporary marketing and retail environments, by revising the concept of unplanned buying. 'Discretionary unplanned buying' is distinguished from impulse buying and is argued to be part of the core meaning of a 'consumer society'. Consumers buy goods and services with discretionary income intentionally, but without prior planning. It is suggested that such purchases account for a significant portion of the excitement and the 'hedonic' satisfaction that consumers receive from their consumption purchases, both in the present day and historically. Consumer experiences as well as the historical development of retail places and consumer society are considered. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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Unplanned buying,  
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### INTRODUCTION

*'The superfluous, a very necessary thing.'*  
Voltaire, *Le Mondrain*

*'Necessity never made a good bargain.'*  
Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's*  
*Almanack*

Daniel Miller (1998) spent a year observing shoppers from households in North London and concluded that the typical shopping experience incorporated 'provisioning' buying and was conducted in supermarkets on a routine basis. Furthermore, shoppers were typically buying for persons other than themselves—family and household members. Those mundane overall findings stood in marked contrast to

what people told Miller about shopping when they learned he was researching it. The 'discourse' about shopping was 'always an extreme form of shopping, an over-the-top activity devoted largely to indulging itself', where shopping was portrayed as 'primarily an act of spending, preferably spending large amounts of money, almost without a care for the consequences' (1998: 68). Miller was therefore confronted with a 'massive disparity' between his observations about typical shopping behaviour and the 'extravagant bout of hedonism and materialism' depicted in the discourse on shopping (1998:70).

This paper addresses a corresponding disjunction between consumer behaviour literature 'discourse' about 'impulse buying' and the reality of

**Michael Wood**  
Dept. of Sociology,  
Hunter College,  
CUNY,  
695 Park Avenue,  
New York, NY 10021,  
USA  
Tel: 212 772 5585  
e-mail: mwood@  
hunter.cuny.edu

consumer and shopper behaviour in contemporary marketing and retailing environments. The consumer behaviour literature features 'impulse buying' as extraordinary, emotion-saturated buying that takes place largely without regard to financial or other consequences. Articles in the popular press feature impulse buying in a negative light and offer advice on how to avoid it. These depictions of impulse buying contrast with treatments of 'unplanned buying' and 'point-of-purchase' decision making in the retail and marketing literature where 'in-store' buyer decisions are considered to be universal, expected and encouraged. Indeed, the economic importance of shopping and 'unplanned' buying for contemporary retailing enterprise cannot be overestimated. In the words of a researcher who specialises in the 'science of shopping': 'If we went into stores only when we needed to buy something, and if once there we bought only what we needed, the economy would collapse, boom' (Underhill, 1999: 31).

The author addresses the disjunction between 'impulse buying' and retail 'point-of-purchase buyer decision making' by rehabilitating and expanding the concept of unplanned buying. In so doing the importance of 'unplanned' buying is considered not only in the present era, but also in the history of the development of commercial society. The author argues for considering 'discretionary unplanned buying' as part of the core meaning of a 'consumer society' in which consumer discretion allows people the freedom to buy items that are not only 'necessary', but also enrich or add to their quality of life in some way. The discussion moves through the three levels of a 'holistic' framework for studying shopping offered by Woodruffe-Burton *et al.* (2001): individual motivations, the socioeconomic context that shoppers bring with them and the shopping and retail environment.

## IMPULSE BUYING VERSUS IN-STORE BUYER DECISION MAKING

Consumer behaviour researchers have been interested in 'unplanned' and 'impulse' buying for some time (Clover, 1950; West, 1951; Stern, 1962; Kollat and Willet, 1967). The older literature tends to consider unplanned and impulse buying as more or less equivalent (eg West, 1951). Stern (1962: 59) differentiated 'reminder impulse buying' (in-store recollection of needed items) from 'planned impulse buying' (shopping for price discounts). 'Pure impulse buying' was a 'novelty or escape purchase which breaks a normal buying pattern' and 'suggestion impulse buying' was the purchase of an item seen for the first time but recognised by a consumer as relevant or needed.

Subsequent consumer behaviour research began to focus more on impulse buying as separate and distinct from unplanned buying (eg D'Antoni and Shenson, 1973). Some earlier statements argue for the usefulness and empirical veracity of differentiating 'true' impulse buying from routine 'reminder' and similar unplanned purchases. But the contemporary definition of impulse buying as extraordinary, emotion saturated and non-rational probably can be traced to research by Rook and colleagues (Rook and Hoch, 1985; Rook, 1987; see Piron, 1991). Rook (1987) argued successfully that impulse buying should be considered distinct from 'unplanned' buying, and depicted it as 'extraordinary', 'exciting', 'hedonically complex' and 'compelled' buyer action. Piron (1991) noted that Rook established five criteria that differentiated impulse from non-impulse buying, including 'a sudden and spontaneous desire to act', a 'state of psychological disequilibrium' with associated 'psychological conflict and struggle', 'reduced cognitive evaluation and regard for consequences' (Piron, 1991: 509).

A negative overall tone tends to surround consumer behaviour literature on 'impulse' buying, and considerations

of 'failure of self-control' and buyer regret are common. Indeed, a central theme of the concept as it appears in contemporary research is 'akratic action', ie action contrary to the buyer's better judgment and an outcome of defective self-control (Wood, 1998a: 299; Baumeister, 2002). (Philosophical concern with 'akratic action' has a long history, see Mortimore (1971) and Mele (1987).) Along these lines, research on 'compulsive buying' generally has not made a firm distinction between impulse and compulsive buying, and similar scale items have been used to measure both phenomena (eg Cole and Sherrell, 1995; DeSarbo and Edwards, 1996). A recent research paper, for example, recounts these themes and weaves them together: 'Impulse buying behaviour is a sudden, compelling, hedonically complex purchasing behaviour in which the rapidity of the impulse purchase decision process precludes thoughtful, deliberate consideration of all information and choice alternatives' (Kacen and Lee, 2002: 163).

Notwithstanding the exotic aura that surrounds consumer behaviour discussions of 'impulse buying', the management and retailing literature approaches the topic of 'in-store' or 'point of purchase' buying as commonplace, expected and encouraged (see Phillips and Bradshaw, 1993; Hackett *et al.*, 1993). While shop owners from as far afield as ancient Rome and Byzantium to 17th century Madrid and (later) Paris and London used signs and displays to attract buyers, retailers in the latter half of the 20th century elevated the use and arrangement of displays, counters, racks, shelves, lighting and music nearly to an art form. (de Waele (1930) and Wycherley (1956) considered shops in the ancient world, while Myres (1953) considered grocery precursors. Braudel (1992) related the world history of shops closer to the modern era. Modern retailing texts typically contain detailed discussions with recommendations about displays,

'visual merchandising' and the store environment (see eg Diamond and Pintel, 1996; Bell and Ternus, 2000).) Retail industry periodicals such as *Drug Store News*, *Supermarket Business* and *Convenience Store News*, as well as specialised management periodicals (eg *In-Store Marketing*), routinely advise managers how to structure shopping environments so as to increase unplanned and impulse buying. (Despite the differentiation of 'impulse buying' from unplanned buying in the consumer behaviour literature, retail and management discussions tend to use 'point of purchase', 'impulse' and 'unplanned' buying interchangeably.) Retailers heed the fundamental principle that the longer a consumer is in a store, the higher the probability that they will make a purchase (Kahn and McAlister, 1997: 124). The 'science of shopping' evolved in part due to the fact, as demonstrated early on in consumer research, that shoppers visiting a retail place do not buy only those items that are on a shopping list, or that they have identified a prior need for (West, 1951; Kollat and Willet, 1967).

In view of the extensive literature detailing the nature and dimensions of individual experiences with respect to impulse buying, and the undeniable importance of unplanned buying in the business of retailing, it is surprising to find a lack of direct evidence bearing on the question of what proportion of unplanned buys are impulse buys. Studies of the 'hedonically complex' psychological processes that constitute impulse buying have not contained quantitative empirical estimates of the proportion of unplanned purchases that constitute 'impulse' purchases. The author has been able to identify only a single study containing a quantitative estimate of the extent of 'impulse buying' as distinct from the other possibilities of 'unplanned buying' in a marketplace. Beatty and colleagues (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998; see also Weun *et al.*, 1998) found that, of 533 mall shoppers who

completed both pre- and post-shopping interviews, a majority (380, 71 per cent) made no unplanned purchases. Of those mall shoppers who made unplanned purchases (153), a majority (66 per cent) could be classified as 'impulsive' according to scale criteria. Interestingly, this issue was mentioned in the introduction to Kollat and Willet's (1967) pioneering study, but then dropped from further consideration. Some relevant but admittedly inadequate survey data have also been published. Rook and Fisher (1995), for example, noted that an average of 38 per cent of adults in an ongoing national marketing survey responded affirmatively to the statement: 'I am an impulse buyer'. Wood (1998a) estimated that a quarter of adults might occasionally experience impulse buying, based on a question asked on a national probability sample survey. Of course, these figures are far from being reliable and valid estimates of the proportion of unplanned purchases which conform to the contemporary definition of 'impulse' purchases.

The problem of measuring the *extent* of 'impulse' buying—as opposed to its experiential outlines—goes even further. Even estimation of the overall amount of 'unplanned' buying is problematic. The measurement of consumer buying without prior plans requires, obviously, measurement of plans and buying intentions. The simple operationalisation of consumer buying intentions by means of a shopping list or consumer-announced plans as they enter a store is problematic, however, as observed early on by researchers (Pollay, 1968; Kollat and Willet, 1969). Kelly *et al.* (2000) noted, in the introduction to their 'benchmark' study of planned and unplanned purchases, that *no* previous study of unplanned buying had comprehensively estimated proportions of consumers entering a store with and without plans, and the extent to which they bought what they planned to buy, or bought unplanned items. Results from the Kelly *et al.* (2000) study of planned

and unplanned buying in discount stores (two stores in each of three different metropolitan areas) showed that, of 2,172 shoppers, 64 per cent made unplanned purchases. That quantitative estimate compares favourably with a 1995 study of 'in-store' decision making carried out by the Point-of-Purchase Advertising Institute (POPAI), the most recent of a series of studies carried out over many years, which indicated that 60 per cent of supermarket purchases and 53 per cent of mass merchandise store purchases were unplanned (POPAI, 1995). (The 1995 POPAI study interviewed over 4,200 shoppers in two markets each from seven geographic regions of the USA. Shoppers were screened for 'a major shopping trip' as they entered the store, interviewed and interviewed a second time upon exit.)

All unplanned buys are surely not instances of 'impulse buys' as defined in the current literature—buying episodes punctuated by sudden and irresistible 'impulses', 'psychological disequilibrium', reduced cognitive functioning and subsequent buyer regret. But the high levels of unplanned buying that exist in contemporary retail places cannot be explained solely as instances of routine or 'reminder' buying either. A conceptual elaboration is needed of the unplanned purchases category that differentiates between the 'sudden' and 'compelling' urges of 'impulse' buying, and the mundane 'reminder' unplanned purchases of needed items or 'sale' items. The remainder of this paper will sketch some ideas that begin to provide an alternative conception of unplanned buying. The discussion begins with consumer experiences and moves to a consideration of the evolution of retail places and the historical development of consumer society.

#### INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATIONS FOR UNPLANNED AND IMPULSE BUYING

Several years ago the author asked students from consumer behaviour

classes (day and evening) at an urban university to distribute questionnaires asking about impulse buying to friends, family and co-workers. He wanted to learn more about the range of consumer experiences with 'impulse buying'. Students were not required to participate and were asked not to complete the questionnaire themselves. Nearly 200 anonymous questionnaires were obtained over the course of several semesters. About half of the respondents were between the ages of 25 and 44, and three-fourths were women. This was obviously not a probability sample, but did include a segment of the population that was well acquainted with shopping and with impulse buying. (If the sample seems too small or unrepresentative to report even qualitative findings, it should be considered that Rook's (1987) study was based on a non-probability sample of 133 gathered from college classrooms and field settings.) The study was designed largely as qualitative and had the purpose of obtaining basic information about consumer experiences with impulse buying. The questionnaire included eight open-ended items where respondents were asked to describe their experiences with 'impulse buying'. The questionnaire preamble supplied a definition drawn from Rook (1987): 'An impulse purchase is when a consumer experiences a sudden and persistent urge to buy something immediately.' The final, open-ended question asked respondents for an overall judgment about their buying habits with respect to impulse buying:

*'Now I would like to ask you about your impulse buying in general. If you could change your shopping habits, would you increase or decrease your impulse buying (assume that your income and expenses would not change)? Please explain.'*

Based on previous impulse buying research, the author expected that most respondents would say they would like

to decrease their impulse buying. The 'increase' prompt was added as a logical possibility during construction of the questionnaire. The results were as expected, a large proportion of respondents (about half) did express a wish to decrease their impulse buying. Some representative responses are given below; common reasons given for wishing to decrease impulse buying were the purchase of unneeded items and overspending.

*'Decrease. I usually buy more than I need or use.'* (25–34 F)

*'Probably decrease. A large percentage of impulse purchases don't get used and collect dust.'* (35–44 M)

*'I would decrease. Reason—although many of the items purchased were not expensive, they were not necessary!'* (18–24 F)

*'I would decrease my impulse buying because it screws up my budget when I give into the urge.'* (35–44 F)

The desire to decrease impulse buying was by no means unanimous. A substantial portion of respondents (about a quarter) indicated that they would keep their level of impulse buying at the same level because it was not a problem and they saw no reason to change. But the surprising finding (for the author at least) was that many respondents indicated that if they could change their shopping habits they would *increase* their impulse buying. Nearly one-fifth of the sample indicated that they would increase their impulse buying in response to the hypothetical question (Wood, 1998b). (Although rough proportions are reported here, it is not being claimed that the figures represent the general population, or impulse buyers in general. Such claims cannot be made on the basis of a non-probability sample. Reporting the relative frequency of open-ended responses underscores and supports the author's theoretical and conceptual assertion that the 'increase' response is



not unique or rare, and should be conceptually provided for in a comprehensive theory of consumer 'unplanned' buying.)

*'I would increase my impulse buying because when you have impulse it makes shopping fun.'* (18–24 F)

*'Increase—well I rarely buy anything—so I would love to have a treat per week.'* (25–34 F)

*'I'd increase it on non-major purchases. I'd like to buy more things that catch my fancy, that I really like, and be a little less practical.'* (35–44 F)

*'I would like to be able to buy a little more freely. I tend to not buy impulsively and then I'm sorry.'* (55–64 F)

*'Generally, my shopping habits are very defined and planned (ie purchase of gifts and necessary items are known well in advance). It might be interesting and fun if one just felt free enough to walk into a store and just buy anything that was appealing.'* (35–44 M)

Not only were these (and other) respondents indicating that they would like to increase their impulse buying—some were even expressing regret that they typically *restrained* themselves. The important theme here was not that impulse buying was more 'fun', because even those who expressed regret for impulse buying said as much; rather, it was the theme that the fun of impulse buying was *linked to the freedom of having money to spend*, either for the self or for a gift for someone else. The open-ended question allowed some respondents to communicate an important and unexpected feature of 'impulse' and unplanned buying: the satisfaction, pleasure and 'fun' of unplanned buying in a context of available discretionary income. These respondents filled in a precondition for their desired, 'less practical' purchases carried out without prior planning: sufficient income over and above their normal expenses so that they could buy without budget excess.

This finding shifted the author's focus away from individual motivations

towards the economic and social context of the buyer. Attention was drawn towards an implicit connection between impulse buying and what appropriately can be called 'discretionary' income. The unexpected finding—that some people saw impulse buying as something they wished for as positive and enriching in their lives—pointed to a more macro level of analysis, to the socioeconomic context of impulse buying. This finding pointed to a relationship between discretionary income, unplanned and non-necessity buying.

### DISCRETIONARY INCOME, DISCRETIONARY EXPENDITURE AND CONSUMER SOCIETY

George Katona (1975) described the changed situation of the American economy and American consumers in the post-Second World War era as a 'consumer economy'. The foundation and immediate cause of the American mass consumption economy was a 'substantial increase in the average family's income together with a great change in the distribution of income' (1975: 20). Increased consumer income, coupled with the prolific production of automobiles and major household appliances, brought consumers to the fore as a major dynamic force in the economy. 'Millions of consumers have latitude in deciding whether to spend or to save, on what to spend and how to save' (1975: 19). Katona's argument was novel at the time, but is today widely accepted. Today, periodic national consumer surveys (another of Katona's innovations) gauge 'consumer sentiment' and are widely disseminated. These indices function as indicators of trends in consumer spending and, hence, in the larger economy as a whole (see Katona, 1957, 1959; Curtin, 1982). (Data from the University of Michigan's survey index of consumer sentiment have evidently achieved the status of 'insider' information. *The Wall Street Journal* reported (Hilsenrath and McCarthy, 2004) that the FBI was investigating the

unauthorised removal of data from the office (computer) of the survey's director prior to its officially scheduled release. There was speculation that leaked information about an imminent decline in consumer sentiment may have influenced bond markets(!.)

Katona's idea of 'discretionary' income proceeded from the idea of a relative increase or surplus. The core meaning of 'consumer discretion' was consumer control and consumer allocation of that income: nontrivial control of when, where and how much to spend. The exercise of consumer discretion meant in some sense that consumers had a scope of choice beyond compelled purchases, or those which were strictly necessary. The core of the new 'consumer society' was discretionary income possessed by the mass of 'middle' consumers, as opposed to the privileged few (Katona, 1975: 20).

What kinds of purchases were being made in the post-war consumer society? Katona referred mainly to the purchase of consumer 'durables', large ticket items such as automobiles, refrigerators and television sets. His concept of 'discretionary expenditures', however, included purchases of travel and items 'often connected' with recreation and luxury (1975: 29). Discretionary expenditures were characterised by three features: there was 'no compelling need to make these expenditures at a given time'; they were 'usually not governed by habit'; and typically they were not made on the 'spur of the moment' but after considerable family deliberation and planning. Importantly for the present discussion, Katona observed that 'relatively inexpensive items—a piece of occasional furniture or a table radio, for instance—are often bought without any extensive planning period' (Katona, 1975: 29–30, emphasis added).

Although Katona (1975) mainly elaborated the concept of consumer discretionary expenditures and discretionary income in the context of consumer durables, the core of his

argument surrounds what could be called the purchase of 'non-necessities'. The author uses the term 'non-necessity' deliberately to avoid the moral connotations inherent in 'luxury' and the associated 'discourse of luxury' (Hunt, 1996). Recognising that any distinction of necessity/non-necessity is dynamic and contingent upon historical time and place, social context (especially class and status) and individual preferences, the author is asserting that discretionary expenditure on a good or service for which there is 'no immediate compelling need' *can* take place on an 'unplanned' basis. Certainly, consumers often exercise planning and forethought for a new ('new and improved') electronic appliance—that was Katona's (1975) main point. But the category of discretionary expenditures must also include purchases for which there might be little forethought or planning. Consumers want excitement, as well as comfort (Scitovsky, 1992). The purchase of a good or service for motives of novelty, excitement, fashion, status, escape from routine, entertainment or other 'hedonic' motivations must count as one of the main and most important types of unplanned purchase. The author is simply resisting the placement of all such purchases under the exotic auspices of 'impulse buying'.

Two additional supportive observations should be made. First, the absence of prior planning, or compressed durational time of decision making, does not preclude consumer rational choice and buyer satisfaction in the marketplace. This was pointed out early on by Stern (1962), and repeated subsequently (Prasad, 1975). Secondly, there is no implication here that unplanned purchases of the type described need to be expensive relative to consumer income or typical shopping patterns. The qualitative study of consumers described above suggested that a large proportion of impulse (unplanned) purchases are for moderately priced clothing, costume

jewellery, cosmetics and recorded music items, or for services such as hairstyling which do not loom large relative to consumer income and spending habits. Consistent with this expectation is the fact that the Kelly *et al.* (2000) study of planned and unplanned purchases showed little difference between expenditures for planned versus unplanned items. The 2,172 shoppers participating in the study were divided into groups according to pre-purchase plans. A majority of shoppers (1,383, 64 per cent) bought both planned and unplanned items, while 398 (18 per cent) bought only planned items and 391 (18 per cent) made no purchases at all. Calculated according to whether a respondent planned to purchase regular priced items, sale items or both, mean expenditures for planned items ranged from a low of \$12.94 to a high of \$27.12. The corresponding mean expenditures for unplanned items ranged from a low of \$14.21 to a high of \$25.76. The overall average expenditure for planned items was \$16.31 and the overall average expenditure for unplanned items was \$17.29 (calculated from Kelly *et al.*, 2000: 254, Table 1).

The author suggests the, admittedly awkward, term 'discretionary unplanned buying' to differentiate this type of unplanned buying from 'impulse' buying. The addition of 'discretionary' to 'unplanned buying' serves to emphasise that this mode of consumer purchase is not compelled, non-rational or inevitably associated with consumer regret. A key difference here is that it is not being asserted that the kind of buying actions described are instances of compelled or 'akratic' action, ie action that is contrary to a buyer's better judgment. Use of 'discretionary' furthermore highlights the fact that consumers need to have income available to fund this kind of purchase. Indeed, there is reason to believe that many or even most of these unplanned purchases do not represent high expenditures relative to consumer

income. Finally, the use of 'unplanned' differentiates this kind of buying from Katona's (1975) focus on the purchase of durables made with forethought, especially high-priced goods relative to consumer income. 'Treats' bought by supermarket shoppers (Miller, 1998), a morning latte, expensive lunch or some other 'affordable luxury' (see Koehn, 2001: 238) share features of what has been termed 'discretionary unplanned buying' here. The author acknowledges the family resemblance but will not attempt a detailed parsing of these categories in this paper. Hausman (2000) has also considered the 'enigma' of impulse buying (ie its negative moral aura despite its apparent universality in the contemporary marketplace); her main findings run parallel with the argument in this paper, although she retained the impulse buying conceptual framework.

Although discretionary unplanned buying is so prevalent as to be arguably *characteristic* of modern shopping and retail environments, the author further suggests that purchases of this nature were important in the development of commercial society, and can be inferred from the historical record. Discretionary unplanned buying therefore can be argued to be part of the essential core of consumers and consumption in a commercial, market society—inclusive of the recent historical past as well as the more distant. To complement this discussion of consumers and consumer experiences, the paper now turns to consideration of the retail environments that provide indirect and inferential evidence for the importance of what has been described as discretionary unplanned buying here.

## CONSUMERS, UNPLANNED BUYING AND THE RETAIL ENVIRONMENT

### Peddlers

The 'pedlar', 'contreporteur' or 'buhonero' was a European itinerant seller who travelled from place to place



carrying goods in a pack with the help of a horse, perhaps a wagon, but often on his back (Braudel, 1992: 75–80). The ‘Yankee Peddler’ was an important figure for rural consumers in the USA and an object of considerable folklore and fascination (Lears, 1989). Peddlers had a problematic reputation as sellers, but they were a fixture of US rural life in the 18th and, especially, 19th centuries. Thousands roamed through rural areas at any one time (Johnson and Ray, 1961: 41–47; Hendrickson, 1979). In cities, language barriers provided opportunities for immigrant community peddlers well into the 20th century (Lears, 1994).

Peddlers sold a full gamut of goods and even expert services. They set out in force in the early spring, when ‘the peddler’s commodious cart, hung with dozens of articles, and as many more concealed in its ingenious compartments, clanked and rumbled throughout the land’ (Johnson and Ray, 1961: 45). Service peddlers included ‘tinkers, carpenters, preachers, dentists’ and portrait painters who ‘carried stock paintings, filling in their customer’s faces on assembly line canvases; women who sat for portraits could choose from various backgrounds and different-sized breasts’ (Hendrickson, 1979: 9). But the characteristic peddler offerings were goods. The range of goods brought to rural consumers by peddlers included the necessities of rural life—farm implements or a Franklin stove—but also comprised a generous assortment of items that added to the quality of rural life: ‘Pots and pans, axes, nails, thread, buttons, scissors, thimbles, and combs were among the fastest-selling items. The biggest profits were earned on such frivolities as bits of lace, ribbon and fancy cloths, mirrors, spices, tea, coffee, toilet water and nostrums. Fiddle strings and spectacles were other popular items’ (Scull and Fuller, 1967: 30). ‘Yankee notions’ was the named category for the assortment of needles, ribbons, buttons, razors, brooms, spices, books and other

small, inexpensive items offered by peddlers (Hower, 1943: 70).

Many of the items offered by peddlers to rural households certainly could be described as ‘non-necessity’ in some sense and hence the use of ‘frivolities’ to describe these items. But the addition to the quality of rural life made by these goods can be appreciated by the following passage, which fills in the lived consumer context of many rural households.

*‘By early March, after a winter of isolation, farm families were eagerly looking for the man with the packs on his back . . . His wares included items the family could not do without. Then, too, he was selling to people who understandably were eager to add the slightest luxuries to their meagre possessions. People possessing so little found it difficult to resist a jew’s-harp for the children, a stick of candy, a bit of gay ribbon or lace, or a pretty piece of chinaware to set on the bare mantel over the kitchen fireplace’* (Scull and Fuller, 1967: 31).

Peddlers provided needed distribution functions by bringing goods to rural areas and to immigrant language communities. But they did more than that, they provided opportunities for the (unplanned) purchase of non-necessity items that afforded wanted diversion and entertainment from the routine of everyday life. The range of items and prices carried by rural peddlers demonstrates that, well before the introduction of consumer goods via mass production and distribution, small, inexpensive but entertaining items were a valued part of the array of goods offered by retail merchants.

## RETAIL PLACES, SHOPPING AND UNPLANNED BUYING

Retail places have evolved towards bringing a wide assortment of attractively displayed goods closer to consumers and enhancing the attractiveness and amenities of the shopping environment. As noted previously, increasing the time that consumers spend in the retail space increases sales volume. The emergence

of the 'Bon Marche' and 'department stores' in the years between 1860 and 1880, featuring grand designs, vast counters, 'stunning' displays, fixed prices and a comprehensive array of goods, virtually created 'shopping' in the modern sense (Miller, 1981; Leach, 1993). The department store democratised both luxury and desire by creating a public space devoted not just to purchasing, but *consuming* in a comprehensive sense. 'Browsing', exploring and dreaming of potential ownership among sumptuous and abundant displays of goods became an experience open not just to an exclusive few but to the public as a whole (Lancaster, 1995: 17).

The retail innovations developed in department stores were echoed at a lower price point by 'five and dime' and 'variety' chain stores pioneered by F. W. Woolworth. From the opening of the first store in 1879, the Woolworth enterprise grew to 239 stores by 1909 (Satterthwaite, 2001). 'Woolworth's' was aimed from the start at offering prices so low that unplanned buying would become typical in the store. Boorstin (1973: 113) describes the basic principle upon which Woolworth's built a successful business that was later widely imitated: 'If an attractive item was offered at a low enough price, the customer would buy it if he needed it—but if the price was low enough and in convenient coin, perhaps the customer would buy it anyway on the spur of the moment, whether or not he 'needed' it.'

The urban department store with fixed prices and an environment that encouraged browsing, and the 'five and dime' store that kept prices so low as to be within the reach of practically everyone each contributed to the growth and development of 'shopping' as a social process that included what has been termed discretionary unplanned buying here. These retail places were eventually imitated by rural 'general' stores. 'By the 1890s many country store merchants had installed a 'five-and-ten-cent counter.' Imitating the

merchandising concept pioneered by F. W. Woolworth in 1879, country storekeepers began displaying a tempting assortment of items—crocheting needles, wash basins and dippers, thimbles, facial soap, baby bibs, watch keys, and harmonicas—that could be bought for the smallest units of change' (Schlereth, 1989: 352).

Peddlers, 'five and dime' stores and 'department stores' alike demonstrate the importance of bringing goods closer to consumers so that they can see, touch and experience them. Retailers have consistently recognised that consumers enjoy purchasing without prior planning. To conclude this consideration of discretionary unplanned buying in the decades prior to the emergence of a consumer society, this paper now turns to the emergence of commercial society itself.

#### **BEFORE THE CONSUMER SOCIETY: HISTORICAL EMERGENCE OF DISCRETIONARY CONSUMER BUYING**

The history of western commercial society is punctuated with the 18th-century growth and expansion of consumer income and the lowering of the prices of consumer goods that has been called the 'consumer revolution'. The consumer revolution meant that 'a greater proportion of the population than in any previous society in human history was able to enjoy the pleasures of buying consumer goods', goods that included 'not only necessities, but decencies, and even luxuries' (McKendrick *et al.*, 1982: 9; Porter, 1991; Brewer and Porter, 1993). What goods constituted 'decencies and even luxuries'? Berg (1999: 65) enumerated the list of goods that were helping to usher in new 'consumer' attitudes and behaviour in the population: 'To some extent they were exotic foods and drink, especially tea, chocolate and coffee. They were new textile fabrics, especially printed calicoes . . . They were also useful and decorative objects, light furnishings, ceramics and glass, metalwares, and

clocks and watches.' Berg (1999) noted that these items were not luxuries available only to the wealthy, but 'semi-luxuries' (1999: 69) that were being purchased by the 'middling' ranks of consumers. Berg (1999) furthermore argued for the influence of consumer demand as a dynamic factor in the continuing process of 18th-century economic development and industrialisation in a manner reminiscent of Katona (1975). The kinds of purchases and goods cited by economic historians as hallmarks of the consumer revolution are reflective of the kinds of expenditure characterised as discretionary unplanned purchases in this paper.

Contemporary historians are re-evaluating the economic historical record prior to the 18th century consumer revolution, and are finding a preceding century of economic quickening that also included (albeit for a smaller proportion of the population) a boom in consumer goods. Jardine (1996) argued for the importance of competitive acquisitiveness, consumer 'impulses' and commercial trade in the development of the Renaissance. Admittedly, many of the consumer goods circulating in this era properly could be termed 'luxury' items. But the central theme is one of the increasing scope of consumer choice and sophistication, the size of consumer demand, and the sheer variety and array of goods available. Brotton (2002: 38–39) noted that, although East-West trade had been taking place in the Mediterranean area for centuries, it increased in scale and scope following the end of the Crusades. Europe tended to export bulk goods such as timber, wool and semi-precious metals, but 'tended to import luxury and high-value goods, whose impact upon the culture and consumption of communities from Venice to London was gradual but profound. Every sphere of life was affected, from eating to painting.' While outside the scope of the present

discussion, it bears mention here that the received view of world economic development (inherited in large part from Marx and Weber and embodied in much sociological and historical research), beginning with the economic quickening of Europe, may be not only 'Eurocentric' but just plain wrong. Long before Europe emerged as a major economic centre there was arguably one world trading system centred in Asia (Frank, 1998).

Hale (1993) dramatised the expansion of European consumer goods in the Renaissance period by reporting on a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci from c.1510. da Vinci drew clouds raining *goods* instead of water: 'a layer of storm clouds that precipitated not hail or rain but a jingling downfall of consumer objects and the tools for making them: clocks and spectacles, wine barrels, musical instruments, lamps, pots and pans, together with hammers set-squares, and pincers' (Hale, 1993: 171). This 'rain of non-necessities from the commercial skies' also included silverware, ceramics and glass, tapestries and painted cloths, copper and steel kitchenware, along with an unprecedented demand for desks, tables, sideboards, sets of hanging shelves and cupboards all for display of new possessions; foodstuffs such as potatoes, olive oil, peppers, cookery books, tea, coffee, chocolate and tobacco; and, finally, services in the form of specialised craftsmen and artisans (Hale, 1993: 173, 266). The major purchasers of such items were the well-off. Nevertheless, 'there was more money in more hands to be spent on things shaped by mind and hand for the pleasure of a reasonably discriminating body of purchasers, things surplus to basic requirements: comforts, conveniences, luxuries and beguiling ostentations that enhanced the sense of the purchaser's well-being—physical, social, intellectual' (Hale, 1993: 261).

Hale thus offered not only an empirical listing but also a conceptual definition of

'non-necessity': status, fashion, taste, entertainment, convenience and comfort must all be considered as motives for the purchase of emerging consumer goods and services. The author hypothesises that a significant number of these buying actions are subsumable under the category of 'discretionary unplanned buys' as defined here.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the course of addressing an interesting disjunction surrounding consumer unplanned buying in contemporary retail environments, the author has tried to illuminate what he regards to be one of the core features of a commercial and market society: the discretionary purchase of goods and services by consumers without prior planning or explicit buying intentions. The author suggests that such purchases account for a significant portion of the excitement and the 'hedonic' satisfaction that consumers feel when making consumption purchases, both in the present day as well as in the past. Consumer action of this kind seems to be too important, and too general, to fit into existing conceptions of 'impulse buying'.

An additional goal of this analysis was to provide conceptual groundwork for a more empirically descriptive conception of 'consumer society'. Sociological statements about consumption and consumer society have tended to be normative critiques that do not grapple seriously with empirical consumer behaviour, or abstract statements that obliterate real world consumers, goods and services in a fog of recondite language and esoteric terminology. A more empirically adequate sociology of consumers and commercial society could begin with the central observation that people as consumers derive satisfaction from shopping and buying goods that is not artificial, counterfeit or morally suspect, but is instead an integral part of the material existence of their social life.

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