

In this three-part series, Mumbai-born consumer psychologist Vanessa Patrick draws on research and real life to point out what's tricking us into spending more and how simple it is to keep our wallets closed

PART II



I Want It Now!

Whether you buy on impulse or let one purchase trigger others, it helps to have time on your side

by Vanessa Patrick

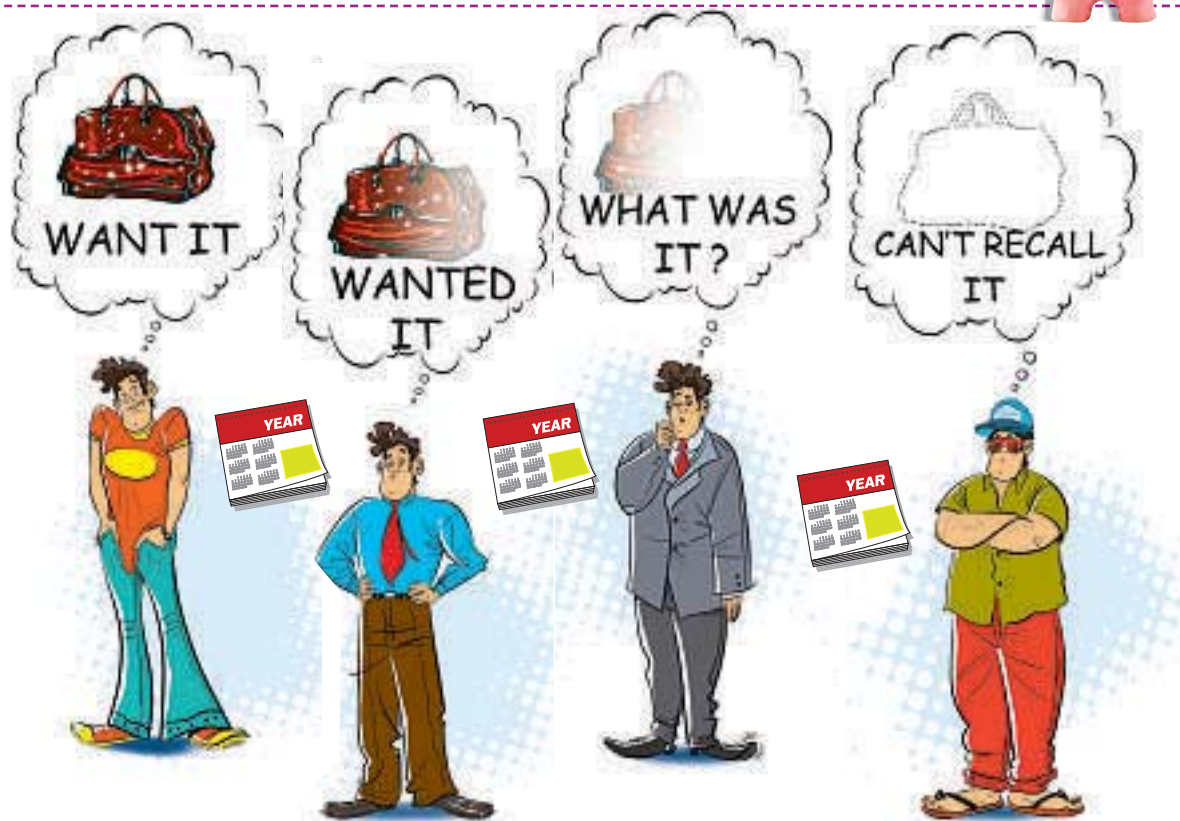
I GREW UP in a middle-class family in Mumbai. We were not poor, but we were not rich either. Growing up, we had a typical Indian spending mentality: buy only what you need. But today, as someone whose job is to understand what makes people buy and why, I often fall into the very traps I'd identified at work just weeks before. I swipe my money away for stuff that looked irresistible at the store, only to realise, hours later, that I was just blinded by the razzle-dazzle of retail.

We all know what an impulse purchase is (it's sitting shamefully at the back of our cupboard). It's a sign that we've given into temptation at the moment of peak desire. But here's something that's emerged in my research: we don't want the same things all the time. For me, this is certainly true. My excitement for the shoes I bought a month ago has now somewhat faded. That crush I had on the boy in short-pants in the 8th standard? It's thankfully now non-existent.

This suggests that desire can be cyclical; that it can peak at certain times and even naturally dissipate over time. So how can we avoid a short-lived retail romance?

NOT NOW, HONEY...

A few years ago, I chanced upon the magic idea of postponement. Like a lot of my research ideas, I recognise them by living them myself or by observing others. Long story short, I really wanted something, but every time the



CHEAT SHEET

Here are some ways to fight impulse buying and retail temptations

Plan your treats: We all love treats and respond with joy and surprise. But a planned indulgence, rather than one made on impulse, makes us happier and less guilty. So, instead of just going with your heart, use your head to make your heart happy.

Consider the big picture: Recent research shows that an abstract mindset (one which is future-oriented and sees things in perspective) helps make better spending choices. While shopping, be aware of the 'innocent' things that might derail you, and consider the longer term. Basically, ask yourself, "Will I love this tomorrow?"

Use specific postponement: One of the key insights from the postponement research is that for it to work, the postponement must be non-specific. Don't say, "I'll have that cake tomorrow or after dinner." Simply say, "I can have the cake later." It is important that you don't promise yourself the treat at a specific time or else when that time comes, your desire will be reactivated and you are more likely to give in to your initial temptation.

desire for it peaked, I just told myself "some other time". The desire faded naturally over time, and I never gave into that temptation.

My friend and colleague Nicole Mead and I are working on a fascinating project (currently under review at a top journal) in which we study how postponement helps manage temptation. Most people either give into it (indulging) or give it up (depriving). We suggest postponing. Simply say to yourself, "I can have this later". You'll distance yourself from the temptation and the desire for the item will actually decrease over time.

FITTING RIGHT IN

One of my favourite pieces of research is inspired by the experience of the French Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot. In his essay *Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown*, Diderot talks about being presented with an elegant new dressing gown. Upon first wearing it, it became apparent that the threadbare old furnishings of his study didn't quite live up to the splendour of his new garment, so he immediately replaced them. He found himself changing the tapestries, chairs, desks, bookshelves, and even a clock so his house could

match up in stylishness. On reflection, Diderot recognised that a single innocent item, the "scarlet robe that forced everything else to conform with its own elegant tone" had led him to purchase a whole stream of new items, leaving him both financially depleted, uncomfortable and unhappy.

In a paper, I published with Henrik Hagtvad at Boston College, we looked into the psychology behind the Diderot effect. We found that some products act like triggers, setting off a stream of almost uncontrollable consumption. I know this well. I once bought some pink sneakers, and before I knew it, my wardrobe was half pink!

Some of our current research shows that it is not just pretty things or specific colours that trigger off a chain of consumption. Sometimes it is a particular brand. Nike shoes, bring on a need for coordinating Nike shorts, wristband and sunglasses. Sometimes it is just a new look. A lady in our research study identified a new haircut as the trigger that led her to buy new sunglasses, sporty clothes, shoes and even led her to sign up for tennis lessons.

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