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Author(s): Zahy Ramadan, Maya F. Farah, Rana Bou Saada

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Fooled in the relationship: how Amazon Prime members' sense of self-control counter-intuitively reinforces impulsive buying behavior

Dr. Zahy Ramadan*

Associate Professor, Adnan Kassar School of Business, Lebanese American University
P.O. Box 13-5053, Chouran Beirut, 1102 2801, Lebanon.
Email Address: zahy.ramadan@lau.edu.lb

Dr. Zahy Ramadan is an Associate Professor of Marketing in the school of Business at the Lebanese American University. He holds a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) from the University of Manchester, Manchester Business School. His research is focused on the Omni-channel consumer journey, social media saturation, online brand-consumer relationships, retailing, and shopper marketing. Dr. Ramadan is also a Chartered Marketer (Chartered Institute of Marketing) with 18 years of work experience covering the Near-East, Arabian Peninsula, and Asia-Pacific markets across several industries, namely FMCG, Luxury Goods and Consumer Electronics.

Dr. Maya F. Farah

Associate Professor and Chairperson of Marketing Department, Adnan Kassar School of Business, Lebanese American University

Dr. Maya Farah is an Associate Professor of Marketing at the Lebanese American University (LAU). She is the chair of the Marketing Department at LAU. Maya has several years of undergraduate, graduate and executive teaching experience at several AACSB accredited universities, including the American University of Beirut (Lebanon) and the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce in Toulouse (France). Through the application of socio-cognitive theories, she enjoys an expanding research experience in the field of consumer behavior

Ms. Rana Bou Saada

Graduate Research Assistant, Adnan Kassar School of Business, Lebanese American University

Ms. Rana Bou Saada is a Business Graduate student and a Research Assistant at the Lebanese American University. She has completed her Bachelor's Degree in Communication Arts with a minor in economics and has received the Valedictorian Award upon graduation. She also has several years of experience in the field of marketing and digital media.

** Corresponding author*

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Fooled in the relationship: how Amazon Prime members' sense of self-control counter-intuitively reinforces impulsive buying behavior

ABSTRACT

Amazon, the leader in the e-retailing sector, has revolutionized online shopping through its vast areas of customer solutions, particularly with its Amazon Prime membership. Nonetheless, shoppers' behavior and attitudes in similar programs are yet to be researched. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the effect of self-control on trust, affective attachment and impulse buying in online membership programs. Herein, researchers integrate retailers-consumers' relational variables alongside shoppers' behavioral dimensions, to understand the long-term relationship members have with Amazon Prime. A quantitative approach was adopted for this purpose, based on data collected over a period of two months from 630 respondents surveyed across the United States of America. Findings show that while self-control first delimits impulsive shopping, it also reinforces shoppers' cognitive and affective ties with Amazon Prime, counter-intuitively increasing their impulsive buys. This study is thus the first to demonstrate that retailers' membership programs such as Amazon Prime may come at the expense of consumers. This is due to the fact that such programs appear to reinforce impulsive behavior, while giving a false-sense of self-control to the shopper.

***Keywords:** Impulsiveness, self-control, trust, e-commerce, retailer-consumer, Amazon*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2014, e-commerce has been rapidly expanding around the world (Angelovska, 2019). In 2019, e-retail sales reached \$3.53 trillion worldwide and revenues are expected to increase to \$6.54 trillion in 2022 (Statista, 2020a). Various factors facilitate this expansion, including easy access to in-home internet connection and search engine optimization techniques. For instance, the number of American households with an internet subscription more than doubled from 42% in 2000 to 87% in 2019 (Statista, 2021). Consequently, E-commerce is nowadays perceived as a continuum of consumers, sellers, products and web technology, which has transformed consumers' shopping experience and their usage of available channels (Lin *et al.* 2019).

The most evident example of an e-retailer revolutionizing technology is Amazon, the market leader and world's largest e-retailer by online revenue (Angelovska, 2019). It has in fact been renowned for its continuous adoption of inventive technology (Farah and Ramadan 2017) and its history of decision making to strategically share this knowhow. Among the various technologies it has put forth, Amazon Prime is of particular interest. This subscription-based program offers unlimited, speedy and free shipping on over 100 million items for around 150 million members worldwide, access to unlimited streaming of movies, TV episodes, songs, e-books, games, etc. among other benefits and rewards (Statista 2020b).

Indeed, the consumer purchase journey has been reshaped in the common public mindset, due to the new innovative technological motives that have led to the digitalization of the retailing world (Farah *et al.* 2019). In order to deal with technological advancements in a highly competitive market, companies such as Amazon are offering easy services and instant access to the desired products (Farah and Ramadan 2017). Those innovations are playing a significant role in strengthening the relationships between customers and retailers alongside an increasing migration to e-commerce (Ramadan *et al.* 2019a). This migration is appealing to consumers, due to the flexibility of delivery and the convenience it provides (Ramadan *et al.* 2019b). Indeed, consumers are able to access a "store" 24/7 through e-commerce, and compare price information to get the most out of their shopping experience, which encourages repeated purchases (Fang *et al.* 2014; Dabbous and Tarhini, 2019; Farah *et al.* 2020). In fact, an increasing number of studies are tackling the multi-faceted concept of e-commerce and its effects on online impulsive shopping behavior (Pappas 2016). Particularly, self-control is a crucial notion for researchers interested in this field, as the lack of the latter might lead to impulsive buying (Baumeister 2002). Furthermore, in a typical

retailer-consumer relationship, trust and affective attachments are considered as critical factors that govern such relationships. Scholars have also been interested in the dynamics of online retail memberships, such as revenues and post-purchase dissonance (Balakrishnan et al. 2020). Nonetheless, they have not yet examined the specific effects of consumers' self-control in such an environment.

Former studies have fairly tackled concepts of self-control, affective attachment, and online memberships. Nevertheless, they were performed sporadically and separately, overlooking the conflicting yet simultaneous outcomes of self-control in online membership programs. The extant literature still lacks a thorough model, integrating cognitive and affective relational variables between retailers and consumers alongside specific shoppers' behavioral dimensions, such as self-control and impulsiveness.

Accordingly, the objective of this paper is to fill this gap by presenting to researchers and practitioners alike a better appreciation of online consumer behavior in the context of a retailer's membership program, hereby Amazon Prime. For that purpose, this study aims to understand the endgame of cognitive self-control when emotional dimensions -such as affective- attachment are considered. Thus, this research reconciles the diverging and multi-layered effects of self-control on emotionally-attached and trusting online shoppers. This allows to measure the effect of self-regulation on impulsiveness in a retailer-driven membership program.

2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Today's technologies have reshaped consumers' interactions with both retailers and manufacturers (Burke 2002). Within this context, e-commerce is today being considered as the most interesting example of information technology revolutionizing retail operations (Lin *et al.* 2019). While this growing industry is characterized by key limitations such as shipping costs and inability to try the product, it has also offered consumers various additional benefits. In fact, online retailers have developed different business models, such as virtual merchants, bricks-and-clicks, and virtual malls to meet consumers' expectations (Grewal *et al.* 2004). The latter have also tried to build a more effective institutional infrastructure and a safer online commerce environment (Fang *et al.* 2014). Furthermore, e-commerce technology has redefined online brand community engagement, allowing enhanced consumer-brand interactions (Dessart *et al.* 2015). Accordingly, e-commerce is evolving into an inclusive social commerce phenomenon, which adopts Web 2.0 capabilities,

enriches consumer participation, and boosts economic value (Huang and Benyoucef 2013). Therefore, it is not technology in itself, but rather its application that is creating customer value (Burke 2002).

Amazon has been following this rationale since its launch in 1995 as an online bookstore. Indeed, Amazon serves customers today by paying special attention to convenience and seeking to be the world's most customer-centric company (Farah and Ramadan 2017). In order to optimize its customer-centricity and drive up its growth and profitability, a firm should take into account three main components: client acquisition, retention and development (Ascarza, Fader and Hardie, 2017).

Along these lines, Amazon has been considerably developing on all levels, with net sales of just over 280 billion dollars in 2019 (Statista 2020c). This growth has been partly the result of consumers' reviews, which helped build trust in Amazon's platform and eventually facilitated online purchasing. Furthermore, Amazon has been recognized to exceed consumers' expectations in relation to affordable and timely delivery by offering its Prime members free daily shipping (Ramadan *et al.* 2019b). Accordingly, Prime membership has been gaining growing popularity with members increasing from 65 million in 2016 (Marketplace Pulse Research 2019) to 150 million in the last quarter of 2019 (Statista 20202).

Technological touch-points such as Amazon's services have thus disrupted the conventional consumers' journey, reshaping it into a fluid, omni-channel one. Consumers too are empowered to transition from mere recipients to active co-creators of value (Farah and Ramadan 2017; Itani et al., 2019). However, it remains unclear how consumers' self-control in online membership programs simultaneously influences their judgment and impulsive buys, especially when shoppers exhibit trust and affective attachment towards the e-retailer.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The effects of consumer spending self-control on retailer's trust

The effects of self-control on decision-making and social behavior have been explored by various researchers (Youn and Faber 2000). This is almost evident due to the very definition of self-control, which is the ability of the self to modify its thoughts, change its emotions and adjust its impulses (Baumeister 2002). Self-control can thus be referred to as self-regulation (Baumeister 2002), as the latter similarly encompasses the three following capacities: establishing standards, monitoring

behavior and moving towards the desired outcome (Vohs and Faber 2007). In particular, consumer spending self-control represents the capacity to impose standards on one's self, and accordingly, control one's feelings, thoughts and decisions related to spending (Haws *et al.* 2012). When consumers display low levels of self-control, they will minimize their deliberate thoughts, searching for instant gratification (Roberts and Manolis 2012) and failing to properly evaluate their behavior's consequences (Karande and Merchant 2012).

While impulsive shoppers may experience post-purchase regret and reduce their future interaction with tech-driven retailers (Farah and Ramadan 2020), those with a higher self-control will make decisions based on a deliberate and rational thought-process (Roberts and Manolis 2012). Herein, the trust variable can be added to the interaction of self-control, decision environment and available cognitive resources. In fact, "self-control affects trust indirectly by influencing the level of effort in decision making," (Evans *et al.*, 2011, p.697).

The type of trust discussed in this regard is specifically the reflective one - which depends on conscious considerations and rational beliefs about the trustee – rather than the impulsive type - characterized by its automatic attitude and affective nature (Murray *et al.* 2011). From a consumer's exhaustive perspective, trust embodies the willingness to rely on the capacity of a brand to execute its promised purpose (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). When consumers trust a seller, they believe that the latter will ethically fulfill their obligations without taking advantage of the buyer's vulnerable dependence (Gefen *et al.* 2003). Trust has been a necessary condition to maintain retailers' success on the long term (Brun *et al.* 2014) and has been explored in different business environments (Viktoria Rampl *et al.* 2012). It has gained particular attention in the online realm, where the seller and buyer are not physically present: online retailers are thus relying on various technological innovations to reinforce consumers' trust in them (Mukherjee and Nath 2007).

Aside from technological solutions, trust can also be strengthened through self-control, since customers with high self-control, are perceived as trustworthy (Righetti and Finkenauer 2011). Furthermore, researchers are interested in the effect of customers' self-control on their trust for other parties namely retailers. In this regard, self-control enhances behavioral trust in economic decision-making, while its scarcity lowers trust in the other entity. This role is pronounced in anonymous contexts, due to the absence of other cues that help decrease social risks (Ainsworth *et al.* 2014). Drawing upon the above discussion, we hypothesize:

H₁. Consumer spending self-control has a positive effect on retailer's trust.

3.2 The effects of consumer spending self-control on retailer's affective attachment

A subjective experience of control has long been associated with overall wellbeing. Langer and Rodin (1976), for example, have proposed that a personal perception of control positively affects long-term health, happiness and satisfaction. Consequently, when consumers experience heightened control, they will be further empowered and satisfied with the outcome they choose. Retailers can thus employ various elements to increase consumers' sense of control, such as information about customers and insights about shopping progress (Wathieu *et al.* 2002).

Similar factors do not only satisfy consumers' needs but also offer them various benefits and values, inducing consumer love (Kim *et al.* 2008; Mrad and Cui, 2020). In fact, perceived service value has a significant effect on consumers' affective attachment and love (Zhou *et al.* 2015), especially for online retailers such as Amazon (Farah and Ramadan 2017). In this regard, scholars remain dubious concerning brand love (Mouncey, 2019): while some of them assure that it causes higher shareholder value and overall profitability (Barker *et al.*, 2015), others refute this claim (Romaniuk, 2013).

Nevertheless, affective emotions are still of particular importance to online retailers, as they primarily indicate long-term consumer retention (Verma *et al.* 2016). In this sense, brand attachment reflects the strength of the link that bonds the consumer with the brand (Hung and Lu 2018). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001, p. 82) describe brand affect as "a brand's potential to elicit a positive emotional response from the average consumer as a result of its use." Emotional attachment to a brand can thus be conceptualized as the link connecting the consumer with the brand in question, and invoking in them feelings of affection, connection, and passion (Malär *et al.* 2011).

Numerous elements can antecede emotional brand attachment such as advanced marketing characteristics, socialization, intergenerational effect and nostalgic ties (Grisaffe and Nguyen 2011). However, strong brand attachment can also occur in relation to the consumer self, when brands support individuals to achieve self-oriented objectives or reinforce their self-concept (Escalas 2004). Along the same lines, consumers are most likely to love brands, which enable, gratify and enrich their selves, creating a perception of a capable and efficient self (Park *et al.* 2006;

Mrad et al., 2020). Conversely, when users feel taken for granted by a brand they previously loved, they are likely to churn away from it (Bullmore, 2006).

To the researchers' best knowledge, tests about the direct effect of self-control on brand affective attachment have been mostly neglected. However, studies have identified a link between a weakened self-control and negative emotions. As self-control is described as "the self's capacity to alter its own states and responses" (Baumeister 2002, p. 670), the lack of it drives consumers to complete purchases whose value does not offset its cost, and thus provoke a feeling of regret (Farah and Ramadan 2020). Moreover, consumers' autonomous motivations can reinforce their perception of choice, self-governance, and ultimately positive brand attachment (Hung and Lu 2018). Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H₂. Consumer spending self-control has a positive effect on retailer's affective attachment.

3.3 The effects of consumer spending self-control on consumer impulsiveness in purchasing

Impulsive purchases are quite common, reaching up to 80% of total purchases for some products and resulting in buying unplanned items (Kacen and Lee 2002). It can thus be inferred that customer behavior is sometimes the mere outcome of impulsiveness, instead of rational reasoning (Strack *et al.* 2006). Indeed, an analysis of in-store decision making reveals that most shoppers display minimal reflection when purchasing usual and basic products. They would rather take rapid and simple decisions to reduce cognitive effort and shopping time, while ensuring a satisfactory outcome (Hoyer, 1984).

Similarly, online shoppers – even those who are not used to e-commerce - prefer to invest minimal time and effort when purchasing groceries, with half of them spending less than 10 seconds for buying a product. With behavioral patterns comparable to those observed in traditional retail stores, most online buyers select their purchases from the first product page displayed online (Anesbury et al., 2016).

This fast and instant decision-making relates to impulsiveness, defined by Rook (1987), as a strong, insistent and sudden urge for instant purchasing. An impulsive buyer thus behaves spontaneously, with no previous buying intentions (also see Beatty and Ferrell 1998; Kacen and Lee 2002). Their behavior represents an unplanned purchase, characterized on one hand by fast decision-making and on the other, by personal bias for instant possession (Japutra *et al.* 2019).

The definition of impulsiveness strongly contrasts with that of self-control, as the latter is characterized by “the choice of a larger, more delayed reinforcer over a smaller, less delayed reinforce”, while impulsiveness is the exact opposite (Forzano *et al.* 2014, p.719). The opposition between desire and willpower is in fact essential to the concept of self-control (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991), since the latter serves to obstruct instant preferences in favor of long-term ones (Wertebroch 1998). Impulsiveness and self-control play an important role in predicting consumer behavior in both traditional and online retail environments: consumers lacking self-control are observed to have high impulsiveness and eventually to perform impulsive purchases (Beatty and Ferrell 1998).

Various factors may determine consumers’ impulsive behavior, ranging from constant personality traits – different people have different impulsiveness intensities (Mohan *et al.* 2013; Beatty and Ferrell 1998) - to cultural values – Western individualism focuses for example on personal desires and thus enhances impulsiveness (Kacen and Lee 2002). However, other studies confirm that impulsiveness levels change according to the context, and are affected by elements such as immediate gratification, online reviews (Zhang *et al.* 2018), most importantly self-control. In this regard, Vohs and Faber (2007) assert that a momentary decrease in self-control would boost impulsive buys. Particular unplanned purchases have been noticed to take place when shoppers feel they are out of control (Thomps 1990), while common impulsive buying could be triggered by a generalized absence of control (Youn and Faber 2000). This is warranted by the observation that individuals with high self-control have a deliberate thought process, while those who lack self-control act rather spontaneously (Roberts and Manolis 2012).

As a matter of fact, several scholars believe that a reduction of self-control causes impulsive buying (Dholakia *et al.* 2006). Baumeister (2002) proposes that self-control is based upon the ability to resist impulsive temptations, and that impulsive buying is likely to increase when self-control is lessened. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H₃. Consumer spending self-control has a negative effect on consumer impulsiveness in purchasing.

3.4 The effects of retailer’s trust on retailer’s affective attachment

As previously discussed, online consumer behavior can be seen in the light of e-channel consumer trust (Pappas 2016). Trust is further valued by online retailers, as consumers assign a higher level

of risk to the absence of a physical store and a tangible product examination (Li *et al.* 2014). As consumers' perception of trust affects their ultimate buying decision (Gupta *et al.* 2009), trust remains a necessary condition for consumers' purchases and retailers' success. With more trust, perceived risk diminishes, and encourages customers to proceed with their purchasing activities (Vlachos *et al.* 2010). Consequently, different business environments have striven to sustain an acceptable amount of consumer trust (Viktoria Rampf *et al.* 2012). It is in fact by building consumer trust that the retailer can improve their competitive advantage and secure their long-term success (Vos *et al.* 2014). Online commerce is thus highly dependent on trust, as an e-retailer that does not found their relationship with customers on trust will fail (Beatty *et al.* 2011).

Along these lines, Santos and Fernandes (2008) argue that trust is crucial to create customer loyalty, by ensuring to the buyers that they will always gain from future transactions. In addition to loyalty, consumers who trust their retailer might have more confidence in trying new goods provided by this retailer (Vlachos *et al.* 2010). They will also be more likely to adopt technological solutions developed by the retailer (Ramadan *et al.* 2019a). In a similar favorable environment, a solid relationship will be founded between companies and consumers (Santos and Fernandes 2008). In fact, trust develops long-lasting, strong and affectionate bonds between the consumer and the retailer (Pappas 2016). Following several positive experiences and opinions, consumers will develop the so-called retailer love, which encompasses intimacy and passion (Albert *et al.* 2008).

The nature of brand love is still largely debated. Junaid *et al.* (2019) argue against operationalizing brand love as an emotion, rather considering it a relationship in the marketing context. Indeed, this so-called love can create an affective attachment towards the retailer and a positive relationship between the two in the long-run (Thakur and Kaur 2015). It is this emotional attachment – in addition to the previously mentioned trust - that will encourage consumers to accept technological tools advanced by the retailer. As such, both trust and love appear to be important factors in determining the success of online retailers in general and Amazon's services in particular (Ramadan *et al.* 2019a).

Different factors can reinforce consumers' affective attachment towards brands, among which strategic thinking, listening and communication skills (Cross 2000), in addition to a consumer's identification with the brand in question (Allen and Meyer 1990). In this regard, Vlachos *et al.* (2010) have specified that emotional attachment is positively influenced by both trust towards the company and trust towards its employees. In reality, consumers' trust is a crucial

antecedent of sustainability and emotional attachment, as trust reflects future assessment of future performance (Park *et al.* 2006). Moreover, while trust reduces consumers' perceived risk, emotional attachment also serves to enhance emotional security (Thomson 2006). Hence, we propose:

H4. Retailer's trust has a positive effect on retailer's affective attachment

3.5 The effects of retailer's affective attachment on consumer impulsiveness in purchasing

The customer-firm affection (Yim *et al.*, 2008), also referred to as consumer's love (Albert *et al.*, 2008; Cui *et al.*, 2018), has in its turn numerous implications on consumers' perceptions and behavior. In accordance with the brand prominence concept, a consumer attached to a brand recognizes as top-of-mind positive feelings and memories related to that brand. Brand attachment, through brand prominence, thus influences decision-making and eventually, consumer purchasing (Park *et al.* 2010).

Among various unfavorable and favorable behaviors induced by brand attachment (Japutra *et al.* 2019), researchers have identified the will to invest personal resources in that brand (Park *et al.* 2010), as well as resistance in switching brands and positive word of mouth (Brocato *et al.* 2015). Word of mouth is similarly frequent across different services, be it repertoire or subscription based ones (East, 2007). While shaped by different antecedents, it remains substantially based on customers' satisfaction rates: dissatisfaction and satisfaction, thus equally generate negative and positive word of mouth respectively (East *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, East, Romaniuk, Chawdhary, and Uncles (2017) advance that positive word of mouth has more effect, while negative word of mouth has less impact, when the feedback relates to a currently used brand. In addition to positive word of mouth, when consumers feel comfortable dealing with a certain retailer, they would express a higher affective attachment towards it and a lower probability in shifting to its competitors (Thorbjørnsen *et al.* 2002).

Scholars have also examined consumers' affective attachment in particular contexts, such as luxury brands and online retailers. For example, Kaufmann *et al.* (2016) have uncovered a consistent positive effect of brand attachment on buying original products. Roy, Lassar and Butaney (2014) from their side have confirmed that customers experience a large affective attachment towards online retailers, expressing their brand devotion through various ways. For instance, they could participate in chat rooms, share blog posts or articles, and thus amplify the

efficiency of electronic word of mouth (Blazevic *et al.* 2013). Consequently, affective attachment strengthens the emotional connection between the consumer and the retailer (Farah and Ramadan 2017), building a lasting bond and even an emotional union between the two of them (Thorbjørnsen *et al.* 2002). Furthermore, the more emotionally attached a consumer is, the more likely he/she is to buy again from the same supplier (Yim *et al.* 2008). In summary, the behavior, cognition and emotion of the consumer are all influenced by their attachment towards a brand. The more brand attachment they display, the higher their paying willingness, buying intentions and impulsiveness towards extensions (Fedorikhin *et al.* 2008).

Impulsive purchases are characterized by their unplanned nature, stimulus exposure and on-spot decisions involving an emotional or reflective response to that stimulus (Jeffrey and Hodge 2007). In fact, while consumer decisions have been thought to utilize cognitive attributes (Jeng and Fesenmaier 2002), some scholars note that affective processes are also important in decision-making (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). This is especially the case with impulsive purchases, as these are often accompanied by arousal and affective feelings (Strack and Deutsch 2006). Impulsive buyers are actually unreflective in their thought process and are rather emotionally attached to the product (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991). As both brand attachment positively affects both impulsive and obsessive-compulsive purchasing (Japutra *et al.* 2019), this study hypothesizes:

H₅. Retailer's affective attachment has a positive effect on consumer impulsiveness

Based on the above discussion of the extent literature and the discussed hypotheses, figure 1 depicts the proposed conceptual model.

INSERT HERE: Figure 1. Conceptual model

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Participants, design, and procedure

A quantitative approach was adopted for the study whereby a web-based survey targeting Amazon Prime members in the US was devised. Qualtrics, a global research agency was tasked with the data collection. The selection criteria for the recruitment of participants was based on surveying current Amazon Prime members with at least 3 months of active membership. No other pre-selection criteria were set with regards to demographic variables in order to ensure data representativeness.

Validity tests were conducted on two separate fronts: face validity and discriminant validity. For the face validity tests, eight respondents were asked to comment on whether they found the survey too lengthy, and to provide their feedback on whether the questions were clear. Furthermore, they had to evaluate the overall flow and structure of the survey instrument. As for discriminant validity, it was tested via both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. In total 630 respondents from the United States of America completed the survey during the month of March 2019. All responses were used as all surveys came to be 100% complete based on the research agency's (Qualtrics) proper screening and participant targeting. Furthermore, a thorough testing of the survey was performed in the pilot stage to refine the research instrument, and hence ensure a high response rate. SPSS 24 and LISREL 8.8 were utilized for data analysis.

This research aimed to integrate cognitive and affective relational variables between retailers and consumers alongside behavioral dimensions such as the self-control and impulsiveness of shoppers in the context of the Amazon Prime membership program. Validated multi-item scales were adopted from the related literature. All the scales measured items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The cognitive and affective relational variables between retailers and consumers were measured through scales related to two constructs, namely retailer's trust and retailer's affective attachment. Trust was measured through the scale developed by Lacey (2007) and Morgan and Hunt (1994), whereby 3 items were retained to measure retailer trust in terms of integrity, honesty and trustworthiness. As for affective attachment, three items were applied from Thorbjørnsen et al. (2002) to evaluate shoppers' level of retailer's love by assessing the attraction of, devotion to and exclusiveness of the latter (Farah and Ramadan 2017).

In relation to the behavioral-related constructs, consumers' spending self-control and impulsiveness were measured using the validated scales respectively by Haws *et al.* (2012) and Rook and Fisher (1995). While the spending self-control construct was measured using 8 items,

consumer buying impulsiveness was assessed using three items. Demographic questions were included in the survey by sample profiling. Table 1 summarizes the demographic profiling of the respondents.

INSERT HERE: Table 1. Participants' Demographics

4.2 Analysis and constructs validation

The general statistics resulting from the analysis of the collected data, namely the mean, standard deviation, Cronbach's α for reliability, AVE, and the factor loadings of the items related to the various constructs are listed in Table 2. The internal consistency of the various constructs reflected an acceptable Cronbach alpha value based on Nunnally (1978) recommended threshold.

Discriminant validity was assessed through exploratory factor analysis, whereby all measured items loaded properly with no cross loading (see Table 2). The AVE method (Bagozzi 1981) was also used to test discriminant validity providing further evidence of such validity. Furthermore, the common method bias test was applied using Harman's single factor test. As the first factor accounted for 39% of total variance, which is less than the needed threshold of 50% (Podsakoff and Organ 1986). This provided evidence that no single factor accounted for the majority of the variance with all un-rotated variables loading on different factors.

Validity checks were performed through confirmatory factor analysis on LISREL 8.8 (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1993). The resulting indices were chi-square (χ^2) = 382.8 (113 degrees of freedom (d.f.)) and $P=0.000$. The model also had good fit indices: $NFI=0.978$, $IFI = 0.985$, $CFI=0.984$, $GFI= 0.937$, and $RMSEA=0.0592$.

INSERT HERE: Table 2. General Statistics and Exploratory Factor Analysis

5. RESULTS

5.1 General statistics

The mean of all the items used to assess the various constructs of this study ranged between 4.32 and 6.20. In particular, the mean of the retailer's trust construct, measured through the three items "is very honest and truthful", "has high integrity", "can be trusted completely", ranged between 6.14-6.20, whereas its standard deviation ranged between 1.00-1.06. In relation to the mean of the

consumer self-control construct, assessed through the following items “*I closely monitor my spending behavior*”, “*I carefully consider my needs before making purchases*”, “*having objectives related to spending is important to me*”, “*in social situations, I am generally aware of what I am spending*”, “*when I go out with friends*”, “*I keep track of what I am spending*”, “*when I count back my spent money*”, “*I know exactly when I spent it*”, “*I am able to resist temptation in order to achieve my budget goals*”, ranged between 5.50-6.01, while the standard deviation ranged between 1.13-1.33. As for the impulsiveness construct, measured through the subsequent three items “*I often buy things spontaneously*”, “*‘Just do it’ describes the way I buy things*”, “*I often buy things without thinking*”, the mean ranged between 4.32-5.17, while the standard deviation ranged between 1.74-2.06. Last but not least, the mean of the retailer’s love construct, measured by “*I feel my relationship with Amazon is exclusive and special*”, “*I have feelings for Amazon that I don’t have for many other retailers*”, “*I feel that Amazon and I were really ‘meant for each other’*” ranged between 5.71-5.85, while the standard deviation ranged between 1.26-1.40.

5.2 Model estimation and research findings

The model estimation through LISREL 8.8 showed that all the linkages proposed are significant. The estimation of the model shows a good fit with $X^2=382.8$ (114), $P\text{-Value}=0.00$, $NFI=0.978$, $IFI=0.985$, $CFI= 0.985$, $RMSEA=0.0588$, $GFI = 0.937$ (see figure 2).

INSERT HERE: Figure 2. Model estimation

As hypothesized, while consumer self-control has a direct positive influence on retailer’s trust ($H_1: \beta = .536, p < .001$) and retailer’s affective attachment ($H_2: \beta = .167, p < .001$), it has a negative effect on impulsiveness ($H_3: \beta = -.123, p < .001$). Retailer’s trust has a positive effect on retailer’s affective attachment ($H_4: \beta = .448, p < .001$), and the latter has a positive effect on impulsiveness ($H_5: \beta = .445, p < .001$). The indirect positive effect of retailer’s trust on impulsiveness was also measured showing a significant impact ($\beta = .199, p < .001$).

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Summary

The evidence from this study suggests that while self-control seemingly obstructs impulsive shopping, it also strengthens customers' cognitive and affective relation with an e-retailer's membership program (such as Amazon Prime). This counter-intuitively reinforces shoppers' impulsive buying behavior whether directly through the emotional connection, or indirectly through cognitive factors such as trust. Indeed, the findings underline the importance of such retailers' driven programs in terms of strengthening the bonding between shoppers and the retailer, while concurrently increasing their impulsive shopping behavior. While such business models have direct positive effects on both the top and the bottom line for the e-retailer employing them, this study underscores the fact such a relationship model may come at the expense of the shopper.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

From a scholarly standpoint, this paper closes a gap in the literature relating to the integration of cognitive and affective relational variables between retailers and consumers, as well as shoppers' behavioral dimensions, hereby self-control and impulsiveness. The need for similar research has risen from the market changes themselves: an expanding e-retail world and a reshaped consumer journey (Farah *et al.* 2019) driven by the fast development and market penetration of countless digital channels.

As such, within the context of retailers' membership driven programs, in particular Amazon Prime, this study advances the understanding of the underlying online shopper behavior. Several previous studies have tackled consumers' perception, trust and online customer behavior (Pappas 2016). However, despite the well-established notion that self-control limits impulsive shopping (Baumeister 2002), this paper is the first to demonstrate that such control also reinforces buyers' cognitive trust and affective attachment to the retailer, probably due to its empowering sense of confidence and safety – hence increasing their online impulsive buying. Typically, online innovations strengthen the relationship between retailers and shoppers, and encourage the transition of the latter towards e-commerce (Ramadan *et al.* 2019a). Nonetheless, such relationships should be further investigated given that consumers can at times be led into superfluous buying.

6.3 Managerial Implications

From a managerial viewpoint, the implications are considerable in relation to the e-retailer (hereby Amazon), shoppers, and other competing retailers. Consumers seemingly seek e-commerce due to the flexibility and convenience it provides (Ramadan *et al.* 2019b). Furthermore, prior research highlighted the increased online interactions between consumers and brands (Dessart *et al.* 2015). Nevertheless, this study demonstrated that subscription-based retailers' membership programs were actually based on a higher order level of relationship between the shopper and the retailer. In the case of Amazon Prime, members felt highly attached to the e-retailer from both a cognitive and emotional perspectives, which reinforced their impulsive buying behavior. Perceived as a high competitive advantage, competing retailers might be lured into replicating the successful model of the Amazon Prime membership. In fact, as the impulsive behavior ensuing from the relationship is highly sought after by Amazon, the current membership model appears to be highly lucrative. Nonetheless, despite the bonding between Prime shoppers and Amazon alongside the revenues of the latter, this study showed that such memberships provided a false sense of self-control to consumers. Accordingly, the suggested strategic approach that competing retailers should adopt would be to avoid replicating the same membership model. Indeed, impulsive behaviors might not be sustained in the long-term. Given that the usage of technology often creates consumer value through the convenience, quality, overall experience delivered by retailers (Burke 2002), retailers can better utilize the capacities of e-commerce in order to secure financial gains while concurrently enhancing consumer experience (Huang and Benyoucef 2013). This can be achieved through the launch of competing relational models that would focus on the true value that shoppers would be receiving.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

This research is the first to delve into the dynamics of e-retailers' membership programs; revealing the implications of shoppers' self-control in similar contexts on the overall consumer-retailer relationship and the ensuing behavioral outcomes. Nonetheless, the current study was limited by the fact that it focuses solely on one retailer, hereby Amazon, alongside its membership program, Amazon Prime in the specific context of the US market. Accordingly, future research could expand on this study by collecting data on other retailers (whether offline or online) that offer different membership programs. Furthermore, other consumer markets could be explored within the context of this study.

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Table 1: Participants' Demographics

Demographic Criteria	Percentage
Gender	
Female	55.0
Male	45.0
Age Groups	
18-24	13.4
25-34	42.0
35-44	23.5
45-54	11.0
55-64	8.1
65-above	2.0
Marital Status	
Single	37.1
Married	54.6
Divorced	4.8
Other	3.5
Occupation	
Employed	69.1
Unemployed	10.8
Self-Employed	10.3
Other	9.8
Educational Level	
Bachelor Degree	59.1
Master's Degree	16.0
Secondary School or under	16.0
Other Educational Degrees	6.4
Doctoral Studies	2.5

Table 2: General Statistics & Exploratory Factor Analysis

	Mean	S.D.	Cronbach Alpha	AVE	C.S. Loading	Exploratory Factor Analysis Loading				
						1	2	3	4	
1- Retailer's Trust										
- Is very honest and truthful.	6.20	1.00	0.89	0.68	.953 (31)	0.851				
- Has high integrity.	6.15	1.03			.825 (*)					0.804
- Can be trusted completely.	6.14	1.06			.907 (29.1)					0.823
2- Consumer Self-Control										
- I am responsible when it comes to how much I spend.	6.01	1.16	0.89	0.53	.811 (21.2)		0.724			
- I closely monitor my spending behavior.	6.00	1.18			.757 (*)					0.724
- I carefully consider my needs before making purchases.	5.98	1.13			.757 (19.5)					0.739
- Having objectives related to spending is important to me.	5.84	1.17			.781 (20.2)					0.695
- In social situations, I am generally aware of what I am spending.	5.81	1.16			.782 (20.3)					0.740
- When I go out with friends, I keep track of what I am spending.	5.78	1.28			.709 (18.1)					0.719
- When I count back my spent money, I know exactly when I spent it.	5.70	1.27			.796 (20.7)					0.775
- I am able to resist temptation in order to achieve my budget goals.	5.50	1.33			.713 (18.3)					0.720
3- Impulsiveness										
- I often buy things spontaneously.	5.17	1.74	0.90	0.81	.865 (*)			0.892		
- "Just do it" describes the way I buy things.	4.71	1.86			.932 (31.8)					0.916
- I often buy things without thinking.	4.32	2.06			.878 (29.5)					0.899
4- Retailer's Love										
- I feel my relationship with Amazon is exclusive and special.	5.85	1.26	0.87	0.60	.854 (*)				0.713	
- I have feelings for Amazon that I don't have for many other retailers.	5.83	1.29			.860 (27.1)				0.809	
- I feel that Amazon and I were really 'meant for each other'.	5.71	1.40			.886 (28.4)				0.799	

*Value was fixed to 1 to set the metric for the other items.