



Drunk Shopping Online: A Conceptual Framework of Impaired Consumer Decision-Making and Implications for Ethical Marketing

Solon Magrizos^{1,2} · Minas N. Kastanakis³ · Katerina Kampouri⁴ · Michael Christofi²

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Abstract

“Drunk shopping,” or shopping online under the influence of alcohol, is a rapidly growing but largely overlooked consumption phenomenon with significant ethical and managerial implications. Intoxicated consumers generate billions of dollars in annual revenue, yet the cognitive and affective impairments of alcohol use raise concerns about consumer vulnerability and online retailers’ responsibility. Employing the theoretical lens of alcohol myopia theory and further drawing from literature in psychology, neuroscience, and alcohol misuse, this conceptual research aims to provide an understanding of this phenomenon and to facilitate development of future research within the ethical marketing literature. We develop an integrative framework that explains the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of drunk shopping in an online environment. We further identify the consequences for consumer well-being and outline the ethical tensions for firms that may profit from, ignore, or even encourage this behavior. We conclude by proposing future research directions and seven propositions to advance ethical marketing scholarship on vulnerable consumers, impaired decision-making, and digital responsibility and call for critical attention on drunk shopping from scholars, practitioners, and policy makers alike.

Keywords Drunk shopping · Impaired decision-making · Alcohol myopia theory · Digital vulnerability

Introduction

With the rapid expansion of online commerce, a new phenomenon has quietly emerged that blurs the boundaries between marketplace activity and private leisure such that consumption occurs in a non-traditional context—namely, drunk shopping. We define “drunk shopping” as a

context-specific, intoxication-amplified form of impulse purchasing that is conceptually distinct from consumption when tired or stressed. When alcohol enters the human organism, it acts as a general disinhibitor, causing individuals to “let go” of the inhibitions that would normally constrain their behavior and increasing the likelihood to engage in foolish and risky behaviors (MacDonald et al., 1995). Although alcohol-intoxicated consumption has received sporadic mentions in fields such as psychology (e.g., Harnish et al., 2025), shopping online while drunk is a largely unexplored area in the marketing, consumer behavior, and business literature streams, despite its implications for both consumers and companies.

While drunk shopping may increase short-term sales revenues for online marketplaces, it can also have potential downsides for consumers. Alcohol-intoxicated consumption may drive consumers to excess spending and related financial stress (Crockett, 2024). Furthermore, research on consumption decisions under diminished self-regulatory capacity suggests that consumers engage in more impulse spending and that deliberate evaluation is reduced (Vohs & Faber, 2007). Such decisions, in turn, lead to more regret and negative emotions, after control is restored. Repeated

✉ Solon Magrizos
s.magrizos@bham.ac.uk

Minas N. Kastanakis
mkastanakis@escp.eu

Katerina Kampouri
kampouri@econ.auth.gr

Michael Christofi
Michail.christofi@evaf.vu.lt

¹ Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

² Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

³ ESCP Business School, London, UK

⁴ School of Economics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece

cycles of impulse purchasing and subsequent regret may lead to diminished well-being, raising concerns about the mental health implications of alcohol-driven consumption in a digital context, especially for vulnerable consumers (Mick et al., 2012). Finally, such behavior may have ripple effects extending beyond the individual consumer, as increased ordering may lead to increased product returns rates, extra packaging, and unnecessary transportation costs, amplifying environmental waste and carbon emissions in the supply chain (Petersen & Kumar, 2009).

Exploration of drunk shopping is therefore important because it may change the theoretical assumptions of various consumer behavior perspectives. That is, most theoretical perspectives focusing on consumers' purchasing behavior assume a rational decision-making process before purchase, which contradicts purchases made by alcohol-intoxicated individuals. Previous research has linked irrational or impaired consumer behavior with anxiety and escapism (Darrat et al., 2016), drawing parallels to gambling disorders (Lejoyeux & Weinstein, 2010). More recently, internet shopping has been characterized as an addiction, facilitated by online marketplaces' immediacy, accessibility, and easy payment systems (Müller et al., 2022). While our work on drunk shopping intersects with this literature, it is conceptually distinct. Impulse buying typically refers to spontaneous purchases driven by cues and after limited deliberation (Rook, 1987); in contrast, compulsive behavior is a more chronic, repetitive pattern driven by internal tensions (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Drunk shopping differs from compulsive behaviors in that it reflects a situational, temporary impairment, not a chronic, trait-based vulnerability. Moreover, drunk shopping cannot be reduced to just ordinary impulse buying, as its intensity, attentional scope, and overall decision-making process are shaped by temporary cognitive impairment.

Crucially, alcohol-intoxicated consumption unfolds within digital environments specifically designed to accelerate purchasing and reduce friction, representing a unique situation of temporary cognitive impairment within a digitally optimized architecture. It represents a distinct setting of disrupted consumer autonomy, raising ethical questions about marketplace operation during diminished capacity. Despite growing research on irrational, compulsive, and addictive behaviors, a framework explaining how temporary intoxication interacts with frictionless, optimized marketplaces to shape consumer decision-making and retailers' ethical responsibility remains underdeveloped. This is, in practice, a business ethics question. Current work treats consumers' vulnerability as a given trait or a socioeconomic condition (Baker et al., 2005) and proposes marketers undertake duties that assume rational, informed exchange (Kastanakis et al., 2026; Laczniak & Murphy, 2006). Current frameworks do not fit a case where cognitive capacity is only temporarily

reduced, or where the impairment is, likely, detectable from digital architectures. Whether profit from a detectable impairment (even if self-induced) can be justified morally remains an underexplored problem within the business ethics literature. Given these considerations, we draw from a diverse body of research in various literature streams related to online purchasing behavior to identify the processes (antecedents, mechanisms, outcomes, and consequences) of drunk shopping in an effort to spark interest in this field.

With these aims, we followed the suggestions of Jaakola (2020) to take a model approach and synthesize key articles published in psychology, neuroscience, marketing, and alcohol literature that provide insights into the behavior of consumers online while drunk. This approach is particularly suited for the exploration of emerging phenomena for which only a few empirical data are available within a field (Yadav, 2010)—in our case, the marketing field. Moreover, it enables us to provide a roadmap for understanding the phenomenon in question (drunk shopping), the processes by which it operates, and the conditions that may affect it (MacInnis, 2011).

To structure the analysis and synthesis of studies, we use a well-grounded model in the marketing field—the stimulus–organism–behavior–consequence (SOBC) model. This model is suitable for our study because it takes into account not only rational but also non-rational factors that may drive consumers' drunk shopping behavior in online contexts. Studies relying on established frameworks have gained a reputation for being the most robust while providing maximum clarity (Paul et al., 2024).

Our study is novel in three ways. First, it consolidates relevant research and establishes connections with disparate literature streams to develop a theoretical, integrative framework of the process of drunk shopping in an online context. This framework not only sheds light on this relatively new area with implications for both firms and consumers but also sets the basis for future scholarly work (Short, 2009). Second, it extends existing models of decision-making to contexts of situational impairment. By employing the theoretical lens of alcohol myopia theory, we move beyond trait-based and chronic vulnerability and conceptualize temporary, and perhaps deliberate, reduced capacity in a digitally optimized environment. Third, we evaluate not only whether alcohol-intoxicated consumers make imperfect choices but also whether firms bear responsibility when their profit generation goals take advantage of impairment, even when their algorithms and personalization systems can detect and target behavior associated with intoxication (e.g., late-night activity, erratic or slow browsing patterns). In doing so, we add to the ongoing discussions in business ethics literature (e.g., Pethig & Kroenung, 2023) about the moral risks of algorithmic optimization exploiting consumer vulnerability.

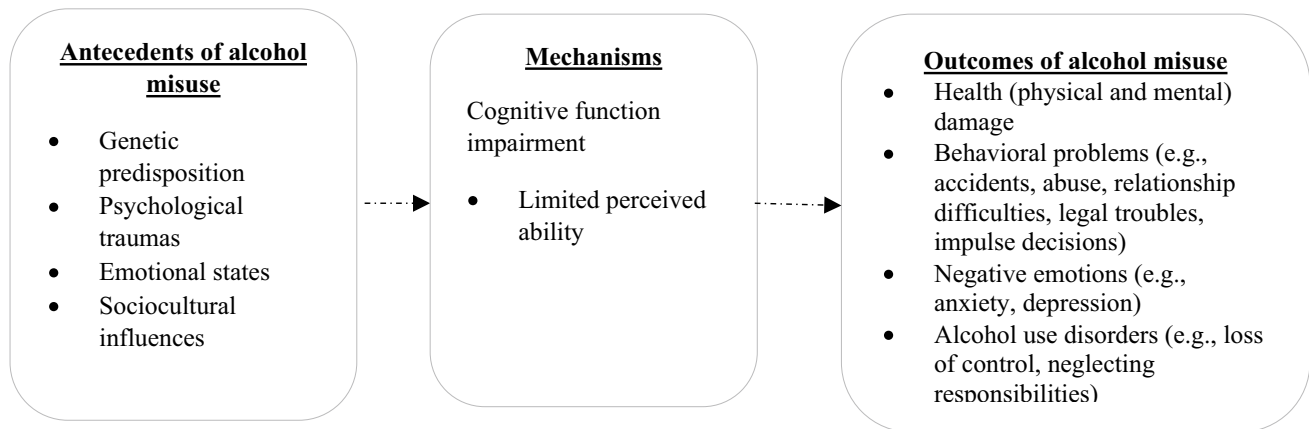


Fig. 1 Antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of alcohol misuse

We begin by delineating the concept of drunkenness and analyzing its implications. We then examine alcohol literature to better understand the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of alcohol (mis)use. Next, we present the proposed theoretical framework related to the process of drunk shopping in online environments. Finally, we discuss future research directions and propositions under the alcohol myopic perspective.

Defining Drunkenness

Drunkenness, also commonly referred to as "intoxication," "binge drinking," and "heavy episodic drinking," refers to excessive drinking. The term "intoxication" reflects a state of being affected by the consumption of alcohol or other substances, leading to physical and mental impairment. "Binge drinking" refers to the consumption of a large amount of alcohol (five or more alcoholic drinks for men, four or more drinks for women) within a short period, leading to a blood alcohol concentration level of at least 0.08% (Courtney & Polich, 2009; Lannoy et al., 2021). While these terms reveal a "linguistic friction" between different definitions of the excessive use of alcohol, a generally accepted definition of drunk behavior is lacking. This is logical, however, as words used to describe the state of drunkenness do not readily translate from one language to another and can have very different cultural connotations (Cameron et al., 2000). For example, Greek words describing drunkenness mean transforming into another being (Cameron et al., 2000); Swedish words describe drunkenness as behavior induced by any level of ingested alcohol. The English, Dutch, and Swedish define the most severe states of intoxication predominantly in behavioral terms; the Scottish describe these states as either psychological states created by any level of intoxication or as post hoc states, as if they are aiming for

a psychological state but make occasional errors in dosage, leading to unintended consequences, either psychological or behavioral. Moreover, the definitions of a standard unit of alcohol and hazardous drinking differ among countries (Kalinowski & Humphreys, 2016).

So, how can we define someone as impaired? According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2025), moderate drinking means one or two drinks per day, whereas heavy drinking means having four or more drinks in a day or eight or more per week for women and five or more drinks in a day or 15 or more per week for men. Nevertheless, "it is not just the quantity of alcohol consumed per week that is a predictor of alcohol problems, but also the amount of alcohol consumed per drinking session and the psychological and behavioral effects of that pattern of consumption" (Cameron et al., 2000, p. 234).

Although any drinker can be susceptible to making purchases online, we argue that they may differ in terms of the mechanisms they have developed to combat alcohol intoxication and thus may adopt different behaviors. For example, heavy drinkers may have developed protective mechanisms to prevent themselves from unnecessary purchases, such as putting up a firewall with a password every time they try to make a purchase.

Alcohol (Mis) Use

Alcohol use refers to the consumption of alcoholic beverages (ethanol). Alcohol consumption to the point of alcohol intoxication, which results from the excessive use of alcohol, is also known as alcohol misuse. In this section, we discuss

the mechanisms, antecedents,¹ and outcomes of alcohol (mis)use, presented graphically in Fig. 1.

Antecedents of Alcohol (Mis) Use

According to the biopsychosocial framework, antecedents of alcohol use or misuse include the interplay of genetics, psychology, emotional states, and the individual's socio-cultural background. Genes account for a large amount of variance in alcohol use and misuse, including whether and at what age an individual starts drinking alcohol (Müller et al., 2022). In addition to a genetic predisposition, personal experiences such as early trauma, maltreatment, and cumulative adversity (e.g., abuse, neglect, family dysfunction) are psychosocial stress factors that have long been associated with alcohol misuse and the development of alcohol use disorders, their maintenance, and relapse (Capusan et al., 2021). Furthermore, individuals may consume alcohol in an effort to attain certain perceived valued outcomes (Cox & Klinger, 1988). For example, people may drink alcohol because it gives them a pleasant feeling or because it helps them relax when they experience stress, are depressed, or are nervous (Abbey et al., 1993).

Alcohol use and addiction are also linked to personality traits (e.g., non-conformity, impulsivity, extraversion, sensation seeking, anxiety sensitivity, self-derogation) (MacKillop et al., 2022; Skóra et al., 2020). Finally, sociocultural influences (e.g., culture-specific drinking styles), past reinforcement from drinking, situational factors (e.g., alcohol is available, being exposed to people who drink), family history of alcohol use, and peer influence (Ouellette et al., 1999) can all induce an individual to start drinking.

Alcohol Myopia Theory

Alcohol myopia is the “short-sighted information processing that is part of alcohol intoxication” (Steele & Josephs, 1990, p. 922). Alcohol myopia theory (Steele & Josephs, 1990; Steele & Southwick, 1985) provides a perspective on how alcohol affects behavior. It maintains that alcohol (mis) use causes a restriction in cognitive capacity, and therefore drunk individuals no longer have the requisite processing skills to attend to all the information from their environment compared with sober individuals (MacDonald et al., 1995; Steele & Southwick, 1985). According to the theory, alcohol reduces the scope and focus of attention, limiting both the range of cues that can be perceived and the ability to process those cues. As such, behaviors are based only on the most salient and impelling (i.e., “go”) cues in the environment,

not the less salient and inhibiting (i.e., “no go”) cues (Steele & Josephs, 1990).

Mocaiber et al. (2011) give an example in a transit context. In transit situations in which the main task is to safely drive the vehicle, people need to be capable of detecting possible relevant stimuli appearing unexpectedly, such as a child suddenly crossing in front of the car. Driving is a divided attentional task: it requires paying attention to both relevant and unexpected (distractive) stimuli. Alcohol-intoxicated individuals, whose attentional capacity is reduced, lack sufficient resources to process new and important stimuli occurring in the scene (i.e., a child suddenly crossing the street). This diminished availability of resources for processing unexpected stimuli therefore increases the likelihood of accidents (MacDonald et al., 1995; Mocaiber et al., 2011).

Outcomes of Alcohol Mis (use)

In small amounts, alcohol can have a relaxing effect and may enhance social interactions.² Low alcohol consumption is also associated with pleasure, enjoyment, and an escape from daily pressures (Harnish et al., 2025), all characteristic of hedonistic motives. Moderate drinking can also result in perceived dominance and pleasurable disinhibition. Despite research indicating that heavy drinkers can derive cardiovascular and other benefits from alcohol consumption³ (Abel & Kruger, 2004), heavy drinking (to the point of alcohol intoxication) can result in negative effects. For example, alcohol misuse can have negative consequences on an individual's physical and mental health and social well-being. It can also lead to various health problems, such as brain and liver damage, or even death (Hingson et al., 2009; Rehm, 2011). Alcohol misuse is also linked with antisocial behaviors such as increased chances of vandalism, abuse, homicide, sexual assault, accidents, suicide, relationship difficulties, and legal troubles (Rehm, 2011; Van Swol et al., 2020). Moreover, problematic drinking is often related to negative emotions such as anxiety and depression (Van Swol et al., 2020). Mushquash et al. (2013) found that depression and feelings of worthlessness made undergraduate women susceptible to heavy drinking. Negative emotions can also be a risk factor for relapse into problematic drinking (Van Swol et al., 2020).

In addition, alcohol misuse can lead to alcohol addiction and alcohol use disorders (Guinle & Sinha, 2020). Alcohol

¹ That is, factors (or conditions) that may contribute to an individual engaging in alcohol use.

² Alcohol has strong symbolic and cultural meaning and is used to enhance social events, signify accomplishments, and celebrate special occasions.

³ Nevertheless, heavy drinkers are especially at risk for developing problems because intoxication implies drinking at levels exceeding tolerance.

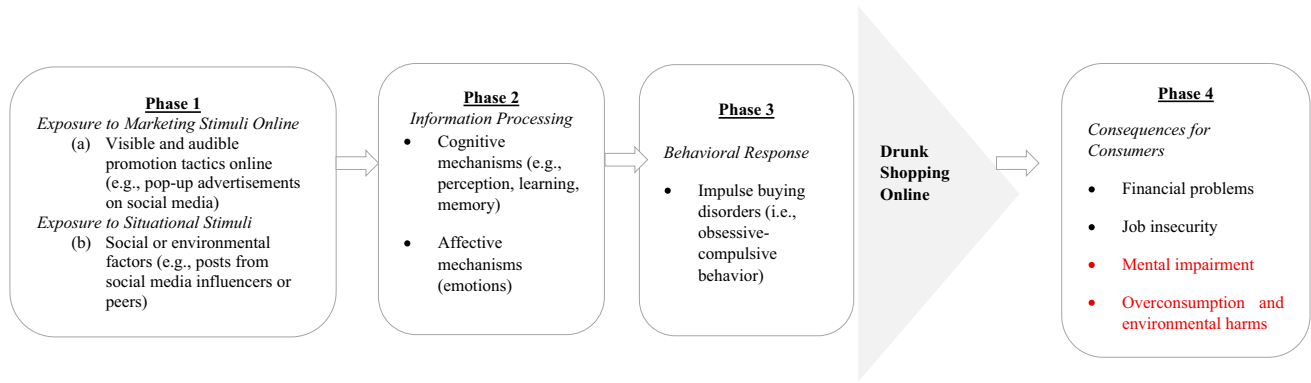


Fig. 2 The processes of drunk shopping

use disorders⁴ are “psychiatric syndromes characterized by impaired control over drinking and other symptoms” (Deak et al., 2019, p. 56). They result from chronic regular alcohol use and encompass a range of symptoms, including a strong desire to drink, compulsive alcohol consumption, tolerance (needing more alcohol to achieve the desired effect), and withdrawal symptoms when alcohol use is reduced or stopped. Alcohol experimentation occurs frequently during adolescence and young adulthood, a time when the likelihood of developing alcohol or substance use disorders is also high.

Thus, alcohol use can lower inhibitions and impair judgment, making individuals feel more self-assured and impulsive and thereby leading to a willingness to take risks. From a marketing standpoint, such a state can result in a sense of invincibility and a desire to indulge in spontaneous purchases of items they may not have considered otherwise.

A Theoretical, Integrative Framework of the Process of Drunk Shopping Online

We drew on the SOBC model to organize the proposed framework. The SOBC model is an extension of the stimulus–organism–response (SOR) perspective (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), which is well-grounded in the consumer behavior field. In SOBC, the “stimulus” element refers to triggers that provoke action and influence an individual’s internal state (Jacoby, 2002). The “organism” element involves information processing, which includes mental

(cognitive⁵) and affective⁶ processes that mediate the relationship between the stimulus and individual responses (Jacoby, 2002). The “behavior” (“response”) element refers to the actions an individual takes (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The “consequence” element refers to the implications of the individual’s actions in life.

The SOBC model is ideal for explaining the interplay between an individual’s environmental stimuli and perceptions (cognitive and affective) while intoxicated by taking into account non-rational factors and, in turn, the individual’s impaired shopping behavior. We chose to adopt SOBC over alternative frameworks such as SOR or dual-process models because of its inclusiveness. While the SOR model distinguishes among internal states, external stimuli, and responses, it does not explicitly delineate downstream consequences, thereby limiting normative evaluation. Similarly, dual-process theories offer useful insights into the internal cognitive mechanisms of impaired consumers, but they put less emphasis on the interaction among digital marketplace architecture, consumer behavior, and (un)ethical outcomes. In contrast, the SOBC framework incorporates consequences as an explicit analytical category, enabling a more systematic examination of how consumer vulnerability leads to consumer harm and retailer ethical responsibility. This inclusion aligns well with ethical literature, which provides not just an explanation of individual behavior but also a moral evaluation of individual actions (Laczniak & Murphy, 2006). Figure 2 depicts the proposed integrative framework on the processes of drunk shopping, encompassing four phases: (1) exposure to marketing and situational

⁴ According to Deak et al., (2019, p. 56), alcohol use disorder refers to “a single spectrum of problematic use of alcohol and clinically significant impairment based on endorsement of 2 or more of 11 criteria assessing behavioral and physical manifestations of heavy alcohol use,” also described as alcohol abuse, hazardous drinking, or harmful drinking.

⁵ Cognitive states reflect the mental processes through which individuals acquire, process, retain, and retrieve information (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

⁶ Affective states, reflect the emotions individuals experience in response to environmental stimuli, including arousal and pleasure.

stimuli, (2) information processing, (3) behavioral response while drunk, and (4) the consequences of drunk shopping.

Exposure to Marketing and Situational Stimuli While Drunk (Phase 1)

The concept “stimuli” involves any external factors that greatly affect customers’ internal states, such as visual or auditory cues (Jacoby, 2002; Vergura et al., 2020). Possible stimuli to which consumers can be exposed when they are drunk are marketing and situational stimuli (Chan et al., 2017). Marketing stimuli are cues used to entice consumers to make a purchase, such as visible and/or audible promotion tactics on a website (e.g., pop-up advertisements on social media, media colors and graphics, product sales or discounts). Situational stimuli are the social and/or environmental factors associated with a particular consumption occasion (e.g., relevant posts from social influencers) that affect consumers’ buying responses. Situational factors may increase or decrease consumers’ propensity to buy impulsively (Chan et al., 2017).

Thus, marketing and situational stimuli can be triggers that provoke action and influence an individual’s internal state. Such stimuli, including one-click purchasing, storage of credit card details, limited-time countdowns (e.g., “offer ends at midnight”), and scarcity prompts (“only two left in stock”), may merely increase the likelihood to purchase out of convenience or persuasion when an individual is sober. However, to alcohol-intoxicated consumers, these stimuli may have a disproportionately stronger effect by narrowing their attention and weakening their self-control. That is, intoxication does not create new stimuli; it alters the weight of these effects in the purchase decision (see also Magrizos et al., 2023, on the non-linear dark side of digitally-mediated experiences).

From an ethical standpoint, this cognitive shift raises questions about the design and timing of marketplace stimuli under conditions of potential consumer impairment. Platforms may reasonably anticipate when some users may be operating under the influence of alcohol (e.g., late-night contexts, jerky mouse movements) and design and time stimuli to actively exploit limited cognitive capacity.

Information Processing While Drunk (Phase 2)

Interacting with marketing and situational stimuli (phase 1) leads consumers to the information processing of such stimuli (phase 2). This process includes cognitive and affective mechanisms that mediate the relationship between the stimulus and individual behavioral responses (Jacoby, 2002). Nevertheless, alcohol consumption to the point of intoxication can affect both cognitive and affective states.

Cognitive Mechanisms

Cognitive mechanisms reflect the mental processes through which individuals acquire, process, retain, and retrieve information (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Alcohol stimulates receptors of a neurotransmitter in the brain called gamma-aminobutyric acid, which quiets the nervous system and reduces brain activity, thereby leading to cognitive impairment. Physiologically, alcohol misuse deteriorates cognitive functions such as visual attention and reaction time (Dougherty et al., 2000; Rohrbaugh et al., 1988). For example, impairment of executive functioning can lead a drunk individual to order more items than needed while intoxicated.

Although the alcohol literature has drawn on many theories (mostly from the psychology field) to explore alcohol-related behaviors, such as alcohol expectancy theory (Oei & Baldwin, 1994) or the cognitive model of binge drinking (Oei & Morawska, 2004), the psychological theory of alcohol myopia addresses attentional deficits (Steele & Josephs, 1990). According to alcohol myopia theory, the more intoxicated individuals are, the less they are able to pay sufficient attention to cognitive tasks; thus, this theory helps explain the attention-related mistakes that people make while drunk. In particular, the theory posits that alcohol narrows individuals’ attentional focus, restricts their ability to perceive details, and reduces their capacity to process meaning from information they perceive (Fleming et al., 2013). As a result, alcohol-intoxicated individuals allocate their attention—they perceive and process only the most salient details of a situation (Steele & Josephs, 1990), leading to a reduction in the encoding of peripheral details (Janssen & Anne, 2019); that is, drunk people attend only to the most prominent of environmental signals and are unable to focus on surrounding factors. For example, in our context, individuals shopping while drunk may pay a great deal of attention to the payment process at the expense of other significant details, such as the amount of money they will spend or the selection of a preferred item.

Affective Mechanisms

Affective states reflect the emotions individuals experience in response to environmental stimuli, and this largely depends on their proclivity for sensation seeking. For example, drunk individuals with a high desire for sensation could be affected by a pop-up advertisement for a product that reminds them of their childhood and impulsively purchase it (Sharma et al., 2010). As mentioned previously, alcohol consumption is associated with pleasure, enjoyment, and a desire to escape from daily pressures (Harnish et al., 2025; Iyer et al., 2020). In response, individuals may turn to online shopping as a means of coping with negative emotions or attaining temporary happiness through retail therapy. When in these emotional states, they may seek comfort or

excitement through shopping, disregarding the potential consequences.

This impairment of cognitive and affective processing raises important ethical concerns about consumer autonomy. According to alcohol myopia theory, decision-making is not simply biased but structurally constrained, as individuals become disproportionately responsive to salient cues while neglecting inhibitory information. As a result, purchase decisions made while drunk may not fully reflect consumers' considered preferences, complicating assumptions of informed and autonomous choice that underpin most marketplace exchanges.

Behavioral Response While Drunk: Impulse and Compulsive Buying (Phase 3)

Excessive drinking and the simultaneous exposure to marketing and situational stimuli (in online contexts) can lower inhibitions, making individuals feel more self-assured. This feeling can lead to a sense of invincibility, a desire to indulge, and thus the spontaneous impulse purchase of items they might not have considered otherwise (Chan et al., 2017; Fenton-O'Creevy & Furnham, 2020; Tarka et al., 2023). Impulse buying occurs when consumers "experience a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately" (Rook, 1987, p. 191) with no pre-shopping intention (Rook & Fisher, 1995). Indeed, consumers spend approximately \$5,400 per year on average on impulse product purchases (Iyer et al., 2020). Given the ubiquity of e-commerce online, many consumers have shifted from in-store to online shopping, leading to increased impulse-buying behavior (Chan et al., 2017).

Although even sober consumers can make impulse purchases, the situation is more intense for drunk consumers. Indeed, shopping under the influence of alcohol is linked to psychopathological mechanisms such as impulse control disorders (Harnish et al., 2025). These disorders are characterized by an impaired ability to resist impulses or to engage in ultimately self-destructive behavior (with deleterious long-term consequences) (Grant et al., 2005). This is especially true in online contexts, which "[enable] avoidance of direct, face-to-face social contact, [allow] the transactions to be kept private (e.g., hidden from family), and [provide] continuous electronic feedback about product offerings and prices" (Lejoyeux & Weinstein, 2010, p. 249). Some consumers may even prefer buying online because they can avoid being observed during their dysfunctional consumption (Weinstein et al., 2016).

Compulsive buying, also known as "compulsive shopping" or "shopping addiction," is a chronic, repetitive activity (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989) related to an "inability to control the urge" (Faber et al., 1995, p. 297) and poor impulse control associated with spending money (Japutra et al., 2022). It arises from "a primary response to negative events

or feelings" (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989, p. 155) and leads to "severe social, psychological, and economic consequences" (Japutra et al., 2022, p. 000). Thus, compulsive buying is a coping mechanism against negative feelings (e.g., depression, stress, need for affection). It reflects uncontrolled thoughts that arise in some people's minds and a lack of control over an irresistible temptation, leading to possible harmful behaviors (Ridgway et al., 2008). However, compulsive buying also allows the individual to focus solely on the purchase process and block other negative feelings for a short time (Japutra et al., 2022).

At its extreme, compulsive buying is an obsessive-compulsive behavior, that is, "an uncontrolled urge to buy repetitively and to reduce anxiety" (Japutra et al., 2022, p. 443). The positive feelings experienced during the act of buying reinforce and increase the recurrence of compulsive buying (Darrat et al., 2016). Obsessive-compulsive buying is characterized as an impulse control disorder (Harnish et al., 2025; Hollander & Allen, 2006; Ridgway et al., 2008), especially because it involves similar phases to those in substance addiction. Initially, episodes bring a feeling of increased physiological and emotional arousal before the act (Hollander & Allen, 2006); the emotions experienced before the act are negative (e.g., sadness, anxiety, boredom). This is followed by an uncontrollable buying binge aiming to alleviate these negative emotions (Koran et al., 2006). During the act (the purchase), pleasure or a sense of gratification arises. As a consequence, compulsive buyers are more interested in the consumption process itself than the goods purchased (Lejoyeux & Weinstein, 2010). After the act, a decrease in arousal and an increase in feelings of guilt and remorse appear (Hollander & Allen, 2006).

Consequently, the behavioral response occurring while drunk shopping cannot be attributed solely to spontaneous individuals; rather, it reflects an interaction between online marketing architecture and alcohol-induced restriction of attentional scope and self-control. Together, these factors can result in purchase decisions that may not truly align with consumers' preferences when sober. This misalignment introduces a critical ethical tension. While the transaction may appear voluntary, the underlying decision process is shaped by temporary impairment and digitally engineered environments that reduce friction and amplify impulsivity.

Consequences of Drunk Shopping (Phase 4)

The "consequence" element refers to the implications of individuals' actions in their lives. The severity of the consequences of impulse and compulsive buying (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989) may differ when consumers are drunk; while impulse buying is frequently associated with negative consequences, it can also result in extreme levels of debt, depression, and domestic discord commonly found among

compulsive buyers. Conversely, some compulsive buyers cannot resist the urge to purchase something for too long (Macca-rrone-Eaglen & Schofield, 2020), regardless of their income (De Mattos et al., 2018), and as such, they often enter a spiral of debt. As companies can benefit from drunk shoppers, they may not do much to address, this issue and instead actively promote drunk shopping such as through late-night flash sales. While the obvious – and defensive – company response is that shoppers who bought something online can return the product, most consumers never or rarely return such products to avoid the hassle of the return process (Selyukh, 2018).

The consequences of purchase decisions in an intoxicated state, however, extend beyond only immediate transactional outcomes. Reduced attentional focus and self-control can increase the likelihood of impulse purchases that consumers may regret when they are sober, possibly leading to financial stress and reduced well-being. Chronic repetition of such behavior may also diminish self-efficacy and contribute to overall vulnerability.

From a normative standpoint, these consequences shift the ethical evaluation from individual responsibility to shared responsibility between consumers and firms. While consumers initiate the transaction, firms operate in environments designed to anticipate, amplify, and monetize behavioral tendencies. This raises the question whether firms should be held accountable not only for facilitating such behavior but also for failing to mitigate predictable harm in contexts of reduced consumer capacity.

Future Research on Drunk Shopping

Research Direction 1: A Focus on the Relationships Among the Antecedents, Mechanisms, and Outcomes of Drunk Shopping Online

In this study, we explore the process of drunk shopping and develop a theoretical, integrative framework on the relationships among antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of

drunk shopping. Nevertheless, as this is a new area of study in the marketing field, many questions are still unanswered (see Table 1). For example, Hendriks et al. (2020) found that social influencers often post about alcohol on Instagram; yet not all consumers have an Instagram account, and not all are affected in the same manner. Therefore, investigating the types of consumers (e.g., those from different generations) motivated by alcohol-related posts to shop online while drunk would be of interest.

Moreover, certain religions (e.g., Islam) forbid alcohol consumption, so the extent of drinking is lower in regions where these religions are dominant (Russell et al., 2020). Therefore, future research could explore the extent to which consumers located in different regions drunk shop online. Such research could help marketers communicate their products, services, or experiences differently across consumer groups.

Research Direction 2: In-Depth Exploration of the Information Processing Phase Under the Lens of Alcohol Myopia Theory

The alcohol literature is replete with various theories and theoretical perspectives that predict consumption, including alcohol expectancy theory (Oei & Baldwin, 1994), the cognitive model of binge drinking (Oei & Morawska, 2004), the incentive motivation model (Cox & Klinger, 1988), and theories of human motivation such as the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1973) and theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In this study, we rely on alcohol myopia theory, which to our knowledge has not been used before in the consumer behavior field, to conceptualize the mechanisms (cognitive and affective) occurring during the information processing phase. Focusing on this phase is important because, despite the correlation between drunkenness and shopping (Harnish et al., 2025), the causal mechanisms underlying this link have yet to be determined. The main reason for our use of alcohol myopia theory is

Table 1 Research directions on drunk shopping and related questions

Research directions	Related questions
Research direction 1: A focus on the relationships among the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of drunk shopping online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which marketing and situation stimuli affect different types of consumers (e.g., those from different generations)? • How do different types of consumers (e.g., located in different regions) drunk shop online? • Do different types of drinkers (e.g., moderate, heavy) differ when shopping online while drunk?
Research direction 2: In-depth exploration of the information processing phase under the lens of alcohol myopia theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do contextual factors (e.g., psychological traumas, sensation seeking) affect the repeat of drunk shopping even when consumers are aware of its implications?
Research direction 3: Exploration of drunk shopping from an ethical standpoint	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the ethical implications of drunk shopping for both consumers and businesses?

that other theories assume that individuals act after careful consideration of the pros and cons of an action. When drunk, however, carefully considering one’s actions is difficult.

According to alcohol myopia theory, how individuals react to marketing and situational stimuli when drunk depends on the most immediate, salient environmental cues they perceive at the time of decision-making. That is, behaviors are determined only by the most salient and impelling cues in the environment, not the less salient and inhibiting cues (Steele & Josephs, 1990). On the one hand, when cues are salient and impelling, we argue that alcohol intoxication will cause a person to focus on these cues and subsequently have stronger intentions to engage in risky behaviors (e.g., impulse purchases while drunk even if they have limited money available). On the other hand, when cues are salient and inhibiting, intoxicated people will perhaps shift their attention from these cues. That is, in the presence of inhibiting cues, alcohol myopia theory suggests that drunk individuals will actually have weaker intentions to engage in risky behaviors. In circumstances in which salient cues are equally impelling and inhibiting, individuals will be more likely to act on the former cues when drunk rather than when sober (Steele & Josephs, 1990).

Impelling and inhibiting cues include cues that are both external and internal to the individual. In an external (online) context, impelling or inhibiting cues include pop-up advertisements or posts on social media, while internal cues include emotions and thoughts (Steele & Josephs, 1990).

Figure 3 graphically represents this interaction. In particular, it integrates alcohol myopia theory within an SOBC structure to explain how digital marketplace stimuli interact with temporary cognitive impairment to produce consumer harm and raise ethical responsibilities for firms.

Research Direction 3: Exploration of Drunk Shopping from an Ethical Standpoint

In line with the analyzed literature, drunk shopping can have implications for both consumers and businesses. Indeed, as we already discussed, drunk shopping increases a company’s sales revenue, but it can also have a potential downside for consumers—namely, it can drive excess spending (Crockett, 2024), which can lead to financial and/or psychological problems, job insecurity, damage to family relationships, and other issues.

Nevertheless, as drunk shopping is a relatively new area of study, a fruitful avenue for future research is to examine the implications of drunk shopping from an ethical standpoint. For example, alcoholism has long been considered a disorder; however, unanswered questions remain. If consumers have (are diagnosed with) alcohol impulse control disorder and buy or do something illegal, are they responsible for this act? What does this mean for the business that sold the product?

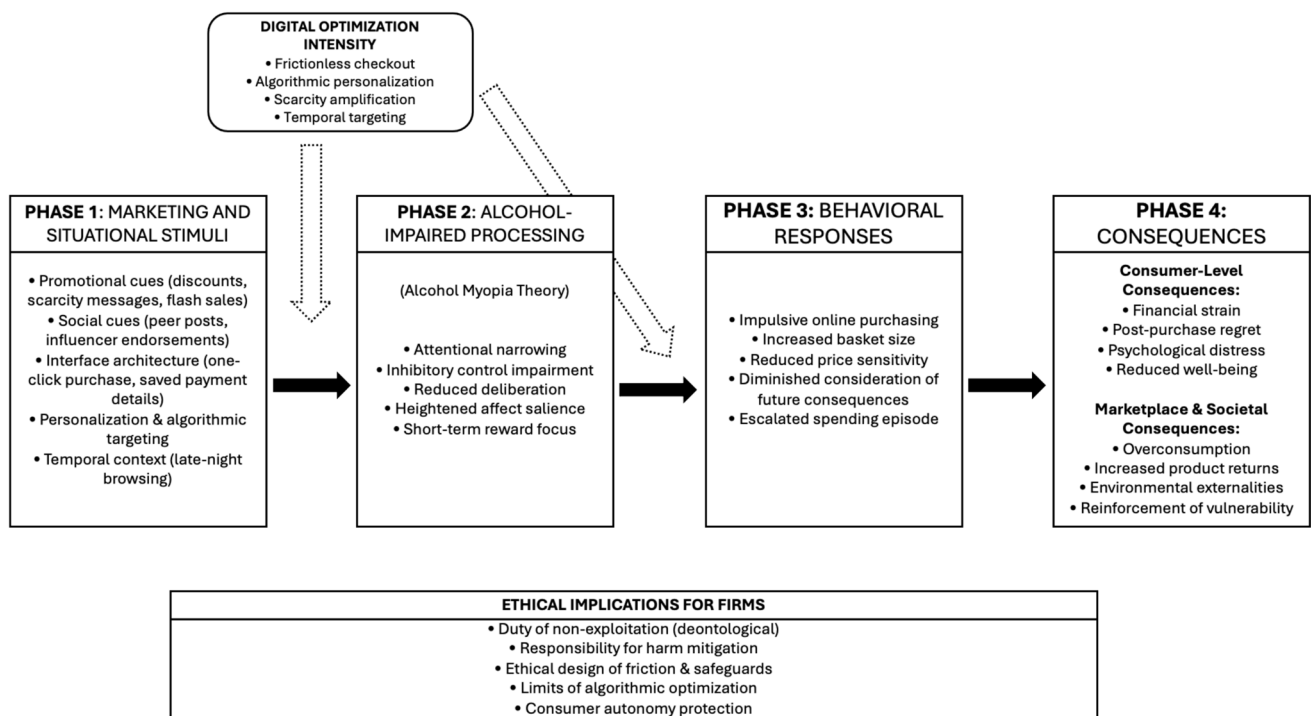


Fig. 3 A conceptual process model of drunk shopping integrating alcohol myopia theory under SOBC

In a transit situation, if an alcoholic has an accident while driving under the influence, it is not considered a mitigating circumstance, but the courts can require that the individual undergo treatment for the alcohol problem, along with any other sentencing requirements. Nevertheless, the implications of drunk shopping for both consumers and businesses from an ethical standpoint are lacking. Such an investigation could provide managers with practices on how to handle such a situation. We briefly discuss the ethical aspects of drunk shopping in the “Discussion” section. In the next section, we develop seven propositions based on alcohol myopia theory and the aforementioned discussion.

Research Propositions

Proposition 1 *When marketing cues online are salient and impelling, drunk consumers make impulse purchases.*

Alcohol myopia theory suggests that the effect of marketing cues online is amplified not just by salience but also when positive alcohol expectancies outweigh actual intake levels; thus, seemingly “neutral” digital cues (e.g., one-click buying) can challenge consumer autonomy more than anticipated, raising ethical questions about manipulative personalization when consumers are in vulnerable states (Lac & Brack, 2018). This issue counters linear cue-response models by highlighting how expectancy-driven myopia enables firm exploitation beyond sober impulsivity. In exploring the dynamics of salient marketing cues under alcohol myopia, we find that digital platforms help escalate impulse purchases with features designed to minimize friction, such as personalized recommendations and flash sales. These cues, while effective in sober contexts, take on a more insidious role during intoxication, as alcohol myopia theory’s narrowing of attention prioritizes immediate gratification over long-term consequences. Such prioritization not only makes purchase intention stronger but also potentially raises ethical concerns, as firms may without intention, or even deliberately, capitalize on consumers’ reduced inhibitions. Hence, from a normative standpoint, such situations reinforce the need for ethical guidelines that would, for example, require platforms to assess and take steps to mitigate cue salience during potential impairment windows (e.g., late-night hours).

Proposition 2 *Drunk consumers experience myopic relief from negative emotions with online purchasing.*

Despite consumers’ well-documented myopic relief from negative emotions, however, alcohol myopia theory indicates that such a relief is transient, often leading to post-sobriety

regrets and potentially to commitment failure, in which cases any short-term hedonic gains may turn into long-term harms (e.g., debt cycles) (Sevincer & Oettingen, 2014). This proposition advances consumer ethics’ extant research by underscoring that firms should be held responsible to mitigate escapism-driven vulnerabilities (rather than profiting from them). Drunk consumers’ pursuit of myopic relief illuminates how alcohol intoxication potentially transforms online shopping into an “emotional escape,” with purchases serving as quick solutions to negative affective states (e.g., stress, boredom or loneliness). Impelling or conspicuous cues such as “buy now for instant savings” may provide immediate relief, but this mechanism also overlooks much broader inhibitory factors, for example budget constraints and other future needs. Ethically, this proposition raises questions about platforms’ foul play in fostering dependence on consumption for mood regulation purposes; this becomes especially unethical when algorithms can detect and amplify emotional vulnerabilities through targeted ads. Normative frameworks, therefore, suggest that firms should implement safeguards (such as emotion-aware prompts), to encourage reflection and prevent harmful behaviors, in line with utilitarian goals of maximizing overall welfare.

Proposition 3 *Drunk consumers exhibit inflated self-perception, leading to riskier purchases.*

Alcohol myopia theory indicates that an inflated self-perception stems from expectancies, such that even moderate drinkers may perceive their “invincibility” as strongly as heavy drinkers, extending ethical debates on situational impairments and platforms’ responsibility to reduce overconfidence with inhibitory designs (Lac & Brack, 2018). An inflated self-perception under alcohol myopia represents a critical distortion in decision-making, as intoxicated consumers overestimate their judgment, leading to bolder and riskier online buying (e.g., luxury items). According to alcohol myopia theory, an inflated self-perception arises from a focus on positive cues, ignoring potential downsides, which platforms can exacerbate with affirming messaging such as “You deserve this.” Such messaging increases not only purchase volume but also ethical risks, as firms may profit from this distorted self-view without intervening. A normative approach that draws on deontology (the study of moral obligation) would mandate designs highlighting risks to restore balance to consumers.

Proposition 4 *Drunk consumers engage in excessive, norm-violating purchases.*

Alcohol myopia theory suggests that both positive and negative expectancies fuel excess beyond simple disinhibition, enabling norm violations under intoxicated

consumption and thus implying deontological obligations for firms to implement safeguards against such myopia-induced transgressions (Sevincer & Oettingen, 2014). Excessive and norm-violating buying under drunk shopping illustrates how cue dominance leads to behaviors opposite to personal or societal standards, such as buying prohibited items or over-spending on taboos. Such purchases stem from narrowed attention that amplifies desirable outcomes while suppressing ethical inhibitors, creating opportunities for platforms to facilitate unchecked excess. Ethically, this issue imposes a duty on firms to prevent harm to vulnerable consumers, perhaps by using normative criteria such as flagging unusual purchases.

We also argue that the nature of salient and impelling cues, which can affect individuals' cognitive and affective mechanisms at the time of decision-making, largely depends on contextual factors. For example, perceived ability while drunk can differ between individuals with different levels of tolerance to alcohol (moderate vs. high), genetic predispositions, or psychological traumas. For example, marketing cues can be salient and impelling for individuals with psychological traumas (e.g., pop-up advertisements that remind them of their childhood). Moreover, when drunk individuals come across a pop-up advertisement on a website, they may perceive different things than what the advertisement actually shows. Although factors such as age are also contextual, especially given that younger customers may be more likely to buy impulsively than older customers who engage in self-control (Kacen & Lee, 2002), these factors are inconsequential when individuals are drunk because alcohol inhibits self-control. Thus:

Proposition 5 *Protective mechanisms moderate drunk shopping, but a low tolerance to alcohol amplifies myopia.*

Alcohol myopia theory suggests that drinkers with a high alcohol tolerance underperceive risks because of habituated expectancies, leading to greater ethical vulnerabilities when these consumers face amplified exploitation, challenging trait-based models and highlighting the need for platform interventions (Lac & Brack, 2018). Protective mechanisms, such as tolerance levels or past experience, serve as moderators in drunk shopping, in which lower alcohol tolerance increases myopia's effects, making even mild cues persuasive. However, these mechanisms are not uniformly protective, as habituation can lessen risk awareness of individuals with high alcohol tolerance, leading to subtler but persistent vulnerabilities. Given this moderation dynamic, marketing practices should account for variability; for example, platform interfaces could adjust cue intensity on the basis of inferred impairment times, ensuring deontological respect for all users. The under-perception of highly tolerant drinkers' resistance creates theoretical tension by inverting

assumptions that experience mitigates harm and instead amplifying ethical risks through complacency. This notion extends consumer ethics debates by advocating for universal safeguards (e.g., spending limits on platforms) and thereby promoting utilitarian equity. By highlighting this paradox, proposition 5 urges firms to adopt virtue-based ethics (e.g., justice, care) in platform design and to proactively support self-regulation.

In addition, individuals can have different tendencies to shopping (e.g., sensation-seeking, propensity to impulse buy, compulsive use of social media), which can affect their emotions and thoughts while drunk. For example, excessive use of social media can contribute to stress, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and other mental health disorders (Roberts et al., 2019); these conditions can also initiate a spiral of irrational consumption, leading to compulsive-buying behavior while drunk in an attempt to achieve psychological relief from these afflictions (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Williams & Grisham, 2012). This is because alcohol can impair executive functioning (Fleming et al., 2013). Thus:

Proposition 6 *Sensation-seeking traits strengthen myopia's effects on purchases.*

According to alcohol myopia theory, traits interact with expectancies to prioritize desirability cues, while post-myopia reversal causes unexpected commitment failures, weakening long-term ethical self-regulation. Thus, firms should adopt ethical approaches to promote reflective traits over impulsive affordances (Sevincer & Oettingen, 2014). Sensation-seeking traits heighten myopia's influence, making online cues seem irresistible to high-sensation seekers, who pursue novel or thrilling purchases under intoxication. These types of consumers focus on desirability, ignoring inhibitors, and engaging in risky behaviors. Ethically, this trait moderation means that firms need to consider personal vulnerabilities in platform design and implement normative criteria (e.g., safeguards) to mitigate exploitation and uphold utilitarian welfare.

For high-sensation seekers, when sober, initial trait-driven enthusiasm dissipates, eroding ethical self-regulation more than it does for low-sensation seekers. This situation challenges trait-stable models and advances marketing ethics by proposing virtue-based interventions that help individuals build reflective habits, ensuring that platforms embody care rather than capitalizing on impulsivity.

We also argue that individuals can be affected by socio-cultural factors (e.g., social media influencers' posts, posts from peers), fostering impulse-buying behavior while drunk. Indeed, some individuals (e.g., college students) post their drinking behavior on social media (Moreno et al., 2010) or other activities they do while drunk. Examples of such posts include photographs with drinks on the table, group

party pictures in which people are holding alcoholic drinks (Beullens & Schepers, 2013), and items they have bought while drunk (Gabulaitè, 2017). These positive social posts are likely to enhance the perception that drinking alcohol is normal and “fun” and confirm that either posting or seeing alcohol posts can increase alcohol use (Geusens & Beullens, 2023).

Being in a social setting in which others are engaging in shopping or being exposed to advertisements or social media posts about sales or deals may increase the likelihood of someone participating in shopping while drunk (Hendriks et al., 2020). Influencers, who build their audiences through social media, are especially persuasive because they can create strong feelings of intimacy (Berryman & Kavka, 2017), thus leading followers to imitate their behavior; for example, they may discuss when they started drinking or their penchant for many types of alcohol. Thus:

Proposition 7 *Posts from social influencers can increase the likelihood of shopping while drunk.*

Alcohol myopia theory suggests that influencers impact stems not only from their direct persuasion capability but also from consumers’ expectancies, which increase social cues’ power and create tension, as seemingly benign posts (e.g., lifestyle endorsements) erode ethical boundaries when consumers are intoxicated (Lac & Brack, 2018). This situation challenges social proof models by revealing how myopia enables covert exploitation, thereby calling for consumer ethics debates on influencers’ accountability. The strong impact of social media influences on drunk shopping underscores how digital ecosystems amplify posts as impelling cues, particularly given alcohol myopia theory’s narrowed attention. Such influencer posts, that often depict aspirational-driven consumption behaviors (e.g., luxury unboxings or “dupes’ culture” promoting lower-cost alternatives that mimic the esthetic of luxury items), can trigger mimetic desires that override sober persons’ restraints, leading to increased purchase intention. Ethically therefore, such posts raise concerns about platforms’ eagerness to facilitate such influencers. This is especially important since algorithms prioritize viral content without much regard for viewer impairment, thereby potentially violating their deontological responsibility to protect vulnerable users from manipulated social norms. Hence, by framing social influencers as “myopia moderators,” our last proposition calls for ethical audits of content algorithms to ensure that they do not disproportionately target or otherwise exploit intoxicated audiences.

Discussion

Normative Ethical Evaluation of Drunk Shopping

Our framework reveals ethical tensions inherent in drunk shopping, but to advance business ethics scholarship, we must move beyond description to normative prescription. Drawing on core ethical theories, we evaluate firms’ responsibilities and propose criteria for moral marketing in impaired contexts.

From a *deontological perspective*, firms have a responsibility not to exploit consumer vulnerabilities (Laczniak & Murphy, 2006). Intoxicated consumers lack full rational agency—firms that deploy salient and impelling cues violate this duty by treating these individuals as means to profit. Normative criteria could include mandatory safeguards, such as impairment detection (e.g., erratic browsing patterns) to pause transactions, ensuring decisions align with sober intent. Failure to implement such measures constitutes moral negligence, especially when platforms can infer intoxication from behavioral data.

From a *utilitarianism perspective*, firms should assess their actions on the basis of net societal welfare (Laczniak & Murphy, 2006). While drunk shopping increases short-term revenues, it generates consumer harms such as financial debt, regret-induced mental strain, and environmental waste from returns—outweighing benefits for most stakeholders. Even if some consumers derive hedonic “relief” (according to alcohol myopia theory), aggregate utility demands that firms prioritize harm reduction, such as time-based ad restrictions or “cooling-off” periods. Ethical criteria could include cost–benefit audits; for example, platforms could quantify vulnerability exploitation and intervene if harms exceed gains.

Finally, *virtue-based ethics* emphasizes firm characteristics such as justice and care (Laczniak & Murphy, 2006). Responsible marketers could design systems that protect consumers (e.g., through education) rather than prey on their temporary impairments, fostering trust and long-term relationships. These normative lenses prescribe a “vulnerability mitigation mandate” for digital retailers: detect, disclose, and defer impaired transactions. Such a mandate would advance ethical marketing by extending vulnerability theory (Baker et al., 2005) to situational impairments.

Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implication

The contribution of this study to the marketing literature is twofold. First, by linking work across different fields, we broaden “the scope of thinking” (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015) and offer an enhanced view of the phenomenon of drunk

shopping (Jaakkola, 2020). In particular, the synthesis of knowledge from various literature streams (i.e., psychology, neuroscience, marketing, and alcohol) enabled us to provide a theoretical, integrative framework for understanding this phenomenon, the processes by which drunk shopping in online contexts operates, and the contextual factors that may affect it (MacInnis, 2011). We show that drunk consumers adopt a different behavior than sober consumers and also delineate the contextual factors related to “when” (e.g., psychological conditions, genetics, and other factors influencing consumers’ actions) and “who” (e.g., individuals with impulse control disorders) (Newbert et al., 2022), which are important to assess the limits of a given theory.

Second, our proposed model extends both impulse- and compulsive-buying literature in several important ways. While traditional impulse-buying models consider purchasing behaviors spontaneous, driven by emotions and triggered by cues, they assume that individuals are operating under optimal mental capacity (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998). Similarly, compulsive-buying behaviors reflect more long-term vulnerability due to individual traits and emotional regulation (Darrat et al., 2016). In contrast, our framework advances a situational perspective in which temporary cognitive impairment may affect otherwise non-compulsive consumers. By employing the theoretical lens of alcohol myopia theory, our model conceptualizes drunk shopping as a decision-making process altered by a temporary reduction in consumers’ ability to suppress impulses, resist temptations, and override automatic responses in the digital environment. We embed intoxicated consumption in our SOBC model and integrate the digitally engineered marketplace architecture – a dimension that remains underdeveloped in traditional impulse- and compulsive-buying theories even when examined in online contexts (e.g., Iyer et al., 2020). In doing so, we frame digital impulse buying not only as behavior driven by cues in an optimized environment but also as behavior temporarily constrained under intoxication.

Third, we contribute to the business ethics literature specifically. The phenomenon of drunk shopping has distinct ethical implications for marketplace design and firm responsibility. This places drunk shopping directly within ongoing business ethics debates on the accountability of algorithms (Pethig & Kroenung, 2023) and the moral issue of profiting from detectable consumer impairment. Drawing on core theories, we propose that firms and digital retailers have an ethical responsibility to detect, disclose, and defer impaired transactions, a suggestion that advances ethical marketing by extending vulnerability theory (Baker et al., 2005) to situational impairments.

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