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How impulse buying influences compulsive buying: The central role of consumer anxiety and escapism

Aadel A. Darrat[a,*], Mahmoud A. Darrat[b], Douglas Amyx[c]

[a] Department of Management, Marketing, and Business Administration, College of Business, McNeese State University, United States
[b] Department of Business Administration, College of Business, Auburn University at Montgomery, United States
[c] Department of Marketing & Analysis, College of Business, Louisiana Tech University, United States

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ABSTRACT

The paper highlights key research findings regarding compulsive buying behavior and aims at describing and testing the relationship between compulsive buying and an alternative buying phenomenon, i.e. impulse buying. Two common views of the relationship between compulsive and impulse buying are discussed and combined to form a hybrid conceptualization. Results suggest that impulse buying increases anxiety in consumers that is in turn, linked to compulsive buying. Notably, consumer escapism appears to deter the conversion of anxiety into compulsive buying. Results and managerial implications are discussed.

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> "Social problems are dysfunctions of society and—at least potentially—degenerate diseases of the body politic. They are ills. But for the management of institutions and above all, business management, they represent challenges. They are major sources of opportunity."
> (Drucker, 2008, p. 216)

1. Introduction

Expressions such as "shopaholic," "retail therapy," and "shop'til you drop" have become commonplace in popular culture. Reality television shows such as *Intervention* and *Hoarders* may help raise social awareness to the negative consequences of compulsive consumption in general and compulsive buying in particular. On the other hand, reality shows like *Extreme Couponing* portray coupon savvy shoppers that accumulate extremely large quantities of groceries for a fraction of the actual cost. Although these customers are essentially saving money on their purchases, they are also purchasing quantities well beyond their needs simply because the items have been discounted, which in itself, may be compulsive. Arguably, mainstream media programs like these promote awareness among consumers about consumption disorders and the harmful consequences therein.

Compulsive consumption is commonly viewed to be an element of the dark side of consumer behavior (Hirschman, 1991). Compulsive consumption is defined as "a response to an uncontrollable drive or desire to obtain, use, or experience a feeling, substance, or activity that leads an individual to repetitively engage in a behavior that will ultimately cause harm to the individual and/or to others" (O'Guinn and Faber, 1989, p. 148). Research suggests that compulsiveness is manifested in binge eating (Faber et al., 1995), hyperactive online and in-store purchasing (Chang et al., 2011; Johnson and Attmann, 2009), gambling (Balabanis, 2002), hoarding (Cherrier and Ponnor, 2010), credit card misuse (Palan et al., 2011), and unrestrained media usage (Yang, 2006). Faber et al. (1987) assert that people who engage in compulsive behaviors commonly do so in order to cope with stress, to escape demands and pressure, or to overcome unpleasant emotions or situations. Compulsive consumption is a behavioral addiction that may be provoked and sustained by negative emotions or events. Research suggests that consumers often resort to compulsive buying out of their need for affection and sense of belonging (O'Guinn and Faber, 1989). Ironically, such addictions often lead to isolation and estrangement from family and friends.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) to highlight key findings in research regarding compulsive buying behavior, (2) to elaborate on the relationship between compulsive buying and an alternative buying phenomenon, i.e. impulse buying, and (3) to present a model of antecedents to compulsive buying based on coping theory and extant research. Investigating the dark side of consumer behavior can be useful in building social awareness and

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: adarrat@mcneese.edu (A.A. Darrat), mdarrat@aum.edu (M.A. Darrat), damyx@latech.edu (D. Amyx).

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generating potential solutions. Insights from negative consumption behavior like compulsive buying may offer alternative viewpoints or new research perspectives for understanding the personal and psychological factors driving consumer behavior. The manuscript investigates whether consumer coping mechanisms such as escapism (fantasizing) impact the conversion of impulse buying into compulsive buying.

1.1. *The nature of compulsive buying*

The technical term for compulsive buying disorder is oniomania, derived from the Greek words *onios* meaning “for sale” and *mania* meaning “insanity.” The root words of the term may imply that compulsive buyers' crazed addiction may be triggered and moderated by sales promotions. Research suggests that compulsive buyers possess greater knowledge of store prices, gain greater transaction value from price promotions, possess higher price consciousness and sale proneness, have greater on-line shopping tendencies, and exhibit higher credit card abuse than non-compulsive buyers (Kukar-Kinney et al., 2012; Palan et al., 2011; Kukar-Kinney et al., 2009; Park and Burns, 2005; Roberts, 1998; d'Astous, 1990). Neurological research reveals that the brain activity in decision-making regions differs significantly between compulsive and non-compulsive buyers (Raab et al., 2011), which could possibly provide an explanation for why compulsive buyers lose control and fall into addiction. In the United States, the prevalence of compulsive buying behavior among consumers is estimated to be 5.8%, the vast majority of whom, roughly 80%, are female (Koran et al., 2006).

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed an influx of literature on compulsive consumption behavior in general and compulsive buying in particular. Consumer research began by recognizing and defining the phenomenon. Faber and O'Guinn (1988) asserted that it would be a positive early step to develop a diagnostic test in order to identify compulsive consumers. Valence et al. (1988) soon answered this call with the development of a compulsive buying scale framed on consumer anxiety. Faber and O'Guinn (1992) responded with a descriptive seven-item measure that better captures extreme cases of compulsive buying behavior. Over the next two decades, consumer researchers conducted numerous empirical studies using these two compulsive buying scales, including several on psychiatric patients with compulsive habits (Chang et al., 2011; Cole and Sherrell, 1995; Johnson and Attmann, 2009; Lejoyeux et al., 1997; Palan et al., 2011; Cherrier and Ponnor, 2010; Roberts, 1998; Tett et al., 2013). In the marketing discipline, the ‘dark side’ of consumer behavior has become an issue of growing importance with numerous studies examining compulsive buying and its outcomes. That said, relatively less is known about how consumer impulses drive compulsiveness (Ozer and Gultekin, 2015).

1.2. *Impulse vs. compulsive buying*

Impulse and compulsive buying are two nonstandard buying behaviors that are frequently discussed in tandem. However, compulsive buying is not synonymous and should not be confused with impulse buying. It is important to make a clear distinction between addictive, uncontrollable buying (compulsive) and spontaneous, unplanned buying impulses. Rook (1987) asserts:

> “Impulse buying occurs when a consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately. The impulse to buy is hedonically complex and may stimulate emotional conflict. Also, impulse buying is prone to occur with diminished regard for its consequences” (p. 191).

More concisely, impulsive buying describes the tendency to make unplanned and unreflective purchases (Jones et al., 2003). Impulse buying is a much more wide spread phenomenon than compulsive buying, with many consumers exhibiting this type of behavior at some point in purchase encounters.

There are two conceptual views that are often employed to explain the relationship or differences between compulsive and impulsive buying. The first of these perspectives contends that consumers are positioned along a continuum of ‘urgency to buy’, and those in the upper extreme are compulsive buyers (d'Astous, 1990). Thus, impulse buyers and compulsive buyers lie on different ends of a spectrum, where compulsive buying represents an extreme urge to buy. This ‘urge to buy continuum’ conceptualization raises some interesting questions. In particular, could repeated impulses and unplanned purchases be an early sign, or trigger for compulsive buying behavior?

An alternative conceptualization focuses on the underlying emotional factors that contribute to compulsive behaviors (Faber and Christenson, 1996). Positive affect refers to the entire spectrum of pleasurable feelings or emotions such as happiness, enjoyment, excitement, enthusiasm, energy, and satisfaction. Negative affect, on the other hand, includes the whole range of unpleasant mood emotions such as depression, anger, nervousness, stressfulness, anxiety, and fear (Watson et al., 1988).

Trait activation theory describes the interaction between a person's traits and/or enduring affective states and the corresponding situation (Tett et al., 2013). Trait manifestation occurs upon stimulation from situational triggers that, in turn, influence a person's behavior. Flight et al. (2012) argue that the role of consumers' sense of affect in compulsive and impulsive buying is a primary differentiator between the two buying behaviors. Their research suggests that positive affect is associated with the tendency to buy impulsively, while negative affect is associated with inherently compulsive buying tendencies (Flight et al., 2012). However, research findings on these issues in marketing and psychology literature have been largely inconsistent. For example, research has also linked impulse buying to consumers' negative affect (Silvera et al., 2008; Verplanken et al., 2005). Perhaps a hybrid conceptualization of the two buying behaviors, discussed next, would serve to better explain the mixed findings in the literature.

1.3. *Hybrid conceptualization*

Valence et al. (1988) suggest that three forces combine to form the basis for the process of engaging in an act of compulsive buying: strong emotional activation, high cognitive control, and high reactivity. Furthermore, these authors state that “the difference between compulsive buying and impulse buying is somehow the whole cognitive process which leads a person to associate a prompt readjustment of his affective disequilibrium to the buying act, and this, through his or her cognitive associations” (p. 420). Essentially, the level of self-control for compulsive buyers is very low to nonexistent, while the level of self-control for impulse buyers is relatively higher. Hoch and Loewenstein (1991) provide an excellent conceptualization of consumer self-control and explain it as a conflict between two opposing psychological forces, i.e. desire and willpower. Desire is defined as initiating hedonic forces that drive our buying impulses, while willpower is the various strategies used to overcome desire.

The two conceptual views, i.e. “the urge to buy continuum” and “the affective states,” can be combined with Hoch and Loewenstein's model of consumer self-control to explain the fundamental differences between impulse buying and compulsive buying. The typical impulse buyer makes occasional spontaneous, unplanned purchases that are driven by positive affect. If the impulse buyer

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