



Balancing the balance: Self-control mechanisms and compulsive buying

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has mainly focused on identifying why compulsive buyers engage in excessive buying, while their attempts to control problematic buying behavior have largely been ignored. The present research examines the self-control attempts of compulsive buyers. Study 1 uses qualitative in-depth interviews to provide initial insights into the self-control attempts of compulsive buyers. Study 2 adopts a quantitative survey approach, and examines how prudent and compulsive buyers differ in their self-control attempts. The studies demonstrate that compulsive buyers engage in self-control, but differ from prudent buyers in how they apply self-control measures. These differences have implications for interventions that aim to enhance the success of compulsive buyers' self-control.

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1. Introduction

A significant number of consumers constantly overspend due to strong and difficult-to-control urges to acquire goods (e.g., Black, 2007). Previous research has labeled this behavioral pattern 'compulsive buying' (Faber & O'Guinn, 1992; Mueller et al., 2010). Compulsive buying has been defined as "chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings" (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989, p. 155). Faber and O'Guinn (1992) extended this definition by highlighting the difficulty of ceasing to buy, which results in harmful consequences for the affected individuals. Compulsive buying has been estimated to affect 2–8% of US adults (Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney, & Monroe, 2008), with similar rates in other Western countries (e.g., Dittmar, 2005a; Neuner, Raab, & Reisch, 2005). Importantly, compulsive buying can harm not only individuals, but also their family, friends, and even society (Faber & O'Guinn, 1992), as it often results in severely distressed and financially crippled individuals (Dittmar & Drury, 2000).

Two streams of research focus on compulsive buying: (a) consumer research and (b) research in clinical psychology and psychiatry. Both streams adopt slightly different perspectives (Mueller, Mitchel, & de Zwaan, 2015). Consumer research has framed compulsive buying as a problematic variant of consumer behavior (e.g., Faber & O'Guinn, 1992), and has aimed to

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identify factors that accompany or contribute to compulsive buying, such as materialism, weak financial skills, self-discrepancies, or mood (e.g., Donnelly, Ksendzova, & Howell, 2013; Pham, Yap, & Dowling, 2012; Ridgway et al., 2008).

The literature from clinical psychology and psychiatry has conceptualized compulsive buying as a behavioral addiction (e.g., Brewer & Potenza, 2008; Hollander & Allen, 2006) or impulse control disorder (e.g., Dell'Osso, Altamura, Allen, Marazziti, & Hollander, 2006; Pazarlis, Katsigiannopoulos, Papazisis, Bolimou, & Garyfallos, 2008). This line of research "categorizes individuals as suffering or not suffering from CB disorder, and views CB not just as an extreme form of normal buying but rather as a distinct disorder" (Mueller et al., 2015, p.135) and mainly focuses on the psychopathology aspect; its major goal is to develop treatments, such as therapeutic programs (e.g., Mitchell, Burgard, Faber, Crosby, & de Zwaan, 2006; Mueller & Mitchell, 2010). Compulsive buying is not considered a separate disorder in the current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013); nevertheless, various clinical psychology and psychiatry studies refer to the phenomenon as 'compulsive buying disorder' (Black, 2007; Mueller et al., 2008), whereas others use the more general term 'compulsive buying' (e.g., Claes et al., 2010; Mueller et al., 2010).

The present research examines whether and how compulsive buyers try to control their purchasing behavior. We address compulsive buying from a consumer research perspective and focus on consumers who are prone to compulsive buying (hereafter referred to as *compulsive buyers*).¹ Previous literature on compulsive buying has not addressed compulsive buyers' efforts to control their maladaptive buying behavior. While recent studies have indicated that compulsive buyers have lower self-control (Claes et al., 2010; Raab, Elger, Neuner, & Weber, 2011), they have used general trait measures of self-control and not specifically examined consumers' attempts to control buying behavior. Some articles have suggested that compulsive buyers do attempt to control their buying behavior; for instance, Sohn and Choi (2012) indicated that some compulsive buyers try to use self-regulatory coping mechanisms. Likewise, 92% of Christenson et al.'s (1994) compulsive buyer sample reported engaging in activities aimed at controlling buying urges, although these were rarely found to be effective. To develop interventions to help compulsive buyers control their buying, understanding the regulatory efforts compulsive buyers naturally engage in is theoretically and practically valuable.

Examining whether and how compulsive buyers attempt to control their purchasing behavior and how these actions differ from those of non-compulsive buyers (hereafter referred to as *prudent buyers*) makes a twofold contribution to the literature. First, we extend previous work by shedding light on how compulsive buyers try to control their buying behavior. Our in-depth interviews highlight several self-control strategies that compulsive buyers use. Thus, our work provides insights that can be used to develop interventions for strengthening these consumers' self-control. Second, by investigating whether compulsive buyers differ from prudent buyers regarding self-control measures, we emphasize the need for specific interventions for consumers who are prone to compulsive buying.

2. Conceptual framework

At the heart of compulsive buying lies a failure of self-control: consumers engage in behavior that brings immediate, but small, rewards, and forgo delayed, but larger, returns (Baumeister, 2002; Faber & Vohs, 2011). Research on impulse and compensatory purchases has found that most consumers fail to control their purchase behavior occasionally (e.g., Kacen, 1998; Rook & Fisher, 1995). An important difference between momentary lapses and compulsive buying is that compulsive buyers are extremely ineffective in controlling their purchasing behavior, and engage in repetitive, often chronic, excessive purchasing (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989).

However, the fact that compulsive buyers are repeatedly ineffective in controlling their buying urge does not mean that they do not, to some extent, try to control their purchase behavior. Dittmar and Drury (2000) found that compulsive buyers exhibit a high degree of reflexivity on their purchasing behavior: compulsive buyers reported that the act of purchasing involves "an internal conflict between 'ought' and 'desire'" (p. 126), which sometimes makes them engage in planned buying. These findings are consistent with Baumeister and Heatherton's (1996) claim that self-control failure is not always a purely automatic reaction to irresistible impulses, but involves a number of steps where consumers may fall short. Thus, compulsive buyers can be assumed to engage in self-control attempts, but it remains unclear as to how they try to prevent excessive purchasing, and the extent to which their self-control attempts differ from those of prudent shoppers, who are more successful in controlling buying impulses.

Baumeister (2002) provided a useful framework for examining compulsive buyers' self-control attempts, wherein three components are considered generally necessary for effective self-control to occur: (a) standards and goals, (b) monitoring, and (c) the capacity to implement control.

2.1. Standards and goals of compulsive buyers

In order to be effective in self-control, consumers must possess a goal to regulate their behavior, and this goal must be active at the moment the critical behavior might occur (Baumeister, 2002). In such situations, individuals typically face a conflict between two competing goals: to indulge (e.g., purchase a tempting item), and to resist temptation in order to achieve a higher goal (e.g., save money for retirement). According to Hoch and Loewenstein (1991), impulse purchasing

¹ We reserve the term 'compulsive buying disorder' for pathological patterns of behavior (e.g., Black, 2007); this is not the focus of our research. Nevertheless, a subgroup of individuals who score high on compulsive buying might also qualify for compulsive buying disorder in a clinical sense.

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