



Compulsive buying and life aspirations: An analysis of intrinsic and extrinsic goals



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ABSTRACT

This study intends to gain better insight into the role the life aspirations described in the framework of Self-determination theory play in compulsive buying. Profiles based on the importance and likelihood for extrinsic and intrinsic personal goals in three groups with low, moderate, and high compulsive buying propensities from a general population representative sample ($N = 2159$) were initially established. Moreover, results from MANCOVA analyses showed that the high propensity group obtained significantly higher scores on the importance placed on each and every one of the extrinsic goals of financial success, image, popularity, and conformity, and on the likelihood of attainment of image and conformity. As for the intrinsic aspirations, it was confirmed that while the high risk group presented similar or significantly higher scores on the importance placed to them, they obtained significantly lower scores for the likelihood of attaining all the intrinsic goals of self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling, physical health, and safety. Accordingly, interventions focused on the potentiation of the perceived likelihood of attainment of intrinsic goals, jointly with the reduction of the importance ascribed to extrinsic aspirations, may contribute to the effective treatment and prevention of compulsive buying.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary theoretical frameworks about human motivation generally assume that life aspirations or personal goals constitute the major reason for why a person initiates and persists at a specific behavior. Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) has emerged in this context as one of the most fruitful approaches to the study of volitional conduct and the social and cultural conditions which promote it. Indeed, studies on SDT and, in particular, those of the Goal-Content Theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000), which differentiates between the life aspirations that people pursue in terms of their intrinsic or extrinsic nature, currently represent an important focus of research in psychology, with a large amount of literature highlighting the prominent role that personal goals play in subjective well-being (e.g., Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). Intrinsic goals including self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling, and physical health have been traditionally defined as those inherently satisfying because they are aimed at the satisfaction of the innate higher order psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, competence, growth and self-actualization,

which are considered by SDT as the cornerstone of psychological health (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Maslow, 1954). On the other hand, the extrinsic goals of financial success, image and popularity are closely related to the construct of materialism, and the lower order needs of sustenance and safety, being typically perceived as a means to achieve some other end like contingent external approval or rewards (Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

Over the last few decades, a widespread consensus has been reached recognizing that people who give priority to intrinsic life aspirations, with its marked organismic character (e.g., Maslow, 1954) and focus on the “being” (Fromm, 1976), instead of the engagement in “having” (i.e., the extrinsic goals), generally experience higher levels of subjective well-being (e.g., Chan & Joseph, 2000). In the other side of the coin, experts have pointed out that the over importance given to the widespread extrinsic life aspirations encouraged by modern capitalist culture is associated with increases in psychological malaise (e.g., Kasser, 2002), and a higher risk for a variety of problems like alcoholism (e.g., Shamloo & Cox, 2010), and bulimic symptoms (e.g., Verstuyf, Vansteenkiste, & Soenens, 2012). Notwithstanding, it is surprising to see the scarcity of studies about the potential role of personal goals in compulsive buying, a behavioral pattern forged in modern consumer societies characterized by aggressive marketing strategies designed to promote and strengthen the endorsement of extrinsic goals and materialistic values which, in the end, spur the individual to continually

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buy more and more products. It is precisely in this framework where it seems urgent and necessary to analyze the role that the intrinsic and extrinsic life aspirations play in this serious problem.

Compulsive buying has been described in terms of the intense preoccupations with buying that lead to chronic and repetitive purchasing episodes, providing short-term positive rewards such as pleasure, or relief of negative emotions, but which ultimately result in long-term negative consequences including psychological distress, financial ills, and interpersonal problems (e.g., O’Guinn and Faber, 1989). The importance of this phenomenon became evident in some studies exploring compulsive buying prevalence in different countries. Indeed, research, starting with general population based samples, has revealed percentages of 6.9% in Germany (Mueller et al., 2010), and 7.1% in Spain (Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2014). At the same time, many efforts have been made in the attempt to identify the determinants that might be implied in the development of this problem. In this regard, it has been consistently demonstrated that psychological variables including materialistic values (e.g., Dittmar, 2005), self-esteem (e.g., Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004), and the personality traits of neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness (e.g., Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2013a, 2013b) often play an important role in the shaping of compulsive buying. Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, the study by Roberts and Pirog (2004) is the only one which has examined the interrelationships between compulsive buying and the aforementioned key determinants for human motivation, that is to say, life aspirations. The authors of that study, employing a sample of American college students, confirmed that while the extrinsic goals of financial success and attractiveness were positively related with compulsive buying, there was a negative link between this phenomenon and the intrinsic life aspirations of self-acceptance and community feeling.

Taking into account this previous research, the current study intends to extend present knowledge about compulsive buying in the context of SDT by means of the identification of the life aspirations which make up the constellation of personal goals underlying the propensity for this problem. With this being our aim, we have explored the potential role of personal goals in compulsive buying in a sociocultural context that has not previously been considered; moreover, we have ensured the representativeness of the participants with respect to the general population. These characteristics represent, therefore, some of the most important features of the current study, which, starting from distinct groups established *a priori* on the basis of their compulsive buying tendency (low, moderate, and high), has as its main objectives: first, to determine if different profiles of both importance and likelihood of extrinsic and intrinsic goals exist within the categories (low, moderate, and high) of propensity for compulsive buying; and, secondly, to verify whether there are statistically significant differences in the importance and likelihood of personal goals with regards to the compulsive buying tendency. In view of the scarcity of available literature on life aspirations, it could be hypothesized that subjects with a high compulsive buying risk, in contrast to people with low and moderate tendencies, show a profile characterized by high levels of importance and likelihood in extrinsic goals, and low scores for importance and likelihood with respect to the intrinsic life aspirations.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

This study was developed in the framework of a large research project on compulsive buying among the population from the Autonomous Community of Galicia (Spain). Data for the current

study was collected between September 2012 and April 2013. In order to obtain a representative sample from the Galician general population, members of the research group and hired personnel – who collaborated in the recruitment of participants after a training period – followed a random routes procedure, which made possible the giving of adequate coverage to the distinct urban streets, neighbourhoods, and rural areas in this region. Once on site, researchers and hired personnel employed a door-to-door recruitment procedure and individually presented potential participants the possibility to take part in the study. Those who voluntarily accepted to participate and met the inclusion criteria (being between 15 and 65 years of age, currently not under psychopharmacological treatment or psychotherapy, and having no other current impulse control disorder other than compulsive buying) received a paper-version of the battery of self-reports, and precise information on how to complete it. They were also given a pre-addressed, postage paid envelope that, after filling in the questionnaires, were to be submitted by mail in approximately three weeks. The study was conducted in compliance with the Helsinki Declaration, and it was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Santiago of Compostela. Accordingly, written informed consent was obtained, and the confidentiality of the data was guaranteed. The return rate was 41.6%.

2.2. Participants

In ensuring the representativeness of the general population for the sample included in this study, we counted on the assistance of a consulting firm of sociologists, who recommended the employment of a quota sampling procedure. This method entailed random selection of subjects from the global data file providing a sample that reproduced the same proportions for different population criteria such as gender, mean age, education, and marital status present in the general Galician population according to the 2011 census, the last completed in this region. Specifically, the resulting sample was comprised of 2159 participants, 1038 males (48.1%) and 1121 females (51.9%), with a mean age of 35.4 years ($SD = 13.24$). As for marital status, 42.1% lived with a partner, 22.9% were single, and the remainder were separated, divorced or widowed. As for education level, 20.2% of the sample had completed primary education, 62% secondary education, and 17.8% had a university degree.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Compulsive buying

The Spanish translated version of the German Compulsive Buying Scale (GCBS; Reisch, 2001) was used in assessing compulsive buying. This measure includes 16 statements that should be answered on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The global score (range: 16–64) is considered an indicator of the compulsive buying propensity. GCBS has demonstrated adequate psychometric properties in other research, including Spanish samples (e.g., Otero-López, Villardefrancos, Castro, & Santiago, 2011), and in the current study Cronbach’s alpha was .90. For purposes of this investigation, participants were classified into three groups according to their GCBS total score. Namely, we considered, in accordance with some previous studies (Mueller et al., 2010; Reisch, 2001), the cut-off score of two standard deviations above the mean value of the group in GCBS. Given that the mean GCBS score in the total sample was 28.9, and the standard deviation was 7.9, a mark of 45 was taken as the cut-off score for classifying subjects in the “High” propensity group. Accordingly, subjects whose GCBS score ranged from 45 to 64 were included in the “High” propensity group ($n = 153$; 7.1% of the total sample), and participants with a score ranging from 16 to 33 were

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