

## The Relationship Between Consumers' Tendencies to Buy Compulsively and Their Motivations to Shop and Buy on the Internet

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### Abstract

This paper presents the results of a survey of customers of an Internet clothing retailer examining how consumers' preferences to shop and buy on the Internet rather than at bricks-and-mortar stores differ depending on their compulsive buying tendencies. Using shopping motivations such as seeking product and information variety, the ability to buy unobserved, avoiding social interactions, and experiencing positive feelings during shopping and buying, we find a positive linear relationship between a tendency to buy compulsively and Internet shopping and buying motivations. The research demonstrates that the items used to measure these motivations can also be used to identify buyers who have a tendency to buy compulsively. The paper also offers important retailing, managerial and public policy implications of the findings.

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between consumers' motivations to shop and buy on the Internet as compared to bricks-and-mortar stores and their tendencies to buy compulsively. For over 20 years, researchers in marketing and consumer behavior have explored what can be referred to as an abnormal consumption behavior—compulsive buying (Faber and O'Guinn 1992; O'Guinn and Faber 1989). Compulsive buying refers to a consumers' tendency to be preoccupied with buying that is revealed through repetitive buying and a lack of impulse control over buying (Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney, and Monroe 2008). Compulsive buying may result in numerous negative consequences for the affected consumers, such as financial problems, emotional harm (e.g., negative feelings, feeling guilty), and social and relationship problems (Faber and O'Guinn 1992). Numerous research articles, popular press articles, books, and websites dedicated to compulsive buying and problems it may cause show that the issue remains of concern

today (e.g., Benson 2000; Faber and Christenson 1996; Seligman 2003; [www.stoppingovershopping.com](http://www.stoppingovershopping.com)). Recently it has been estimated that between 5.8 percent (Koran et al. 2006) and 8.9 percent (Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney, and Monroe 2008) of the U.S. population could be compulsive buyers.

In addition to the current interest in compulsive buying, the importance of Internet retailing also has been growing steadily (Grewal, Iyer, and Levy 2004). Reports indicate that approximately 70 percent of consumers are using the Internet to buy products (Plunkett Research Ltd. 2007). For 2007, it was estimated that total retail Internet sales ranged between \$136B and \$175B, with an annual growth rate near 20 percent (Forrester Research Inc. 2007; U.S. Census Bureau 2007). Moreover, relative to bricks-and-mortar sales, the percentage of Internet sales is increasing (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). Investigating the relationship between Internet buying and compulsive buying is important because the Internet retail environment possesses characteristics that seem to encourage compulsive buying. For example, the Internet offers the opportunity to buy frequently, at any time, and unobserved. Also, the Internet allows consumers to satisfy an urge to buy more quickly. (Indeed, quite a few Internet retailers encourage "Express Checkout", which means that once a customer enters their email and password, just one click completes the order.)

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The goal of the present research is to enhance our knowledge about compulsive buying in the Internet retailing environment. Building on previous research on compulsive buying and on the influence of the Internet on purchasing behavior, we investigate how consumers' motivations to shop and buy on the Internet differ depending on their compulsive buying tendencies. We find that, compared to shoppers with low compulsive buying tendencies, consumers with higher compulsive buying tendencies prefer shopping and buying online over traditional stores to: avoid social interactions, buy unobserved, and experience immediate positive feelings.

Another important contribution of this research is the development of measures of shopping and buying motivations that can be useful for predicting consumers' tendencies to buy compulsively. We show that the identified motivations can be used to cluster consumers into different segments depending on their shopping and purchase behaviors. Because of an e-tailer's cooperation, we were able to match consumer actual purchase data with survey (i.e., self-report) responses. This enabled us to validate the shopping motivations and the resulting consumer segments with actual buying behavior, allowing us to minimize any potential common-method bias. The research has important managerial and consumer research implications with regards to customer segmentation, communication strategies, ways of identifying compulsive buyers, and explaining the reasons for consumers' choice of online or offline retail channels. Finally, the research offers public policy implications.

### Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Motivation has been defined as goal-directed arousal (Park and Mittal 1985). In the current context, the goal, and our focus, is restricted to consumer shopping or buying activities and motivations. The topic of shopping and buying motivations has been of interest in marketing research for some time. For example, several typologies have been developed for retail shopping motivations (Bellenger and Korgaonka 1980; Moschis 1976; Westbrook and Black 1985). Motives studied have included product-oriented motives, experiential motives (including the recreational and hedonic aspects of buying), shopping convenience, information search, recreational shopping, and variety seeking (Arnold and Reynolds 2003; Darden and Ashton 1975; Dawson, Bloch, and Ridgway 1990). One typology developed for Internet shoppers includes the convenience shopper, the variety seeker, the store-oriented shopper and the balanced buyer (Rohm and Swaminathan 2004). Recently, researchers found significant differences between Internet shoppers with utilitarian motives and hedonic motives (To, Liao, and Lin 2007). Similarly, Noble, Griffith, and Adjie (2006) compared information search, price comparison, uniqueness seeking, product assortment, convenience seeking, social interaction and browsing as Internet shopping motives. We selected the motivations used in this research based on Noble, Griffith, and Adjie (2006), to select the motivations used in this research. Further, to develop the hypotheses linking motivations with compulsive buying tendencies, we draw on previous research on compulsive buying (e.g.,

Dittmar and Drury 2000; Faber and O'Guinn 1992; McElroy et al. 1994).

#### *Ability to buy unobserved and to avoid social interaction*

Compulsive buyers have been found to experience shame, guilt, and regret because of their frequent buying episodes (O'Guinn and Faber 1989). Because of these feelings, compulsive buyers may not want others (including family members) to see what, how frequently, and how much they buy. Consequently, these consumers may feel the need to hide their buying activities. Also, they may fear that instant recognition by sales clerks labels them as buyers who buy too often (Lee, Lennon, and Rudd 2000). Compared to the bricks-and-mortar store environment, the Internet retail environment enables consumers to be alone while shopping and buying, and offers a low to non-existent level of social interaction, as it is free of direct, face-to-face social contact (Alba et al. 1997). Because of these features, the motivations to: (1) shop and buy unobserved, and (2) avoid social interactions will be more strongly associated with preferences for Internet buying by compulsive relative to non-compulsive buyers. Therefore, we propose a positive relationship between these motives and consumers' compulsive buying tendencies.

*H1: There will be a positive relationship between consumers' motivation to shop and buy unobserved on the Internet and their compulsive buying tendencies.*

*H2: There will be a positive relationship between consumers' motivation to avoid social interactions while shopping on the Internet and their compulsive buying tendencies.*

#### *Variety and choice*

Compulsive buyers desire to experience positive, stimulating feelings while buying (Faber and O'Guinn 1992). When feeling down, compulsive buying can help them relieve the negative feelings by producing a temporary "high" (Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney, and Monroe 2008). Greater product variety provides compulsive buyers with a way to achieve more positive feelings, as it offers a more stimulating and exciting buying experience (McAlister and Pessemier 1982). Relative to a bricks-and-mortar store environment, the Internet enables consumers to shop for and buy products across a much larger number and variety of stores, products, and brands that may otherwise be inaccessible. Consequently, the greater the consumers' compulsive buying tendencies, the greater should be their motivation to shop and buy on the Internet due to the ability to access a larger number of products and brands via Internet relative to bricks-and-mortar stores.

*H3: There will be a positive relationship between consumers' motivation to shop and buy on the Internet and their compulsive buying tendencies because of the ability to access a large variety of products.*

#### *Information search*

The Internet environment offers vast amounts of information. The existence of search engines and shopping robots can help consumers identify greater amounts of pertinent information than could be found in a bricks-and-mortar setting (Alba et

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