

Shorter communication

## Comparison of treatment seeking compulsive buyers in Germany and the United States

Astrid Mueller<sup>a,\*</sup>, James E. Mitchell<sup>b</sup>, Christian Mertens<sup>a</sup>, Ulrike Mueller<sup>a</sup>,  
Andrea Silbermann<sup>a</sup>, Melissa Burgard<sup>b</sup>, Martina de Zwaan<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Schwabachanlage 6,  
D 91054 Erlangen, Germany*

<sup>b</sup>*Neuropsychiatric Research Institute and Department of Clinical Neuroscience, School of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of North  
Dakota, Fargo, North Dakota*

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The aim of this pilot study was to compare a German (Bavaria) and an American (North Dakota) sample of women suffering from compulsive buying.

**Method:** Thirty-eight German and 39 American female compulsive buyers were screened with the Compulsive Buying Scale (CBS), and the Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale-Shopping Version (Y-BOCS-SV) prior to entering a group treatment study. Psychiatric co-morbidity was assessed with the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV Axis I disorders (SCID).

**Results:** There were no statistically significant differences between the German sample and the American sample with regard to age (mean 43.7 and 45 years, respectively), and with regard to the scores on the CBS and the Y-BOCS-SV. A high lifetime co-morbidity rate with Axis I disorders, especially mood disorders, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, OCD, and binge eating disorder was detected in both samples. Almost all participants met criteria for at least one lifetime Axis I disorder. However, German compulsive buyers showed significantly higher current prevalence rates of any affective disorder, and higher current and lifetime prevalence rates of any anxiety disorder and somatoform disorder. In addition, German compulsive buyers were significantly more likely to have more than one Axis I disorder.

**Conclusion:** The groups did not differ with regard to age and with regard to the severity of compulsive buying and showed a high co-morbidity with Axis I disorders. However, the German compulsive buying sample presented with significantly more psychiatric co-morbidity compared to the American sample. Further research is needed to provide a better understanding of this disorder in general and cross-culturally.

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\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +499131 8534890; fax: +499131 8534145.

E-mail address: [astrid.mueller@psych.imed.uni-erlangen.de](mailto:astrid.mueller@psych.imed.uni-erlangen.de) (A. Mueller).

## Introduction

Compulsive buying is characterized by shopping and spending behaviour that causes marked distress and results in social and financial problems (Faber & O'Guinn, 1992; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Historically, Kraepelin (Kraepelin, 1909) and Bleuler (Bleuler, 1923) first described this phenomenon as "oniomania". Even though the research on this topic has increased over the last 10 years and literature has been reviewed in several publications (Black, 1996, 2001; Black, Monahan, Schlosser, & Repertinger, 2001; Faber & O'Guinn, 1992; Faber, O'Guinn, & Krych, 1987; Müller, Reinecker, Jacobi, Reisch, & de Zwaan, 2005; Scherhorn, Reisch, & Raab, 1990), this disorder is frequently overlooked in routine clinical practise. Compulsive buying is classified in DSM-IV as an impulse control disorder not otherwise specified. Preliminary findings suggest that compulsive buying is more common in women.

It is generally acknowledged that compulsive buying is associated with high rates of psychiatric co-morbidity, particularly mood and anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and disorders of impulse control, particularly pathological gambling (Black, Gabel, Hansen, & Schlosser, 2000; Faber, Christenson, de Zwaan, & Mitchell, 1995; Frost et al., 1998; McElroy, Keck, Pope, Smith, & Strakowski, 1994; Ninan et al., 2000; Schlosser, Black, Repertinger, & Freet, 1994). The results of previous controlled and uncontrolled studies are described in more detail in Table 1. Three American controlled studies have reported on lifetime psychiatric co-morbidity of compulsive buyers compared with normal buyers. Black et al. (Black, Repertinger, Gaffney, & Gabel, 1998) found higher rates of lifetime mood disorders (especially major depression) among compulsive buyers ( $n = 33$ ) compared with non-compulsive subjects ( $n = 22$ ). Christenson et al. (Christenson et al., 1994) detected higher lifetime prevalence rates of anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, and eating disorders in a group of compulsive buyers ( $n = 24$ ) compared with normal buyers ( $n = 24$ ). Mitchell et al. (Mitchell et al., 2002) reported that only substance abuse or dependence were significantly more frequent among compulsive buyers ( $n = 19$ ) compared with controls ( $n = 20$ ). Little has been published about co-morbid personality disorders or traits (Schlosser et al., 1994).

In 1992, Faber and O'Guinn found that 8.1 percent of a general population sample ( $n = 292$ ) could be classified as compulsive buyers. In 1991, a representative survey was conducted in Germany (Scherhorn et al., 1990) in a sample of 1454 German consumers. The results showed that 5.1 percent of the West German population and 1 percent of the East German population could be classified as compulsive buyers. Ten years later the survey was repeated in a sample of 1017 consumers (Neuner, Raab, & Reisch, 2005), which revealed a marked increase in compulsive buying in Germany. The findings in 2001 suggest that 8 percent of the West German and 6.5 percent of the East German consumers could be classified as compulsive buyers. Due to a lack of epidemiological studies, the current prevalence of compulsive buying in USA is unknown. Compulsive buying has increased markedly in Germany over the last decade, and probably has increased in the US as well.

There exists no standard treatment for compulsive buying. Some open trials have shown improvement with antidepressants (usually SSRIs), mood stabilizers or opioid antagonists (naltrexone) (Black, Monahan, & Gabel, 1997; Grant, 2003; Kim, 1998; Koran, Bullock, Hartston, Elliott, & D'Andrea, 2002; Koran, Chuong, Bullock, & Smith, 2003; Lejoyeux, Hourtané, & Adès, 1995; McElroy et al., 1994; McElroy, Satlin, Pope, Keck, & Hudson, 1991). However, two randomized controlled trials found no superiority for fluvoxamine over placebo (Black et al., 2000; Ninan et al., 2000).

There are only a few case studies on psychotherapy (Bernik, Akerman, Amartal, & Braun, 1996; Krueger, 1988; Lawrence, 1990; Winestine, 1985). The positive results of a randomized pilot study suggest that a cognitive behavioural group therapy may be effective (Mitchell, Burgard, Faber, Crosby, & de Zwaan, 2006).

There is a lack of cross-cultural comparisons on descriptive characteristics and psychiatric co-morbidity of compulsive buyers. We are aware of only one group of researchers who presented cross-cultural data comparing 242 undergraduate students from the US and 201 undergraduate students from South Korea (Kwak, Zinkhan, & Crask, 2003; Kwak, Zinkhan, & Roushanzamir, 2004). In a questionnaire study they found a high co-morbidity between those with compulsive buying behaviour (measured with the CBS), substance abuse, and compulsive gamblers or lottery players in both countries. The aim of this pilot study was to compare the psychiatric co-morbidity of a German (Bavaria) and an American (North Dakota) group of women suffering from compulsive buying. In both countries participants were recruited for a treatment study

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