

COMPULSIVE BUYING AMONG COLLEGE GIRL STUDENTS: AN INVESTIGATION OF ITS ANTECEDENTS, CONSEQUENCES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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Abstract: Compulsive buying has been described as chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings. This study is an investigation of the incidence, consequences and public policy implication of compulsive buying among college going girl students. Using Faber & O'Guinn's (1992) clinical screener for compulsive buying, around six percent of the sample girl students termed as compulsive buyers. Factors such as psychological, sociological, and demographic influences on the sample were studied. Also hierarchical regression found that the factor driving compulsive buying was credit card use with $\beta = .58$; $p < .01$, wherein $R^2 = .57$. 't' test confirmed that age is not correlated significantly with compulsive buying with 't' value=2.28, $p=.023$. Consumer policy implications are discussed, and suggestions are offered.

Introduction: Compulsive buying has been described as "chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings" (O'Guinn and Faber 1989, 155). Most of the research on compulsive buying has addressed this behavior in the adult population and has focused largely on self-identified samples of compulsive buyers (Faber and O'Guinn 1992; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Scherhorn et al. 1990). Few research studies have investigated the antecedents and incidence of compulsive buying in adolescents and/or young adults (for an exception, see d'Astous, Maltais, and Roberge 1990). For most people, buying is a normal and routine part of everyday life. For compulsive buyers, the inability to control an overpowering impulse to buy pervades their lives and results in significant and sometimes severe consequences. Compulsive buyers buy not so much to obtain utility or service from a purchased commodity as to achieve gratification through the buying process itself. One reason the study of abnormal consumer behavior is important is that these behaviors have severe consequences for both the affected individual and others. Compulsive buyers who amass unmanageable amounts of debt can create economic and emotional problems for themselves and their families. An inability to retire this debt can also adversely affect their creditors. Thus, understanding this problem and providing help for those who suffer from it is not only humanitarian, but in the interest of society as well. Compulsions are "repetitive and seemingly purposeful behaviors that are performed according to certain rules or in a stereotyped fashion" (American Psychiatric Association 1985, p. 234). They are often excessive and ritualistic behaviors designed to alleviate tension, anxiety, or discomfort aroused by an obtrusive thought or obsession. Research on compulsive consumption reveals a number of consistent findings. As discussed by Faber, Christenson, de Zwaan, and Mitchell (1995), compulsive consumption behaviors are associated with low levels of self-esteem, high

levels of depression, and high levels of anxiety. In their summary of the literature, DeSarbo and Edwards (1996) linked compulsive consumption to a number of psychological traits, including "dependence, denial, depression, lack of impulsive control, low self-esteem, approval seeking, anxiety, escape coping tendencies, general compulsiveness, materialism (envy), isolation, excitement seeking, and perfectionism". Today's young adults have been reared in a unique and radically changing environment; therefore, an investigation of the factors which lead to compulsive buying in this generation is warranted. The present study focuses on undergraduate girl students and suggests that a cluster of concurrent factors could lead to high levels of compulsive buying, resulting in serious implications for public policy. The behavioral component of compulsive buying may result in financial problems, including credit card debt and bankruptcy. Roberts (1998) found that credit card misuse is a strong predictor of compulsive buying, while Roberts and Jones (2001) found that credit card use (abuse) moderates the relationship between one's attitudes toward money and compulsive buying. Credit card debt is a significant portion of debt for many individuals seeking protection under the bankruptcy code (Moss 1999). Especially troubling is the fact that compulsive buying can be passed on from parents to their children (d'Astous, Maltais and Roberge 1990, Roberts 1998; Valence et al. 1988), making its growth in society a concern.

Study Objectives: The three objectives of this study are (1) Exploring the psychological antecedents of compulsive buying (2) Exploring the sociological antecedents of compulsive buying ; and (3) discuss the implications of the findings researchers and consumer policy.

Hypothesis Development: Psychological: H₁: Compulsive Buying is negatively associated with self esteem, Sociological:H₂: Compulsive Buying is positively associated with TV viewing,H₃: Compulsive

Buying is positively associated with irrational credit card use. Demographic: H4: Compulsive Buying is negatively associated with age. H5: Compulsive Buying is negatively associated with socio economic status.

Psychological Influence: Self-esteem. Individuals prone to addictive behaviors likely experienced childhood and adolescence marked by feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem (Faber 1992). Low self-esteem has consistently been found to increase the likelihood of compulsive buying (d'Astous et al. 1990; Faber and O'Guinn 1989; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Scherhorn et al. (1990). Desarbo and Edwards (1992) contend that individuals experience fear and guilt because of their inability to control their purchasing behavior. Compulsive buying may be an attempt to temporarily overcome these feelings. . Thus, low self-esteem is posited to be both an antecedent and consequence of compulsive buying. Material acquisitions compensate or reinforce self-esteem in the girls. Compulsive buying and the need for instant gratification are symptomatic of lower self-esteem found in the girl students.

Sociological Influences: Sociological influences are numerous and vision viewing, peer pressure, shopping frequency, similarity and use. Television viewing. Moschis and Churchill (1978) report a positive association between television viewing and materialism among adolescents, and Pollay (1986) suggests that television advertising reinforces the materialistic ideal among members of society. Television viewing has been found to increase the compulsion to buy (Faber and O'Guinn 1988; Rook 1987), and mass media, therefore, plays an important role in consumer socialization. Faber and O'Guinn (1988) cite several reasons for this impact. Researchers have found that, over time, heavy TV viewers begin to believe that the real world is similar to the world depicted on TV. Wealth is portrayed as both desirable and common. Television characters are almost always professionals who live in affluent surroundings. The disparity between what is seen on TV and the viewer's life may create tension and unhappiness because of the viewer's belief that others have more. This may create a desire to have "what everyone else has" and lead to compulsive buying. Because time is very limited on television programs and commercials, information about a character's background or personality is conveyed visually by the luxuriousness of the setting, clothing styles, or the products and brands they are using (Faber and O'Guinn 1988) . Instant gratification is an identified trait among the Baby Bust generation, and acquisitions are seen as a way to gain social acceptance and status (Herbig et al. 1993). Peer pressure. Peer pressure is a strong influence among adolescents and young adults. d'Astous et al. (1990)

found that friends play a significant role in adolescents' consumption experiences. Compulsive buyers are typically guided by responses of others or by other external points of reference (Krueger 1988). Reliance on others for feelings of self-worth and acceptance leads compulsive buyers to depend on appearance or possessions to positively influence others. Peers are seen as potential deviant socialization agents (Moschis and Cox 1989). Credit card use and accessibility. Credit card use stimulates spending and when compared to cash, credit cards lead to greater imprudence. For example, the introduction of credit cards into fast-food restaurants resulted in more sales and transactions that are 50 to 100 percent larger than cash transactions (Ritzer 1995). To many, the money involved in credit card transactions is abstract and unreal. Baby Busters have been raised in a credit card society; they grew up with debt and use credit freely (Ritzer 1995). Credit cards are so profitable that banks and lenders have been eager to give more credit to people who are less able to pay (Direct Selling Education Foundation 1997).

Demographic Correlates Gender. The evidence suggests that the vast majority of compulsive buyers are female (Faber 1992). O'Guinn and Faber (1989) found that 90 percent of their self-identified compulsive buyers were females, and similar percentages were reported by Scherhorn et al. (1990). Women are more likely to have been socialized to derive pleasure from shopping. Herbig et al. (1993) reported that the average female teenager spends 11 hours per weekend at malls. An increase in opportunities and exposure to products may cause an increase in addictive buying (Scherhorn 1990). Age. A negative relationship between age and compulsive buying has been found across a number of studies (d'Astous 1990; d'Astous and Tremblay 1989; O'Guinn and Faber 1989). Socioeconomic status. The proposed inverse relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and compulsive buying has found support in research by d'Astous (1990). However, the majority of research has found either a very weak or nonexistent relationship between SES and compulsive buying (Damon 1988; d'Astous and Tremblay 1988; Krueger 1988; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Scherhorn et al. 1990).

Methodology: The research design is a causal survey design, where the relationship between psychological, sociological and demographic factors was studied with compulsive buying. Quantitative data was collected with the help of standardized questionnaire, and the data was subject to multivariate and regression analysis. A random sample of 100 college girl students was selected from 3 colleges from Delhi University. The seven-item clinical screener for compulsive buying developed by Faber and O'Guinn (1992) was used to gauge compulsive buying in the study's sample. Self-esteem was measured using a 10-

item scale developed by Rosenberg (1965). This scale has a rich history of use and allows for comparison with previous studies. Degree of irrational credit card use was measured using the scale designed by d'Astous (1990). The remaining scales for Demographic factors on compulsive buying were developed by d'Astous et al. (1990).

Table1. Scale Summary Statistics

Variable	No of items in Scale	Scale Mean	Standard Deviation
Self Esteem	10	40.61	4.5
TV Viewing	1	1.07	.8
Credit Cards	1	1.14	.9
Credit Card Use	6	8.25	2.1

The seven-item clinical screener for compulsive buying developed by Faber and O'Guinn (1992) was used to gauge compulsive buying in the study's sample. Compulsive buying is defined as chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings. Rigorous scale development and validation by the authors found the scale to be highly reliable ($\alpha = .95$), one-dimensional, and valid. Alpha for the compulsive buying scale was .70 for the present study. Summary statistics for the study's scales including means, standard deviations, are presented in Table 5. Self-esteem was measured using a 10-item scale developed by Rosenberg (1965). This scale has a rich history of use and allows for comparison with previous studies. Alpha for the present study was .81. Degree of irrational credit card use was measured using the scale designed by d'Astous (1990). Six items tapped the credit card use construct, and response categories included "often," "sometimes," or "never" as related to the subject's credit card usage. Alpha for the credit card use scale was .66

Results : Due to the psychological, sociological, and demographic factors enumerated earlier, it was posited that a large share of the college student would display compulsive buying tendencies compared to earlier studies which investigated compulsive buying using a broader range of adults. Researchers and public policy officials need to have an estimate of the incidence of this type of behavior in this segment of society. Many individuals with the disorder can cause problems for the larger social structure, thereby creating a public policy issue (Ritzer 1995). The present study used the screener for compulsive buying developed by Faber and O'Guinn (1992, 468). The same weighting scheme for each of the seven items of the scale and cutoff point of -1.34 (464) were used to identify compulsive buyers. All respondents who scored less than -1.34 were considered compulsive

buyers (Table 2). The above resulted in six percent of the sample being classified as compulsive buyers.

Hypotheses Tests: The study's hypotheses (Table 1) were tested using correlational analyses. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis using the compulsive buying scale as the dependent variable and the hypothesized influence measures as predictor variables was also employed to view relationships in a multivariate context because of the belief that multiple indicators of compulsive buying exist. The regression analysis also estimated the relative importance of each predictor variable's influence on the sample's compulsive buying. Consistent with previous research, self-esteem was found to be negatively correlated with compulsive buying, supporting H1. Of the sociological factors TV Viewing were classified this way because of this generations heavy TV viewership and shopping habits, the correlations between compulsive buying and TV viewing was positive and significant, supporting H2. Credit card use was found to be positively and significantly ($p < .001$) correlated with compulsive buying, lending support for H3. Age was not found to be significantly correlated with compulsive buying. Thus, H4 was not supported. Family income, was also found not to be significantly correlated with compulsive buying, which does not support H5.

Regression Analysis: To gauge the ability of the study's variables to explain compulsive buying and assess the relative impact of each, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed. It explained 57 percent of the variation in the sample's compulsive buying

Table2 Multiple Regression Results:

Dependent Variable = Compulsive buying

Independent variables	Beta Coefficient
Self Esteem	-.15**
Perceived Social Status	.11*
TV Viewing	.10*
Credit Card Use	.58**
R ²	.57

* $p < .05$

* $p < .01$

The Beta coefficients suggest that credit card use is the most important contributor in explaining compulsive buying, followed by, self-esteem, social status, and TV viewing.

Discussion and implications for consumer policy: The results of this study have important implications for researchers and consumer policy. First, six percent of the samples were identified as compulsive buyers, which is at the upper end of earlier estimates of the incidence of compulsive buying in the adult population. Earlier estimates ranged from one to two percent. This type of behavior may have severe consequences for affected individuals, others around them, and society at

large. Compulsive buying of this magnitude could negatively impact the natural environment. It is essential that we understand why it is that, having so much, we are quickly devouring the earth's resources in our hunger for more (Schmookler 1991). Increases in personal bankruptcies and credit card debt are other possible negative economic aspects of compulsive buying. The FDIC reported recently (September, 2016) that banks suffered \$3.8 billion in losses on credit cards and consumer loans, a 36 percent increase over the same period for the previous year. Personal bankruptcies topped \$1 million in 2016. The Bank of New York added \$350 million to its reserves for bad credit card debt. The amount of credit card debt written off as uncollectable increased to 4.2 percent of total outstanding credit card debts in the first half of 2016. Depression, anxiety, frustration, and low self-esteem affect the compulsive buyer and his/her personal relationships. As posited by Desarbo and Edwards (1992), these mental states are also likely outcomes of compulsive buying. The present study found that 29 percent of the students owned three or more credit cards. Compulsive buying has become more noticeable with the rapid growth in the bank card industry (Faber, O'Guinn and Krych 1987). From a consumer policy perspective, this relationship has important implications. One implication may be that students and younger adults should not be the focus of such aggressive marketing campaigns. They are a vulnerable population and perhaps could benefit from legislation that would restrict, or put qualifications on, credit card marketing. Other options that would protect young adults include

lowering credit limits, requiring minimum income levels, issuing debit cards where students deposit money into an account and then "buy down" the balance, and advertising the hazards of incorrect use of credit cards by the issuers. Currently, most advertising for credit cards appeals to the desire for status and instant gratification. Adolescents and compulsive buyers are particularly vulnerable to such appeals (Faber, O'Guinn and Krych 2014). Subsequent discussion highlights the importance of perceived social status on compulsive buying. The college student market is of great interest to credit card marketers because it is felt that brand loyalty is low and longterm relationships are possible (Coulton 1996). Banks have historically encouraged. One suggested solution to help stem the rising tide of personal bankruptcies and credit card debt has been consumer education on the proper use of credit. Although credit card issuers provide some information on the costs of credit (Coulton 1996) and have run advertisements directed toward its proper use (Jennings 2015), perhaps more could be done. , females are more likely to receive gifts of money and are not generally taught to be money conscious (Furnham and Thomas 1984). Given the amount of advertising and marketing efforts directed toward children and young adults, Cohen (1994) suggests that parents should encourage and cultivate consumer skills in their children as early as possible. Later attempts at consumer education by schools, churches, and others will be more successful if those children have been actively socialized to be competent consumers by their parents (Carlson et al. 1994).

Conclusion: Few studies to date have investigated the incidence and antecedents of compulsive buying in young adults. Due to the factors enumerated earlier, it was posited that students would exhibit high levels of compulsive buying. Using the clinical screener for compulsive buying developed by Faber and O'Guinn (1992), the study's results suggest that six percent of the present sample exhibited compulsive buying tendencies. A hierarchical regression found that the factor driving compulsive buying was credit card use. The policy implications of such a finding were discussed. A person's self-esteem, perceived social status associated with buying, and television viewing were all linked to compulsive buying. The strength of the correlation coefficients warrants further research. It appears that compulsive buying is both a personal and cultural phenomena, suggesting that programs focused on the individual as well as more macro solutions (social status associated with buying, TV viewing) may be helpful in addressing the problem of compulsive buying.

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