

**The Compulsive Consumption Misbehaviour:  
an alternative approach for defining the paradox  
of happiness in the postmodern society**

INTRODUCTION

About one and a half century ago Marx wrote: “A commodity is... an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether for instance they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference”. This is also the idea behind the concept of “ophelimity” in Pareto and the core of the neoclassical epistemological systematization by Robbins.

But Marx was not convinced that such goods might satisfy our needs, stressing the danger that systematic aspirations to material things may create the illusion that possession is a way to happiness. What has recently been defined the paradox of happiness is exactly this: we desire and try to buy more and more, at the same time increasing our distance from happiness.

In the postmodern society consumers are not always aware about their real needs and might indulge in compulsive consumption misbehaviours that might harm themselves or others in some way (other consumers, the environment and society at large). Compulsive consumption behaviour is defined by O’Guinn and Faber (1989) as a “response to an uncontrollable drive or desire to obtain, use, or experience a feeling, substance, or activity that leads an individual to repetitively engage in a behaviour that will ultimately cause harm to the individual and/or to others”.

The aim of this paper is to enquire into the literature on the *compulsive consumption misbehaviour* and provide a critical analysis of the reasons why consumers tend to buy products that they cannot afford – and beyond their apparent, biological or social needs.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

In order to find the causes why individuals engage in a compulsive consuming behaviour, three different but related streams of research can be identified: shopping motivations, shopping value and consumer decision-making styles. That is the reason why consumers are led by their personal and/or social needs (Tauber, 1972) or it can be that the value that consumers find out in their total shopping experience makes them keep going shopping (Babin et al., 1994). Otherwise, consumers seem to approach the retail marketplace with certain decision-making styles which are described as a mental orientation characterising a consumer's approach to making shopping choices (Lysonski et al., 1996; Sproles and Kendall, 1986; Walsh et al., 2001). Motivation is normally defined as "an inner drive that reflects goal-directed arousal" (Arnould et al., 2002, p. 378). In a shopping context, we can define motivation as the driving force within consumers that moves them to take a particular action. Indeed motivation is a basic concept in human behaviour and thus, also in consumer behaviour. This driving force is produced by a state of tension, which exist as a result of an unfulfilled need that moves us away from psychological equilibrium or homeostasis.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, motivated behaviour is an activity meant to achieve a goal or objective. As Maslow's hierarchy of needs demonstrates, not all motives derive from physical drives. Once satisfied their hunger and other physical needs, people are encouraged to buy such items as fashionable clothes or cosmetics. Apparently, the reasons behind this behaviour stem quite separately from those that involve the satisfaction of the physiological drives (also called biogenic drives) of, for example, keeping warm and "needing" to eat and drink in order to survive. A whole range of psychogenic drives (e.g. the desire to be appreciated or to have status or feel "at one with one's self") origin from our social environment, culture and social group interactions. Many, such as Belk et al. (2003), even argue that want (or desire), which is fundamentally social in nature, is the major driving force or motivation behind much of our contemporary consumption.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. Evans, A. Jamal and G. Foxall, *Consumer Behaviour 2th edition*, Wiley, 2009 p.6-10

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem

Each consumer has the same basic need structure, but different specific needs will be shown up in different individuals at various points in time and according to different cultural and social contexts.

As a consequence of an acknowledged study of shopping motivations, Tauber (1972) discovered a number of shopping motivations with the assumption that consumers are motivated by two types of psychosocial needs: personal and social. The personal motives include the needs for role-playing, diversion, self-gratification, learning about new trends, physical activity and sensory

stimulation. The role-playing motive reveals activities that are learned and are expected as part of a certain role or position in society such as mother, housewife or husband. Diversion reflects shopping's ability to give chances to the shopper to get away from the everyday routines and therefore embodies a type of recreation and desire to escape. Self-gratification underlines the shopping's potential to relieve sadness as consumers can spend money and acquire something nice when they are in a bad mood. Physical activity focuses on consumers' need for engaging in physical exercise by walking in spacious and appealing retail centres, especially when they are living in a urban setting. Sensory stimulation highlights the ability of the retail institutions to provide spenders with a lot of sensory benefits in order to make consumers enjoy the physical sensation of handling merchandise, the pleasant background music and the scents. The social motives described by Tauber (1972), on the other hand, entail the needs for social experiences, communication with others, peer group attractions, status and authority, and pleasure in bargaining. The shopping's potential relating to the social and communication motives features give possibilities to socialise, meet and communicate with others with similar hobbies and interests. The peer group attraction emphasizes consumers' desires to be with their reference group, while status and authority mirror shopping's ability to provide opportunities for consumers to attract attention and esteem from others. The pleasure of bargaining reflects consumers' desires and abilities to make wiser decisions by engaging in comparison shopping and special sales.

A large part of consumer behaviour is considered by most of people simply a part of their routines of daily life. Only unusual special or major purchases acquire importance to the typical

consumer. Many consumption activities receive little consideration and require little involvement. However, to some people, consumption itself can become fundamental and deeply involving. It can have major, often severe, consequences for many aspects of their lives. In these cases, consumption becomes dysfunctional, and is often typified by a compulsive quality.

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

In the early 20th century Bleuler<sup>3</sup> and Kraepelin<sup>4</sup> first described compulsive buying misbehaviour in clinical terms. Bleuler writes: "As a last category Kraepelin mentions the buying maniacs (oniomaniacs) in whom even buying is compulsive and leads to senseless contraction of debts with continuous delay of payment until a catastrophe clears the situation a little - a little bit never altogether because they never admit to their debts". Compulsive buying misbehaviour is defined by Bleuler as an example of a "reactive impulse", or "impulsive insanity", which he classified besides kleptomania and pyromania.

"Compulsive consumption" is an expression used for describing a type of consumer behaviour which is not suitable, extremely excessive, and really dangerous to the lives of people who seem to be impulsively driven to buy. The individual who purchases many identical sweaters in different colours because he simply "has to" or because "I felt good in it," even though he knows he cannot afford to pay for it, is a case in point. Even though the effects may have serious consequences on his daily life, the compulsive consumer buys anyway. So no wonder if even normal activities such as opening the mail or answering the phone take on new meaning and must be considered under a different light. Most of compulsive consumer are really afraid of being confronted by another large bill, or angry creditor. Sometimes it could happen people are involved even in criminal activities in order to pay for their bills and maintain their line of credit.

Before the 20th century compulsive buying misbehaviour was not very popular among researchers, but began to get attention

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<sup>3</sup> Bleuler E. New York: Macmillan; 1930. Textbook of psychiatry.

<sup>4</sup> Kraepelin E. 8th ed. Leipzig: Barth; 1915. Psychiatrie.

just from behaviorists<sup>5</sup> and psychoanalysts<sup>6</sup>. Some clinical case series from three independent research groups came into view<sup>7</sup> in the early 1990s and the interest for this topic aroused.

The appropriate classification of Compulsive buying misbehaviour continues to be discussed. Some researchers have linked Compulsive buying misbehaviour to addictive disorders<sup>8</sup>, while others have linked it to obsessive-compulsive disorder<sup>9</sup>, and still others to mood disorders<sup>10</sup>.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF COMPULSIVE MISBEHAVIOUR

According to the literature a number of basic features common across different types of compulsive behaviours (Anderson and Brown 1984; Miller 1980; Russell 1979) have been identified. Among them appear physical and/or psychological dependence on the substance or activity, as well as occasional loss of control regarding the behaviour and subsequent interference with normal life functioning. Other shared features entail the presence of a drive, impulse or urge to engage in the behaviour; denial of the harmful implications of persisting with the behaviour; and repeated defeat in monitoring or changing the behaviour. The compulsive behaviour is often used in order to face stress, escaping demands and pressure or to get through

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<sup>5</sup> O'Guinn TC. Faber RJ. Compulsive buying: a phenomenological exploration. *J Consumer Res.* 1989; pp.147–157; Elliott R. Addictive consumption: function and fragmentation in post-modernity. *J Consumer Policy.* 1994, pp. 159–179; Valence G. D'Astous A. Fortier L. Compulsive buying: concept and measurement. *J Consum Policy.* 1988, pp.419–433; Scherhorn G. Reisch LA. Raab G. Addictive buying in West Germany: an empirical study. *J Consum Policy.* 1990, pp. 355–387.

<sup>6</sup> Krueger DW. On compulsive shopping and spending: a psychodynamic inquiry. *Am J Psychother.* 1988, pp. 574–584; Lawrence L. The psychodynamics of the compulsive female shopper. *Am J Psychoanal.* 1990, 67–70; Winestine MC. Compulsive shopping as a derivative of childhood seduction. *Psychoanal Q.* 1985, pp. 70–72.

<sup>7</sup> McElroy S., Jr Keck PE., Jr Pope HG, Jr, et al. Compulsive buying: a report of 20 cases. *J Clin Psychiatry.* 1994, pp. 242–248; Christenson GA. Faber JR. de Zwann M. Compulsive buying: descriptive characteristics and psychiatric comorbidity. *J Clin Psychiatry.* 1994, pp.5–11; Schlosser S. Black DW. Repertinger S, et al. Compulsive buying: demography, phenomenology, and comorbidity in 46 subjects. *Gen Hosp Psychiatry.* 1994, pp. 205–212.

<sup>8</sup> Krych R. Abnormal consumer behavior: a model of addictive behaviors. *Adv Consum Res.* 1989, pp. 745–748.

<sup>9</sup> Hollander E, editor. *Obsessive-compulsive related disorders.* Washington: American Psychiatric Press; 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Lejoyeux M. Andes J. Tassian V, et al. Phenomenology and psychopathology of uncontrolled buying. *Am J Psychiatry.* 1996, pp.1524–9.

unpleasant emotions or situations. Often a lowered sense of self worth is present. Most of researchers shows that these characteristics are generally found in compulsive consumers.

Compulsive behaviour can sometimes include psychological dependence. Psychological dependence is a clinical term generally used relating to substances. However, it has been used in the context of behaviours such as work, exercise, and sex. In such a context, the dependent individual turns to a behaviour like work in response to some environmental stimulus such as an interpersonal difficulty.

Compulsive spenders often put into action an inappropriate consumption response to various situations. The stimuli may be different from shopper to shopper, but the buying responses were fairly similar. The language adopted by these individuals was also a very indicative sign of a dependency. They would commonly refer to the shopping response as "a need," or something they simply have to do," in response to something else in their lives.

Many, not to say most, compulsive purchasers, consider buying as a way to overcome stress or unpleasant situations. So compulsive consumers' use of shopping is in most cases a way to escape from unhappiness. One section of the questionnaire administered to compulsive consumers by R. J. Faber and T. C. O'Guinn asked shoppers to complete a number of sentences. One sentence fragment read, "I am most likely to buy myself something when . . ." Among respondents, 43.5% completed this sentence by giving a negative emotion such as "I'm depressed" or "feel bad about myself" as their first response. An additional 30.4% talked about negative feelings as some part of their response although not the first thing they mentioned.

Thus, it seems that for at least some compulsive shoppers buying is the most important way of overcoming unhappiness.

Other typical features of compulsive behaviour entail the negative implications of the behaviour and the desire and difficulty of trying to stop buying. Even though the compulsive behaviour may cause severe effects and mess up one's life, the individual persists in this behaviour.

Consumer behaviour researchers revealed a wide array of **negative consequences** associated with the compulsive behaviours. For example: over-extended credit lines, forced sales of property and even writing bad checks or taking money by fraud to cover debts incurred during shopping impulse. Interestingly, many compulsive consumers perceived these acts as desperate, and "unlike" themselves, but had sometimes repeated them several times.

On the basis of several investigations<sup>11</sup> while these individuals may sometimes feel good or excited soon after the act of buying, several of them declare that they get little pleasure or use from the things they purchase. Some people state that after buying they were so afraid that someone would find out (usually their spouse) that they hid their purchases and never used these things. Others stated buying so many things that they never got to use all of them.

Both the fear of being discovered and the act of spending beyond their possibilities have a very bad influence over the lives of many compulsive consumers. Almost all report some feelings of guilt and anxiety over their behaviour. It is, perhaps, this reaction to buying which most clearly distinguishes compulsive spenders from normal consumers.

## CAUSES

Once described the problem, in order to better analyze it, it is important to try to investigate what drives people to become compulsive spenders. This task is easier said than done because little agreement exists in psychology with reference to the underlying causes of compulsive behaviour.

There are a lot of theories meant to explain the etiology of compulsive and addictive behaviours. Most theoretical models focus on biological, psychological or sociological reasons. Biological models propose that there may be a genetic natural tendency to have a compulsive behaviour. In the fields of alcoholism and drug dependency there is increasing support for this viewpoint. Some scholars have hypothesized that compulsive behaviours may be due to varying brain activity. For example, Milkman and Sunderworth (1983) declare that

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<sup>11</sup> O'Guinn TC. Faber RJ. Compulsive buying: a phenomenological exploration. J Consumer Res. 1989

compulsive gambling is an “arousal mode of gratification which effects neurotransmitters in a similar way to amphetamines and cocaine.” Other researchers have suggested that the differences revealed in cortical arousability may be a crucial factor (Anderson and Brown 1984). Still other researchers are investigating the consequences of individual differences in endorphin levels in various types of addicts (Blaszczynski et al. 1986). These data turn out to be suggestive of a neurological substrate for compulsive behaviours.

While according to psychological theories compulsive behaviours help the individual alleviate the stress deriving from pressure to perform or succeed at tasks or caused by low self-esteem. Sociological models suggest that compulsive behaviours originates from peer pressure or from beliefs about cultural norms. These models suggest that society in general and important subgroups, legitimize and may even spur some of these behaviours. The media also contribute by glamorizing these behaviours in entertainment works and commercials, or by making them appear to be expected behaviours.

Most likely, some factors emanating from each of these different theories play a role in contributing to compulsive condition.

Support for psychological and sociological bases for this problem also exist. Compulsive consumers often believe the roots of their problem go back to their childhood.<sup>12</sup> However, there is little agreement over just what kinds of early consumption behaviours may trigger the problem. Some people feel it stems from not having any money of their own to spend when they were young. Others attribute it to not having any controls on their spending. Again, while there may not be one uniform type of raising children which drive to compulsive consumption, some enquiries into childhood consumption activities and parental rules, communication patterns and behaviours may be very useful.

The final area which must be spotlighted concerns the important role played by the advertising and the mass media. It has been found that most of compulsive consumers feel that advertising is not so suggestive for their problem. They think that it is other factors to influence their need to buy. However,

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<sup>12</sup> ibidem

it is possible that advertising and the mass media have a less overt role in promoting this problem. They may encourage the belief that happiness can be found through consumption. Thus, while advertising and media presentations may not provoke this problem, they may spur people with low self-esteem to alleviate their troubles through buying.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude we can affirm that it is in the interest of both people who suffer from compulsive spending and society in general not to underestimate this problem and to try to reduce the incidence of it. Indeed for society, compulsive consumption misbehaviour and credit abuse increase the amount of “bad” debt and drive up interest rates, to say nothing of the human misery it can cause. For the compulsive consumers themselves, this problem can become a nightmare which overwhelms all other parts of their lives.