



Beyond Shopaholism:  
A Socio-Cultural Examination of Compulsive Clothing Buying Behavior

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For many consumers, shopping represents more than just a transaction. Shopping is an opportunity to spend time with others (Underhill, 2009), can be used as a strategy to cope with negative life situations and emotions (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989), and is, for some, even a way of life (Miles, 1998). Thus, it is not surprising to see some consumers become obsessed with buying things. For this reason, research on an extreme form of consumer behavior known as compulsive buying has emerged. Findings from this research indicate that compulsive buyers experience repetitive, irresistible, and uncontrollable urges to acquire goods, typically appearance-related products (e.g., O’Guinn & Faber, 1989). Indeed, evidence suggests that compulsive buyers tend to prefer appearance-related products, to the extent that Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009) defined Compulsive Clothing Buying (CCB) specifically as the “repetitive purchasing of clothing products in response to anxiety and/or stress” (p. 269).

Existing studies point to the extent to which compulsive buying is a socially misunderstood phenomenon, the scope of which has been undermined by the frequent media use of such terms as “retail therapy” and “shopaholic” (e.g., O’Guinn & Faber, 2005) which trivialize the behavior. Moreover, compulsive buying has been the subject of much confusion in the academic literature. This confusion largely stems from an unclear clinical classification of the behavior and a failure to differentiate it from other forms of buying behavior, such as impulsive buying or excessive buying (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989). Moreover, the lack of understanding among the general population regarding what compulsive buying is and what it entails, coupled with the fact that most studies on the topic have been conducted using participants that self-identify as compulsive buyers, further hinders development of a clear understanding of the behavior. Thus, there is a need to examine CCB from different perspectives, including those who have been diagnosed with CCB, those who are at risk for developing it, and those who treat individuals diagnosed with it.

The purpose of this study was to examine CCB within a socio-cultural context that encourages shopping and buying as coping strategies. A qualitative approach was employed to address this purpose. Upon receipt of IRB approval, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 20 participants in the US (16 females, 4 males; 22 to 62 years old) including six mental health providers, six individuals diagnosed as compulsive clothing buyers, and eight individuals at risk for the behavior. All participants were recruited on a referral basis. Interviews lasted from 1 to 3 hours and were conducted in person and online. To ensure a systematic approach to the data collection process, an outline containing between 10 and 15 questions (questions differed for each of the 3 types of participants) was followed. As is the protocol within qualitative research, interviews were conducted with participants until responses reached saturation (Kvale, 1996). Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Following the process proposed by Spiggle

(1994), responses were analyzed thematically by both authors; patterns in the data were identified and labeled, and conceptual links between patterns were defined and differences resolved through discussion. Three core thematic areas emerged and were used to structure the interpretation.

The first thematic area, *Promoting Consumption*, examines participants' perceptions of society's views on consumption. Participants pointed to the ways that US society encourages the acquisition of goods in favor of a healthy economy, thereby teaching individuals to use consumption to communicate status. Mental health providers and compulsive clothing buyers expressed that the media and society in general promotes the shopping mall as a venue where happiness can be achieved and problems can be forgotten. The second area, *Popular Misconceptions*, points to the extent of the lack of sociocultural understanding of CCB. Both compulsive and non-compulsive buyers expressed that society does not see CCB as a serious issue, as it is thought that, unlike alcoholism or drug abuse, individuals should ultimately be able to control their buying behaviors. Compulsive buyers further explained that, for them, clothing shopping is no different than other addictive behaviors. Most participants indicated that terms such as "shopaholic" and "retail therapy" are euphemisms used in the popular media to mask the seriousness of CCB, thereby making it a socially acceptable behavior and, in turn, more difficult to recognize as a problem. The third area, *Potential Consequences*, highlights the implications of these misconceptions. Mental health providers explained that due to the lack of awareness of CCB, individuals often seek therapy not because of CCB but because of some other affliction. Compulsive clothing buyers indicated that the lack of understanding about CCB prompts them to hide the extreme nature of their behavior out of fear that they will be judged by others.

Findings of this study support and expand upon previous research suggesting that messages about consumption and its promotion within contemporary society hinder acceptance of the seriousness of CCB. Moreover, findings offer ways to improve identification of the disorder, and, in turn, to not only provide clarification of issues in research on the topic, but help mental health professionals better identify and treat CCB. In addition, findings suggest approaches to the shopping process that can help consumers gain control over urges to overbuy and potentially overspend. Last, this study highlights the need for further research, especially studies that focus on risk behaviors and the potential role these behaviors play as predisposing CCB factors.

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