CONSUMER CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH COMPULSIVE BUYING

How consumers behave in the marketplace is far from the ideal rational model described by economic theory and sometimes even falls short of the less stringent decision models appearing in consumer behavior texts. In addition to the limits on rationality described as "bounded rationality" or "satisficing," many consumer decisions are driven by emotions or conditioned by the environment. An even less rational pattern of buying is describing as *compulsive buying,* defined as *chronic, repetitive purchasing behaviors that are a response to negative events or feelings* (Babin and Harris 2014, p. 314). Studies of compulsive buying reveal several consumer characteristics systematically associated with and presumed to underlie or motivate compulsive buying. The **purpose** of the present study is to add empirical evidence bearing on these presumed motivators for this non-rational behavior pattern.

THEORETICAL FOCUS

The definition of compulsive shopping suggests that a desire to improve one's feelings motivates it. Brand engagement in self-concept (BESC), however, describes using brands to define who one is and to express this image to others (Sprott et al., 2009). Consumers motivated by BESC might also shop compulsively as they seek brands for their self-concept expressive abilities. Hypothesis 1 is that consumers higher in brand engagement are more likely than others are to shop compulsively. Moreover, buying to gain status, termed status consumption by Eastman et al. (1999), can also be surmised to motivate compulsive buying because status needs are seemingly unlimited, so H2 proposes that high status consumers also tend to be compulsive shoppers (cf, Joireman et al., 2010). Supporting this surmise, Palan et al. (2011) provide evidence that prestige needs motivate student consumers to overuse credit cards and shop excessively. Finally, we surmise that frugality or restrained spending and careful use of goods

operates to reduce compulsive buying, so H3 proposes that frugality is negatively related to compulsive buying.

DATA AND METHOD

The data comes from a survey of undergraduate students at two state universities in the U.S. Southeast. After obtaining IRB approval, the researchers made the survey available to students taking business classes via an online survey administered by Qualtrics. The questionnaire operationalized the constructs via multi-item scales derived from published sources. Compulsive buying was measured by 5 items from Edwards's (1993) longer scale, chosen as a parsimonious measure based on factor loadings reported in the source article. Brand Engagement in Self-Concept was measured using the 8-item scale developed by Sprott et al. (2009). Status consumption was measured by the 5-item scale developed by Eastman et al. (1999). Frugality was operationalized by the 7-item scale described by (Lastovicka et al. 1999). The order in which the scales appeared in the questionnaire was randomized for each respondent and the order in which the individual items appeared was also randomized. In addition, respondent data were collect on gender, age, and income, where the latter used a 9-item scale ranging from $20K or less to $90K or more.

To enhance data quality, the questionnaire contained three questions that stated: "If you read this item, do not respond to it." Responses to any of these three items flagged the respondent as a potentially poor source of data owing to blind checking. Of the original 509 completed questionnaires, 45 respondents were flagged by the three quality items and removed from the analysis, leaving an effective sample size of 464, although missing responses for age (10) and income (4) did reduce samples for some statistical tests. After factor analyzing each multi-item scale to assess its dimensionality (frugality showed two factors), the items were

summed to form composite scales and their internal consistency was assessed by coefficient alpha (see Table 1). The first frugality subscale (Frugal 1) represents careful conservation of money when buying, and the second (Frugal 2) represents reuse and conservation of resources.

FINDINGS

Correlating the composite scores and demographics showed that compulsive buying was uncorrelated with income, negatively correlated with age, and positive with being female. Compulsive buying was also positively related to brand engagement and status buying, but negatively related to frugality. To summarize these findings, consumers more likely to be compulsive shoppers were more likely to be female, to use brands to express their self-concepts, to acquire status, and to be less frugal. Thus, the hypotheses are supported.

Regression analysis (see Table 2) estimates the relative contribution to explained variance ($R^2 = .31$) of each of the variables, where the demographics can be taken as control variables so that we can observe the incremental contributions of the psychological characteristics. The analysis shows that when controlling for the demographics, brand engagement, status consumption, and frugality all explain unique portions of the variance.

DISCUSSION

The present study adds to our knowledge of compulsive shopping by showing that concepts not explicitly studied before are related to it. Being brand engaged and status seeking through buying are positively related to compulsive shopping, while being frugal is negatively related. Public policy makers seeking to mitigate the negative consequences of compulsive shopping can use this information to try to persuade consumes that real self-concept and status do not come from what one owns but from more positive and constructive activities such as doing kindnesses for others, socializing with friends, and generally contributing positively to the

general social welfare. Moreover, frugal consumers are less likely to shop compulsively, so helping consumers to live frugal lifestyles might also have a positive effect.

The limitations of the study lie in the non-representative sample and the choice of variable operationalizations. Representative samples and multi-operationalizations will enhance the generalizability of the findings. Studies of non-U.S. populations will contribute greatly to the global understanding of compulsive buying as well.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Compulsive	13.1	4.7	(.86)							
2. Age	21	3.8	-.10*	--						
3. Gender			-.36**	.04	--					
4. Income	1.5	1.6	.03	.32**	.02	--				
5. BESC	24.6	6.5	.26**	-.02	-.01	.05	(.92)			
6. Status	14.2	3.8	.24**	-.09*	.08	.02	.36**	(.82)		
7. Frugality 1	15.9	2.7	-.35**	-.07	.04	-.05	-.10*	-.19**	(.81)	
8. Frugality 2	8.7	1.0	-.15**	.00	.04	.03	.03	-.11*	.41**	()

Notes: n = 464; coefficient alpha on the diagonal in parentheses; where 0 = female and 1 = male.

Table 2: Results of Regressing Compulsive Buying on the Other Variables

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Variable	β	Part	R^2_{adj}	df	95% CI

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Sex	-.365*	-.363	.313	7/442	.24-.38
Age	-.105*	-.098			
Income	.042	.040			
BESC	.167*	.154			
Status	.147*	.133			
Frugal 1	-.280*	-.249			
Frugal 2	-.012	-.013			

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*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$; 0 = Female, 1 = Male

Notes: n = 450; The Part coefficient in SPSS is the semipartial correlation. The squared

semipartial correlation is the proportion of the total variance in Y that is uniquely attributable to

X_i, that is, the increase in R^2 when X_i is added to the model already containing the variables in

the covariate set (Hayes, 2013, p. 74).