

## **Consumed by Consumption: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Compulsive Clothing Buying Experience**

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While some individuals joke about being a “shopaholic” and “helping the economy” with their purchases, others struggle with the inability to control their shopping and buying behaviors. In the literature, these consumers are known as compulsive buyers and are identified by a tendency to experience repetitive, irresistible, and uncontrollable urges to acquire goods (e.g., Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, & Ertelt, 2010; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989). The compulsive nature of the behavior is caused by the interplay of psychological and sociocultural factors and comes as “a primary response to negative life events, inner deficiencies, or negative feelings” (Neuner, Raab, & Reisch, 2005, p. 510). As consumers who are compulsive buyers tend to prefer clothing over other product categories, Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009) suggested that compulsive buyers may use clothing as a way to enhance impressions and as symbols of the self. Although the authors offer some explanation as to the important role of clothing in compulsive buying, no studies exist that actually investigate why this is the case. In addition, theoretical inconsistencies as well as a lack of unified explanations regarding the behavior point to the need for more in-depth research on the topic. Thus, the purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the compulsive buying experience through an in-depth exploration of what it is like to be a compulsive buyer, and in particular, a compulsive clothing buyer.

To address this purpose, a phenomenological approach to inquiry was employed. Two data collection methods were used: in-depth interviews and personal journals. Upon receipt of IRB approval, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 6 females in the US between the ages of 28 and 55. All participants were recruited on a referral basis and, through a screening questionnaire, were determined to be compulsive clothing buyers. Each participant was interviewed five times over a period of three months. Each interview session lasted from 1 to 3 hours and was conducted via Skype or telephone. To ensure a systematic approach, an outline containing 10-15 questions per interview session was followed. Interviews were conducted with participants until responses reached saturation. Participants were also asked to keep personal journals for a period of four weeks. Recorded interviews and journals were transcribed verbatim reflecting a total of 38 hours of interviews and 138 pages of journal text. Responses were analyzed thematically by the researchers; patterns in the data were identified and labeled, and conceptual links between patterns were defined and differences resolved through discussion (Spiggle, 1994). Four core thematic areas emerged and were used to structure the interpretation.

In the first theme, *The Person*, participants’ triggers and motivations to engage in compulsive clothing buying were identified along with when and how they came to realize that they needed help to stop the behavior. It was not until they had accumulated significant amounts of debt that most realized they were having problems controlling their buying. In all cases, the

delay was attributed to the views on consumption that they learned during childhood and from society in general. Participants indicated that life transitions (e.g., college) first triggered the behavior by prompting negative feelings such as loneliness or boredom. The second theme, *The Process*, explores participants' experiences with the act of shopping and buying clothing compulsively. Participants indicated that their compulsive episodes either involve a plan or are exploratory in nature. For instance, Dolores commented, "I start out with a plan, you know, I'm gonna spend 'x' amount of money," whereas Lynn stated, "I often [don't] go with a plan. It [is] often just like, *Oh, I have some time. Let me see if I can find something cool.*" Participants described experiencing a wide array of emotions before, during, and after episodes of compulsive buying. Typically, they experience negative feelings (e.g., low self-esteem, anxiety) before engaging, positive feelings (e.g., happiness, excitement) during the process, and short-term positive (e.g., accomplishment) and long-term negative feelings (e.g., shame, regret) after the fact.

The third theme, *The Product*, provides a deep examination of participants' preference for clothing. Participants preferred clothing due to its physical attributes, the way clothing makes them feel, and the fact that clothing allows them to fix/alter/communicate who they are, fill a gap in their lives, and/or take control over an aspect of their lives. Even though clothing serves these critical purposes, most items go unused in the closet. Some fantasize about the idea of a future self and how these items will fit in that life. Others commented that their unworn clothing makes them feel important and protected. In the fourth theme, *The Path to Recovery*, the consequences of the behavior and the different strategies used to try to take control of it were explored. Most participants expressed that compulsive clothing buying has had a negative impact on their lives, from relationship issues to financial debt to negative feelings and emotions (e.g., guilt, shame). However, participants also thought there were positive consequences of the behavior (e.g., excitement, feeling prepared for the future).

Findings from this study support and enhance previous studies suggesting the importance of clothing among compulsive buyers. However, this study is the first to offer potential explanations for this preference, including the physical attributes of the product as well as its ability to transform the self through appearance. Results suggest that, even if it is never worn, compulsive clothing buyers attach strong meaning to their clothing. Further research that examines the reasons for this level of attachment is needed, as it could contribute to the development of strategies designed to help compulsive clothing buyers control the persistent urge to buy.

## References

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