

## Extreme consumption: television shoppers and compulsive buying

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### Abstract

Compulsive buyers chronically purchase in response to negative events; they are susceptible to social influence and often return purchases. All in-home shoppers can shop 24/7 using a 1-800 number and a credit card, which may enable compulsive buying. Unlike other in-home shoppers, television shoppers (1) cannot plan their purchases because they do not know what specific merchandise will be offered for sale on any program and (2) may develop pseudo-social relationships with television shopping program hosts, called parasocial interaction. Television shoppers (N=1598) responded to mailed surveys and data were analyzed with structural equation modeling, ANOVA, and multiple regression. Results showed that parasocial interaction is positively related to compulsive buying, compulsive buying is (a) positively related to paying extra to have items shipped sooner and to credit card use and (b) is negatively related to satisfaction with the handling of returns. Much of the consumer socialization literature deals with examining how people learn to be rational, adaptive, good consumers (e.g., Faber & O'Guinn, 1988a, 1988b), while the dysfunctional and non-utilitarian types of consumer behavior have received less attention until recently. Consumer behavior is extreme when it is both excessive and dysfunctional. One such type of extreme consumer behavior is compulsive consumption, which has been studied by consumer (e.g., Faber, O'Guinn, & Krych, 1987) and medical researchers (e.g., McElroy, Keck, & Phillips, 1995). Compulsive consumption is defined as consumption that is inappropriate, excessive, and disruptive to those who consume (Faber et al., 1987) and, thus, is a type of extreme consumer behavior. Compulsive consumption is important to investigate because it is an important result of U.S. consumer culture (Faber & O'Guinn, 1992; Richins, 1995) and because it can have

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deleterious effects on consumers and society (Hassay & Smith, 1996; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). One important type of compulsive consumption is compulsive buying. In a review of several types of compulsive consumption, McElroy et al. (1995) noted that compulsive buyers often experience significant personal difficulties, family problems, interpersonal distress, and often significant debt. In one study, many respondents indicated that access to television shopping (TV) programs may have increased their compulsive buying (McElroy, Keck, Pope, Smith, & Strakowski, 1994). This suggests that TV shopping may be a useful context in which to study compulsive buying. In fact, compulsive buyers may be over-represented among TV shoppers even though compulsive buyers tend to be young women and TV shoppers tend to be at mid-life or older women (Lee, Lennon, & Rudd, 2000). Like other in-home shoppers, TV shoppers can shop 24/7 using a 1-800 number and a credit card, which makes it easy to buy compulsively (McElroy et al., 1995). Unlike other in-home shoppers, TV shoppers cannot plan their purchases because they typically do not know what specific merchandise will be offered for sale in any given program. Another way that TV shoppers differ from other in-home shoppers is that they may develop pseudo-social relationships with TV shopping personalities, called parasocial interaction. In TV shopping the program hosts are the targets of the parasocial interaction (Auter & Moore, 1993; Stephens, Hill, & Bergman, 1996), although others may influence TV shoppers (e.g., designers, fashion models, and viewers who call in to advocate for products). Researchers have found positive relationships between parasocial interaction and buying from TV shopping programs (Auter & Moore, 1993; Grant, Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991). In fact, parasocial interaction may be a factor in TV-shopping program success (Rublin, 1986; Zaklan, 1990) and shoppers may choose that medium for social reasons. Given the growth and popularity of TV shopping (*Shopping by television*, 1995; Stephens et al., 1996), it is important to learn more about relationships among TV shopping, compulsive buying, and parasocial interaction. Thus, the purpose of this research was to study parasocial interaction and other antecedents and consequences of compulsive buying in TV shoppers.

### **Relevant literature**

Compulsive buying has been studied by medical (e.g., McElroy, Keck, & Phillips, 1995) and by consumer behavior researchers (e.g., Faber,

O'Guinn & Krych, 1987). Compulsive buying is defined as "chronic repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings" (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989, p. 155) and may be a reaction to stress (Faber, O'Guinn, & Krych, 1987) and unhappiness (Faber & O'Guinn, 1988b) or other types of negative affect (Faber & Christenson, 1996), such as low self-esteem. Compulsive consumption is related to materialism and is found in mass cultures. Availability of catalogs and access to TV shopping programs increases compulsive buying (McElroy, Keck, Pope, Smith, & Strakowski, 1994).

TV shopping channels have become a popular way to sell merchandise and a growing number of consumers is purchasing products from the TV home shopping networks. For example, Quality Value Convenience (QVC) reports that they received more than 178 million phone calls in the U.S. in 2005 (Fast Facts, 2006). In 1992 TV shopping was a \$2 billion industry (Underwood, 1993). By 2001 it was \$7 billion (Lustig, 2005). HSN reported a 9% sales growth from 2002 to 2003, while QVC and ShopNBC both reported 12% sales growth (Gordon, 2005). Given this dollar importance and growth rate, and the ease with which consumers can purchase from TV, it is important to learn more about consumers who shop from TV shopping networks.

The three biggest TV shopping networks are QVC, HSN formerly called Home Shopping Network, and ShopNBC (Company Information, 2003; Corporate Facts, 2003; Moss, 2002), which recently changed its name from Value Vision. In 2005 QVC was first in sales at \$6.5 billion (Fast Facts, 2006), HSN was second with sales of over \$3 billion (Company Information, 2006), and ShopNBC was third with sales of \$617 million (Gordon, 2005). In terms of penetration, QVC has 160 million subscribers and HSN has 89 million. ShopNBC's penetration information has recently been reported at 65 million (Home Shopping, 2007).

Academic researchers have begun to give some attention to TV shopping (Eastlick & Liu, 1997; Grant, Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991; Kim & Lennon, 2000; Lee et al., 2000; Stanforth, Lennon, & Moore, 2001; Stephens et al., 1996). Kim and Lennon took a rational approach to TV shopping and found that perceived amount of information available in a segment is negatively related to perceived risk and positively related to purchase intent. Eastlick and Liu also took a

rational approach and found that perceptions of attributes of TV shopping predicted actual patronage behavior and patronage intent.

On the other hand, given the nature of TV shopping other researchers have focused on the extent to which TV shoppers are impulsive or even compulsive. Park and Lennon (2004) found that about 4% of TV apparel shoppers acknowledged that they had purchased from TV on impulse; they also found a positive relationship between impulse buying and TV shopping program exposure. In addition, Lee et al. found that compulsive buying was positively related to TV shopping program exposure and that about 10% of their sample of TV shoppers were classified as compulsive buyers.

### **Theoretical framework**

Compulsive buying can be understood using social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). Festinger reasoned that humans have a need to evaluate themselves and, if no objective standard is available for comparison, will compare themselves to others. Comparison to someone better off along the dimension of comparison may result in negative feelings and emotions, such as dissatisfaction or low self-esteem. Comparison to someone worse off along the dimension of comparison may result in positive affect, such as self-enhancement, satisfaction, and increased self-esteem.

Because mass media images are ubiquitous in mass society, people often compare with such images (Richins, 1995). According to Richins, media images reflect materialistic values and a highly unrealistic, but desirable, life that only few people can achieve. After exposure to these images, people may evaluate themselves and their circumstances in comparison to them. When this happens, people are almost inevitably making upward comparisons. The result of such comparison may be dissatisfaction and negative feelings, such as envy and anger. In fact, Ackerman, MacInnis, and Folkes (2000) found that dissatisfaction and negative feelings resulted from knowing that others owned something better.

Lee et al. (2000) conducted research guided by social comparison theory to study compulsive consumption tendencies among TV shoppers. Lee et al. suggested that comparison occurred because beautiful and wealthy people are displayed in media images and facilitate automatic

comparisons by viewers, which may lead to negative affect. The negative affect in turn can lead to compulsive buying (Faber & Christenson, 1996). Faber and Christenson found evidence that compulsive buyers use compulsive buying to manage negative affect. Accordingly, people automatically compare themselves to idealized images, this comparison may lead to negative affect, which in turn leads to subsequent compulsive buying to alleviate the negative affect. This rationale suggests that frequent exposure to attractive models and desirable products on TV shopping programs may lead to negative affect, which in turn may encourage compulsive buying.

There are aspects of the TV shopping context that may facilitate compulsive buying. In one study (McElroy et al., 1994), compulsive buyers self-identified triggers to their buying urges. Having access to TV home shopping programs was one of the triggers identified. In addition, researchers have found that TV viewing (Roberts, 1998), TV home shopping program viewing (Lee et al., 2000), and shopping frequency (Roberts, 1998) are all positively related to compulsive buying. Compulsive buyers say that their urges to buy arise most commonly while at home (Christenson et al., 1994) where they have access to TV shopping programs. Finally, TV shoppers cannot plan their purchases from the shopping channels due to the nature of the programming. Items are presented in a linear fashion and viewers typically do not know what specific products will be sold in a given segment. The average consumer may be wary of making unplanned purchases from TV and be less likely to purchase from that venue. For example, according to Will Lansing, president of ShopNBC, only about 8% of households reached by the TV shopping networks actually buy anything from them (Gordon, 2005). However, compulsive buyers, who by definition seldom plan their purchases, are unlikely to be deterred from purchasing from TV for that reason.

Compulsive buyers are sensitive to social influence. Krueger (1988) reported that compulsive buyers try to please others and derive their sense of self from others' responses to them. Compulsive buyers have reported receiving considerable positive feedback and self-esteem reinforcement from attentive salespeople in stores (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989) and some respondents spoke of salespeople as friends. In fact, d'Astous (1990) found a positive relationship between compulsive buying tendencies and susceptibility to social influence, such that those

with greater tendency to buy compulsively were more easily influenced by salespeople. For compulsive buyers the act of buying may enhance self-esteem and facilitate positive interactions with sales staff. In the context of TV shopping programs, compulsive buyers may enjoy the attention of the program hosts who may be viewed as friends (Levy, 1979). Thus, compulsive buyers may shop for the social experience of shopping. These considerations led to the following hypothesis.

H1: Among TV shoppers, shopping as a social experience is positively related to compulsive buying.

Given their vulnerability to social influence, compulsive buyers may be especially susceptible to the influence of parasocial interaction. The term *parasocial interaction* is used to describe a TV viewer's "perceived interpersonal relationship with a mass media persona" (Perse & Rubin, 1989, p. 59). Because these relationships are not really social (e.g., they only require the active involvement of the viewer) they are called parasocial. However, parasocial interactions resemble actual social interactions and are almost like personal friendships (e.g., viewers may consider the host of a program to be a friend [Levy, 1979]). They provide companionship and there is an element of social attraction to both social and parasocial relationships (Perse & Rubin, 1990). Parasocial relationships develop slowly with repeated viewing.

Auter and Moore (1993) and Stephens et al. (1996) studied parasocial interaction in the context of TV shopping shows. They noted many ways that the techniques used by the programs and their hosts encouraged parasocial interaction. Stephens et al. analyzed shopping programs on the QVC channel and found that hosts of the programs used parasocial relationships as a basis for selling products. Other researchers have found relationships between purchasing from a TV shopping channel and parasocial interaction. In a survey of TV shoppers, Grant et al. (1991) found a positive relationship between parasocial interaction and number of items purchased from TV. In other research, Auter and Moore (1993) found that in TV shoppers, parasocial interaction is related to buying behavior. Because compulsive buyers are particularly susceptible to social influence (e.g., d'Astous, 1990) and enjoy the attention received from salespeople (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989), it is reasonable that in a TV shopping context parasocial interaction will be positively related to

compulsive buying. Based on these considerations the following hypothesis was developed.

H2: Among TV shoppers, parasocial interaction will be positively related to compulsive buying.

One of the characteristics of compulsive buying is that people report feeling out of control when compulsively buying (Christenson et al., 1994; Faber & O'Guinn, 1988b) and experience anxiety (McElroy, Satlin, Pope, Keck, & Hudson, 1991; McElroy et al., 1994). Urges to buy are often experienced by compulsive buyers (McElroy et al., 1994). In Christenson et al. (1994), compulsive buyers said that their buying urges resulted in a purchase 74.5% of the time. It is reasonable to expect that the urge to buy experienced by compulsive buyers might lead them to pay extra to facilitate speedy delivery. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis was developed.

H3: Among TV shoppers, extent of compulsive buying is positively related to paying extra to have items shipped sooner.

Researchers report that after purchasing, compulsive buyers get little use or enjoyment from what they buy (Faber et al., 1987; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Schlosser, Black, Repertinger, & Freet (1994). Compulsive buyers' urges to buy are not necessarily based on desire for an item (Krueger, 1988) or concern with an item (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989); compulsive buyers are not more possessive than non-compulsive buyers (Faber & O'Guinn, 1988b). Faber and O'Guinn (1988b) found that as compared to non-compulsive buyers, compulsive buyers were more likely to buy without caring what they bought. Research conducted by Hassey and Smith (1996) found that as compared to non-compulsive buyers, compulsive buyers are more likely to return products, show greater concern for return policies, and actually report higher return volumes. Schlosser et al. (1994) found that items purchased by compulsive buyers were often unused, returned, or given away. In summary, compulsive buyers buy excessively, without caring what they buy. They also tend to return much of what they buy and show greater concern for return policies. Combining these ideas, it is reasonable to expect that they would tend to be dissatisfied with return policies. These considerations led to the development of the following hypothesis.

H4: Among TV shoppers, extent of compulsive buying is positively associated with dissatisfaction with the handling of returns.



Compulsive buying may lead to extensive use of credit cards and high credit card debt because credit cards can be used for purchasing even when consumers can ill afford to make purchases (Pinto, Parente, & Palmer, 2000). Over 70% of families have credit cards (Durkin, 2002, p. 202) and the average balance carried on a credit card is \$8,000 (*Taking credit*, 2002). Credit card spending and compulsive buying may have precipitated a great number of personal bankruptcies and credit card debts (Roberts & Jones, 2001). These ideas led to the following hypothesis.

H5: Among TV shoppers, compulsive buying is positively related to credit card use.

### **Method**

To measure compulsive buying Faber and O'Guinn's (1992) screener was used, which consists of seven 5-point items with endpoints strongly agree/very often (1) and strongly disagree/never (5). Item scores are entered into a scoring equation for a compulsive buying score. Faber and O'Guinn reported a Cronbach's  $\alpha = .95$ . Adequate construct validity was also established for the screener. Individuals who score less than or equal to -1.34 are identified as compulsive buyers. However, it is also possible to view compulsive buying as a continuum so that scores on the screener represent compulsive buying tendencies. Low scores indicate greater compulsive buying tendencies. To measure parasocial interaction, the seven parasocial interaction items developed by Levy (1979) were used after adapting them to reflect the TV shopping program format. Levy reported a reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) of .73 for the measure. All items measuring parasocial interaction used a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) Likert format.

Respondents were also asked the extent to which they (a) would pay extra to have an item shipped sooner and (b) were satisfied with the way returns were handled. These items used a 5-point response format with endpoints always (5) and never (1). To assess the extent to which respondents enjoyed shopping as a social experience, we adopted four items from Forman and Sriram (1991). The items used a 5-point Likert response format with endpoints strongly agree (5) and strongly disagree (1). The researchers reported a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .70. Because shoppers may also interact with unknown shoppers while shopping, one other item using the same format was developed: "When I am shopping, I like



to talk to other shoppers even if I don't know them." Finally, some demographic information and some information about credit card use was elicited. The researchers developed an item to assess the extent to which respondents were charged to the limit on their credit cards. This item had the following closed-ended format: 'yes, all' (3), 'yes, some' (2), 'yes, one' (1), and 'no, none' (0).

A mailing list of 6000 consumers was randomly selected from a national sample of known TV shoppers. Each person on the list was mailed a questionnaire and a cover letter. Non-responders were sent a second questionnaire three weeks after the first questionnaire was mailed.

### **Results**

After the first mailing 1274 questionnaires were received; after the second mailing 348 questionnaires were returned. After eliminating unusable questionnaires, there were 1057 usable questionnaires (usable response rate = 18%). Respondents were 124 men, 933 women. The typical respondent was a woman nearly 51 years of age ( $M = 51.37$ ), who had over 13 years of formal education ( $M = 13.38$ ) and an average monthly income of \$2513.02. Using the cutoff suggested by Faber and O'Guinn (1992), 126 or 12% could be classified as compulsive buyers.

Three principle components factor analyses with varimax rotation were applied for data reduction of (a) the five items tapping shopping as a social experience, (b) the parasocial interaction scale, and (c) the compulsive buying items. Using an eigenvalue of 1.0 as a criterion, only one factor was identified in each analysis and those factors each contained three items. In each case the three items were used in the model estimation (see Table 1). Compulsive buying was recoded so that higher scores reflected greater compulsive buying tendencies.

### **Model estimation**

The proposed model included two exogenous latent variables (shopping as social experience, parasocial interaction) and four endogenous latent variables (compulsive buying, willingness to pay extra, satisfaction with the handling of returns, credit card use). Willingness to pay extra for the order to be shipped sooner, satisfaction with the handling of returns, and credit card use were treated as dummy latent variables (i.e., a latent variable with a single indicator). Maximum-likelihood simultaneous estimation was used to test the proposed model with the

Variable	Factor loadings	Item-total correlation	Cronbach's alpha	Variance
Parasocial interaction				
hre9	.91	.797	.90	82.97
hre10	.93	.838		
hre11	.89	.757		
Social experience				
store3	.86	.66	.80	72.17
store4	.89	.72		
store5	.79	.57		
Compulsive buying				
imphi1	.82	.62	.80	72.89
imphi2	.89	.72		
imphi3	.85	.64		

Table 1. Measurement Properties from Factor Analysis

use of AMOS 4.0. Table 2 presents standardized estimates for the hypothesized paths and fit indices. The various fit indices suggest that the proposed structural model fit the data reasonably well. Although an overall Chi-square indicates a poor fit of the model ( $df = 51$ , Chi-square = 193.41,  $p < .001$ ), this is not surprising given the large sample size. All other fit indices suggest that the hypothesized structural model fits the data reasonably well (AGFI = 0.96, NNFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.05) (see Table 2).

### Hypotheses testing

The component fit measures indicate some support for the hypothesized model. Structural path coefficients suggested that: shopping as social experience (H1) did not significantly influence compulsive buying tendencies ( $\gamma_1 = 0.07$ ,  $t = 1.89$ ,  $p = 0.06$ ), (H2) parasocial interaction positively influenced the extent of compulsive buying tendencies ( $\gamma_2 = 0.154$ ,  $t = 4.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), (H3) compulsive buying tendencies positively influenced paying extra to have items shipped sooner ( $\beta_1 = 0.09$ ,  $t = 2.55$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), (H4) compulsive buying tendencies negatively influenced satisfaction with the handling of returns ( $\beta_2 = -0.11$ ,  $t = -3.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and (H5) compulsive buying tendencies positively influenced credit card use ( $\beta_3 = 0.27$ ,  $t = 7.87$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, H2 through H5 were supported in the analysis (see Figure 1 and Table 2).

Hypothesized path	Structural coefficients	t-value	p-value
Social experience → Compulsive buying	.070	1.888	.059
Parasocial Interaction → Compulsive buying	.154	4.230	.000
Compulsive buying → Paying extra	.085	2.546	.011
Compulsive buying → Satisfaction with handling of returns	-.110	-3.283	.001
Compulsive buying → Credit card use	.265	7.868	.000
<b>Fit statistics</b>			
df	51		
Chi-square	193.41		
AGFI	.96		
NNFI	.96		
CFI	.97		
RMSEA	.05	90% CI	(.04; .06)

Table 2. Standardized Coefficients and Fit Statistics for the Structural Model

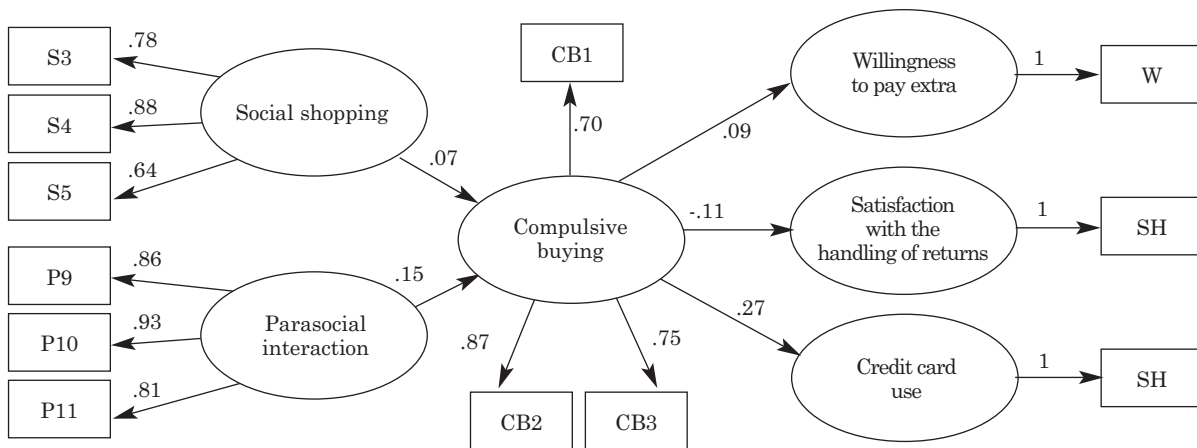


Figure 1. Hypothesized Model (Standardized Parameter Estimates)

**Discussion**

The overall purpose of this research was to investigate parasocial interaction and other antecedents and consequences of compulsive buying in TV shoppers. To do so, survey methodology was used to determine the extent to which (a) shopping as a social experience and (b) parasocial interaction predicted compulsive buying and the extent to which compulsive buying predicted (c) willingness to pay extra for speedy delivery, (d) dissatisfaction with the handling of returns, and (e) credit card use among TV shoppers. Results of structural equation

modeling analysis provide support for parasocial interaction, but not shopping as a social experience, as antecedent to compulsive buying among TV shoppers. Shopping as a social experience and parasocial interaction both tap into a dependence on social interaction, but apparently the influence of parasocial interaction is stronger in the context of TV shopping. All hypotheses about the consequences of compulsive buying were supported by our analysis. As compulsive buying tendencies increase, consumers are more willing to pay extra for speedy delivery, their credit card spending rises, and they are less satisfied with the handling of returns.

Information on the extent of compulsive buying in the U.S. population is difficult to ascertain. Faber and O'Guinn (1989) suggested that 5.9% of the general population are compulsive buyers, but in a later study of 292 adults (Faber & O'Guinn, 1992) found that 8.1% of respondents were classified as compulsive buyers using the Compulsive Buying Scale. In a study of TV shoppers, Lee et al. (2000) found that 10% of their respondents could be classified as compulsive buyers. In this research, 12% were classified as compulsive buyers. These figures suggest that compulsive buying is likely to be more common among TV shoppers than among the general U.S. population.

### **Conclusions and implications**

Compulsive buying is a serious type of extreme consumption and the results of this research suggest that compulsive buyers may be overrepresented among TV shoppers. Because TV shopping so uniquely facilitates compulsive buying with its linear presentation format and its fuzzy program guides, it might be advisable for the TV shopping networks to seek ways to discourage compulsive buying. Furthermore, TV shoppers with greater compulsive buying tendencies tended to be dissatisfied with the handling of returns and other research shows that they frequently return products. Because restocking returned products is expensive for companies (Schuman, 2004), discouraging compulsive buying could actually pay off for the home shopping networks in terms of the cost of handling returns. Taking proactive steps to discourage compulsive buying might help the TV shopping networks avoid possible regulation. For example, software exists to track frequent returners and the shopping networks should weigh the benefits and drawbacks to using it. Another less controversial thing the shopping networks might

do is to provide channel guides that better describe upcoming merchandise. Currently available channel guides are fairly vague and do not provide enough information to allow viewers to plan purchases. Although all TV shoppers may not have access to online shopping, another strategy is to post more detailed information about upcoming products including photos and close-ups on the companies' websites.

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