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Chronic consumer states influencing compulsive consumption

K. Prakash Vel and Lif Miriam Hamouda

***Abstract*—**Consumer behaviour analysis represents an important field of study in marketing. Particularly strategy development for marketing and communications will be more focused and effective when marketers have an understanding of the motivations, behaviour and psychology of consumers. While materialism has been found to be one of the important elements in consumer behaviour, compulsive consumption represents another aspect that has recently attracted more attention. This is because of the growing prevalence of dysfunctional buying that has raised concern in consumer societies. Present studies and analyses on origins and motivations of compulsive buying have mainly focused on either individual factors or groups of related factors and hence a need for a holistic view exists. This paper provides a comprehensive perspective on compulsive consumption and establishes relevant propositions keeping the family life cycle stages as a reference for the incidence of chronic consumer states and their influence on compulsive consumption.

***Keywords*—**Chronic consumer states, compulsive consumption, family life cycle

I. Introduction

CONSUMER behaviour analysis is a key requirement for successful strategy and policy development in marketing. Marketers need to develop a detailed understanding of the consumer in terms of the motivations, the behaviours and the psychology behind consumer purchase decisions. In particular, dysfunctional states and their influence on consumption decisions have become important for ethical issues pertaining to marketers of consumer products and services. In this regard, compulsive consumption as a dysfunctional area of buying was found to be an important consideration in consumer behaviour and represents the focus of study in this paper.

Compulsive consumption was first described in the clinical and the psychiatric literature in the beginning of the 20th century by Kraeplin (1915) and Bleuer (1930) referring to the condition as buying mania [1]. Compulsive consumption was then introduced to consumer behaviour literature as a 'dysfunctional form of buyer behaviour', where the primary motivation is the act of purchasing rather than having any orientation towards the product being purchased [2]. This concept has been further developed to define compulsive consumers as people who are impulsively driven to consume, cannot control this behaviour, and seem to buy in order to escape from other problems. For these people, buying is often inappropriate, typically excessive and clearly disruptive to their lives [3]. In recent years, researchers have given increased attention to compulsive buying behaviour and have suggested alternative definitions of this concept. However, there are three common elements that have proliferated throughout these studies: (1) the irresistible nature of the urge to buy, (2) uncontrolled buying and (3) continued buying after experiencing negative consequences in the personal, social and occupational lives as well as financial debt [4].

Although compulsive consumption has been identified almost 100 years ago it has only recently become a concern in developed mass consumer societies [4]. A study conducted in Germany found that a post-modern environment characterised by a mature consumer society supports an increase in compulsive buying [5]. The fact that the prevalence of dysfunctional buying has been increasing suggests that compulsive consumption becomes a more important consideration in consumer behaviour and hence an important area to be studied.

The present authors have therefore researched and analysed existing literature on the chronic consumer states related to compulsive consumption with the objective to provide a perspective and a model for future research. Consumer states are those that are associated with an adult consumer and which have a possibility of directly and indirectly manifesting in the behaviour consumers demonstrate in their purchase decisions. In this study, the present authors have identified "chronic consumer states" that may directly or indirectly influence their purchase behaviour. Chronic consumer states have been defined by the current authors as those states associated with an adult consumer for a considerable part of the family life cycle stages (refer to Appendix A) and which may manifest themselves in the terminal behaviour of the individual.

The family life cycle (FLC) concept is a useful tool in consumer research as the life cycle stages can provide an indication of consumption behaviour. Therefore, the FLC has

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been used herein as a framework for identifying and evaluating chronic consumer states. The FLC models developed by Murphy and Staples (1979) and Gilly and Enis (1982) introduce non-traditional family situations that are more common in today's society [6]. The Gilly and Enis model recognises the "changing role of women in contemporary society and the impact of such changes upon the types and composition of families" [7] and accounts for modernised stages in the life cycle such as a single person household and cohabitation by on-legally married adults (refer to Appendix A). Herein, the life cycle stages are based on age, marital status and the ages and presence or absence of children in the household [7]. The model presents a life cycle flow which can move along various paths as opposed to a linear sequence, thereby better representing the changes in an individual's personal life. Hence, any state of an individual or a consumer which flows through a considerable part of the FLC may be interpreted as a chronic state, evolving and manifesting itself in the individual and his/her behaviour.

This paper explores current research on such chronic states influencing compulsive consumption, anchoring on the modern family lifecycle and seeks to develop a holistic perspective supported by the relevant propositions.

II. Paucity In Existing Research And Proposed Direction

The present study has found gaps in the existing literature on factors influencing compulsive consumption. In particular, previous studies have only focused on specific areas rather than a comprehensive view on all the factors predicting compulsive consumption.

There are around 10 factors influencing compulsive consumption as brought out by individual studies that comply with the stipulated definition of chronic consumer states. These factors include *low self-esteem* [8], [9], and [10], *depression* [11], [12], and [13], *obsessive compulsiveness* [14] and [15], *self-discrepancies* [16] and [17], *emotion related buying* [18] and [13], *proneness to fantasy* [15] and [19], *ideal-self seeking* [17] and [20], anxiety [9] and [12], *desire for stimulation* [3] and [21], *emotional instability* [22] and [23], and *low conscientiousness* [22] and [23].

Low self-esteem was the factor mostly discussed in existing studies on compulsive consumption which found that individuals who lack self-esteem would try to enhance their self-worth through repeated buying ultimately resulting in an addiction [8]. It has also been discovered that individuals suffering from depression are more likely to exhibit compulsive buying behaviour [12]. Individuals demonstrating dysfunctional buying patterns were diagnosed with generally higher ratings on obsessive compulsiveness [14]. Self-discrepancies arising from a gap between the actual and ideal self were found to be related to compulsive buying [16]. Furthermore, individuals who tend to make purchases in order to overcome negative emotions were more likely to develop compulsive consumption [13]. Individuals being more prone to fantasising in an attempt to escape reality were found to be more likely to be compulsive buyers [15]. Compulsive buying was also found to be motivated by ideal-self seeking [17]. In addition, a positive relationship between anxiety and compulsive consumption has been identified [12]. It has also been statistically confirmed that individuals having a desire for stimulation and seek to experience pleasure through buying were likely to become compulsive in their consumption [3]. Moreover, emotional instability has been identified as a strong predictor for compulsive consumption [22]. Research has also revealed that compulsive buyers are characterised by low levels of conscientiousness [23].

These findings show that there have been extensive efforts to identify the factors related to compulsive consumption.

TABLE I
Chronic Consumer States

Chronic Consumer State	Reference
Low self-esteem	[8], [9], [10], [14], [15], [19], [21], [24], [25], [26], [27], [28], [29]
Depression	[11], [12], [13], [27], [30]
Obsessive-compulsiveness	[3], [14], [15], [21], [30]
Self discrepancies	[4], [16], [17], [20]
Emotion related buying	[3], [13], [18], [21]
Proneness to fantasy	[14], [15], [19], [21]
Anxiety	[9], [12], [31]
Desire for stimulation	[3], [21]
Emotional instability	[22], [23]
Low conscientiousness	[22], [23]

However, there is a need for a comprehensive perspective that shows a holistic view on chronic consumer states influencing compulsive consumption. Hence, the present authors had gone through a structured review of the exiting inventory of factors (56) indentified by current researchers as influencers on compulsive consumption. The second stage of the review process was the "refinement phase" where the researched inventory of 56 factors were subject to a discussion in terms of their alignment with the definition of chronic consumer states as stipulated by the current authors. As a result, 10 instrumental factors had been isolated which have formed the basis for setting our propositions and the modular view of "chronic consumer states influencing compulsive consumption". Through establishing relevant propositions which show the role played by an influence on compulsive consumption the present paper contributes to providing a basis for future consumer research and establishes the fundamentals for a modular study on chronic consumer states influencing compulsive consumption. The ten major chronic consumer states identified as influencers of compulsive consumption and the strength of current research have been given in Table 1.

III. Chronic Consumer States Influencing Compulsive Consumption

A. Low self-esteem

Low self esteem is a consumer state that that has been associated with compulsive buying consistently throughout the existing literature and which is frequently a result of an individual's childhood experiences [21]. It has been found that compulsive buying tendencies are significantly negatively related to an individual's self-esteem [8]. This implies that individuals, who use buying to compensate for their low self-esteem, are more prone to develop compulsive consumption behaviour. Similarly, a negative and highly significant relationship between self-esteem and compulsive consumption tendencies was discovered [24]. Additionally, a strong negative relationship between self-esteem and compulsive buying tendencies was found in a study on addictive consumption [25]. Low self-esteem, as pointed out in [25], is thereby a cause as well as a result of compulsive buying. Furthermore, low self-esteem and other related factors such as unattractiveness and lack of identity were found to be significantly lower in compulsive buyers [21]. As found in an exploratory study about self-esteem and compulsive buying, compulsive consumers were found to have lower levels of self-esteem on an overall basis [26]. Furthermore, low self-esteem has been identified as a factor increasing an individual's tendency towards compulsive buying behaviour [27]. A negative relationship between self-esteem and compulsive buying was also found in [19]. Reference [28] shows, there is a general relationship between compulsive buying tendencies and low self-esteem. Similarly, a negative correlation was found between an individual's level of self-esteem and compulsive buying behaviour [29]. In a more evolutionary analysis of compulsive buying, low self-esteem developed from early family experiences has been suggested as a factor influencing compulsive consumption [10]. In addition, low self-esteem had been identified as a predispositional factor and driver of compulsive buying behaviour [9]. In their study, the authors also suggest that low self-esteem not only represents an antecedent for dysfunctional buying behaviour but also a result of uncontrolled and addictive buying [9]. In developing a diagnostic tool for classifying compulsive consumers, self-esteem has been identified as an item on the scale [14] indicating the significance of this factor in identifying compulsive buyers. Notably, self-esteem has also been identified as an item in a clinical screener for compulsive buying [15] which further supports the relevance of this factor in identifying addictive buyers. Accordingly, the proposition:

Proposition 1: Low self-esteem directly influences an individual's compulsive buying behaviour.

B. Depression

Compulsive buyers were found to be more likely to suffer from "lifetime" mood disorders like major depression and psychiatric disorders [11]. The results of the same study also indicated that the direct relatives of compulsive buyers are more likely to have depression and other mental disorders [11]. Based on these findings the authors suggested that there is not only a causal relationship between compulsive consumption and depression but also that there might be a compulsive buying history running in families [11]. According to a study [12], clinically higher levels of depression were found in individuals exhibiting compulsive consumption. The authors suggested that for individuals characterized by frequently reoccurring negative and intense emotional states, compulsive buying is the response for managing these mood states thereby serving as a form of self medication [12]. The relationship between compulsive buying and major depression has also been confirmed in [30]. In an effort to develop a theoretical model of compulsive buying it has been found that compulsive buyers exhibit more symptoms of depression [30]. As a result, depression has been identified as one of five domains related to compulsive consumption [30]. Furthermore, compulsive consumption was found to be motivated by depressed feelings [13] indicating that depression does not necessarily need to be present in the form of a psychological disorder in order to influence compulsive consumption. Lastly, depression developed from parental conflict during childhood was found to increase an individual's vulnerability to develop addictive buying behaviour establishing a direct relationship between compulsive consumption and depression [27]. The findings of the same study also indicated people who suffer from addictive buying feel more depressed thereby establishing a two-directional causal relationship between compulsive buying and depression [27]. Hence the proposition:

Proposition 2: Depression directly influences an individual's compulsive buying behaviour.

C. Obsessive compulsiveness

In a study on compulsive consumption it was found that compulsive consumers score significantly higher on a test of obsessive compulsiveness than the general population [3]. The authors also suggested that a general tendency in an individual to develop compulsive buying behaviour exists depending on socialisation and other early experiences [3]. In developing a diagnostic tool for classifying compulsive consumers, compulsivity has been identified as the first factor on the screener instrument [14]. Similarly, the ranking on the obsessive compulsiveness scale has been identified an item in the clinical screener for compulsive buying [15]. The identification of obsessive compulsiveness as an item included in compulsive buying diagnostic tools indicated the significance of this factor in compulsive consumption. Moreover, compulsive consumption was found to be closely related to obsessive compulsive disorder with compulsive buyers being more likely to exhibit more symptoms of

obsessive compulsive disorder [30]. Reference [30] also suggests that memories of parenting influence obsessive-compulsive disorders. In an exploratory study, compulsive buyers were found to score significantly higher on obsessive compulsiveness suggesting a greater likelihood of obsessive compulsiveness in compulsive buyers [21]. Hence the proposition:

Proposition 3: Obsessive compulsiveness directly influences an individual's compulsive buying behaviour.

D. Self discrepancies

Large self discrepancies together with materialistic values have found to be a strong predictor of compulsive buying tendencies [16]. The increasing discrepancies between an individual's actual self and the ideal self result in a greater tendency towards excessive buying behaviour when the individual has high materialistic values [16]. In an attempt to achieve the ideal-self, individuals try to reach their goal through activities such as buying which will develop into compulsive consumption due to their loss of control [20], [4]. It has also been suggested that individuals suffering from compulsive buying behaviour have chronically high self-discrepancies [20]. In a different paper it has been suggested that the bigger the individual's perceived gap between actual self and ideal self, the stronger the drive to buy more [17]. Therefore, individuals with greater self discrepancies are more likely to exhibit compulsive consumption [17]. The author also argues that individuals who attempt to define their identity through material goods are likely to have stronger materialistic values and would engage in more buying, the further they are from their ideal identity [17]. This proposition has later been empirically supported in the 'Two Factor Model of Compulsive Buying' [20] in which compulsive buying tendencies were found to be stronger in individuals with self discrepancies and materialistic values [20]. Further strengthening the causal relationship between self discrepancies and compulsive consumption, self discrepancies together with materialistic values were identified as predictors for compulsive buying tendencies [4]. Hence the proposition:

Proposition 4: Self discrepancies motivate an individual's compulsive buying behaviour.

E. Emotion related buying

Emotional buying motives such as emotional enhancement and mood regulation were found to be strong predictors for compulsive buying in a study on online buying motives [18]. According to the authors, seeking emotional enhancement, such as 'fun', 'excitement' and 'buzz', is a significant motivator for compulsive buying online and is anchored on materialistic values [18]. Furthermore, compulsive buyers were found to be motivated by the positive emotions experienced while shopping [3]. According to the authors, the joy experienced while buying rather than the acquisition of specific goods is the primary motivator for compulsive buyers [3]. In a different study it was found that "compulsive buying is motivated by negative emotions (mainly depressed or sad feelings) and maintained by negative reinforcement as the negative emotions are dissipated or supplanted by euphoria or other positive emotional experiences while buying" [13]. Interestingly, changes in sadness or euphoria were the predominant emotional changes related to compulsive buying [13]. Furthermore, emotions were identified as being motives for compulsive consumption by providing compulsive buyers with greater emotional lift during the buying process [21]. Hence the proposition:

Proposition 5: Emotions motivate an individual's compulsive buying behaviour.

F. Proneness to fantasy

The level of fantasy and imagination was found to be significantly higher in individuals exhibiting compulsive buying behaviour [21]. The authors suggest that individuals more prone to fantasise can more "effectively escape reality" while shopping [21]. Notably, fantasy has been included as an item in a diagnostic tool for classifying compulsive consumption in one of the initial consumer behavioural studies in 1989 [14]. This indicates that proneness to fantasy not only acts as a predictor for compulsive buying behaviour but also serves as factor used to identify individuals who are compulsive buyers. Similarly, fantasy has been suggested as an item in a clinical screener for compulsive buying [15]. Using this clinical screener, a significant positive correlation between an individual's fantasising proneness and compulsive buying has been found [19]. Hence the proposition:

Proposition 6: Proneness to fantasy directly influences an individual's compulsive buying behaviour.

G. Anxiety

The relationship between an individual's predisposition to anxiety and compulsive buying was found to be positive and statistically significant [31]. According to the authors, a group of factors rather than one single factor result in compulsive buying. However, anxiety was found to be a central factor which was found to be not only a cause but an effect of the compulsive buying act [31]. In addition, a conceptual framework that describes anxiety as being influenced by a variety of factors such as genetic factors, family environment and biological dysfunctioning has been developed [30]. In a study on compulsive buying, the authors have statistically tested the assumption that due to "more frequently or more deeply" experienced negative emotions, compulsive buyers should score higher in generalised anxiety [12]. The results of the study confirmed that compulsive buyers have clinically higher levels of anxiety [12]. Furthermore, anxiety together with other psychological factors has also been identified as

being a driver in compulsive buyers [9]. The authors suggest that in compulsive buyers, buying serves as a way to "escape from high levels of anxiety" which exists due to profound psychological problems [9]. Hence the proposition:

Proposition 7: High levels of anxiety directly influence an individual's compulsive buying behaviour.

H. Desire for stimulation

The desire for stimulation or arousal was found to be a motivation for compulsive consumption in a qualitative study [21]. The authors concluded that compulsive consumers experience the "basic desire to create a more stimulating or arousing environment" which outweighs the negative feelings and experiences that result after the buying process [21]. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that compulsive consumers gain more pleasure from the act of buying rather than the product being bought indicating that the feelings experienced while shopping are the motivator for compulsive buying [3]. Hence the proposition:

Proposition 8: Desire for stimulation in an individual motivates compulsive buying behaviour.

I. Emotional instability

Using the '3M Model of Motivation and Personality' [22], a relationship between compulsive buying and elemental traits has been observed and emotional instability was found to be a significant predictor. A significant negative relationship between stability and compulsive consumption was also found [23]. The study suggests that individuals who are more moody, temperamental and envious than others [23] are more likely to exhibit compulsive consumption behaviour. Hence the proposition:

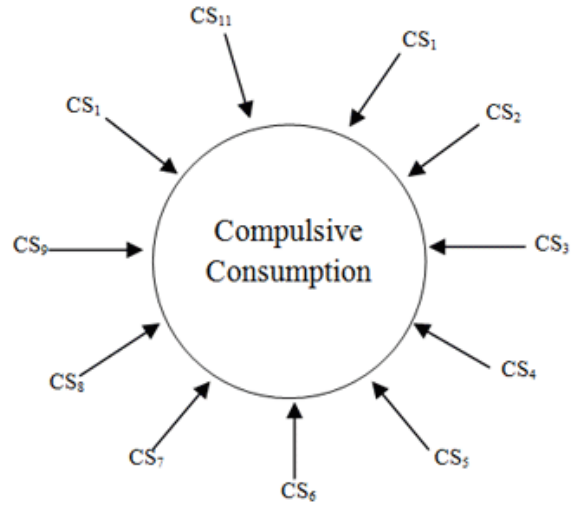
Proposition 9: High levels of emotional instability directly influence an individual's compulsive buying behaviour.

J. Low conscientiousness

A significantly negative and direct relationship between conscientiousness and compulsive consumption has been identified, indicating that individuals low in conscientiousness exhibit higher levels of compulsive buying [23]. The authors defined conscientiousness as "a lack of organisation, precision and efficiency" [23]. In addition, a relationship between compulsive buying and elemental traits has been observed and low conscientiousness has been found to be a significant predictor [22]. Hence the proposition:

Proposition 10: Low levels of conscientiousness directly influence an individual's compulsive buying behaviour.

Based on the discussions maintained about various chronic consumer states influencing compulsive consumption, a holistic summary of the entire set of propositions has being described by the current authors through Figure 1.



CS_1	Low self esteem
CS_2	Depression
CS_3	Obsessive Compulsiveness
CS_4	Self discrepancies
CS_5	Emotion related buying
CS_6	Proneness to fantasy
CS_7	Ideal self-seeking
CS_8	Anxiety
CS_9	Desire for stimulation
CS_{10}	Emotional instability
CS_{11}	Low conscientiousness

Fig. 1 Comprehensive nature of chronic consumer states influencing compulsive consumption

IV. Future Areas Of Study

The present paper has focused on developing a comprehensive perspective on chronic consumer states influencing compulsive consumption based on factors identified in previous research. Future researchers may identify other factors which may comply with the set definition of chronic consumer states and add them to the existing model.

The most important areas to be studied as future works on compulsive consumption would include:

A. Mediators of chronic consumer states influencing compulsive consumption

In our present analysis we have uncovered various relevant chronic states influencing compulsive consumption. However, a study on the interfaces or the mediators between chronic states and compulsive consumption, both internal and external, needs to be captured.

B. Influence of demographic and psychographic descriptors on compulsive consumption

The influences played by demographic factors like gender, age, income, occupation and psychographic values, attitudes

and lifestyles and their effect on compulsive buying behaviour adds value to existing literature on compulsive consumption.

C. *Influence of buying styles and perception on compulsive consumption*

The highly varying phenomena between different types of consumers in terms of their buying styles and buyer perceptions on products purchased and their impact on compulsive consumption would form buyer category-specific analysis on compulsive consumption.

D. *Need for statistically testing the significance of the model*

A primary quantitative study would be useful to test the statistical significance of the proposed model on the influence of various chronic consumer states on compulsive consumption.

V. Implications Of The Study

A. *Figures and Tables*

This study has analysed chronic consumer states as predispositions of compulsive consumption and has also found that some of these states can act both as a cause and effect of the condition. Overall, the consequences and implications of compulsive buying to the individual can be detrimental and far reaching. Due to the addictive nature of the condition and the loss of control that is experienced by the compulsive buyer, family members and friends are also affected. This shows that compulsive consumption is not only a condition, with effects limited to the individual but which also affects the society at large.

The main stakeholders of the implications of this study include behavioural analysts as well as public policy and regulatory bodies. Public policy and regulatory bodies include governmental and semi-governmental firms (NGOs) as well as consumer action groups. The main implications of our study in terms of its benefits to various stakeholders are as follows:

a. A study of factors influencing compulsive consumption can be useful for Institutions, Public policy makers and Health care practitioners to discourage and educate on curbing deviant social behaviours including Alcoholism, Shop-Lifting, Smoking ,heavier credit card usage trends and associated debt and consumer stress levels.

b. Government and Social Marketers can reduce the amount of material and purchase dependence that sets in a society out of the etiological reasons and related social ills brought about by compulsive consumption by understanding its influencers more clearly.

c. Useful for preparing suitable social marketing interventions like counselling or education to reduce the rising consumer debts arising out of compulsive consumption.

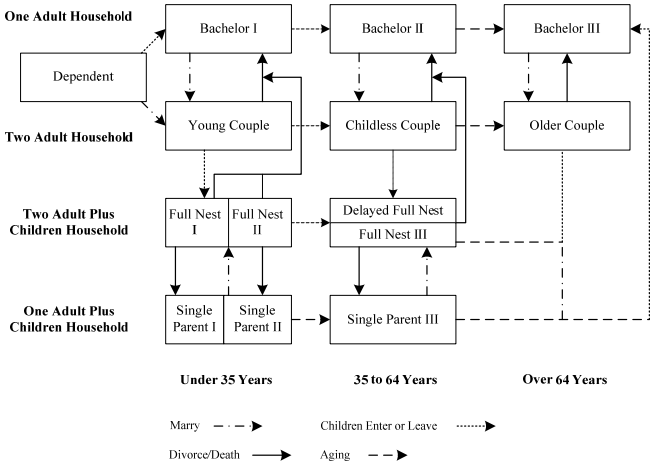
d. A study on factors influencing compulsive consumption helps Advertising and Regulatory bodies of different countries to reduce physiological (binge eating, problem drinking) dangers of compulsive consumption and reduces the neutralization possibilities, individuals use to justify compulsive consumption.

VI. Conclusion

This study on compulsive consumption has been presented by the authors as an attempt to comprehend and to summarise the different chronic consumer states influencing compulsive buying behaviour. Such a perspective would be of use to consumer behavioural analysts oriented towards a holistic picture on compulsive consumption. Additionally, this study and the suggested future areas of study are proposed as effective tools for governmental and service oriented institutions who seek insight into the phenomenon of compulsive consumption and its implications to individuals at large. Institutional and governmental policy makers may find value in this information when setting guidelines for ethical marketing practices. Additionally, it presents an opportunity to consumer behaviour analysts interested in developing a comprehensive insight about a multi-dimensional construct like compulsive consumption.

Appendix

A. *Gilly and Enis Famliy Life Cycle*



Source: M. Gilly, B. Enis, "Recycling the family life cycle: A proposal for redefinition," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 9, A. Mitchell, Ed. Association for Consumer Research, Ann Arbor, 1982, pp.271-276.

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