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Self-image – is it in the bag? A qualitative comparison between “ordinary” and “excessive” consumers

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Abstract

An in-depth thematic analysis is presented of 32 interviews, which examined commonsense definitions of impulsive and planned buying, characteristics of typical impulse buy episodes, motivations for impulsive buying, issues of self-image and self-presentation, and regret. Ten interviews each were conducted with “ordinary” men and women consumers, and a further 10 with women classified as “excessive shoppers” (more commonly referred to as “compulsive buyers”). Two male excessive consumers were also interviewed. Distinctive patterns emerged for each different shopper group. Findings show that impulse buying, regret and other concepts have complex meanings beyond those that can be measured easily in survey research, and that the level of sophistication and reflexivity about one’s shopping behaviour is far greater in excessive shoppers. On the basis of the gender differences found, it is proposed that self and shopping are more closely linked for women than for men. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Impulsive and excessive buying has been of theoretical and practical significance to economics, consumer research and psychology. It is likely that this behaviour has increased over the last two decades, as a consequence of linked economic and social changes in advanced Western economies, such as dramatic increases in personal disposable incomes and credit facilities. Alongside these developments in “modern” consumer spending, there are important shifts in the psychological, social and cultural significance of buying consumer goods. The traditional economic and consumer behaviour models assume a “rational”, discerning, thoughtful consumer, who gathers information strategically and buys goods according to functional cost–benefit considerations. However, this view has been challenged, particularly in the context of widening consumer choices.

Consumer goods can and do function as material symbols of who a person is and who they would like to be. A focus on buying provisions to satisfy the physical needs of oneself and one’s family has shifted towards using consumer goods as a modern means of acquiring and expressing a sense of self-identity (e.g., Dittmar, 1992), regulating emotions (e.g., Elliott, 1994) or gaining social status (e.g., McCracken, 1990). This shift is captured by the stereotype of modern consumerism “I shop therefore I am”. Buying goods in order to bolster one’s self-image is probably a motivation that plays some role in most buying behaviour, but it might be particularly important when people engage in non-planned “spur of the moment” purchases. Such impulsive buys, without careful deliberation and prior intent, may well be regretted later. Although most people experience the occasional lapse of judgement in purchasing, in an extreme form it can result in excessive buying behaviour. Empirical studies on “shopping addiction” or “compulsive buying” have been carried out recently in the United States (Hanley & Wilhelm, 1992; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989), Canada (Valence, d’Astous & Fortier, 1988), Germany (Scherhorn, Reisch & Raab, 1990), Belgium (Vlerick, 1998), and the UK (Elliott, 1994). All suggest that such extreme buying is on the increase, affecting an estimated 2–5% of adults in developed Western economies. These estimates imply that, for instance, possibly more than ten million adults in the US could be affected, and up to half a million in the UK. This

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