

## Patterns of Addictive Consumption[1]

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### Introduction

Addictive consumers buy for motives unrelated to the actual possession of the goods, and most purchases remain unused. Feelings of anticipation and excitement prior to and during the shopping experience are replaced by guilt and shame afterwards. Patterns of behaviour are developed and maintained in secret over a period of time. This paper seeks to explain how and why some consumers (predominantly women) develop and maintain an addiction to the consumption experience. Previous similar studies tended to view such extremes of consumption as dysfunctional, aberrant or even as a form of mental disorder. In contrast, this paper, drawing on a large scale UK study, argues that addictive consumers develop and maintain their behaviour over time as a means of coping with, managing or making sense of their personal lives.

This paper presents the results of a study of forty-six women in the UK who identified themselves as addictive consumers. Through phenomenological interviews, they describe their thoughts and experiences both within the shopping environment and in their everyday lives. A rich picture of the reality of being an addictive consumer emerges, not only in terms of the consumption activity but also the precursors to, the consequences, and the means of self-managing the activity. Addictive consumers are presented here as women who have adopted what is traditionally considered to be a male-based mechanism for coping with depression or unsatisfactory situations - that is, *doing* something rather than *thinking* about their problems. These women have chosen to engage in a familiar, enjoyable and socially acceptable activity, shopping, to gain some kind of control in their lives. Paradoxically, the activity is developed and maintained to such an extent that *it* controls *them*.

The consumption behaviour itself is almost identical in each case, but addictive consumers are not a homogeneous group. Four patterns or sub-groups of addictive consumers emerge - the existential addict, the revenge addict, the mood repair addict and the serial addict.

### Addictive Consumption

Addictive consumption, as a pathological form of shopping behaviour, was initially explored in studies in the USA (O'Guinn and Faber 1989), Canada (Valence, d'Astous, and Fortier 1988), Germany (Scherhorn, Reisch, and Raab 1990) and the UK (Elliott 1994; Elliott, Eccles and Gournay 1996). All the studies noted that these consumers (predominantly female) buy for motives that are not directly related to the actual possession of the goods - in fact, many of the purchases remain wrapped and hidden in cupboards. They persistently repeat the behaviour despite it leading to severe financial and social consequences, such as huge levels of personal debt and even marital breakdown. The *act* of shopping itself is an important element, as many people seem to need to engage in a shopping process within a store environment. Typically, addictive consumers experience feelings of great excitement and anticipation prior to and during the shopping experience, only to feel guilty and ashamed of themselves and their behaviour at the post-shopping stage.

As much as there has been interest in the behaviour of the addictive consumer itself in recent

years, there has been debate as to the appropriate terminology for this form of aberrant and excessive behaviour. Described variously as 'compulsive buying' (e.g. Valence, d'Astous and Fortier, 1988 and O'Guinn and Faber, 1989), 'compulsive consumption' (e.g. Shoaf, Scattone, Morrin and Maheswaran, 1995) and 'addictive buying' (e.g. Scherhorn, Reisch and Raab, 1990), there appears to be little acceptance of one term that could be used universally. Yet evidence to date would suggest that researchers are actually investigating a similar sort of behaviour, and developing and exploring similar phenomena. This difference in opinion is important not only from a conceptual point of view, but also because of the differences in the ways of measuring and treating compulsive as opposed to addictive behaviours. There is increasing concern regarding the personal, social, physical and financial implications of addictive behaviours generally, and a recognition in medical and counselling fields that addictive behaviour may require very different and specialized treatment. For example, Concar (1994) explored some of the current research and treatment for drug addicts, and the conflict between the influence of 'nature' (e.g. genetics) and 'nurture' (e.g. socialization) in identifying and understanding addictive behaviours.

Although initial research (e.g. Faber and O'Guinn et al., 1987, 1988, 1989, 1992; Valence and d'Astous et al., 1988, 1990) termed this behaviour as compulsive consumption or buying, it is believed that a more appropriate term is 'addictive consumption'. This latter term, as noted by Elliott (1994), incorporates the development of normal, everyday behaviour into a pathological habit, and encompasses the whole experience from the pre-shopping anticipation and planning, through to the secretion of goods and manipulation of finances.

## **Methodology**

This particular study was based on in-depth interviews with fifty self-referred participants, who identified themselves as addictive consumers. They came from a variety of backgrounds, but were predominantly female (n=46) and all UK based. Each participant considered him/herself to be an addictive consumer. All, to a greater or lesser degree, showed the same pattern of anticipation and excitement prior to and during the shopping experience, feelings of guilt and remorse afterwards and a desire to keep their behaviour and goods a secret from others. By using phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989), informants were able to 'tell their own story' rather than answer prescribed questions.

As previous research into addictive consumption had been based on mail-out questionnaires and semi-structured interviews (e.g. O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Scherhorn, Reisch and Raab 1990), it was felt appropriate to utilise an alternative paradigm, existential phenomenology, which allows the voices of the researched to be more fully represented. This would allow a deeper and less directed set of experiences to be expressed by the respondents. Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989, p135) present existential phenomenology as an alternative paradigm for understanding and researching the consumer experience. They use metaphors of pattern, figure/ground, and seeing to illustrate the core assumptions of this alternative world view. In proposing a philosophy and method for consumer research, Thompson, Locander and Pollio contend that human experience can be seen as a pattern emerging from a context. They state that the research focus should be on individual experience described from a first person perspective. The researcher should seek to recognise patterns as they emerge. Descriptions of specific experience should be related to each other, and to the overall context, in a holistic way. Existential-phenomenological interviews should focus on identifying recurring experiential patterns. The research goal is to give

a thematic description of experience.

All of those interviewed were at different 'stages' of addiction. Some felt that, due to changing circumstances such as losing a job, being declared bankrupt, or becoming involved in a loving supportive relationship, they had become *less* addicted to the shopping experience. They had faced up to their behaviour, come to terms with and explored the reasons they had become addicted and taken positive steps to break the addiction, usually with the support of a partner or professional. Others, on the other hand, had only recently acknowledged to themselves that their behaviour had negative or unmanageable financial and social consequences - that they were, in fact, addictive consumers. It was yet another unresolved 'problem' in their life often alongside issues such as abuse, bereavement or loneliness. All the informants acknowledged that the shopping experience yielded short-term positive feelings that provided an escape from depressive mood states and aversive self-awareness.

## **Findings**

One of the most significant findings of this study was the different 'patterns' of addictive consumption in terms of the precursors to and outcomes of the behaviour. These have been termed the "existential" addict, the "revenge" addict, the "mood repair" addict and the "serial" addict. Each is discussed below but it should also be noted that these patterns are not mutually exclusive. Some respondents showed elements of two of the patterns although in all cases, one pattern dominated.

### **The Existential Addict**

Existential addicts can be defined as those who engage in addictive consumption in order to create a sense of meaning in their lives through their consumer choices, which for them involve an experience of 'flow'. Although not necessarily intrinsically unhappy, they develop and maintain the behaviour over time to an extent that is excessive. They experience the same feelings of craving, anticipation, excitement and a 'high', guilt and secrecy as other addictive consumers, but in the consumption process appear to experience a state of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), where their skills as a shopper are matched by the challenge of the consumption choice and purchase. They are similar to the 'market maven' described by Feick and Price (1985) in that they are skilled, expert consumers to whom others may turn for advice. There are possible links here with other non-drug forms of addiction. For example, the thrill experienced by excessive gamblers (particularly when the game is based on skill, not just chance) may encourage them to take risky decisions (Orford, 1985). As Baumeister, Heatherton and Tice found (1994; p.223) *"some gamblers take pride in their skill level and have great expectations for future winnings"*. They further argued that such forms of skilled performance *"requires keeping attention carefully focused on the task but not on one's own internal responses and processes"* (p. 52). So, it may well be that the skill, concentration and absorption in the process of consumption is not only a means of providing a short term feeling of being in control and "feeling good" but also a sense of optimism for the future.

### **The Revenge Addict**

Some addictive consumers appear to be in spoiled personal relationships (see Duck and Wood, 1995; p. 10) where they do not have a positive regard for their partner. These revenge addicts feel that they are in control whilst in the retail environment. This control is only over a small part of their lives, and the whole behaviour is kept secret from others, but it seems to provide them with the focus and respite that they need from the rest of their lives. At the same time, there is the feeling of being able to 'get back at' their partner, through spending his/their money. The

consequences of this form of addictive consumption are probably similar to that of all the other addictive consumers in terms of finance and personal relationships.

What seems to be common is that the development of addictive consumption as a form of revenge is not a spontaneous or one-off reaction to a particular incident. It builds up over several years and in some cases over a lifetime, and is often a last resort when all other attempts at communication with the partner have failed. All the participants who showed elements of revenge in their addictive shopping behaviour appear to have feelings of lack of control in their relationship with their partner (and often, previously, their father). They felt undermined and patronized, and that their only responsibility was for 'mundane' tasks such as housekeeping and cooking. Comments such as '*he still treats me like a child*' were common, even though the participants themselves feel they have 'grown up' because of family or professional responsibilities. It appears therefore that these women developed and maintain their shopping behaviour in order to have some kind of 'exciting' or even slightly dangerous control over a part of their personal lives and their finances. This in turn suggests some feeling of power, albeit secretive, over their partner. The fact that many partners appear to tolerate what they know or suspect about the shopping activities seems, if anything, to encourage the participants to take even greater risks and be even more outrageous in their activities (Elliott, Eccles and Gournay, 1996a and 1996b).

### **The Mood Repair Addict**

Although the term 'mood repair addict' suggests someone who is intrinsically unhappy, women with elements of this pattern in their behaviour did not present themselves as particularly depressed, and were articulate and thoughtful in their comments. The sort of negative moods or feelings these women describe include feeling '*cheesed off*,' needing '*a fix*,' '*not having anyone to share things with*,' '*a bit of comfort*,' being '*fed up*.' Although some of them talked in terms of being or having been depressed, such depression appears to be reactive rather than endogenous. It occurred as a reaction to negative external events that were, at the time, beyond their control. By developing and maintaining an activity they already found pleasurable and satisfying (i.e. shopping) into an addiction, they had also taken some kind of action (albeit excessive and secretive) which they felt helped them cope with and survive negative times. Even though their behaviour may be described as being out of control, the consequences of their addiction do not necessarily have to be extreme. It appears by trying to stay *in control* of a difficult or unhappy situation, one of the activities they enjoy most (i.e. shopping) is developed and maintained until *it controls them* (unlike the type of "compensatory consumption" described by Eccles and Woodruffe, 2000). It may be that mood repair addicts progress in and out of addictive consumption over many years, using it as a relatively short-term coping mechanism as events occur in their lives.

Shopping as a means of alleviating negative mood states has been extensively studied and commented on by within the consumer research arena by, for example, Woodruffe (1996), Gronmo (1988) and Luamala (1998). As Annie Chan (2001) found from her accompanied shopping trips with three women in Hong Kong, "*All three women confessed that occasionally they feel an inexplicable need to spend some money, usually when they are unhappy or troubled by certain things*" (p. 213). However, when this "occasional need" becomes a daily necessity, it is possible that such shopping shifts from becoming a short-term coping mechanism to a longer-term addiction.

### **The Serial Addict**

This group of participants shows evidence of deep-rooted unhappiness. They have often been addicted to other behaviours or substances (e.g. alcohol or eating disorders), or are currently

being treated for clinical depression. Their consumption behaviour tends to be more spasmodic and manic, although the actual process of the addictive behaviour is similar to that of all other addictive consumers. However, their individual histories and personalities suggest profoundly unhappy women who have struggled for years to cope with and fend off depression.

For consumers who show element of the serial addiction pattern, the precursors to their behaviour are complex and deep-rooted. Their consumption is just one of so many other dysfunctional behaviours, that it would be inappropriate to attempt to address it in total isolation. It is, however, possible to conclude that in all such cases, the addiction to consumption is probably the least of their problems. They may be in some debt, or spending more than they would wish on consumption, but the effects on their physical health are less damaging than alcohol, exercise or food abuse, which some of those interviewed had been addicted to in the past. As Harris (2000) states "*some people practice serial addiction and substitute one addiction for another, such as replacing smoking with overeating. Others practice addictions simultaneously, such as shopping and overeating, or drinking and smoking*" (p. 207). By drawing on the work of Lefevre (1988) and Wilson-Schaefer (1987) she suggests that such addictions are used to mask and perpetuate feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness. However, the risk is that by treating one form of addiction without taking account of other previous or concurrent addictive behaviours, underlying issues and reasons such behaviour developing in the first place may not be fully addressed, leading to the substitution of yet another addiction. For these addictive consumers, breaking the cycle of serial addiction may be longer term and more challenging for others.

## **Discussion**

There is no single explanatory theory of addiction (McMurrin 1994). Researchers would argue that economic, sociological or physiological factors, for example, have a contribution to make to a greater or lesser degree. This study has attempted to understand how and why some consumers develop and maintain their consumption behaviour over time, to the extent that it becomes a (or even *the*) central focus in their lives. Despite the apparent loss of self-control suggested by this excessive behaviour, it may be, paradoxically, the only time these individuals feel *in* control. A range of internal and external factors and experiences, such as culture, family, personal thoughts and feelings, appear to strongly influence the development and maintenance of this behaviour.

This develops research by, for example, Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1990) and Elliott (1995). They suggested that the issue of consumers of being in or out of control of their consumption experiences reflected an anxiety about "not buying the 'right' way, so that women felt guilty when they perceived themselves as not making rational purchase decisions" (Elliott 1995, 292). A strong emergent theme from this research is feeling in or out of control of one's life or situation. What transpired from the interviews was that each of the participants in the research, to a greater or lesser extent, were living in a situation where they felt they had little control over many aspects of their everyday lives. The causes of this were varied, but included living with an over-dominant partner, being unemployed or under-employed, marital breakdown, or long-term illness. For the main part of their everyday lives, these women felt that both major and minor decisions were being made for them – that their lives were being "managed" by someone or something out of their control.

This contrasts with their reflections on their shopping experiences. In the shopping environment, awareness of the surroundings and atmosphere enhance their feelings of being in control of themselves. They can choose where to go, what to look at, what to buy. In other words, for this

period of time, addictive consumers can make their own decisions, untroubled by external pressures or concerns. It is an important “space” in their lives where they can remove themselves not only from everyday issues, but also take full responsibility for what they are doing. “*It’s a sort of freedom.*”

Even beyond the shopping environment, this element of being in control continues. Secreting the goods away, sorting out paying the credit card bills, hiding both the purchases and the consumption behaviour from partners, friends and families all contribute to the feeling that a small part of their lives is free from the knowledge and interference of others. So, while addictive consumption has been described as an *inability* to control behaviour, the findings from this study suggest the contrary. The shopping and associated behaviour appear to provide feelings of empowerment and emancipation, through a process of self management.

It may also be that these some of these women are adopting what is usually considered to be a more male-based coping mechanism for negative mood. This applies particularly but not exclusively to mood repair addicts. Nolen-Hoeksema (1987) argues that ‘*men’s responses to their dysphoria are more behavioural and dampen their depressive episodes, whereas women’s responses to their depressive episodes are to ruminate and amplify them*’ (p. 274). She argues that there are distinct gender differences in the way that periods of depression are addressed. By ruminating and trying to find the possible causes of their mood and implications of their depressive episode, women are more likely to prolong the depression symptoms. By taking an active course of behaviour, men are more likely to dampen and shorten their depressive symptoms. What seems remarkable about many of these women is that they seem to be engaging in *both* coping mechanisms. They are still very aware of the pain and unpleasantness of their situation, and do not appear to be seeking to totally escape from these experiences. On reflection, they articulate a certain wisdom and understanding about what they did and why - which was to actively seek out a pleasurable, familiar and socially-acceptable experience in order to allow negative feelings to recede, if only on a short-term basis. The difficulty these consumers have over ‘normal’ consumers is that the coping mechanism developed is so successful that it is eventually maintained over time as an addiction, with all the characteristics of such addictive behaviour.

Baumeister, Heatherton and Tice point out that “*even the most law-abiding citizens suffer from problems arising from lack of self-control*” (1994: p. 4) evidenced through, for example, a reluctance to give up smoking, poor eating habits and inadequate exercise that may all lead to subsequent health problems. They argue that being in control requires self-regulation and that when this fails it can be understood in two forms – under-regulation (a failure to control oneself) and misregulation (“*controlling oneself in a fashion that produces an undesirable or counterproductive outcome*” p. 33). This latter concept could well be applicable to addictive consumers. Arguably, addictive consumption can be seen from two points of view – as a positive means of coping with and making sense of ones life or, in more negative terms, as a form of distorted self-control that has inevitably negative consequences.

Addictive consumers should not be perceived as necessarily ‘dysfunctional’ or ‘aberrant’ women - the fact that many of them appear to be using their consumption activities as a means of coping, should perhaps be seen in more positive terms by others, despite any negative consequences. At the very least, it provides an alternative to ruminating and introspection; at best, it may prevent other more damaging behaviours (to the self or to others) being developed such as alcoholism, shoplifting or drug dependency. Within the UK, there has been an increased interest in the

shopping experience and shopping behaviour of the consumer as an individual. Recent studies have explored, for example, the phenomena of compensatory consumption (Woodruffe, 1996), the apathetic shopper (Reid and Brown, 1996) and addictive consumption (Elliott, 1994). Woodruffe (1996) suggested the concept of a continuum of consumer behaviour, with apathetic shoppers at one extreme and addictive consumers at the other. Although simplistic, such a model presents a useful starting point for researchers to begin to identify the fragmentation and typologies of consumers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which potentially can embrace internal and external factors, can allow for change over time of the individual, and can encourage researchers to view the consumer as a constantly changing and adapting individual. It is within this context that researchers can understand addictive consumption as an extreme yet significant facet of consumer behaviour.

### **Acknowledgements**

This research was supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

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