CONSUMING IN A CONSUMER CULTURE: COLLEGE STUDENTS, MATERIALISM, STATUS CONSUMPTION, AND COMPULSIVE BUYING

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The emergence of a worldwide consumer culture has potentially severe negative consequences. A primary objective of the present study was to investigate the relationships between materialism, status consumption, and compulsive buying in a sample of young adults in the United States. Why materialism and status consumption? Because materialism and status consumption are the cornerstones of the consumer culture. A negative by-product of the consumer culture is compulsive buying (Roberts and Martinez 1997; Roberts and Sepulveda 1999). Study results revealed elevated levels of compulsive buying among U.S. college students. A hierarchical regression analysis found that Richins and Dawson's (1992) "Acquisition Centrality" and "Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness" dimensions of materialism were important motivating factors behind compulsive buying.

INTRODUCTION

> It is better to be satisfied with what you have than to always be wanting something else.
> Ecclesiastes 6:9

The consumer culture is defined as a culture in which the majority of consumers avidly desire, pursue, consume, and display goods and services that are valued for nonutilitarian reasons, such as status, envy provocation, and pleasure seeking (Belk 1988). As the consumer culture becomes a worldwide norm, it is imperative that a significant portion of consumer behavior research focus on the individual and societal implications of materialism, status consumption, and compulsive buying.

The desire for material goods may be innate, but certain conditions need to be met for this preoccupation with material goods to flourish globally. First, consumers must have the spending power to purchase such goods. This condition is clearly met in most of the United States, Europe, and Japan. However, even consumers in less developed countries are attracted to and indulge in aspects of conspicuous consumption even before they have met their more basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing (Belk 1988).

A second condition that must be present for the consumer culture to spread is a prevailing ethos toward hedonism (Rassuli and Hollander 1986). This consumption ethos is transmitted via global mass media, multi-national marketing, and international tourism (Ger and Belk 1996). Social comparison to more consumption focused cultures may be the strongest force behind the spread of the consumer culture (Belk 1988).

A third condition conducive to the spread of consumer culture is the degree of mobility prevailing in class relations and the extent of the marketing effort being exerted upon consumers (Rassuli and Hollander 1986). Newly opened free markets in Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union are good examples of cultures moving toward a preoccupation with material possessions – a consumer culture.

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Research in the areas of materialism, status consumption, and compulsive buying is needed because of the potentially negative consequences of a consumer culture. One negative outcome of the consumer culture may include destruction of traditional culture. Although one may think of this only in the sense of developing economies it appears to also be present in countries with more established economies as well. In the United States, the consumer culture is clearly at odds with a culture that at one time encouraged savings and eschewed frivolous spending.

In developing economies, local products are often overlooked for the more favored foreign products. Western products have either replaced or merged with traditional rituals and consumption patterns. The desire for Western goods is seen as the developed world's chief export (Belk 1988).

A third potential consequence of a consumer culture is that desires will always likely outstrip the means to make such purchases. This is not only evident in the consumer behavior of third-world consumers (Belk 1988), but is evidenced in the daily spending habits of American consumers as well. Compulsive buying and the consumer culture's impact on spending and saving have been significant. Increases in personal bankruptcies and credit card debt are negative economic aspects of compulsive buying. In 1998, personal bankruptcies reached an all-time high of 1.38 million. In 1999, consumer bankruptcies declined by nine percent, ending the year at 1.26 million (Adler 2000). This number of filings resulted in approximately 1.3 percent of all U.S. households declaring bankruptcy in 1995 – an increase from .8 percent in 1995 (Zuckerman 2000). It is predicted that bankruptcies will increase to 1.3 million in 200 and may reach as high as 1.75 million filings by 2002 or 2003 (Adler 2000).

Credit card debt is a significant portion of debt for many individuals seeking protection under the Bankruptcy Code (Moss 1999). The average U.S. household now possesses 13 credit or charge cards, and carries an average of $7,500 in credit card balances, up from $3,000 in 1990 (Zuckerman 2000). Research by Roberts (1998) documented the central role credit card usage plays in compulsive buying. Consumer spending has now exceeded disposable income. Savings have reached an all-time low of –0.5 percent (Shoesmith 1999).

The above trends are mirrored in the personal financial dealings of young adults. Nearly nine percent of debtors under 35 years of age are at least 60 days behind in their payments on all kinds of debt. A recent survey by VISA found that 8.7 percent of those applying for bankruptcy were under the age of 25. A few years ago, young people made up only one percent of those filing for bankruptcy (McBride 1997). For many young adults, bankruptcy appears to be an acceptable debt-management technique. Increasing numbers of personal bankruptcies and mounting credit card debt among young adults can be linked to the easy availability of credit (McBride 1997), and a culture that encourages conspicuous consumption and excess (Zuckerman 2000). Banks have historically encouraged savings and discouraged debt, but are now targeting college students and young adults and are encouraging credit card debt (Ritzer 1995).

Research has also found that materialistic people or cultures are less happy than their less materialistic counterparts (Belk 1985; Richins and Dawson 1992; Tang 1993). Level of wealth has little to do with happiness. Pursuing materialistic ideals is a competitive and comparative process. To achieve a position of social power or status, one must exceed the existing community norm. As long as others are also attempting to signal their social power through possessing and displaying material goods, the level of goods required to make a powerful social statement continually rises. The result is no end to our wants and little improvement in our satisfaction, despite an ever increasing consumption of goods (Bell 1998). The process of moving ahead materially without any real gain in satisfaction has been termed the treadmill of consumption (Bell 1998).

Study Objectives

The emergence of a world-wide consumer culture whose lynchpin is materialism has potentially severe negative consequences for everyone. Even those consumers who do not practice or espouse such ideals are affected by others' pursuit of materialist ideals. "One criterion for considering the usefulness of research concerns its contribution to society and society's welfare" (Peter 1991, p. 543).

A primary objective of the present study is to investigate the relationships between materialism, status consumption, and compulsive buying among college students in the United States. Why materialism and status consumption? Because materialism and status consumption are the cornerstones of the consumer culture. In earlier research, Eastman et al. (1997) demonstrated that materialism and status consumption are distinct constructs. A negative outcome of the consumer culture is compulsive buying (Roberts and Martinez 1997; Roberts and Sepulveda 1999). Research in this area is critical because of the potentially severe consequences of compulsive buying for the individual affected, others around him/her, and society at large (Roberts 1998).

College students in the United States were used for several reasons. First, the U. S. has long been considered at the vanguard of materialistic consumption (Mick 1996). Second, young adults in the U. S. today are considered to be highly materialistic (Dunn 1993; Spiers 1992; Litvan 1996) and have exhibited higher levels of compulsive buying than previous studies using older adult populations (Roberts 1998).

A second objective of the present study will be to gauge levels of compulsive buying in one segment of the U.S. young adult population – college students. A profile of the factors which drive compulsive buying in college students will also be offered. An estimate of the incidence of compulsive buying is important to understand the magnitude of the problem. A profile of the young adult compulsive buyer will help researchers and policy makers better understand which groups may be most likely to espouse materialistic attitudes, status concerns, and exhibit compulsive buying behavior.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Compulsive Buying

Compulsive buying has been described as "chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings" (O'Guinn and Faber 1989, p. 155). Most of the research on compulsive buying has addressed this behavior in the adult population and largely with self-identified samples of compulsive buyers (Faber and O'Guinn 1992; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Scherhorn et al. 1990). Few research studies have investigated the antecedents and incidence of compulsive buying in adolescents and/or young adults (d'Astous, Maltais, and Roberge 1990; Roberts 1998; Roberts and Martinez 1997).

Many theories have been proposed to explain the etiology of compulsive or addictive behaviors. However, most theoretical models focus on family, biological, psychological, or sociological causes (Roberts 1998), all likely factors in compulsive buying. Compulsive buying is viewed as the result of multiple factors rather than any single cause. The present study will limit its focus to two psychological variables that are seen as the cornerstones of the consumer culture – materialism and status consumption. Materialistic ideals and concern for status supersede the impact of family, sociological, and even demographics. If a desire for material possessions and social status are not present, compulsive buying would not exist.

Incidence of Compulsive Buying

An important question is whether young adults today are more materialistic than older adults. Currently, young adults in the U. S. are considered to be highly materialistic (Dunn 1993; Litvan 1996) and want to indulge their materialistic values (Spiers 1992). In a series of research studies in the U. S. and Mexico, Roberts and several co-authors found that college students/young adults exhibited higher levels of compulsive buying than previous studies which used older adult populations (Roberts 1998; Roberts and Martinez 1997; Roberts and Sepulveda 1999).

Why should one expect today's young adults to exhibit such high levels of compulsive buying? An investigation of the socio-cultural environment in which they were raised provides clues. Damon (1988) investigated three aspects of the socio-cultural environment that have contributed to the creation of compulsive buyers in our society. She cites the breakdown of the family, advertising messages, and that spending has become a form of worship in current society. These factors coalesce to create an environment that reinforces one's beliefs, attitudes, and personal norms that overspending and excess buying is acceptable. Magee (1994) found that compulsive buyers have more permissive attitudes towards dysfunctional behavior. Over time, social norms and attitudes may be modified to reflect this dysfunctional orientation. Such permissive attitudes toward compulsive buying would create an even more conducive environment for this phenomenon. Based upon the above, the following hypothesis will be tested.

H_1: The present sample of young adults will exhibit higher levels of compulsive buying than previous research with older adults which estimated that one to six percent of adults can be classified as compulsive buyers.

Demographic Correlates of Compulsive Buying

Certain demographic variables have also been found to be associated with compulsive buying. Because of the nature of the present sample (college students), no hypotheses regarding education, or occupation will be tested.

Research evidence suggests that the vast majority of compulsive buyers are female (Faber 1992; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Roberts 1998; Roberts and Martinez 1997; Scherhorn 1990). Women are more likely to have been socialized to derive pleasure from shopping (Roberts 1998). Thus, based upon the consistent findings of previous research it is hypothesized that:

H_2: Women will score higher than men on a scale designed to measure compulsive buying.

The relationship between socio-economic status and compulsive buying has been equivocal. The majority of research has found either a very weak or non-existent relationship between SES and compulsive buying (Damon 1988; d'Astous and Tremblay 1989; Krueger 1988, O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Roberts 1998; Scherhorn et al. 1990). D'Astous (1990) found support for an inverse relationship between SES and compulsive buying. The equivocal previous research results suggest the following hypothesis:

H_3: There will be no relationship between level of income and compulsive buying.

A negative relationship between age and compulsive buying has been found across a number of studies (d'Astous 1990; d'Astous and Tremblay 1989; O'Guinn and Faber 1989). Consumer socialization literature suggests that childhood and adolescence may be the most crucial periods for the acquisition of consumption related orientations, both desirable and undesirable (Moschis and Cox 1989). However, Scherhorn et al. (1990) and Roberts (1998) found no relationship between age and compulsive buying. The cross-sectional nature of the samples used in the above studies suggests that further research into the age-compulsive buying relationship is needed. Based upon the above, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H_4: Age will be negatively associated with compulsive buying.

Status Consumption and Compulsive Buying

Status consumption has been described as a "form of power that consists of respect, consideration, and envy from others and represents the goals of a culture" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, p. 29). Modern culture revolves around attempts to signal our comparative degree of social power through what Veblen (1899) referred to as conspicuous consumption. Consumers demonstrate their social power by displaying their material wealth, because wealth is the best indicator of power in modern society (Bell 1998). Today, status is seen more through ownership of status products than through personal, occupational, or family reputation (Eastman et al. 1997).

Status consumption is best viewed as a consumer value (Richins and Dawson 1992). Values play an important role for individuals, "guiding actions, attitudes, judgements, and comparisons across specific objects" (Rokeach 1973, p. 18). The value consumers place on particular possessions are made in terms of personal values. The possessions people hold as important are a reflection of their values (Richins 1994). It is clear that patterns of consumption will be the result of consumer values.

The present study's treatment of status consumption and materialism is consistent with the work of Eastman et al. (1997). While status is an important component of materialism, the two variables are related, but not redundant. Materialists value possessions, both those that convey status and those that do not. Status consumption is most closely aligned with Richins and Dawson's (1992) "Possession-defined Success" dimension, where consumers judge their own and others' success by the number and quality of possessions accumulated. Based upon the above, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H_5: Status consumption will be positively associated with materialism, but will account for unique variance in compulsive buying.

Research by d'Astous and Tremblay (1989), found that compulsive buyers were more likely to associate buying with social status. This is consistent with the more recent findings of Roberts (1998) and Roberts and Martinez (1997) who found a positive relationship between the social status associated with buying and compulsive buying both in the United States and Mexico. Hanley and Wilhelm (1992) found compulsive spenders to be preoccupied with money as a solution to problems and as a means of comparison. Compulsive spenders were more likely to report the need to spend money in such a way as to reflect power and status. Elliot (1994) found that one of the primary functions of compulsive buying is to increase the compulsive buyer's ability to match his/her subjective perceptions of socially desirable or required appearances.

Status consumption allows consumers to feel socially powerful. However, status consumption is a competitive and comparative process which requires consumers to continually increase their conspicuous signals of wealth and power (Bell 1998). Clearly, status consumption has the potential to lead to compulsive buying. Thus, the following hypothesis is offered:

H_6: Status consumption will be positively associated with compulsive buying.

Materialism and Compulsive Buying

Belk (1985, p. 265) defined materialism as "the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions." He envisioned materialism as a personality variable with three traits: envy, possessiveness, and non-generosity. Status was not directly included in Belk's operationalization of materialism. However, low reliabilities for each of the subscales of Belk's materialism measure (Ger and Belk 1996) led the present study to Richins and Dawson's (1992) conceptualization and scale designed to measure materialism.

Richins and Dawson (1992, p. 308) defined materialism as a "set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life." Materialism was conceptualized as consisting of three dimensions: (1) Acquisition Centrality, (2) Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness, and (3) Possession- defined Success. More than other values or personality traits, materialism is uniquely identified with consumption (Richins and Rudmin 1994).

Acquisition centrality addresses the importance consumers place on possessions and their acquisitions. Materialists would place possessions and their acquisition at the center of their lives (Richins and Dawson 1992). Material consumption functions as a goal and becomes a way of life. Materialism can play a dominant role in a materialist's life. For some materialists, "consumption for the sake of consumption" becomes an all consuming focus. Based upon the above, the following hypothesis is offered:

H_7: The "Acquisition Centrality" dimension of Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale will be positively associated with compulsive buying.

Materialists attempt to find happiness and satisfaction through possessions and acquisitions. Possessions assume a central role in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Belk 1984). Materialists believe that expanded levels of consumption will increase the amount of pleasure enjoyed in life. Research, however, paints a bleak picture for happiness through acquisition. Materialists are seen as less happy with their lives (LaBarbera and Gurhan 1997; Belk 1985; Bell 1998; Richins and Dawson; 1992; Richins 1987; Richins and Rudmin 1994). On average, U.S. consumers are no more happy than consumers around the world (Belk 1985).

Materialists become discontented with their lives and themselves because they are "caught in an unending cycle in which the pleasure of new acquisitions is rapidly replaced by a desire for more" (Mick 1996, p. 110). Because materialists base their happiness and success on the acquisition of goods, it is likely they will be more prone to engage in chronic, repeated buying behavior that develops as a main response to negative events or feelings – compulsive buying. Based on the above, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H_8: The "Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness" dimension of Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale will be positively associated with compulsive buying.

The third dimension of Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale measures the tendency of consumers to judge their own and others' success by the number and quality of accumulated possessions. Richins and Dawson (1992) labeled this dimension "Possession-defined Success." The value of possessions is their ability to confer status and project a desired self-image. Materialists view themselves and others successful only to the extent they can possess products that project a desired image (Richins and Rudmin 1994).

Richins (1994) found that materialistic consumers were more likely to purchase products that were worn or used in public places. Dittmar et al.'s (1995) research found that women impulsively buy symbolic and self-expressive goods related to appearance and emotional aspects of self. Faber (1992) reported that female compulsive buyers frequently spent their money on clothes. Herbig et al. (1993) found that members of Generation X (young adults) are acquisitive and attempt to create a fantasy life which has the superficial appearance of success and financial well being.

As long as other consumers are also attempting to signal their social power through conspicuous consumption, the levels required to make a conspicuous statement of power will continue to rise. After price, status is the principal theme of most advertisements (Bell 1998). Based upon the above, the following hypothesis is offered:

H_9: The "Possession-defined Success" dimension of Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale will be positively associated with compulsive buying.

METHODOLOGY

A self-report survey was conducted to collect the needed information in the spring of 1998. A convenience sample of college students was selected from a private university with an enrollment of 13,000 students in the State of Texas. The respondent group was, for the most part, comprised of Freshman and Sophomore students enrolled in an Introduction to Business class that included students from across the university. Four hundred and six students participated in the survey. The questionnaires were completed during class with full participation from the students attending class that day.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics = % Respondents (n=406)

Sex	%	Age	%
Male	51.5	17	0.7
Female	48.5	18	22.4
Total	100	19	52
		20	18.5
		21	6.4
		Total	100

Income			Years in School	
< $10,000	1.3		Freshman	66
$10,000-19,999	1.6		Sophomore	24.4
$20,000-29,999	4.2		Junior	8.6
$30,000-39,999	6.6		Senior	0.5
$40,000-49,999	4.8		**Other**	0.5
$50,000-59,999	5.8		**Total**	100
$60,000-69,999	6.3			
$70,000-79,999	7.1		**Race**	
$80,000 plus	62.2		**Caucasian**	77.6
Total	100		**Mexican/Hispanic**	6.4
			African American	5.9
			Asian	7.9
			Other	2.2
			Total	100

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics
Compulsive (n=35) v.
Non-Compulsive Buyers (n=362)

	%				%		
Sex	Comp.	Non-Comp	X^2	Age	Comp.	Non-Comp	X^2
Male	37.1	52.8		17	0	0.8	
Female	62.9	47.2	9.91[a]	18	20	22.7	
Total	100	100		19	34.3	53.3	
				20	40	16.6	
				21	5.7	6.6	41.0[a]
				Total	100	100	

Income			Years in School		
< $10,000	3	0.6	Freshman	40	68.2
$10,000-19,999	3	1.5	Sophomore	37.1	23.5
$20,000-29,999	3	4.5	Junior	20	7.5
$30,000-39,999	6.1	6.2	Senior	0	0.6
$40,000-49,999	0	5.3	Other	2.9	0.3
$50,000-59,999	3	6.2	Total	100	100
$60,000-69,999	3	6.8	$X^2 = 40.96$[a]		
$70,000-79,999	12.1	6.8	Race		
$80,000 plus	66.7	62	Caucasian		
Total $X^2 = 24.88$[a]	100	100	Mexican/ Hispanic		
			African American		
			Asian		
			Other		
			Total $X^2 = .86$		

a = p < .01
b = p < .05

The questionnaire was pre-tested with both student groups and faculty to ensure the clarity of the questions and that few ambiguities existed. While there is an on-going debate over the use of student samples (Wells 1993), a college student sample was deemed appropriate for several reasons. First, an important objective of the present study was to estimate the incidence of compulsive buying in young adults. Much has been written that suggests members of Generations X and Y (those born after 1976) are highly materialistic. They have been raised in an environment marked by an increased marketing effort focused on young people as consumers. Second, earlier research by Roberts (1998) hypothesized and found an elevated level of compulsive buying in members of Generation X. It is the present study's contention that materialism, and hence, compulsive buying is spiraling upward in subsequent generations.

Descriptive statistics for the present sample can be found in Table One. The sample consisted of approximately half females and males, with an average age of 19 years old, and 90 percent were either Freshman (66%) or Sophomores (24%). Approximately three-fourths of the respondents (77.6%) were Caucasian and family income was positively skewed. Sixty-two percent of the respondents reported total family income of over $80,000 for the past year.

Table 3
Compulsive Buying Scale[a] Items

Scoring equation = -9.69 + (Q1a X .33) + (Q2a X .34) + (Q2b X .50) + (Q2c X .47) + (Q2d X .33) + (Q2e X .38) + (Q2f X. .31)

If score ≤ -1.34, subject is classified as a compulsive buyer.

1. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the statements below. Place an X on the line which best indicates how you feel about each statement.

	strongly agree	**somewhat agree**	**neither agree nor disagree**	**somewhat disagree**	**strongly disagree**
a. If I have any money left at the end of the pay period, I just have to spend it.	**(1)**	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**

2. Please indicate how often you have done each of the following things by placing an X on the appropriate line.

	Very often	**Often**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**
a. Felt others would be horrified if they knew of my spending habits	**(1)**	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**
b. Bought things even though I couldn't afford them.					
c. Wrote a check when I knew I didn't have enough money in the bank to cover it.					
d. Bought myself something in order to make myself feel better.					
e. Felt anxious or nervous on days I didn't go shopping					
f. Made only the minimum payments on my credit cards.					

[a] Scale designed by Faber and O'Guinn (1992)

Table Two contains the descriptive statistics for both the non-compulsive and compulsive buyers groups. The present study used Faber and O'Guinn's (1992, p. 468) screener for compulsive buying to form the two groups. The same weighting scheme and cut-off point of -1.34 used by Faber and O'Guinn for the seven items of the scale were used to identify compulsive buyers. All respondents who scored less than -1.34 were considered compulsive buyers. A detailed listing of scale items and weighting scheme can be found in Table Three.

Chi-square tests were used to assess if any differences existed across the two groups on the demographic variables of sex, age, income, year in school, and race. As can bee seen in Table 2, females made up a larger percentage of the compulsive buyers group. Significant differences were also found between the two groups on the variables of age, income, and year in school. Race was the only variable that showed no differences between the two groups.

Measure of Compulsive Buying

The seven-item clinical screener for compulsive buying developed by Faber and O'Guinn (1992) was used to gauge compulsive buying in the study's sample. Compulsive buying is defined as chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings. Rigorous scale development and validation by the authors found the scale to be highly reliable (alpha = .95), one-dimensional, and valid. Alpha for the compulsive buying scale was .78 for the present study. See Table 3 for a listing of scale items and scoring equation. A factor analysis supported a one-dimensional measure.

Materialism Measure

The present study used Richins and Dawson's (1992) 18-item measure of materialism. These authors defined materialism as a "set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life" (p. 308). Materialism was conceptualized as consisting of three dimensions: (1) "Acquisition Centrality" (7 items), (2) "Acquisitions as the Pursuit of Happiness" (5 items), and (3) "Possession-defined Success (6 items). Acquisition centrality measures how central a role possessions and their acquisition play in a person's life. Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness gauges whether a person views possessions and their acquisition as essential to their happiness and well being. Possession-defined success measures whether a person bases his and others' success on the number and quality of possessions accumulated.

Alpha for the materialism scale was .84 for the entire scale and .69 (centrality), .76 (happiness), and .70 (success) for each of its sub-scales. A factor analysis of the materialism scale for the present study resulted in a four-factor solution. Three items of the centrality dimension were found to load higher on a fourth dimension that has a focus on spending money (see items 7, 10, and 11 of Table 4). This will be elaborated on further in the discussion section of the present paper. However, to provide continuity between the present study and past studies which used Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale, the original scale and corresponding sub-scale items will be used in the present study's analyses.

Table 4
Status Consumption and Materialism Scale Items

Status Consumption Items (Kilsheimer 1993)
1. I am interested in new products with status.
2. I would buy a product just because it has status.
3. I would pay more for a product if it has status.
4. The status of a product is irrelevant to me.
5. A product is more valuable to me if it has some snob appeal.
Materialism Items (Richins and Dwason 1992)
6. I admire people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes.
7. Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions.
8. I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success.
9. The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.
10. I like to own things that impress people.
11. I don't pay much attention to the material objects other people own.
12. I usually buy only the things I need.
13. I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned.
14. The things I own aren't all that important to me.
15. I enjoy spending money on things that aren't practical.
16. Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.
17. I like a lot of luxury in my life.
18. I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know.
19. I have all the things I really need to enjoy life.
20. My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.
21. I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things.
22. I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.
23. It sometimes bothers me quite a bit hat I can't afford to buy all the things I'd like.

Status Consumption Measure

The present study used Kilsheimer's (1993) five-item scale to measure status consumption. Kilsheimer defined status consumption as the motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolize status both for the individual and surrounding significant others. Alpha for the present study was .78. An exploratory factor analysis supported the scale's one-dimensional structure. See Table Four for a listing of scale items.

Other measures used in the present study included the standard measures for gender, age, and income. Gender was dummy-coded to allow its use in the present study's regression analysis.

RESULTS

Incidence of Compulsive Buying (H_1)

It was hypothesized that young adults would exhibit higher levels of compulsive buying than previous research which used older adults and estimated that between one to six percent of adults could be classified as compulsive buyers (Faber and O'Guinn 1992; Faber and O'Guinn 1989). Researchers and public policy officials need to have an estimate of the incidence of this type of behavior in this segment of the market. Many individuals with the same disorder can cause problems for the larger social structure, thereby creating a public policy issue (Ritzer 1995).

The present study used the screener for compulsive buying developed by Faber and O'Guinn (1992, p. 468). The same weighting scheme for each of the seven items of the scale and cutoff point of –1.34 (p. 464) were used to identify compulsive buyers (Table Three). The above resulted in 8.8 percent of the sample being classified as compulsive buyers. Previous estimates of compulsive buying in the adult population classified between one to six percent of consumers as compulsive buyers (Faber and O'Guinn 1989; Faber and O'Guinn 1992; Trachtenberg 1988). The 8.8 percent estimate of the present study may be conservative because the Faber and O'Guinn scale identifies only the more extreme cases of compulsive buying behavior (Cole and Sherrell 1995). The above estimate lends support for H_1.

Demographic Correlates of Compulsive Buying (H_2 – H_4)

The remainder of the study's hypotheses were tested using a hierarchical multiple regression analysis (Tables 5 and 6). The first block of variables included the demographic measures of gender, age, and family income and explained eight percent of the variation in the sample's compulsive buying. As hypothesized, sex of the respondent was a significant predictor of compulsive buying. The positive Beta coefficient suggested that women were more likely to be compulsive buyers. This result is consistent with the Chi-square test results which found significantly more women in the compulsive buying group. Thus, support is found for H_2.

The positive relationship found between age and compulsive runs counter to its hypothesized negative relationship. Thus, no support is found for H_3.

No relationship was found between the sample's total family income and compulsive buying. This is consistent with H4 that hypothesized no association between family income and compulsive buying.

Status Consumption and Compulsive Buying (H_5 – H_6)

Status consumption was added in the second block of the hierarchical regression analysis and accounted for an additional eight percent variation explained. The total variance explained now equaled 16.5 percent. The positive association found between status consumption and compulsive buying lends support for H_6. However, the inclusion of materialism in the third block of the regression analysis reduced the status consumption – compulsive buying relationship to non-significance. Thus, H_5 is not supported. It appears that variance explained by status consumption is accounted for by the materialism measure.

Table 5
Coefficient Alphas and Matrix of Correlations

	Coefficient Alpha	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Compulsive Buying (1)	0.78	--								
Sex (2)	N/A	.22[a]	--							
Age (3)	N/A	.13[a]	-0.09	--						
Income (4)	N/A	0.01	-0.05	0.04	--					
Status Consumption (5)	0.78	.30[a]	0.07	-0.04	0.06	--				
Materialism (6)	0.84	.47[a]	-0.01	0.04	0.04	.50[a]	--			
Centrality (7)	0.69	.51[a]	.16[a]	0.01	.15[a]	0.4	.81[a]	--		
Happiness (8)	0.76	.33[a]	-.11[a]	0.08	-0.1	.29[a]	.79[a]	.40[a]	--	
Success (9)	0.7	.28[a]	-0.08	0.01	0.04	.45[a]	.84[a]	.53[a]	.51[a]	--

Table 6
Multiple Regression Results
Dependent Variable = Compulsive Buying

Independent Variables	Block 1	Block 2	Beta Coefficients Block 3
Sex	.25[a]	.22[a]	.18[a]
Age	.16[a]	.15[a]	.14[a]
Income	0.01	0.02	0.06
Status Consumption		.29[a]	0.06
Centrality			.42[a]
Happiness			.16[a]
Success			0.03
R-Squared	0.08	0.16	0.34
F	10.96[a]	17.82[a]	26.83[a]
R-Squared Change		0.08	0.18
F		35.29[a]	32.60[a]

a = p < .01; b = p < .05

Materialism and Compulsive Buying ($H_7 - H_9$)

The three dimensions of Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism measure were included in block three of the regression analysis. As hypothesized, both "Acquisition Centrality" and "Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness" were found to be positively associated with compulsive buying. This lends support for H7 and H8. However, "Possession-defined Success" was not significantly associated with compulsive buying. Thus, no support is found for H9.

Discussion and Implications

The results of this study have important implications for both researchers and society at large. Nearly nine percent of the present sample were identified as compulsive buyers. This exceeds earlier estimates of compulsive buying in the older adult population where findings ranged from one to six percent (Faber and O'Guinn 1992; Faber and O'Guinn 1989). Recent research by Roberts (1998) classified nearly six percent of college students as compulsive buyers. As hypothesized in Roberts (1998) and the present study, members of Generations X and Y are more likely to exhibit compulsive buying behavior than older adults. Compulsive buying is a logical outcome (by-product) of the consumer culture and its rising levels of materialism. As discussed earlier in the introduction of this paper, compulsive buying may have severe consequences for affected individuals, others around them, and society at large.

Having documented high levels of compulsive buying among college students, and discussed the potential negative outcomes of the consumer culture and compulsive buying, our focus should next be directed toward the antecedents of compulsive buying. As earlier research has pointed out, there are likely multiple indicators of compulsive buying (Roberts 1998). The current study investigated the roles demographics, status consumption, and materialism play in compulsive buying.

As it relates to the demographic correlates of compulsive buying, the study supported the important role gender plays in compulsive buying. Consistent with previous research, women were more likely to be compulsive buyers. However, even with the inclusion of family income and age, demographics explained only eight percent of the variation in compulsive buying. As hypothesized, income was found not to be associated with compulsive buying. This finding is consistent with earlier equivocal findings regarding the relationship between socio-economic status and compulsive buying. It is becoming evident that compulsive buyers may come from all socio-economic strata.

A somewhat surprising finding was the relationship noted between age and compulsive buying. A fairly consistent inverse relationship has been found in previous studies. These earlier studies involved a broader age range of adults. It may be that the present study's results do not contradict earlier findings, but are simply a function of the present sample. In the present study of college students, age range was restricted to 17 to 21. It is possible that younger students bring with them some more rational consumer tendencies from home. However, with college comes independence. Younger students are likely to look to older students as points of reference. These students have been aggressively marketed to since they arrived at college and typically have credit cards to facilitate their spending. It is likely this acculturation by younger students that explains this seemingly contradictory finding between age and compulsive buying.

Eastman et al. (1997) conceptualized that status consumption was distinct from materialism. However, as the authors point out, status consumption is linked to the "Possession-defined Success" dimension of Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale. The present study treated the two variables as separate which resulted in somewhat contradictory findings. As hypothesized, status consumption was found to be positively associated with compulsive buying when entered as the only variable in the second block of the regression analysis (before entering the three dimensions of materialism in the third block). When Richins and Dawson's (1992) three dimensions of materialism were entered in the third block of the regression analysis, both the status consumption measure and "Possession-defined Success" dimension failed to achieve significance. A possible interpretation is that, while status consumption may be related to compulsive buying, its essence is captured in the centrality dimension of Richins and Dawson's materialism measure. Materialists worship things – things which are also likely held in high esteem by others. It is when the pursuit of possessions becomes the focus of one's life, that one is said to be a materialist.

The above finding is particularly important because it lends insight into the motivations behind compulsive buying. If one closely examines Faber and O'Guinn's (1992) definition of compulsive buying, one finds that it only hints at the possibility that desire for status may drive compulsive buying. And, this interpretation requires that "negative events or feelings" be construed to entail negative feelings that result from unfavorable social comparisons.

In light of previous research that has found a consistently negative relationship between self-esteem and compulsive buying (Roberts 1998), it may be more appropriate to look at Richins and Dawson's (1992) "Acquisition Centrality" and

"Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness" dimensions as motivating factors behind compulsive buying. The present study identified "Acquisition Centrality" as the most important predictor variable (based on Beta coefficients). Materialists place possessions and their acquisitions at the center of their lives. Materialism is a life style in which a high level of material consumption functions as a goal. Materialism lends meaning to life and provides an objective for daily endeavors (Richins and Dawson 1992). A main reason possessions and their acquisition are so important to materialists is that they view these as essential to their happiness and well-being (Richins and Rudmin 1994). The above interpretation is consistent with the results of the present regression analysis.

The above results throw into question O'Guinn and Faber's (1989) contention that compulsive buyers are no more possessive than other consumers. O'Guinn and Faber used Belk's (1985) measure of materialism which has exhibited low levels of reliability in subsequent uses (Ger and Belk 1996). A close inspection of Belk's scale suggests that its conceptualization and operationalization are distinct from Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism measure. Possessiveness is largely conceptualized as a fear of losing possessions. Two items, which measure attachment to photographs (p. 270), would really be better measures for non-materialists since materialists would place more value on less personal/more public possessions.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND STUDY LIMITATIONS

As always, future research efforts should attempt to utilize better measures of the constructs under study. In the present study, Faber and O'Guinn's (1992) scale demonstrated acceptable reliability (.78) and a uni-dimensional structure. However, several authors (Roberts 1998; Roberts and Sepulveda 1999) have called for an improved measure of compulsive buying. The scale contains items that measure constructs that are distinct from the concept of compulsive buying. These items measure credit card use, attitudes towards money, payment of debt, and impulse buying. There is a possibility that these items may be confounded with items designed to measure the antecedents of compulsive buying. Also, Faber and O'Guinn's conceptual definition lacks correspondence with the items used to operationalize it. The scale also contains several items that may not be appropriate for college student or young adult samples (e.g., low bank balance and minimum credit card payment items).

Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale may also be in need of some further testing. Although the entire materialism scale demonstrated good reliability (.84), a factor analysis suggested that a four-factor solution may be more appropriate. The happiness sub-scale was robust, but several items from the "success" and "centrality" dimensions either cross-loaded or switched factors. Additionally, a fourth factor drew three items from the "centrality" sub-scale. These items were numbers 7, 10, and 11 (Table 4) and all focused on spending money. This may be an improvement as spending money seems to be conceptually distinct (or a dimension of) the centrality of possessions in one's life.

In addition to the above, samples are needed which allow for broader generalization of study results. Longitudinal studies will indicate if the high levels of compulsive buying in young adults found in this study and others (Roberts 1998; Roberts and Martinez 1997) are a function of age or indicate an increase in materialism and compulsive buying.

A third area of needed research is model development. A meta-analysis and subsequent model development would push forward an area of research that has seen a good amount of credible research, but lacks a testable model of the compulsive buying phenomenon.

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