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The Lived Experiences of Women as Addictive Consumers

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### ABSTRACT

Addictive consumption is an extreme form of consumer behavior which, until recently, has been relatively unexplored and understudied. 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 behavior are developed and maintained in secret over a period of time. This paper presents the results of a study of forty-six women in the UK who identified themselves as addictive consumers. Through interviews, they describe their thoughts and experiences both within the shopping environment and in their everyday lives.

### ARTICLE

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Shopping for many (although by no means all!) consumers can be a pleasurable and rewarding activity. We may go shopping for the enjoyment of being in the retail environment, browsing for the latest fashions or products, being with friends or buying goods because we need them or we want them. Some consumers will go shopping to cheer themselves up (after a bad day at work or an argument with their partner, for example), others as a way of relaxing and having fun. However, for a small group of consumers, their shopping behavior can get excessive, to the point of being an addiction. These are the *real* shopaholics, as often publicized (and maligned) in the media.

This article presents a brief overview of a study of forty-six women in the UK who identified themselves as addictive consumers. Through individual depth interviews, they described their thoughts

and experiences both within the shopping environment and in their everyday lives. Addictive consumers buy for motives that are not related to the actual possession of the goods and most purchases remain unused, often hidden away in drawers and cupboard in their original packaging. Feelings of anticipation and excitement prior to and during the shopping experience are replaced by guilt and shame afterwards. The whole of this behavior is developed and maintained in secret over a period of time.

As with most addictive behaviors, there is usually a history or reason that helps us to understand why some people develop an everyday activity such as shopping into a pathological habit. 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 behavior 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.

### **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. Although not necessarily intrinsically unhappy, they develop and maintain the behavior 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', where their skills as a shopper are matched by the challenge of the consumption choice and purchase. They are skilled, expert consumers to whom friends and family may turn for shopping advice. 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 where they do not have a positive regard for their

partner, and quite often do not feel as if they are an equal partner in the relationship. 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 behavior 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 women who showed elements of revenge in their addictive shopping behavior 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 behavior 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.

### **The Mood Repair Addict**

Although the term 'mood repair addict' suggests someone who is intrinsically unhappy, women with elements of this pattern in their behavior 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*". These feelings are often a reaction to negative external events that were, at the time, beyond their control, such as bereavement, divorce, redundancy etc. 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 behavior 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*. 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.

### **The Serial Addict**

This group of participants shows evidence of deep-rooted unhappiness. They have often been addicted to other behaviors or substances (e.g. alcohol or eating disorders), or are currently being treated for clinical depression. Their consumption behavior tends to be more spasmodic and manic, although the actual process of the addictive behavior 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 elements of the serial addiction pattern, the precursors to their behavior are complex and deep-rooted. Their consumption is just one of so many other dysfunctional behaviors, 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. Research 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 behaviors, underlying issues and reasons for such behavior 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 than for others.

### **The Implications and Consequences of Addictive Consumption**

From the interviews, it is clear that each addictive consumer is a total individual. The actual behavior may be the same in all cases, but the precursors and consequences will vary in extreme and form. Whilst some addictive consumers may benefit from medical

intervention, it should not be assumed that this will be appropriate in all cases. For example, there is little evidence from the interviews that *Prozac* is effective in sending the behavior into remission. *Prozac* may treat the symptoms, but will not deal with the problems or causes. Many addictive consumers have found that the opportunity to talk about themselves, their lives and their situation has been a catalyst to beginning to regain control over their addictive consumption.

So for anyone who feels that he or she, or someone they know, has a serious problem with excessive consumption, the advice is to talk about it to someone - this may be a friend, partner, family member, doctor or bank manager. Alternatively, organizations such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau or National Debt Counseling Service in the UK, and similar equivalent bodies in many other countries, provide advice and support in understanding and dealing with the consequences of addictive consumption. Finally, it can be valuable to talk to the banks, credit card companies and retail outlets that provide store cards. Many companies may be sympathetic if they are fully aware of the situation, and the advice is to contact them direct wherever possible. Addictive consumption, however, is *not* just about over-spending or being unable to manage money. The benefits of understanding and addressing some of the underlying reasons for becoming addicted in the first place should be recognized.

Finally, 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 potential or actual negative consequences. At the very least, it provides an alternative to ruminating and introspection; at best, it may prevent other more damaging behaviors (to the self or to others) being developed such as alcoholism, shoplifting or drug dependency.

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