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Online and In-Store Compulsive Buying Among Metrosexuals and Other Male Consumers

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an exploratory study of compulsive buying behavior among males, specifically metrosexual consumers. These men represent significant purchasing power, but to date they have not been studied in both online and in-store environments. The current research has significant importance for public policy, consumer behavior and marketing. The literature has largely ignored male compulsive shopping behavior, especially how this behavior manifests itself in different shopping environments and among different subsets of male consumers. For the current research, data was gathered via an online survey of 193 males. The study discusses both online and in-store compulsive buying by various product categories. The results of this study show that metrosexuals have higher levels of compulsive behavior than other males, but these differences do not seem to vary significantly by shopping environment.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer research into compulsive buying (CB) behavior has been conducted for over twenty-five years, beginning with Faber, O'Guinn and Krych's 1987 study. Since then, numerous studies have investigated many aspects of this phenomenon. Studies have revealed the importance of this area of research due to the negative consequences, such as financial problems, social relationships, and emotional harm, that CB may have on those afflicted with the problem (Faber and O'Guinn, 1992). More recently, several studies have examined compulsive buying online (Mueller et al. 2011b; Kukar-Kinney, Ridgway et al., 2008; Bridges and Florsheim, 2008). However, a comprehensive review of the literature revealed no study that examined online compulsive buying among the general male population, much less metrosexuals.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it examines compulsive buying behavior among males, specifically metrosexual consumers, in both online and in-store environments. Second, it investigates product categories in which CB may be more or less likely to occur among this population. Research has shown that understanding negative aspects of consumer behavior can help firms to better focus their efforts on encouraging positive behavior (O'Guinn and Faber, 1991), which emphasizes the importance to consumer behavior and marketing. This highlights the public policy importance of this issue.

COMPULSIVE BEHAVIOR LITERATURE REVIEW

CB has been defined in numerous ways. O'Guinn and Faber (1989, p. 155) described it as "chronic repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings." Other definitions include spending habits, which are excessive and are controlled by urges and possibly involve preoccupations with shopping (Black, 2001) or "impulsive and/or compulsive buying of unneeded objects" (Ninan et al. 2000, 362). Solomon (2002) found that consumers exhibiting CB behavior shopped repetitively, sometimes excessively, out of boredom, tension or anxiety. Research has also shown consumers who exhibit CB behavior tend to have lower self-esteem, and fantasize more often than other consumers (O'Guinn and Faber, 1989).

While some researchers use compulsive behavior synonymously with impulsive behavior, others distinguish between the two. Unlike CB, impulsive shopping behavior is characterized by having an irresistible urge to make an unplanned purchase (Solomon, 2002). Although impulse purchasing can develop into CB and has been linked to it, not all shoppers who make an impulse purchase exhibit compulsive buying (Shohum and Brencic, 2003). Therefore, a more complete definition of CB includes some element of lack of impulse control. Ridgway et al. (2008, 622) do that by defining compulsive buying as "a consumer's tendency to be preoccupied with buying that is revealed through repetitive buying and a lack of impulsive control over buying." The current paper focuses on the Ridgway et al. (2008) definition.

CB research has most often focused on three main areas (1) diagnostic criteria for the disorder, (2) characteristics of people with CB, and (3) differing rates of CB by demographic characteristics such as age and gender. Diagnostic criteria has been found to include purchasing preoccupation, intrusive or senseless urges to buy, excessive time spent shopping, often purchasing unneeded items or spending more than one can afford, and experiencing negative side effects from shopping, such as distress, anxiety, financial problems, and negative social functioning (McElroy et al., 1994).

Past research shows that people with CB often have low self esteem. They tend to be materialistic, impulsive, lonely, and suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder (Faber, O'Guinn, 1992). These buyers are more likely to return purchases (Hassay and Smith, 1996), hide their purchasing activities from others, suffer from guilt or shame over their spending activities (Ridgway et al., 2008), and suffer from depression (Mueller et al., 2011a). In addition, Roberts and Jones (2001) found that people with CB often have credit card problems and suffer financial uncertainty from overspending.

Research into varying levels of CB behavior among different age groups shows that CB is negatively correlated with age, (e.g. D'Astous, 1990; Magee, 1994; Ditmar, 2005). One reason

for this is that younger consumers tend to be more materialistic (Myers, 2000). Finally, gender-based compulsive buying research results are inconsistent. Some gender-based CB research has found women to suffer from the disorder more often than men (Black, 2004; Faber, 2004; Dittmar, 2005; Neuner et al., 2004); whereas, other research has not found this to be the case (Koran et al., 2006; Mueller et al. 2011a).

With a major shift in the way people shop, a new area of inquiry is developing. Online shopping research has increased greatly in recent years (Grewal et al., 2004). Some articles regarding online shopping and CB have emerged (e.g. Bridges and Florsheim, 2008; Kukar-Kinney et al., 2009). Since internet shopping is increasing more rapidly than traditional bricks and mortar retailing (U.S. Census) it is ever more important to investigate how it may impact CB behavior. Finally, since the internet possesses features that may actually encourage CB behavior, such as unobserved shopping at any time, express checkouts, and easy frequent shopping, (Kukar-Kinney et al., 2009) research that examines the extent that the internet may drive CB behavior is imperative.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Kukar-Kinney et al. (2009) faced the challenge of examining the relationship between CB and internet shopping. In their study, a positive linear relationship between the two was revealed, but only studied the phenomenon for women. The current study will further that research by examining male internet shoppers. As stated earlier, studies regarding gender and CB have been inconclusive. However, men have been found to be less likely to use shopping lists; therefore, men are more likely to make impulse purchases (Cobb and Hoyer, 1986). Given the potential for the internet to foster an environment that makes it easy for impulse purchases, men should be more likely to impulsively shop online than at traditional retail outlets. Because impulse purchasing is positively linked with CB, the first research question arises:

R1: Will men be more likely to exhibit CB online than at traditional bricks-and-mortar retail outlets?

One subset of males, metrosexuals, has gained great interest in society over the past twenty years. They are young, single, urban, heterosexual males who spend considerable time on their appearance (Simpson, 1994; Lertwannawit et al., 2010). These consumers are more hedonistic and interested in traditionally feminine pursuits, such as cooking, fashion, and shopping (Lertwannawit et al., 2010). These men have been described as one of the most promising emerging consumer groups (Simpson, 1994). Moreover, hedonistic shopping is more likely to include elements, such as fantasy, arousal and escapism. Hedonistic shoppers are more likely to exhibit CB behavior than average consumers (Bridges and Florsheim, 2008). Therefore, metrosexuals, given their inclination toward hedonism, should be more likely to engage in CB behavior, which leads to the second research question.

R2: Will metrosexuals be more likely to exhibit CB behavior than other males?

METHODOLOGY

The research for this study was conducted via an online survey of 193 male online consumers. Several subjects were removed prior to deriving this number for various reasons, such as failing attention checks or being female. Three existing scales that exhibit robust reliability and validity were used for testing various elements of metrosexuality, such as status consumption, fashion consciousness, and body-appearance consciousness. The Status Scale (Eastman et al., 1999) was incorporated into the survey instrument. It measures consumption for status or appearance sake; thus, it measures an element of metrosexuality. The Fashion Consciousness Scale developed by Gould and Stern, (1989) was used because it further measures an element of metrosexuality. More specifically, factor 1, the generalized overall fashion consciousness portion was used. This portion of the scale accounted for over 41% of variance in the original study and had reliability of .96. Finally, the appearance orientation portion of the Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (Cash, et al., 1986) was employed to further evaluate the appearance element of metrosexuality distinct from status.

To determine a subject's compulsive buying behavior, a scale developed by Faber and O'Guinn, (1992) was employed. This scale scores high on multiple dimensions of both reliability and validity and encompasses a wider view of CB that also includes impulsivity. Finally, the dependent metrosexuality variables, appearance orientation, fashion consciousness, and status, and independent CB behavior index variables, in-store and online, were tested for correlations and levels of significance.

RESULTS

Research Questions

To see if men exhibited more CB online than in stores, Research Question 1, subjects were asked the Faber and O'Guinn CB scale questions twice, once for online shopping and again for in-store buying. Respondents were asked how frequently they engaged in specific compulsive buying behavior, with 1 representing "never" and 5 representing "very often." A simple cursory examination of the means shows no significant difference with a mean of 1.88 for online and 1.89 for in-store shopping.

The results for Research Question 2 show that all three metrosexual variables show significant 2-tailed correlations for both in-store and online CB. Status was significantly correlated with CB in both shopping environments at the .01 level of significance. Pearson Correlations were moderately to strongly positive for both environments as well with a score of .397 for in-store and .413 for online. Fashion Consciousness was also significant in a 2-tail test in both environments at the .01 level of significance. Pearson Correlations were moderately positive at .366 for in-store and .369 for online shopping. Finally, Body-Appearance Consciousness was statistically significant at the .01 level of significance in a 2-tailed test in both environments. Pearson Correlations, however; were weakly positive for both at .202 for in-store and .244 for online.

Pattern of Male Compulsive Shopping by Type of Good and Type of Shopping

After defining compulsive shopping, subjects were asked to indicate the type of product they compulsively purchase either in-store or online. Further instructions requested respondents to choose all that applied. Overall results, sorted by in-store and then by online, are presented in Figure 1, Table 1, Figure 2, and Table 2.

In-Store Pattern

In-store compulsive shopping is dominated by three types of goods (1) food/beverages, (2) clothing, and (3) electronics/technology. At least 1 out of 5 or 20% of respondents reported this behavior. More than 1 out of 3 respondents indicate compulsive shopping for food and beverages. Food and beverage is a product category strongly influenced by many factors, one of the most important being impulse control. Given that most individuals shop for this category multiple times per week, they are exposed to stimuli, which is likely to trigger a compulsive purchase. The fact that only 6.2% of respondents reporting compulsive shopping online for food and beverage indicates that something temporal is in the compulsion, such as waiting for food and beverage to arrive via mail or other delivery, that does not instigate the compulsive behavior. Clothing, the product type with the second highest percentage of respondents indicating in-store compulsive behavior, is a highly personal product. As such, this product type is closely associated with personal identity and strongly influenced by body type and “fit.” More than 1 out of 4 respondents report compulsive shopping in-store for clothes. The third product type, electronics/technology, includes things such as stereo equipment, phones, computers, cameras, drones, as well as other similar products. More than 1 out of 5 respondents indicated they compulsively shop in-store for electronics/technology. Many specialty stores in the category, such as Brookstone or Apple, are physically designed to stimulate customer interaction with their products to cater to customers who prefer a physical experience with their product.

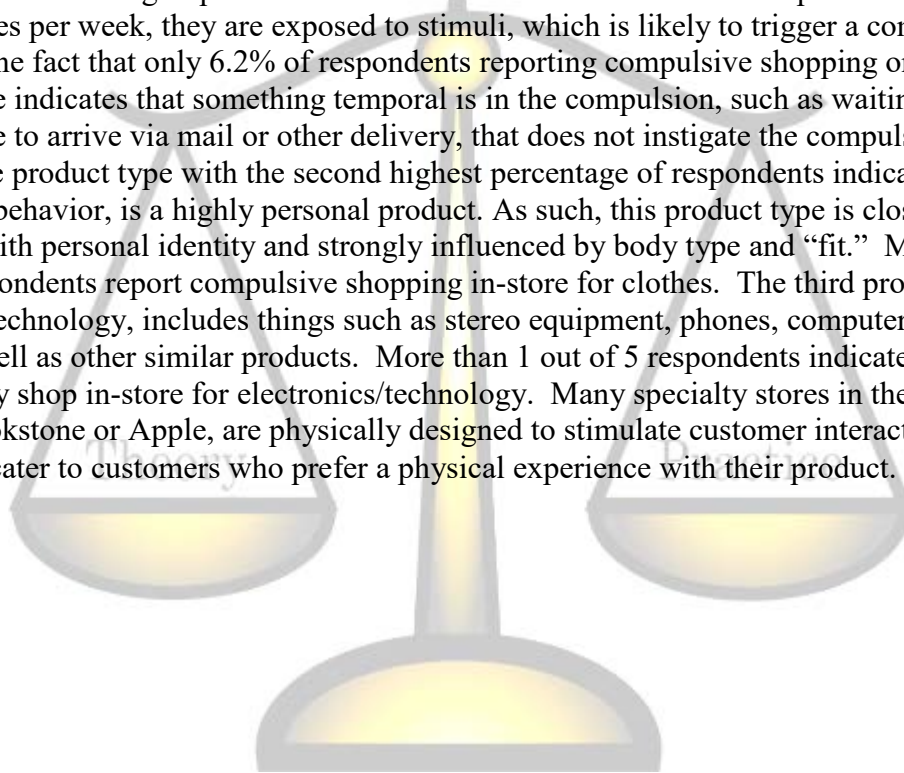


Figure 1
Compulsive Shopping by Type of Good:
Instore vs Online (% of total respondents)

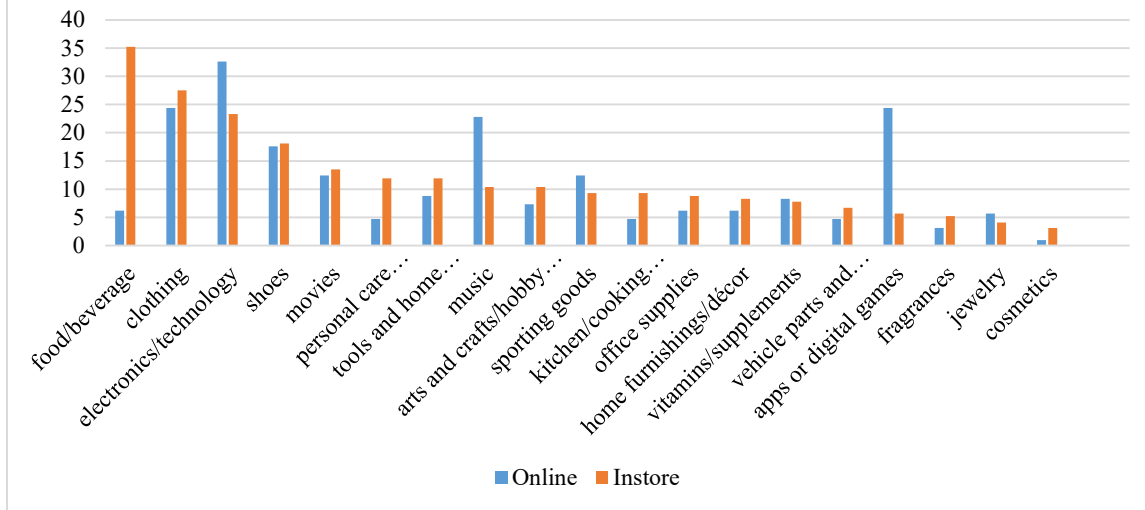


Table 1
Compulsive Shopping Behavior by Type of Good (% of Total Respondents)
Sorted by In-store Behavior

<u>Type of Good</u>	<u>In-Store</u>	<u>Online</u>
food/beverage	35.2	6.2
clothing	27.5	24.4
electronics/technology	23.3	32.6
shoes	18.1	17.6
movies	13.5	12.4
tools and home improvement	11.9	8.8
personal care (soap/shampoo/etc)	11.9	4.7
music	10.4	22.8
arts and crafts/hobby supplies	10.4	7.3
sporting goods	9.3	12.4
kitchen/cooking equipment	9.3	4.7
office supplies	8.8	6.2
home furnishings/décor	8.3	6.2
vitamins/supplements	7.8	8.3
vehicle parts and accessories	6.7	4.7
apps or digital games	5.7	24.4
fragrances	5.2	3.1
jewelry	4.1	5.7
cosmetics	3.1	1

Online Pattern

Electronics/technology, clothing, apps/digital games, and music were reported most frequently as items compulsively shopped online with at least 1 out of 5 respondents reporting this behavior. With the plethora of information on the web related to electronics/technology related products, the fact that approximately 1 out of 3 respondents compulsively shop for these online is not surprising. These products frequently require no personal modification. “Fit” and product specifications are more easily communicated using quantitative data rather than “feel;” hence, they can easily be purchased and enjoyed via online sales. Compulsive shopping is frequently reported in both categories, in-store and online. The study revealed that clothing had the second highest percentage of respondents who reported compulsively buying online. Approximately 1 out of 4 respondents exhibited this compulsion in store as well as online. While many types of clothes require careful “fit,” part of the joy of shopping for clothes may be “trying them on.” Many online retailers have addressed this problem by adding visual elements to their websites that allow some customization based on consumer characteristics. These provide a simulation of “fit.” Most clothing websites have also added liberal return policies. As a result, online shopping for clothes is now common and it may be the only way to purchase styles on the fringe of the mainstream. Interestingly, shoes, another fashion item, also shows up as a category with significant compulsive shopping both in-store and online with 18.1% of the respondents reporting the behavior in-store and 17.6% reporting it online. The next two product categories, apps/digital games and music, are dominated by online sales and online immediate delivery of product so it makes sense that compulsive tendencies would show up online more frequently than in-store. Retailers are fast disappearing in both categories. Online marketing and delivery are now the norm.

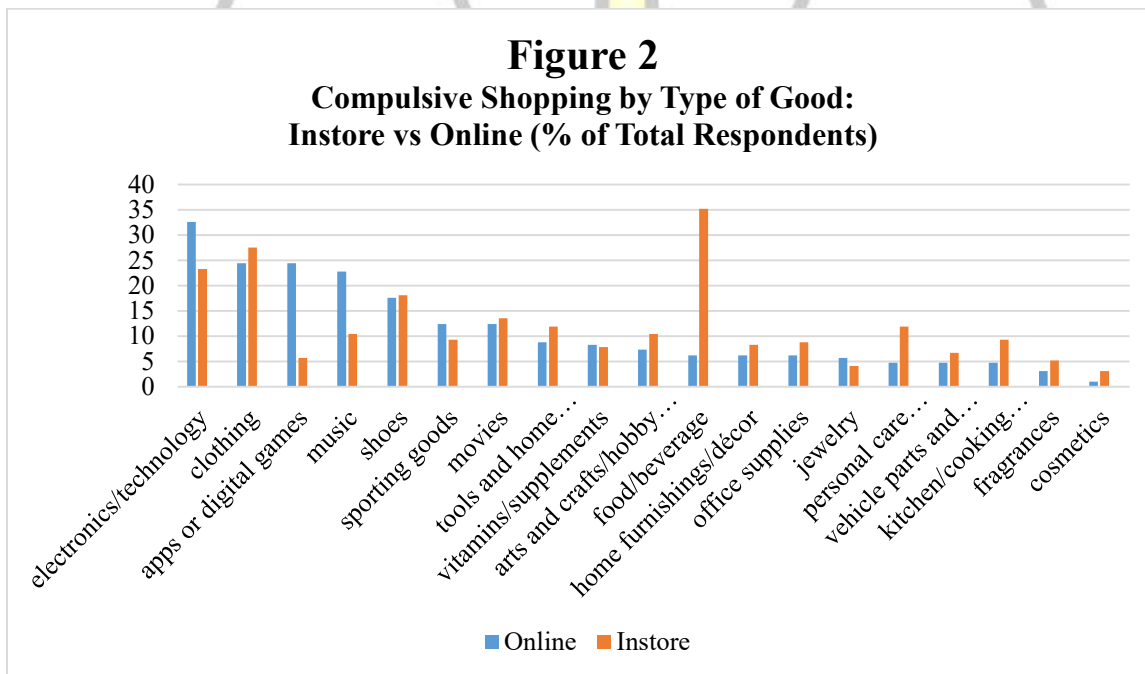


Table 2
Compulsive Shopping Behavior by Type of Good (% of Total Respondents)
Sorted by Online Behavior

Type of Good	Online	In-store
electronics/technology	32.6	23.3
clothing	24.4	27.5
apps or digital games	24.4	5.7
music	22.8	10.4
shoes	17.6	18.1
sporting goods	12.4	9.3
movies	12.4	13.5
tools and home improvement	8.8	11.9
vitamins/supplements	8.3	7.8
arts and crafts/hobby supplies	7.3	10.4
food/beverage	6.2	35.2
home furnishings/décor	6.2	8.3
office supplies	6.2	8.8
jewelry	5.7	4.1
personal care (soap/shampoo/etc)	4.7	11.9
vehicle parts and accessories	4.7	6.7
kitchen/cooking equipment	4.7	9.3
fragrances	3.1	5.2
cosmetics	1.0	3.1

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The exploratory nature of this study has inherent limitations. First, the purpose was to better understand the phenomena of CB as it exists in men, specifically in the sub-group metrosexuals. The second was to explore potential differences by shopping environment. Research questions were presented, but no attempt was made to empirically prove any hypotheses or causal relationships. Perhaps future research can apply the insights from this study to one that empirically tests these relationships more rigorously. Future research should create different treatment groups of subjects for testing online vs. in-store CB behavior. While this paper asked respondents which products they felt they shopped compulsively for both online and in-store, this information was self-reported. Future research should empirically investigate the level of CB in these environments beyond that of self-reporting. Finally, CB inherently lends itself to problematic behavior, such as increased consumer debt, self-loathing, and potentially bankruptcy. An investigation into protecting consumers from these problematic behaviors, or at least advising them about how to avoid these behaviors would be useful.

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