The Effects of Self-Control on Compulsive Buying

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INTRODUCTION

Self-Control

Consumer’s emotions cause individuals to interpret things differently and consumer self-control can cause him or her to override impulses and automatic or habitual responses (Gaillot & Baumeister, 2007). Rigoni, Kühn, Gaudino, Sartori, and Brass (2012) investigated free will in relation to two aspects of self-control; intentional inhabitation (or the ability to voluntarily refrain from already planned actions) and perceived self-control. Self-control and intentional inhabitation was lower in the experimental group with no-free will than in the controlled group. Understanding how individuals interpret free will is important because it shows how it can degrade self-control and lead to compulsive buying.

Compulsive Buying

Compulsive buying is defined as a chronic, repetitive activity that is a primary response to negative events or feelings (Faber & O’Guinn, 1992). Young consumers are a prime target for compulsive buying, and experience a fluctuation of emotions when shopping. Saraneva and Sääksjärvi (2008) focused on the “youth market” or young consumers between 12 and 25 years of age. What separated Saraneva and Sääksjärvi’s research from other compulsive buying research, is they surveyed their participants during the shopping experience as opposed to just the shopping experience pre or post using cell phones. They discovered that young consumer emotions were not predominantly negative or positive but rather fluctuate across an emotional continuum. The emotions were often triggered by bargains, (i.e., if they find a good bargain the young consumer felt pride but if they didn’t find a good bargain young consumers felt disappointment.)

Hypothesis

Self-control continues to exert a major influence on decision-making. Compulsive buying has been investigated in relation to gender, age, and other influences, and is slowly beginning to show growth in understanding. In some cases self-control has influenced compulsive buying. Based on the aforementioned literature, it is hypothesized that individual consumers with low self-control will demonstrate higher levels of compulsive buying.

METHOD

Participants

The convenience sample of 110 participants in the study ranged in age from 18 to 44 years of age (M = 21.45 SD = 3.92). Of those surveyed 64.5% were female and 35.5% were male. The sample included 43.5% Latino/Latina Americans, 19.4% White Americans, 13.9% Asian Americans, 6.5% Biracial/Multiracial, 5.6% African Americans and 11.1% “Other” ethnicities.

Measures

Participants were asked to complete a three-page survey that consisted of three demographic questions, in addition to 10 questions on self-control and 13 questions on compulsive buying. The Self-Scoring Self-Control Scale (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone 2004), asked participants to self-report the extent of their self-control. An example item included, “Pleasure and fun sometimes keep me from getting work done”. The measure included 10 items, using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all like me to 5 = very much like me). A composite average was computed, and then a median split was created to produce high and low self-control groups. The Compulsive Buying Scale (Valence, D’Astous & Fortier 1988) asked participants to indicate the degree to which they identified with each statement based on compulsive buying. An example item included, “For me, shopping is a way of facing the stress of my daily life and relaxing”. The scale included 13 items, using a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree). The 13 questions were averaged to create a composite for each participant.

Procedure

Surveys were group-administered during regularly scheduled classes at a university at the undergraduate level. Participants where informed that the questionnaire was confidential and voluntary. Each student signed a consent form and filled out a questionnaire.

RESULTS

Results from a one-way between subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) with self-control (low, high) as the independent variable revealed a significant effect; F(1, 108) = 7.28, p < .008, eta squared = .06. High self-control individuals have greater compulsive buying attitudes (M = 2.68, SD = .58) then do low self-control individuals (M = 2.98, SD = .60).

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Composite Compulsive Buying by Self-Control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composite Compulsive Buying</th>
<th>Self-Control</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>44</td>
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Note. The lower the mean the greater the compulsive buying behavior/attitude. Means with different subscripted letter are statically significantly different at p < .05.

DISCUSSION

Compulsive buying is becoming a growing area of interest. In the previous literature, many different variables have been studied to identify the key influences on compulsive buying. A major demographic variable that has been studied is gender Mueller et al. (2011) confirmed that there is a gender difference in the underlying factors of compulsive buying, in terms of their study of depression, emotions, and self-control. The current study did not focus on gender differences in compulsive buying, but the current study’s sample, which was comprised of 64.5% female, individuals who demonstrate high self-control reported to be high compulsive buyers. Although gender differences were not examined, the higher number of compulsive buyers coupled with the higher number of female participants points to potential influences of gender on reported compulsive buying. Mueller et al. (2011) concluded that gender is an important demographic to study when researching compulsive buying because it is such a large factor, therefore, future studies should more closely examine these differences, as well as investigate what types of purchases men and women make.

As mentioned in the previous literature, compulsive buying is found to be more prevalent in college females (Claes et al., 2010), but what Harvanko et al. (2013) found that of the majority of female college students who reported to be more compulsive buyers than males, they also reported suffering greater psychiatric comorbidity, lower grade point averages, increased stress, and poorer physical health. Harvanko et al. (2013) findings confirm that female college students struggle with compulsive buying habits and focused more on the problems that are associated with compulsive buying. The results of the present study may have been influenced by some limitations. The study lacked diversity in race/ethnicity. The population mainly represented was Latino/Hispanic. Another important limitation to note in the study is the male to female ratio, with the majority of the sample being female. The literature discusses the heavy influence of gender on compulsive buying but the current study did not look at gender as a variable. Future studies should examine whether compulsive buying results from other problems or contributes to other problems, such as stress or personal conflict. This study adds to the importance of understanding compulsive buyers because businesses are keenly interested in understanding consumer behaviors. Psychologists are also interested in the motivations of behavior and the effects of compulsive behaviors on other areas of individuals lives. Understanding all aspects of compulsive buying will elucidate the potential causes of compulsive buying and bring awareness to this population.