

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Compulsive buying behavior tendencies: The case of Turkish consumers

Elif Akagün Ergin

Çankaya University, Department of Management, Ankara - Turkey. E-mail: [elifrutgers@yahoo.com](mailto:elifrutgers@yahoo.com).  
Tel: 00(90)(312)284-4500 Ext. 175. Fax: 00(90)(312)286-4873.

Accepted 20 January 2010

**Compulsive buying is a dysfunctional consumer behavior, a chronic failure to control the urge to purchase products and services. The two main goals of this study were to explore whether gender was a significant predictor of compulsive buying behavior and to determine the effect of two particular predispositional factors (anxiety, depression) on compulsive buying. The primary data for this study was obtained from a questionnaire that was administered in the capital city of Ankara. A convenience sample of three hundred and fourteen respondents participated in the study. Independent sample t - test, correlational and regression analyses were conducted for data analysis. The empirical findings showed that there are marked differences in compulsive buying tendencies of Turkish women and men, and factors such as age and anxiety are strongly related to compulsive buying behavior.**

**Key Words:** Compulsive buying, purchasing, consumer behavior, Turkish market.

## INTRODUCTION

Compulsive buying is a phenomenon with serious societal and personal consequences. Consumer researchers have been exploring this phenomenon in an effort to describe, and identify it as clearly as possible. Psychology has given us some answers concerning the origins of this phenomenon. Compulsive buying is a behavioral disorder that causes an individual to make continuous purchases regardless of financial, social, or psychological consequences (Damon 1988; Faber 1992; Krueger 1988; Faber and O'Guinn 1992; Scherhorn 1990; Valence et al., 1988). It is a condition marked by binge buying and subsequent social, vocational, family and financial hardship. Compulsive buying is characterized by excessive, uncontrollable, repetitive and time-consuming shopping in response to negative situations and mood states (Faber and O'Guinn, 1992; McElroy, Keck, Pope, Smith and Stakowski, 1994). In a society that emphasizes materialism, compulsive shopping is frequently overlooked as a problem, often even treated as a joke. Compulsive shoppers, also referred to as "oniomaniacs", are sometimes dismissed as being financially irresponsible. The reality of this negative phenomenon is far more complicated than that. Compulsive shopping can be devastating not only financially, but also socially, mentally and emotionally.

Compulsive buying is distinguished from functional buying by the following characteristics: the items are not bought for the intrinsic value, there is denial to the negative consequences of the actions, it is disruptive to the individual's life, repeated failures in attempts to control the behavior, and a urge or drive to buy (Faber et al., 1987; Krueger 1988; O'Guinn and Faber, 1989; Valence et al. 1988). People who have compulsive buying disorder are trapped in a terrible cycle. They are often struck with an irresistible, intrusive and often senseless impulse to buy (Faber and O'Guinn, 1989). It is common for sufferers to go on frequent shopping binges and to accumulate large quantities of unnecessary and/or unwanted products and services. Their primary motivation appears to be the psychological benefits derived from the buying process itself rather than from the possession of purchased objects (Faber and O'Guinn, 1989). Often times, the emotional and functional toll of compulsive buying may become too great for a consumer to bear. Some negative consequences of compulsive buying disorder include marital conflict, credit card debts, embezzlement, bankruptcy, and even suicide attempts. (Lejoyeux et al., 1996). This paper reports a study which explores compulsive buying tendencies of male and female consumers, with a particular focus on consumers'

age and income level. Furthermore, the research discusses the impact of two particular predispositional factors, anxiety and depression on compulsive buying tendencies. The paper is divided into three parts: the first part deals with the literature on compulsive buying, what has been reported about the phenomenon and how it ties to the objectives of this research. The second part details the methodology along with the study's results, and in the third part, implications are discussed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Compulsive buying started to receive increasing attention in the late 1980s. All of the compulsive buying research has centered on defining, explaining and measuring the phenomenon. Faber and O'Guinn (1988) defined compulsive consumption "as a response to an uncontrollable drive or desire to obtain, use or experience a feeling, substance or activity that leads an individual to repetitively engage in a behavior that will ultimately cause harm to the individual and/or to others." d'Astous (1990) provides a less extreme definition of compulsive buying "as a generalized urge to buy in the consumer population and that individuals who are extremely high on this factor may be called compulsive buyers." d'Astous argued that if all consumers were limited to two categories, compulsive and functional, much of the compulsive consumption phenomenon would be overlooked. Elaborate research efforts have been made on identifying determinants of compulsive buying. Most research on this phenomenon tend to be focused on marketing variables related to mass media, as well as socio-environmental variables related to family and peer influences (De Sarbo and Edwards, 1996; Roberts, 1998; Mowen and Spears, 1999; Valence et al., 1988).

Several empirical studies have yielded interesting results about gender-based factors related to compulsive buyers. Emotion and identity-related dimensions of shopping were reported to be more important for women than men (Dittmar, Long and Meek, 2004). Women seemed to have positive attitudes towards browsing, shopping, and social interaction, perceiving the act of buying as a leisure activity (Campbell, 2000). Dittmar and Drury (2000) have also determined that shopping plays a stronger emotional, psychological and symbolic role for women compared with men. The work of O'Guinn and Faber (1989,1992) found that women tend to score higher as compulsive buyers. d'Astous (1990) and Scherhorn et al. (1990) have stated similar findings indicating women to have higher compulsive buying tendencies. In these studies, women were observed to be more apt to view dysfunctional purchasing behaviors as normal. In contrast, Block and Morwitz (1999) argued that females will exhibit lower levels of compulsive buying tendencies. This particular point of research forms the basis for the

first hypothesis in this study. No previous research has been done among Turkish consumers to determine whether gender plays an important role in compulsive buying tendencies. The primary goal here is to discover whether there are marked differences in compulsive buying tendencies of Turkish women and men.

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant difference between the compulsive buying tendencies of male and female consumers.

There is no previous research that addresses possible age differences in compulsive buying systematically, but there are indications that younger consumers may be more strongly affected. O'Guinn and Faber (1989,1992) have also stated that compulsive buyers tend to be younger. More recent studies (Hassay and Smith, 1996; Roberts and Jones, 2001) have noted that estimates of compulsive buying among young adults range from 6 to 12.2% of the population. This is considerably higher than previous estimates of compulsive buying among adults where compulsive buying was thought to range from 1 to 6% of the population (Trachtenberg, 1988; Faber and O'Guinn, 1989). A recent European Union project identified 46% of Scottish 16 to 18 -year olds as showing early tendencies toward uncontrolled buying, because they reported being unable to resist advertising stimuli and had a lack of control over their spending habits (Garces Prieto, 2002). On another note, Koran et al. (2006) indicated that compulsive buyers are also more likely to earn less money. About 54% of them reported earning less than \$50,000 annually, compared with 39% of the other participants. Compulsive buyers do not have more credit cards or bigger credit card balances but their lower incomes make it tougher to pay off their balances. This particular stream of research on the significance of age and income level factors, yielded H<sub>1a</sub> and H<sub>1b</sub> hypotheses for this study. With respect to income level, compulsive buying was predicted to be stronger among lower income respondents. With respect to age, compulsive buying was predicted to be stronger among younger respondents.

H<sub>1a</sub>: There is a significant relationship between compulsive buying tendency and income level.

H<sub>1b</sub>: There is a significant relationship between compulsive buying tendency and age.

Compulsive buying was linked to psychological traits such as depression, lack of impulsive control, low self-esteem, isolation, anxiety, escape - coping tendencies, general compulsiveness, and materialism (Briney, 1989; Christy, 1993; Edwards, 1992; Faber and O'Guinn, 1989; Hanley and Wilhelm, 1992; Scherhorn et al., 1990). Compulsive buying was also described as a form of addiction, a behavior triggered by internal psychological tension and accompanied by relief and frustration because of its addictive nature (Valence et al., 1988), or as a disruptive

consumer behavior performed repeatedly despite negative consequences (Krych, 1989). In his study, Hirschmann (1992) stated that addictive compulsive consumption would originate from feelings of inadequacy and/or depression, as a behavior used to fill an emotional void. Compulsive buying was described as an addictive process whereby the affected individual escapes from stress and anxiety by being preoccupied with the compulsive buying activity itself (Edwards, 1992; Scherhorn, 1990). Lazarus' (1966) work supported this by determining that compulsive buyers use the shopping and spending activity as a means of relieving stress and its associated anxiety. Since no previous research has been conducted among Turkish consumers to determine the effect of these particular predispositional factors (anxiety, depression) of compulsive buying, the following hypotheses are developed to be tested:

H<sub>2</sub>: There is a significant relationship between compulsive buying tendency and feeling regret/remorse after a purchase.

H<sub>3</sub>: The urge to go shopping when sad or upset and the urge to spend all of the money in the wallet have an effect on compulsive buying tendency.

It is important to note that Turkish consumer market has been growing rapidly within the last two decades. Due to its large number of population and vast profit opportunities, many multinational companies have started operation into Turkish market, with an implementation of their global marketing strategies. These multinationals such as Ikea, Carrefour, Marks and Spencer, Media Market, Bauhaus, ElektroWorld have been successful at encouraging the average Turkish consumer that shopping is an economically desirable activity, thus Turkish society has become a huge consumption society (www.radikal.com.tr, 2008). According to a joint report by Pricewaterhouse Coopers and Turkish Shopping Malls and Retailers Association, the total inventory for the Turkish retail sector is expected to reach 199 billion dollars in 2010. Shopping malls have multiplied in big cities, reaching a total of 179 malls across the country. In the capital city of Ankara, where this research was carried out, there are currently 24 malls serving the city's population of 4, 4 million people.

A growing number of Turkish consumers engage in uncontrollable and excessive purchase of products and services. In the recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in Turkish adult consumers who are laboring under their credit card debt burden. (www.tumgazeteler.com, 2009). A research by Aviva Co. revealed that 36% of Turkish consumers' total debt is credit card debt (www.biroybil.com, 2009). Many unfortunate incidents like suicide attempts, divorces, credit card frauds, embezzlements are being reported by the media on a daily basis. For these reasons, it is of primary interest for re-

searchers to shed more light on the serious nature of the compulsive buying phenomenon for Turkish consumers.

## METHODOLOGY

The primary data for this study was obtained from a questionnaire that was administered in the capital city of Ankara. The questionnaire was composed of 15 questions. Participants were approached on a next - to - pass basis and questionnaires were conducted face-to-face in four shopping malls in Ankara. Three hundred and fourteen (314) respondents were selected through convenience sampling. The consumers in the study were between the ages of 18 - 50. All of the 314 surveys were sufficiently completed and therefore included in the study. Independent sample t - test, correlational and regression analyses were conducted for data analysis (Table 3). Faber and O'Guinn (1989) had previously identified and validated variables discriminating between compulsive and functional consumers. This diagnostic tool that they have developed, for the purpose of classifying compulsive consumers, has been used in a large number of research studies. The scale is comprised of 14 psychological and economic measures which best discriminate self identified compulsive buyers from members of the general population. Construct validity for this screening instrument was then assessed by comparing responses from people who were identified as compulsive buyers with a sample of self-identified compulsive buyers on a distinct set of psychological and motivational variables. These variables had previously been found to distinguish compulsive buyers from other consumers. The questionnaire used in this study included 8 variables from this particular diagnostic tool. Each of the respondents were asked "How frequently have you experienced the following situations?" before they were given the list of variables presented below.

1. Bought things even though I could not afford them.
2. Shopping is fun.
3. Felt anxious or nervous on days I didn't go shopping.
4. Wrote a check when I knew I didn't have enough money in the bank to cover it.
5. Bought something in order to make myself feel better.
6. Bought something and when I got home I wasn't sure why I had bought it.
7. I often buy things simply because they are on sale.
8. Felt depressed after shopping.

## FINDINGS

Table 2 presents the demographic profile of the respondents including their gender, age, educational qualifications and personal income levels. Of the 314 respondents, 64% of them were female consumers and the remaining 36% were male consumers. As for the age distribution, half of the participants were between the ages of 45 - 50. The remaining 21.7 were between 38 - 44 years old, 13.6% were between 25 - 31 years old, 8% were between 32 - 37 years old and lastly 6.7% were between the ages of 18 - 24. 62.4% of the respondents in the study were married and 37.6% were single. In addition, almost half of the respondents had an undergraduate degree. In terms of income level distribution, the majority of the participants (58%) belonged to upper income levels

**Table 1.** Independent samples t - test for male and female consumers' compulsive buying tendencies.

		Levene's test for equality of variances		T - test for equality of means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Compulsive Buying Tendency	Equal variances assumed	0.072	0.788	2.578	312	0.010	0.231	0.090	0.055	0.408

**Table 2.** Demographic profiles

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	200	64
Male	113	36
<b>Age</b>		
18 - 24	21	6.7
25 - 31	43	13.6
32 - 37	25	8
38 - 44	68	21.7
45 - 50	157	50
<b>Education level</b>		
Primary school	8	2.5
Secondary school	11	3.6
High school	82	26.1
University	151	48.1
Master degree	62	19.7
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	196	62.4
Single	118	37.6
<b>Income level</b>		
500 - 999 TL	84	26.8
1000 - 1499 TL	22	7
1500 - 1999 TL	26	8.2
2000 TL and over	182	58

whereas 26.8% came from lower income families. The remaining 15.2% of consumers reported to be earning between 1000 - 1999 TL of monthly income. When the respondents were asked about how frequently they used their credit cards in shopping, the vast majority (70%) stated they always do so. Only 18.1% indicated they never used their credit cards.

The extent to which consumers engage in in - store decision - making processes could be used to determine

**Table 3.** Respondents rate of making unplanned purchases.

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	215	68.5
No	16	5.1
Sometimes	83	26.4

their compulsive buying tendencies. For this reason, participants in the study were asked to list the specific types of products they acquire through their unplanned purchases. Female consumers stated that they engage in unplanned purchases mostly for grocery items, apparel and accessories. Male consumers, on the other hand, identified their top three unplanned purchase categories as apparel, electronics and hobbies' supplies (fishing materials, computers games, etc.). Participants were also asked to list the most effective factors that lead them to make unplanned purchases. These factors were reported as store discounts (79.3%), efficient sales representatives (35.4%), and interior design of the store (30.6%). In the questionnaire, respondents were given a list of factors that lead them to making unplanned purchases (Table 3). Respondents were then asked to rank the top three factors based on their own experiences. Store discounts, efficient sales representatives and interior design of the store were reported as the top three factors. Other factors on the list included product's packaging, music played in the store, the window display and others.  $H_1$  hypothesis explored whether there are any gender differences between compulsive buying tendencies of male and female consumers. Levene's test results indicated that both groups (women vs. men) had equal variances ( $F = 0.072$ ;  $sig = 0.788$ ). A further examination of equal variances assumed values revealed ( $sig. = 0.010 < 0.05$ ) and this data supported  $H_1$ . In line with our expectations, it is concluded that gender is a significant predictor of compulsive buying behavior and that women are more affected by compulsive buying than men. The statistics presented below on Table 4, reveal that the mean value for compulsive buying tendencies of Turkish female consumers is higher compared to male consumers. Cultural norms,

**Table 4.** Comparison of male and female consumers' compulsive buying tendencies.

Gender	n	Mean	Std. deviation	T - value	P - value
Female	201	2.01	0.787	2.578	0.010
Male	113	1.78	0.716		

**Table 5.** Linear regression analysis for compulsive buying tendency

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	Correlations		
		B	Std. error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Part
1	(Constant)	1.409	0.226		6.242	0.000			
	a	-0.119	0.026	-0.248	-4.511	0.000	-0.207	-0.249	-0.243
	b	0.009	0.037	0.013	0.233	0.816	0.028	0.013	0.013
	c	0.068	0.033	0.116	2.068	0.039	0.117	0.117	0.111
	d	0.169	0.049	0.195	3.438	0.001	0.197	0.192	0.185

R = 0.322 R<sup>2</sup> = 0.104 F = 8,937 p = 0.000.

values and shared representations contribute to women's social, personal and gender identities. In Turkey, women are still the majority of homemakers and primary careers for children; therefore they have fewer outlets for any other form of psychological compensation. This makes Turkish women more vulnerable to compulsive buying. The act of shopping fulfills both an emotional and psychological role for the women in Turkish society.

In terms of examining the impact of age and income factors on compulsive buying, it was hypothesized that younger and less affluent consumers would be more strongly affected. H<sub>1A</sub> tested the relationship between compulsive buying tendency and income level (H<sub>1A</sub>), the correlation analysis revealed (sig. = 0.01 < 0.05). For this reason, H<sub>1A</sub> has been supported and it can be concluded that there is a weak but positive relationship between these two particular variables. In other words, we accept that there is a link, though not a strong one, between consumers' level of income and their compulsive buying tendencies. Moreover, H<sub>1b</sub> examined the relationship between compulsive buying tendency and age. The correlation analysis revealed (sig. = 0.000) which is less than 0.05. Thus, as hypothesized, it can be stated that there is a positive relationship between a consumer's age and compulsive buying tendency (r = 0.445). In line with previous research done in other European countries, younger Turkish consumers are more prone to compulsive buying. For the purpose of determining the effect of two predispositional factors (anxiety, depression), H<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>3</sub> hypotheses had been developed. The relationship between compulsive buying tendency and the feeling of remorse/guilt following a purchase has been tested with H<sub>2</sub>. The regression analysis yielded a value of sig. = 0.092 which is greater than 0.05. This data did not

support H<sub>2</sub>, therefore this hypothesis is rejected (r = -0.001, sig. = 0.992). It is determined that compulsive buying tendency and the feeling of remorse/guilt following a purchase are in fact inversely related. This finding is expected since the previous findings confirmed that Turkish consumers, women in particular, associate the act of shopping with various social and emotional elements. Shopping provides an outlet for psychological compensation, it helps to reduce the anxiety and stress in their everyday lives (Table 5). H<sub>3</sub> hypothesis examined the effect of four variables (a, b, c, d) on compulsive buying tendency. Multi - linear regression analyses yielded a coefficient value of 0.322. The three variables (a,c,d) are able to explain 10% of the variation on compulsive buying tendency (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.104 F = 8.937 sig = 0.000). The effect of three (a,c,d) variables on compulsive buying tendency are considered to be statistically significant as sig. = 0.000 < 0.05.

Based on the standardized beta coefficients, the order of significance of these independent variables on the dependent variable can be listed as: shopping is fun (B = 0.195), buying things simply because of a sale (B = 0.116), and feeling anxious on days of no shopping (B = 0.-248). Based on the overall analysis, it is concluded that these three particular variables of a,c, and d have an effect on compulsive buying tendency. It must also be stated that there are other factors and predictors that account for the variation in compulsive buying tendency.

A future research could study additional factors and predictors.

## Conclusion

This study was concerned with exploring whether gender

was a significant predictor of compulsive buying behavior for consumers in Turkey. No previous research has been done among Turkish consumers to determine this specific notion. Along with the main hypotheses, additional relationships were tested to determine age - related and income-related differences in compulsive buying tendencies. The results confirmed previously documented gender differences, indicating Turkish women to be more affected by the compulsive buying phenomenon. This vulnerability stems from the traditional role that Turkish society has cast on the women. Shopping has a strong symbolic, emotional role for women. It helps them to deal with a number of factors including boredom, stress, low self-esteem and even depression. Additionally, the study demonstrated that younger consumers are more prone to compulsive buying in general. Turkey has a population of 71.517.100 people and 49% of this huge population is under the age of 25 (tuik.gov.tr). This statistics alone is enough to be seriously concerned about compulsive buying and the negative consequences it brings upon the members of the society. The harmful effects of compulsive buying behavior disorder not only affect the consumer but also his family, friends and colleagues. Therefore, research conducted on negative consumption phenomena such as compulsive buying disorder will contribute to a society's well being. The results of such research efforts may provide guidelines to public policy makers about how to fight this disorder and reduce its impact. Societal attitudes and norms could be modified over time to create a more friendly environment and subdue the dysfunctional orientation of compulsive buying.

Consumers with compulsive buying behavior need some form of assistance and treatment to overcome their disorder. They need to be taught to discover specific triggers, and cues, and must be empowered with techniques to break the cycle of overspending, and gain control over their shopping decisions. These consumers must learn to gradually manage their feelings and mood states and become wiser, more responsible consumers. To be able to do all of these, it is crucial to initially comprehend the nature of compulsive buying behavior, and the tendencies that lead to it. The relationship between compulsive buying and gender needs to be more fully explored. Consumer researchers must be concerned about the abuse potential of consumption and various factors that have an impact on this abuse. Specific consideration must be given to female consumers since they form the main shoppers with higher compulsivity tendencies. Screening instruments, and segmentation based on gender need to be considered.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations of this research, therefore

findings should be viewed with caution. First, this research was conducted on urban Turkish consumers, the results may have been quite different with rural consumers. Second, Turkey is a developing country with a huge population, one of the highest in the region. There have been significant advances in both the private and public sectors in the market in the last decade. To be able to generalize the findings from this research, countries with similar economic and social infrastructure must be studied. Lastly, a convenience sample was used to test the hypotheses in the research. The sample was made up of urban consumers and half of the participants were between the ages of 45 - 50. Future research can be conducted with consumers from more diverse age groups.

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