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Ying Wang

*School of Business, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, 130117, China, wangy327@nenu.edu.cn*

Xiao-qin He

*School of Business, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, 130117, China*

Xue Yin

*School of Business, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, 130117, China*

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# The Impact of Consumer Materialism in China on Online Compulsive Buying Behavior

*Ying Wang<sup>1</sup>, Xiao-qin He, Xue Yin*

(School of Business, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, 130117, China)

**Abstract:** With the development of online shopping environment, the “dark side” of online shopping begins to appear. Online compulsive buying behavior has always been a very important research topic in the marketing field. However, the discussion on online compulsive buying behavior by Chinese scholars is limited. Online compulsive buying behavior can be a problem for consumers, families and even harm to society. Therefore, from the perspective of materialism, this article explores the effect of materialism on the online compulsive buying behavior, primarily through four aspects: the individual negative emotions, individual economic insecurity, family and peer influence on the individual and the individual’s life satisfaction and well-being. This paper aims to study the effects of psychological mechanism of materialism on online compulsive buying behavior, in order to find the drivers of online compulsive buying behavior. The results will be used to avoid the online compulsive buying behavior marketing activities.

**Key words:** materialism, online compulsive buying behavior, economic insecurity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Shopaholic” was a synonym for economic strength, however, because consumers cannot resist the desire to splurge and even results in shopping addiction, making them “compulsive buying”, now it has become a nightmare for many families. Compulsive buying behavior is a progressive, abnormal forms of consumer behavior, and it shows that consumers cannot control themselves, repeatedly shopping, so it causes consumers not only in financial trouble may also generate debt crisis (Edwards, 1992)<sup>[1]</sup>. This shopping mode causes consumers addictive and serious problems in daily life.

In China, due to the application of 3G and 4G, innovative technology products, the promotion of services, and convenience of online shopping, marketing academics use promotions to encourage consumers’ buying behavior. As an objective existence and more and more highlight special consumer behavior, compulsive buying behavior is not only harmful in economic aspects, but also leads to social problems. This consumer group has not attracted adequate attention in academia yet. This study wants to explore the characteristics of Chinese consumer of online compulsive buying and what is the role of materialism in the online compulsive buying behavior?

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Compulsive buying

In most cases, compulsive buyers cannot control their shopping addiction and sometimes lead to serious consequences. Nevertheless, compulsive buying behavior has become increasingly common. With the change of contemporary social environment, the factors that affecting consumers’ compulsive buying are even more complicated.

The earliest definition of compulsive buying behavior comes from scholars Valence et al. (1988)<sup>[2]</sup>. The study mentions three factors of compulsive buying: strong emotions, high cognitive control and highly reaction. Although consumers have temporarily positive emotions after compulsive buying behavior, they will have to go through quite a long period of negative emotions. Most researchers agree with Faber & O’Guinn’s (1989) point of view<sup>[3]</sup>. They believe that “when acquiring, using or experiencing a feeling or material activities, people

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<sup>1</sup>Email: wangy327@nenu.edu.cn

express an uncontrollable desire or driving force which causes a person to engage in a repeat behavior, and people ultimately will trouble themselves or others". They stress that the definition of compulsive buying must also have two criteria: must be repeated purchase, must bring them personal distress. If these two criteria are not included, then it will not be able to be called compulsive buying. O'Guinn & Faber (1992) proposes compulsive buying scale that it can identify negative, abnormal consumption behavior and normal consumption behavior in a more convenient and correct way<sup>[4]</sup>. The scale contains seven dimensions and the follow-up studies about cross-cultural applicability are based on it.

Because of the dangers of compulsive buying behavior, in the past 20 years, compulsive buying behavior has attracted consumer behavior researchers' attention. There are a lot of research literatures. The typical research literature including: discussion on the cause analysis of compulsive buying behavior (Frost et al., 1998)<sup>[5]</sup>, analysis of influencing factors (Park, 2005; Duan Xinhuan et al., 2007)<sup>[6,7]</sup>, measurement of compulsive buyers (Roberts, 2006)<sup>[8]</sup> and the relationship between impulse buying and compulsive buying (Kwak, 2006; Sneath, 2009; Chen Jian, 2012)<sup>[9,10,11]</sup>. Recently, research issues focus on the role of materialistic values to compulsive buying behavior (Weaver, 2011)<sup>[12]</sup> and an analysis of the differences between generations of compulsive buying behavior (GuoZhaoyang, 2009; Bindah, 2012; Eren, 2012)<sup>[13,14,15]</sup>.

## 2.2 Online compulsive buying

At home and abroad, there are many researches about the online compulsive buying behavior, and the mainstream research path is to transplant or appropriately expand the research framework of compulsive buying behavior of traditional channels to the Internet channels. However, there are still many differences between the traditional channels and online compulsive buying behavior, mainly in the following four aspects: (1) Some consumers are not compulsive buyers in the traditional channel, however, in online shopping channels are; (2) Online shopping process includes three stages: online store contact, transaction process and implementation process, which is more complex compared with traditional channels' shopping process. (3) In the process of online shopping, imagination may play a very important role in the online compulsive buying behavior. (4) The network provides unlimited shopping opportunities to compulsive buyers, and consumers can purchase freely at any time and any place without contacting with others.

For online compulsive buying behavior, academia do not have specialized definition, and it generally refers to the compulsive buying behavior through the online channel. Typical outcomes of the research on online compulsive buying behavior are: (1) Promotional factors (Vicdan, 2008)<sup>[16]</sup> and the online environment factors that stimulate or induce online compulsive buying behavior (Lyons & Henderson, 2000)<sup>[17]</sup>. (2) Virtual community has certain effects on compulsive buying (Lee & Park, 2008)<sup>[18]</sup>. (3) Social psychological motivation, especially materialism values affect online compulsive buying behavior (Dittmar et al., 2007; Du Xiaomeng & ZhaoZhanbo, 2011)<sup>[19,20]</sup>.

In summary, domestic research on the online compulsive buying behavior is later than that of the foreign countries, and the research results are also less than that of the foreign countries. Currently, most researches focus on the social and psychological motivation. The perspectives mainly migrate from traditional channels' research results to online channels. Some researchers have considered the impact of online shopping environment, but do not discuss the relationship between internet addiction and online compulsive buying.

## 2.3 The significance of online compulsive buying

The compulsive buying phenomenon of online retail market is an "old question at new market" (Lyons & Henderson, 2000)<sup>[17]</sup>. Currently, the rich material consumer society provides more growth conditions to the online compulsive consumers, which presents a more complex development situation in the new market (GuoZhaoyang, 2009)<sup>[13]</sup>.

Therefore, the research about online compulsive buying behavior should depart from the characteristics of

online consumers. Considering the information spread of social network and virtual communities further exacerbates the spread of compulsive buying behavior, so it will obviously increase the online compulsive buying behavior, but the current studies of online compulsive buying behavior are not sufficient. Based on the issues above, this article is expected to make judgments by the characteristics of online compulsive buying behavior, in order to control addictive source, alert online compulsive buying behavior and reduce its negative impact on society. The study not only makes important theoretical contributions in the field of consumer behavior research, but also be helpful to the psychology, sociology and psychiatry field. Besides the negative consequences of economy and interpersonal relationship aspects, online compulsive buying behavior will also lead to negative psychological sentiment. Such negative sentiment will reflectin the evaluation of the online consumers to business, so severely affect reputation and word-of-mouth of the business.

This study will contribute to the corresponding enterprises to understand the compulsive buying decision-making process of consumers in online marketing, especially understanding the origin of compulsive buying behavior from the mechanism of action and the understanding the characteristics of compulsive buyers. Accordingly, to identify compulsive buying propensity of consumers and to reduce the possibility of its negative evaluation,so we could guide enterprises to develop more efficient marketing behavior in online marketing.

#### **2.4 The consequences of consumer materialism**

Both “Materialism” and “Materialistic” represent the same meaning, which means materialism or materialistic (Richins&Dawson,1992)<sup>[21]</sup>. Oxford dictionary refers to materialism as: “keen on material needs and expectations, and ignore the spiritual things, which is based on a material interest lifestyle, opinions and tendencies”. At present, western scholars pay enough attention to materialism. Belk’s (1985) definition of materialism is extremely valued secular property<sup>[22]</sup>. Materialists worship material excessively, pursue the possession of substance,and build their own life beliefs and behavior in this way. Richins& Dawson (1992) believe that materialism is a value. Materialists will compare their own property with others and regard it as a behavioral tendency of success. So they would rather spend time to work in exchange for money than spend time on entertainment<sup>[21]</sup>. Some scholars believe that consumer materialism will bring some serious problems in the individual level and social level (Larsen et al., 1999; Scott, 2009)<sup>[23,24]</sup>.

From the individual level, people who have high material tendency will have higher anxiety, guilt and other negative feelings such as frustration after purchasing than low materialists. So they often alleviate these negative feelings by more purchase behavior (Richins&Najjar, 1992)<sup>[25]</sup>. Even consumers materialism and other mental disorders (e.g., paranoia and depression) are positive related (Kasser&Ryan, 1993), have disputes with spouses (Paduska, 1992),and have a theft tendency (Larsen et al., 1999)<sup>[23]</sup>. Consumers with materialism tendencies are often not willing to savings and often excessive use of credit card (Watson, 2003)<sup>[26]</sup>, and they feel the lower overall life satisfaction (Larsen &Wright, 1993)<sup>[27]</sup>. More seriously, in terms of consumer ethics, consumers with high material tendency lead to lower ethical standards; whereas, materialism tendencies characteristic of high ethical standards is low. Therefore, it is an irresponsible behavior that marketers encourage consumers’ materialism (Muncy&Eastman, 1998)<sup>[28]</sup>. Materialism may also lead to consumer behavior disorders such as compulsive buying (Dittmar, 2005)<sup>[29]</sup>.

From the social level, materialism enables people to reduce their time to spend with their families and even reduce interest and involvement in social issues (Roberts & Clement, 2007)<sup>[30]</sup>. The popular of social materialism will bring conflict with many of the traditional concept, for example, make the world a better place, eager to contribute to the fairness and justice, andlower attention to environmental and ecological issues (Kasser, 2002)<sup>[31]</sup>. In addition, scholars have noted the excessive consumption problem caused by materialism, which has become a major obstacle to sustainable consumption. For example, Ghadrian (2010) points out that 20% of the world’s people live in industrialized (that is, materialized) countries, which consume 86% of the world’s

resources.

Therefore, for materialists, obtaining property is their primary goal, which is a way of life. They evaluate their property higher than other living things and activities. From the discussion above, materialism is a kind of value which pursues happiness and reveals the social status of promotion by owning money and possessions, while high materialists will express their own unique by consuming, in order to win other people's attention, respect, spiritual satisfaction and happiness. Whether the individual or society level, we should not ignore the spread of materialism. We should pay full attention to the generalization effect of the development process and inhibit the spread of materialism.

## 2.5 The impact of consumer materialism on online compulsive buying behavior

Dittmar (2005) considers that compulsive buyers more often view material goods as compensation mood and identity, and there is a strong positive link between materialism values and compulsive buying behavior<sup>[29]</sup>. How does this impact drive in online consumers? In China, consumers are affected by Confucian culture, and they encourage frugality, filial piety, social face and emphasize scientific achievements. Along with the advance of globalization, whether the materialism values will affect China's online consumers, which is the core of this study.

Explore the impact of consumer materialism on online compulsive buying behavior from the relationship between materialism and personal feeling. People who have high material tendency will have higher anxiety, guilt and other negative feelings such as frustration after purchasing than low materialists. Therefore they often alleviate these negative feelings by more purchase behavior (Richins & Najjar, 1992)<sup>[25]</sup>. The high materialists tend to believe that acquisition and consumption are necessary to satisfy their daily lives, and the level of consumption expansion will make them happier, even they ultimately develop into a compulsive buying characteristic. However, compulsive consumers do not want others to know their purchasing behavior. Therefore, compared with lower compulsive buying tendency shoppers, higher compulsive buying tendency consumers tend to the online channel rather than traditional stores channel.

Explore the impact of consumer materialism on online compulsive buying behavior from the relationship between materialism and economic insecurity. Allen & Wilson (2005) find that people who experienced food insecurity (such as hunger, malnutrition) due to the low level of social economy in the childhood tend to be materialism. They regard food safety as the primary target of personal life, tend to store more food at home and use food as a mood of comfort<sup>[32]</sup>. Compared to the younger generation, the older generation high materialism values occupy an important position, because they grew up in a period of social unrest and economic deprivation. Thus, economic insecurity will drive people to the pursuit of material as a target.

Explore the impact of consumer materialism on online compulsive buying behavior from the relationship between materialism and family and peers. Family is an important environment for children to live and grow up. Studies have shown that family environment and parental rearing patterns are closely associated with materialism. Compared to individuals grew up in intact families, individuals grew up in broken families show a higher degree of materialism and compulsive buying behavior (Rindfleisch et al., 1997)<sup>[33]</sup>. The development of social network platform, such as micro blogging and WeChat circle of friends show a variety of shopping booty, which displayed on the incentives of individuals is more than family, and ultimately lead to individuals show off their wealth. Some individuals will regard brand, high-end electronic products and luxury cars as the ideal way of life. Under the background of online environment, a variety of shopping sites in China launch a new payment method, that is, pay after the first shopping such as JingDong Ious, and induce more online compulsive buyers. Thus, in the online context, the impact of family and peer group is one of the causes of individual materialism values generated.

Explore the impact of consumer materialism on online compulsive buying behavior from the relationship

between materialism and individual life satisfaction and happiness sense. Belk (1985) defines materialism as “consumers have been given the importance of the treasures of the earth”, and materialists character appeared as possession, the characteristics of non-generosity and envy, which is correlated with happiness and life satisfaction negatively<sup>[22]</sup>. When the materialism values occupy the most important position in the individual’s value system, with very harmful consequences, materialism can lead to individual low self-esteem, low life satisfaction and low well-being sense, especially the compulsive buying behavior. Research finds that people with compulsive buying tendency exhibit higher intensity materialism. Therefore, materialists will experience more dissatisfied with their own standard of living than non-materialists, and this will penetrate into the whole life and cause life unsatisfied.

### **3. METHODOLOGY AND EXPECTED CONCLUSIONS**

#### **3.1 Methodology**

This paper adopts the method of questionnaire survey. We need to describe demographic variables of online compulsive buyers, as well as the characteristics of the family environment and the local areas. For the measurement of consumer materialism, this study uses “materialism values scale” (MVS) compiled by Richins & Dawson in 1992<sup>[21]</sup>. However, at present, domestic academic do not have uniform measurement scale for determining of online compulsive buying, and most are appropriate revised by the foreign compulsive buying scale, then add “online shopping”, “online” and other environmental vocabulary. Therefore, for online shopping features of Chinese consumers, the revision of the scale is carried out in this study. This research refers to the following scales: “compulsive buying scale” compiled by Faber & O’Guinn (1992)<sup>[14]</sup>, “online compulsive buying scale” revised by Sun Shanqiao (2011)<sup>[34]</sup>, and “online shopping addiction scale” revised by Xu Lang (2014)<sup>[35]</sup>, then we remove duplicate and difficult to understand questions, and finally get 43 items (see Table 1). We expect to complete the pre-test in March, and get corrected online compulsive buying scale by collecting and analyzing data. Next, we conduct a formal questionnaire survey, which is expected to complete the collection and analysis of data in May.

In future research, focus of this research is to find compulsive buyers from online consumers, so we need to do a lot of research work. The difficulty of this study is that compulsive buyers don’t want to show their addictive behavior, most of them have psychological resistance or hidden subconscious of this behavior. The later research approach not only needs to do the questionnaire, but also requires a combination of in-depth interview method. Therefore, there is a certain degree of difficulty.

#### **3.2 Expected conclusions**

The development of online technology makes online commercial transactions become more and more vigorous. E-commerce uses the convenience of online shopping and a variety of promotional tools to cater to consumer demands. Furthermore, the increase of the pressure of modern life makes people eliminate the pressure by increasing the seemingly normal buying behavior, which could temporarily relieve their physical and mental pressure. Online consumers may purchase freely at any time and any place without contact with others. In recent years, this shopping mode has become popular between consumers with compulsive buying tendency. Therefore, online compulsive buyers have become a common group in the online economy era. But the study on the current online compulsive buying behavior in China has not received enough attention.

Taking into account the complexity of the social network environment, from the perspective of internet addiction behavior, this article describes the characteristics of the compulsive purchase behavior currently, and discusses the effect of materialism on online compulsive buying behavior. The paper mainly discusses the impact of materialism on online compulsive buying behavior from four aspects: the individual negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, guilt), individual economic insecurity (e.g., stock up behavior), family and peer influence

**Table 1,Item of pre-testing phase of the online compulsive shopping scale**

Item
1. I find that once I start visiting shopping sites, it is hard to stop.
2. I will want to spend part or all of the money, when I have money.
3. I would also like to use the Internet to shop, even if I do not have time and money.
4. I will be unbridled online shopping. When I am depressed, angry and disappointed.
5. I will carry out online shopping, even if I cannot afford the cost.
6. I only make the minimum payments on my credit cards.
7. I write a check when I know I don't have enough money in the bank to cover it.
8. I always spend a lot of time every day to visit shopping sites.
9. I spend too much money on online shopping.
10. I always forget the time, when visiting shopping sites.
11. I have a sense of guilt owing to spending too much money on online shopping.
12. I cannot help visiting a variety of shopping sites, and even buy some things that do not need.
13. I will be in high spirits, when I'm crazy for online shopping.
14. Online shopping can let me relax.
15. I will make my own sense of satisfaction because of online shopping.
16. I will get pleasure from online shopping.
17. The days without online shopping will make me feel nervous and anxious.
18. People will be surprised if they know my spending habits.
19. I don't want to show some things to others, because I fear that others think my online shopping behavior is not reasonable.
20. I feel anxious or guilty when I'm not in control of the online shopping.
21. I will use the Internet to express emotions when I am down.
22. I am great pleasure when ordering on online shopping.
23. I am very happy when I unpack delivery.
24. I am much focused and forget the pressure when I am on online shopping.
25. I think things related with online shopping when I don't have online shopping.
26. I am lack of sleep because I visit shopping sites.
27. Online shopping has become my habit, when I don't visit shopping sites every day I feel something is lacking.
28. I am hiding the actual cost of online shopping.
29. I ignore what I do (work, school or family life) in my daily life because I like to be online.
30. I have tried to take some measures to reduce online shopping, but it has no effect.
31. I would have been thinking about this thing if the online shopping has not been completed on the suspension.
32. I will try every means to solve the problem to continue to do online shopping, if online shopping is limited.
33. I will feel no fun, if there is no online shopping in life.
34. I will be very distressed, when I want to do online shopping but there is no net.
35. When I am on online shopping, if I must immediately stop for any reason, it makes me very unhappy.
36. I often buy things I don't need or not on online.
37. Sometimes I have a strong desire for online shopping.
38. Sometimes I feel that I have the power to make me go shopping on online.
39. I often respond or click-through promotional information.
40. I will do online shopping, even if I worry about my spending habits.
41. Some people (friends and family) advise me to reduce the activities of the online.
42. I prefer to be online rather than with other people (friends and family).
43. I'm looking forward to be online again.

on individual values (e.g., show off their wealth) and the individual life satisfaction and well-being (e.g., jealousy). So the purpose of this paper is to apply the research results to the marketing activities to avoid the online compulsive buying behavior and the findings will be presented at the 2016 WHICEB Conference.

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