

Overconsumption and the Effects on Mental Health and Well-Being: A Review



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Abstract

Currently we live in a society of consumption and consuming is inevitable, but over consuming is a world problem and we argue it can be prevented. The present consumer society contributes to the development of buying behaviors aimed at the possession of material goods, to give, apparently, social status, success, and well-being [1]. This article aims to address overconsumption from a psychological view and the repercussions of excessive buying behavior on mental health and personal well-being. "I believe that the very purpose of life is to be happy. From the very core of our being, we desire contentment. Since we are not solely material creatures, it is a mistake to place all our hopes for happiness on external development alone. The key is to develop inner peace." Dalai Lama XIV [2].

Keywords: Overconsumption; Excessive buying behavior; Well-being; Mental health; over-indebtedness

Introduction

Over the past 100 years, consumption has been accepted as a cultural means of seeking success, happiness, and the populist notion of a good life [3]. As reported by Brewer & Porter [4] our lives today are dominated by the material objects that proliferate all around us, including the prospects and problems they afford. In fact, the Industrial Revolution enabled the development of new production techniques that promoted mass production and technological advances that revolutionized the transport sector, which was essential for better movement of goods and raw materials and disposal of products. Advertising, marketing sales technics and payment facilities incite consumption and make individuals consume more than they really need, emerging the society of consumption. Hence consumption starts to occupy a central place in the lives of individuals [5].

Increased quantity of goods is a great advantage to consumers to the extent that the need for disposal of products leads to lowering prices. On the other hand, mass consumption and easy access induce overconsumption, which is characterized by a set of attitudes and behavior leading to unreasonable consumption and unforeseen [5]. According to Elkins [6], overconsumption is defined as the excessive use of goods and services in the belief that the possession and use of many goods and services is the main cultural aspiration being understood as the main way to happiness, social status, and success. Several studies show that

excessive consumption has a negative impact, not only in terms of individual well-being as environmentally (ex.: the overuse of natural resources can lead to lack of resources). In these situations, individuals act on impulse, carelessly consuming goods that they do not need. Credit and payment facilities amplify the existence of indiscriminate consumption and situations of over-indebtedness.

A small number of studies have been conducted on how to motivate people to change their lifestyles and reduce consumption in general. Excessive consumption can emerge from several factors: personal, social, and cultural. Cultural factors influence values, perceptions and behaviors of a given society, i.e., establish standards of rules and behaviors that individuals of a given society should be governed. According to Soares et al. [7] consumption is often motivated by personal factors such as emotional and psychological disorders, low self-confidence, and the need for acceptance. It has been created the illusion that consuming without limits is synonymous with well-being and civilization." Other authors like Fabber suggests that excessive consumption can result from the interaction of biological factors, such as serotonin deficiency) psychological factors such as high levels of materialism social factors and social acceptance. In fact, the current consumer society contributes to the development of buying behaviors aimed at the possession of material goods, to give apparent status, success, and well-being [1].

Effects on Mental Well-Being

The relationship between materialism and well-being is complex [3]. Previous studies sustain the idea that the relationship between these two constructs depends on other factors like religious orientation [8], family background and economic resources [9]. Materialism is perceived as an important life value [3] placed on the acquisition of material objects. Richins & Dawson [10] materialism is defined as “set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one’s life”. According to Rokeach [11], a value is “a centrally held, enduring belief which guides actions and judgments across specific situations and beyond immediate goals to more ultimate end-states of existence.” Strong materialistic values are negatively associated with subjective well-being, and it conflicts with collective-oriented values. Some researchers suggest that financial and emotional insecurity develop strong materialistic values. The belief that well-being can be enhanced through one’s relationship with objects is one central characteristic of highly materialistic individuals. Research suggests that these individuals are less happy and more unsatisfied, facing a greater risk of psychological disorders such as depression and neuroticism compared with less materialistic individuals [3].

Well-being consists in three components: cognitive evaluations of the conditions of one’s life (e.g., overall life satisfaction); positive affective states (e.g., happiness) and negative affective states (e.g., depression;) [3]. According to Hoffmann & Lee [12] well-being on a micro level includes happiness, life satisfaction, and subjective and objective well-being oppositely to well-being on a macro level which includes societal, environmental, and political issues. Authors like Lee & Ahn [2] Iyer and Muncy [13] provided conceptual framework that confirms that by reducing one’s level of consumption, subjective well-being increases on the micro level [12]. As stated by Lee & Ahn [2] in their research, “excessive consumption negatively affects consumer well-being,” although ironically, consumers in developed countries still consider that the primary source of happiness consists in the possession of material goods [2]. In fact, materialistic consumers experience a lack of control and autonomy in consumption. Studies demonstrate that a greater level of control promotes self-determination and self-actualization leading to a higher level of consumer well-being [2]. The authors consider that materialism cannot lead to an enduring state of life satisfaction due to the process of hedonic adaptation. According to literature, money can buy happiness only to a certain point and consumer materialism is associated with lower levels of subjective well-being [12].

Based on literature, the less materialistic people report, the more life satisfaction. Accordingly with social scientists, individuals who focus on the acquisition of material objects have a reduced life satisfaction [10], diminished levels of happiness [3], since it takes time away from the things that can nurture happiness: comprising relationships, spend time with family

and friends. People with strong materialistic values appear to have goal orientations that may lead to poorer well-being [14]. In Kasser’s book [14], “The High Price of Materialism” research shows that “when people organize their lives around extrinsic goals such as product acquisition, they report greater unhappiness in relationships, poorer moods and more psychological problems” [14]. Kasser [14] distinguishes extrinsic goals, which tend to focus on possessions, image, status and receiving rewards and praise from intrinsic ones, which aims at outcomes like personal growth and community connection and are satisfying in and of themselves [14].

Authors like Kasser & Ryan [15] propose that materialism (i.e., financial success aspiration, [3]) is an extrinsic goal that is less effective than intrinsic goals like affiliation and community feeling and promoting individual well-being. Also, individuals who aspire to financial success have lower levels of self-actualization, vitality, and global function and higher levels of anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders than individuals who aspire to more intrinsic goals. In a longitudinal study with adolescents about the effects of materialism on well-being, Cohen & Cohen [9] found that, adolescents’ esteem of materialism is associated with several psychological disorders, including attention deficit disorder, conduct disorder and narcissism.

It’s expected that individuals who hold oppositional values experience value conflict in the form of psychological tension. Rokeach & Ball-Rokeach [11,16] emphasize that inconsistencies in one’s value system decrease self-satisfaction and motivate people to try to realign their values. The notion of value conflict (and realignment) can be conceptually linked to classic cognitive consistency theories, including balance theory of Heider [3] and cognitive dissonance theory of Festinger [3]. Prior research confirms that the motives underlying materialism (e.g., acquisitiveness, self-centeredness) should conflict with the motives underlying more self-transcendent values such as religious values, spirituality, and selflessness [3].

Psychological Clinical Aspects of Excessive Consumption

Shopping experiences provide pleasure and relaxation, although when excessive is a costly way of life [16]. Likewise compulsive buyers organize their lives around shopping experiences, promoting concerns that can lead to clinical disorders. Compulsive buying disorders or “oniomania” are not included in contemporary diagnostic systems, such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; APA, [2013]) or the International Classification of Diseases, 10th edition [16]. Oniomania leads to irrational contraction of debts, occupational, interpersonal, marriage, social, and spiritual distress [16]. Materialism stands out as one of the most influential variables in impulsive buying behavior [17]. Edwards [16] suggests that compulsive buying behavior is an “abnormal form of shopping and spending in which the afflicted consumer has

an overpowering uncontrollable, chronic and repetitive urge to shop and spend (that functions) as a means of alleviating negative feelings of stress and anxiety” (p.67). According to Rook & Fisher [18], the impulsive buying is the “consumer tendency to buy spontaneously, without reflection, immediately stimulated by the physical proximity of the desired object, dominated by emotional attraction and absorbed by the promise of instant gratification” (p.306).

In fact, Rook [19] postulates that impulsive buying is composed by five elements, namely:

- i. Spontaneity, which is characterized by the sudden need to act triggered by a visual stimulus (e.g.: a promotional activity).
- ii. The feeling of psychological imbalance caused by the intensity of the desire to suddenly acquire a product.
- iii. The psychological conflict experienced by consumers when considering receiving a direct reward from their impulsiveness and on the other hand, the negative consequences that may arise from the purchase impulsively.
- iv. Decreased cognitive ability to make assessments, which begins with the intensity of consumer’s emotional stages resulting in lack of cognitive control over their final decision.
- v. Disregard of the consequences resulting on anxiety caused by impulsiveness, since the consumer does not perform a careful evaluation of the purchase alternatives, disregarding the possible consequences of the purchase (mainly negative).

In accordance with a study performed by Lin & Chuang [20] which aimed to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and impulse buying in Taiwanese adolescents, it was found that adolescents with low emotional intelligence were more likely to carry out impulsive purchases, pointing to emotional arousal as an important factor of mediation between emotional intelligence and impulse buying behavior. Furthermore, one study in Portugal on impulse buying also show that there is a negative correlation between impulsive buying and self-esteem [21]. Additionally, and according to Dittmar & Kasser [22], high levels of materialism are associated with low levels of psychological well-being and satisfaction with life.

Factors that Influence Impulsive Buying

Investigations on consumption have reported significant gender differences in buying behavior [23], Otnes & McGrath, 2001. The literature shows differences between men and women about intentions, values, decision-making, processes related to the purchase, information processing, types of items purchased, motives and reasons to make a purchase, influences in deciding what to buy, feelings and emotions in the act of buying, attitudes towards consumption and time spent shopping [24]. According to Gąsiorowska [25] gender has a moderating effect on the relationship between individual differences and the tendency

to impulsive buying. A study by Silvera & Kropp [26] has shown that, women tend to buy more by impulse than men. The sex differences in impulse buying may reflect the different buying habits of men and women [19]. Another variable that is related to impulsive buying is the family income since the greater availability of financial resources the more the consumer is likely to make impulsive purchases [27]. Research into social practices shows that malls and shopping centers are places with physical structures oriented to hedonic buying behavior [17] and that a person tends to buy on impulse more easily, by being in a shopping center [17].

Nowadays, social media has a great influence on social behavior. Social media allows consumers to share their shopping experiences, being that shared content has a strong impact on purchase intentions of users [17]. Holbrook & Hirschman [28] emphasized the importance of intangible and subjective aspects that are part of the purchase act (for example, emotional, fantasy and direct experience with the product at point of sale). Thus, the desire of gratification that the individual experiences when owning a product is directly related to impulse buying [6], the pleasure in shopping is possibly the most strongly related factor to the impulsive buying [17]. Therefore, consumers who have the greatest tendency to carry out impulse purchases are those who are driven by hedonic desires or non-economic reasons, such as fun, social, or emotional satisfaction [29]. The brand, more than a symbol, is the representation of a value behind that symbol. Brands can be interpreted as a synonym of prestige, status, group identity and the feeling of belonging [17]. Also, when consumers make purchases in the company of other people they tend to spend more [30] and tend to make more unplanned purchases [31]. Several studies reveal that values influence the decisions of consumers [17] since products and their brands represent social and cultural values of the consumer [17]. About impulsive buying, materialism appears as a prominent value [17].

Final Considerations

Overconsumption is an overviewed problem with big repercussions to personal well-being, since it might repress the psychological needs, leading to serious mental health disorders if not intervened correctly. Nowadays there is still no standard approach for treating compulsive buying disorder [32]. The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be advantageous in promoting more conscious and prudent buying behavior [33]. In addition to interactivity with technology, persuasion methods can be personalized to individual needs, allowing interventions at critical decision-making points [33].

I. E-health is a recent term for healthcare practice supported by electronic processes, communication, functions, and services involved in the health sector [34]. The main tools of E-health consist of health information networks, digital records, telemedicine services, health portals, personal devices that monitor patients and devices that fall in support for prevention,

diagnostic process, treatments, and the subsequent monitoring that could be very useful for people who suffers from compulsive buying disorders. As reported by Espanha [35] communication plays an important role in health by improving health care in cases of chronic and acute diseases, and promoting the reduction of socio-economic impact, racial, ethnic, or specific diseases in their health care and the promotion of health and prevention. In agreement with Varela [36] information and knowledge about mental and physical health is a strong social component, contributing significantly to the strengthening of communities through the dissemination of more and better knowledge, promoting awareness [37-45].

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