



RESEARCH PAPER

Relationship of Self-Esteem and Compulsive Buying: Role of Age and Gender

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the relationship between self-esteem, compulsive buying, gender and age. Self esteem has been considered as a factor contributing towards tendency of compulsive buying in the research literature. Especially low self esteem is considered to be one of the major triggers of compulsive buying behavior. Moreover, age and gender have been assumed to have a significant relationship with compulsive buying. Therefore it is important to explore relationship among these variables especially in today's world when owning material things has become easier and more desirable. Cross-sectional research design was used. The study was carried out with a convenience sample of 231 participants in the age range 18 - 40 years. Rosenberg self esteem scale was used as measure of self esteem. For compulsive buying, Edwards Compulsive Buying Scale- Revised was used. The findings indicated non significant correlation between self-esteem and compulsive buying, a non significant relationship between gender and compulsive buying and a weak but significant correlation between age and compulsive buying. Future research should investigate the relationship between self esteem and compulsive buying with a larger sample in a wider age range. Moreover qualitative investigation in to the dynamics of compulsive buying as well as those of coping with low self esteem and seeking pleasure in case of high self esteem, in both genders will also provide better insight regarding gender, self esteem and compulsive buying.

Keywords: Self-esteem, Compulsive buying, Shopping behavior, Materialism

Introduction

Information Compulsive buying refers to buying behavior that is out of proportion in comparison with a person's needs and is done obsessively only as fulfillment of an impulse for purchasing addiction. Another key feature of this behavior is experience of distress after needless buying. "Compulsive buying is defined as a consumer's tendency to be preoccupied with buying that is revealed through repetitive buying and a lack of impulse control over buying" (Ridgway et al., 200, page 622). Compulsive buying is considered to be a serious concern as it can be a problem or an indicator of an underlying or potential problem. Compulsive buying might turn into compulsive buying disorder (Black, 2007), might make the person suffer financially. Although accessibility of products due to consumer culture is one of the factors, there might also be person related factors at work too.

One such factor that can be studied as a possible correlate of compulsive buying is self-esteem. Self esteem has been classically defined by Rosenberg (1965) as "a positive or negative attitude toward the self." It can be considered as a global evaluation a person carries of his/ her self-worth. It can be assumed that low self esteem is at work, making the person purchase unnecessary things obsessively and impulsively just to fill the emotional vacuum created by lack of satisfaction with oneself.

Literature Review

According to self-discrepancy theory by Higgins (1987), there are three kinds of selves, 1. actual self, 2. ought self, 3. ideal self. The theory proposes that people make comparisons between actual self, ideal self and ought self. A gap between actual self and ideal self can take the form of feeling worthless and eventually in causing low self esteem. This low self esteem can be so distressing that a person tries to compensate it at any cost, in this case purchasing and 'owning' various kinds of things.

Another theory that can help explain low self esteem is self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (2000) that postulates that self-esteem is affected by psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness). Individuals with low self-esteem may engage in compulsive buying to compensate for unmet needs, while those with higher self-esteem may purchase to enhance hedonic experiences rather than compensate for deficits.

Another reason to explore a possible relationship between compulsive buying and low self esteem can be materialistic approach which is becoming increasingly common, that defines success and worth in terms of materialistic possessions (Richins & Dawson, 1992). People with low self esteem may try to buy material things to fill up the void created by feelings of worthlessness.

Yet another way compulsive buying and low self esteem might be related is that every time a person does compulsive buying, he/ she gets reinforced due to feelings of temporary satisfaction. This may increase the tendency in a person with low self esteem to become addicted with purchasing unnecessary things.

Empirical studies have also provided evidence that supports the assumption that self esteem and compulsive buying might be significantly related. For example one study conducted in France (Lejoyeux et al., 2011) found that individuals who score high on compulsive buying had significantly lesser scores on self-esteem measure. Similarly this kind of results were also observed in India, indicating a significant inverse relationship between self esteem and compulsive buying (Sehgal, 2023). Another study revealed self esteem to be a significant mediator between parent-child relationship and compulsive buying among adolescents (Singh & Nayak, 2016).

However a few studies also suggest a positive and not an inverse relationship between self esteem and compulsive buying. For example Jain and Shukla (2024) revealed a that self esteem and compulsive buying have a significant positive relationship, specifically if hedonic motivation is taken as a mediator. The implication of this finding is that people with high self esteem indulge in compulsive buying in order to seek pleasure and not to overcome feelings of worthlessness. Among Indonesian sample, self-esteem was not found to have significant direct relationship with compulsive buying when narcissism and social media usage were taken into the model (Dhewi et al., 2024).

Other studies have also indicated that materialism as a significant mediator between self esteem and compulsive buying (Jalees et al., 2024).

Another factor that might be considered as a factor in compulsive buying is gender. Women due to their interest and pleasure in buying self care and home related products might be more susceptible to compulsive buying. However, keeping in view that men have more financial resources in Pakistan than women, they may be indulged in compulsive buying more than women. The findings on gender differences are mixed in recent literature (Laskowski et al., 2025; Pérez de Albéniz-Garrote et al., 2021; Gallagher et al., 2017).

Yet another factor that might be associated with compulsive buying is age. People in their early to middle adulthood are expected to spend money more impulsively as

materialistic things seem attractive and there is more tendency of experimentation. However, as age increases, we can expect that emotion regulation improves and impulsivity decreases, therefore there might be a decrease in compulsive buying tendencies too. Recent literature also supports this assumption that compulsive buying decreases with age (Zhang et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022).

Hypotheses

Based on existing literature on compulsive buying as well as on self esteem and the relationship between the two variables, following hypotheses were developed.

H1: Self-esteem will be significantly related with compulsive buying.

H2: Compulsive buying will be significantly related with age.

H3: There will be a significant gender difference on compulsive buying.

Material and Methods

Nature of Study and Research Design

The study adopted a cross sectional correlational design.

Tools

Self esteem was measured by Rosenberg self esteem scale (1965) that has shown to have Cronbach's alpha, .77 - .88 for general population. Compulsive buying was measured by Edwards Compulsive Buying Scale- Revised (Maraz et al., 2015). Cronbach's Alpha for ECBS-R was found to be .87 (Neale & Reed, 2023).

Pilot Testing

Pilot testing of the scales was carried out on a convenience sample of 45 participants. Both scales showed good internal consistency, with RSES showing Cronbach's Alpha of .78 and ECBS-R showing Cronbach's Alpha of .83. Hence both scales were considered suitable for usage in the intended population.

Main Study

Sample for main study comprised a convenience sample of 250 participants in the age range 18 to 50 years. Inclusion criteria was 12 years of formal education. After data collection however 19 forms were discarded due to incomplete responses on questionnaires, no responses or irrelevant responses. The final sample size was 231 with 102 females and 129 males.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was taken from all participants. They were allowed to withdraw their data at any stage of the study.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Descriptives

	Edwards Compulsive Buying Scale- Revised	Roosenberg Self Esteem Scale
N	231	231

Range	64	30
Mean	48	29
SD	13	6
Skewness	.09	-.59
Kurtosis	-.28	.16
Cronbach's Alpha	.89	.85

Table 2
Pearson Correlation Among the Study Variables

	1	2	3
Compulsive Buying	-	-.054	.133*
Self-Esteem	-	-	.06
Age	-	-	-

*probability<.05

The descriptives (see Table 1) show that the data were normally distributed and showed good Cronbach's Alpha for both scales.

For H1, the findings indicated non significant weak Pearson correlation between self esteem and compulsive buying. Hence the data did not support the hypothesis that self esteem and compulsive buying are related. Similarly, for H2, the Pearson correlation between compulsive buying and age was calculated that showed a weak but significant correlation, $r(229) = .133$, $p < .05$. Therefore, it can be inferred that the data supported the hypothesis that age is significantly related with compulsive buying (see Table 2).

For H3, an independent-samples t-test was conducted, the results indicated no significant difference in compulsive buying scores between males ($M = 46.65$, $SD = 14.48$) and females ($M = 49.95$, $SD = 12.05$), $t(229) = -1.88$ (equal variances not assumed), $p = .062$. Therefore, it can be inferred that the data did not support the hypothesis that there is gender difference in terms of compulsive buying.

Discussion

The current study aimed to explore the relationships between self-esteem, age, gender, and compulsive buying. The results indicated that self esteem was not significantly related with compulsive buying. This finding suggests that having low or high self esteem does no matter in whether a person will develop compulsive buying behavior or not. The finding is in line with existing literature which reports mixed results about the association between self esteem and compulsive buying (Manolis & Roberts, 2012; Maraz et al., 2015). It can be assumed that there might be some other factors at work such as income, access to purchasable products and cultural norms. In the cultural context of Pakistan, self-esteem may not be a significant predictor of compulsive buying as there might exist other ways to compensate for the low self-esteem such as relating with others or acceptance of fate, similarly compulsive buying might also not be associated with people with high self esteem, as culturally appropriate modes of cherishing self satisfaction might be different. Besides, independence in decision making regarding purchase decisions might also play a role in compulsive buying despite low or high self esteem. Availability of sufficient finances might also be a factor that could hinder or enhance the tendency for compulsive buying behavior despite having low or high self esteem. All these factors need to be explored in relation with self-esteem and compulsive buying before reaching a conclusion about the relationship between the two variables.

The findings indicated a weak but significant relationship between age and compulsive buying. Although the relationship is modest, it suggests that age may play a role in developing compulsive buying behavior. Surprisingly the older participants showed relatively higher trend for compulsive buying despite the fact that emotion regulation is

assumed to improve with age and therefore it was reasonable to expect that with age and better emotion regulation, impulse control might also be improved, which in this case turned out to be otherwise. This finding is also in contradiction with other researches indicating higher tendency in younger individuals for compulsive buying (Ye et al., 2021). One of the reasons that might have resulted in the significant positive correlation between age and compulsive buying could be that the sample in current study included participants in the age range of 18 to 40 years. Although it is an age range of 22 years, it can be speculated that people become more independent both in terms of finances and decision making as they age. Usually once they are over 30 years of age, most people in the current cultural context experience more freedom and empowerment due to job or marriage. With current access to online shopping and frequently offered discounts, people in their thirties may indulge in compulsive buying more often than their younger counterparts who are not financially and psychologically that much empowered yet. A larger age range would be more appropriate in this regard.

Finally, independent samples t-test revealed no gender differences in compulsive buying which is consistent with the over all mixed findings in the existing literature regarding the relationship between gender and compulsive buying. Men and women seem to equally indulge in compulsive buying. Usually women are expected to do compulsive buying more than men, but it can be assumed that as the dynamics of shopping behavior have changed in recent times, various kinds of products that men can find interesting are also readily available in the market as well as on online platforms. Such items might include clothing, perfumes and car accessories. Therefore, if women purchase home decoration items, kitchen gadgets, clothes and self care products, men have their own list of attractive products available these days. It would be insightful as well if gender differences in patterns of compulsive buying were studied.

Conclusion

In conclusion, self-esteem and gender were not found to be related with compulsive buying. Age was slightly related but the relationship needs to be interpreted carefully keeping in view the age range. It needs to be taken in to account that the specific cultural and economic context may have an important role on shaping the relationship between self-esteem, compulsive buying, age and gender.

Limitations

The age range in the current study was not sufficiently large which makes the relationship to be interpreted with care. Longitudinal study with large age range could make the picture clearer. The study also included only the participants with at least 12 years of education, which may limit the generalizability of findings for this population only and therefore the findings cannot be generalized on people with lesser number of years of education, who comprise a large part of general population.

Implications

The research implications of the current study are that the phenomenon of compulsive buying, like most other psychological variables is a complex one. There are no straight forward and simple answers to questions inquiring the relationship between self-esteem and compulsive buying. Mixed method research along with mediating role of various factors needs to be explored before a clear cut conclusion can be reached about factors contributing to compulsive buying. Moreover, qualitative research on compulsive buying as well as on behaviors adopted to compensate for low self esteem and those adopted for enhancing pleasure in case of high self-esteem would provide meaningful insights on the dynamics of compulsive buying.

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