

Shopping Can Lead to Depression

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The Ubysey (The University of British Columbia)

MONTREAL (CUP) — Most have learnt to rationalize impulse buying and overspending as shoppers in a consumer-driven society.

Associations between pleasurable feelings and shopping have led many to expect to experience happiness every time money is spent. Sales are delightful to the shopper's budget, maxed-out credit cards may litter the insides of wallets and often, after the thrill of that perfect purchase wears off, shopping-addicts still feel slighted.

But just how threatening are these emotional highs and lows attached to spending money? Could some have a shopping-related medical disorder or are pharmaceutical companies just looking for an excuse to market new mood-altering drugs?

"I know I'm a shopaholic," said 22 year-old Julia Tordjman. "I'm \$4,000 in debt and can't go a single day without buying something. I've seriously tried, but I go crazy thinking of what's out there. It's almost as frustrating as when I get the bills."

Dissatisfaction is slowly becoming a recognized part of the shopping process. A recent study in Britain, confirmed that retail therapy was no longer an emotional cure. Publicis, which carried out the nationwide study, found that out of 1,000 people interviewed, 550 people said they were depressed because they regretted buying something they purchased when emotionally distraught.

Whether a physiological experience, a pleasurable rush or an elated sort of tranquillity, something about the act of spending reacts on endorphins in the body.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines a shopaholic as "a person who shops compulsively or very frequently." The medical term for people who have a problem with overbuying is oniomania and researchers are looking for a medical solution to it. The American Psychological Association recognizes it and says it's a form of self-medication against depression.

"The fact that you have the ability to buy things with your own money makes you feel in control," explained psychotherapist Dr. Varkha Chulani in an article on shopaholics.

Oniomania is a disorder and a threat to mental and financial health. It's usually the signs of feeling out of control which ignite the cycle between shopping and depression. The human mind craves the stimulation of new and different experiences and shopping is an exhilarating and relieving experience. For addicted shoppers, consistent purchases are followed by a strong sense of self-directed anger or guilt.

What has advanced this trend even more is advertising, which manipulates an already emotionally confused consumer into believing that buying anything—from clothes to beauty products to household appliances—is the easiest route to happiness.

Naomi Klein's book *No Logo* explains how companies brand the commodities they market to represent values like freedom or youthfulness to target their consumers. To top it off, the easy availability of credit cards make it even easier to spend money people don't have. With consumer spending soaring, it is now estimated that nearly one in five people have a problem keeping their shopping habits under control.

American doctors have responded by prescribing the drug Cipramil for shopaholics who carry on buying despite running into huge debt. Cipramil, which was tested by Stanford University scientists, is similar to Prozac. The drug contains serotonin, a chemical that helps regulate a person's moods. A study of 21 female shopaholics carried out at Stanford Medical School found that use of the drug produced marked improvements in their compulsive shopping behavior.

It has been suggested, however, that oniomania is merely a figment of drug companies' business scheming and an excuse to sell consumers just one more product.

Watch What You Buy: Over-Consumption Is a Growing Problem in Western Societies

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VANCOUVER (CUP) — Over-consumption is often considered to be a hallmark of today's affluent Western society. Advertisers and marketers have become increasingly sophisticated at telling us what to buy, what we need, even what we want. What we choose to buy has enormous social and environmental consequences.

The costs of over-consumption include the depletion of resources, the spread of dangerous pollutants, undermining of ecosystems and the fast progression of climate change. And with consumption increasing on a global scale, environmentalists are left scrambling to find ways to get these messages across to populations.

Lisa Mastny, a senior editor of the Worldwatch Institute, an independent research firm in the United States, says, "every product you buy and the services required to make that product has a history behind it, a lifecycle, most consumers don't think about that."

Instead, if consumers were to pause before buying something, to think about the product's history and implications and ask: "Do I really need this? Or where does this come from?" Mastny hopes people would reconsider their purchases.

Consider the production of a plastic bag. The ingredients that go into making one include crude oil, natural gas, and other petrochemical derivatives. Each year around 100 billion plastic grocery bags are tossed in the U.S. Though they take up less space in landfills than paper bags, many plastic bags don't make it to the landfills; instead they end up in gutters, sewers, fences and trees.

Research indicates that North America is the greatest consumer of private expenditures — goods and services at the household level. According to the World Bank's World Development Indicators Database, North America, with 5.2 per cent of

the world's population, contributes to 31.5 per cent of consumer spending in the world.

Rather than have people feel guilty about the purchases they make, Mastny says what she tries to do is portray a positive side, "an exciting side" to needed change. To explain, she postures: "Wouldn't it be cool if we could get all of our energy from the sun or the wind?"

Another tactic Mastny uses is pointing to larger equity and issues by portraying people as world citizens. Given the state of rapacious consumption "how is there going to be enough to go around? That kind of comparison might result in some change," she says.

A recent State of the World report, by the Worldwatch Institute indicates that "providing adequate food, clean water and basic education for the world's poorest could all be achieved for less than people spend annually on makeup, ice cream and pet food."

While consumerism continues to increase, developing countries remain mired in poverty. J.W. Smith, author of *Economic Democracy*, explains, "Wealth comes from resources and most of those resources aren't within imperialistic nations." It is developing countries that provide cheap labour to produce the goods that North Americans consume.

By adopting a more cradle-to-cradle approach, wherein the design, production, and the lifetime of products is taken into consideration, consumers and producers can make substantial adjustments.

Mastny is hopeful. "The tools are there, now it's just about ramping up support and taking action." Compared to 10 years ago where solutions were unclear, today there are tangible actions. "Now it's not a question about what are the issues, it's just a question of doing it" Mastny says, "that's what makes me optimistic."