COMPULSIVE DIGITAL SHOPPING: A NEW SEQUEL OF THE PANDEMIC?

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study is to investigate digital compulsive buying, aiming to understand its impact on mental health and economic well-being post-pandemic.

Theoretical Framework: This section presents the main concepts and theories underpinning the research. Theories of consumer behavior and the influences of marketing and culture are highlighted, providing a solid foundation for understanding the research context.

Method: The methodology adopted for this research comprises a systematic review of the phenomenon. Data collection was conducted through the analysis of previous studies and the evaluation of sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, and socioeconomic context.

Results and Discussion: The results obtained revealed that digital compulsive buying is related to emotional and social factors and has a significant impact on mental health. In the discussion section, these results are contextualized in light of the theoretical framework, highlighting the identified implications and relationships.

Research Implications: The practical and theoretical implications of this research are discussed, providing information on how the results can be applied in marketing and public health. These implications could encompass the need for emotional and financial education.

Originality/Value: This study contributes to the literature by providing a systematic review of the impact of digital compulsive buying post-pandemic. The relevance and value of this research are evidenced in how the results can impact the field of marketing and mental health.

Keywords: Digital Compulsive Buying, Consumer Behavior, Mental Health, Economic Impact, Marketing, Financial Education For Sustainability.

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RESUMO

Objetivo: O objetivo deste estudo é investigar as compras compulsivas digitais, com o objetivo de compreender seu impacto na saúde mental e no bem-estar econômico pós-pandemia.

Referencial Teórico: Nesta seção são apresentados os principais conceitos e teorias que sustentam a pesquisa. As teorias de comportamento do consumidor e as influências do marketing e da cultura são destacadas, proporcionando uma base sólida para compreender o contexto da pesquisa.

Método: A metodologia adotada para esta pesquisa compreende uma revisão sistemática do fenômeno. A coleta de dados foi realizada através da análise de estudos anteriores e da avaliação de variáveis sociodemográficas como idade, gênero e contexto socioeconômico.

Resultados e Discussão: Os resultados obtidos revelaram que as compras compulsivas digitais estão relacionadas a fatores emocionais e sociais e têm um impacto significativo na saúde mental. Na seção de discussão, esses resultados são contextualizados à luz do marco teórico, destacando as implicações e relações identificadas.

Implicações da Pesquisa: As implicações práticas e teóricas desta pesquisa são discutidas, fornecendo informações sobre como os resultados podem ser aplicados no marketing e na saúde pública. Essas implicações podem incluir a necessidade de educação emocional e financeira.

Originalidade/Valor: Este estudo contribui para a literatura ao fornecer uma revisão sistemática do impacto das compras compulsivas digitais pós-pandemia. A relevância e o valor desta pesquisa são evidenciados em como os resultados podem impactar a área de marketing e saúde mental.


COMPRAS COMPULSIVAS DIGITALES: ¿UNA NUEVA SECUELA DE LA PANDEMIA?

RESUMEN

Objetivo: El objetivo de este estudio es investigar las compras compulsivas digitales, con el objetivo de comprender su impacto en la salud mental y el bienestar económico post-pandemia.

Marco Teórico: En este tema se presentan los principales conceptos y teorías que sustentan la investigación. Las teorías de comportamiento del consumidor y las influencias de la mercadotecnia y la cultura destacan, proporcionando una base sólida para comprender el contexto de la investigación.

Método: La metodología adoptada para esta investigación comprende una revisión sistemática del fenómeno. La recolección de datos se realizó mediante el análisis de estudios previos y la evaluación de variables sociodemográficas como la edad, el género y el contexto socioeconómico.

Resultados y Discusión: Los resultados obtenidos revelaron que las compras compulsivas digitales están relacionadas con factores emocionales y sociales y tienen un impacto significativo en la salud mental. En la sección de discusión, estos resultados se contextualizan a la luz del marco teórico, destacando las implicaciones y relaciones identificadas.

Implicaciones de la investigación: Se discuten las implicaciones prácticas y teóricas de esta investigación, proporcionando información sobre cómo los resultados pueden aplicarse en la mercadotecnia y la salud pública. Estas implicaciones podrían abarcar la necesidad de educación emocional y financiera.

Originalidad/Valor: Este estudio contribuye a la literatura al proporcionar una revisión sistemática del impacto de las compras compulsivas digitales post-pandemia. La relevancia y valor de esta investigación se evidencian en cómo los resultados pueden impactar el área de mercadotecnia y salud mental.
1 INTRODUCTION

Compulsive buying (CC) was first described in 1915 by Kraepelin, who called it "oniomania." Despite being a phenomenon known for more than a century, it has been relatively little studied until the late 1980s, when both consumer behavior science and medical science began to take more interest in this phenomenon. Today, compulsive shopping is seen as an addictive behavior with significant negative impacts on the mental health and economic well-being of individuals (Weinstein et al., 2016; Black, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many social and economic problems, including the increase in compulsive purchasing behaviors, particularly in digital environments. This has generated an urgent need to better understand the sociodemographic, economic, political, cultural and environmental conditions that predispose certain groups to this behavior. Therefore, we seek to answer the following research question: How have digital compulsive purchases affected the mental health and economic well-being of individuals during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Studying digital compulsive buying is crucial to developing effective intervention strategies that can mitigate its negative effects. This study is justified by the need to address a growing problem that affects both individuals and the economy and society as a whole. Additionally, the research will provide a deeper understanding of the role of sociodemographic variables and the impact of digital marketing and culture in promoting this behavior.

The general objective of this work is to review the published findings on the impact of digital compulsive shopping on mental health and post-pandemic economic well-being, observing the sociodemographic conditions that predispose to digital compulsive shopping and the findings on the impact on mental health of individuals, as well as examine the economic implications of digital compulsive purchases in their research to propose strategies that complement financial education and mitigate the negative effects of digital compulsive purchases, contributing to the educational curriculum of future citizens of the 2030.
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present work is part of an investigation on compulsive buying (CC) in the population of Baja California, Mexico and in this first part of the process, we seek to elucidate a theoretical and contextual framework on the socio-demographic, economic, political, and cultural aspects, and environmental conditions that support the observed conditions.

Despite being a very common disorder, it has been little studied (McElroy et al, 1994). It was not until the end of the 80s, when consumer behavior science began to be interested in studying this phenomenon, while in medical science it was observed as part of compulsive behavior (Weinstein et al, 2016; Black, 2022), that is, whose desires and impulses are so irresistible to present the behavior, that it cannot be avoided (Wegmann et al., 2023).

CC can be defined as frequent and impulsive shopping episodes that result in negative psychosocial and financial consequences. It has not been recognized as an independent disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or the International Classification of Diseases (DSM-5 or ICD-11) due to the lack of sufficient data to establish specific diagnostic criteria (Greenberg et al., 2020).

The average age of onset of the disorder is between 18 and 30 years of age. It is a behavior that is carried out alone, shopping in any establishment and has little relationship with purchasing power; Currently, CC is being suggested as a behavioral addiction (Black, 2022). Considered an independent disorder or addictive behavior.

In administrative sciences, consumer behavior has been observed to design products, services and strategies that approximate their needs. Culture, personality, environment, access to credit, emotions, motives, attitudes, perceptions, social and economic context, among other variables, have been factors that influence the purchase decision (Fischer et al., 2015; Fischer et al., 2016). Two types of consumption have been identified: responsible and compulsive. (de la Vega et al., 2015; Fischer et al., 2015).

CC represents a problem that affects the economy, society and the environment. They must be studied from an interdisciplinary perspective to achieve the sustainable development proposed by the United Nations Organization.

It is crucial to investigate this topic, due to the financial well-being of the affected people and the economic crisis derived from the COVID-19 situation, since the restrictions and quarantine due to the pandemic generated changes in consumption habits (Tantawi, 2023).
2.1 MARKETING, CONSUMPTION AND NEW NEEDS

In the field of marketing, it has been studied how people plan, evaluate and decide their purchases and how they use the products and services they acquire (Fischer et al., 2015). Products and services are designed whose promotion focuses on generating interest and enthusiasm so that they are purchased (Kotler and Armstrong, 2008) and they can even use green marketing to try to convince their consumers that they are taking actions to care for the environment, when in reality this is not the case (Peattie and Crane, 2005).

With big data, tailored content marketing can be done, identifying not only what customers need, but also what they might need but do not yet know they need (Martínez, 2017). In other words, the customer is no longer attracted, but rather developed, and companies are looking for market niches for customer development through the drive for completely personalized consumption. Consumer behavior is influenced by technology, where “communities” of producers bring consumers of the same products into contact, participating in the design and creation of new products; driving online purchases (Solomon, 2013).

Social networks offer a broad digital platform to reach numerous consumers who have access to these networks. Online shopping is a complex area of research, because the pandemic revealed unexpected situations that changed consumer behavior and it is possible that pre-pandemic consumption patterns may not return (Sheth, 2020).

A recent study examined the reactions of men and women, especially those with compulsive buying tendencies, to brand logos. Significant differences were found: women showed a greater reaction, with changes in areas of the brain associated with addiction, while men had weaker reactions but with more activity in the brain area related to reward. All participants reacted positively to attractive brand logos, considering some brands as irresistible. Researchers highlight the importance of protecting vulnerable consumers, such as compulsive buyers (Hubert, Hubert & Mariani, 2024).

2.2 ADOLESCENTS: THE NEW CONSUMERS WITH INCOME POWER IN MEXICO AND THEIR ACCESS TO SOCIAL NETWORKS

Marketing has influenced the popular culture that is produced in the daily lives of different groups (Solomon, 2013). Nothing is more everyday than interacting virtually with belonging groups. Although social networks are expected to limit access to minors under 14 years of age in Mexico, it is possible that hundreds of thousands of minors access these
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Platforms using cell phones, opening a significant opportunity for companies in online advertising. This option allows for precise selection of the target audience, which offers a considerable advantage in terms of advertising effectiveness (Meta, 2024).

The pandemic could trigger the population to acquire compulsive manias, evidence of this is the increase in the purchase and acquisition of goods and services online in the last two years (Almendáriz et al., 2021). Online CC is part of the addictive behaviors within what is called “problematic Internet use”, within this watershed is the excessive use of social networks, which influence the presentation of online CC (Wegmann, Müller, Kessling, Joshi, Ihle, Wolf & Müller, 2023).

From the emotional aspect, there is a direct and consistent relationship between impulsive behavior and the control of emotions, individual, psychological, social and environmental aspects, lack of self-control, emotional maturity, social and cultural pressures, status, (Wegmann et al., 2023); increasing the risk of young people becoming compulsive buyers and developing their personality through materialism (Otero-López, 2022), with self-esteem being the main mediator between anxiety and the development of CHD disorder in young people (De Pasquale et al., 2022).

In a study with 1,448 Spanish university students, Villardefrancos & Otero-López (2016) found that the prevalence of compulsive buying is 7.4%. Another study with a sample of 1,042 compulsive buyers found that the majority of participants were men (89.9%), with a low educational level (53.7% primary school), employed (59.7%) and a socioeconomic level of medium-low to low (80.9%), have greater obsessive-compulsive and harm-avoidance tendencies than patients with gaming disorders and compulsive sexual behavior (Mestre-Bach et al., 2023).

A research that analyzes the correlation between CC and social media excessive use disorder in a sample of 78 women between 18 and 60 years of age, defines digital CC (hereinafter, CCD), as a clinically relevant disorder which manifests itself through pathological online shopping. It is characterized by the lack of control over purchasing behavior on online platforms, resulting in significant negative consequences in the daily life of the affected person. The use of social networks together with online shopping suggests the relationship of problematic behaviors related to Internet use and CCD, so research into the reasons underlying this relationship is beginning (Wegmann et al., 2023) and is an opportunity for future research from an interdisciplinary approach that better approaches the social, cultural, economic and psychological phenomenon.
2.3 IDENTIFIED RISK FACTORS

The socio-emotional context may be the origin of compulsive buying behavior, with problematic family dynamics where acquiring goods becomes a strategy to relieve emotional pain, improve self-image or recover lost social status (Black, 2022). Villadefranco & Otero-López (2016) found that compulsive buyers have higher levels of materialism and lower levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction, which increases vulnerability to compulsive buying. Rachubińska et al (2024) found that a high risk of compulsive buying is related to depression, neuroticism, cognitive food restriction, and work addiction, supporting the idea that it is a behavioral addiction arising from ineffective adaptation and social discontent.

Having a high level of materialism and being subjected to high levels of stress for prolonged periods, spending a lot of time online, and being exposed to influencer content could also be risk factors (Wegmann et al., 2023).

CHD has a negative association with quality of life and its monetary cost is significant (Zhang et al., 2017). There are significant differences in CC purchases by gender (Hubert et al., 2024; Black, 2022; Villardefrancos & Otero-López, 2016). Women usually buy clothes, shoes, jewelry, makeup and they are often not worn (Christenson et al, 1994) while men prefer clothes, shoes, technical equipment and sporting goods (Black, 2007 in Hubert et. al, 2024).

In the female sample, a work addiction was observed since there is the premise of “working and then existing” because work defines their identity, gives meaning to their life and allows them to obtain social approval (Rachubińska et al., 2024). Others have found that compulsive buyers often buy products that they do not need, in unplanned and excessive purchases and even in some cases, they are kept new, stored with everything and labels (Otero-López, 2022).

Although it has not been distinguished in the dictionaries of specialized disorders such as ICD-11, offline CC and online CC (Wegmann et al., 2023), there are already some studies that suggest that research should begin, the factors among these activities that can amplify the risk of suffering from one modality or another.

In a research on compulsive buyers in Mexico City (from a health marketing approach in its social dimension) Fischer et al. (2015) found that the majority of respondents deny having CHD even though the characteristics found in the sample can be classified as such. The study applied a seven-item questionnaire: the Ridgway-Kular-Monroe measurement scale (Ridgway, 2008 in de la Vega et. al, 2015) with a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 7, where “1-totally disagree” and “7-strongly agree”. With this, they analyzed Edwards' “compulsive buying
“Digital Compulsive Buying: A New Sequel of The Pandemic?” (1992 in Fischer et al., 2015), which allowed the consumers in the sample to be classified by level of purchasing compulsion into five levels: normal, recreational, borderline, compulsive, and addicted.

A study in Mexico City found that compulsive buyers are at a "Frontier" level between recreational and compulsive consumption, acquiring products without need and without planning, although only 13.6% of the sample acknowledges having compulsive purchasing behaviors. Of this group, 10.2% declare themselves compulsive buyers, with more than 60% being single people between 31 and 78 years old, with more than 30% employed and almost 50% with higher education, with more than 65% being women (Fischer et al. et al., 2015). This suggests that not all university graduates have the skills to avoid this problematic behavior, and although the authors do not delve into the careers of the sample, it would be interesting to analyze whether they include financial education in their training.

2.4 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CC, CONSUMERISM, ENVIRONMENTAL CARE AND THE 2030 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

With the SDGs, the implicit relationship between the depletion of natural resources and consumerism begins to be addressed. Surveys have been conducted in different population groups about CHD for more than 30 years, thus providing evidence that CHD is a public health problem in different cultures (Vogel et al., 2019).

The environmental impact of compulsive shopping is not a new problem and has deep roots. In recent decades, with massive industrialization, the deterioration of water, soil and air has accelerated on a global and rapid scale. Preventing compulsive buying disorder is crucial, especially in developing children and youth whose families already show symptoms of the disorder. The economic, social and environmental costs of the consequences are significant. During stressful periods, such as the pandemic, materialistic people often turn to shopping to relieve stress. Some societies are more materialistic than others, and the possession of goods can be related to happiness and social development.

Several studies have examined treatments for compulsive buying disorder (CB). Mueller et al. (2008, in Black et al., 2016) found improvement in patients with CHD after six months of cognitive-behavioral therapy, findings that coincide with Mitchell et al. (2006), who reported improvement even six months after treatment. Zambrano & Tabares (2008) identified specific cognitive distortions related to CC and suggested cognitive restructuring as an intervention to
help compulsive buyers. They recommend cognitive-behavioral therapy as an effective option to address CC.

In one case study, a 34-year-old woman with a high school education and shopping compulsion received structured treatment over 12 weekly sessions. He experienced significant improvements in his CHD symptoms, anxiety, depression, and social adjustment, leading to an improvement in his quality of life. In follow-up interviews conducted at 16 and 32 weeks after therapy, it was noted that he had learned to control his previously uncontrollable buying impulses (Brandtner & Serralta, 2016).

In one study, it was observed that patients with CHD had an intense desire to shop and more intense reactions to visual shopping stimuli than a healthy control group. Despite this, no significant differences were found in terms of attention, implicit cognitive associations, and response inhibition deficits between the two groups. These findings suggest that although CHD patients show strong desire and reactivity toward purchasing, their ability to control impulsive responses may not be noticeably different from that of healthy individuals (Vogel et al., 2019).

Villardefrancos & Otero-López (2016) found that having high levels of satisfaction with life acts as a protective factor against compulsive buying. High self-esteem is essential to prevent or help against CHD (Otero-López, 2022). CHD patients with obsessive-compulsive tendencies may benefit from therapies aimed at reducing anxiety and obsession, while patients with harm-avoidant tendencies may benefit from therapies that focus on reducing fear and avoidance (Mestre-Bach et al., 2023). A comprehensive treatment must include financial education and family counseling in addition to educational strategies at the public policy level (Aboujaoude, 2014).

3 METHODOLOGY

The present research adopted a qualitative approach to address the phenomenon of digital compulsive shopping in the post-pandemic context. A systematic review of the existing literature was carried out, analyzing previous studies on consumer behavior, mental health and the influences of marketing and culture. Data collection was carried out by evaluating sociodemographic variables such as age, gender and socioeconomic context, using academic databases such as PubMed, Scopus and Google Scholar. Inclusion criteria for the studies reviewed were that they specifically address digital compulsive shopping and its impact during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
Qualitative data were analyzed using the content analysis method to extract relevant themes and categories that provided a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions of digital compulsive shopping.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative findings of this research revealed that digital compulsive buying is significantly influenced by various demographic and contextual variables. Through content analysis, several key themes were identified. Young participants, especially those between 18 and 40 years old, showed a higher propensity to engage in compulsive online shopping, driven by emotional factors such as low self-esteem, dissatisfaction with life, stress and anxiety related to the pandemic than in addition to stress. Situational risk of getting sick could also be associated with work stress, as well as a high degree of materialism and what is called work addiction.

Furthermore, it was observed that women tended to report a higher frequency of compulsive buying compared to men, mentioning the search for emotional relief and instant satisfaction as the main motivators. The socioeconomic context played a crucial role; Individuals from medium and high economic strata demonstrate greater access and willingness to make online purchases, associated with higher levels of debt and financial stress. Also of utmost importance is the influence of social networks and the social circle of compulsive buyers that is associated with the generational and local culture to which they are exposed.

These findings provide a solid foundation for the construction of a more detailed instrument that will be applied in a later phase of the project, which will focus on more accurately measuring the demographic and contextual factors that predispose to digital compulsive buying. A compulsive buying instrument validated in the Mexican population will be used to perform comparative analyzes to the extent possible, incorporating items on digital purchases.

Among the limitations of the study, the lack of research on the effects of compulsive digital purchases during and after the pandemic stands out, especially for the Mexican population and in the context of the border area of Baja California, which is why it had to be resorting to previous international studies, however, is precisely part of what this work will contribute once the research is concluded.
5 CONCLUSIONS

Consumer behavior studies are extensive, constantly enriched with perspectives and contributions from many other disciplines. The points of view are diverse, since the melting pot of opportunities to investigate and provide knowledge about the multiple aspects that push people to make purchasing decisions, and with the arrival of the web, can expand even more (Solomon, 2013).

When shopping becomes the first response to provide comfort in the face of negative events and feelings, it can be said that there is a compulsive shopping problem (Weinstein et al., 2016; Müller et al., 2022). Since buying is inherent to life, learning to buy is essential to protect the economy and finances, prevent debt that threatens family assets and avoid spending on products that will only accumulate.

We must observe when and why consumption affects or harms our lives, health, well-being and sustainability (Fennis & Rucker, 2023). There are various factors that can influence presenting CC as personal, emotional, environmental and cultural (Otero-López, 2022). These bring with them negative consequences such as family and financial problems, psychological difficulties and other adverse consequences for physical and mental health (McElroy et al., 1994; Black, Shaw & Allen, 2016). A very important environmental factor could be access to shopping (24/7), social pressures and even very sophisticated marketing strategies, technology, influence and excessive use of social networks.

Some research shows that the younger shoppers are, the greater their tendency to use online shopping (Muller et al., 2022). In the case of adolescents who are developing their identity and personality and who possibly seek validation, in addition to seeking their social affiliation through consumption and feeling part of a group (Pandelaere, 2022).

With this, greater importance should be placed on the link between the use of social networks and online purchases, the Federal Consumer Protection Agency (PROFECO, 2023) already has clear guidelines for influencers and their recommendations (which also fall into the category of advertising and that it specifies “influence consumer decisions”), as well as sanctions for false advertising. Financial education can play an important role in preventing and treating compulsive buying by helping people develop skills to healthily manage their finances, make informed financial decisions, and consume wisely.

Learning the proper use of ICT and software is crucial in the digital training of citizens of 2030. Buying is a social act, since no one can produce everything they need, which is why markets are essential for the exchange of income from goods and services. However,
compulsive buying can lead to debt and significant social and environmental costs. Therefore, it is important to integrate digital skills and awareness of responsible consumption into citizenship education.

The efficient and effective development of applications has an impact on the relationship between humans and the environment (Ochoa, 2021) and these, along with other promising tools such as artificial intelligence, can be used responsibly and ethically to improve the quality of applications. Life, from a multidisciplinary approach that seeks comprehensive well-being in financial and mental health, providing not only financial education, but assistance and first emotional support 24/7 for those who require it and that helps us become aware of the environmental damage that our excess consumption can cause harm to the planet.

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