EXPLORING THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND SPENDING ADDICTION


Unlike Hollywood's inevitably sanitized presentation, real-life shopping addiction isn't cured by the love of a hot man, the help of a kooky pal or a climactic montage of a big old jumble sale.

In reality, spending addiction often results in substantial debt, legal issues, alienation from family and friends, and even marriage problems. What's more, studies show the co-presence of compulsive spending with other mental illnesses like depression, anxiety and eating disorders. So if estimates are true, and between one and eight percent of the population is a compulsive shopper, why is it not yet taken seriously and classified as its own addiction in diagnostic manuals?

Unlike those of us who buy things that we need, and things that we want to own, shopping addicts buy things for the euphoric feeling of spending itself. "The process of browsing is highly stimulating," says self-confessed addict Henry over email. "You are bombarded with pages and pages of pictures of desirable things. In the moment of purchase there is strange driving excitement. But then immediately afterwards, there is a feeling of: oh god, what have I done?"

Actual possession of the object is besides the point once that transient high has passed, and addicts often resent, return, hide or discard items afterwards. Janie, a 33-year-old addict, tells me that afterwards, she just feels remorse. "Usually the items sit in my closet with the tags on them for weeks or even months. And every time I run across those items it makes me sad. The lowest points have been hiding purchases from my boyfriend – keeping them in my car until he's not home and then sneaking them in."

Janie's problem and her subsequent feelings of guilt have created problems in her personal life, as she tell me that her and her partner "keep our finances completely separate so he doesn't know how much I spend. We have no credit cards together because I'm always late with payments and have recently defaulted on at least 12 different cards. Plus, having such a low credit score that no utilities can be in my name for our house."

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Her experience conforms to the Bergen Shopping Addiction Scale, created by Norwegian psychology professors last year, which distinguishes shopping addiction from enjoyment by determining whether the subject thinks about buying stuff all the time, feels like they have to buy more to get the same feeling as they used to, and if it has negatively impacted their well-being or ability to participate in their normal life.
Shopping addiction, like a lot of other rewarding behaviours, shares the same neuropsychological explanation as substance abuse. "On the surface, chemical and behavioural addictions look quite different", Dr Jansari, a professor of cognitive neuropsychology from Goldsmiths University, tells me over the phone. "But we know from studies on gaming addiction for example, that similar parts of the brain are involved. So when you show a cocaine user a video of someone shooting up, a certain part of the brain – the reward centre – gets activated, and neurotransmitters get released. We know that the same parts of the brain get activated in a brain scanner when a gaming addict sees their favourite games."

Ben, a self-confessed spending addict, told me over the phone that there's "definitely some funky wiring going on. It's almost like I trick myself into buying things, and then after the fact it's like, 'How did that happen?' I think other addicts can relate, it's like they indulge even though they told themselves it wouldn't happen."

On Reddit support forums for spending addictions, I find one woman talking about how she quit heroin but found herself unable to stop buying nail polish. Explaining how spending addictions can come about out of earlier substance abuse problems, Dr Jansari tells me that once certain neurological pathways are created within the brain, these addictive tendencies are hard to shake off. "Generally it's probably the case that the pathways or neural structures that are involved don't really care whether it's cocaine or shopping – there will be some differences but they won't be dramatically big. So you can substitute one addiction for another relatively easily."

Other spending addicts seem to feel that their problem stems in part from their upbringing. Ben says that growing up, "Money was always considered tight, not to say we were struggling, but we were always penny-pinching. I've often tried to determine why I'm so interested in shopping, and the fact that there was a restriction on it when I was young seems to be a factor in some way."

Unlike other addictions, which take hold in the teens, studies have shown spending addictions mostly develop in the 30s, when people achieve financial independence. Added to this, the addiction is only prevalent in developed countries where there is a system of credit and a consumer culture. Is the addiction a by-product of modern consumer culture rather than innate brain-wiring? "This kind of shopping behaviour has only emerged in recent history," says Robert Bilder, Chief of Medical Psychology at UCLA. "If we go back even a hundred years, there was not that much opportunity, both in terms of the available portals for shopping, and the available income that people had to pursue it. Albeit you could probably go back and find other kinds of behaviours that were rewarding and that people could develop compulsions about."

Whether shopping addiction is the result of an inherited neurological tendency towards addiction, or the side effect of a lifetime of consumer conditioning and psychologically damaging experiences, is unclear. One obvious fact is that compulsive shoppers all seem to share experiences of mental illness. While prevalence of shopping addiction in the general public is at around five percent, one study of depressed patients showed it prevalent in 31.9 percent of cases. A study into OCD patients at showed it's prevalence at 23 percent and one into binge eating as 17.6 percent.
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But there is some confusion as to whether compulsive shopping is an illness of itself, or a symptom of something else going on. Bill, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at the age of 34, was keen to impress that he would not class himself as an addict. Rather, "one of the many symptoms of bipolar disorder is an extreme impulsiveness, and many are given to fits of shopping. Like Stephen Fry mentions his obsession with gadgets in his first documentary on the subject."

Ben says he feels his mental illness and spending addictions "feed into each other". For him, it might be said that he isn't addicted to the euphoria of spending itself, but rather the momentary relief from overwhelming feelings of anxiety and depression. "It can feel like an easy way to," he says. "Just by clicking buy to give yourself a little pick-me-up."

The ubiquity and accessibility of internet shopping seems to enable a lot of addicts, with reports tellingly stating that they spend on average four times longer online than the rest of us. "Micropayments in online games are highly, highly enabling of bad habits," says Henry. "I spent a good deal of money on Neopets at the NC Mall as a young teen on clothes for my Neopets, but I knew people who spent several times the amount that I did on Neocash."

Shopping addiction remains widely misunderstood, with many seeing "shopaholics" as simply people who are a little too into shoes. But this stereotype alienates those afflicted, and may even be stopping it from being studied as seriously as its effects warrant. Ben says, "I'll never really forget when my dad said, 'Well it could be worse, it could be a drug addiction', and maybe that's one way in which I justify it. I don't think it's actually better, but I think the perception of it as not that bad makes it harder to talk about."

Yet as Robert Bilder points out, the recognition of its seriousness may only be a matter of time. Its recognition as a physical and psychological addiction "is a case where there is an absence of evidence rather than evidence of absence."