Internet Addiction: Measurement and Relationship With Materialism and Compulsive Buying

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Although most consumption activities in our modern society are desired and unproblematic, there seem to exist undesired side effects which have been described in literature as “the dark side of consumer behavior” (Mowen and Minor 2000). These effects include, e.g., materialism, compulsive buying, pathological gambling, and substance abuse. More recently, the excessive use of the Internet has been added to this list, and some authors (Griffiths 2000, Young 1996, 1998) suggest that individuals may become addicted to the Internet in a similar way as they become addicted to substance abuse or other forms of compulsive behavior. Despite the attention Internet addiction (IA) has received in the popular press and some journals specialized in psychology and behavior on the Internet, there are several measurement issues such as construct validity and reliability that have not been resolved satisfactorily yet. Further, it is not clear if IA constitutes a substitute for other compulsive behaviors such as compulsive buying (in this case, IA and compulsive buying would show a negative correlation), or if IA and other compulsive behaviors occur simultaneously and thus indicate comorbidity (indicated by a positive correlation between the constructs). Previous research has suggested comorbidity for the relationship between compulsive buying and binge eating (Faber et al. 1995), or the relationship between pathological gambling and cocaine-dependence (Hall et al. 2000). The study presented here aims to address the measurement problems mentioned above, and also hopes to contribute to the question how Internet addiction is related with two important consumer constructs of the “dark side,” materialism and compulsive buying.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Although most consumption activities in our modern society are desired and unproblematic, there seem to exist undesired side effects
which have been described in literature as “the dark side of consumer behavior” (Mowen and Minor 2000). These effects include, e.g.,
materialism, compulsive buying, pathological gambling, and substance abuse. More recently, the excessive use of the Internet has been
added to this list, and some authors (Griffiths 2000, Young 1996, 1998) suggest that individuals may become addicted to the Internet in
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and binge eating (Faber et al. 1995), or the relationship between pathological gambling and cocaine-dependence (Hall et al. 2000).
The study presented here aims to address the measurement problems mentioned above, and also hopes to contribute to the question how Internet
addiction is related with two important consumer constructs of the “dark side,” materialism and compulsive buying.

Materialism, compulsive buying and Internet addiction were measured with scales previously developed and published in literature
(Richins 2004, Faber and O’Guinn 1992, Felix 2004). All scales were translated into Spanish and then backtranslated into English. A
sample procedure similar to snowball sampling (Lohr 1999) was used to obtain data from diverse parts of the population in a larger
industrial city in Northern Mexico. This procedure resulted in 296 useable surveys. No gender effects were found for the three constructs,
and age was correlated weakly to only one of the constructs, materialism.
Exploratory factor analysis for the nine-item materialism scale revealed two factors. However, one of these factors was composed of only one item (item 8), which is a reverse-worded item. Reverse-worded items have been shown to be problematic for the material values scale (Wong, Rindfleisch, and Burroughs 2003), and removing this item from the scale increased internal consistency (Cronbach Alpha) from .82 to .84 and provided a one-factor solution. Using confirmatory factor analysis, the one factor solution was compared to a three factor solution, reproducing the suggested factor structure previously documented in literature (Richins and Dawson 1992) with the three dimensions of success, centrality, and happiness. Model fit indices such as NFI, CFI, and RMSEA suggest that the three-factor solution is superior to the one-factor solution. The correlations between the three dimensions range from .72 to .80, thus suggesting that the three dimensions are in fact related to the same underlying construct, materialism. Psychometric properties for the seven-item compulsive buying and the 11-item Internet addiction scales were satisfying as well. Cronbach Alphas were .87 and .92, respectively. Whereas model fit indicators for the compulsive buying scale were good, models fits for the Internet addiction scale showed to be problematic. An inspection of the modification indices suggested some error covariances that might improve model fit when being estimated. However, because the estimation of these error covariances would have been statistically motivated instead of being based on a sound theoretical grounding, the option of removing two items with low item-total correlations was chosen. The reduced nine-item Internet addiction scale showed improved model fits and good internal consistency (Cronbach Alpha=.91).

To investigate the relationship between materialism, compulsive buying, and Internet addiction, three cases were distinguished conceptually. First, the correlation between two addictive behaviors can be negative, indicating a substitutional relationship. Second, the correlation may be zero or not significant, indicating independence between the constructs. And third, the correlation may be positive, indicating the simultaneous occurrence of the behaviors and thus suggesting comorbidity. Both Pearson correlations and correlations from confirmatory factor analysis showed a relatively strong and positive relationship between materialism and compulsive buying, a relatively weak, but still significant, positive relationship between materialism and Internet addiction, and a moderate, positive relationship between compulsive buying and Internet addiction. Thus, the results suggest comorbidity among the three constructs, with the highest level of comorbidity between materialism and compulsive buying.

The results suggest several implications for marketing practice and policy making. From a policy making point of view, educators may try to emphasize non-materialistic values more than those based on worldly possessions. For marketing practitioners, there are ethical questions that should be considered and discussed more openly. For example, quite some advertisements propagate the idea that worldly possessions are able to resolve problems in personal or social relationships. Marketers frequently suggest that buying a certain brand of cars, perfumes, clothing, or accessories such as watches and jewelry will make individuals more attractive, more desirable, and more successful in their relationships with others. However, a negative side effect of this cultivation of material values may be the emergence of more addictive (and as such problematic) behaviors. Evidence from this study suggests that Internet addiction is a real phenomenon that is in fact related to other problematic consumer behaviors and traits. Finally, it should be noted that this research has considered only three constructs related to problematic consumer behavior, and future research should strive to integrate other constructs, such as pathological gambling or substance abuse, to obtain a more complete picture of problematic consumer behavior.

Selected References