Ahi, I'M a Compulsive Buyer: A Content Analysis of Themes From Testimonial Telephone Calls At Qvc

Nancy M. Ridgway, University of Richmond
Monika Kukar-Kinney, University of Richmond

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INTRODUCTION
The objective of this paper is to conduct a content analysis of testimonial telephone calls at a major television shopping network (QVC) for the purpose of uncovering themes relevant to consumer behavior researchers. Testimonial telephone calls are calls made to a shopping network that are put on the air live so that all consumers watching the network can hear the caller. Sometimes, the host will ask for buyers to call in and sometimes the calls are unsolicited. The purpose and contribution of this study is to use content analysis to classify themes from testimonial calls that deal with compulsive buying. In the next paragraphs, we briefly describe the importance of television shopping networks in the retailing realm. Then, we discuss the possible links between television shopping and compulsive buying.

Interest in television shopping networks and the consumers who shop at them has increased as the number of networks have grown and the sales at the large networks have exploded (Moss 2002). There are currently approximately a dozen television shopping networks on various cable stations (Beres 2003). The two largest are QVC located in suburban Philadelphia, PA and HSN located in Clearwater, FL (Hoover’s Online 2004). Other, much smaller television shopping channels include ShopNBC and Shop at Home (Moss 2002). QVC is the largest (and most studied) network with 2003 sales of $4.9 billion and reach of approximately 95 million U. S. households (QVC also has international networks in England, Ireland, Scotland and Germany) (Higgins 2003; Lillo 2003). QVC features approximately 1600 items on the air each week (Kaptik 2003). QVC is able to answer 162,000 telephone calls each hour and can ship up to 300,000 packages each day (Ragas 2002). By contrast, HSN had $2 billion in sales in 2003 and reaches 79 million households (Hoover’s Online 2004). The other networks are much smaller in both sales and reach.

More than one thousand journal and popular press articles have been published in the last decade that mention the topic of television shopping or home shopping networks (cf., Infotrac Online Database). Most of the articles deal with non-consumer behavior issues such as ownership of various networks, stock price changes, executive changes, etc. After collecting several hundred of the most relevant articles and categorizing them in terms of major themes, three themes of interest to consumer researchers appear to dominate both the academic and popular press articles. These themes are: 1) television shopping is a major force in retailing and growing rapidly (Beres 2003; Hoover’s Online HSN 2003; Hoover’s Online QVC 2003). To support this theme, on Dec. 2, 2001, QVC sold $80 million worth of product in one day, breaking its previous total of $60 million (Moss 2002; Van Camp 2002); 2) television shopping appeals more to women than to men (Hill 2002; Lawrence 1990); and 3) television shopping networks are conducive to compulsive buying (Hill 2002; Hunt 2003; Lee, Lennon and Rudd 2000; Marsden 2002; McPherson 2003; Steins 1997). It is the second and third themes, and their relationship to each other, that are of particular interest in this study.

In the next section, compulsive buying is briefly discussed, including the proposed relationship between compulsive buying and television shopping. The relationship of gender to compulsive buying and television shopping is also highlighted. Then, the method that was used to collect testimonial telephone calls from QVC is described. Next, the resulting themes are presented and discussed. Finally, suggestions for future research are offered.

COMPULSIVE BUYING AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO TELEVISION SHOPPING
Compulsive buying has been widely studied in the consumer behavior literature. It is defined as “chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings” (O’Guinn and Faber 1989, p. 155). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, a comprehensive review of the possible sources of compulsive behaviors and addiction can be found in Hirschman (1992). There are at least three scales that measure a consumer’s tendency toward compulsive buying (Edwards 1993; Faber and O’Guinn 1992; Valence, D’Astous and Fortier 1988). Research has shown correlates of compulsive buying to include low self-esteem, materialism, loneliness, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety and stress (Faber and Christenson 1996; Faber and O’Guinn 1989; 1992; Scherhorn 1990; Stephens, Hill and Bergman 1996). Compulsive buying appears to possess the characteristics common of all compulsive behaviors, including repetition, loss of control, dysfunctional nature, and the desire to engage in the behavior in order to escape other problems or for mood control (cf., O’Guinn and Faber 1989; Rindfleisch 1997). Another common characteristic of compulsive buying is that the behavior appears to be much more common among women than men (Black 1996; Faber, Christenson, DeZwaan and Mitchell 1995; Faber and O’Guinn 1989). While it is estimated that only about 10% of the population can be labeled compulsive buyers, 80-92% of these are female (Black 1998; Faber and O’Guinn 1989).

According to existing research, there is a relationship between television shopping and compulsive buying. Although causation is not claimed, some authors believe that television shopping is an activity that may enable compulsive buying (McElroy, Keck and Phillips 1995; Stephens et al. 1996). “QVC may contribute to the transformation of occasional impulse buying into compulsive buying, for a person so predisposed, in several ways” (Stephens et al. p. 195). They mention the continuous availability of the channel in the home, the friendliness of the hosts, and the items sold as factors that may contribute to compulsive buying. The availability of QVC and its potential as a “secret venue” for buying is also supported in other research (Lee et al. 2000; Stanforth and Lennon 1996). Faber and O’Guinn (1988) state that although media are certainly not the cause of compulsive shopping, the constant exposure may encourage such activity. Harden (1996) found in focus groups that many

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middle-aged women found television shopping networks to be addictive. Finally, researchers have found that between 44-60% of QVC’s transactions are from repeat buyers, indicating the existence of at least brand loyalty and possibly compulsive buying (cf. Cook 2000).

Although it is often assumed that QVC buyers are from the lower middle-class in terms of socio-economic status, this does not appear to be the case. Television shopping networks in general and QVC in particular appear to know their customers’ characteristics very well (Kerver 2000). This target market is backed up by articles that describe the typical customer as female (75%), Chachere (2002; 90%, Stesin 1997), age between 40-65, income of $50,000-$70,000, and college educated (Jeffries 2003; Stanforth and Lennon 1996). Further evidence of the socio-economic status of the typical QVC buyer is found in the products that sell extremely well on the network. Expensive brands such as Philosophy, Bare Escentuals, L’Occitane and Birkenstock are top sellers. Cubic zirconium jewelry (often associated with television shopping networks) represent only 2% of the network’s sales (Chachere 2002).

To keep buyers apprised of programming, QVC sends what is called a Program Guide, covering one month of programs, with each purchase and to all QVC credit card holders. These program guides show each “program” that is on the air each hour. Based on a sampling (n=50) and categorizing of these guides, it was found that approximately 80-85% of all programming is geared specifically to women (examples include jewelry, women’s clothing and shoes, cosmetics, candles and other home décor, scrap book supplies, and bedding). Only about 10% of the programming is geared more specifically toward male interests (i.e., shows that sell NASCAR collectibles and Craftsmen tools). The remaining programming is of interest to both females and males (examples include CDs of famous artists, computers, cameras, and food products).

There appears to be a natural link between television shopping networks and women who may be compulsive buyers. First, the presentation of the products is very casual, friendly, happy and personal (Cook 2000). Hosts reveal details about their personal life presentation of the products is very casual, friendly, happy and personal (Gumpert and Faber 1989). Using

Second, the program guides enable shoppers to plan their buying around particular time slots. By showing the hourly lineup of shows a month at a time, shoppers are able to pick and choose the items to buy. In addition to the program guides, the hosts frequently encourage shoppers to stay up late for a particular show or to be up at midnight when a new “Today’s Special Value” (one product that is presented at a special low price for a 24-hour period) is first offered. There are also constant reminders by hosts and through the use of program ads of the next four or five shows that will air after the current show is over (each “program” lasts one hour).

Third, the products are presented with some urgency to purchase. Each product remains on the air for approximately eight minutes. Although consumers can buy any item at any time, it is most convenient to order the item when it is on the air. It is only during this period that the live or automated operator has the item number available and it does not have to be remembered by the buyer. In addition, urgency is present in the form of a counter on the screen that shows the number of orders for each item updated in real time. If there is only one item being presented (such as a piece of jewelry), the host continually updates viewers on the number still available. If there are multiple items for sale at one time (such as a jacket that comes in six sizes), a yellow dot appears on the screen by the size when it becomes limited and a red dot appears when the item is sold out (or put on waitlist only status).

Finally, according to Lee et al. (2000): “It is also likely that television shopping channel exposure contributes to the belief that happiness can be found through consumption. Thus, television shopping channel viewing may encourage television shoppers who are predisposed to manifest their problems through compulsive buying.” (p. 480).

METHOD

In order to summarize a vast amount of data into systematic and objective categories, content analysis was considered an appropriate data analysis technique (Kassarjian 1977). Thus, a content analysis was performed using testimonial calls as the item of classification. In preparing to collect the data, several factors were deemed important. First, a sufficient quantity of data was necessary to allow on-air testimonials to support themes. Although we were unsure how many testimonial telephone calls would be needed, we decided to collect a large number of data points. Second, it was believed that the sample should be drawn from a variety of times in case testimonial calls differed by time of day or by day of the week. Thus, calls were sampled from morning, afternoon, evening, and overnight hours and from week-days, week-ends, and holidays (QVC is on the air 24 hours a day, 364 days a year—taking only Christmas Day off). Third, the data was collected at a variety of times during the year, so that special holidays (i.e., Christmas, Easter, Valentine’s Day, etc.) did not have a greater than normal impact on the testimonial calls. Table 1 shows the data collection procedure. Because most viewers watch during the evening hours (except on week-ends) and the least number during the overnight hours, the number of hours for each time period reflects viewer numbers (Moss 2002).

As shown in Table 1, all data were collected over a six-month period between April-September 2001. Hours recorded were selected randomly but in the proportion shown. All testimonials collected during the 100 hours recorded were coded. After first coding the testimonials based on the time of day the data were collected, it was agreed that the same themes emerged in approximately the same proportion when the data were combined. The findings report the data in the combined form. Although content analysis often uses a pre-determined system of coding items within established categories, preconceived categories were not used in this study. So as not to force the themes of interest (i.e., compulsive buying by women) onto the testimonial calls, the coding scheme was developed separately by the two judges working independently. That is, each judge developed names (or titles) for the theme(s) suggested. Not only were the judges’ theme names remarkably similar, the judges agreed on the testimonial code theme for all but 6% of the testimonials. These disagreements were reviewed, discussed, and resolved. The major area of disagreement was that many of the calls contained several themes, so the number of testimonials that suggest each theme summed across the themes is greater than the total number collected (514).
FINDINGS

Four themes dominated the testimonial telephone calls. Several of the calls suggested a variety of other themes, but there was insufficient quantity to warrant discussion. The key themes are presented and discussed below. It should be noted that approximately 5% of the testimonials had little or no content and on average lasted only about 20 seconds. The callers seemed very nervous and only tentatively answered a few questions posed by the hosts with one word answers. These calls were excluded from further analysis.

**THEME ONE: I LOVE QVC PRODUCTS AND THEIR QUALITY (n=332).**

Love of QVC products was the theme that was expressed by the majority of testimonial calls. Many customers related that they had not only bought the current item on the air, but had bought dozens of other items from QVC. Most of these calls also contained at least one additional theme that dealt with compulsive buying. However, because this theme is not necessarily related to compulsive buying, only a few verbatims are listed below:

"Ladies, get off the fence and order this, you will love the beauty and the quality." (bracellet)

"If anyone is reluctant, they should buy this, it works!" (Philosophy moisturizer called Hope in a Jar)

"I love everything that you sell on your program" (it is interesting to note that this caller and many others refer to QVC as a show or a program rather than a 24-hour per day commercial for selling products.)

**THEME TWO: MY BUYING IS OUT OF CONTROL (n=290).**

This was the second most dominant theme. As shown by the number of callers who mention this theme, it is a close 2nd to the quality theme above and directly relates to compulsive buying. Although in the last few years (since 2002), hosts have obviously been told to downplay these types of testimonials, at the time this data were collected, no such controls were in place. There is no citation documenting this change of behavior of the hosts, but in listening to current testimonials, it is evident that hosts quickly change the subject when a caller brings up this theme. In fact, there are recent instances where a caller is quickly dismissed by the host if she continues on the compulsive buying theme. Examples of testimonials expressing this theme include:

"You guys are going to make me poor. I bought another outfit by this brand earlier this week." (Susan Graver fashion).

"I shouldn’t be allowed to have a QVC credit card. It is always at the limit and then I just pull out my other credit cards to buy.” (18K gold jewelry)

"I can’t believe that I just bought the entire collection you are showing now.” (Mojave Magic cosmetics—cost about $575)

"I’ve told my mother/friend/sister about QVC and now her/their credit cards are sky high too.” (This type of statement was made frequently.)

"I love your program and I buy everything.”

"I didn’t just buy one set (of variously scented candles from Valerie Parr Hill). I bought three sets. The last time I ordered, I bought three sets and I gave them all away. These three are just for me.”

"This is my third or fourth order for this product (Breezie underwear). There is no tugging or pulling in the back, if you know what I mean. I guess I’m just a Breezie girl.”

"I buy way too much. The product explanations are so clear that I really love to buy everything I see.”

"I have everything that you sell. My house is completely full of QVC products. I have no space left.”

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**TABLE 1**

Data Collection Procedure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Period: April-September, 2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of testimonials: 514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of testimonials by gender: female=492 (96%) male=22 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of hours of television coded: 100</td>
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<tr>
<td># hours of morning television: 20</td>
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<td># hours of afternoon television: 20</td>
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<tr>
<td># hours of evening television: 40</td>
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<tr>
<td># hours of overnight television: 20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average # of testimonials/hour: 5.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Range of # of testimonials/hour: 0–11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average length of testimonials: approximately 2 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of length of testimonials: 25 seconds–5 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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“I started collecting dolls after watching QVC. Now I have over 300.” (dolls priced between $100-$400 designed by Marie Osmond dolls were being sold at the time—QVC has many doll designers that sell on QVC)

“I bought every single color of t-shirt and Capri pants that you showed.” (Denim & Company clothing—a QVC brand)

“I just can’t stop buying from QVC. I watch it all the time—as many hours per day as I can.”

“I waited until my husband went to sleep to start ordering.” (indicating the possibility of a “secret venue” as a way to hide purchases from family members)

“My QVC card is so high that I can only buy on Easy-Pay.” (a QVC policy that allows customers to buy certain products, receive them now, and pay for them over a 2-5 month period).

“Well, I’ve already bought 3 or 4 things tonight from this line and now I want this shirt.” (fashion hour)

“I’ve stayed up all night so I wouldn’t miss anything. I’ve bought so much I can’t believe it.” (caller during Fashion Day—24 hours of fashion)

“I called in sick at work today so I could watch all 24 hours.” (Fashion Day)

“I’m trying to get my sister to order this. I know it is perfect for her.” (trying to turn ones relatives into compulsive buyers?)

THEME THREE: I LOVE THE QVC HOSTS AND BELIEVE THEY ARE MY FRIENDS/FAMILY (n= 197). The calls expressing this theme appear to be engaging in parasocial relationships. Stephens et al. (1996) found strong evidence of these relationships in their research. Even the then President of QVC has stated that he wants the audience to love the hosts and to make the audience part of an extended family (Gumpert and Drucker 1992). Hosts are trained in techniques to draw consumers into their family (Gumpert and Drucker 1992). While many callers indicated that QVC products treat or to cheer oneself (Faber and Christenson 1996; Shapiro 1993; Woodruffe 1997). Many callers indicated that QVC products helped them physically. Examples of testimonials expressing this theme include:

“Just love you. You’re one of my favorite hosts—you can sell me anything.” (referring to Judy Crowell—host)

“Mary Beth (Roe), you’re so great—you’re my favorite host.”

“You’re one of my very favorites—you epitomize the word lady.” (Mary Beth Roe)

“You are so beautiful and I know you were a beauty queen before working for QVC.” (Lisa Robertson)

“Jane, I am so happy that you’re pregnant—do you know if it is a boy or a girl?” (Jane Rudolph Treacy)

“I heard you adopted a little girl from China. Do you have a picture of her that you can show me? (Mary Beth Roe showed a picture of her baby)

“Congratulations on your engagement, I am so happy for you. When are you going to show us a picture of the lucky groom?” (Jill Bauer)

“I feel I know you as a friend and I love you so much.” (Dan Hughes)

“How are you handling your divorce? I worry about you.” (Dan Hughes)

“I’m a big fan of Joan Rivers and I love her. She is so funny when she is on the air and I love her jewelry.”

“Richard Simmons, I love you so much. You are my incentive to lose weight.”

“Thank you so much for talking to me. I really love you as a daughter.” (Pat Dimintri)

“You are so beautiful. You look great in all your clothes.” (to host)

THEME FOUR: “I AM TREATING MYSELF TO GIFTS (n=150). This theme was unexpected but interesting with many callers indicating how the products they buy make them more confident and happy about themselves (especially in terms of their looks or figure). In addition, many callers referred to negative mood states they were in and how the “product treat” would help them feel better. Several researchers have found that compulsive buying results in a lot of self-gifts during negative mood-states—either to treat or to cheer oneself (Faber and Christenson 1996; Shapiro 1993; Woodruffe 1997). Many callers indicated that QVC products helped them physically. Examples of testimonials expressing this theme include:

“I decided I was due a bracelet because I haven’t bought one in a while.”

“I’m treating myself today. I’m home sick and I’ve been treating myself all day.”

“I’m home recovering from surgery and I’m buying lots of pretty things for myself.”

“When I wear this make-up, I feel beautiful.” (Victoria Principle cosmetics)

“This will look good on me.” (Bare Escentuals cosmetics)

“I’ve never used one before, so I bought it today. As I get older, I need this more. I can’t wait to get it because I know I will look better.” (a face shaver that removes hair from above the lip and cheeks)
“I love this jacket. I look really good in this. It’s hard to find fashion for larger sized women, but I really look good in the ones I buy at QVC.” (Delta Burke fashions)

“I just turned 40 and I love this stuff (Laura Geller’s Spackle Cream Under Make-Up Primer). At the end of the day, I look good.”

“I am really appreciating this. I am in a lot of pain with my back. This has helped me so much. God bless you. (Wacoal Under-wire T-back bra)

**DISCUSSION**

Although several of the themes found in this research have been examined before, theme one (quality of products) and theme four (love/care of self) have not previously been discussed in academic literature in the context of television shopping. Of primary interest to this study was theme two (My Buying Is Out of Control), which was found to be the second most dominant theme in terms of number of mentions. It adds evidence to the idea that QVC may, in fact, be enabling and/or encouraging compulsive shopping. Of the over 500 calls examined, a majority of the callers mentioned their over-spending and debt. A caller who has bought over 300 dolls from QVC sounds to the outside world as “out of control.” The hosts are careful to never tell a caller that their behavior is odd or out of the ordinary. Instead, they make comments that reinforce the caller’s sensible spending. If a caller says: “I bought one in every color” (referring to a clothing item, for example), the host will generally respond with “and now you have one to go with everything in your wardrobe, so you’ve really saved money.”

Theme three (I Love the QVC Hosts as Friends/Family) also relates strongly to compulsive buying. Since it has been found that compulsive buyers score higher than others on loneliness scales, the parasocial relationships with the hosts may encourage additional buying and improve the caller’s mood (cf., Faber and Christenson 1996). Theme four (I Am Treating Myself to Gifts) appears to also be related to compulsive buying. The verbatims indicate that many of these callers feel negative in some way (ill, unattractive, etc.). If buying an entire line of make-up makes a consumer feel better about themselves, then, as with theme three, negative feelings can lead to compulsive buying.

In conclusion, the overall take-away from the examination of testimonial calls by viewers is that the themes represented in the content analysis of 100 hours of telephone testimonials appear to be highly related to much of the research on compulsive buying. For example, general overspending, buying one in each color, buying an entire line of make-up, running credit cards to the limit, waiting until a husband is asleep to begin ordering, watching late into the night, taking off of work to watch QVC all seem to be represented in Theme Two: My Buying Is Out of Control. Likewise, the parasocial relationships formed with the hosts feeds into the acceptance of excessive buying they provide. In addition, the loneliness that many compulsive buyers feel may be assuaged by the support and personal touch the hosts give to the buyers. These are represented in Theme Three: I Love the QVC Hosts as Friends/Family. Theme Four: I Am Treating Myself to Gifts also appears to be related to compulsive buying. Taken from the adage, “When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping”, this theme represents shoppers who appear to be in a negative mood state (see verbatims). Purchasing at such times appears to indicate an attempt to make oneself feel better through consumption.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL RESEARCH**

From all sources, it appears that television shopping networks are growing and will represent a larger percentage of retail sales in the future (Albright 2004; Beres 2003). That said, there are several avenues for future research in this area, especially where compulsive shopping is concerned. First, the greatest need is to verify the themes empirically. A random survey of television home shoppers may show a different picture than is presented in the testimonial telephone calls. It may be that compulsive shoppers are more likely to ask to be put on the air or are more willing to wait to speak with one of the hosts. Many callers expressed that they had talked to various hosts multiple times in the past. Thus, the on-air testimonials appear to consist of a self-selected group of QVC buyers. Since previous research indicates that approximately 10% of all female consumers are compulsive buyers, it is necessary to get empirical data to have a clearer picture of the actual percentage of television shopping network buyers (Faber and O’Guinn 1992).

Additional qualitative research on this topic would also be helpful. Depth interviews with testimonial callers would greatly help in understanding whether the statements made on air represent a true disorder or a milder form of enjoyment of shopping. It is possible that callers exaggerate their purchases in the excitement of the moment or to please the hosts. Depth interviews would more clearly reveal the motivations of the callers. Moreover, in terms of motivations, a better understanding of self or other gift-giving behavior is necessary. Do compulsive television buyers use products to treat or cheer themselves when they are in different moods? When do they buy for themselves versus for others? How do motivations for buying for others differ?

Finally, it is important to continue to study the reason why women seem to be most affected by compulsive buying in general and from television shopping networks, in particular. Are there products or venues in which men are compulsive buyers? For example, in buying coins or other collectibles, are men more prone than women to buy compulsively? Surveying male consumers who frequent the eBay site would be instructive in fleshing out this apparent over-representation of women in the compulsive buyer group.

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