“My Fifty Pairs of Shoes Are All Different!”: Exploring and Explaining Exorbitant Buying

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Heretofore consumer researchers have studied impulsive, compulsive and excessive buying, collecting, status buying and fixated buying behavior, all of which have negative psychological consequences and connections. Unexplored is the commonly observed phenomenon of “exorbitant buying” that refers to buying extensively to augment one’s inventory of a category of goods for which rational justification, defensible in the mind of the buyer, exists. This study uses in-depth interviews to identify the emergent themes and develop a concept map. Results show that individuals tend to thin-slice their needs, differentiate products based on minute differences and acquire an ever-expanding list of products based on specific purchasing criteria.

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affected by the writing task, and (if so) in what direction. In addition, participants completed various demographic measures and follow-up questions (not discussed here).

Results and Conclusions
Participants were excluded from the analysis if they had seen the clip before, did not finish, or were not native English speakers, leaving a sample of 99 participants. A composite rating measure was formed by combining the standardized residuals of the four attitude questions and the ten-star scale. Univariate ANOVA on this measure revealed an overall effect of condition ($t=2.29, \ p=.03$), indicating that review writing did in fact influence ratings. Ratings assigned by the control group ($M=2.80$) were significantly lower than those assigned by both the target-focused group ($M=.278, \ t=2.43, \ p=.02$) and the self-focused group ($M=.109, \ t=1.83, \ p=.07$), supporting Hypothesis 1. The difference in ratings of the two review groups was directionally consistent with Hypothesis 2 but not significant ($p>.4$).

Supporting Hypothesis 3, the data revealed a lack of awareness regarding the effect of review writing. The vast majority of participants in the review groups (44 out of 60) did not believe that writing affected their evaluations, yet the ratings of this subset were significantly higher than the control group ($F=5.18, \ p=.026$). Of the remaining 16 participants, most (11) suggested that the review process negatively influenced their evaluations; however, the ratings for these participants were also (directionally) higher than those of the control group. Overall, lay theories had no significant effect on ratings ($F=.06, \ ns$).

Further analysis revealed that the total number of words written was not significantly different across the treatment and control groups ($M=116.67$ vs. $130.13, \ ns$), suggesting that it was not writing in itself that enhanced attitudes. Coding conducted by an independent assistant confirmed that both target-focused and self-focused reviews were generally positive in valence ($M=5.71$ and 5.34 on a 7-pt scale). Interestingly, the correlation between review valence and ratings was directionally lower for the target-focus group than the self-focus group ($r=.71$ vs. $.91, \ ns$).

Overall, these initial results support our contention that the act of writing a review can influence consumers’ evaluations of the products they consume. In following up this research, we plan to explore the robustness of this effect to consumption experiences which differ in product category, valence, intensity, etc. Also, we plan to isolate the underlying mechanism by varying features of the review process. For example, our construal approach suggests that when review instructions are obviously nondiagnostic, consumers may discount the review from their mental representation, resulting in contrast effects.

References

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“I like shopping but I am not a compulsive buyer. When I find something I want, I sleep it through and when I think I still want it, I head to buy ... I still have 73 pairs of shoes.”

Why do some of us have the fourteenth black shoe? Fifty pens? Thirty fishing rods? These questions have intrigued researchers studying buying behavior, and diverse explanations exist. While some motivations relate to compulsive buying (O’Guinn and Faber 1989), others involve impulsive buying (Rook 1987) and still others refer to conspicuous (Frank 2000) and status buying (O’Cass and McEwen 2004), excessive buying (Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney and Monroe 2006; Wu, Malhotra and van Ittersum 2006), collecting (Arnould, Zinkhan and Price 2004) and fixated buying (Schifffman and Kanuk 2007). However, there is a set of consumers who purchase recurrently, have an inventory far greater than that of a typical consumer and yet do not share the negative characteristics of the extreme buying mentioned...
earlier. This set of consumers is termed ‘exorbitant buyers’ and little research exists to understand them (ACR Exorbitant Buying Roundtable 2007).

Only three inquiries of exorbitant buying exist that relate to shopping and ownership experience, and motivations of product purchase and their subsequent non-consumption (Danziger 2002, Trocchia and Janda 2002, and Strack, Werth and Deutsch 2006). These studies have identified buyer characteristics and motivations in non-consumption, but have failed to acknowledge the underlying intent of buying a great many products in certain categories. This exploratory study seeks to define and describe exorbitant buying and to understand the underlying processes, motivations and factors affecting it. A second goal of this study is to analyze and explain exorbitant buying using concept mapping, based on social representations theory (concept map formed by sense-making of the participants about their inventory of products, Moscovici 1981).

Characterizing Exorbitant Buying
Exorbitant buying may be defined as an extensive acquisition of products to augment one’s inventory of goods (of a certain category such as shoes, tools and others), for which logical justification, defensible in the mind of the buyer, exists. Central to the phenomenon are the fine-grained, thin-slicing ‘needs’ for which an ever-expanding list of products that necessitate buying in a bid to stay prepared for any eventuality (“I need black, open-toed shoes just in case I am invited to the party”). Individuals observe minute distinctions in their inventory of products such that they “see uniqueness in each of their products” that form the basis of rationalizing their purchases.

“People may look at them and say, they’re all blue…I wouldn’t say that any of them are exactly alike. They all have sort of a unique character in my mind, something different about them.”

With a highly developed consumption vocabulary, these individuals are “picky” in their buying behavior; purchasing only items that fit their preference criteria. Detailed understanding of the nature of the phenomenon emerged from in-depth interviews conducted with students and non-student subjects; analysis of the former is presented here.

Methodology
Twenty exorbitant buyers were interviewed. During each interview, informants shared self-taken photographs of the products they buy exorbitantly for themselves. Questions related to the types of inventory that participants possessed, the reasons for such an inventory, and the process and outcomes of shopping (to understand inventory acquisition and consequences). Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed using an open coding process. A total of 38 themes emerged from these data. Next, QDA Miner was used to develop the concept map.

To elicit the structure of social representations, analysis of similarity (Flament 1986) was used with the assumption that the more themes are used together; the closer they are in the social representation. Inter-attribute similarity coefficients defined relationships among the themes; while a nearest neighbor algorithm identified the important relationships (Kruskal 1956). Next, core and periphery analysis of the social representation was conducted (Abric 2001). Core elements represent themes that constitute the essence of the representation. Coreness (Borgatti and Everett 1999), salience and sum similarity (Pawlowski, Kaganer and Carter 2007) were used to determine the core/peripheral concepts (map to be supplied at presentation).

Results: Dominant themes of Exorbitant Buying
• More articulated ‘needs’ per product category and average or more products per articulated need
  o Owing to refined preferences with the ability to differentiate products based on minute, exacting differences (of looks, styles and purposes).
  o Because of the perfectionist nature (pickiness in buying and consumption)
  o Ever-expanding list of needs to be acquired.
  o Look for variety in trends and styles to fit their needs.
• High level of self-control in shopping; with no purchases made if the products do not fit certain preference criteria.
• An extensive consumption vocabulary, with detailed knowledge about products in a particular product category.
• Products are consequential to ‘staying prepared’ and ‘in control’ in response to current or anticipated events.
• Switch brands; not brand loyal as products are bought to fulfill particular needs rather than be used for display.
• An ‘insider-outsider’ phenomenon in which the buyer (insider) rationalizes the purchase and may not consider the purchase excessive while the observer (outsider) deems it superfluous.
• Constant, deliberate and purposive search for a perfect purchase; short span of attention in terms of post-purchase consumption and a likelihood to “move on” to the next product; high attachment for the product rather than the process.
• No pronounced feelings of regret or guilt on the part of the buyer; low levels of financial stress as a result of buying unlike other extreme buying forms.

Conclusion
While commonly observed, exorbitant buying has had virtually no research attention. This study is the first attempt towards explaining consumer’s rationalization of their inventory of products. The social representation approach helped identify that though shopping tends to be a positive emotional experience, the choice of items of the ever-increasing inventory tends to be based on analytic justification, defensible in the mind of the consumer.

References