The Impact of Early Life Experiences on Young Adults' Compulsive Buying Tendencies

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The present paper employs the multi-theoretical life course paradigm and tests a set of hypotheses regarding the underlying mechanisms that link family disruptions experienced in adolescent years to young Greek adults' compulsive consumption tendencies. The results provide insights into mechanisms of the development of compulsive buying behavior.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
While there has been a long-standing interest in understanding the development and consequences of compulsive consumer behaviors, there is still limited knowledge regarding the onset and the processes that characterize their development (e.g., Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney, and Monroe 2008). Previous attempts have mainly relied on stress theory to explain the development of such maladaptive behaviors (e.g., Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton 1997), neglecting additional theoretical perspectives that may offer alternative explanations (e.g., Hill, Yeung, and Duncan 2001).

The study of compulsive buying in contexts that are heavily afflicted by easy credit, such as Greece, appears to be timely and essential. The life course paradigm, which has been rapidly diffused across countries and disciplines (Mortimer and Shanahan 2003), might fill gaps in previous research efforts that have focused on theoretical and substantive time- and context-related consumer issues pertaining to the development of compulsive behaviors (Moschis 2007). It has been used to study similar phenomena of maladaptive behavior, such as the impulse-control disorders of binge-eating and binge-drinking, and would be appropriate for studying yet another form of maladaptive behavior - i.e., compulsive buying. By adopting the life course paradigm, this study examines the impact of various conditions in an adolescent’s environment that contribute to the onset and development of compulsive proclivities in later life.

The life course paradigm merges diverse theoretical perspectives from various fields of social and behavioral sciences (Moschis 2007). These different viewpoints are complimentary when explaining the impact of early life experiences on consumer behavior (Mortimer and Shanahan 2003). The life course conceptual framework includes: (a) life events encountered at a certain point in time, (b) processes prompted by these events, and (c) outcomes that take place at future times as a result of previously-encountered events and processes within contexts in which the person is embedded during a certain period of time (Moschis 2007). Critical life events affect an individual’s consumer behavior directly and indirectly, as the individual responds and adapts to new life conditions. This adaptation entails the processes of stress and coping, socialization, and development or decline in mental resources, which are viewed as the underlying change mechanisms of the three most widely-accepted life course perspectives: the stress perspective, the normative perspective, and the human capital perspective. These perspectives serve as bases for deriving the hypotheses of this study.

The study used a sample of 285 undergraduate Greek students from four Greek universities. Nearly half (49.5%) of the participants were female and the ages of the group ranged from 18 to 28 (average age = 22.87, SD = 2.58 years). Students were approached during classes but filled out the anonymous questionnaire that was intended to back translation prior to administering. They were directed to submit the completed questionnaires to a secure place ensuring confidentiality. All measures used were based on similar studies reported in the relevant literature. For each construct the recommended .70 threshold level was adopted to determine internal consistency (CR) and the benchmark of .50 for AVE to gauge convergent validity. Overall, the results indicate that the measures possess good internal reliability and validity.

To test the hypothesized model, we first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to establish the validity of the measurement model. For all multi-item reflective measures we specified first-order factors with uncorrelated errors. We then examined the full structural equation model (SEM) with covariates (i.e., age, gender, and social desirability) to assess the impact of the structural paths on fit. All models were analyzed using the maximum likelihood estimation method in Mplus 6. Overall model fit was assessed by CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

Contrary to previous studies, which assumed a direct effect of family disruptions on compulsive buying and stress as a developmental mechanism (e.g., Rindfleisch et al. 1997), our study findings suggest that such effects may be indirect, operating through social processes. The study findings contribute to compulsive behavior research in several ways. First, by employing the life course paradigm we surpass the limitations inherent in many previous time-specific studies that exclude the role and value of prior life experiences and earlier family interactions. Second, unlike previous studies that tend to rely on a single theoretical perspective, our study draws together diverse theoretical perspectives from several disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and consumer behavior theories (Moschis 2007). Third, by tying-in previous findings with ours, we further contribute to an explanation for the reasons and conditions that may cause some young adults to be more vulnerable to compulsive buying than others. Our findings provide additional insights into the impact of family disruptions, peer groups and family communications on the development of young adults’ compulsive buying tendencies. While the inclusion of such additional factors has been suggested by prior studies (e.g., Rindfleisch et al. 1997), the absence of a relevant theoretical framework may have hampered their investigation.

REFERENCES