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“At some point we have to face the certain reality: despite all the good the world seems to offer, true happiness can only be found in one thing: shopping” (*Ally McBeal*, 1997 as cited in Wagner, 2007). In today’s society, shopping is positioned as a major source of happiness and a signal of status and success. Messages in popular media not only condone the excessive acquisition of material possessions but promote it. Indeed, there is a great deal of pressure to think that “we are what we have.” Most individuals have appropriate defense mechanisms to resist this pressure, however, there are others that do not. Life experiences and personal characteristics, when combined with sociocultural factors, can lead these individuals to the excessive consumption of products in the hopes of achieving a desired sense of self, avoiding negative feelings or emotions, or compensating for perceived internal deficiencies. Indeed, buying behavior becomes a response to the desire to exert control over one’s life. Paradoxically, these individuals develop and maintain such behavior to the extent that it ends up controlling them (Cardella, 2010; Eccles, 2002). These consumers, known in the literature as *compulsive buyers*, are the focus of this dissertation.

Compulsive buying behavior (CBB) is conceptualized as a compulsive behavior in which the individual uses shopping as a compensation mechanism due to feelings of emptiness or as an escape from unpleasant situations or negative feelings (Neuner, Raab, & Reisch, 2005; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989). Research suggests that these consumers tend to prefer appearance-related products when engaging in the behavior. However, little is

known about the reasons why compulsive buyers prefer such items. To this end, the purpose of this dissertation was to develop an in-depth understanding of the compulsive buying experience. Further, this study addresses gaps within the consumer research literature specifically regarding the preference among compulsive buyers for appearance-related products (ARPs) by examining the experiences of as well as the overall shopping and buying process among six women who are compulsive clothing buyers.

Three objectives were developed to address the purpose of this dissertation: (1) to examine the behaviors that comprise compulsive buying, (2) to investigate the role of appearance-related products relative to these behaviors, and (3) to explore the meanings compulsive clothing buyers assign to appearance-related items. A phenomenological approach to inquiry was used to accomplish the objectives and overall purpose of this dissertation. A combination of in-depth interviews and personal journals formed the basis of the data collection. Six women between the ages of 32 and 55 years old comprised the sample.

Three levels of interpretation were developed based on the data collected. Personal Narratives constituted the first level of interpretation. Among the areas covered in each narrative are: participants' personal background and family situation, early experiences with shopping and buying, moment of realization, motivations and triggers to engage in the behavior, product preference, thoughts about shopping and buying, and the importance of shopping and buying in her life.

A thematic interpretation grounded on commonalities and differences across participants' experiences formed the second level of interpretation. Four conceptual areas

– The Person, The Process, The Product, and The Path to Recovery – frame the themes that surfaced to link each participant’s experiences with those of the group. In the first conceptual area, *The Person*, participants’ lived experiences with CCB are examined and their understandings of the behavior, triggers and motivations to engage, moments of realization and major struggles are identified. In the second conceptual area, *The Process*, the process of shopping and buying compulsively for appearance-related items as explained by the participants is explored. The third conceptual area, *The Product*, presents a deeper examination of participants’ preference for appearance-related products. In the fourth and last conceptual area, *The Path to Recovery*, consequences of CCB as experienced by participants and their paths to recovery are explored. The third level of interpretation, Theoretical Considerations, was then developed to theorize about the role of appearance-related products on compulsive buying and how these items impact participants’ sense of self.

Findings indicate that compulsive buyers prefer ARPs over other consumer goods due to their physical attributes, the way these items make them feel, and the fact that these products allow individuals to fix/alter who they are, communicate who they are, fill a gap in their lives and/or take control over an aspect of their lives. Findings support previous research suggesting that CBB is a result of the interplay between psychological and sociocultural factors (e.g., DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010, O’Guinn & Faber, 1989), but offers situational factors as significant triggers of the behavior. Specifically, findings point to two triggers that have received little to no attention in the consumer behavior literature: fashion blogs and retail promotions.

Findings also point to tensions participants experience at different stages of the shopping and buying process, whether before, during or after. These tensions would benefit from further exploration, especially through the Dialogical Self Theory. The ability to fantasize was also found to play a significant role on participants' CCB. Finally, results suggest that associations between the terms "shopping" and "therapy" must be limited, as these associations impede the recognition of the behavior as a disorder and therefore deny the seriousness of CBB.

CONSUMED BY CONSUMPTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF  
THE COMPULSIVE CLOTHING BUYING EXPERIENCE

by

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To God Almighty who has given me life, direction, and the strength to achieve this goal. To my amazing parents Norma and José Víctor, my dear brother Omar, and my lovely cat Pepper for your unconditional love and support. You guys have been my rock throughout this journey. Thank you for believing in me and for letting me pursue my dreams even when that meant us being apart. ¡Los amo con todo mi corazón! To my beautiful island, Puerto Rico. I am grateful that even when I had to leave home, home never left me.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

I used shopping to avoid myself. I used shopping to define myself. And at some point I realized that I was no longer consuming; I was being consumed.  
*Spent: Memoirs of a Shopping Addict* (Cardella, 2010, p. 3)

Shopping is a common pastime for many people. Every day, consumers engage in the acquisition, consumption, and disposition of goods. What was once a way to satisfy a need, today shopping is a complex activity used to both avoid and create the self (Cardella, 2010). Indeed, shopping has become an opportunity to share experiences (Underhill, 2009), is synonymous with high status and progress (Catalano & Sonenberg, 1993), is used as a strategy to mask emptiness (Cushman, 1990), to cope with negative life situations and emotions (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989), and is even a way of life for some (Miles, 1998).

Sayings such as “*Whoever said money can't buy happiness didn't know where to shop*” and “*Shopping is cheaper than a psychiatrist*” are common in the United States today (Benson, 2008). As consumers, we are inundated by messages about products and what they can do to make ourselves and our lives better. Indeed, what began as a way to communicate products or services to consumers, advertising is now an increasingly sophisticated means of establishing connections between these products and services and the consumer (Pope, 2003). Pope (2003) explains that images in advertising are deliberately designed to “show scenes of prosperity, material comfort, even luxury well

beyond the conditions of life of most Americans” (p. 6). The author asserts that media efforts depict the world that consumers aspire to, rather the world they actually live in. Thus, it is not uncommon to see consumers obsessed with shopping and buying, seeking to fulfill their dreams and desires through the acquisition of material possessions (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003).

Purchases often promise more than utility. Consumers are regularly exposed to advertisements with the underlying message: “*If* you use our product, *then* you will feel good about yourself” (Durgee, 1986, p. 23). As Cushman (1990) explains, after World War II, individuals began to turn more frequently to material possessions as a means to fulfill an empty self, stating “The post-World War II self thus yearns to acquire and consume as an unconscious way of compensating for what has been lost...” (p. 600). According to Cushman (1990), the empty self was a consequence of the desire to match the needs of the new economy with the social conditions of post-war America. Cushman posits that psychology and advertising were responsible for building and promoting a self lacking in personal conviction and worth. Thus, supporting the distorted images of society suggested by Pope (2003) became the primary aim of selling products.

However, media efforts are only one part of consumerism; society as a whole also plays a significant role in our views on consumption. In contemporary America, wealth and the acquisition of material goods continues to be glamorized (Mitchell, 2011). As Veblen (1899) wrote more than a century ago, “In order to gain and hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be

put in evidence” (p. 42). It is the display of material symbols that helps the individual establish the self in society. As Catalano and Sonenberg (1993) explain,

Showing your finery in public is a way of demonstrating your wealth and power (and taste and personality) to all the strangers and friends you encounter in a modern city day – or on a typical stroll through the mall. It takes less time for people to judge you for what they see you *have* than it takes for them to stop and ask you what you *do*. Much less than for them to ask you who you *are* [emphasis in original]. (p. 37)

Catalano and Sonenberg (1993) add that a more serious problem arises when we start believing that material possessions are what makes us who we are. That is, when we confuse image (how others see us) with self-image (how we see ourselves), and self-image with self-worth. Indeed, there is a great deal of pressure to think that “we are what we have.” Most individuals have appropriate defense mechanisms to resist this pressure, however, there are others that do not. Life experiences and personal characteristics, when combined with sociocultural factors, can lead these individuals to the excessive consumption of products in the hopes of achieving a desired sense of self, avoiding negative feelings or emotions, or compensating for perceived internal deficiencies. Indeed, buying behavior becomes a response to the desire to exert control over one’s life. Paradoxically, these individuals develop and maintain such behavior to the extent that it ends up controlling them (Cardella, 2010; Eccles, 2002). In the literature, these consumers are known as *compulsive buyers*.

Research indicates that compulsive buyers experience extreme preoccupation with shopping and buying, shop for longer periods of time than intended, and buy more than they can afford (McElroy, Keck, Pope, Smith, & Strakowski, 1994). They tend to buy

items they do not need, therefore most purchases remain unused (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, & Ertelt, 2010; Schlosser, Black, Repertinger, & Freet, 1994). Compulsive buying behavior (CBB) typically leads to short-term improvement of affect (e.g., sense of relief, excitement, power), but this is shortly replaced by long-term negative consequences (e.g., guilt, shame, substantial debt, familial problems) (Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010).

Compulsive buying behavior is a disorder that affects approximately 6% of the total U.S. population (Koran, Faber, Aboujaode, Large, & Serpes, 2006). Faber (2011) argues that the prevalence of CBB appears to be increasing in the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world. Taking this increased prevalence into account, researchers have sought to identify the causes of CBB as well as the consequences that might result from it (e.g., Davenport, Houson, & Griffiths, 2012; DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996; Miltenberger et al., 2003; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Reeves, Baker, & Truluck, 2012; Rindfleish, Burroughs, & Denton, 1997; Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004). Researchers have also developed screening as well as assessment instruments (e.g., Edwards, 1993; Faber & O'Guinn, 1992; Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney, & Monroe, 2008; Valence, d'Astous, & Fortier, 1988) and have designed treatments aimed at helping those who are affected by CBB (e.g., Black, Gabel, Hansen, & Schlosser, 2000; Mitchell, Burgard, Faber, Crosby, & de Zwaan, 2006). Efforts towards the development of a comprehensive definition and description of CBB have also been made (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Although research on the topic of CBB has increased in the last two decades, areas of the topic remain unexplored.

For instance, researchers have argued that compulsive buyers tend to prefer certain product categories when engaging in CBB (Workman & Paper, 2010). Specifically, this group of consumers is inclined to purchase primarily appearance-related products such as clothing, shoes, jewelry, and make-up and, to a lesser degree, electronic equipment and collectibles (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994; Mitchell et al., 2006). Workman and Paper (2010) argue that these products tend to be linked to an individual's self-esteem, "either affecting how one looks or how one thinks of oneself" (p. 100). Faber, O'Guinn, and Krych (1987) posit that the purchase of these products can be used as a means of coping with feelings of isolation or to enhance self-esteem. Although the literature offers some explanation as to why compulsive buyers buy certain products more than others, a better understanding of the why behind this phenomenon is needed.

To address these gaps in knowledge, the purpose of this dissertation is to develop an in-depth understanding of the compulsive buying experience through the exploration of the role of appearance-related products relative to this experience. The guiding question of this study is: *What is it like to be a compulsive clothing buyer?* In the following sections of this chapter, I provide an introduction to the overall dissertation topic. Background information is provided, followed by discussion of the purpose and objectives of the study. Then, a brief explanation of the methodological approach and theoretical framework is presented. This is followed by discussion of the study's scope and significance. Finally, definitions of several key terms are provided.

## **Background**

To better understand the nature of compulsive clothing buying, concepts related to this phenomenon are examined in this section. First, consumption is explored from a sociocultural standpoint. Then, an explanation of compulsive consumption is offered, followed by a brief description of compulsive buying behavior and compulsive clothing buying. Next, compulsive buying is distinguished from other buying behaviors, including impulsive buying, retail therapy, and excessive buying. Finally, terms used in the literature to refer to compulsive buying (i.e., shopping, spending, acquisition) are explored and the differences between them outlined.

### **Consumption in American Society**

Consumption, though a common practice, is a complex idea. Campbell (1995) defines consumption as “the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product of service” (p. 102). Miles (1998), on the other hand, argues that consumption is much more complex, citing McCracken’s (1990) work as one means for understanding the intricacies of the term. McCracken challenges the conventional definition of consumption by adding to it the processes by which consumer goods and services are created, bought, and used. For McCracken, consumption is undeniably a cultural phenomenon; it is shaped, driven, and constrained at every point by cultural considerations. He explains,

...in Western developed societies[,] culture is profoundly connected to and dependent upon consumption. Without consumer goods, modern developed societies would lose key instruments for the reciprocation, representation, and manipulation of their culture [...] The meaning of consumer goods and the meaning creation accomplished by [the] consumer process are important parts of

the scaffolding of our present realities. Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition and collective definition in this culture would be impossible. (p. xi)

McCracken (1990) posits that the notion of culture is deeply connected to that of consumption, therefore, it follows that consumption is more than just an economic activity, it is also a cultural and social endeavor. Miller (2012) asserts that consumer culture is indeed culture and because of that, “entirely amenable to the same kind of anthropological study as any tribal or village society” (p. 63).

Within the literature on consumption, there is a distinction between consumption and consumerism. Miles (1998) argues that consumption is an act, while consumerism is a way of life. As a result, consumerism is the cultural expression and manifestation of the act of consumption (Miles, 1998). The most common definition of consumerism is “the preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods” (“Consumerism,” n.d.). Similarly, Trentmann (2004) defines consumption as “the lure of material goods” (p. 400). Consumerism, according to Stearns (as cited in Trentmann, 2004), “describes a society in which many people formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that they clearly do not need for subsistence or for traditional display” (pp. 376-377). From this perspective, within consumerism, consumption can become the main strategy used by an individual to deal with everyday life situations.

Consumption, in the form of shopping and buying, allows the individual to build and develop relationships with others and to validate the self and identity. Some individuals occasionally resort to shopping and buying as a way to cope with stress and negative life situations, or as a recreational activity (e.g., Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Kang



& Johnson, 2011; Tauber, 1972; Underhill, 2009). Underhill (2009) explains that in the act of browsing and acquiring, that is, the shopping and buying process, individuals engage in more than the mere exchange of commodities. Instead, shopping possesses a strong social component that has nothing to do with either buying or selling. As he explains,

Shopping is an activity that brings people together. When women were slaves to household work, it got them out of the house. In more primitive times shopping was an occasion for people to gather and do the things they do in groups, like talk and exchange news and gossip and opinions. Shopping still serves that purpose. (p. 288)

As Underhill (2009) explains, what started as a functional activity eventually transformed into something meaningful, specifically an opportunity for shared experience. The author adds that shopping is used as a form of entertainment to nearly the same extent as movies, going to the zoo, or visiting a park. However, there are consumers that develop a strong attachment to the process of shopping and buying and use it as their only strategy for coping with the stresses of everyday life

Mitchell (2011) argues that in American society, messages about consumption are consistently mixed. On the one hand, buying excessively is presented as a negative, while on the other, society “encourages you to try to get whatever gratification you want whenever you want it” (p. 179). Moreover, stories of success are often presented in the context of material possessions (Catalano & Sonenberg, 1993) in as much as the successful individual’s possessions such as cars, houses, and designer clothing are presented as evidence of his or her achievements. By defining who and what people are

based on the cars they drive or the clothes they wear and the appropriation of this perspective as a lifestyle, shopping tends to become a means of both self-expression and self-definition (Catalano & Sonenberg, 1993). Ultimately, it is rather easy to begin shopping and buying excessively in a society that encourages and even urges individuals to consume. Indeed, what begins as a social issue turns into a personal disorder (Mills, 1959).

### **Compulsive Consumption**

According to the literature, Compulsive Buying Behavior, or CBB, is one type of compulsive consumption behavior (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989). Compulsions, as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013), are “repetitive behaviors or mental acts that an individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession or according to rules that must be applied rigidly” (p. 235). O’Guinn and Faber (1989) explain that compulsions are excessive and ritualistic behaviors designed to alleviate tension, anxiety, or discomfort caused by unpleasant thoughts or obsessions. Faber et al. (1987) argue that “a behavior is considered as compulsive when it results from compelling impulses or urges and is inappropriate or disruptive” (p. 132).

A compulsion that is manifested through consumption is referred to as *compulsive consumption* or “a response to an uncontrollable drive or desire to obtain, use, or experience a feeling, substance, or activity that leads an individual to repetitively engage in a behavior that will ultimately cause harm to the individual and/or to others” (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989, p. 148). According to this definition, several addictive or excessive

behaviors may be considered as forms of compulsive consumption. For instance, substance abuse, eating disorders, sex addiction, gambling disorder, kleptomania, and compulsive buying are all considered forms of compulsive consumption (Hirschman, 1992; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Faber et al. (1987) explain that compulsive consumption behaviors are often used as a way to cope with stress, escape demands and pressure, or to overcome unpleasant emotions and/or situations. Characteristically, these behaviors produce immediate gratification but lead to long term negative consequences (Hirschman, 1992; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Moreover, compulsive consumption may present similar patterns of development (Hirschman, 1992) and can also be comorbid (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994). That is, an individual suffering from compulsive buying can also suffer from substance abuse or kleptomania.

Researchers have associated compulsive consumption with addictive behaviors, specifically, Faber et al. (1987) suggest, "The behaviors of the compulsive consumer seem fairly similar to common manifestations of addictive behavior" (p. 132). Hirschman (1992) argues that addictive behaviors are "analogous to extreme compulsive behaviors" (p. 158) as compulsive consumption behaviors go beyond the limits of normality and surpass the individuals' ability to control them through reason and willpower. Mendelson and Mello (1986) define addictive behavior as a "behavior [that] is excessive, compulsive, beyond the control of the person who engages in it, and destructive psychologically or physically" (p. 21).

Faber et al. (1987) posit that there are certain commonalities between compulsive consumption and addictive behaviors, including: (1) physical and/or psychological dependence on the substance or activity, (2) occasional loss of control regarding the

behavior and subsequent interference with normal life functioning, (3) the presence of a drive, impulse, or urge to engage in the behavior, (4) denial of the harmful consequences of continuing the behavior, and (5) repeated failure in effort to control or modify the behavior. Many of these characteristics have been observed in individuals suffering from Compulsive Buying Behavior (CBB) (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). The next section outlines some of these characteristics along with a discussion of CBB in general.

### **Compulsive Buying Behavior**

As discussed, CBB is considered to be a form of compulsive consumption. Previous studies have found that different compulsive consumption behaviors may present similar causes, patterns of development, consequences, and may also be comorbid (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Faber, Christenson, de Zwaan, & Mitchell, 1995; McElroy et al., 1994). For example, CBB is conceptualized as a compulsive consumption behavior in which the individual uses buying as a compensation mechanism due to a feeling of emptiness or as an escape from unpleasant situations or negative feelings. Specifically, Neuner, Raab, and Reisch (2005) define CBB as “a chronic, repetitive, and excessive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative life events, inner deficiencies, or negative feelings, and hence carries a strong compensatory component” (p. 510).

Estimates indicate that approximately 19 million Americans are affected by CBB, which represents around 6% of the total U.S. population (Koran et al., 2006). Previous studies have suggested that between 80 and 94% of compulsive buyers are women (Black, 2007b), with women accounting for 90% of the individuals in treatment-seeking samples (Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010). However, some studies suggest a much narrower difference between the two genders, with a prevalence of 5.5% among men and

6% among women (Koran et al., 2006). According to Black (2007a, 2007b), the age of onset of CBB ranges from 18 to 30 years old, but the author posits that this range might be explained by sample selection. For instance, in one study using advertising to recruit participants, the mean age reported was 18 years old (Christenson et al., 1994) whereas a study in which individuals selected were undergoing psychological treatment reported a mean age of 30 years (McElroy et al., 1994). Black also suggests that “the age of onset could correspond with emancipation from the nuclear family, as well as the age at which people first established credit” (p. 126).

Despite the findings reported by such studies, Benson (2000) argues that the identity of the “real” compulsive buyer remains unknown. Benson believes that many studies on CBB support a popular, stereotypical notion of the “typical compulsive buyer,” described as a “thirtysomething female who experiences irresistible urges, uncontrollable needs, or mounting tension that can be relieved only by the compulsive buying of clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics, and who has been buying compulsively since her late teens or early twenties” (p. xxv). Benson criticizes such a description, arguing that there are “serious methodological questions” about the studies that this description is based on, in as much as they tend to rely on the use of self-identified compulsive buyers as subjects (pp. xxv-xxvi). Instead, the author posits that compulsive buyers are a heterogeneous group whose members differ in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic status, patterns of buying, intensity of compulsion, and underlying motivations.

In line with Benson (2000), several other researchers have sought to classify CBB, some along a continuum, while others in terms of motivations. In a study reporting

the development of a scale, Edwards (1993) classified compulsive buyers along a continuum that ranged from normal (non-compulsive) buyers, to recreational, borderline, compulsive, and finally addicted buyers. In an effort to determine the degree of heterogeneity in compulsive buyer behaviors, DeSarbo and Edwards (1996) identified two clusters of compulsive buyers. The first cluster appeared to be more motivated by internal feelings (e.g., anxiety, low self-esteem) and exhibited a lack of feelings of power or control. The second cluster appeared to be influenced by external feelings (e.g., materialism, social isolation, denial) or circumstances, rather than psychological motivations or personality traits. Moreover, in a series of studies conducted by Elliot, Eccles, and Gournay (1996a, 1996b) and Eccles (2002), it was found that some individuals develop and maintain CBB for reasons of (1) revenge on a partner and/or family member, (2) as an act of existential choice (i.e., to add a sense of meaning to their lives or to create and maintain an identity), or (3) as a form of mood repair (i.e., to cope with negative feelings or emotions such as loneliness and depression).

Research on CBB indicates that no single factor is sufficient enough to explain the cause of the behavior (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Rather, previous research suggests that this behavior is the result of a combination of a variety of factors. That is, CBB is driven by the interaction of biological factors (e.g., genetic factors), psychological factors (e.g., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem), as well as sociocultural factors (e.g., culture, advertising) (e.g., DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996; Faber, 1992; Faber & Christenson, 1996; Raab, Elger, Neuner, & Weber, 2011; Rodríguez-Villarino, González-Lorenzo, Fernández-González, Lameiras-Fernández, & Foltz, 2006; Valence et al., 1988). Such

findings suggest that CBB is about far more than just being a “shopaholic.” Instead, it is a complex disorder that requires careful study.

Studies in psychiatry, psychology, and consumer behavior (e.g., Lejoyeux & Weinstein, 2010; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989) report that compulsive buyers experience repetitive, irresistible, and uncontrollable urges to acquire goods. According to Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al. (2010), compulsive buyers are often preoccupied with shopping to the extent that they devote all of their resources (i.e., time and money) to it. Despite the negative consequences that result from this behavior, such as frustration, remorse, guilt, shame, depression, anxiety, financial debt, and familial problems, efforts to curb the behavior often prove unsuccessful (Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989).

Moreover, researchers have found strong similarities between the causes and consequences of CBB. The fact that this behavior can be self-reinforcing over time is one explanation for these similarities (Kellett & Bolton, 2009). Before an individual engages in CBB, he or she is typically in a negative mood state (e.g., depression, anxiety, denial, frustration) from which the buying process offers temporary relief by replacing it with feelings of euphoria, satisfaction, pleasure, and/or excitement. However, once the buying act is concluded, the positive feelings disappear, only to be replaced by the negative mood state once again. The sum total of the negative feelings, substantial debt accrued over time, and resulting personal or social problems, leads to reinforcement of the behavior by returning to the buying act as a way to ease the cumulative “burden” (Kellett & Bolton, 2009; Rodríguez-Villarino et al., 2006).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, appearance-related items (i.e., clothing, cosmetics, jewelry, and shoes) have been found to be the most popular among compulsive buyers (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Dittmar, 2005a; McElroy et al., 1994; Mitchell et al., 2006; Schlosser et al., 1994). However, once purchased, such goods are typically not actually used. Instead, the individual will hide, hoard, give away or forget about the items (Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; Schlosser et al., 1994). Currently the literature does not fully address why compulsive buyers prefer these products, nor does it examine the reasons why such purchases go unused. In the next section, the concept of compulsive buying specifically as it relates to appearance-related products, or *compulsive clothing buying* (Johnson & Attmann, 2009), is explored.

### **Compulsive Clothing Buying**

Research suggests that appearance is an important aspect for compulsive buyers (Krueger, 1988; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Scherhorn, Reisch, & Raab, 1990). As Krueger (1988) explains CBB “occurs in individuals who are very conscious of how they look and appear to others, who attempt to be pleasing to others, and whose fragile esteem and sense of self depends on the responses of others” (p. 575). According to Krueger, the compulsive acquisition of clothes follows some narcissistic wound, such as the disruption of an emotional bond with someone important, and that “such a disruption sets into motion a desperate need to appear attractive and desirable and a hope that new clothes will fulfill this need for affirmation” (p. 575). Krueger adds that compulsive buyers are continuously looking for objects that will help them “to fill internal emptiness and to



make them feel complete... they may search for the ideal companion or impressive possessions, especially clothing, in attempts to fashion a pseudo-identity” (p. 576).

It is therefore not surprising that several studies have found that appearance-related products such as clothing, shoes, jewelry, and cosmetics are the most commonly purchased products among compulsive buyers (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994; Mitchell et al., 2006; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989; Schlosser et al., 1994). For example, in a study about self-discrepancies and materialistic values as predictors of CBB tendencies, Dittmar (2005a) found that the most frequent and psychologically-motivated purchase for women was apparel. Scherhorn et al. (1990), in a study of 26 compulsive buyers, found that women prefer to buy clothing, shoes, jewelry, household goods, books, and groceries. Furthermore, Yurchisin and Johnson (2004), in a study with college students, found that apparel-product involvement is a strong predictor of CBB.

Such findings have prompted the investigation of CBB in relation to specific product categories, including appearance-related products. However, at present there are just two studies that specifically investigate the role of apparel products in CBB. In one of the studies, Johnson and Attmann (2009) point out that even though there is evidence suggesting that compulsive buyers prefer appearance-related products, the bulk of research on CBB examines the behavior in a general context. To address this gap, the authors examined the influence of variables related to general CBB (i.e., neuroticism, materialism, and fashion interest) on what they called “compulsive clothing buying” (CCB). In the second study, Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009) explored the relationship between fashion orientation, binge eating, and CCB. Although both studies

provide a starting point for investigating CBB from a product-specific perspective, the authors identified very few characteristics specific to compulsive clothing buyers.

Johnson and Attmann (2009) found that fashion interest has a strong relationship with CCB and may be an important mediating variable between this extreme form of buying behavior and materialism. The authors suggest that in order to understand CCB, it is important to understand the consumer traits that are associated with it. They found that compulsive clothing buyers are neurotic, which means they experience worry and anxiety. However, while compulsive buyers worry and experience anxiety in general, compulsive clothing buyers may worry and experience anxiety about clothing and appearance in particular.

Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009) confirmed suggestions by others (Faber et al., 1987; Krueger, 1988; Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004) that appearance seems to be of a particular importance among compulsive buyers. That is, compulsive buyers may use appearance-related products as: (1) a way to enhance their own impressions or those of others, (2) a symbol to define the self, increase self-confidence and project an ideal image, and (3) a way to obtain approval or recognition (Trautmann-Attmann & Johnson, 2009, p. 271). However, the idea that most of the items purchased by compulsive clothing buyers go unused (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; Schlosser et al., 1994) was not addressed. Consequently, the compulsive buyer's goal of enhancing his or her appearance may not be achieved. To address this conceptual gap, in this dissertation, CCB is viewed within the context of the entire consumption cycle, including the stages of acquisition, use, and disposal (Winakor, 1969).

## **Compulsive Buying and Related Behaviors**

As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter II, CBB is often popularly confused with minor disorders or with more “normal” kinds of consumer behaviors (e.g., impulsive buying, retail therapy, excessive buying). Although CBB may share several behavioral characteristics with these “normal” kinds of behaviors, research indicates that the causes and consequences of CBB differ significantly (Faber, 2011). What follows is a brief explanation of how CBB differs from other types of consumption behaviors.

**Compulsive Buying versus Impulsive Buying.** Faber (2011) explains that impulsive buying is a common form of buying, and one that almost everyone may experience at some point. Rook and Fisher (1995) define buying impulsiveness as “a consumer’s tendency to buy spontaneously, unreflectively, immediately, and kinetically” (p. 306). O’Guinn and Faber (2005) contrast impulsive buying with CBB and identify a number of differences between the two behaviors having to do with triggers, focus, consequences, prevalence, frequency of shopping, and issues of self-regulation. A summary of the differences is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Differences between Impulsive Buying and Compulsive Buying

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Impulsive Buying</b>	<b>Compulsive buying</b>
<i>Trigger</i>	Externally-driven	Internally-driven
<i>It comes as a result of...</i>	Reaction to a specific item or environment	An uncontrollable urge to buy The urge or tension to buy usually begins before exposure to a buying environment.
<i>Primary focus</i>	Focused on the product The desire for the product, at least temporarily, outweighs the willpower to resist it.	Focused on the act of shopping The urge or tension experienced exerts a pressure that can only be relieved after the purchase is made.
<i>Consequences</i>	Minor consequences	Severe consequences
<i>Prevalence and Frequency of shopping</i>	A large percentage of the population engages in this behavior at relatively infrequent intervals.	Affects a small percentage of the population; urge to buy is frequent. Individuals engage in this behavior several times a week.
<i>Self-regulation</i>	Involves individual instances of self-regulation failure, but afterwards the individual re-establishes control over purchasing behavior. The self-regulation failure is usually due to a depletion of regulatory resources that lead to under-regulation of the behavior.	Involves a chronic and complete breakdown of the self-regulatory process which is a result of conflicting goals – the need to maintain emotional stability overwhelms efforts to maintain purchasing and economic goals.

*Note.* Developed based on T. C. O’Guinn and R. J. Faber, 2005, Compulsive buying: Review and Reflection. In P. C. Haugtvedt, P. Herr, and F. Kardes (Eds.), *Handbook of Consumer Psychology* (pp. 1-23), Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

**Compulsive Buying versus Retail Therapy.** CBB has been associated with retail therapy, which is considered to be a more “normal” kind of buying behavior. Retail therapy has been conceptualized as a compensatory consumption behavior and as a negative mood-alleviating consumption behavior. According to Woodruffe-Burton (1998) retail therapy is likely to occur “when an individual feels a need, lack, or desire which cannot be satisfied with a primary fulfillment so they use purchasing behavior as an alternative means of fulfillment” (p. 301).

Although the conceptualization of retail therapy appears to be similar to that of CBB, the two behaviors are quite different. CBB is an extreme form of buying behavior; it is uncontrollable and repetitive (Edwards, 1993; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989) and is considered an abnormal buying behavior that results in harmful consequences such as shame, regret, guilt, and frustration. In contrast, retail therapy is considered a normal buying behavior and a type of hedonic shopping (Kang & Johnson, 2011). Further, in a study about the mood-alleviating aspect of retail therapy, Atalay and Meloy (2011) found that retail therapy has lasting positive impacts on mood and that feelings of regret and guilt are not associated with it. Edwards (1993) argued that on a continuum ranging from normal to extreme behaviors, CBB pertains to the latter end. In turn, retail therapy, according to Kang and Johnson’s (2011) conceptualization, can be positioned on the “normal” end (see Figure 1).

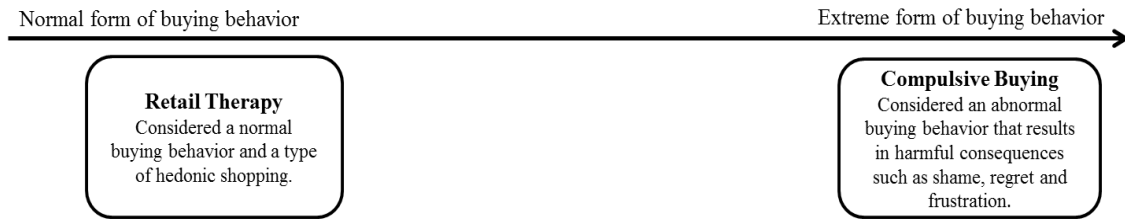


Figure 1. Continuum of Buying Behaviors. Developed based on Kang and Johnson (2011) and Edwards (1993).

**Compulsive Buying versus Excessive Buying.** Another area of potential conceptual confusion can be found between those individuals who may buy excessively (i.e., excessive buyers) and compulsive buyers (Faber, 2011). Faber (2011) clarifies that although individuals suffering from CBB buy excessively, not all excessive buyers suffer from CBB. As the author explains,

Excessive buying can occur on the basis of [the] amount of things purchased or the amount of money spent. For some people, their purchasing may appear to be excessively high simply because they can afford to spend almost limitless amounts. Others may spend far beyond their means because of a high level of materialism or desire for things, poor financial skills, or for other reasons. (p. 7)

Acknowledging differences between excessive and compulsive buyers is important, as doing so provides a better understanding of the characteristics that comprise the “real” compulsive buyer. As a point of reference, DeSarbo and Edwards (1996) examined the degree of heterogeneity in compulsive buyers’ behavior and their underlying motivations. The authors identified two types, or clusters, of compulsive buyers: one cluster is more motivated by internal feelings (e.g., anxiety, low self-esteem) and the other is motivated by external feelings (e.g., materialism, social isolation). According to Faber (2011), the cluster motivated by internal feelings presented a higher number of characteristics

associated with the pathological (or compulsive) buyer, whereas participants in the other cluster exhibited a higher number of characteristics associated with the excessive buyer.

**Compulsive Buying versus Compulsive Shopping, Compulsive Spending, and Compulsive Acquisition.** In both the popular and academic literature, multiple terms have been used to refer to *compulsive buying*, among them “compulsive shopping,” “compulsive spending,” and “compulsive acquisition.” Likewise, researchers tend to use *shopping, buying, spending, and acquisition* interchangeably. However, these terms actually refer to different behaviors. Shopping, as Benson (2000) explains, is considered to be a broader act, “as a kind of consumer ritual that enables the shopper to gather information for immediate or further use, shopping can be a way to satisfy many nonpurchase motives” (p. xxiv). Buying, on the other hand, is considered to be a relatively narrow act: taking possession of a good or service. Spending, which Benson considers to be closer to buying than shopping, indicates the action of giving up funds. Acquisition, in contrast to spending, refers to the act of gathering material objects (Benson, 2000).

Natarajan and Goff (1992) explain that using these terms synonymously can ultimately “give rise to semantic murkiness” (p. 32). The authors argue that using these terms interchangeably causes confusion and impedes the development of typologies in the area of abnormal consumer behaviors. Hassay and Smith (1996) present an analogy that helps to better understand the differences among some of these terms.

The distinction between these compulsive consumption behaviors can be illustrated through the use of [a] hunting analogy. The hunter (consumer) may be variously motivated by the hunt (shopping), the kill (buying), or the firing of a weapon for its own sake (spending). (pp. 744-745)

According to Natarajan and Goff (1992) one might buy without having to shop, or shop without having to buy. To avoid confusion, the term *compulsive buying* will be used consistently throughout this dissertation. This term was selected as it is the term that is employed most often in the literature (Benson, 2000).

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this dissertation is to develop an in-depth understanding of the compulsive buying experience. To address this purpose, the following three research objectives were developed: (1) to examine the behaviors that comprise compulsive buying, (2) to investigate the role of appearance-related products relative to these behaviors, and (3) to explore the meanings compulsive clothing buyers assign to appearance-related items.

As will be discussed in the next section, to address the purpose and objectives of the study, a qualitative research approach was employed within this dissertation. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate to explore the meanings of the phenomenon because (1) academic research about the role of appearance-related products in CBB is scant, and (2) research exploring the use and meaning of appearance-related products among compulsive buyers is also limited. Likewise, because most of the research on CBB is quantitative in nature (e.g., DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996; Johnson & Attmann, 2009; Kyrios, Frost, & Steketee, 2004; Park & Burns, 2005; Roberts & Sepúlveda, 1999; Roberts & Roberts, 2012; Trautmann-Attmann & Johnson, 2009; Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004), studies that employ a qualitative approach, such as this



dissertation, offer examination of the deeper meanings of the compulsive buying experience.

### **Methodological Framework**

Understanding the lived experience of the compulsive buyer and the role of appearance-related products within this experience is the central goal of this dissertation. To address this goal, a phenomenological framework was employed. Phenomenology, according to van Manen (1984), is the study of lived experience, and ultimately the search for what it means to be human. As Giorgi writes, phenomenology “is research based upon descriptions of experiences as they occur in everyday life by persons from all walks of life” (as cited in Willis, 2007, p. 173). Likewise, van Manen (1990) asserts that lived experience is both the starting and ending point of phenomenological research, and the purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to understand the meanings behind a particular behavior or phenomenon. Thus, a phenomenological approach to inquiry allowed me to explore the question of what it is like to be a compulsive clothing buyer and uncover the essence of the experience as lived by the participants.

As will be discussed in more depth in Chapter III, in order to address the specific objectives of the study and to uncover the essence of participants’ lived experiences, two methods of data collection were employed. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to better understand the behaviors that comprise compulsive buying, the role of appearance-related products relative to these behaviors, and the meanings the participant assigns to these products. As part of the interview process, participants were asked to explain the content of their closets while discussing their

buying behaviors and preferences. To this end, participants were asked to highlight and discuss items bought during compulsive buying acts.

The in-depth interview was selected as a primary data collection method for this dissertation due to its usefulness for getting to the core of a phenomenon. As Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989) state, “The interview is perhaps the most powerful means for attaining an in-depth understanding of another person’s experiences” (p. 138). Indeed, van Manen (1990) asserts that interviews are vehicles to (1) explore and gather “experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (p. 66), and (2) develop a conversational relationship with an individual regarding the meaning of an experience. Thus, through the phenomenological interview, detailed descriptions of the compulsive clothing buying experience can be obtained, which, in turn, will allow for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

As a second method of data collection, participants were asked to maintain a journal to reflect on their shopping and buying behaviors and experiences. Following Black’s (2011) suggestions, participants were asked to describe their thoughts, moods, feelings, and emotions before, during, and after a compulsive clothing buying episode. In addition, participants were asked to record where they shop, how much they spent, and what they bought. Given the personal nature of the phenomenon under study, journals were considered particularly useful as a tool for data collection. Through the process of writing, participants were able to recall and share anecdotes and details that did not necessarily surface during the interviews. Moreover, journals allowed participants to

share their thoughts and feelings without fear of embarrassment arising from a face-to-face interview (Sprague, 2005). In sum, journals served as a process of self-reflection for the participants and offered a source of data that, when combined with in-depth interviews, allowed for a more thorough understanding of the compulsive clothing buying experience.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

It is commonly recognized that clothing is used to communicate aspects of an individual's identity in society (Joseph, 1995; Nash, 1995). At the same time, it has been argued that individuals rely on clothing to infer meanings related to others' identities (Stone, 1995). In the field of consumer behavior, several theories have been used to explain and understand the communicative function of apparel, including Symbolic Interaction and Symbolic Self-Completion. Rooted in sociology and social psychology, Symbolic Interaction Theory posits that an individual defines him or herself through the interactions and relationships he or she establishes with others (Miller-Spillman, Reilly, & Hunt-Hurst, 2012). Moreover, Symbolic Interaction proposes that individuals have multiple identities which are acquired through social interaction in various settings (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

Symbolic Self-Completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) is also useful for explaining the role of clothing relative to the self. Symbolic Self-Completion proposes that when important indicators of an individual's self-definition are lacking, that individual experiences a sense of incompleteness and therefore feels the need to self-symbolize (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). By engaging in activities or acquiring

products associated with a particular self-definition, the individual will be able to convince others, and consequently him or herself, that he or she possesses a particular self-definition and thus achieves self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982).

Such theories propose that individuals have multiple personal and social identities. In the literature on dress and identity, it has been demonstrated repeatedly that dress plays an important role in communicating these identities (e.g., Kang, Sklar, & Johnson, 2011; Hegland & Nelson, 2002). However, in the case of compulsive buyers, the story seems to be somewhat different. In as much as compulsive buyers buy items that they typically do not need or never use, such theories might not be fully applicable. That is, compulsive buyers might be acquiring appearance-related products for purposes other than communicating particular identities. Likewise, some researchers have posited that Symbolic Self-Completion Theory might explain why compulsive buyers engage in this behavior and that certain products (e.g., clothes, shoes) serve as symbols to help them achieve desired self-definitions (e.g., Dittmar, Beattie, & Friese, 1996; Dittmar, 2005a). However, for this theory to apply, compulsive buyers would need to wear the items and receive the approval of others, which contradicts findings indicating that compulsive buyers usually do not use (e.g., wear) the items they buy (Christenson et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; Schlosser et al., 1994).

It appears that CBB may also disrupt the accepted apparel consumption process (Winakor, 1969). Like other products, the apparel consumption process is generally comprised of three phases: (1) acquisition, (2) inventory (use, care, active storage), and (3) disposition of goods (Solomon, 2010; Winakor, 1969). However, for compulsive

buyers the process appears to be different. As items purchased by compulsive buyers are typically not used (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010), it can be argued that the process of consumption becomes merely a process of acquisition. On the other hand, as compulsive buyers are more prone to fantasizing (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989), it may be that they figuratively “consume” the item before acquiring it, and therefore the act of acquisition becomes, at the same time, the act of disposition.

As discussed earlier, studies suggest that compulsive buyers have a strong preference for buying appearance-related items (Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989). However, as of yet, no study offers a detailed examination of this preference. Moreover, while some suggest that compulsive buyers are less concerned about the product as a motive for acquisition (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989), others have found that compulsive buyers present high levels of apparel involvement, fashion orientation, and perceived social status associated with buying (Park & Burns, 2005; Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004). The theoretical inconsistencies found in the literature and the lack of unified explanations regarding CCB point to the need for more research on the topic, particularly research that sheds light on its various nuances. To address this need, in this dissertation I examine the phenomenon of CCB relative to such theories and consider the implications of their use to explain these particular buying and consumption behaviors that are outside the norm.

## **Scope and Significance**

As cited earlier, estimates suggest that around 19 million Americans are suffering from CBB (Koran et al., 2006). This number is rather alarming, if only because it means that there are 19 million Americans who cannot control their buying behaviors, and are likely facing substantial debt, potential bankruptcy and/or familial and social problems as a result (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Koran et al., 2006; McElroy et al., 1994; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Roberts, 1998). Studying the causes and consequences of CBB is therefore vital for our understanding of consumer behavior more broadly, and for addressing the needs of individuals who suffer from it.

As discussed, CBB is often popularly confused with more “normal” kinds of compensatory consumption behaviors, such as retail therapy and impulsive buying. However, research in the field demonstrates otherwise. According to Faber and O'Guinn (1992), the study of the negative types of consumer behavior, like CBB, provides a more complete picture of what it means to consume and “may also help to provide new perspectives on critical dimensions and process in the context of [the] so-called normal behavior” (p. 459). Moreover, investigation of the negative aspects of consumer behavior may contribute to the well-being of individuals in society (Faber & O'Guinn, 1992) by creating greater awareness, offering new means of prevention, and by ultimately helping those who are suffering from an extreme form of consumer behavior like CBB.

By approaching the topic from a phenomenological perspective, an in-depth understanding of the compulsive clothing buying experience was developed. That is, through descriptive details of how participants live the experience of buying clothing

compulsively, a holistic and experientially-based understanding of CCB was gained (Thompson et al., 1989). Moreover, a phenomenological approach to CCB provided new insight into (1) the nuances of the compulsive buying experience, and (2) the role of the product within the compulsive buying act, both of which were lacking in the literature on the topic.

It is important to acknowledge that consumer behavior is about human behavior. Thus, the study of consumption must be comprehensive. To that end, though positivist inquiries help to inform the knowledge base, the core of understanding human – and therefore consumer – behavior, resides in questions of experience. As several researchers and philosophers have stated, human science requires consideration of the heterogeneity of human experience as well as language, meaning, and context (Becker, 2007; Flybjerg, 2001; Rorty, 1989; Winch, 2008). In this regard, phenomenology is an essential tool, that, when applied to the study of CCB, offered a broader perspective on the phenomenon than currently exists in the literature.

This dissertation also contributes to the body of literature on compulsive buying from a theoretical perspective, as it considers how compulsive clothing buyers' experiences relate to established theories of consumer behavior and related fields (e.g., sociology, psychology). Findings help to distinguish compulsive clothing buyers' behaviors from the behaviors of those individuals who engage in more “normal” clothing buying behaviors. Moreover, this study offers insights that may be applied to such theories to better explain the behaviors of this understudied group of consumers.

From a societal perspective, this dissertation offers greater understanding of CBB and particularly CCB. Outcomes of this understanding could include tools to identify risky behaviors and suggestions for helping these who suffer from CCB. Ultimately, such outcomes may help to eradicate the popular perception that being a “shopaholic” is “cool” or something to be encouraged. In sum, by conducting this research, increased clarity with regards to CBB, specifically CCB is provided, which leads to improved understanding of and interventions for a disorder that causes significant psychological (e.g., depression, anxiety) as well as financial distress and can result in financial, familial, social, and even legal problems.

### **Key Terms**

Definitions and descriptions of key terms are provided in this section. Some of the terms defined herein pertain to the different conceptualizations of the classification of CBB (e.g., Addiction, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and Impulse-Control Disorder), while others have to do with characteristics of the behavior (e.g., compensation, defense mechanism). As there are often multiple terms used to refer to compulsive buying, it is important to delineate differences to ensure conceptual clarity throughout this dissertation. Likewise, providing definitions of key terms helps to illuminate the complexity of the phenomenon.

### **Compulsion**

In the *DSM-5* (APA, 2013) compulsions are defined as “repetitive behaviors (e.g., hand washing, ordering, checking) or mental acts (e.g., praying, counting, repeating words silently) that the individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession, or



according to rules that must be applied rigidly” (p. 237). Further, the *DSM-5* explains that:

The behaviors or mental acts are aimed at preventing or reducing anxiety or distress, or preventing some dreaded event or situation; however, these behaviors or mental acts are not connected in a realistic way with what they are designed to neutralize or prevent or are clearly excessive. (p. 237)

According to Cardwell (1999), an individual performs these repetitive behaviors (compulsions) in order to keep something terrible from happening. Although the connection between the compulsive behavior and its purpose tends to be unrealistic (i.e., the intended action is incongruent with the intended purpose) those who are affected by the behavior feel the need to perform the act periodically, lest they will face perceived negative consequences (Cardwell, 1999). As Kelly (2014) explains:

...compulsions are often unrealistic solutions to the problems they are supposed to prevent. For example, it is unlikely (if not impossible) that folding laundry in a particular way or counting up to a particular number could ever prevent the death of a loved one. (para. 3)

Kelly (2014) adds that individuals suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorders “usually have insight into the fact that the compulsion has little to do with the actual event, but feel an intense need to carry out the compulsion anyway” (para. 3). Cardwell explains that by performing these actions the individual relieves his or her anxiety, however, the effect only lasts for a short period of time.

## **Addiction**

An addiction, according to the *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (VandenBos, 2007), is a “state of psychological or physical dependence (or both) on the use of alcohol or other drugs of abuse” (p. 18). Colman (2006) adds that an addiction is “characterized by a strong physiological and/or psychological need and a compulsive inability to resist taking the drug despite anticipation of probable adverse consequences, withdrawal if there is an abrupt deprivation of the substance, and in some cases drug tolerance” (p. 12). Similarly, Cardwell (1999) explains that an addiction “refers to the dependence that a person may develop toward a substance or an activity [...] [and] may be characterized by tolerance (in that moderate amounts of stimulation no longer have an effect) and withdrawal symptoms (unpleasant feelings when not taking the substance or engaging in the activity)” (p. 3).

Corsini (1999) expands on the definition by stating that an addiction is a “psychological dependence, a strong and compelling need for something such as companionship, entertainment, attention, activity, travel, sexual encounters” (p. 18). The author explains that when “such needs are strong and unusual and continue despite harmful effects to the self or others, a person is considered medically or psychologically impaired” (p. 18).

## **Psychological Dependence**

Psychological dependence is “a term used to describe a reliance on a drug because it makes stressful events more bearable” (Cardwell, 1999, p. 185). The term is employed when an individual continuously consumes a drug that is not necessary for normal

physical functions. Cardwell explains that, in this case, the dependence on a drug is more the result of a drive to continue taking the drug because of its effects. That is, the way it makes the individual feel. In the *Dictionary of Psychology* (Corsini, 1999), psychological dependence is described as “a feeling of behavior, pattern of behavior, or both, characterized by being somewhat compulsively attached to a situation, person, or substance in spite of significant problems arising out of this relationship” (p. 782).

Based on the conceptualization of CBB, it can be argued that compulsive buyers may experience a psychological dependence on the act of buying. As with drugs, this dependence, as Cardwell (1999) explains, may be the result of the particular feeling and/or emotion experienced by these individuals during the act of buying something.

### **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder**

According to the *DSM-5*, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is an anxiety disorder characterized by the presence of obsessions and/or compulsions. *Obsessions* are recurrent and persistent thoughts (e.g., of contamination), urges (e.g., to stab someone), or images (e.g., of violent or horrific scenes) that are experienced as intrusive and unwanted. *Compulsions*, also known as rituals, are repetitive behaviors (e.g., washing, checking) or mental acts (e.g., counting, repeating words silently) that an individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession or according to rules that must be applied rigidly. These obsessions and/or compulsions “are time-consuming or can cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (p. 237). For instance, an individual suffering from OCD can experience an unreasonable fear of germs, which leads him/her to constantly wash his/her hands.

In the *DSM-5* it is explained that OCD differs from developmentally normative preoccupations and rituals, in that the former is excessive or persisting beyond developmentally appropriate periods. Researchers have linked CBB to OCD based on studies indicating that both disorders share phenomenological similarities (Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994). That is, studies have demonstrated that consumers affected by CBB are preoccupied with buying and repetitive buying behavior is performed as means to reduce anxiety (Ridgway et al., 2008).

### **Impulse-Control Disorders**

Impulse-control disorders (ICD) refer to a type of “mental disorder characterized by a failure to resist impulses, drives, or temptations to behave in ways that are damaging to self or others” (Colman, 2006, p. 369). Under the revised fourth edition of the *DSM* (*DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000), ICD included kleptomania, pyromania, pathological gambling, and trichotillomania (hair pulling), among others. However, in the new edition of the *DSM* (i.e., *DSM-5*), the disorders included under this category have changed. That is, the *DSM-5* (APA, 2013) includes a new chapter on “Disruptive, Impulse-Control, and Conduct Disorders” bringing together disorders that were previously included in the chapters “Disorders Usually First Diagnosed in Infancy, Childhood, or Adolescence” and “Impulse-Control Disorders Not Otherwise Specified.” Disorders in the new chapter are characterized by problems with emotional and behavioral self-control (e.g., Pyromania, Kleptomania) (APA, 2013). The American Psychiatric Association explains that although other disorders may involve problems with emotional and/or behavioral regulation, Disruptive, Impulse-Control, and

Conduct Disorders are unique because they are manifested in behaviors that violate the rights of others, such as aggressions and/or disruption of property. In addition, these disorders can bring the individual into significant conflict with societal norms or authority figures.

Researchers engaged in the debate about the classification of CBB have used previous editions of the *DSM-5* (e.g., *DSM-IV-TR*) as a basis for interpretation. Specifically, researchers have used the definitional criteria of ICD included in previous editions of the manual to make suggestions for CBB classification. For the sake of clarity and consistency, this dissertation relies on the conceptualization found in previous editions.

Research on CBB indicates that compulsive buyers experience a lack of control over the urge to buy (Ridgway et al., 2008), which is consistent with the clinical delineation of ICD in previous versions of the *DSM* (e.g., *DSM-IV-TR*). Christenson et al. (1994) found that the basic characteristics of ICD, including (a) repetitive problematic behavior, (b) urges or mounting tension preceding the behavior, and (c) release of tension or gratification following the behavior, were present in the buying behavior of the compulsive buyers participating in their study. Consequently, the authors suggest that CBB is a disorder better understood via ICD, although they acknowledged the presence of OCD traits.

### **Defense Mechanism**

According to the *DSM-5*, defense mechanisms are “mechanisms that mediate the individual’s reaction to emotional conflicts and to external stressors” (p. 819). The *APA*

*Dictionary of Psychology* (VandenBos, 2007) explains that, as part of psychoanalytic theory, a defense mechanism is “an unconscious reaction pattern employed by the ego to protect itself from the anxiety that arises from psychic conflict” (p. 262). According to VandenBos (2007), recent psychological theories view the use of defense mechanisms as a normal means of coping with everyday life problems, although the excessive use of any type of defense mechanism is still considered pathological. Several behaviors are considered to be defense mechanisms, including compensation (e.g., Corsini, 1999), which is integral to the conceptualization of CBB in the literature (Neuner et al., 2005).

### **Compensation**

The term “compensation” has been defined in several ways. In the *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (VandenBos, 2007), compensation is defined as the “substitution or development of strength or capability in one area to offset real or imagined lack or deficiency in another” (p. 203). In the work of the Austrian psychiatrist Alfred Adler (i.e., Theory of Personality – Inferiority Complex), compensation refers to a conscious or unconscious “defense mechanism against feelings of inferiority that motivates a person to attempt to achieve superiority in areas of perceived weakness to gain feelings of social adequacy” (Corsini, 1999, p. 194). In psychoanalysis (i.e., Psychoanalytic Theory of Sigmund Freud), compensation refers to “a defense mechanism in which one attempts to redress a perceived deficiency that cannot be eliminated, such as a physical defect, by excelling in some other way” (Colman, 2006, p. 153).

Within all of these conceptualizations of compensation, the individual is engaging in what is considered to be a “process of substitution.” That is, the individual who

perceives him or herself as having a lack or deficiency in a particular area will seek to compensate for that deficiency by engaging in some activity. Thus, CBB could be seen as a form of compensation, in that the individual acquires excessive amounts of goods to compensate (or as a form of substitution) for a particular deficit or negative feelings or emotions. Indeed, Neuner et al. (2005) argue that this behavior carries a compensatory component. The authors explain that compensatory buyers tend to use “the act of buying as a means of compensation for stress, disappointment, frustration, or even structural deficit, caused by a distortion of autonomy and experienced as a lack of self-esteem” (p. 511). In this dissertation, compensation is framed relative to consumption: as compensatory consumption manifesting itself through compulsive buying.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, a context for the study of compulsive buying, including the role of specific products, was provided. The research purpose and objectives were presented and the methodological framework was discussed, which included an explanation of how a phenomenological approach to inquiry was used to achieve the research purpose and objectives. This explanation was followed by a brief description of the methods that were used to collect data for this dissertation. Discussion of the theoretical considerations as well as the study’s scope and significance was then provided. Last, definitions of key terms were discussed. In the next chapter, a review of the relevant literature is presented.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE LITERATURE THAT INFORMS THE RESEARCH**

As introduced in the previous chapter, the guiding question of this dissertation is *what is it like to be a compulsive clothing buyer?* In light of this question, this chapter examines the body of literature that informs this dissertation. To that end, research from a wide variety of fields is explored, including psychology, psychiatry, sociology, consumer behavior, social psychology, economics, and marketing. By discussing the research relevant to the focus of this dissertation, this chapter highlights gaps in the existing literature and indicates the specific areas in need of further investigation that are addressed by this study.

This chapter begins with an overview of research relevant to the development of the study of compulsive buying behavior. That is, compulsive buying is studied from its conception in 1915 to the present, including its etiology, consequences, treatments, and measurement, among other dimensions. This discussion is followed by an examination of the development of relevant CBB conceptual frameworks, particularly the application of theory within the study of CBB. To provide a conceptual point of departure for addressing the purpose and objectives of this dissertation, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the literature that explores the meanings of products, specifically appearance-related products, and how these meanings help to establish and communicate identity.



## **Compulsive Buying Behavior: An Overview**

The study of Compulsive Buying Behavior (CBB) dates back to the first decades of the twentieth century, when both Emil Kraepelin (1915) and Eugen Bleuler (1924) included buying mania, or what was called *oniomania*, in their psychiatric textbooks as a type of pathologic or reactive impulse (McElroy, Keck, & Phillips, 1995). Yet it would not be until six decades later that the study of CBB would be taken up by researchers in the field of consumer behavior (Faber et al., 1987; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989; Valence et al., 1988) as well as psychology and psychiatry (Glatt & Cook, 1987; Krueger, 1988; Winestine, 1985). Since that time, a more comprehensive understanding of the behavior has been achieved, in as much as the etiology, symptomology and prevalence of CBB, along with demographic and psychographic characteristics and severity of effect, have been explored. Further, screening instruments as well as treatments have since been developed. This section provides an overview of current knowledge regarding CBB from a variety of academic disciplines.

### **Concept Development**

What began as a subject of social and cultural humor (typically directed at women) is now a topic of serious discussion among academics, mental health professionals, and the media (O’Guinn & Faber, 2005). As mentioned above, both Kraepelin (1915) and Bleuler (1924) recognized CBB, referring to it as *oniomania* or *buying mania*, and categorizing it as an example of a reactive impulse or “impulsive insanity.” However, it was between 1987 and 1992 that some of the most influential work in the development of the study of CBB would be published. Faber et al. (1987), Krueger (1988), O’Guinn and

Faber (1989), Faber and O'Guinn (1992), and Christenson et al. (1994) were among the studies that laid the foundation for the investigation of CBB. These studies helped to provide an overview of key aspects of the behavior, describing the phenomenon as a psychiatric disorder affecting a significant percentage of the U.S. population.

During this time, the study of CBB was centered on defining and understanding the behavior. Most research examined either the etiology and phenomenology of CBB (e.g., Faber et al., 1987; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989) or the psychiatric comorbidity and characteristics of the compulsive buyer (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994). In addition, during this period several screening instruments (Edwards, 1993; Faber & O'Guinn, 1992; Valence et al., 1988) and diagnostic criteria (McElroy et al., 1994) were developed. Such studies helped to highlight the various dimensions of the behavior.

By the mid to late 1990s, exploration of CBB had expanded to include typologies of compulsive buyers, the influence of cultural, familial, and psychological factors on the development of CBB, and clinical treatment design. For instance, in 1996, DeSarbo and Edwards' comprehensive study aimed to identify typologies of compulsive buyers based on factors triggering the behavior. Rindfleisch et al.'s 1997 study explored the influence of family structure and materialism on CBB. Faber and Christenson (1996) investigated differences in mood states between compulsive and non-compulsive buyers before and during the shopping/buying process. In terms of assessment and treatment, Monahan, Black, and Gabel (1996) developed a scale to measure change in individuals suffering

from CBB, while Black, Monahan, and Gabel (1997) conducted a clinical trial examining the effectiveness of drug therapy on individuals suffering from CBB.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, research on factors contributing to the development of CBB increased (e.g., Dittmar, 2005a, 2005b; Miltenberger et al., 2003; Park & Burns, 2005; Rodríguez-Villarino et al., 2006; Xu, 2008; Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004). In addition, research on the assessment (Kwak, Zinkhan, & Crask, 2003; Manolis, Roberts, & Kyshyap, 2008; Manolis & Roberts, 2008; Ridgway et al., 2008) and treatment of compulsive buyers was augmented (Koran, Bullock, Hartson, Elliot, & D'Andrea, 2002; Lee & Mysyk, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2006; Mueller et al., 2007). Several reviews on the topic were also published during this time period (e.g., Black, 2007a, 2007b; Dell'Osso, Allen, Altamura, Buoli, & Hollander, 2008; O'Guinn & Faber, 2005), which demonstrate a degree of maturation in terms of the study of the behavior. Furthermore, during this decade CBB was studied relative to specific product categories such as apparel (Johnson & Attmann, 2009; Trautmann-Attmann & Johnson, 2009). Explorations of CBB in the online retail environment also emerged during this period (Dittmar, Long, & Bond, 2007; Kukar-Kinney, Ridgway, & Monroe, 2009; Wang & Yang, 2008).

Currently, the study of CBB is primarily centered on (1) factors influencing the development of the behavior (e.g., Donnelly, Ksendzova, & Howell, 2013; Guo & Cai, 2011; Müller et al., 2014; Roberts, Manolis, & Pullig, 2014); (2) personality traits (e.g., Mikolajczak-Degrauwe, Brengman, Wauters, & Rossi, 2010; Mueller, Claes, et al., 2010); (3) psychological and pharmacological treatments (e.g., Grant, Odlaug, Mooney,

O'Brien, & Kim, 2012; Müller, Arikian, de Zwaan, & Mitchell, 2013); (4) classification issues (e.g., Racine, Kahn, & Hollander, 2014; Swan-Kremier, Mitchell, & Faber, 2005; Zambrano-Filomensky et al., 2012); and (5) overlap of CBB with other psychiatric disorders (e.g., Claes, Bijttebier, Mitchell, de Zwaan, & Mueller, 2011; Lo & Harvey, 2014).

Although the study of CBB has seen tremendous development over the past 30 years, there are areas that remain unexplored. For instance, even though most of the research posits that compulsive buyers tend to be women, there is some evidence that CBB affects women and men to nearly the same extent (Koran et al., 2006). However, studies providing an in-depth understanding of men's motivations to engage in the behavior are lacking. The same can be said for studies that examine similarities and differences of CBB as it manifests among men and women.

Another area that has received very little attention is that of product category preference. Although there is evidence suggesting that compulsive buyers tend to prefer specific product categories (e.g., appearance-related products, collectibles), the literature offers a limited explanation as to why this is the case. Moreover, little collaboration across disciplines has occurred on the topic of CBB, as the knowledge comes primarily from three areas: psychiatry, psychology, and consumer behavior. From a theoretical standpoint, researchers seem to be working independently; paying little attention to what scholars in other disciplines are doing or have done. Thus, a multidisciplinary approach to the study of CBB is needed.

This dissertation seeks to address gaps in the literature by examining the role of appearance-related products relative to CBB. Moreover, this study is built upon literature informed by multiple fields (e.g., psychology, psychiatry, economics, consumer behavior, marketing), thereby acknowledging the complexities of the behavior.

### **Defining CBB**

In 1915, Kraepelin defined *oniomania* as being “impulsively driven buying that resulted in a senseless amount of debt” (O’Guinn & Faber, 2005, p. 2). In 1924, Bleuler classified the behavior under reactive impulses or *monomanias*, along with kleptomania, hoarding, and pyromania. In his textbook, the author describes *buying maniacs* as different from other type of consumers:

The usual frivolous debt makers, who in this way wish to get the means for pleasure, naturally do not belong here. The particular element is impulsiveness; they “cannot help it,” [...] the patients are absolutely incapable to think differently, and to conceive the senseless consequences of their act, and the possibilities of not doing it. They do not even feel the impulse, but they act out of their nature like the caterpillar which devours the leaves. (p. 540)

In his description, Bleuler (1924) makes clear that the compulsive buyer suffers from a lack of control over his or her shopping/buying behavior, regardless of the consequences.

In 1987, Faber et al. renamed this behavior *compulsive buying*. Although the behavior of compulsive consumers is akin to common manifestations of addictive behaviors, the authors decided to use the term *compulsive* rather than *addictive* to avoid issues with terminology. As they explained, there was some controversy regarding the term *addiction* among clinicians during this time. Faber et al. (1987) described CBB as “inappropriate, typically excessive, and clearly disruptive to the lives of individuals who

appear impulsively driven to consume” (p. 132). In this definition, buying is conceived of as an excessive activity that inevitably leads to significant distress or impairment. In line with Bleuler’s description, this definition also highlights the impulsive trait of CBB. In a phenomenological exploration of CBB, O’Guinn and Faber (1989) went on to define CBB as “chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings” (p. 155). In this definition, O’Guinn and Faber not only demarcated the severity of the behavior (i.e., “chronic, repetitive purchasing...”) but also positioned CBB as a coping mechanism (i.e., “...becomes a primary response to negative events or feelings”).

Recent definitions of CBB have stayed true to that of O’Guinn and Faber (1989), with the addition of elements now known to be characteristic of the behavior. For instance, Neuner et al. (2005), drawing from the work conducted by O’Guinn and Faber (1989) and Scherhorn et al. (1990), integrated an element of *compensation* into the definition. They state: “In consumer behavior literature compulsive buying was first described as a chronic, repetitive and excessive purchasing that becomes a primary response to negative life events, inner deficiencies, or negative feelings, and hence *carries a strong compensatory component* [emphasis added]” (p. 510). Moreover, while some researchers define the behavior in terms of its triggers and primary characteristics, others emphasize its consequences. For instance, Müller et al. (2013) defined CBB as an “extreme preoccupation with buying/shopping and frequent buying that causes substantial negative psychological, social, occupational and financial consequences” (p. 28).

Although researchers tend to define CBB in slightly different ways, all of them stress that compulsive buyers are incapable of controlling their shopping/buying behaviors, as they are described as being impulsive. Moreover, in contrast to the popular notion of a *shopaholic*, many emphasize that CBB is a serious disorder that is used to cope with negative feelings and emotions, and one that unavoidably leads to significant distress. Thus, CBB is far from being something individuals should be proud of (or something that the media should reinforce), but is instead a behavior that needs medical attention.

### **Epidemiology**

Studies of CBB have predominantly focused on developed countries (Black 2007a, 2007b), such as the U.S., Germany, and United Kingdom. The first published attempt to determine the prevalence of CBB in the U.S. was conducted by Faber and O'Guinn in 1992. In developing a scale to distinguish between compulsive and non-compulsive buyers, the authors provided initial estimates of how widespread the behavior might be, postulating that somewhere between 1.8% and 8.1% of the adult U.S. population was affected by CBB, depending on the cut-off point used on the Compulsive Buying Scale (CBS).

A more recent study examining the prevalence of CBB in the U.S. was conducted in 2006 by Koran et al., and is the largest study of the prevalence of behavior in the U.S. to date, wherein a random sample of 2,513 adults were surveyed. The authors suggest that at least 5.8% of the U.S. population suffers from CBB. That is to say that

approximately 19 million<sup>1</sup> Americans may be compulsive buyers. Koran et al.'s (2006) study remains the best estimate of the prevalence of the behavior in the U.S.

In comparison, studies conducted in Germany reveal a significant growth of the prevalence of CBB over a ten year period. For example, Neuner et al. (2005) reported that in 1991, 5.1% of the West German population and 1% of the East German population were affected by CBB. A follow-up study conducted in 2001 revealed that 8% of the West German population and 6.5% of the East German population could be classified as compulsive buyers.<sup>2</sup> The authors attribute these changes to the development of a consumer society that promotes an environment of compensatory and therefore compulsive buying, particularly in the area of East Germany as it was under communist control. Similar studies conducted in the United Kingdom have reported that approximately 10% of the total adult population suffer from CBB (Dittmar, Beattie, & Friese, as cited in Neuner et al., 2005, p. 511).

As mentioned previously, CBB is more likely to occur in developed countries (Black, 2007a, 2007b). In this regard, Faber (2011) argues that for CBB to develop, the only prerequisite seems to be the availability of resources and goods for people to consume. Likewise, Black (2007a) explains that for CBB to occur there has to be a “market-based economy, the availability of a wide variety of goods, disposable income,

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the U.S. Census Bureau (2014) population estimates.

<sup>2</sup> Neuner et al. (2005) analyzed CBB in the context of an acculturation process after the reunification of East and West Germany in 1989. The authors explained that East Germany “witnessed rapid and dramatic change” as a result of the reunification of East and West Germany. Participants in the 2001 study were classified as West or East German based on location.



and significant leisure time” (p. 16). Based on these characteristics, it is not surprising that a higher prevalence of CBB is seen within western countries.

### **Phenomenology**

Most studies, whether in psychiatry, psychology, or consumer behavior (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Lejoyeux & Weinstein, 2010; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989) report that compulsive buyers experience repetitive, irresistible, and uncontrollable urges to acquire goods. Typically such goods are never actually used, but left in the original package or shopping bag (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Schlosser et al., 1994). Indeed, clinical studies report that compulsive buyers tend to hide, hoard, return, give away, or simply forget about the items they buy (Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010).

According to Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al. (2010), compulsive buyers experience a constant preoccupation with shopping and buying to the extent that they devote most of their resources to it. Despite the negative consequences that result from CBB, including frustration, remorse, guilt, shame, depression, anxiety, financial debt, and familial problems, efforts to curb the behavior often prove unsuccessful (Christenson et al., 1994; Faber et al., 1987; Mueller Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989; Schlosser et al., 1994). Typically, the act of buying leads to short-term positive consequences, such as pleasure, arousal, and a sense of relief, but after a while the negative consequences arise, leading to the perpetuation of the behavior (e.g., Clark & Calleja, 2008; Kellett & Bolton, 2009).

Compulsive buyers are often depressed (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Faber et al., 1987; Lejoyeux, Tassain, Solomon, & Adès, 1997) and show lower levels of self-esteem than non-compulsive consumers (e.g., O’Guinn & Faber, 1989). Evidence suggests that they tend to buy alone (Schlosser et al., 1994) and that their shopping/buying episodes can occur in any venue, whether department stores, boutiques, consignment shops, or garage sales (Black, 2007a, 2007b). Furthermore, compulsive buyers have been found to (1) have greater knowledge of store prices, (2) are more price conscious, (3) derive greater transaction value from price promotions, (4) are more brand conscious and prestige sensitive, and (5) are more prone to being seduced by sales than non-compulsive buyers (Kukar-Kinney, Ridgway, & Monroe, 2012). Finally, while shopping, compulsive buyers have been found to be acutely aware of product colors, smells, and textures, as well as other people in the store (Schlosser et al., 1994).

### **Demographic Characteristics**

*Who is the typical compulsive buyer?* It appears that the answer is not simple. April Benson, editor of *I shop, Therefore I am: Compulsive Buying and The Search for Self* (2000) argues that several studies (i.e., Black et al., 1997; Christenson et al., 1994; Scherhorn et al. 1990) posit the stereotype of a “thirtysomething female who experiences irresistible urges, uncontrollable needs, or mounting tension that can be relived only by the compulsive buying of clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics, and who has been buying compulsively since her late teens or early twenties” (p. xxv). Benson criticizes such a description, arguing that there are “serious methodological questions” about the studies that this description is based upon (pp. xxv-xxvi). Her argument is that compulsive

buyers are instead a heterogeneous group, and therefore any efforts to profile a typical compulsive buyer are likely to be unsuccessful.

For Benson (2000), compulsive buyers are individuals who differ from one another in terms of “age and gender, in socioeconomic status, in patterns of buying, in the intensity of their compulsion, and in underlying motivation” (p. xxvi). In other words, there is no specific demographic group that can be clearly identified (or labeled) as compulsive buyers. In a similar vein, DeSarbo and Edwards (1996) argue that one of the most important contributions of their research is that it provides evidence of the differences that exist among compulsive buyers. The following discussion of demographic characteristics takes the suggestions of these authors into account.

**Gender.** According to Workman and Paper (2010), the study of demographics in CBB tends to over-represent individuals who seek treatment, therefore any findings need to be interpreted with caution. However, the literature consistently suggests that CBB is primarily a “female disorder” (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989). Indeed, from the very earliest conceptualizations of CBB (i.e., Bleuler, 1924; Kraepelin, 1915), the disorder has been viewed as such. For example, Bleuler’s *Textbook of Psychiatry* states:

...*buying maniacs* (oniomaniacs) in whom even buying is impulsive and leads to senseless contraction of debts, with continuous delaying of payment until a catastrophe clears the situation a little – a little but never altogether, because they never admit all their debts. According to Kraepelin, here, too, *it always involves women* [emphasis added]. (p. 540)

In a clinical study examining the characteristics and psychiatric comorbidity of compulsive buyers, Christenson et al. (1994) found that the typical compulsive buyer was a “36-year-old female who had developed compulsive buying at age 17½ and whose buying had resulted in adverse psychological consequences” (p. 5). Moreover, in a study about compulsive buying in depressed patients, Lejoyeux et al. (1997) found that individuals who experienced compulsive buying were more often women than men. Similarly, in a study examining the relation between CBB and materialism, depression, and temperament, 77.5% of the sample were women, while 22.5% were men (Müller et al., 2014). Studies with similar ratios are abundant (e.g., Hanley & Wilhelm, 1992; Yi, 2012) as well as studies in which women are the focus (e.g., Claes et al., 2011; Johnson & Attmann, 2009; Miltenberger et al., 2003).

Although the majority of research on the topic has presented CBB as primarily a “female disorder” (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Faber, Christenson, de Zwann, & Mitchell, 1995; McElroy et al., 1994), some studies suggest that women and men are affected to nearly the same extent. In a national study, Koran et al. (2006) found a difference of just 0.5% in the prevalence of the behavior between men and women (i.e., 5.5% for men; 6% for women). Reisch and Scherhorn (as cited in Reisch, 1999, p. 76) did not find significant differences between the genders within a group of individuals deemed “heavily at risk” of becoming compulsive buyers. The authors argued that once buying is transformed into an addiction, gender differences are minimal. Unfortunately, more recent studies have not considered gender relative to CBB.

In an attempt to explain why women seem to be more likely to engage in CBB, some researchers suggest that it might be due to the fact that women are more prone to seek treatment for their problems (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Workman & Paper, 2010). Others contend that it might be a product of gender roles (Scherhorn et al., 1990) and, perhaps, the development of a consumer culture. As Glickman (1999) explains:

Consumption became a gendered phenomenon, particularly in the late nineteenth century. For many families, shopping was a form of women's work; at the same time, the new commercial world afforded women new opportunities in the worlds of work and leisure. (p. 4)

Faber (2011) states that gender differences in CBB may be consistent with the literature in psychology related to impulse control disorders. The author explains that, historically, women have been more likely to engage in kleptomania and trichotillomania whereas men are more likely to engage in pathological gambling, pyromania, and intermittent-explosive disorder. Culture may be behind these gender differences, in that, as Faber contends, "In Western culture women typically do more of the shopping and spend significantly more time in this activity, it would seem possible that CB[B] may be a more common problem among women" (p. 13).

Regardless of the reasons why women appear to engage in CBB more often than men, there is a need to assess the prevalence among men and to understand their motivations for the behavior. This assessment is particularly important given the studies suggesting that gender may not be a factor in the disorder.

**Age.** Findings regarding the typical age of the compulsive buyer are inconclusive. Several researches argue that compulsive buyers tend to be younger than non-compulsive

ones (e.g., Dittmar, 2005a; Koran et al., 2006; Lejoyeux et al., 1997; Neuner et al., 2005; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). It appears that age of onset generally occurs in the late teens or early 20s, but the realization of the behavior does not occur until mid to late 20s (Christenson et al., 1994; Schlosser et al., 1994). For example, Christenson et al. (1994) reported a mean age of 17.5 years old at onset, but the realization of the CBB disorder did not occur until a mean age of 29.7 years old. Similarly, Schlosser et al. (1994) reported a mean age of onset of 18.7 years old and realization mean age of 24.9. However, McElroy et al. (1994) found a much later mean age of onset (i.e., 30 years old). Faber (2011) suggests that CBB is not manifested until the individual reaches financial independence. The inconsistency in findings points to the need for more research examining the relationship between age and CBB.

**Income.** Findings regarding income and CBB are also inconclusive (Workman & Paper, 2010). Workman and Paper (2010) assert that, over the years, a variation regarding the reported economic situation of the compulsive buyer can be seen, ranging from individuals with lower-middle incomes, to all income groups. Faber et al. (1987) suggested that CBB might be limited to individuals with middle or lower income who have a strong desire for goods and little self-control. In a study about the prevalence of CBB in the U.S., Koran et al. (2006) found that higher scores on the Compulsive Buying Scale were correlated with lower incomes. In contrast, O'Guinn and Faber (1989) and Scherhorn et al. (1990) found no significant correlation between CBB and income.

Faber (2011) suggests that instead of pointing to an individual at risk of engaging in CBB, income affects where the compulsive buyer shops and what he or she buys. The author explains:

People with limited income may manifest this behavior by buying at thrift shops and garage sales, while those with very large incomes may be more likely to buy in exclusive boutiques or excessively spend on expensive items such as cars and real estate. (p. 12)

**Education, Ethnicity, and Marital Status.** Faber (2011) suggests that when it comes to education, ethnicity, and marital status, researchers have not found significant differences between compulsive and non-compulsive consumers. In terms of education, Christenson et al. (1994) offered a superficial answer to the question of education level when defining the typical compulsive buyer as an “educated woman.” In a study of cognitive factors affecting CBB, Kyrios et al. (2004) did not find a significant relationship between CBB and educational level, but their participants reported having an average of 2 to 3 years of college education.

In terms of ethnicity, Koran et al. (2006) found that “race/ethnicity did not contribute to the differences in prevalence rates” (p. 1810). However, it is important to point out that 75.1% of their sample was reported to be white. In a study on comorbidity and temperament, Claes et al. (2011) acknowledged that differences might exist between ethnicities with respect to CBB.

Finally, marital status is perhaps the least discussed demographic factor in the study of CBB. Evidence suggests differences between compulsive buyers and non-compulsive buyers relative to marital status. However, one study reported that

compulsive buyers were more frequently unmarried (Lejoyeux et al., 1997). In short, further research that examines demographic characteristics with respect to the manifestation of CBB is needed.

### **Causes and Consequences**

Several authors seem to agree that it is the interplay of psychological, biological, and sociocultural factors rather than one single factor which contributes to the development of CBB (e.g., DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996; Faber, 1992; Faber & Christenson, 1996; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; O'Guinn & Faber, 2005). In regards to the consequences resulting from CBB, researchers have found that compulsive buyers experience short-term, positive consequences right after the buying act, and long-term, negative consequences after a period of time. Researchers have also found that the behavior becomes a vicious cycle. Below, an examination of the factors driving CBB, as well as the consequences that result from it, are discussed.

**Causes of CBB.** As mentioned earlier, researchers have suggested that the cause of CBB cannot be attributed to a single factor, but to the interaction of multiple biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. In this regard, Valence et al. (1988) proposed a conceptual framework wherein anxiety acts as the central factor influenced by personality-situations, family environment, biological dysfunction, and sociocultural environments. Kellett and Bolton (2009) considered individuals' early experiences, family environment, schemas (i.e., entitlement, recognition-seeking), specific cognitions (e.g., materialistic attitudes, buying beliefs), and impulsive/compulsive cognitive vulnerabilities as antecedents of CBB. In addition, the authors considered the individual's



internal state (i.e., depressed, anxious, uncomfortable sense of self) and external cues (i.e., advertising, interaction with staff, credit) as triggers of the behavior. Both studies acknowledge the fact that CBB results from the interplay of several factors (e.g., exposure to advertisements + low self-esteem + depression + credit availability) rather than one single factor (e.g., depression). Table 2 presents a wide selection of the factors that have been studied relative to CBB and provides examples of studies in which these factors have been addressed.

Table 2  
Potential Drivers of Compulsive Buying Behavior

	<b>Variables</b>	<b>Examples of Studies</b>
<b>Biological Factors</b>	Genetic Factors	Donovan (cited in O’Guinn & Faber 2005, p.11); Lobo and Kennedy (2006)
	Neurological Factors	Mueller et al. (2010); Raab et al. (2011); Racine et al. (2014)
<b>Psychological Factors</b>	Anxiety	Christenson et al. (1994); Davenport et al. (2012); DeSarbo & Edwards (1996)
	Apparel Involvement	Yurchisin and Johnson (2004)
	Approval Seeking	DeSarbo and Edwards (1996)
	Compulsivity	Christenson et al. (1994); DeSarbo and Edwards (1996)
	Coping Mechanism	DeSarbo and Edwards (1996)
	Denial	DeSarbo and Edwards (1996); Faber et al. (1987)

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Examples of Studies</b>
Dependence	DeSarbo and Edwards (1996)
Depression	Christenson et al. (1994); Lejoyeux, Hourtané, and Adès (1995); Müller et al. (2014)
Eating Disorders	McElroy et al. (1995); Mitchell et al. (2002); Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009)
Excitement Seeking	DeSarbo and Edwards (1996); Lejoyeux et al. (1997)
Fashion orientation	Park and Burns (2005); Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009)
Isolation	DeSarbo and Edwards (1996)
Lack of self-regulation	Claes et al. (2010); Faber and Vohs (2010)
Locus of Control	DeSarbo and Edwards (1996); Rodríguez-Villarino et al. (2006)
Loneliness	Christenson et al. (1994); O'Guinn and Faber (1989); Schlosser et al. (1994)
Low Self-esteem	Christenson et al. (1994); Faber et al. (1987); Elliot (1994); Hanley and Wilhelm (1992); O'Guinn and Faber (1989); Scherhorn et al. (1990); Yurchisin and Johnson (2004)
Perfectionism	DeSarbo and Edwards (1996); Kyrios et al. (2004)
Personality Traits	Mikolajczak-Degrauwe et al. (2010); Mikolajczak-Degrauwe, Rossi, Wauters, and Rossi (2012); Mowen and Spears (1999); Mueller, Claes, et al. (2010); Shahjehan, Qureshi, Zeb, and Saifullah (2012)
Propensity to Fantasize	O'Guinn and Faber (1989)
Public Self-Consciousness	Xu (2008)

	<b>Variables</b>	<b>Examples of Studies</b>
<b>Sociocultural Factors</b>	Reward Sensitivity	Davenport et al. (2012)
	Social Status Associated with Buying	Yurchisin and Johnson (2004)
	Advertising	Valence et al. (1988); Neuner et al. (2005)
	Culture	Babbar (2007); Black (2007a, 2007b); Faber (2011)
	Family	Gwin, Roberts, and Martínez (2004); Rindfleisch et al. (1997); Roberts, Manolis, and Tanner (2003, 2006)
	Gender Roles	Dittmar (2005b); Faber (2011); Reisch (1999); Shoham and Brenčič (2003)
	Materialism	Dittmar (2005a, 2005b); Donnelly et al. (2013); Reeves et al. (2012); Rindfleisch et al. (1997); Xu (2008); Roberts et al. (2003, 2006); Yurchisin and Johnson (2004)
	Easy access to credit	Park and Burns (2005)

**Biological Factors.** The idea that CBB might be caused by biological factors comes from studies about comorbidity and family history, as well as evidence from pharmaceutical studies (O’Guinn & Faber, 2005). According to Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al. (2010), biological models speculate as to the contribution of a series of neurotransmitters (i.e., dopaminergic, opioidergic, serotonergic). As of today, there is no direct evidence confirming these models. Moreover, researchers have argued that it is possible that genetic elements could be responsible for the development of CBB. That is,

individuals with a family history of any type of impulse control disorder (ICD) may be more at risk of developing CBB (Donovan, as cited in O'Guinn & Faber, 2005, p. 11). The fact that there is evidence linking CBB to different psychiatric disorders (e.g., personality disorders, mood disorders, eating disorders) has led to such conclusions. However, research is needed to clarify how relationships between these disorders might make an individual more prone to engage in CBB.

***Psychological Factors.*** The psychological factors triggering CBB are those most often studied in the literature (O'Guinn & Faber, 2005). These factors include, but are not limited to: low self-esteem (e.g., O'Guinn & Faber, 1989), anxiety (e.g., Davenport et al., 2012), depression (e.g., Lejoyeux et al., 1997), personality traits (e.g., Mueller, Claes, et al., 2010), dependence (e.g., DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996), fantasizing (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989), apparel-product involvement (Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004), and beliefs and lack of self-regulation (e.g., Faber & Vohs, 2010).

Studies on the topic have found that individuals suffering from CBB score high on measures of depression and anxiety (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Scherhorn et al., 1990). Indeed, clinical studies offer evidence that between 25% and 50% of all compulsive buyers have suffered from major depression (e.g., McElroy et al., 1994; Schlosser et al., 1994). Findings also indicate that compulsive buyers tend to have lower levels of self-esteem (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Scherhorn et al., 1990).

Furthermore, compulsive buyers have been found to be highly impulsive and perfectionist in nature (DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996). Research suggests that these consumers present a high propensity to fantasize (DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996; O'Guinn &

Faber, 1989). O'Guinn and Faber (2005) explain that this characteristic allows compulsive buyers to temporally imagine themselves differently, or to imagine that others will see them differently, especially during the buying process. The authors add that this characteristic provides the individual with a temporary escape from a negative self-image (O'Guinn & Faber, 2005).

Researchers have found that perceived social status associated with buying, materialism, and apparel-product involvement are strong predictors of CBB (Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004). In a study examining reward sensitivity, anxiety, impulsivity, self-esteem, and social desirability in excessive eating and CBB, Davenport et al. (2012) found that individuals reduced their cognitive anxieties (anxiety provoked by mental concerns) by engaging in CBB. The authors also found that somatic anxiety (i.e., physical symptoms of anxiety; for example, dizziness, sweating, nausea, breathing difficulty) is significantly correlated with CBB, and suggests that as CBB decreases, somatic anxiety increases. In other words, an individual suffering from somatic anxiety is less likely to display CBB. Davenport et al. (2012) also found support for the relationship between CBB and such factors as reward sensitivity (positive), self-esteem (negative), social desirability (negative), and impulsivity (positive).

Although psychological factors are the most frequently studied factors in the CBB literature, further research is needed to explain the interplay between these and other factors discussed (e.g., biological, sociocultural factors). Moreover, research exploring these factors relative to different demographic and psychographic characteristics of compulsive buyers is needed.

***Sociocultural Factors.*** In contrast to psychological factors, sociocultural factors influencing the development of CBB have received much less attention in the literature. These factors include, but are not limited to, media influences (i.e., advertising), culture, family, gender roles, access to credit, and materialism. According to Faber and Christenson (1996), sociocultural factors play an important role in the development of CBB, specifically, early family experiences, gender roles, and the general disintegration of modern life. The authors add that together, social norms and media portrayals of shopping as a way to overcome negative feelings or emotions (e.g., unhappiness) may also play an important role in the development of the behavior (Faber & Christenson, 1996).

In terms of family influences, Rindfleisch et al. (1997) found that young adults reared in disrupted families (i.e., parents that were divorced or separated) are more materialistic and show higher levels of compulsive consumption than young adults reared in intact families (i.e., parents that were not divorced or separated). Scherhorn (1990) argues that rather than psychologically rewarding appropriate behavior, parents of compulsive buyers tend to use money and/or gifts as the primary means of reinforcement. From these experiences, individuals can become compulsive buyers out of a drive for reward sensitivity. Davenport et al. (2012) did in fact find evidence linking the development of CBB to reward sensitivity.

With regards to culture, Black (2007a, 2007b) argues that the fact that CBB occurs mainly in developed countries suggests that cultural environment plays an integral part in the development and promotion of the behavior. Black (2007a) posits that certain

social and cultural elements are necessary for the development of CBB such as: “a market-based economy, the availability of a wide variety of goods, disposable income, and significant leisure time” (p. 16). Easy access to credit has also been suggested as a necessary factor for CBB (Black, 2007b). Thus, according to Black (2007a, 2007b), CBB is unlikely to occur in poorly developed countries. However, O’Guinn and Faber (2005) argue that CBB can exist in some form in many societies regardless of economic conditions, in as much as the authors suggest that individuals will always manage to acquire goods.

Some researchers believe that advertising may be responsible for the progressive transmission and internalization of materialistic ideals (Valence et al., 1988). Generally, it has been argued that advertising creates unrealistic expectations and desires in the consumer’s mind. For example, adolescents that grow up exposed to the idea that thin women are more attractive could develop low self-esteem, eating disorders, and excessive consumption behaviors if they do not meet such standards (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Saraneva & Sääksjärvi, 2008). In the case of those who engage in CBB, dissatisfaction may be reflected in excessive purchasing of clothing, cosmetics, shoes, and jewelry. However, studies addressing the influence of sociocultural factors on CBB are scant. Thus, further research addressing the impact of these factors on the development of the behavior is needed.

In sum, the literature demonstrates that CBB is a complex disorder that is likely driven by more than one particular factor. DeSarbo and Edwards (1996) support this belief in stating that one of the most meaningful contributions of their paper was “the

notion that there are multiple routes to, or alternative motivations for, compulsive buying behavior” (p. 252). Future research should investigate how these factors are manifested in the individual and examine if combinations of them can be translated into different compulsive buyer profiles. DeSarbo and Edwards (1996) began to uncover this possibility, but more recent research has not followed suit. Ultimately, further research in this area will lead to a better understanding of CBB.

**Consequences and The Vicious Cycle.** Researchers point to how CBB is accompanied by short-term, positive feelings, but followed by long-term, negative consequences (e.g., Faber & Vohs, 2010; Kellett & Bolton, 2009; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989). In terms of the positive consequences, Kellett and Bolton (2009) suggest that buying provides an immediate sense of gratification. O’Guinn and Faber (1989) indicate that this sense of gratification tends to be associated with interpersonal interaction and enhanced self-perception. For example, one participant in O’Guinn and Faber’s study commented that her buying practices make her feel high: “It’s almost like you’re on a drunk. You’re so intoxicated; ... I got this great high. It was like you couldn’t have given me more of a rush” (p. 153).

Once the sense of gratification vanishes, then the long-term negative consequences emerge. As Christenson et al. (1994) found, for the “typical” compulsive buyer, this means “personal distress and financial, marital, familial, social, and or legal consequences” (p. 9). Roberts (1998) noted that personal bankruptcies and credit card debt are negative consequences that arise from CBB. Likewise, DeSarbo and Edwards



(1996) indicated that depression, anxiety, frustration, and low self-esteem not only cause CBB, but are also likely to be outcomes of it.

Although several studies have commented on the positive and negative consequences of CBB, little research has explored both aspects in-depth. The path from positive to negative is uncertain, therefore research focusing on not just the negative, but the positive consequences of CBB is needed. It is likely that one of the keys to understanding the experience of the compulsive buyer and what drives him or her to engage in the behavior lies in the positive consequences of the behavior.

On the other hand, researchers have found that before a compulsive buying episode individuals typically feel sad, depressed, lonely, anxious, tense, bored, or in some cases even happy (Miltenberger et al., 2003; Schlosser et al., 1994). During the compulsive buying act, compulsive buyers have expressed feeling euphoric, relieved, calm or relaxed, as well as happy or good (Miltenberger et al., 2003). After the compulsive buying episode, individuals report feelings of guilt, sadness/depression, boredom, and rarely, happiness (Miltenberger et al., 2003). It seems that the feelings experienced after the compulsive buying act perpetuate the behavior.

By definition, CBB is considered to be the “primary response to negative events or feelings” (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989, p. 155). Individuals engage in the behavior as a way of coping with these negative feelings or emotions. Thus, if the positive outcomes of the behavior are only temporary, and are soon replaced by negative feelings, it is logical to think that the compulsive buyer will resort to CBB again (Kellest & Bolton, 2009; Rodríguez-Villarino et al., 2006; Workman & Paper, 2010). Indeed, Rodríguez-Villarino

et al. (2006) suggest that CBB is a vicious cycle: "... our findings appear to confirm what some researchers have postulated regarding a sort of *vicious cycle* [emphasis in original] in which emotional unrest sets the stage for a whole sequence of addictive buying habits: emotional distress → buying → positive consequences → negative consequences → emotional distress → buying, etc." (p. 519). Understanding CBB requires understanding its consequences, both the positive and the negative ones, as they are likely integral to the perpetuation of the behavior.

### Assessment and Diagnostic Criteria

Since the study of CBB reemerged in the 1980s, several researchers have developed instruments that aid in the successful identification of compulsive buyers (see Table 3). This section includes a review of those instruments most often used by clinicians and researchers to identify compulsive buyers and concludes with a brief discussion of evaluation of these instruments found in the literature.

Table 3

Screening Instruments Developed to Identify Compulsive Buyers

	Screening Instrument	Authors
Questionnaire	Compulsive Buying Scale	Faber and O’Guinn (1992)
	Edwards’ Compulsive Buying Scale	Edwards (1993)
	Canadian Compulsive Buying Measurement Scale	Valence et al. (1988)
	Questionnaire about Buying Behavior	Lejoyeux et al. (1997)
	Ridgway et al.’s Compulsive Buying Scale	Ridgway et al. (2008)

	Screening Instrument	Authors
<b>Interviews</b>	Minnesota Impulsive Disorder Interview	Christenson et al. (1994)
	Yale-Brown Obsessive-Compulsive Scale-Shopping Version	Monahan et al. (1996)

*Note.* Adapted from “Compulsive Buying,” by A., Mueller, J. E. Mitchell, J. M., Marino, & T. W., Ertelt, 2010. In G. F. Koob, M. Le Moal, & R. F. Thompson, *Encyclopedia of Behavioral Neuroscience*. (Vol. 3, pp. 317-321). Elsevier Science.

**Diagnostic Criteria.** In order to identify the presence of CBB, clinicians and researchers must first be able to recognize the behavior (Black, 2011), thereby requiring that they be familiar with its main characteristics. In this regard, McElroy et al. (1994) developed a set of operational criteria to help clinicians and researchers identify them. Mc Elroy et al.’s (1994) criteria have primarily been used in clinical studies (e.g., Black, Reperntinger, Gaffney, & Gabel, 1998; Monahan et al., 1996; Mueller, Claes, et al., 2010). Researchers have reported that because CBB has not been included in the *DSM-5* (APA, 2013), McElroy et al.’s (1994) diagnostic criteria have helped to advance the characterization of the behavior as a disorder (Babbar, 2007).

Although McElroy et al.’s (1994) diagnostic criteria are considered to be helpful in the identification of compulsive buyers, they do not make a distinction between the terms “shopping” and “buying.” For example, items include both buying and shopping together: “maladaptive preoccupation with buying or shopping...” and “the excessive buying or shopping behavior.” As a result, it is possible that researchers (following the criteria) might include individuals who behave differently. That is, individuals who shop and do not buy or who buy without shopping. This could create a problem when

comparing the literature, as researchers will not know if the studies they are evaluating included individuals who shop without buying or vice versa. It is important to account for such differences, in as much as they are not necessarily one and the same.

**Instruments.** Several instruments have been developed to distinguish compulsive buyers from non-compulsive buyers, to position the compulsive buyer along a continuum, or to evaluate the severity of or change in CBB. Below, a succinct description of the most common instruments is provided.

*Canadian Compulsive Buying Measurement Scale (CCBMS).* The CCBMS was one of the first scales to appear in the literature. It was developed by Valence et al. in 1988 based on research conducted by Faber et al. (1987) and anecdotal information reported in Holmstrom (1985) and Mitchell (1986). The scale is comprised of 13 items reflecting three dimensions: tendency to spend, reactive aspect, and post purchase guilt. Items are measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

*Faber and O'Guinn's Compulsive Buying Scale (CBS).* The CBS is a validated screening instrument developed by Faber and O'Guinn in 1992. In this scale, lower scores indicate greater levels of CBB. The CBS is comprised of 7 items measured using a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5) for the first item, and very often (1) to never (5) for the remaining items. This scale was primarily developed as a screener to distinguish between compulsive and non-compulsive buyers.

***Edwards' Compulsive Buying Scale (ECBS).*** The ECBS was developed by Edwards in 1993. This measurement contains 13 items assessing individuals' experiences and feelings with shopping and spending. Five dimensions are reflected in this scale: (1) tendency to spend, (2) compulsion/drive to spend, (3) feelings (joy) about shopping and spending, (4) dysfunctional spending, and (5) post-purchase guilt. Edwards (1993) developed this measurement because "no test or instrument has been developed to determine not only whether a person is a compulsive buyer but also just how compulsive or addictive the person is in their buying behavior" (p. 72). The author believed that compulsive buying is part of a continuum that ranges from "normal/non-compulsive" to "addicted." Items are measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1).

***Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale-Shopping Version (Y-BOCS-SV).*** Monahan et al. (1996) developed the Y-BOCS-SV in 1996 based on the Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale. Comprised of ten items, this scale seeks to assess "cognitions and behaviors associated with compulsive buying instead of assessing obsessions and compulsions" (p. 60). The main focus is on the relationship between CBB and OCD. The authors argue that it was developed to measure severity and change in individuals suffering from CBB.

***Questionnaire about Buying Behavior (QABB).*** The QABB was developed by Lejoyeux, et al. in 1997. This questionnaire consists of 19 "yes" or "no" items representing the basic features of CBB, including impulsivity; urges to shop and buy; emotions typically felt before, during, and after purchasing; post-purchase guilt and

regret; degree of engagement of short-term gratification; tangible consequences of buying; and avoidance strategies. According to the authors, the QABB was designed specifically for the assessment of CBB among psychiatric patients and allows for the assessment of the behavior itself as well as its consequences. The focus of the questionnaire is on buying impulses.

***Ridgway et al.'s Compulsive Buying Scale (RCBS).*** The RCBS was developed by Ridgway et al. in 2008. The scale was developed based on the idea that a compulsive buying scale should not include items related to income or consequences, and should assess not only the impulse-control dimension but the obsessive-compulsive dimension of the behavior. The RCBS is comprised of six items measured using a 7-point Likert scale that ranges from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) for the first four items, and never (1) to very often (7) for the remaining items.

**Instrument Critiques.** As mentioned earlier, the measures available in the literature were developed for different reasons, such as distinguishing compulsive buyers from non-compulsive buyers, positioning the compulsive buyer along a continuum, and evaluating the severity of and change in CBB. As such, a researcher should consider the research purpose prior to selecting the appropriate assessment instrument. For example, Cole and Sherrell (1995) compared the scales developed by Valence et al. (1988) and Faber and O'Guinn (1992) in terms of the conceptual dimensions assessed by both, as well as the nomological and predictive validity of both. Results indicated that the two scales measure different yet related dimensions of CBB. Cole and Sherrell (1995) suggest that it might be possible that Valence et al.'s scale is more closely associated with the

notion of *shopping*, while Faber and O’Guinn’s scale is more closely associated with the notion of *buying*.

Similarly, in a review of 15 years of CBB research, Manolis et al. (2008) evaluated the CBS and the ECBS. The authors found that both scales present several psychometric issues (e.g., content validity, concerns with items). Moreover, they argue that although both instruments were designed to measure CBB, they “capture separate dimensions of the same compulsive buying construct” (p. 162). Finally, Ridgway et al. (2008) provide a list of limitations of some of the instruments that have been developed, including: (a) limited applicability (e.g., need to be administered in a personal interview format); (b) wording problems (e.g., include double-barreled items); (c) sole focus on either obsessive-compulsive or impulse-control dimension of the behavior; and (d) issues of validity and reliability (p. 625).

### **Psychiatric Comorbidity**

Data from clinical studies (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Black, et al., 2010; Ninan et al., 2000; Schlosser et al., 1994) demonstrate that individuals with CBB tend to meet lifetime criteria for Axis I disorders, particularly mood (e.g., bipolar disorder, major depression) and anxiety disorders (e.g., OCD, generalized anxiety), substance use disorders (e.g., alcohol, drugs), and eating disorders (e.g., binge eating). For instance, in a study of 171 compulsive buyers, Mueller, Mitchell, Black et al. (2010) reported a high incidence of Axis I disorders; that is, 90% of their sample presented a lifetime history of any Axis I disorder and 51% met the criteria for a current Axis I disorder. Moreover, in a controlled study with 24 compulsive buyers,

Christenson et al. (1994) reported that 50% of their sample presented a lifetime history of major depression, 21% presented a lifetime history of generalized anxiety, 13% presented a lifetime history of OCD, 46% a presented lifetime history of substance abuse/dependence, and 17% presented a lifetime history of binge eating disorder.

Impulse control disorders such as kleptomania, intermittent explosive disorder, and pathological gambling are also relatively common among individuals suffering from CBB (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Black, et al., 2010). Mueller, Mitchell, Black, et al. (2010) reported that 21% of their sample presented a lifetime diagnosis of an ICD. In a study assessing demographic and phenomenological characteristics as well as psychiatric comorbidity in 46 compulsive buyers, Schlosser et al. (1994) reported a 37% incidence of kleptomania, 22% incidence of intermittent explosive disorder, and a 20% incidence of pathological gambling.

According to de Zwaan (2011), studies examining the incidence of Axis II disorders or traits on CBB are not as prominent as those exploring Axis I disorders. However, during the past few years, an increasing number of studies examining this relationship have emerged. In one of the first studies published, Schlosser et al. (1994), using a self-report instrument and structured interview, found that nearly 60% of the sample met the criteria for at least one personality disorder type through the consensus of both instruments. Although none of the personality types stand out (over the others) the most commonly identified were obsessive-compulsive (22%), avoidant (15%), and borderline (15%). In a more recent study, Sansone, Chang, Jewell, Sellborn, and Bidwell (2013) found evidence pointing to a relationship between CBB and borderline personality



disorder. Moreover, in a study on personality traits and CBB, Mueller, Claes, et al. (2010) identified two clusters, one described as “resilient” and “overcontrolled” and the other as “undercontrolled/emotionally” impaired. Cluster I scored significantly higher on most of the Big Five personality traits (i.e., extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) than Cluster II, indicating that the latter is a more severe undercontrolled/emotionally impaired cluster and that Cluster I is more resilient. With regards to psychiatric comorbidity, those in the undercontrolled cluster exhibited a higher incidence of mood and anxiety disorders and interpersonal problems. That is, this cluster showed more symptoms of anxiety, depression, interpersonal sensitivity, and paranoia. In sum, the complexities of CBB and its relationship to other disorders make it difficult to classify.

### **Classification Issues**

Previous studies have argued for the inclusion of CBB within the *DSM-5* as part of either obsessive-compulsive disorders, impulse control disorders, or addictions. However, the *DSM-5*, published in May 2013, did not include CBB as a disorder. The argument is that, at this time, there is not enough peer-reviewed evidence to establish the diagnostic criteria and course descriptions needed to categorize this behavior as a new mental disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Racine et al., 2014).

Although CBB is not explicitly included under any specific group of disorders in the *DSM-5*, it is specifically mentioned in the behavioral addiction section, alongside sex addiction and exercise addiction. The fact that CBB is mentioned in this section provides indication of a potential inclusion of the behavior under behavioral addictions. In other

words, it appears that the evidence gathered to this day points to the classification of the behavior as an addiction rather than an impulse control disorder (ICD) or an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), as was previously argued.

Christenson et al. (1994) found that all of the compulsive buyers who participated in their study reported “irresistible urges, uncontrollable needs, or mounting tension that could be relieved only by buying” (p. 7). After the buying act, participants reported that they experienced feelings of gratification and tension release, which is consistent with ICD. Additional studies report findings suggesting that CBB can be classified under ICD, given its overlap with other disorders that present this symptomatology (e.g., pathological gambling) (McElroy et al., 1994; Schlosser et al., 1994).

Several studies have also reported a link between CBB and OCD (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Schlosser et al., 1994). These studies found that compulsive buyers: (1) had experienced, and tried to control, urges or thoughts related to buying, (2) scored higher on OCD symptomatology, and (3) met the criteria for obsessive-compulsive personality disorders. In clinical trials, it has also been suggested that there is a relationship between OCD and CBB (e.g., Black et al., 1997).

On the other hand, Dittmar (2005a) posits that CBB might be better understood as a behavioral addiction, as it presents characteristics akin to such disorders. The author explains that CBB “includes both positive and negative affect, entails some volition, and can serve a range of psychological functions” (p. 833). To date, the debate regarding the classification of CBB remains ongoing. More attention from clinicians and academics is needed in order to allow for a more consistent means of classification.

## **Treatment**

Given the fact CBB is frequently accompanied by other psychiatric disorders, therefore manifesting differently in each individual, its treatment has not been standardized. Currently, researchers are examining the effectiveness of psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy on CBB. To date, clinical studies indicate that the use of psychotherapy (individual or group) is the most effective in suppressing the negative emotions associated with CBB, thereby leading the individual to a state of remission (e.g., Kellett & Bolton, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2006; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010). For example, Kellett and Bolton (2009) reported successful treatment of a woman with CBB using the cognitive-behavioral approach.

According to Müller et al. (2013), controlled studies examining the effectiveness of psychotherapy for treating CBB have not yet been conducted. However, two recent studies (Mitchell et al., 2006; Mueller et al., 2008) support the notion that group cognitive-behavioral therapy could be effective in treating CBB. In both studies, the primary goal of the treatment was to interrupt and control the problematic buying behavior by “restructuring maladaptive thoughts associated with shopping and buying, establishing healthy purchasing patterns, and developing healthy coping skills” (Müller et al., 2013, p. 29)

With regards to pharmacological studies, Black (2007a) argues that there are conflicting results. That is, some of the clinical trials on the medicalization of CBB have proven to be effective, while others have not. For example, Grant (2003) examined the effectiveness of naltrexone (an opioid antagonist) in reducing the symptoms of CBB.

Findings revealed that treatment with high-doses of the medication led to partial or complete remission of the urges to shop and buy compulsively. In McElroy, Satlin, Pope, Keck, and Hudson (1991) it was suggested that antidepressants could hinder the symptoms of CBB. Black et al. (1997) successfully tested the effectiveness of fluvoxamine (a serotonin reuptake inhibitor) on compulsive buyers. However, two other studies examining the effectiveness of the same drug were unsuccessful (i.e., Black et al., 2000; Ninan et al., 2000).

Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al. (2010) argue that findings of pharmacological studies should be interpreted with caution due to the small samples, high dropout rates, and placebo-response rates. Furthermore, although psychotherapy and, in some cases, medication are being described as effective treatments for CBB, other researchers suggest that consumer education, self-help books, and support groups might also help (e.g., Black, 2007a, 2007b; Lejoyeux, Adès, Tassain, & Solomon, 1996). In this regard, research is needed to prove the effectiveness of different treatments for CBB, including the combination of approaches (e.g., how psychotherapy works in conjunction with drug therapy).

### **Product Preferences**

Clinical as well as academic studies have reported that compulsive buyers tend to buy specific products during a “buying spree.” Table 4 highlights findings from five clinical studies in regards to the types of products individuals with CBB report buying during compulsive buying episodes. As seen in the table, the most frequently purchased items were those related to physical appearance, such as clothing, shoes, jewelry, and

makeup. Studies in the field of consumer behavior report similar results. For example, O’Guinn and Faber (1989) found that clothing, cosmetics, and gifts were the products most frequently purchased by compulsive buyers.

Table 4  
Items Most Commonly Purchased by Compulsive Buyers

Item	Study				
	Schlosser et al. (1994) <sup>a</sup> <i>n</i> = 46	Christenson et al. (1994) <sup>a</sup> <i>n</i> = 24	McElroy et al. (1994) <sup>a</sup> <i>n</i> = 20	Miltenberger et al. (2003) <i>n</i> = 19	Mitchell et al. (2006) <sup>a</sup> <i>n</i> = 39
Clothes	33	23	20	15	28
Shoes	16	18	–	–	12
CDs/tapes	16	–	–	–	4
Jewelry	12	10	20	3	6
Makeup/Cosmetics	10	8	20	3	–
Electronics	7	–	Some	–	–
Food	5	–	Some	–	–
Collectables/Antiques	9 / 4	6 / 6	–	–	3
Crafts and/or art	2	4	–	–	14
Books or magazines	1	3	–	–	9
Cars and/or auto parts	–	4	–	11 <sup>b</sup>	–
Household items	–	3	–	11 <sup>b</sup>	–
Furniture/Appliances	–	–	Some	–	4 / 6
Gifts/Greeting Cards	–	–	–	–	20 / 5
Purses	–	–	–	6	3
Other	7	–	–	–	25

Note. <sup>a</sup> Controlled studies. <sup>b</sup> Purchase frequency of household and vehicle items was reported together in this study.

O'Guinn and Faber (1989) stress that individuals suffering from CBB buy to achieve a certain level of gratification, rather than to obtain utility from the products or services purchased. Moreover, object attachment is not a strong motivation to engage in the behavior, as the authors explain: "...the desire to own products is not a primary motivation behind this behavioral problem. Instead, [...] positive interpersonal interactions and enhanced self-perceptions appear to be the more important short-term gratification received by compulsive buyers" (pp. 155-156). According to the authors, the individual places high value on interactions with sales personnel, in as much the process of buying "seems to facilitate positive social interaction and increased self-esteem" (p. 154). In a later study, O'Guinn and Faber (2005) maintained that compulsive buyers' preferences for specific types of products relates to the locations where positive feedback from store employees and/or other customers can best be obtained.

In line with O'Guinn and Faber (1989), Faber (2011) suggests that CBB is qualitatively different from "normal" buying in that "it is less about the item purchased and much more about the need to obtain some short-term relief from mounting tension or negative feelings" (p. 14). However, Workman and Paper (2010) argue that the item purchased tends to be linked to an individual's self-esteem, either affecting how he or she looks or how the individual thinks he or she looks. Faber et al. (1987) argued that the purchase of these items can be used as a means to avoid the isolation that the compulsive buyer might be suffering from and that it may be a way to increase self-esteem. Similarly, Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009) posit that appearance seems to be of particular importance to compulsive buyers, in that compulsive buyers may use appearance-related

products as: (1) a way to enhance impressions of themselves and/or others' impressions of them, (2) a symbol to define the self, increase self-confidence, and project an ideal image, and (3) a way to obtain approval or recognition (p. 271).

Although such explanations seem plausible, none of these authors discuss the fact that most items purchased by compulsive buyers are never used. O'Guinn and Faber (2005) briefly explained that compulsive buyers' purchases "are seen as object reminders and concrete evidence of the presence of a problematic behavior. If left unopened and out of sight, then they are less ego threatening" (p. 10). The authors added that compulsive buyers can hide their purchases just like "an alcoholic hides or disposes of evidence of the secreted behavior." O'Guinn and Faber further explained that although these explanations could play a role in compulsive buyers' post-purchase behavior, they strongly support the notion that compulsive buying is not about the acquisition of goods but about the act of buying.

If in fact a compulsive buyer leaves the item in its original packaging, gives the item away, puts the item in storage, returns the item to the store, or resells the item, then it is likely that goals related to enhancing appearance may not be achieved. This dissertation therefore not only considers the reasons why compulsive buyers prefer certain product categories over others, but also examines how they use the products that they buy. In the next section, an examination of the development and application of theories to the study of CBB is provided.

## **Theoretical Approaches to Understanding CBB**

Compulsive buying is considered to be a complex phenomenon (Robert et al., 2014). As outlined in the previous section, its multiple potential causes and consequences, along with its phenomenological characteristics serve as evidence of how complex it is. Researchers seeking to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of this behavior have developed several conceptual/theoretical frameworks. Aiming to explain the etiology of CBB, researchers have also applied a variety of well-known theories to the study of the disorder. In this section, this research is examined in depth.

### **Conceptual/Theoretical Models of CBB**

Despite a growing interest in the study of CBB since the 1980s, there are relatively few established models for examining specific dimensions of the behavior (Kellett & Bolton, 2009). Among those found in the literature, the following four are discussed here: (a) *Compulsive Buying Behavior: A Conceptual Framework* (Valence et al., 1988), (b) *Theoretical Model of Impulse Buying/Theoretical Model of Compulsive/Impulsive Buying* (Dittmar et al., 1996; Xu, 2008), (c) *Cognitive-behavioral Model of Compulsive Buying* (Kellett & Bolton, 2009), and (d) *Theoretical Framework of Compulsive Buying* (Workman & Paper, 2010).

**Compulsive Buying Behavior: A Conceptual Framework.** In one of the earliest works on CBB, Valence et al. (1988) developed a conceptual framework (see Figure 2) grounded in previous research and in their own beliefs with respect to the factors that were thought to explain CBB. In this model, anxiety acts as the central factor, primarily because it may cause a spontaneous reaction and can prompt consumers to seek to



relieve stress. The authors incorporated *family environment* and *genetic factors* because both shape personality. They included *biological dysfunctioning factors*, as compulsive buying may be a result of the absence of a chemical substance produced when cerebral activity is stimulated (Faber et al., 1987). The *sociocultural environment* (comprised of culture, commercial environment, and advertising) acts as a general cause of CBB. Finally, Valence et al. also included *financial constraints*, as this factor can regulate the extent to which the individual engages in the behavior and can lead him or her to resort to other strategies or types of excessive consumption behavior.

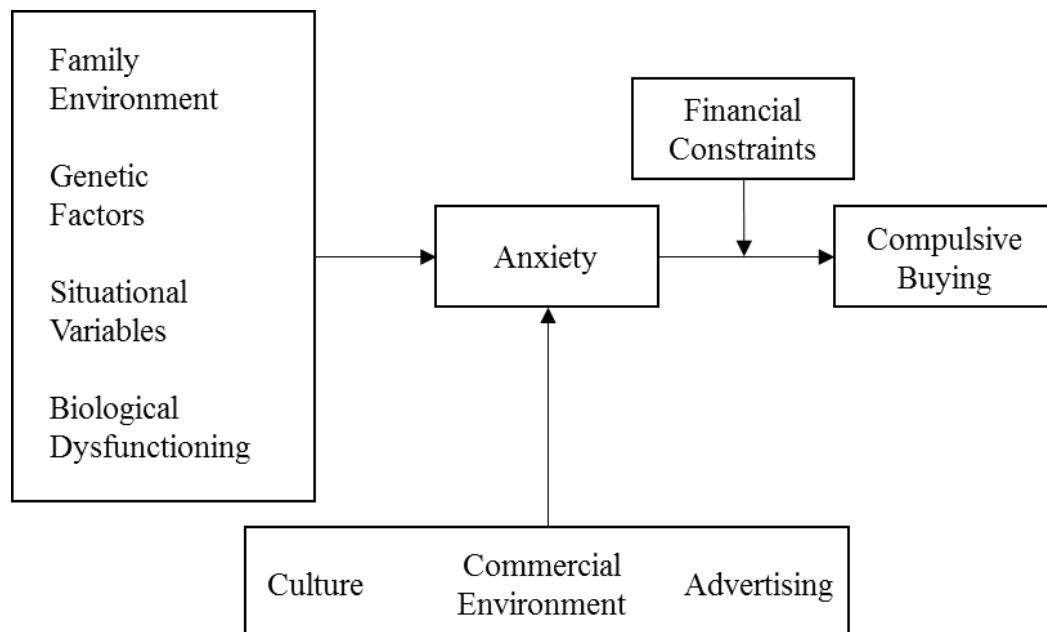


Figure 2. Compulsive Buying Behavior: A Conceptual Framework. Source: “Compulsive Buying: Concept and Measurement,” by G. Valence, A. d’Astous, and L. Fortier, 1988, *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 11(4), p. 424.

**Theoretical Model of Impulse Buying.** Dittmar et al. (1996) developed the *Theoretical Model of Impulse Buying* (see Figure 3) in response to the inability of several

theories in economics, marketing, and psychology to explain the underlying motivations for impulsive buying and why certain products are bought impulsively more than others. The socio-psychological model proposed and examined by the authors was developed based on a social constructionist model of material possessions and the Symbolic Self-Completion Theory. The model predicts that consumers buy impulsively in order to acquire material symbols of personal and social identity. The model also predicts that consumers will differ in terms of the goods they buy on impulse and the reasons for buying on impulse.

In concrete terms, the model suggests that social and environmental factors (individual factors, social category membership) influence self-discrepancies. This, in turn, leads to a compensation mechanism, such as consumption/materialism or other strategies. If the individual decides to take the consumption/materialism path, then he or she will engage in “impulsive/compulsive buying,” under which his or her buying considerations (e.g., mood, self-image) and categories of goods (e.g., clothes, sports items) are taken into account. It is worth mentioning that although the Dittmar et al. model was developed for impulse buying, it is also used to examine CBB. Indeed, the hypotheses tested by Dittmar et al. include both impulse and compulsive buying (e.g., “Some categories of consumer goods will be bought on impulse [...] more frequently than others. There will be [...] some differences between individuals with relatively higher compulsive shopping tendencies [high CS] versus those low in compulsive shopping tendencies [low CS]” (p. 191).

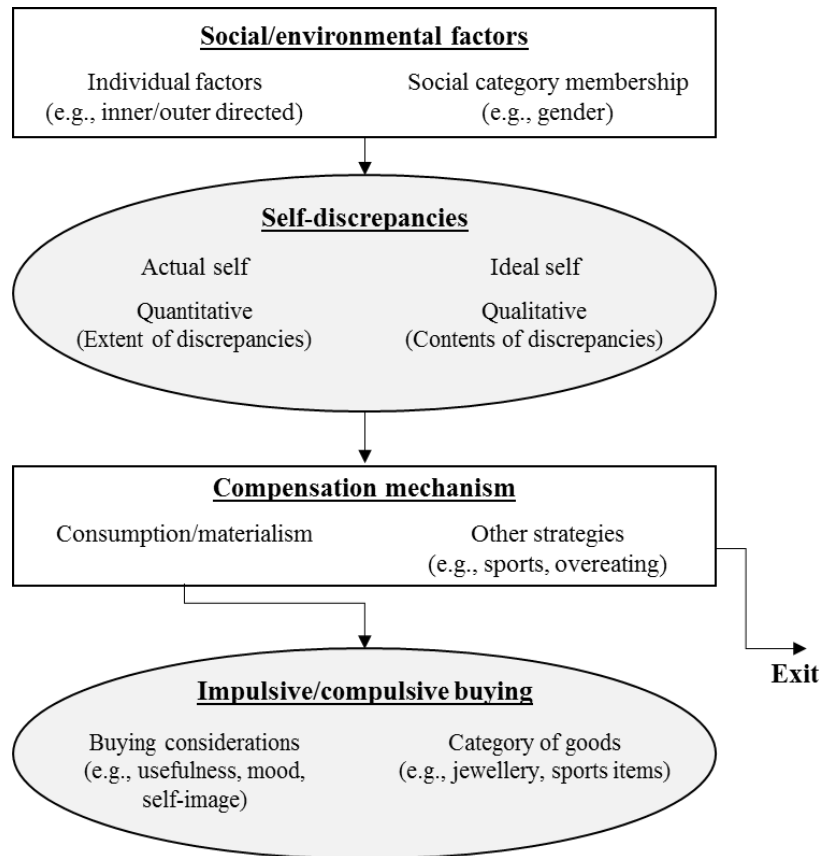


Figure 3. Theoretical Model of Impulse Buying. Source: “Objects, decision considerations and self-image in men’s and women’s impulse purchases,” by H. Dittmar, J. Beattie, and S. Friese, 1996, *Acta Psychologica*, 93, p. 192.

Dittmar et al.’s theoretical model was later modified by Xu (2008). In the latter’s version of the model (see Figure 4), it was predicted that an individual who experiences discrepancies between the actual self and the ideal self, and who is willing to use symbolic consumption as a self-completion strategy, will be motivated to acquire goods which are expected to perform a self-completing role (e.g., clothes or jewelry). Moreover, the model predicts that impulsive/compulsive buying will be more likely to occur in individuals who experience self-discrepancies (i.e., discrepancy between the actual and the ideal self).

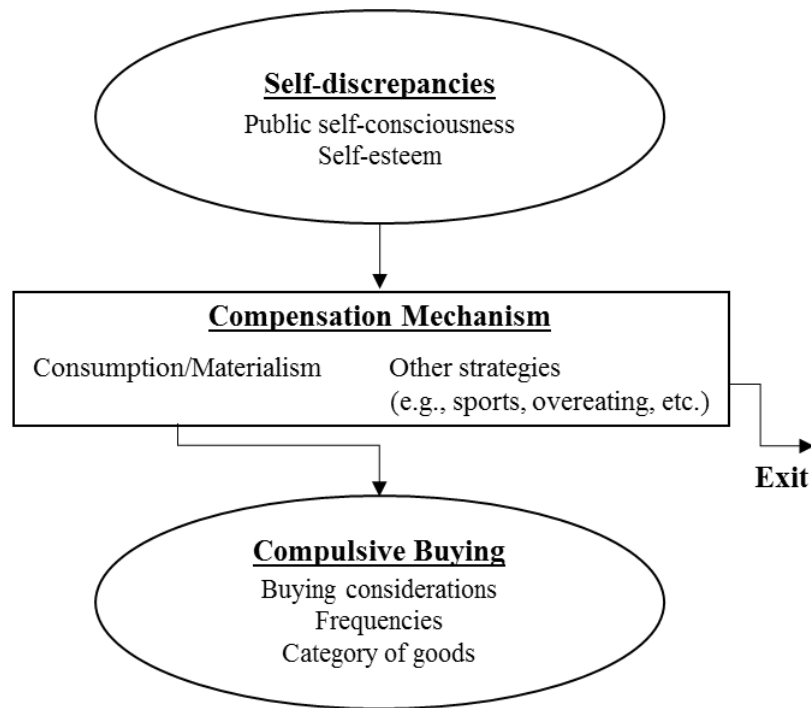


Figure 4. Theoretical Model of Compulsive/Impulse Buying. Source: “The Influence of Public Self-consciousness and Materialism on Young Consumers’ Compulsive Buying,” by Y. Xu, 2008, *Young Consumers: Insight and Ideas for Responsible Marketers*, 9(1), p. 41.

Xu used the adapted model, *Theoretical Model of Compulsive/Impulsive Buying*, to study the influence of public self-consciousness and materialism on young consumers’ compulsive buying. Findings revealed a strong indirect relationship between public self-consciousness and CBB, thereby providing support for the model suggested by Dittmar et al. (1996). In the model, the relationship between public self-consciousness and CBB is mediated by materialism. In terms of motivations, results suggest that the compulsive buying tendency is driven by materialistic values and is more likely to be employed as a way to improve public self-identity by those who score high on public self-consciousness.

**Cognitive-behavioral Model of Compulsive Buying.** Kellett and Bolton (2009)

developed the Cognitive-behavioral Model of Compulsive Buying (see Figure 5) in an attempt to synthesize the available literature on the topic, stimulate hypothesis testing, and provide a guide for clinicians when engaging in cognitive-behavioral treatments. The authors argue that though CBB has become a topic of interest for researchers and clinicians alike, there is currently little theoretical guidance for clinicians attempting to intervene with compulsive buyers and no established model for researchers to use to study the behavior.

The model presents the compulsive buying cycle in four phases: (1) antecedents, (2) internal/external triggers, (3) the act of buying, and (4) post-purchase. Importantly, this model distinguishes between cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors in each phase, and identifies how CBB can turn into a vicious cycle. Within the proposed model, the relationships and interactions between the identified phases were hypothesized.

Kellett and Bolton (2009) used a case study to test the model. A 36-year-old married woman who had presented a life-long preoccupation with shopping was the focus. The authors employed a series of scales to assess her behavior. The results describe a woman reared in a disrupted family who developed a misconception and misunderstanding of what love and affection mean. She seeks to overcome this problem through the acquisition of possessions. Feelings of depression are part of her internal triggers, but she also feels an intense urge to buy over which she has little control. According to the authors, once she completes the shopping trip she feels shame and guilt.

The woman's case was considered to be good model fit and served as evidence of its validity and applicability.

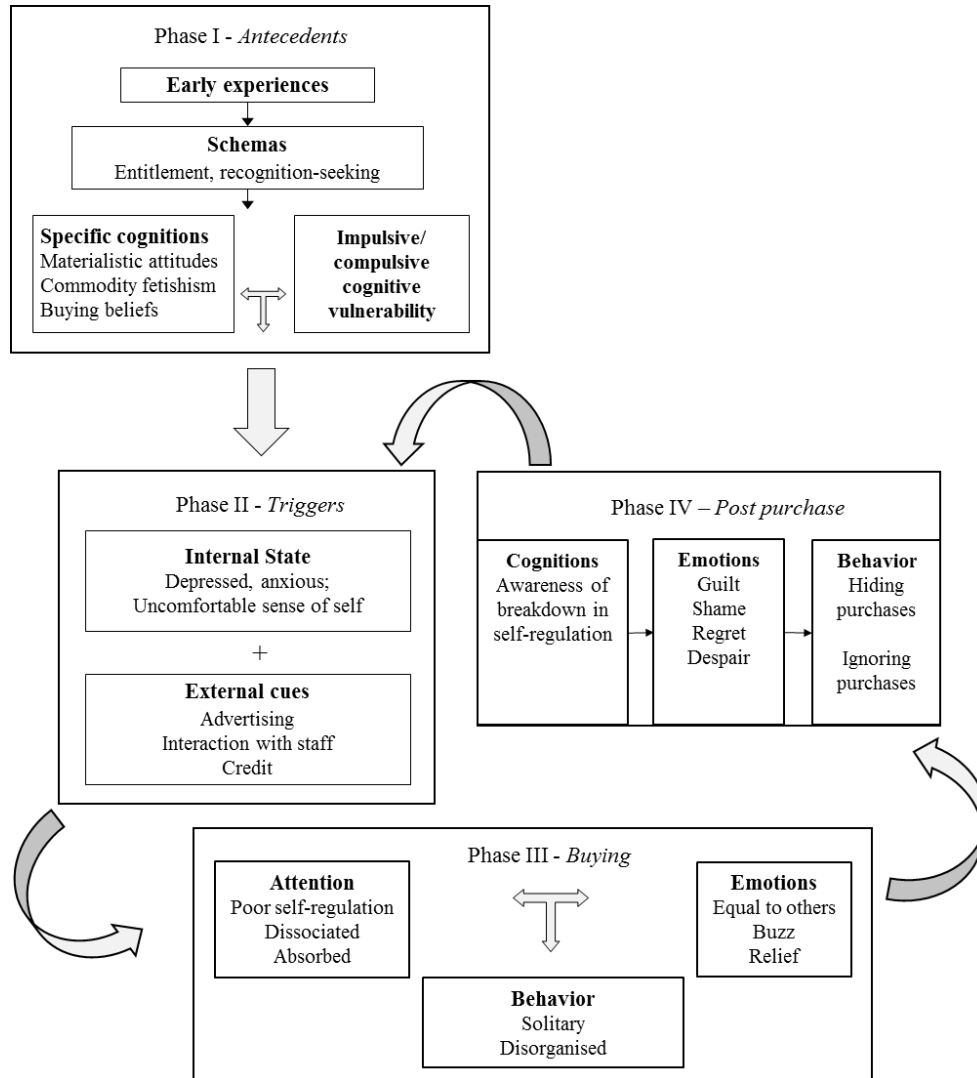


Figure 5. Cognitive-Behavioural Model of Compulsive Buying. Source: “Compulsive Buying: A Cognitive-Behavioural Model,” by S. Kellett and J. V. Bolton, 2009. *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 16(2), p. 91.

**Theoretical Framework of Compulsive Buying.** In a comprehensive article about CBB, Workman and Paper (2010) developed a theoretical framework (see Figure 6)

grounded in findings and suggestions from previous research. The authors briefly explained the framework by stating that it identifies “the relevant variables and themes associated with compulsive buying and the consequences of this behavior” (p. 110). The model proposes that a series of antecedents (e.g., loneliness, fantasizing, low self-esteem, compulsivity, materialism) evoke a response in the individual (e.g., non-low, normative, evaluations/impulse control). This response leads to a specific set of consequences at both the individual and societal level. The model accounts for self-perpetuation of the behavior as the consequences/effects become antecedents.

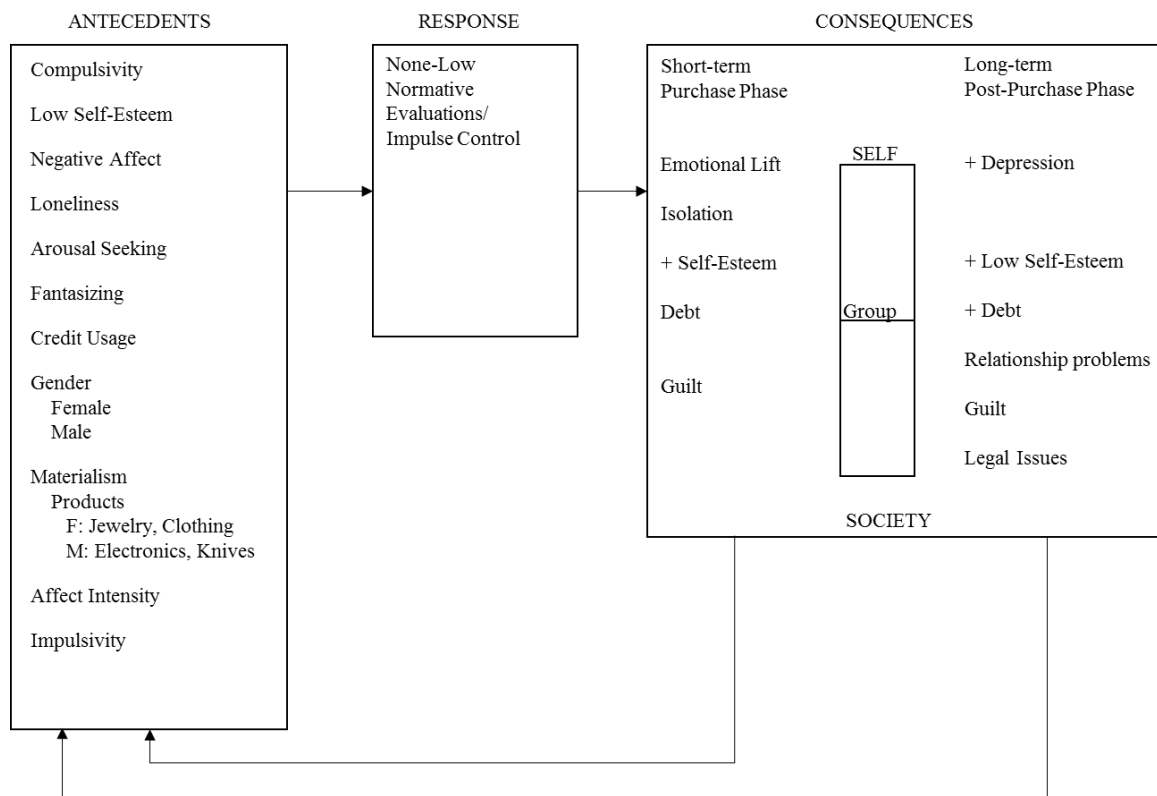


Figure 6. Theoretical Framework of Compulsive Buying. Source: “Compulsive Buying: A Theoretical Framework,” by L. Workman and D. Paper, 2010. *The Journal of Business Inquiry*, 9(1), p. 111.

Although the development of these four models offers a better understanding of CBB, most researchers have not adopted any of them as frameworks for their own studies (with the exception of Xu's 2008 study). Although research should strive for the advancement of CBB knowledge, it should also be concerned with providing continuity and consistency to the area of study. To that end, future research should consider testing and/or applying the theoretical frameworks that have been developed in previous research.

### **Theories Applied to the Study of CBB**

Researchers have drawn from theories in disciplines such as sociology and psychology to try to understand and explain the behavior of compulsive buyers. Specifically, researchers have sought out existing theories that aid in understanding why compulsive buyers engage in this type of self-destructive behavior. Escape Theory, Empty Self Theory, Symbolic Self-Completion, and Self-Discrepancy Theory are among the theories that have been used most often to make sense of CBB. In this section, a brief examination of each theory is provided.

**Escape Theory.** Escape Theory (Baumeister, 1990; Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991) was developed to explain why people may engage in self-destructive actions (O'Guinn & Faber, 2005). Typically used to explain eating disorders and suicide, this theory proposes that, for some individuals, self-awareness can be very painful. Thus, to temporarily relieve these painful feelings, individuals "narrow their attention by focusing on immediate, concrete tasks (such as buying)" (O'Guinn & Faber, 2005, p. 14). O'Guinn and Faber (2005) explain that this cognitive narrowing not only blocks out painful



thoughts but “creates disinhibition and prevents considerations of the long-term consequences of the action” (p. 14).

O’Guinn and Faber (2005) argue that Escape Theory is perhaps the most complete theory that has been used to explain why individuals engage in CBB. Faber (2006) noted that previous attempts to explain the whys behind CBB have not fully addressed the dimensions of the behavior. For example, Faber explains that the framework of mood regulation has been used to account for CBB (Faber & Christenson, 1996). That is, CBB serves as an effective strategy to improve an individual’s mood. However, this framework does not account for the extreme negative consequences that result from CBB. Thus, Faber believes that Escape Theory can provide a better theoretical account of CBB, in that compulsive buyers: (1) experience negative and painful self-awareness; (2) tend to be perfectionist and hold themselves to impossibly high standards; (3) perceived failure and negative self-feelings trigger their compulsive buying episodes; (4) experience compulsive buying episodes characterized by a high level of absorption and cognitive narrowing; (5) engage in fanciful and magical thinking during compulsive buying episodes; and (6) block out long range consequences when engaged in compulsive buying.

In another example, Yi (2012) integrated Escape Theory with the literature on negative self-conscious emotions to investigate the influence of shame-proneness on CBB. In this study, shame-proneness was conceptualized as “reflecting the intensity and frequency of chronic painful self-awareness,” prompting the individual to engage in CBB (p. 407). Findings revealed that shame-proneness is a risk factor of CBB. The author

explains that CBB “partially relays the effect of shame-proneness on the use of avoidant coping strategies following buying lapses” (p. 407).

**Empty Self Theory.** The Empty Self Theory was proposed by Cushman in 1990. According to Cushman, this version of the self emerged in the West due to a convergence of sociocultural, psychological, economic, and demographic changes (Cushman, 1990; Reeves et al., 2012). The Empty Self Theory posits a corrupted version of the self that seeks external gratification to remedy and soothe internal deficiencies.

Cushman (1990) asserts that after World War II, the empty self became predominant as a consequence of matching the needs of the new economy with the desired social conditions. The author explains that the conditions after the war shaped a self that experiences a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning. This scenario leads the self to experience a lack of personal conviction and worth, and an emotional hunger that is reflected in the acquisition and consumption of nonessential goods as an unconscious means of compensation. Reeves et al. (2012) applied the Empty Self Theory and the Absorption-Addiction model of Celebrity Worship to CBB and materialism. Findings extended the Empty Self Theory through the relationship between materialism, compulsive buying tendency, and celebrity worship. That is, those who score high in celebrity worship, materialism, and compulsive buying lack internal resources such as a clear sense of self and positive self-regard. As the authors explain,

Such people appear to need external stimulation, possibly as an escape from aversive consequences of introspection, and turn to external, yet ineffectual, sources of gratification, such as celebrity worship and materialistic pursuits, in an attempt to compensate for their deficiencies. (p. 678)

**Symbolic Self-Completion Theory.** Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) is another theory that has been applied to the study of CBB. This theory proposes that an individual who is committed to a particular self-definition (identity) and experiences a shortcoming (lack of indicators) will compensate by acquiring/using symbols of completeness associated with the desired self-definition. According to the theory, these symbols of completeness have to be acknowledged by others in order for the individual to experience self-completion. Two studies on CBB, one by Dittmar (2005a) and another by Yurchisin and Johnson (2004), employ Symbolic Self-Completion to explain the behavior.

**Self-Discrepancy Theory.** Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) proposes that individuals experience discomfort when there is a gap between the different versions of the self. Higgins (1987) considered three representations of the self: actual, ideal, and ought. The *actual* self refers to the attributes someone (yourself or another individual) believes you possess whereas the *ideal* self refers to the attributes someone (yourself or another individual) would like to possess. The *ought* self, on the other hand, refers to the attributes someone (yourself or another individual) believes you should possess. One study on CBB employs this theory seeking to explain the behavior. Specifically, Dittmar (2005a) combined Symbolic Self-Completion Theory with Self-Discrepancy Theory to examine self-discrepancies and materialistic values as predictors of CBB. The author found that those who score higher on compulsive buying exhibited higher levels of materialism and a greater gap between the actual and ideal self. Table 5 provides a brief

description of the theories discussed in this section and their applications within research on CBB.

Table 5

Theories Applied to the Study of CBB (2004-2014)

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Study</b>	<b>Main tenets</b>	<b>Application to CBB</b>
Escape Theory (Baumeister, 1990)	Faber (2006); Yi (2012)	When individuals fall short of their own standards and expectations, and become aware of these inadequacies, they experience a negative affect. They cope by avoiding meaningful self-awareness and this leads to irrational behavior.	Faber (2006) – The author explains that characteristics of Escape Theory are present in accounts of CBB.  Yi (2012) – The author integrated Escape Theory (as described in Faber [2004]) and psychological literature on negative self-conscious emotions (i.e., shame-proneness).
Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982)	Yurchisin and Johnson (2004); Dittmar (2005a)	The perception of shortcomings in one's self concept produces a motivation to compensate.	Compulsive buyers with high materialistic values present persistent self-symbolizing efforts. They do not stop evaluating if others validate their self-definition.
Empty Self Theory (Cushman, 1990, 1995)	Reeves et al. (2012)	The self is characterized by self-contained individualism, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and attempts to master the environment for one's own needs. Under this view, the self is expected to be able to soothe itself in order to be able to function	High levels of materialism and compulsive buying tendencies have been related to a pattern of poor adjustment and well-being that fits the description of the empty self.  The empty self creates a nonspecific, chronic emotional need which the individual attempts to remedy by the constant acquisition and consumption of non-essential

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Study</b>	<b>Main tenets</b>	<b>Application to CBB</b>
		autonomously. Thus, the empty self is plagued by a sense of isolation, depression, low self-esteem, and poor relationships with others, among other characteristics.	goods.
Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987)	Dittmar (2005a)	The self is comprised of the actual, ideal and ought self. These different instances of the self can contradict each other, resulting in self-discrepancies.	Actual-ideal self-discrepancies are seen as motivators of CBB aimed at reducing the perceived gaps between how the individual sees himself and how he would like to be.

Although some theories have been used in the study of CBB, there is no consensus regarding the effectiveness of one particular theory (or group of theories) to explain the practices, characteristics, and motivations of compulsive buyers. The study of the behavior has largely focused on the factors that drive it, while little attention has been paid to the application of theories that would aid in explaining the behavior as a whole, thereby suggesting the need for future research guided by theory. In the next section, research that examines the use of products to communicate the self is examined relative to CBB.

### **Compulsive Buying Behavior and Appearance-Related Products**

As discussed, studies indicate that compulsive buyers tend to buy appearance-related products (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994; Mitchell et al., 2006; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989; Schlosser et al., 1994). In this dissertation, an appearance-

related product (ARP) is defined as a product used to maintain, complement, or enhance one's appearance, specifically clothing, shoes, makeup, and jewelry. Although studies have found that this category of products tends to be preferred by compulsive buyers, research has yet to fully examine why this is the case. Moreover, studies that examine CBB relative to a specific product category, such as ARP, are scant (i.e., Johnson & Attmann, 2009; Trautmann-Attmann & Johnson, 2009). Hence the focus of this dissertation on the role of ARPs within the CBB experience.

Intrigued by the evidence suggesting that compulsive buyers tend to prefer ARPs, Johnson and Attmann (2009) and Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009) examined the behavior specific to clothing consumption. The authors coined the term "Compulsive Clothing Buying" (CCB) and defined it as the "repetitive purchasing of clothing products in response to anxiety and/or stress" (Trautmann-Attmann & Johnson, 2009, p. 269). Although the term *compulsive clothing buyers* will be used in this dissertation, at the same time, the definition of this term is expanded to include appearance-related products other than clothing. That is, CCB is used to refer to the chronic, repetitive, and excessive purchasing of ARPs (e.g., clothing, shoes, makeup, and jewelry) in response to negative emotions, life events, or feelings.

Because the focus of this dissertation is CCB, an examination of the literature on self and identity relative to the consumption of ARPs is necessary. In this section, I first provide an overview of the literature on consumption motivations. Literature that pertains specifically to ARPs as a product category will also be examined, along with literature on the communicative aspects of ARPs. I then explore the concepts of self and identity

through theories rooted in psychology and sociology that are useful for understanding how these concepts may relate to the consumption of ARPs. This exploration will provide a theoretical framework that will aid in the process of understanding and deriving meaning from the CCB experience.

### **Consuming Appearance-Related Products**

*Why do we consume?* Undoubtedly, the answer is different for each individual, as each has different motivations to consume and different outcomes derived from it (e.g., Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Tauber, 1972; Underhill, 2009; Westbrook & Black, 1985). For instance, in an early study about shopping motivations, Tauber (1972) posed the question: “Why do people shop?” Beyond the generic answer that it is “because they need to purchase something” (which only considers the product purchased), Tauber argued that more complex elements should be explored, and classified these elements into personal motives (i.e., role playing, diversion, self-gratification, physical activity, and sensory stimulation) and social motives (i.e., social experiences outside the home, communication with others having similar interests, peer group attraction, status and authority, and the pleasure of bargaining to engage in the process of shopping and buying). The multiplicity of shopping motives speaks to the fact that although people engage in the same action (shopping), the motivations to engage in this action vary from person to person. Thus, it is not only about product utility, but about the psychological benefits that the process of shopping provides. Tauber (1972) explains,

If the shopping motive is a function of only the buying motive, the decision to shop will occur when a person’s need for particular goods become sufficiently strong for him to allocate time, money, and effort to visit a store. However, the

multiplicity of hypothesized shopping motives suggest that a person may also go shopping when he needs attention, wants to be with peers, desires to meet people with similar interests, feels a need to exercise, or has leisure time. The foregoing discussion indicates that a person experiences a need and recognizes that shopping activities may satisfy that need. (p. 48)

Westbrook and Black (1985) stated that Tauber's work aids in the advancement of the understanding of shopping motivations. According to the authors, through Tauber's seminal studies, it is known that shopping behavior may arise (1) principally to acquire a product for which needs are experienced, (2) to acquire both the desired product *and* to provide satisfaction for various additional non-product related needs, or (3) to primarily attain goals unrelated to product acquisition (p. 85). In a similar vein, Arnold and Reynolds (2003) studied hedonic, non-product shopping motivations. The authors developed a taxonomy of hedonic shopping motivations (i.e., adventure, gratification, role, value, social, and idea shopping motivations) and ultimately validate Tauber's initial classifications of motivations, in that their taxonomy reflects both personal and social shopping motives.

Considering these early and fundamental studies on motivations, it can be argued that ARPs are acquired not only for their utility, but for the psychological benefits that can be derived from them. Dress scholars have argued that an ARP is imbued with meaning (Feinberg, Mataro, & Burroughs, 1992; Joseph, 1995; Kaiser, 1998; Nash, 1995; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992; Stone, 1995). According to Kaiser (1998), appearance and ARPs are powerful non-verbal communication tools. Likewise, Miller-Spillman et al. (2012) assert that dress is polysemic. That is, dress communicates multiple messages about the wearer to both the wearer and the observer. Thus, individuals, whether



consciously or unconsciously may shop, buy, and/or consume ARPs to communicate a wide range of messages, from their many roles to their multiple identities. Moreover, Miller-Spillman et al. (2012) posit that dress – any intentional modification of or supplement to the body – helps an individual to manage the self in social situations. Likewise, Kang et al. (2011) argue that individuals “hold expectations for dress and appearance that are tied to different occupational roles,” (p. 414) and add that these expectations motivate individuals to make an effort in selecting and wearing the “right” dress to communicate the “right” identity.

Research suggests that individuals not only use appearance to communicate many things about their identities (Joseph, 1995; Nash, 1995), but that they also rely on it to infer meanings about others (Stone, 1995). According to Feinberg et al. (1992), research on apparel products indicates that (a) individuals form impressions of others based on clothing cues, (b) observers behave differently toward people depending on the clothing they see them wear, and (c) individuals appear to prefer clothing that communicates images similar to the images they have of themselves (p. 18). Literature exploring the effect of clothing on human behavior (e.g., Feinberg et al., 1992; Freitas et al., 1997; Johnson, Yoo, Kim, & Lennon, 2008; Kaiser, 1998; Lennon & Miller, 1984) supports these notions. For instance, Nash (as cited in Johnson et al., 2008, pp. 3-4) illustrates how dress influences human behavior. Nash observed interactions between runners and noted that they developed a language of clothes and body movement that dictated how they behave toward each other (e.g., pass by, greet, or establish a conversation with). When two runners dress similarly, they engaged in a prolonged conversation, but when two

runners dress differently, a short nonverbal greeting occurred. Thus, dress – in its more general sense – appears to influence the nature of the relationship developed between individuals.

In a similar vein, Feinberg et al. (1992) argued that “clothing is a significant social symbol used by individuals in identity definition because (a) clothing is used in daily activity, (b) clothes constitute a frequent public display, and (c) clothing choice is an easy manipulatable symbol” (p. 18). Golden (2000) asserts that clothes, like many other things, have been transformed from necessity to art, specifically from a means of simply protecting the body to a way of expressing the self and identity to others. The author explains that when we see ourselves performing different tasks or roles, “we generally distinguish one ‘me’ from all the others by the way we dress the image” (p. 136), adding that “Because of its intimate association with all aspects of our lives, clothing carries great symbolic and metaphoric weight” (Golden, 2000, p. 136).

According to Golden (2000), clothing differs from other objects in that we experience it as self and not-self at the same time. The fact that we are always dressed makes clothing a tool for moderating the tensions between the self and the outside world. However, it is important to note that dress does not have meaning in itself, but it is the individual who assigns meaning to it. As Golden explains: “...the physical garment is already there, but it has no psychological potency until its wearer invests (a clothing metaphor) meaning in it. [...] The psychological importance of clothing is invented by the individual wearer in the service of safe exploration of the self and not-self worlds” (p. 138). In short, it can be argued that clothing is a complex object that serves many

purposes, from providing physical and nonphysical protection to delineating self related boundaries (Golden, 2000).

According to Golden (2000), like drugs or food, clothing can be the subject of an addiction. Because clothing serves a wide array of human needs, it can become captivating to consume. However, most consumers who have a fascination with clothing are not compulsive. Indeed, when individuals are compulsive consumers, the cause generally has very little to do with the product, and in this case, clothing (e.g., Faber, 2011; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Yet, as discussed earlier, clothing has been shown to be a common type of product category among compulsive buyers. Thus, it is worth asking the questions: *Under what conditions does an ordinary interest in clothing become compulsive? And, what is it about clothing that makes it a subject of compulsion?* (Golden, 2000). Because such questions have generally been overlooked in the compulsive buying literature, they are used to guide the approach to the topic of CBB in this dissertation.

Golden (2000) proposed that clothing and compulsions can be considered to be naturally intertwined, writing that:

Clothes lend themselves to compulsive scenarios because of their metaphoric richness, their unsurpassed selfobject [*sic*] potential, and their conceptual location in the same transitional area in which the vicissitudes of magical thinking occur. In addition, they can to some degree substitute concretely for unreliable internal resources – for instance, provide a look of self-confidence for a person who cannot feel it – and so they offer a kind of tempting transitional mimicry when the need arises. (p. 152)

However, the author does not provide empirical evidence supporting such claims. In addition, Golden's proposition does not specify the nature of the relationship between clothing and the individual. Research in CBB suggests that compulsive buyers tend to buy things out of the need to consume, that the items purchased are rarely used, and that the behavior is not about the object *per se* but about the process in itself (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Schlosser et al., 1994). This evidence has implications for the study of clothing and the self. First, it suggests that compulsive buyers' behaviors may disrupt the accepted apparel consumption process (Winakor, 1969). Second, it indicates that compulsive buyers may have more complex reasons for the purchase of goods than non-compulsive consumers.

Winakor (1969) proposed that the apparel consumption process is comprised of three phases: (1) acquisition, (2) inventory (use, care, active storage), and (3) disposition of goods. Among compulsive buyers, items purchased are not typically worn or used. Thus, it is likely that the consumption process phases either do not occur or look differently when applied to compulsive clothing consumption. Indeed, it may be that they use fantasizing to figuratively "consume" the item before acquiring it (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). The act of acquisition therefore becomes, at the same time, the act of disposition.

On the other hand, the behavior of compulsive buyers suggests that it is not the properties of clothing that motivate CCB behavior, but something else. Some researchers have pointed to the interaction with sales representatives as one of the most valued elements of the shopping and buying process among compulsive buyers (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). That is, compulsive buyers experience feelings of loneliness, and the

interaction with store personnel can provide them with positive feedback that helps to boost low self-esteem (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Indeed, it has been suggested that compulsive buyers' low self-esteem helps to explain why they tend to prefer ARP, in as much as these items attract recognition from others, which, in turn, helps to enhance feelings of self-worth (Marčinko, Bolanča, & Rudan, 2006).

Moreover, while some suggest that compulsive buyers are less concerned about the product as a motive for acquisition (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989), others have found that compulsive buyers present high levels of apparel involvement, fashion orientation, and perceived social status associated with buying (Park & Burns, 2005; Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004). The theoretical inconsistencies found in the literature and the lack of unified explanations regarding compulsive buyers' practices point to the need for more research on CBB and specifically on CCB, particularly research that sheds light on the latter's various dimensions. To address this need, this dissertation explores theories that have been designed to explain or describe "normal" buying and consumption behaviors through the lived experiences of compulsive clothing buyers. To get a better idea of how ARPs may be used by consumers, in the next section, I present a brief overview of theories of the self and discuss the potential application of them to CCB.

### **Theories of the Self**

Researchers have suggested that to understand people we must understand their relationships with objects. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) explain that, "To understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things. What things are cherished, and why, should become

part of our knowledge of human beings” (p. 1). Objects, in general, have been the focus of countless studies. Objects related to an individual’s appearance have also received a great deal of attention (e.g., Johnson et al., 2008; Kaiser, 1998; Kang et al., 2011; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992; Stone, 1995). In an attempt to provide an in-depth understanding of the meanings and communicative aspects of ARP, dress scholars have borrowed theories from disciplines such as psychology and sociology. Chief among them are theories that are designed to examine how objects relate to the self, including Symbolic Self-Completion Theory. Other theories, such as Dialogical Self Theory, have also been helpful in understanding how individuals use products to communicate the self. A brief description of both of these theories and their potential applications to CCB is provided below.

**Symbolic Self-Completion Theory.** Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) is useful for explaining the role of clothing relative to the self. Symbolic Self-Completion proposes that when important indicators of an individual’s self-definitions are lacking, he or she will experience a sense of incompleteness and will feel the need for self-symbolizing. By engaging in activities or acquiring products associated with that particular self-definition, the individual will be able to convince others, and consequently him or herself, that he or she possesses a particular self-definition and thus achieves self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982).

Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981) described three major concepts that comprise Symbolic Self-Completion Theory: (1) commitment to self-defining goals, (2) symbols of

completeness, and (3) social reality. The authors defined self-definition as “a sense of oneself as having permanent qualities, which in turn have implications for future behavioral and thinking patterns” (p. 31). According to the authors, self-definitions can be universal or narrow. Self-definitions are often occupationally directed, but not in the sense of a social role. Self-definitions are not intended to be viewed as derived from behavior or defined in terms of behavior. The authors argue that self-definitions are created by society and are communicated to society in the form of symbols. Gollwitzer, Wicklund, and Hilton (1982) commented that the process of self-completion cannot be observed unless the individual is committed to a self-defining goal.

Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981) posit that to distinguish self-defined goals from other kind of goals, a clear idea of what “self-defining” means is important. They explain that self-defining “means that people predicate of themselves some quality that corresponds to a sense of control and capability, such as parent, athlete, or artist” (p. 92). According to the authors, goals have to be defined by interacting with others and the sense of progress toward these goals requires the recognition of others.

Symbols of completeness are further defined as “indicators of one’s standing with respect to a self-defining goal that are potentially recognizable by others” (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, p. 92). Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) refer to such symbols as the building blocks of self-definition. They explain that the most primitive form of symbol is the positive self-description. For example, an individual can describe himself as fluent in Spanish. Other, perhaps less evident symbols of that individual’s self-definition might be that he (1) lived for a while in a Spanish speaking country, (2) holds an academic degree

in Spanish, or (3) is friends with a Spanish-speaker. The purpose of the symbol is simple: to prompt a response from society. The symbol will be effective as long as society acknowledges the individual's desired self-definition. As in the previous example, the symbol used by the individual will be effective only if others recognize that he is, in fact, fluent in Spanish.

Symbolic Self-Completion Theory also acknowledges the concept of social reality. This concept is based on the ideas of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934), "who state that a sense of self can come into being and remain stable only by virtue and acknowledgement of others" (Gollwitzer et al., 1982, p. 360). In other words, self-defining goals are dependent on the acknowledgements of others, in as much as an individual cannot validate his/her self-definition until another person recognizes it.

*Symbolic Self-Completion Theory and CBB.* Symbolic Self-Completion Theory helps explain the behavior of compulsive buyers. In a study of college students, Yurchisin and Johnson (2004) used Symbolic Self-Completion Theory to provide a context for their research and to inform their findings. Yurchisin and Johnson (2004) found that apparel-product involvement, materialism, perceived social status associated with buying, and low self-esteem significantly influences CBB. The authors argued that the positive relationship found between apparel-product involvement and CBB suggests that the process of symbolic self-completion drives the behavior. Likewise, Dittmar et al. (1996) posit that the process of symbolic self-completion is intrinsically related to CBB.

Dittmar (2005a) also applied Symbolic Self-Completion Theory to the study of CBB. The author asserts that consumer goods not only help individuals to regulate their



emotions and gain social status, but, most importantly, such goods can symbolically determine who an individual is as well as who he or she would like to be. As Dittmar explains, “people increasingly consume the symbolic meanings associated with goods in expressing their identities and searching for a better self” (p. 835). In Dittmar’s study, compulsive buyers were found to make more psychologically motivated purchases than non-compulsive buyers, and that clothing was the most common item bought in this way. In contrast to other types of goods, Dittmar posits that clothing fulfills a stronger symbolic self-completion function.

Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009), in a study about compulsive clothing buying, suggest that the process of symbolic self-completion might explain why individuals compulsively buy clothing. The authors explained that appearance seems to be of particular importance for female compulsive buyers. Thus, these consumers may use apparel products to enhance the impression they have about themselves and/or to enhance the impression others have of them. Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson suggest that a fashionable apparel product might act as “a symbol that female compulsive buyers use to define themselves, increase their self-confidence and project an ideal image” (p. 271).

In sum, previous studies on CBB support the notion that compulsive buyers may buy a certain type of goods (e.g., ARPs) out of consideration of the symbols that can be used to achieve a desired self-definition. However, some of the characteristics regarding the consumption practices of compulsive buyers contradicts such suggestions, specifically that compulsive buyers usually do not use (e.g., wear) the items they buy

(Christenson et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; Schlosser et al., 1994). It is clear that further research is needed to better understand this inconsistency. Thus, a primary goal of this dissertation was to explore what ARP consumption means in the context of compulsive buying.

**Dialogical Self Theory.** Dialogical Self Theory was originally proposed by Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon in 1992. Bahl and Milne (2010) further developed the theory and applied it to the consumption of products. According to Bahl and Milne (2010), Dialogical Self Theory “provides a framework to attend to relationships between different thoughts and perspectives in consumers in order to understand how inconsistencies are experienced and dealt with in consumption contexts” (p. 177). The theory recognizes the self at three levels: meta-position, I-position, and *Me*'s. The “I” refers to the self as knower and “me” the self as known, including people, thoughts, and possessions that the self identifies with. The meta-self is a “special” kind of I-position that maintains a more neutral, less biased position as compared to other I-positions.

Dialogical Self Theory recognizes that each “me” acts individually. That is, each “me” is a character with its own voice and independent view of the world. Bahl and Milne (2010) further explain that the Dialogical Self Theory “deals with the conflict among multiple selves by allowing each self or me to speak for itself by being provided an I-position to speak from and engage in dialog” (p. 177). In other words, the Dialogical Self Theory recognizes multiple selves and allows each to have its own voice (Bahl & Milne, 2010). Bahl and Milne (2010) posit that the dialogical self “allows for multiple authors who have independent stories and can engage in dialogs coming from different

perspectives” (p. 177). The authors assert that through this theory a better understanding of consumer experiences and decision-making in the marketplace can be attained.

As previously mentioned, the Dialogical Self Theory recognizes a meta-self. The meta-self can be seen as a “referee” between the competing voices. As Bahl and Milne (2010) explain: “The meta-self maintains a more balanced perspective than the specific I-positions and juxtaposes different I-positions without identifying with any particular position” (p. 177). The authors clarify that the meta-self is not to be confused with a metaperspective, because the meta-self is not seen as being superior to the other I-positions. Moreover, the voice of the meta-self can be overshadowed by selves at I-positions, either temporarily or for extended period of times.

Bahl and Milne (2010) found that Dialogical Self Theory helps to explain negative consumption behaviors, specifically how people decide whether or not to engage in them. Understanding an individual’s consumption preferences at multiple I-positions helps to identify “the source of mixed feelings expressed at the meta-self level and gain a better understanding of the actual consumption experience” (p. 183). The following example provided by Bahl and Milne (2010) helps to illustrate the Dialogical Self Theory,

*Brad’s consumption of donuts.* If we look at the experience of donuts from the lens of his different I-positions, we can see that donuts are experienced as a positive activity only from the lens of his open self, which finds them “fun” and enjoys sharing them.” His closed and critical selves use donuts as “an instant fix” for “drowning sorrow.” And even though he says he “loves” donuts from the lens of his critical self, he realizes that they affect his looks and the he will “hate” himself for eating them, but he still eats them to find instant relief. (p. 183)

Brad's example illustrates the conflicting thoughts experienced by consumers when it comes to the consumption of products.

*Dialogical Self Theory and CBB.* Dialogical Self Theory appears to be particularly useful in understanding the compulsive buying experience, as it deals with the cognitive process of the individual. Moreover, this theory considers the self at multiple levels and allows for an understanding of different "voices."

Researchers studying CBB have not fully addressed how or why individuals engage in the excessive consumption of products, or why they engage in buying as opposed to other compulsive activities such as gambling, eating disorders, or drug abuse. Likewise, as mentioned previously, there is very little investigation into why individuals suffering from CBB tend to prefer ARPs. The Dialogical Self Theory focuses on the thinking of the individual as related to the behavior, which may help better explain why compulsive buyers prefer ARPs, as well as what these products mean for these consumers.

Research on CBB indicates that although individuals recognize the negative consequences of the behavior, efforts to stop it are often unsuccessful (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010). Thus, some level of conflict is implicit in the behavior. By considering Dialogical Self Theory related to CCB, it is hoped that a better understanding of the phenomenon can be achieved.

As previously discussed, the overarching purpose of this dissertation is to explore the compulsive buying phenomenon relative to appearance-related products. Specifically, in this dissertation I seek to (1) examine the behaviors comprising compulsive buying, (2) investigate the role of ARPs relative to these behaviors, and (3) explore the meanings that

compulsive buyers assign to these products. The theories presented in this section serve as a context in which the behaviors of compulsive clothing buyers may be better understood. To clarify, these theories can be used as tools in a toolbox to make sense out of the phenomenon. For instance, both Empty Self Theory and Escape Theory posit a damaged sense of self that seeks to avoid its painful reality through shopping and buying activities. Thus, these theories can aid in the process of understanding the underlying motivations to engage in CBB, and the behaviors comprising the compulsive buying experience.

Specifically, the Dialogical Self Theory offers an opportunity to make sense out of the complexities of the compulsive clothing buyers' behaviors, as it provides a framework to understand their thought processes and cognitive conflicts. The role of ARPs can also be explored in the context of this theory, as it offers a particular frame or lens through which the consumer decision-making process may be explained. Finally, Symbolic Self-Completion Theory is based on the idea that the self is constructed and validated through interaction with others, which, in turn, requires the consumption of goods. These theories are helpful in identifying and understanding similarities and differences between compulsive buyers and non-compulsive buyers. Although these theories have primarily been used to explain "normal" consumption, they may also be useful in exploring the complexities of CCB as a particular form of CBB.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have reviewed literature from various disciplines relevant to the guiding question of this dissertation, which is: *What is it like to be a compulsive clothing*

*buyer?* This chapter began with an overview of relevant research on compulsive buying behavior, including its characteristics, diagnosis, and assessment, as well as product preferences relative to it. This overview was followed by a discussion of the development and application of theory to the study of CBB. Lastly, the literature on the self and appearance-related products was explored. Through the examination of research relevant to the central goal of this dissertation, gaps in the existing literature were highlighted and specific areas in need of further investigation that are addressed by this study were indicated. In the next chapter, the methodological framework and methods that were used to collect data are explained.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

The goal of this study is to explore the phenomenon of compulsive buying behavior relative to appearance-related products, by addressing the question: *What is it like to be a compulsive clothing buyer?* As discussed in Chapter I, a phenomenological approach to inquiry was used to accomplish the three objectives of the study, which are: (1) to examine the behaviors that comprise compulsive clothing buying; (2) to investigate the role of appearance-related products relative to these behaviors, and (3) to explore the meanings compulsive clothing buyers assign to appearance-related products.

This study begins to fill a gap within the consumer research literature regarding the preference among compulsive buyers for appearance-related items (i.e., clothing, shoes, make-up, and jewelry) that has been suggested by previous studies. In this chapter, I outline the methodological framework used in exploring the preferences and behaviors that comprise compulsive clothing buying, and the meanings of these preferences and behaviors from the perspective of compulsive clothing buyers. This framework is constructed using a phenomenological approach, which is outlined within the two parts of this chapter: (1) *Procedure* and (2) *Process*.

I begin with a general discussion of phenomenology in the context of interpretive research. Included in this discussion are epistemological and methodological factors involved in the phenomenological approach to research as the study of lived experience.

Then, I discuss the procedures that I used to conduct the study, beginning with an explanation of participant selection. This explanation is followed by a discussion of the methods that I used to gather data, including in-depth interviews and personal journals.

The second part of this chapter focuses on the analysis and interpretation of lived experience from a phenomenological-interpretive perspective. In this section, I explain the three levels of interpretation that were developed based on the data gathered, including personal narratives, thematic interpretation, and theoretical considerations. This section concludes with a discussion of how the interpretation was forged through a partnership between myself and each of the participants.

#### **Procedure: Exploring Lived Experience through Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a comprehensive term that refers to both a philosophical movement and a range of research approaches (Finlay, 2008). The philosopher and mathematician Edmund Husserl is credited with initiating the phenomenological school of thought in the early 1900s. Groenewald (2004) commented that although the origins of phenomenology can be traced back to Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, researchers recognize Husserl as the father of phenomenology during the twentieth century. His approach was considered a radical new way of doing philosophy. Husserl's phenomenology was described by van Manen (1990) as "a discipline that endeavors to describe how the world is constituted and experienced through conscious acts" (p. 184). Over the years, however, philosophers such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty would modify Husserl's phenomenology, giving it a different, and sometimes more applied focus.



Although phenomenology has been approached from different vantage points, researchers have argued that there are certain commonalities among them. In this regard, Giorgi (1989) stated four core characteristics that are common across all variations of the phenomenological approach: (1) the research is rigorously descriptive; (2) the research uses phenomenological reduction; (3) the research explores the intentional relationship between persons and situations; and (4) the research discloses the essences of meaning immanent in human experiences through imaginative variation. Researchers also argue that the nature of phenomenology allows us to not only produce purely phenomenological research, but also to use its “tools” for other types of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998).

Phenomenology has been defined as the science of the phenomenon. According to Husserl (1970a), pure phenomenological research seeks to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective that is free of prejudices or, “pure knowledge.” More specifically, Wertz (2005) describes phenomenology in the following way: “phenomenology is a low-hovering, in-dwelling, meditative philosophy that glories in the concreteness of person-world relations and accords lived experience, with all its indeterminacy [*sic*] and ambiguity, primacy over the known” (p. 175).

Finlay (2008) explains that the focus of phenomenology is on the way things appear to us through experience or in our consciousness. To this end, the phenomenological researcher aims to provide fresh, complex, and rich descriptions of a phenomenon, as the individual experiences it. The question is, “What is this kind of experience like?” or, “How does the lived world present itself to me?” According to van

Manen (1990), phenomenology differs from other interpretive research approaches, such as ethnography, in that phenomenology makes a distinction between appearance and essence.

For van Manen (1984), phenomenology differs from almost every other science, in that it attempts to gain detailed descriptions of the way we experience the world. This approach offers us the possibility of obtaining believable insight that brings us in more direct contact with the world. According to van Manen, “there is a difference between comprehending the project of phenomenology intellectually and understanding it from the inside, as it were” (p. 37). Likewise, Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues that we can only understand phenomenology by doing it, by becoming immersed in the process ourselves. However, there are a variety of ways that this process has been conceived. For instance, van Manen (1984) explains that phenomenology is the study of lived experiences (life-world), the study of essences, the attentive practice of thoughtfulness, a search for what it means to be a human, and a poetizing activity (pp. 37-39).

As the study of lived experiences (the life-world), van Manen (1984) explains that phenomenology aims to come to a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. It is the study of the world as we immediately experience it, rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or theorize about it. From this perspective, the main question becomes: “What is this or that kind of experience like?” As the study of essences, van Manen explains that phenomenology asks about the very nature of a phenomenon: what it is that makes a “thing” what it is. In this case, according to van Manen, phenomenology is “less interested in whether something actually happened, how

often it happened, or how the occurrence of an experience is related to the prevalence of other conditions or events” (p. 38).

In terms of the idea that phenomenology is an attentive practice of thoughtfulness, van Manen remarked that phenomenology can be considered a synonym of thoughtfulness. According to the author, thoughtfulness reflects the notion of phenomenology; it is described as “a minding, a heeding, a caring attunement - a heedful, mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life” (p. 38). Thus, to a certain degree, the theoretical practice of phenomenological research is a ministering of thoughtfulness. On the other hand, as a search for what it means to be human, van Manen (1984) explains:

As we research the possible meaning structures of our lived experiences, we come to a fuller grasp of what it means to be in the world as a man, a woman, a child, taking into account the sociocultural and the historical traditions which have given meaning to our ways of being in the world. (p. 38)

Thus, phenomenological research has as its ultimate aim to fulfill our human nature: to become more fully who we are (van Manen, 1984). Finally, van Manen (1984) explains that when phenomenology is framed as a poetizing activity, it highlights the fact that phenomenology is textual as it employs methods designed to describe our lived experiences.

The assumptions underlying a phenomenological study shape the ways the researcher views the world and what can be considered as knowable. The goal of phenomenological research is to determine what a lived experience means for an individual (Moustakas, 1994). Meaning is derived from and framed through

understanding. Understanding, along with interpretation, is therefore the focus of the research outcome. In this dissertation, the process of buying clothing compulsively is seen as a particular lived experience. Thus, the phenomenological approach offered the opportunity to better understand what it means for those individuals who experience and live it.

An interpretive or qualitative ontology such as that of phenomenology postulates that there are multiple realities, and that these realities are socially constructed by individuals. In other words, they do not exist as distinct from the individuals who create/experience them. Qualitative research, consequently, was conceived as a means to understand what these multiple realities mean (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Epistemological assumptions within this framework address the question: *How do we come to know the world through these realities?* For phenomenology, understanding the meanings behind phenomena is the epistemological goal. When this approach is applied to the research process, the primary instrument of data collection is the researcher, and the methodology he/she uses reflects certain epistemological assumptions. More specifically, rather than starting with scientific processes, the methodological process of phenomenology begins with the explanation of lived experience (Kvale, 1996).

### **Data Collection Methods**

As previously discussed, an interpretive, or qualitative approach to data collection was employed in this dissertation, as it allows for the development of an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon from the participants' perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Different qualitative methods often share similar functions, and therefore

can be used together through a multi-method approach (Merriam, 1998). The use of multi-methods is particularly helpful, as it allows the researcher multiple points of departure relative to the topic, which, in turn, serve to strengthen the validity of the research. In this dissertation, two specific methods of data collection were used: (1) in-depth interviews and (2) personal journals. A questionnaire was also used as part of the interviews to compile demographic information on each participant. A discussion of both data collection methods follows.

**In-depth Interviews.** I conducted a total of five in-depth, one-on-one interviews with each participant. Interviews are usually seen as a conversation with a specific purpose; the researcher engages the participant in a conversation, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon at hand by focusing on the individual's perspective and experience as the starting point (Daines, 1989). Indeed, McCracken (1988) points out that interviews allow respondents to tell their own stories and in their own words. Likewise, according to van Manen (1990), interviews are a vehicle (1) to explore and gather "experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon" (p. 66), and (2) to develop a conversational relationship with an individual regarding the meaning of an experience. As discussed in Chapter II, examination of the literature in CBB reveals that little is known about the lived experiences of compulsive buyers. Moreover, since the study of specific product categories was initiated only very recently (i.e., Johnson & Attmann, 2009; Trautmann-Attmann & Johnson, 2009) and it has been studied primarily from a positivist perspective, little is known about what it is like to be a compulsive clothing

buyer. Thus, in-depth interviews were deemed appropriate for the present study. As Flyvbjerg (2001) explains, talking to someone is the only way to truly understand that person's experiences in his or her everyday life. In this regard, interviews provided me with the opportunity to begin conversations that helped me to grasp participants' lived experiences, and therefore to better understand what it is like to be a compulsive clothing buyer.

As is the practice within qualitative research, interviews were conducted with a small number of participants, in this case six women, until the saturation point was reached (Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988). Five in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant over a period of three months. Specifically, I met with each participant five times, from one to three hours each time for a total of 30 interviews and 38 hours of audio recordings. After a screening interview, I conducted an introductory meeting in which I talked to the participant about the goals and objectives of the study, explained to her the informed consent and how she was going to be collaborating, and clarified questions she might have. I asked each participant to complete the demographic questionnaire and I provided instructions for completing the journal (discussed below). Given the nature of the behavior under study, each participant was provided with a journal, rather than giving her a reason to engage in a shopping/buying activity. As part of this introductory session, I also set up a tentative schedule for subsequent interviews with the participant.

Because participants resided in different parts of the U.S., interviews were conducted using Skype or FaceTime (online video based calls). Most participants

expressed feeling comfortable using these applications, except one who expressed that she preferred to be interviewed by phone. To conduct her interviews, I used the “speaker” feature of my mobile phone to be able to record the conversation. To ensure a systematic approach to the interview data collection process, I followed a semi-structured interview outline containing several open-ended questions (Merriam, 1998) (see Appendix A). Questions were developed based on existing literature on the topic, particularly the work conducted by Benson (2000, 2008) and Mitchell (2011).

Each interview session was designed to address a specific aspect of the behavior (see Appendix B). For instance, the first interview was comprised of introductory questions, whereby the participant was asked to talk about a recent experience with shopping and/or buying. Participants were then asked to go more in-depth into their behaviors by discussing triggers/motivators, the moment of realization, the shopping and buying process, product and store preferences, and the consequences of shopping/buying behaviors. The goal was to get a broad understanding of the experience as lived by the participant. In subsequent interviews, these aspects were explored more in-depth. Finally, the purpose of the last interview was to provide closure. For example, participants were asked if they wanted to share any other thoughts, reflections or experiences with shopping and buying, as well as how they felt through the research process.

Following McCracken’s (1988) recommendation, a demographic questionnaire was completed by the participant during the introductory meeting. The information gathered from the questionnaire was useful for providing a context for understanding each participant’s experiences, particularly the socio-cultural, familial, financial, and

lifestyle factors that contextualize them. Gathering demographic information from the participant also allowed me to explore the links between a participant's shopping/buying behaviors and her current lifestyle. The demographic questionnaire is included as Appendix C.

**Personal Journals.** Personal journals comprised the second approach to data collection for this dissertation. When employed in research, journals are considered to be useful in settings where (1) activities or events are expected to change over time, (2) contextual information (e.g., circumstances leading up to or following an event) are considered important, and (3) respondents are likely to experience difficulties remembering past experiences (Wiseman, Conteh, & Matovu, 2005, p. 394). Researchers have argued that journals offer greater accuracy in collecting data about a phenomenon as compared to interviews because of the reflexive nature of journal writing (Moule & Goodman, 2009; Nicholl, 2010; Wiseman et al., 2005). That is, information gathered through a journal is considered to be more precise, as it relies on short-term versus long-term memory. In addition, journals allow participants to answer questions on their own time (Grosh & Glewwe, 2000).

In qualitative research, journals are typically used as a means for participants to record their feelings, experiences, events, actions, and reflections (Moule & Goodman, 2009). Wiseman et al. (2005) explain that journals help to place the phenomenon under study in a broader social, economic, and/or political context. In line with the aim of phenomenological research, personal journals can provide access to people's perceptions and interpretations of their own worlds (Alaszewski, 2006). Polit and Beck (2006) argue



that a journal helps to develop a realistic picture of a phenomenon while it provides detailed descriptions of an individual's daily life.

In this study, journals were particularly helpful as this method allowed participants to record their thoughts and feelings about their shopping and buying experiences as they occurred, without the presence of an "outsider," and at their own pace. Moreover, journaling allowed for a greater understanding of the compulsive clothing buying experience, as journal data complemented that of the interviews (Nicholl, 2010). Black (2011) argued that efforts to understand CBB benefit from the recording of shopping and buying behavior among compulsive buyers. Benson (2008) asserted that shopping journals are helpful because "in the mental and physical act of writing, we often discover what we really think" (p. 25). From a research perspective, this reflexive process is particularly helpful, as it allows for the possibility of identifying compulsive buyers' underlying patterns of shopping and buying that otherwise may not be revealed.

Wiseman et al. (2005) posited that records of consumption and expenditures should not be kept for more than four weeks at a time, because over time individuals "become tired of keeping records and become less thorough in their reporting" (p. 397). Thus, participants were asked to complete the journal for a period of four weeks. Some participants decided to keep writing for a longer period of time, as they found the exercise to be helpful for them. In terms of the format of the journal, Wiseman et al. (2005) explained that journals used for the purposes of data collection can either be structured or unstructured. Structured journals often take the form of a log, or a calendar in which participants make daily entries. These entries may follow a series of prompts, or

may be questionnaire-like, in which participants check the boxes that best represent their perspectives, behaviors, and feelings, among other possibilities. In contrast, unstructured journals allow participants to record events as they occur and typically use minimal prompts. For this dissertation, I employed a combination of both approaches, resulting in a semi-structured journal format.

Although journaling has been proven to be a valuable research tool, this method is not without limitations. Researchers have noted that journals can be a relatively costly approach to data gathering in terms of resources (i.e., time and energy) on the part of participants and researchers (Alaszewski, 2006; Richardson, 1994; Wiseman et al., 2005). Journals are very labor intensive, often causing participants to gradually stop recording detailed accounts of their experiences over time (Wiseman et al., 2005). Thus, in order to keep participants engaged in the journaling process and to minimize any fatigue, there were opportunities to make free entries about any experiences, feelings, and thoughts, along with specific activities designed to help them in documenting their behaviors and experiences. These activities were based on recommendations from Benson (2008), Catalano and Sonenberg (1993), and Mitchell (2011). All of these authors include journal activities that help individuals to identify the root and scope of their compulsive buying behaviors. Activities were modified slightly to fit the goals of the present study (see Appendix D).

Following Black's (2011) recommendations, participants were asked to record their shopping and buying experiences as they engage in them. Participants were also asked to record where they shopped, how much they spent, and what they bought during

each shopping/buying episode. In addition, participants were asked to record reasons for purchasing the articles and to discuss how they felt before, during, and after the episode. Participants were also asked to note whether the buying episode was prompted by something in particular (e.g., mood, boredom, etc.). Acknowledging the fact that some individuals enjoy writing more than others, participants had the opportunity to record this information in two ways: (1) by using the purchasing record included in the journal (see Appendix E) or (2) by writing it out in the free space.

As mentioned earlier, instructions on how to fill out the journal were provided during the introductory meeting. Participants were asked to have the journal with them for each subsequent interview. This allowed me to make sure the participant was filling out the journal, to discuss any questions or concerns that arose, and to talk about their entries. Considering the labor-intensive nature of this task, I continuously encouraged participants to maintain a record of their experiences, feelings, and thoughts in the journal. Alternative ways of completing the journal were considered for those participants who were not comfortable using a hand-written format. Specifically, some participants asked to type their entries rather than hand-write them. They printed out those pages and then sent them back to me along with the rest of the journal.

The data collected through journaling was used to gain a better understanding of participants' typical buying behaviors. In addition, it was used to supplement the interview data. Black (2011) found that using journals enables compulsive buyers to "become fully aware of the extent and severity of their disorder" (p. 36). Through the process of journaling, participants were also able to share anecdotes and details that may

not have occurred to them during the interview process. In addition, the data collected through journals helped to build a more comprehensive account of the CCB experience.

### **Participant Sample and Selection**

Because understanding the compulsive clothing buying experience is the primary goal of this dissertation, I explored the behaviors that comprise compulsive clothing buying, the role of appearance-related products relative to these behaviors, and the meanings assigned to them from the perspective of the compulsive clothing buyer. In doing so, I began by talking with the main actors of this experience: compulsive clothing buyers.

**Sample Composition.** Considering the purpose and objectives of the study, as well as the in-depth nature of the topic, I examined the experiences of six women between the ages of 32 and 55 (see Table 6). Although the initial goal was to examine the experiences of both men and women, only women volunteered to participate in the study. Perhaps the fact that women are more likely to come forward about their issues with shopping and buying (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989; Workman & Paper, 2010) and the general view that shopping is more of a women’s activity affected sample composition. In terms of level of education, three out of the six participants had a Master’s degree – two of which were working on a doctorate – one had a Doctoral degree, one had a Law degree, and one had high school diploma. With regards to marital status, three out of the six participants were married, two were single and one was divorced. Income levels ranged from \$20,000 to \$120,000. To preserve confidentiality, real names are not used to identify participants.

Table 6

## Participant Information

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Income</b>
Dolores	51	Caucasian	Doctoral Degree	Associate Professor	Married	\$80,000
Helen	32	Asian	Master's Degree	Student	Single	\$20,000
Julia	28	Asian American	Master's Degree	Student	Single	Not reported
Kelly	30	Caucasian	Professional Degree	Stay at Home Mom/Inactive Attorney	Married	\$120,000*
Lisa	55	Caucasian	High School Degree	University Program Coordinator	Divorced	\$52,000
Lynn	48	Caucasian	Master's Degree	Writer	Married	Not reported

*Note.* \*Spouse/Partner Income

**Sampling Procedure.** As is typical within qualitative research, I used a purposive sampling strategy. Robinson (2014) explains that in a purposive sampling strategy it is assumed, based on the researcher's "a-priori theoretical understanding of the topic being studied, that certain categories of individuals may have a unique, different or important perspective on the phenomenon in question and their presence in the sample should be ensured" (p. 32). In this dissertation, the unique experiences of individuals affected by CCB were considered of vital importance to be able to address the question of *What is it*

*like to be a compulsive clothing buyer?* Family members of a compulsive buyer, or even a therapist, could have talked about the many implications of CBB/CCB. However, it is the compulsive buyer who can provide the most authentic account of the phenomenon, as she is the one experiencing it. As such, it is through the detailed description of the compulsive clothing buyer's lived experiences that we can come to know "what it is like" to be one.

**Recruitment Process.** Previous research has demonstrated that CBB symptomatology overlaps with other psychiatric disorders (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Claes et al., 2011; Lejoyeux et al., 1997; Lejoyeux et al., 1995; McElroy et al., 1994; Ninan et al., 2000; Schlosser et al., 1994), thereby pointing to the need for caution when selecting participants for research on CBB. Researchers have suggested that these comorbidities may significantly affect study outcomes. For example, bipolar disorder may lead to inappropriate buying and spending, particularly when in the manic stage, and therefore might represent compulsive buying as a secondary rather than a primary disorder (e.g., Dell'Osso et al., 2008). In addition, it has been argued that the co-occurrence of CBB with other disorders may interfere with the stability of the research (Black et al., 1998). For example, including individuals who are suffering from personality disorders or those exhibiting suicidal behavior in the sample might result in a higher dropout rate or even delay the completion of the study.

To avoid such issues stemming from the sample, strict requirements for study participation were followed (see Appendix F). First, participants needed to be 18 years old or older and had to meet the diagnosis criteria proposed by McElroy et al. (1994) (see

Appendix G), as described in Chapter I. McElroy et al.'s criteria was assessed through the *Questionnaire about Buying Behavior* developed by Lejoyeux et al. (1997), as it reflects the dimensions comprising McElroy et al.'s criteria. Second, participants were asked to answer the modified version of Edwards' (1993) Compulsive Buying Scale and score above the average (see Appendix H). This screening instrument was selected over Faber and O'Guinn's (1992) Compulsive Buying Scale because it has been successfully modified to be used in the context of apparel products in a previous study (Johnson & Attmann, 2009). Additionally, in preliminary research that I conducted with a total of six mental health providers, it was found that Edwards' scale was considered to be more clear and comprehensive than Faber and O'Guinn's scale, particularly in terms of the dimensions of the behavior that are reflected in the scale. However, participants did recommend wording modifications. Thus, for the purposes of this dissertation, minimal modifications in the wording of the Edwards' Compulsive Buying Scale were made. For example, the words "binge" and "high" have been replaced with "spree" and "euphoric" for the sake of clarity. The results of the screening questionnaire were used exclusively for sampling purposes; that is, they were not included in the analysis of data.

In addition to the modified version of Edward's (1993) Compulsive Buying Scale, participants were required to answer another set of questions designed to assess the frequency of clothing purchase, withdrawal symptoms, and social, personal, and work/study impact of the behavior (see Appendix I). This set of questions was developed based on the recommendations made by the participants in the aforementioned preliminary study. Participants suggested the development of a series of questions that

serve as a complement to the screening questionnaire (see Appendix J), in as much as they posited that presence of symptoms does not necessarily indicate presence of the behavior (Martínez-Novoa & Hodges, 2016). This additional instrument was therefore designed to aid in the quest to better identify compulsive buyers prior to participation in the study.

Moreover, two additional measures were used to aid in the identification of compulsive buyers: the Depression, Stress, and Anxiety Scale (DASS) and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem scale. The DASS is a 21-item developed by Lovibond and Lovibond in 1995 that measures depression, anxiety, and stress over the previous week. Each item is measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 = did not apply to me at all, to 3 = applied to me very much, or most of the time. Previous research has reported excellent internal consistency as well as high discriminant validity between the three subscales comprising the measure (Kyrios, McQueen, & Moulding, 2013). For instance, Ridgway et al. (2008), reported internal consistency reliabilities of .89 for the depression subscale, .72 for the anxiety subscale, and .83 for the stress subscale. From this scale, only the items measuring anxiety (e.g., "I felt scared without any good reason") and depression (e.g., "I felt that I had nothing to look forward to") were used.

The second measure is the Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem scale. This unidimensional scale is comprised of 10-items (e.g., "At times I think I am not good at all") measured on a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree). This scale has been proven to be highly reliable and has been widely used in the study of CBB (e.g., Davenport et al., 2012; Hanley & Wilhelm, 1992; Yurchisin &



Johnson, 2004). As discussed in Chapter II, compulsive buyers have been found to have lower self-esteem than non-compulsive buyers and to experience anxiety and depression (e.g., Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Thus, the inclusion of both the DASS and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem scale was helpful in the identification of participants.

Furthermore, CBB must represent the major problem affecting participants. That is, individuals affected by (a) bipolar disorder, (b) schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder, (c) current substance abuse (past six months), or (d) suicidal behavior were not considered. Each participant's clinical background was assessed through a series of questions that were included as part of the initial questionnaire (see Appendix J). Preference was given to those who were undergoing psychotherapeutic treatment with a mental health professional due to compulsive shopping and buying behavior, or were interested in receiving therapeutic treatment, because it was expected that these individuals would be more inclined to talk openly about their experiences and behaviors.

Participants were recruited through referrals. I first contacted mental health providers, self-help groups (e.g., Debtors Anonymous) and/or other related organizations to recruit participants. Specifically, I made initial contact with these groups through telephone calls to assess their willingness to help me in the recruitment process. Because I did not receive any response from them, I decided to send them a formal letter explaining the purpose and objectives of the study, the requirements for participation, and encouraging clinicians to support clients' participation, hoping to get a response that way. I also posted flyers in the waiting rooms of clinicians' offices in an effort to prompt

individuals who have shopping, buying and/or spending problems to volunteer. Since none of these strategies were fruitful, I contacted several experts on the topic of compulsive buying to ask for their guidance. One of them referred me to the author of a blog on the topic. I emailed this blogger asking her for her help. After I explained the goals and objectives of the study to her, she agreed to help by posting the information about the study on her blog. She not only encouraged readers to volunteer, but decided to take part in the study too.

As a first step in determining participants' eligibility, I conducted a phone screening interview, in which I inquired about: (1) age – if the individual is 18 years old or older; (2) awareness of the behavior; (3) treatment – if the individual is undergoing treatment; (4) ruled out mania – bipolar disorder; and (5) product preference – that the individual preferred to buy appearance-related products when engaging in the compulsive buying act. If the individual met these initial criteria, I then arranged a meeting to: (1) provide her with more information about the study and the participation requirements; (2) administer the screening questionnaire to partially determine the presence of compulsive buying; and (3) assess the presence of any mental or medical condition that would make the individual ineligible to participate. This screening interview also served as a means to begin building rapport with participants. This rapport was considered to be particularly important, as it represented the beginning of the relationship between researcher and participant in which trust and comfort were at the core. It is my belief that this trust and comfort led participants to disclosing more detailed information about their experiences. Moreover, through this initial conversation I was also able to determine whether the

participant was a good fit for the study. This decision was largely based on the compulsive buying questionnaire score, current or past mental health conditions, and agreement to comply with the requirements of the study (i.e., willingness to be voice-recorded, to devote the time required for data collection, and agree to the publication of the findings – see Appendix K: Informed Consent). Individuals who met the requirements and expressed interest in participating in the study were then asked about their availabilities for scheduling the introductory meeting.

### **Process: Data Analysis and Interpretation**

As discussed in Chapter II, the study of CBB is comprised mostly of positivist research that, as is its nature, focuses on a general characterization of the behavior. As stated by van Manen (1990),

The preferred method for natural science, since Galileo, has been detached observation, controlled experiment[s], and mathematical or quantitative measurement. And when the natural science method has been applied to the behavioral social science it has retained procedures of experimentation and quantitative analysis. (p. 4)

Thus, it is not surprising that CBB is typically studied as a means to predict and/or describe the behavior (e.g., causes, consequences) rather than to understand it. Most studies seek to establish patterns and characteristics that may be applied or transferred from one compulsive buyer to another. Although this approach to the study of CBB has provided valuable insight, it has left a void in the literature. That is, the voices of compulsive buyers have gone unheard, and consequently an in-depth understanding of the behavior is lacking. This dissertation sought to address this gap in the literature by

exploring compulsive buying from the perspectives of those who live it. This approach allowed for better representation of participants' lived experiences and did so in a way that created their own stories by using their own words. Thus, in contrast to what has largely been done on the topic, in this dissertation, the voices of compulsive clothing buyers were actively present throughout the interpretation of data.

Once the data were collected, the interviews were transcribed verbatim representing a total of 38 hours of interviews and 138 pages of journal text. Three levels of analysis and interpretation were then conducted. First, personal narratives that reflect the lived experiences of each participant were developed. Then, themes were articulated based on these narratives through the investigation of shared experiences among and across participants. Finally, the essences of the themes were explored relative to existing research and theories used to explain consumption and identity. Each of these levels is discussed below, followed by a brief discussion of the role of the participant within the interpretation process.

### **Levels of Interpretation**

As mentioned above, three levels of interpretation were developed from the data, beginning with personal narratives and ending with theoretical considerations. The first level of interpretation focused on exploring participants' experiences of compulsive clothing buying as individuals. Combining the responses to the demographic questionnaire, the personal journals and the data gathered through the in-depth interviews, I developed a narrative unique to each participant that is conveyed through their own words as much as possible. Therefore, in the first level of interpretation, my

voice as researcher/interpreter entered into these narratives to the extent that I organized each narrative based on the questions/topics selected.

In the second level of interpretation, I described and explained the emergent themes that elucidate the compulsive clothing buying experience. To this end, I followed Spiggle's (1994) recommendations for data analysis and interpretation. Spiggle's guidelines are not designed to occur in an ordered, sequential fashion, but to be used at various stages of analysis. The author explains that through these operations, researchers organize data, extract meaning, arrive at conclusions, and generate or confirm conceptual schemes and theories that describe the data.

According to Spiggle (1994), the process of developing a thematic interpretation is iterative, as it requires the researcher to go back and forth between the various types of data to develop a conceptually rich interpretation. This process starts with a thorough analysis of the data gathered. That is, patterns in the data are identified and labeled, and conceptual links between patterns are defined and examined for similarities and differences. Then, a set of thematic categories emerged and relationships across these categories were identified to develop characteristics and dimensions within each theme. In this dissertation, the focus of the thematic interpretation was to find the common threads across participants' experiences that shed light on what it means to be a compulsive clothing buyer.

The third and final level of interpretation involved consideration of the compulsive clothing buying experience by reflecting on the factors that make this particular experience significant (van Manen, 1984). This level of interpretation served to

clarify the two previous levels of interpretation, while also describing how the data gathered related to the existing body of literature on the topic. That is, the broader significance of the interpretation, including its theoretical and conceptual relevance for what is known about the compulsive clothing buying experience was articulated.

### **Participant Confirmation**

Because the participant's voice is critical to understanding the CCB experience, I sought feedback from each participant regarding her narrative. To be specific, I shared a draft of the narrative with each participant in order to provide her with an opportunity for clarification. This allowed for the identification of areas within the narratives that participants felt were inaccurate or needed to be changed. This process served to strengthen the believability and credibility of the interpretation (Hodges, 2011; Kvale, 1996).

The goal of this study was to understand what it means to experience compulsive buying from the perspective of those who are compulsive buyers. Approaching the topic from a qualitative, and specifically phenomenological perspective allowed for gaps in knowledge to be addressed, and for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon to emerge based on the experiences of those who live it.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the methodological framework that was used to address the guiding research question of this dissertation, which is: *What is it like to be a compulsive clothing buyer?* I discussed phenomenology as means for developing an understanding of the compulsive buying experience. I described the methodological tools

that I used to collect data, and discussed how they helped me to develop an understanding of the compulsive buying experience. I explained the process I followed for participant selection as well as the sample characteristics. Finally, the three-tiered approach to data analysis and interpretation was described.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **PERSONAL NARRATIVES**

In this chapter, I present the first level of interpretation, which is comprised of personal narratives of each of the six participants. The narratives reflect the unique experiences with compulsive clothing buying behavior that each participant shared during data collection. The narratives are developed based on information gathered through in-depth interviews, along with participants' journals and demographic questionnaires. Each of the individual narratives is presented separately, yet all follow a similar structure that allows for an understanding of participants' everyday lived experience with compulsive clothing buying. The personal narratives are then used as a foundation for the second and third levels of interpretation, presented in Chapters V to IX.

Each narrative begins with the personal background and family situation of each participant. The participant's early experiences with shopping and buying are considered. The narrative describes the point when the participant realized her behavior was compulsive, her thoughts about shopping and buying, and the importance of shopping and buying in her life. Included in each narrative are the factors that trigger her compulsive clothing buying behavior and some of the issues and/or concerns she faces throughout the shopping and buying process. Additionally, narratives explore each participant's preference for appearance-related items. Finally, consequences of the



behavior and actions taken towards recovery, if any, are discussed. All names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

### **Kelly Knox**

Kelly Knox was born in Florida in 1983, where she currently lives. Kelly grew up and went to school in Florida, and even attended college in Florida. She met her husband in college. They both graduated and decided to start attending law school. After finishing their law degrees, they both got jobs in St. Petersburg, FL, and decided to start a family. Kelly got pregnant with their daughter in 2010 and gave birth in 2011. After her daughter was born, she decided to quit her job to stay home and take care of the baby while her husband continued working.

Currently, Kelly is a stay-at-home mom and has no concrete plans regarding going back to practice law. She says that she enjoys being at home and having the opportunity to take care of her now 4-year-old daughter. For her, the ideal job would be one that provides her with enough free time to volunteer for her daughter's school activities.

With regards to her parents, Kelly expressed that she has always had a very close relationship with them. Being an only child, she had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with them while growing up. As family activities, they went sailing, scuba diving, and bike riding. She was also very close to her paternal grandparents, as they used to live in the same neighborhood. She describes them as being "incredibly wonderful people." They used to have family dinners together, and they were always present during holidays,

birthdays, and every other meaningful moment of Kelly's life. Judging by her tone as we talked, family is one of the things that brings a lot of joy to Kelly's life.

Kelly's family has always enjoyed giving her sentimental gifts. During the interviews, she remembered with much nostalgia when, as a present from graduation, her mother gave her a gold bracelet that was her own when she was young. Also, her father, a carpenter by profession, made her a wooden sailing boat. Kelly explained that her family never placed much importance on material possessions. Thus, the fact that she is now obsessed with clothing makes her feel like she is betraying the way that she was raised.

Kelly: I didn't grow up this way, you know what I mean. They never placed that much value on clothing and stuff. They always had nice clothing. I always had the proper stuff. But it was never focus on like that. So, now it's like, when I focus on it, I feel guilt, like I'm betraying my upbringing, somewhat.

Kelly describes herself as a "Florida girl." She enjoys the beach lifestyle, which is reflected in the kinds of things she likes to do with her family and in the type of items she buys. She enjoys being outside doing activities such as paddle-boarding and shell collecting. Kelly explains that her love of Florida can be seen in the way she decorates her house and in the way that she dresses.

K: I see myself as a Florida girl. I identify really strongly with Florida. Um... you know, I grew up around the water. I really resonate with like the beach, Florida, warm weather, color, heat, all of that kind of stuff. It's like I like my home to reflect Florida. I like my style to reflect Florida. You know, everything. Like I just really resonate with, like, being kind of like a Florida girl.

One other thing that Kelly truly enjoys is shopping. In fact, she expressed that she considers shopping to be her favorite hobby.

K: It's something that I really enjoy doing. It's relaxing. It's... I don't want to say mindless, but at the same time it's just like, I don't know, it's just, not stressful for me. It's just like a fun activity that's relaxing.

In fact, Kelly explained that, even though she has a lot of fun engaging in outdoor activities, she cannot stop herself from thinking about how shopping and buying could make those experiences better. She explained that she struggles with this tension, and cannot understand how, with all of her education, she can still be trapped in the situation of being a compulsive clothing consumer. Cognizant of her problem, Kelly is trying to find another hobby that she can derive the same degree of satisfaction and enjoyment from that she gets from shopping and buying. So far, she has not been successful. Indeed, her thoughts about shopping and buying have become not only intrusive, but quite pervasive. As she pointed out, she wants to find a way to stop these thoughts, and talked about how she hopes for a day when she does not feel like she needs to buy something so that she can be at peace.

K: There is a lot of things that I really enjoy doing. I like being outside, I like doing water activities and umm... like shell collecting and paddle-boarding and... you know, I enjoy doing all those things that are fun, but even when I'm doing those I like, I'm thinking about how shopping could make them better. I know that sounds weird but it's like, I was out paddle-boarding this weekend and I was thinking, like "*Oh, wouldn't it be nice to get one of those sun shirts, so that I wouldn't have to put sunscreen on*" or "*Wouldn't a new seersucker hat look good on this paddle board?*" or "*Wouldn't...*" Why do I think that? No one else thinks that. You know, so it's like those thoughts just consume me a lot and I would really like to not think about them. I'm always thinking about, like I said, that cycle, like what I need next to like... I'll get whatever it is and then there'll be something else and I wish that there was not that something else.

Kelly thinks that she has actually been exhibiting compulsive buying traits since she was a little girl. When she was in elementary school, she recalled that she used to feel very excited every time her mother told her that they were going back-to-school shopping.

K: It was when I was young. I used to lose sleep over going school shopping. My mom would take me school shopping when I was a little girl and I would be up at night, the night before, like nervous and excited to go, like so excited to go. And, yeah... I didn't realize it at the time but looking back that's kind of, like, my first "Wow!" I used to get physically, like mentally, like really stimulated about going shopping, you know.

Throughout the years, Kelly repeatedly found that she had real difficulty controlling her shopping and buying behaviors. She describes this as a "collection of moments" rather than a specific time that led to a big epiphany. As an adult who is in the process of trying to make sense of her shopping and buying behaviors, she now thinks that at many different points in her life she was acting out of control. She goes on to explain that she believes she has always been obsessed with things, especially with those that come as – or can be seen as – collections.

K: There is like a lot of little instances that kind of... that add up. So it's hard because there are little instances in high school, little instances... so I don't know if there was really like that "aha moment" it was more the collection of them. I've always been – this is a personality trait of mine too – I've always been a collector. I'm not a hoarder or anything, my house is spotless but... umm, I've always like obsessed with things. If something comes in a set, I like to have the whole set. I don't like to have a missing piece. And so, like even in high school... I can view clothing now whereas sometimes I'll be, you know, reading a magazine "The 10 items you must have in your closet." Well I'm missing two of those so I need the full set, that type of thing. Or... I remember... the summer before I went to college I was working in a retail store and they had like, this underwear that would go on sale, and I would have to have every color of them. And it was like

crazy ‘cause I remember my mom finding them and being like, “*Why do you have 40 pair of underwear, like, with the tags on?*” I’m like, “*Oh, I just bought it from my job*” and it was kind of like, you know, the crazy flags, you know. It’s that type of thing.

Reflecting on her past behavior, Kelly believes that it was during the initial years of college that she realized that it was not only the love for shopping that was driving her to the mall, but something much deeper. She was about 19 years old when she first maxed out a credit card buying appearance-related items such as clothing, handbags, and jewelry. She expressed that she had mixed feelings about those purchases. On the one hand, she felt relieved that she had acquired the items because she was convinced that she needed them. On the other, she felt that she had made poor financial decisions. The money she made working at a retail store was not enough to cover her debts, therefore she was forced to ask her parents for help.

K: Well, the credit card thing in college got me. I had a credit card maxed out in college and my parents had to bail me out with that, and so that was kind of my first like, “*Oh, geez! That was dumb!*” and that was, you know. But at the same time, I felt like I couldn’t help it, you know what I mean? Like, I had to have those things, you know. And I was remorseful for it but at the same time I was relieved that I owned them. So, like that’s... I know that’s like crazy but that’s how I felt, and so that was like my first like real “aha,” there is more to this than just shopping. So that would be the first, like, you know, realization that I had maybe a problem.

For Kelly, budgeting has always been an issue. She recalled that her parents tried to teach her how to use a checking account, but never really taught her how to budget. As she explained, when she finally moved out of her parents’ house to go to college, she had a hard time managing her finances.

K: But budgeting was always a hard thing. I wasn't taught budgeting growing up. So when I was off for college for the first time, I had a hard time budgeting just generally speaking. And then when you have credit card it was like, "*Oh, I can buy, I can take it home.*" I don't think I had a full understanding of it either, at the time. And then, once the balance kept getting larger, it was overwhelming and upsetting. And looking back on it, it's like, "*That was dumb!*" but, you know, that's what you do when you are 19 years old.

For Kelly, coming to the realization that she had a problem with shopping and buying took several years. While she was growing up, her parents controlled the amount of money she received and what she acquired. When she moved out to attend college, she experienced, for the first time, the freedom of having her own money. No one told her she could not buy an item that she wanted. As she described, this was one of the main reasons why her shopping and buying got out of control.

K: I can tell you exactly [what made me realize that I had a problem with shopping and buying], it was being able to have my own money... because when I was a kid I was completely dependent on what my parents wanted to buy me [...]. I didn't have a job or an income as a kid and so whatever they bought me is what I had and, you know, I would use my best negotiating skills to get stuff I wanted but that was all there was, whereas in college, you know, I had a job. I had student loans. I had credit cards. And it was like... like, I have all this like independence, sort of... you know what I mean? And it was dangerous [...] because, you know, you just had all this money available to you whether it was technically yours or not, you know. So it was like, all those times that you wanted something and your parents would tell you, "*No, you can't have that*" or "*We can't afford it,*" or whatever it was, and you would let it go or you know, whatever it was. Now it's like, well, I could just have that, you know. And that's kind of what I did.

Before Kelly's parents helped her pay off her credit card debt, she remembers feeling a mental burden. She talked about how buying the items that she wanted felt

good, but the fact that she acquired a significant amount of debt while doing so truly affected her to the point where she could not stop thinking about it. After her parents became aware of her problem, and helped her, she felt remorseful and guilty. In fact, she started questioning why she was going through this situation in the first place. She arrived at a somewhat unexpected explanation: that she was “broken.”

K: Well before my parents knew about that, I would just be really... like, I would just think about it a lot. Like it would just be on my mind, like you lay down to go to sleep at night and be like, in your thoughts. All of that, you know, like it was just like a burden on you, you know. It was like, “*Oh I feel good that I have this stuff in my closet, but now I feel really... guilty and upset that I have this debt hanging over me.*” So that was really upsetting. And so, I would feel pretty bad about that. Then once my parents bailed me out with it, I felt guilty that, you know, they did that. Then, I was, you know, there’s something wrong with me, obviously. Like I felt really, I don’t know, your self-worth is kind of low at that point because it was like, “*Why am I the one with this problem? Why am I broken?*”

When I asked Kelly to clarify what she meant by “broken,” she explained to me that, unlike other people who can take the issue of shopping lightly, she cannot. Indeed, she was not even able to explain to her parents why she was buying compulsively.

K: Well, I just, you know, like everyone else doesn’t seem to have that issue, so it’s like, what’s wrong with me, why am I the one who is like, you know, not normal, you know. Especially with my parents, they don’t... my mom likes fashion, ok. My dad could care less. So like, from their point of view it was, they were as sweet and understanding as they could possibly be about it, but at the same time it was just like, I was like an alien about it. You know, it was like they just could not... like, “*Why are you doing this,*” they could not wrap their heads around it. And it’s not like I could be like “*I’m doing this because of XYZ*” either but... you know, there wasn’t any kind of understanding either.

Not being able to articulate the reasons why she started to engage in compulsive buying upsets Kelly. During one interview session, when trying to explain the reasons behind her actions, her tone sounded frustrated and almost desperate. At one point, Kelly attributed her behavior to peer pressure and her desire to fit in, and the process of defining her own image.

K: You know, I don't know [why I bought so much], I think it was just... I think it was like trying to define... I guess it is about personal image, right? I was like you are trying to define your personal image, and in college there is a big part of that too, where you are trying to define your personal image. And, you know, you have a lot of peer pressure too – as dumb as that sounds – you know, from other people around you that are dressing a certain way or doing a certain thing, and it's like, "*Well, I want to be like that too.*" So, I guess maybe I did it to fit in to some extent and also to define myself to some extent, and I don't know, it would feel really good to get something, you know, and it is yours and you would look good in it, you know, fit in with it and so then I was like "*Well, I need the next thing for that or I need more of that or...*" you know, whatever it was.

Kelly remembered that one of the most problematic purchases she made while in college was a *Coach* handbag that cost her approximately \$170. She considered this sum of money to be substantial because she was not generating enough income to justify it. Kelly explained that she grew up surrounded by nice things, as she was born into a middle-class family and is an only child. However, she felt like she had never had that "next level stuff," that is, the same items that other girls in college had.

K: It was a lot for me... and also growing up with... my mom always bought me nice clothes. It wasn't like I didn't have nice clothes or things but I never had anything like you went to college and it was that next level stuff. It was like, "*Oh my gosh!*" The girls that were there had just like... just such different things and I was like, "*I really wanted to have some of that, be like that.*" And part of that was handbags, you know, that was the thing, which is funny because handbags really... don't do it for me anymore (laughs) but at that time it was like a thing



and it was like, “*I really needed that bag,*” you know, I really wanted it. That was probably the thing that started it all.

Image was an integral part of Kelly’s life in college. She used to work for a retail store that put a lot of emphasis on employee appearance. She not only needed to look good, but to wear specific styles (i.e., clothing sold by the store). Working at this store added a sense of status to her life.

K: Oh, definitely! Well the store I worked for was really image conscious as well. Like extremely image conscious and they required that you wore their clothes and... their clothes were... well, they were expensive at the time for what they were and... you know, it was like... it’s probably a status thing too. It was like, “*Oh, you work for this great store, you wear all their clothes.*” Everyone knows that you work for the great store. Like, it was just... it was fun, you know. And obviously it got me into trouble too.

According to Kelly, the retail job was another thing that heightened her compulsive buying behavior. Being one of the first persons to go through the new inventory and having an employee discount made Kelly feel like she could always be one step ahead, fashionably speaking. She remembered how she wanted to buy all the new items coming to the store: “I would have an employee discount and to be able to buy stuff at a discount, and you know, you want all the new stuff that came in...”

Kelly explained that presently, she is more prone to engage in compulsive clothing buying when she is bored, when there is a change in season, or when there is a promotion going on. When talking about one of her most recent purchases, she explained that it was a promotion that triggered it. Indeed, she confessed between laughs that she is a fan of “gift with purchase” promotions.

K: Umm they... well, the gift with purchase always motivates me. I love a gift with purchase, which is probably... I'm sure it is some kind of... like a key thing that you guys know about. I do, I'm a sucker for a gift with purchase, especially if it's from a brand that I like. I'm very, very, very brand loyal. I would not just buy random stuff. I've a couple brands that I really like, and that's what I purchase. So when those brands have a gift with purchase or they have a promotion, I really like those.

Seeing an item at the store or online is not enough for Kelly. As she stated, "I need to own it, yeah. I can't appreciate it from the store, it needs to be in my closet."

When she purchases something, Kelly likes to put it on display for her own enjoyment.

She will either wear the item the same week or will wait a couple of months. She confessed that most of the time she does not wear things right away because, according to her, she does not want to look like a "walking mannequin."

K: I just... like it kind of goes back to that relief, like "*I own it, it's mine, it's there, I can see it now.*" Umm... but I also don't like to wear stuff all the time right away because it is in stores. I know that sounds weird but it's like, I don't want to go out in a dress that like is hanging in a store right now and especially with the brands I shop. There's very few things, it's not like they have like... it's not like a white t-shirt, where who cares? If it's a white t-shirt I'll wear it right away because I needed a white t-shirt and there it is, it's fine. But if it's like a dress of a certain print, well I know that print is everywhere right now. Like I've seen it all over the place. I've seen it, whatever... I don't want to wear it right now 'cause then it's like I'm a walking mannequin. Like it's not just what I want to be, but I like the print so I want to have it. So I will hold on to it until it's a little older and then I'll wear it.

Kelly comments that most of the things she buys she does wear. She does not buy things she does not like and she does not keep things that no longer fit. She has a particular preference for print dresses, which she explains has to do with her lifestyle.

K: I do... everything in my closet – I say that it’s excessively large. Well, I don’t have a large closet, I have a lot of stuff in there – I think I use it. I don’t have anything I don’t like or that doesn’t fit. It’s all curated and nice. I can’t physically possibly wear it all in a year, probably because there is just so much of it. But yeah, I like to have it and own it and I like to see it.

Everything in Kelly’s closet has been carefully selected. The time she has spent finding all the items make her value them even more. Even though she explained that she is really good at getting rid of stuff, she indicated that it is hard for her to let go of those items she considers to be part of her “little collection of things.”

K: Um... yes. I’m good at purging but only certain things (laughs). I’m good at purging like... I do not like, like a cluttered space. I like things organized and nice. So I’m good at purging as far as my house goes. My closet is a little trickier because I don’t like to get rid of things that I see as sort of a collectible for me. Like there are certain prints, especially. Because even though I might not wear it all the time, well, that print is never going to exist again in the history of human kind and I like the print. So, if I were to get rid of it, it would be very difficult to track it back down. Umm... so I would get rid of things and purge things routinely like, you know, jeans or plain t-shirt or things like that but when it comes to prints, I’m kind of a print hoarder.

Fortunately, when it comes to consequences, Kelly’s compulsive clothing buying behavior has not really affected her financially. She lives a comfortable life; as a family, they have enough to cover all of their expenses and to engage in family activities. She has no credit card debt; the household credit cards are paid in full at the end of each month. However, she does believe that her problem with shopping and buying has not allowed her to save as much money as she would like. She also regrets that the money she spends on appearance-related items could be better spent on activities for the whole family.

According to Kelly, it is not the spending as much as it is the intrusive nature of her thoughts that affects her the most. Even though she tries to stop thinking about shopping, she cannot do it. She has never talked about her behavior with her friends or family. Kelly believes they think her buying behavior is normal but “if they knew, like, my mental process with it, like how I will obsess over things or think about things constantly, then they would think that’s not normal.” Her mental process is intense and, most of the time, she finds this tiring. There are times when she tries to avoid making purchases, but the voices in her head cannot be silenced. Thus, she succumbs to her desire in order to be able to move on.

K: I don’t know... I think maybe it wears me down too, at some point. Like I’ll think about it for a while and I’ll be like, “*Well, you know, I don’t need that, let’s not do it.*” But then several days later I will still think about it. And it’s like, at some point, it’s just like my willpower just like... I’m like, “*You know what, does it really matter? Let me just get it.*”

The main problem for Kelly is that shortly after she makes one purchase, she finds another target. That is, she finds another item to obsess over. Thus, the cycle starts all over again. As she described, she starts obsessing over an item and the thoughts about it will not go away until she buys it.

K: Usually the purchase will be the relief, you know. And soon after there’ll be something new to obsess over. Like, usually the cycle, you know, that will happen with me but for the moment it’s like, “*Oh, I can forget about it now. I’m done.*”

When I asked Kelly to further describe how this cycle works, she explained that she likes to create “false needs” for herself. When she classifies an item as a need, she is then able

to purchase it without feeling as bad about it as something that is not a need. For her, it is a justifiable purchase, rather than merely a desire that she was unable to suppress.

K: Yeah. It's like... I like to create false needs for myself. Do you know what I mean? Like I'll see something and it's like I justify wanting it and then it's like, "*Well, I really do need it*" and because it's a need I should buy it and you know... And then I obsess over it, and then eventually I buy it, and then I'm like, "*Oh I'm good,*" and then shortly after there will be some other thing that perks my interest. And then I'll do that again.

Kelly tends to make most of her purchases online. For her, online shopping is easier and more convenient than going to the shopping mall. She lives about an hour from the mall that has the stores she likes to buy from. When describing the emotions she experiences during the process of shopping, Kelly explained that she feels differently at different stages.

K: ...while I'm shopping it's just like relaxing 'cause typically I'm just like adding things to my basket for fun. It's like... I'm not actually considering buying it at that moment. It's more just like... things are like, it is like a wish list kind of thing and whatever. And then, when I'm actively trying to narrow down what I want, you know, I guess it's just... it's like a combination of excitement and guilt, it's like, "*Well, I really shouldn't do this. It feels bad that I'm doing this. Why am I doing this right now?*" but "*Oh, look how cute it is! This would be cute, let me pair it up with things in my head,*" you know, like it kind of... it's like, like you said, angel and devil on your shoulder at the same time. You kind of play that back and forth. And then, I finally purchase something and I feel relieved [...]. I'll be like, "*Oh, well that's done, I can quit thinking about it now.*" And then sometimes I will feel... I don't usually feel remorse or guilt right afterwards, it would be like, when it comes in the mail or when I go through my closet and it's like the first thing seen, and I'm like, "*Clearly I did not need to purchase this. This was dumb.*" But I still really like it. It's like hard to reconcile, you know.

To take control over her compulsive buying, Kelly has been reading about budgeting and has tried to be more mindful of her purchases. But even when she has managed to budget successfully, she still struggles balancing her needs and wants. In many instances, she finds herself debating between the desire to acquire specific items and the fact that she does not need anything else.

K: I guess just more aware and trying to be... I read about budgeting and stuff to... to the point where I budget successfully for the most part. You know, there is obviously always months where stuff happens, but for the most part I've been budgeting successfully. But it's always a struggle 'cause it's like... I feel like, "*Oh, you know, I really want more clothes.*" Where I know I don't need more clothes. Like, rationally, logically, I know that stuff.... And it would be nice to spend the money on something else. But at the same time, I really love shopping.

Kelly explained the struggle she constantly experiences when it comes to shopping and buying. On the one hand, she recognizes that she does not need to purchase more clothing items. On the other, she feels like she cannot help herself because she truly enjoys shopping for such things. Indeed, she described how she struggles with her thoughts about shopping and buying.

K: You look at your closet, and you are like, "*Obviously, here is all that stuff [the stuff I would like to do with my money], there is no way you need one more thing, why did you get it?*" I don't know! I don't know the answer to that, if I knew I wouldn't be here, I guess. That's... so, for me like going forward it's just been trying to balance that little monster with the reality of life.

Kelly also started reading blogs about compulsive buying, hoping to find strategies that will help her take control. When talking about the blog where she found

the information about the present study, she explained that the blogger posts truly resonate with her situation and give her hope.

K: I came across it because, one, she posts things about closet organization too, which I like to read about but, two, it's like, I know something is obviously not right 'cause the way I think. Like I think about it all the time and so it's like obviously I have some kind of problem with it and it would be really nice to manage those feelings. Umm, and she has like that thing on that, it's like *Trading a full closet for a full life*, and it's like, you know, I would obviously like to not think about shopping and do shopping so much. I would like to do other activities... I would basically like to have any other hobby that I like as much as shopping, you know. I wish there was something that I felt that way about.

As for the near future, Kelly feels that she still has work to do. However, she intends to engage in other activities, such as volunteering, that hopefully will keep her mind off of shopping.

### **Helen Crawley**

Helen Crawley was born in Taiwan in 1984. She is the only daughter of a businessman and a stay-at-home mom. Helen's parents wanted to provide her with the best education possible and, with that in mind, they decided to move to the United States. They settled in California where Helen attended elementary school. Mr. and Mrs. Crawley were not happy with the life they were leading in the U.S., as they missed home too much. Thus, after five years, they decided to go back to Taiwan, where Helen completed school and her Bachelor's degree. Then, when she was ready to attend graduate school, she decided to move to California on her own.

The time that Helen spent in the U.S. when she was young made her feel more comfortable with American culture than with her own. She expressed that she now feels more American than Taiwanese.

Helen: It [California] felt more like home to me than Taiwan, I guess. Umm, 'cause like I mean I was... at the time that we moved back to Taiwan I already forgot a lot of my Chinese so I kind of had to re-learn everything in Taiwan and cultural wise, I think that I'm more American, Californian, than Taiwanese.

Currently, Helen is working on her doctoral degree at a university in the southeastern U.S. She is single, has no children, and lives by herself in a comfortable apartment not far away from where she studies. In her spare time, Helen enjoys shopping, watching TV, going to the movies, going out with her friends, and playing the piano. She also enjoys traveling and sitting down to watch people interact with each other. She comments that she finds human behavior very interesting. Among all the activities she likes to do, Helen comments that shopping is the one that she enjoys the most. Indeed, shopping occupies second place on her list of priorities, and is tied with studying. For her, shopping is not only a pleasant experience, but a convenient activity. She explained that, in contrast to activities where she has to dress up and get out of the house to be able to enjoy them, shopping is something she can do at any time and from the comfort of her home.

H: I think it's convenient for me. So like if you want to watch a movie you have to go out or you have to find it, but then if you want to shop you can just find any website. You can do online shopping. So it's very convenient. I think that's one of the major reasons [why I like shopping].



Helen tends to shop almost every day. For her, this activity has become part of her daily routine. A common day for her involves working on her class assignments, talking to friends and/or family, eating, sleeping, and shopping. Most of the time, she finds herself buying random items that she knows she will never use.

H: It's almost every day that I shop. So like yesterday I was shopping online, just very randomly. Umm I think every day I have to go on some kind of website to just look around and, umm, see what's going on out there, kind of. And it's kind of like an escape or... I don't know, for me I think I'm kind of addicted to it, umm... I just have to do it every day. It's kind of a task for me every day.

Advertisements and promotions are Helen's "Achilles heel." Every day she receives a significant amount of emails from the different stores she likes to shop at. According to Helen, these promotions are one of the major triggers of her excessive shopping and buying behaviors. She confessed that even though she knows that these promotions are marketing strategies designed to trick consumers into buying things they might not need, she cannot help herself. She needs to buy.

H: So, one of the biggest reasons that I go on these websites every day or the reasons that I chose these websites is because they keep on sending me emails. So, whenever I check my email and then they say, "*Oh, there is a discount*" and then I just click on it and so I start shopping from that, there. So it's like, you know, every day you get tons of emails from everybody.

When reflecting on her actual shopping and buying behaviors, Helen affirms that she knows they are not normal. However, she has not been able to identify the reasons behind her actions. She expressed that for a while she thought that her behavior was the

norm, mostly because she grew up in a privileged family, which allowed her and those around her to get everything they wanted.

H: I think it's not normal, compared to the people around me, I don't think I'm normal. I used to think I was normal. Umm 'cause I think a lot of my close friends are like this and mostly my cousins are like this too. But we are in the same family so [we] grew up privileged, I guess. So, we kind of had the same lifestyle. I don't know. I don't know [if] that's a reason or not but umm... So I used to think that I was normal but then as I grew up more and met more friends I think I'm both impulsive and compulsive because I still feel guilty afterwards and I do buy things I don't need and I don't know why.

As Helen described, both her immediate and extended family members enjoy shopping. Her parents basically set the example for her, particularly that shopping and buying in ways that some might consider excessive are normal and/or common. She remembered that her father used to travel quite frequently to Japan and the U.S. due to the family business. Every time he went on a business trip, he returned with gifts, usually in the form of clothing, most of which ended up unused because she did not like what he bought.

H: ...so my mom has her shopping behavior and umm I think I saw that and so I always thought that was a normal thing; that there was nothing unusual if you shop that much and also my dad... He doesn't shop with us but whenever he travels for work, which he did a lot when I was little, whenever he goes out of the country he would buy A LOT of things for me. So he would go shopping himself and buy a lot of clothes, like he always buys me a lot of clothes.

I: What did you do with the clothing?

H: I just never wore it and so like you know how kids grow up really fast, so they just gave it to our umm give it away. They had to give a lot of things away that were mine 'cause I wouldn't wear them. But yeah, my dad's buying behavior made me think that, "*Oh, it's ok to buy that many things... clothes.*"

In the Crawley family, shopping clearly played an important role. For instance, during family vacations they would travel to different countries. However, rather than going on tours, her family preferred to go shopping. Helen's parents enjoyed acquiring things for the house as well as appearance-related items such as clothing and jewelry. One of Helen's memories of shopping in another country pertains to *Hello Kitty* items, of which she used to have a collection.

H: I used to go to Japan with my parents when I was little. We used to make kind of like... I don't know, yearly trips, every year and the reason that we would go is for shopping (laughs) and because ok, so when I was little there was no *Hello Kitty* things in Taiwan. Like at that time, Taiwan was more closed, conservative so we didn't have a lot of things exported from other countries so my parents would take me to Japan and they would take me to the flagship store (laughs) of *Sanrio* and so they would be "*Get whatever you want*" so we would buy... I don't know, like half the store or something like that. I have like plates. I have, I don't know, a whole collection of *Hello Kitty*.

Helen believes she is fortunate to have parents who sought to give her everything she asked for. She remembered making lists specifying the items she wanted for her birthday or for Christmas. She commented, "...I always looked forward to like birthdays or Christmas 'cause like I would put down like a whole list of things that I wanted and I would get them." Helen was also rewarded for her performance at school and for other achievements, such as graduation.

According to Helen, her experience with shopping started very early in life, and it was not always pleasurable. She described how, when she was four years old, her mother began taking her shopping every afternoon, Monday through Friday. When reflecting on her first memory about shopping, Helen said:

H: It was when I was probably four. Umm but not shopping myself but umm my mom used to take me shopping every day. Every single day, every single afternoon she would... 'cause she is a house wife and she has nothing else to do 'cause we have umm maids and everything to do the house work and so she would umm push me, I remember like in the car, and we would go shopping every day in department stores.

Helen remembered that even the sales representatives knew her mother by name and knew the style and brands that she liked. Her mother had a particular affinity for clothes, which Helen believes has to do with the fact that she grew up in a less privileged family. On every shopping trip, her mother would buy many clothing items for the two of them. Helen described how she hated those visits to the stores because they were very boring for her as a little girl. Her mother, on the other hand, had a good time would have Helen try on a wide variety of clothes. For her, it was perhaps a form of entertainment, but Helen does not see it that way. Rather, as she described, it made her feel like a “puppet.”

H: I just didn't want to be there 'cause it was like every single day I would have to be there and it got boring for me umm when I was little and 'cause she used to take me and then she wanted me to try on so many clothes and every time there's something new she was like “try it on” and so I was kind of like her little model to try on clothes for her to see. Umm... I felt like a puppet maybe.

Helen thinks that her mother's shopping and buying behaviors provided her with a clear understanding of consumption dynamics. That is, the experiences she had with her mother taught her where and how to shop and buy. They also led her to believe that it is normal to engage in shopping and buying so frequently.

I: Would you say that your mother's shopping behavior got you into compulsive buying?

H: No, not that much, but I was familiar with shopping, the behavior itself so umm... I knew where to get things and like... I guess I knew the concept already like, what matches what, what looks good with what and where would I buy them. I mean, I would tell kids, "*Hey I'm going to Nordstrom*" and they were like, "*Where? Where?*" Like, some kids don't have that much idea of shopping I guess... but I guess my mom's shopping behavior kind of took me to more different places to shop.

It was not until Helen was in fourth or fifth grade that she got interested in shopping. She recalled that the need to fit in and to be accepted by others was what sparked her interest in it. Helen believed that the way to accomplish her objectives was through the use of the right clothes.

H: I think it was peer pressure, partly. 'Cause I mean... I wanted to be one of the, I don't know, cool kids, whatever, and you have to dress in order to be in that group. Dress in a certain way so... I think that's how... kind of [what] got me into shopping.

When she was in high school, Helen used to go shopping with her friends every month. The first time they went out together, Helen remembered that she "bought a lot of clothes. Clothes, accessories, you know, high school kids... just some accessories, like earrings, like that..." She described her experiences shopping with friends as fun, however, going without her parents meant that she was not able to spend as much. But Helen found a way around that by going to stores that sold clothes at cheaper prices.

At this point, shopping was not only about the act of buying, but, as she explained, it became a social activity. Shopping allowed her to spend time with her

friends without her parents being around. When comparing her experience shopping with her friends versus shopping with her parents, Helen commented:

H: I don't know... umm, well, it's kind of like... it's a social activity instead of just going shopping. It's more like we, you know, we go to a restaurant, we eat, we talk, we chat, and we go shopping. So it's more this whole social activity. Like a whole day of different activities.

Moreover, as Helen discussed, her parents were very strict with regards to her social life. Thus, after a while, she started seeing shopping as her way to freedom, in that it basically became her escape mechanism.

H: Well, it's... I think it's kind of like I feel like an escape 'cause like my family is very strict on me. So that's why my dad picked me up from school so I can't go anywhere else; so that after school I would not go out with my friends or you know, like, umm... He is afraid that like, I don't know, I hang out with bad friends or something so I think umm like whenever I could go shopping on the weekends with my friends it's kind of like an escape umm I think it is like umm... I don't know how to explain it but umm... like it was a treat, was a treat for me.

As Helen explained, after a while, the idea of using shopping to escape from reality turned into something more serious. At 24 years old, when Helen moved to California to work on her Master's degree, she started to realize that she was having trouble controlling her shopping and buying behaviors. She believes that her behavior got out of control due to the freedom she experienced by moving out of her parents' house and because of the amount of money she started receiving from her parents.

H: Well, I moved out of my parents' place and moved to the [United] States... so I started having a lot of money, 'cause my dad gave me a lot of money to keep in my account and then umm... so then I kind of had freedom to spend as much as I wanted and then I started shopping a lot.

At the beginning, it was Helen's friends who noted her excessive buying behavior. She used to go shopping with them on her way to school. The store displays, filled with fashionable clothing items and designer bags, used to draw her attention. She recalled that, as was the case with her mom when she was a kid, sales representatives knew her by her name.

H: ...I never realized that I was spending too much but my friends tell me that, or my friends told me – like back then – they were telling me that, “*Oh, you are spending a lot of money*” [...]. So I would go out with them, I mean, just going to school we had to walk through downtown, because my school was located downtown. So I had to go through all the stores and everything. So every day I would go into a certain store and I would come out with a lot of shopping bags. [...] I mean, I would be spending hundreds every day. So I kind of realized that that was a problem. Like... like a lot of the stores that I visit know [knew] me by name.

When Helen started working for a renowned fashion brand, she decided to cut financial ties with her parents and instead live off of her personal income. Soon she noticed that she was not able to keep the same lifestyle she was living before she took the job. She commented, “When I started working and when I started not taking money from my family. Yeah, I realized it was a problem [the shopping behavior] ‘cause I couldn’t afford myself.” Running out of money made her want to stop, but since she was working in retail, the behavior actually got worse because she was able to acquire designer clothing and other items at discount prices.

H: Well I stopped... no I didn’t really stop buying that much since I worked in retail, it is the worst (laughs). ‘Cause you get discounts and it is really good discount for nice things, I mean *Ralph Lauren*, they have so many different lines and so, and you know, my colleagues they always saved my size for me. And it was always like, “*Oh, I have to get that*” and I could buy from, like bedding, like

sheets, you know, from that to clothes. So, it's not really better but umm well at that time my – I kind of moved in with one of my boyfriends, my ex back then and he had a bigger problem than me (laughs). So... so I thought, "*Ok, I think I'm not that... [bad]*"

Helen thinks that she has been having trouble with shopping and buying since she was in college. However, at that point, she was not able to recognize the symptoms because she was not getting into any kind of debt and she had the mindset that shopping to that extent was completely normal. Nonetheless, every month Helen would spend all the money she was given and saved nothing for incidentals. When talking about the reasons why she could not identify that she had a shopping and buying problem, she confessed:

H: Well, 'cause at that time I didn't have that much money to spend anyway. And I don't have credit cards, I'm not umm... that's why I don't have any debts. Like I wasn't used to using credit cards back then. I've never had a credit card and so... I could spend... but I would spend all my money every month. So umm I guess it's when I went to California, when I had like that big amount of money with me, then I didn't know how to control it.

Currently, Helen believes she has taken more control over her shopping and buying behaviors. However, shopping still represents a way to escape from reality. As she pointed out, when the semester gets intense due to multiple exams and assignments, she turns to shopping as a way to cope with negative feelings.

H: Ok, so like, when I'm stressed, I have to shop! When I feel depressed, I have to shop! There is a lot of... I guess people would say, excuses to shop but for me that's just my escape. Like some people smoke, some people drink a lo[ooo]t, but I shop a lot. So that's my escape.



It appears that shopping also allows her to deal with an internal conflict. Helen struggles with the idea of the kind of women she is supposed to be. She believes that she was brought up to look like a lady. That is, to have a conservative look or more of a “preppy style.” However, she enjoys wearing more fashionable items. This battle is reflected in the things she purchases and is one of the primary reasons why items are stored for years in her closet without use.

I: So, why you haven’t worn [your purchases]?

H: No idea.

I: Does it have to do with the fact that you haven’t found like a perfect outfit for them?

H: I don’t feel like wearing them.

I: Ok. And you would not return them?

H: No. I don’t know why (laughs) ‘Cause I think that maybe I will wear it someday... but I know, like, deep down, I know I’m not gonna wear it. So they are gonna go to donations one day.

When Helen browses for clothing online, she tends to pay attention to the way models look in “lady-like” styles. She then plays with the idea of becoming the person she was “always supposed to be,” which leads to making purchases that are not very well thought out. According to Helen, the problem is that deep inside, she knows she will never wear these clothes because they are not her style, yet she does not return the items because she hopes that she will wear them at some point. When talking about the unused items in her closet, Helen explained:

I: That's very interesting. Even if you don't like the style, knowing all the cons, you still make the purchase.

H: I guess it's like in a way I want to become like that. Maybe... like I think maybe one day I'll be like that and maybe I'll be more lady-like (laughs). And style wise I'll be more lady-like so I buy those things, but then I know I'm not gonna wear them.

Currently, Helen has no plans to change her shopping or buying patterns. She believes it is not interfering with her studies or with any other aspect of her life. She has no debts and the process does not take very much time, as she tends to make purchases very quickly. She is conscious that her approach to shopping and buying is not "normal," but she enjoys it too much. She explained that after making purchases she feels guilt for a little while, but this guilt does not stop her from engaging in another compulsive buying episode. Most of the time, Helen feels satisfied and excited about the purchases she makes. The fact that she is single provides her with the freedom to continue this behavior without being held accountable. However, she warns that the person who wants to have a relationship with her must accept her buying habits. In sum, Helen does not feel like her compulsive behavior will need to change anytime soon.

### **Lisa Nedina**

Lisa Nedina was born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1958. When she was four years old, her family moved to a smaller town, where she then attended school. She currently is divorced and has a 28-year-old daughter, Christine, and a six-month old granddaughter. Lisa enjoys running with her dog, listening to music, and going to concerts. She is always very positive and tries to have a great attitude toward life. Currently, Lisa works as a program coordinator at one of the largest universities in Texas. She also has two part-

time jobs; one as a customer service representative at an arena and other as a proctor of standardized tests. Alongside her jobs, Lisa takes care of her mother, who suffers from dementia.

Over the years, Lisa has acquired around \$70,000 in credit card debt due to compulsive buying. In our conversations, Lisa explained that her shopping and buying behaviors have been influenced by her life experiences. She also explained that the stress of her job, her mother's health condition, and her relationship with her daughter have all acted as catalysts for these behaviors.

Lisa grew up in a low-income family. She explained that her mother was very responsible but not too fun to be around. Her father, on the other hand, was a "difficult person. He wasn't very responsible, not very emotionally mature. [He] didn't go to work a lot." Lisa remembered that when she was on her way back home from school, she used to ask the bus driver to stop at a corner and then she would walk home. She explained that she was not comfortable with others seeing where she lived because of the way that her dad kept the front yard.

Lisa: My father was not terribly prone to working so we struggled financially a lot, and we lived in this old run down house. [...] our yard was full of crap, like motorcycle [parts], just random crap that my dad would bring home. It looked like a junk yard. I mean, it was a full one-acre lot and it looked like a junk yard.

In the summer of 1976, right after she graduated from high school, Lisa got married for the first time. Her marriage only lasted a year and a half; she got divorced in February of 1978. She considers this marriage a mistake driven by her desire to get out of the house. Several years later, Lisa married again and moved with her husband to Forest

Hill, TX. They lived in a small apartment while their house was being built. The relationship between Lisa and her husband, Marcus, was not what she had hoped for. In fact, he turned out to be abusive. In 1986, they moved into their new home, but shortly after that they decided to separate. While in the process of divorce, Lisa got pregnant.

Lisa remembers that Marcus thought getting pregnant was her way to keep him from divorcing her. Because Marcus decided not to cooperate with the baby expenses, Lisa was forced to take care of everything. She commented that it was at this point that she started accumulating credit card debt.

L: He thought I got pregnant with her to trap him or keep him. Actually, I didn't want him and I didn't want to keep him. [...] He didn't want to buy things for the baby. When she needed a baby crib and formula and all these things, he would be just like, "*figure it out,*" you know, "*I'm not gonna give you money for that. You wanted this baby. You had this baby.*" And that's when I started accumulating a lot of credit card debt. I mean, I bought her baby crib on credit. I bought her formula on credit.

Lisa and Marcus separated when their daughter Christine was three years old. However, Marcus told Lisa that he was not going to divorce her until their daughter was 18 years old because he did not want to pay child support and only see Christine on the weekends. Marcus, however, could make the house payments. If Lisa agreed with Marcus' proposal, then she would be able to stay in the house they built, which she described as a "beautiful 3,400 square feet, custom-built rock home, and 11 acres with the backyard full of horses and ducks and bunnies." Since she wanted to raise Christine there, she "made a deal with the devil." Christine, however, never considered that a good decision, mostly because of her father's behavior. Lisa recalled that Christine would often

say, “I wish we had lived in a walk-up apartment, you know, and just not had to deal with him.”

Years after they separated, Marcus came back home. Lisa recalled that she never felt safe in her own house. She explained that they were not living together as a couple, but more as housemates. They divided everything in the house, from the space in the pantry to the space in the closets. While living together, Lisa recalled that Marcus tried to hurt her more than once. In one instance, he tampered with the brakes of her car. Another time, he covered a knife with a kitchen towel, so when she grabbed the towel she cut herself. Due to the relationship Lisa had with Marcus, she tried her best to avoid being home alone with him. Thus, when Christine started to have more of a social life, Lisa decided to engage in something that would keep her away from home. It turned out to be shopping.

L: When I was still toward the end of my marriage, umm things were very volatile. He had come back home but we were living in kind of a divided household. Literally, like, tape down the middle of the refrigerator and tape down the middle of the pantry. Like his half and my half and there was, you know, he was abusive and so I would try to stay calm. Like I didn't... I couldn't go home and be at home safely by myself without her [Christine] there. She was kind of the buffer, like then there would be a witness, you know, if he hurt me. But, so, I would stay out and I would typically go to the mall.

According to Lisa, she spent most of her time taking care of her daughter. But when Christine started high school and wanted to go out with friends, Lisa found herself having more free time. Lisa recalled that she was not dating anybody and had very few friends, therefore, the mall became her “safe place.” For Lisa, the mall became a place where she was able to make friends and enjoy herself.

L: I used to go, when my daughter was 15 and she first started not dating, she never did that, but like going with groups of friends on Friday night. I raised her by myself, you know, it has always been about her sports and her activities. Suddenly she was old enough to do things with her friends on Friday night. I wasn't dating anybody. And I would go to the mall and browse sale racks and I would buy things for myself. A lot of which are things that I'm currently getting rid of now. It's like things that may still have tags on from ten years ago. Umm... you know, but I spent a lot of Friday nights at the mall, so I had a place to go and people to be with.

Lisa used to hide her purchases from Marcus. She described how she would leave the bags in the trunk of her car, wait until Marcus was gone, and then she would take them inside the house. Even though they had separate finances, Marcus would still get angry if he knew that Lisa was spending money on appearance-related items. In 2005, Lisa finally divorced Marcus.

Lisa discussed how, with the divorce, she had hopes of a new life. For Lisa, this new life needed to be accompanied by a new style and a new wardrobe. She remembered saying to herself, "Wow! Ok, I'm single, you know, I need these clothes for my future life." Lisa realized that she had the opportunity to start all over again and to maybe have the life she always dreamed of. Thus, she began buying things that she would need for that "future life."

L: I think that all along I was buying for this future life – this after my bad marriage life. And a lot of those things I'm still glad I have in my closet even though I'm not, you know... I still want that life. I want a life where I get to go to a nice restaurant, I get to go out on a date or go to a fancy wedding or whatever...

Lisa explained that although she has not been able to wear most of the clothes she bought on those shopping trips, she is happy that she owns them. Looking at her closet,

she expressed that she has almost everything she needs for the life she aspires to have. However, she understands that now that she is closer to this ideal life, she should not keep buying items that do not fit with her “actual life.”

L: ...you know, it's important to me not to keep buying things for this life I don't have but I bought these things that I bought that I still, I think... as I look back, I had pretty good taste for a girl that has never been anywhere (laughs), you know? So, like I'm able to put together these outfits now. I'm like, I have a pretty classic taste, like blazers, you know, fitted, you know, kind of classic stuff that is not really outdated so I think... you know, I'm still glad that I chose some of those pieces because as I was going through my closet last night I have almost everything I could need. [...] I'm not sure I regret all those purchases.

When she divorced, Lisa noticed that she did not have much casual wear in her wardrobe. She recalled an instance when her daughter pointed out that her wardrobe needed to be updated.

L: ...in the past I've never had like social occasions to go to or anything, so I have done a lot of spending, like since my divorce, to build a wardrobe of things that normal people do. Like, I didn't have any blue jeans. When my daughter was in college she said, “*You still have the jeans that you got when I was in junior high.*” They come up to your waist and have elastic in them. Like, “*you can't wear those.*” And I remember she made me go to *Nordstrom* and buy, you know, try all the jeans. Like jeans from this century and *Joe's* jeans happened to be the one that fit. They had a curvy fit and I paid nearly \$200 for my first pair of *Joe's* jeans. I still have them. I still wear them.

Lisa went on to explain that she decided to build a wardrobe that included a good amount of casual clothing so that she could be appropriately dressed for any occasion.

L: ...I didn't have any clothes. Like I literally had clothes you would clean the house in or clothes you would wear to an office job. And for years I didn't have anything in between. I've probably bought too much stuff in between but it's like, now there is no occasion that I don't have something for. So, I think there was a

period of time when I was kind of, you know, starting my new life, buying a new house umm... old house actually, but I own my own home. I... I know that some of that was filling in holes but I also feel a little – maybe I’m still just defending my bad shopping behavior – but I didn’t, you know, I didn’t have a swim suit. I didn’t have any casual clothing. I didn’t have running shorts, but yet I run. But I was running in like, you know, old gym shorts that rub holes in me if I ran very far. So, umm... I’ve always said I love any sport or activity that requires clothes. Like... if I was going skiing I wouldn’t wear a pair of jeans I would want ski pants. So, I like having the right – again back to appropriate – if I’m going skiing, I want the ski overalls and the ski jacket.

Being appropriately dressed is extremely important to Lisa. She recalled that her mother was never interested in fashion. Instead, she was very mindful of how the money was spent. Lisa described her mother as being “very plain. Never cared about anything like that and always thought it was wrong for me to care about it.” Growing up, her mother made Lisa’s clothes. Lisa wanted clothing that was consistent with the fashions of the time, but her mother was not acquainted with these styles. Lisa explained that she wanted to dress like her friends and to fit in. Presently, the story is similar. When I asked Lisa about the importance of shopping in her life, she explained that shopping is still more important than it should be and that clothing items are important for her, as they allow her to fit in and to feel like she looks appropriate for any occasion.

L: The most important thing for me with clothes, overall, it’s not to look like I spent a lot money, it’s not to have a certain brand, I want to feel like I’m dressed appropriately for whatever the situation is, whether it is work or church or umm a date. I want to feel like I fit in and I grew up – I don’t even know if lower or middle class would be – I grew up in a family without very much money. I never had the clothes, you know, that the other kids had. My mother made most of my clothes. I hated them. And so... all my adult life, even though I’ve never really had much money, I’ve had a couple of mentors that helped me learn to dress like middle class white people dress, you know, like to fit in. [...] My overall goal with buying clothes is to feel like I fit in to whatever situation it is. And then I



think that I make a lot of excuses thinking that I don't have the right thing, "*you need to get this.*" But I would say, I'm better...

Lisa commented that it was in the early 2000s when her buying behavior started to become a problem. She explained that her compulsive clothing buying resulted from a series of changes in her life.

L: Umm, it probably really turned to being a problem when shopping is therapy or shopping as an activity to replace other things. Probably, when she [Christine] was in... junior high to high school. So, I'll say probably 13, 14 years ago is when, when it really started. And it changed, kind of taking on some different forms. But probably like, when I described you those nights where she would be with her church group or whatever and I will have these... you know, I'll be at loose ends and didn't feel safe going home with him [Marcus] there, [I] would spend this time at the mall and buy myself things. Plus, it was always important because I have a job where I do have to wear like suits and professional clothing. I mean, you could make a case that, "*Oh, I need this for my work,*" you know, and I obviously bought other things.

Lisa pointed out that her excessive shopping and buying started as a way to avoid being at home alone with her husband given that her daughter was developing more of social life. She also talked about how these items allowed her to look appropriate for her job. Moreover, Lisa explained that her purchases of appearance-related products were also driven by her desire to be independent and her hopes for a better future as a single woman.

L: So... there was just a lot of craziness but as I started to think about escaping the relationship I started to... I think part of that was, "*Wow! Ok, I'll be single, you know, I need these clothes for my future life*" and I think that's when some of the future life thinking started, but a lot of it was just, yeah, lonely at the mall. You know, that was the kind of thing I was buying. It wasn't so much things that I would wear then. It was more things for the future.

I: And what year was that? Do you remember?

L: Let me think. She started high school in 2000... so, probably 1999, 2000s somewhere around there. That's also the time I got the job I have now and my income went up substantially. So, even escaping became more of a reality because I suddenly... I doubled my salary in the first seven years that I was there, at that job I have now. [...] Once I got this job and saw that it looks like I can stay and I could grow in this position and start to make some more money, I sort of formulated a plan of how I was going to become independent from him [Marcus]. So I think a lot of things, you know, my income went up, my daughter became a teenager and started to have her own social life – I think it was a convergence of a lot of things.

Lisa explained that for a while, she felt guilty about the “absence” of Christine’s father. In contrast to other kids, Christine did not have the economic support of her father and, in some way, Lisa blamed herself for that. She believed that she did not make the right decision when she married him. This situation led Lisa to question what would have happened if Christine’s father had been there. That is, if Christine would have had more both emotionally and financially. Following that line of thought, Lisa decided to give her daughter as much as she could, even if it meant going into a great deal of debt.

L: When I would say I was doing more of the excessive shopping or, you know, the compulsive shopping was more about buying things for her [Christine]. Whether it was for the wedding or just... I’ve always felt so guilty that, you know, I didn’t chose an appropriate father for her, and my rule of thumb was never, “*Does she need this?*” but “*If she had a dad, would she have [had] this?*” It was more like that and I bought her a lot of things because I’m like, “*Well, if she had a dad, she would have had that.*” So, and that’s set up a very bad dynamic.

According to Lisa, it has always been important for her daughter to have the things she did not have growing up. Thus, Lisa feels like she has made a lot of sacrifices for her daughter, from putting her through college to selling a property to pay for a credit

card she maxed out. While in college, Christine acquired a substantial amount of credit card debt “trying to keep up with the rich kids.” When Lisa sold a property to pay off Christine’s debt, her daughter, again, maxed out her credit card, causing Lisa a great deal of frustration.

L: And there was a period of time where I started to feel... [that] I really had made a lot of sacrifices for her, you know, you get her through 6 years of college. It took her 6 years to get a 4-year degree, and get a teaching certificate, and she did the compulsive... the really compulsive spending [...] She ran out a credit card up to \$10,000 that I didn’t know she had and then, I found out. And I actually sold some property and I paid it off for her. So, “*Ok, clean start,*” and then she did it again!

Lisa talked about how her relationship with Christine has not always been an easy one. Since Christine was young, Lisa has been trying to get close to her, but does not feel that she has been successful. She explained that they tried going to counseling, but that did not help. Lisa explained that she has tried her best to satisfy Christine’s needs and wants, but that her efforts are never enough.

L: My daughter and I have a really complicated relationship. We are very different from each other. [...] When she was growing up, you know, I wanted her not to feel the same like I felt, that she didn’t have things that the other kids had. Obviously, she didn’t have as much. She got a car when she turned 16, but she got a six-year-old used [car]. All of her friends got brand new Acuras when they turned 16. I tried to make sure that she got a car, [although] it wasn’t the same type of car [that her friends had]. And I always felt like I was trying so hard and trying to do things for her... and it was never quite good enough for her, you know.

Lisa went on to explain that her relationship with her daughter has always been difficult. She mentioned how shopping became a way for the two of them to connect. That is,

shopping became the activity that brought them closer together and helped Lisa feel that her daughter appreciated her.

L: Our relationship probably has been strange since the day she was born. She was the baby that cried all the time and couldn't be consoled and if you try to hold her like you snuggle a baby like she would push off with her hands [...] And she never liked to be touched or held [...] So shopping, I mean, buying her things has been an important part of our relationship because that's when she is nice to me.

According to Lisa, even though she had been engaging in compulsive buying since the early 2000s, it was not until she went to a bank to ask for a loan to pay for the expenses of her daughter's wedding in 2012 that she actually realized that she was having a real problem with shopping and buying.

L: I think... probably one of the real eye openers was when I went to apply for a loan at my credit union – where I've done business for like 20 years – for my daughter's wedding, and they would only give a certain amount. I wanted to open up a line of credit so that, you know, I could just like write a check to the caterer, write a check... I needed a line of credit type situation so that we could go out and shop for wedding things, and they wouldn't give me the full amount that I wanted and, you know, it's like I've never made a late payment. I've never umm... I've always paid more than my minimums, but just because of the outstanding amount of credit card debt that I had they wouldn't loan me the full amount that I wanted for her wedding and that was the first time I started really thinking, "*Well, how much do I have?*" you know, and started adding it. And so that would have been in early 2012 when I started, probably like January 2012, probably when I first went, "*Wow! Wait a minute! How much have I really spent?*"

Even though she and Christine never had a close relationship, Lisa still wanted to give her daughter the best possible wedding experience. Lisa felt like her son-in-law's family always "looked down" on her daughter because she was from a divorced family. As a result, she wanted to make sure they knew "that she was raised with just as much

love as their son.” For Lisa, it was important to keep up appearances, “I wanted to keep up appearances like this. I wanted them to see, you know, that there was nothing wrong with my daughter or her, you know, the little family that she has, so...”

As Lisa explained, the desire to look the part added to her already substantial amount of debt. She estimated that she still owes over \$10,000 in expenses for her daughter’s wedding. She has since taken two part-time jobs to pay off this debt. Lisa explained that her daughter’s wedding acted as an even greater catalyst for her compulsive buying behavior.

L: So, I used her wedding... and it’s, you know, when you are spending \$12,000 on something what’s another \$50 here and \$75 there, you know. Seems like small numbers compared with this overall thing. So, I think the wedding was a catalyst last year, especially, you know, suddenly she was gone from home and there were no witnesses, as I like to say. You know, I could shop all the time or have packages sent here. I would spend a lot of time online. I started reading more fashion blogs. Started thinking about starting, you know, trying to seriously date, you know, since I haven’t been able to do that when she was at home and it was sort of like, *“This is for me!”*

Lisa explained that she knew her buying behavior was a real problem in her life, however, she was not able to deal with it right way. With her daughter’s upcoming wedding, she felt like she had the perfect excuse to keep buying all the “necessary” or “just in case” items.

L: ...when the bank wouldn’t loan me as much money as I wanted, that was kind of an eye opening thing. I did sit down and add up all the credit cards. But I had this wedding, you know, so it kind of like the wedding... I was still using the excuse, *“but we have this wedding, I have to buy these things.”* So I don’t think initially my shopping habit... – and I would say, *“Well, I’m not going to buy anything that’s not for the wedding”* but it’s amazing how you can sort of, you know, find excuses, you know. *“What if she has a shower? I need this dress I can*

*wear it to her shower, that she never had*” or so... I think I was realizing that I needed to make changes, I wasn't really, I guess, ready to commit to making them and I was using excuses...

After the wedding, Lisa continued buying excessively. For the first time in many years, Lisa was living by herself. Now she only needed to take care of herself and her dog. For Lisa this was a big change. As she pointed out, she felt like she could buy as much as she wanted to and did not need to explain or deal with criticism of her behavior: “I think when my daughter moved out, you know, and got married, it was like: ‘Hey! There are no witnesses! I can shop and boxes can show up and nobody else will know!’”

Lisa admits that one of the big triggers of her compulsive clothing buying is fashion blogs. She explained that it is through blogs that she learns about new styles. Sometimes their recommendations lead to what she considers to be good purchases, however, there are other times when what she buys ends up unused, buried somewhere in her closet.

L: There's a couple of blogs that I have followed. Women who have a very similar style to mine or who's style I would like to emulate and... it's like, you know, when they have their “must have items,” I have been guilty of that, occasionally. On the other hand, one of them recommended these pair of boots, [...] the brand was *Aquatalia by Marvin K*, and these are like \$400 boots at *Nordstrom*. And this lady writes this glowing column about how she wore those to France and she walked all over and it was just wonderful and they are water proof and, oh my gosh! And I start thinking, “*I need these boots.*” Now, I'm not going to Paris, but I do work on a large university campus and I have to be outside and I'm thinking, “*I need to find these boots!*” And I was lucky enough to find them. *Nordstrom* ran them on sale for \$245 but my size was sold out before I got them, so I kept after it and on a suggestion from another blogger, I tried *eBay* and they had a pair that were like new in my size, so I got them for a \$129 and I wore those at least 3 days a week this winter. [...] I think that was a good purchase. I would never have known they existed if I haven't seen them on a blog, umm, but they met a need that I had for comfortable footwear that went with my work

clothes umm you know, and I was able to get them on *eBay* at a real deal umm... so, I think that was a smart purchase, but I have to be... There have been a couple of other things that I've bought umm from that same lady's blog, I bought an *Eileen Fisher* top at *Nordstrom* [...]. I mean, it was a piece that was really perfect for me, except that I had it three months and I haven't worn it yet. And I'm like, why, if this is the greatest piece ever, why am I not wearing it? And I realized, well because it really only goes with jeans, and I don't go that many places where I wear jeans [...] I don't read her blog anymore because I feel like I'm very susceptible or suggestable, you know, "*You need this. This is perfect.*" Well, I don't really need it right now, you know.

As Lisa explained, suggestions from fashion bloggers often turn her desire for an item into a quest. She feels like she is playing a game and she has been challenged to win the round. Indeed, she commented that in her mission to find a specific item, it is not only important to find the item, but to get the best deal. Lisa is so captivated by this process that as she put it, if shopping was "a competitive Olympic sport, I would want to be team captain."

L: I'm trying to stay off those blogs because there is one lady I like, umm... and she buys most of her clothes like at *Target* and *TJ Maxx* and all, but I... I get on these quests, if I have a quest for something like, let's say there is this sweater or top and she's seen it at *Target*, I'm like, it becomes important to me to be able to find it. That's a game I'm going to win. Umm... and I'm trying not to shop like that, like finding that *Reba* dress on sale at *Dillard's* was kind of like that quest. It's like, "*I found it, it's not quite my size, now I made some phone calls and I found it in my size 'cause I'm such a super shopper and talked them into holding it and I go and I get it*" and like to take that back [to return it] was a really big thing for me because I won that round, you know. I found this thing and it was on sale and I found it in my size and I had to work really, really hard and it was like this, like a... like playing a video game. It's like I worked so hard and I finally won and umm I'm trying not to do that as much, you know. Because when a blogger says, "*This is a must have thing*" it becomes a contest to see if you can get it in your size, whatever, and you feel like you won and it's like "*Yay, I won!*" but what did you really win? You spent money. You know, you spent money. Maybe you didn't need it. Umm... those are the kinds of realizations that I'm having. Like shopping for sport has got to stop.

According to Lisa, the multiple promotions she receives through email are another trigger. She explained that even if she might not need anything at the moment, the email messages prompt her to take a closer look at items she had been contemplating buying:

L: Now, one thing will lead to another. I'll get on *Nordstrom* and *Nordstrom* does recommendations, you know, based on your past buying habits. They are very effective at that. Umm... I've noticed a couple of sites like they will email the next day. I looked at an item on *Pottery Barn Kids* and it's something that I already bought and it's on backorder and I looked at it yesterday because I wanted to show a friend a picture of it, I just wanted to look up the picture. Well, this morning I had an email from *Pottery Barn Kids* and it says, "*Hey! You looked at this bunny rabbit thing, don't you want to buy the bunny rabbit thing?*" And I had retailers doing that with clothing as well. And then you start thinking, "*Well, I should buy the thing, you know, I should buy that thing. They are right, I need this.*"

When I asked Lisa if she had ever tried to erase these emails without opening them, she replied that she is trying to avoid being tempted by them, yet erasing them is not an option. That is, if she does not open them, then she would not know if there is a promotion going on. For example, when we were talking about a pair of white jeans she had been looking to purchase, she explained:

L: So I keep opening the Loft emails because, you know, I don't want to pay full price for them. My rule is never pay full price for anything at Loft because there [will] always be a coupon or sale, but it's like I'm stalking their website right now trying to find these jeans for summer and... 'cause the day they put them out, the 8-talls would go and so I feel like that fear of missing out is part of it. [...] But it is like, if I delete the *LOFT's* emails then I won't know, you know, when the jeans come. So I think that's... those are very effective marketing tools and I'm trying to be less susceptible to them.

Stress seems to act as another trigger for Lisa's compulsive clothing buying. Lisa works full time as a program coordinator at a Texas university, where she has been



working for the past 17 years. Until recently, her job had been her “happy place,” but a change in the executive personnel has taken that feeling away. Now she worries that she can be fired at any time. She comments that her situation at work has become one of the three biggest stressors for her (along with her mother’s health issues and her relationship with her daughter), and a major trigger of her compulsive buying.

L: My job has always been kind of like the most rewarding thing in my life and it hasn’t been that way for the last, I guess since August. Now I feel like the three major areas in my life are stressful and I really saw that come out in shopping, during the fall, through the Christmas season.

After a bad day at work, Lisa tends to go home, prepare dinner, and sit down in front of her computer to see what is out there to buy. She thinks that not being in a relationship aggravates her buying behavior. That is, Lisa feels like nobody takes care of her, therefore she needs to take care of herself.

L: When I have a really stressful day at work, which doesn’t make sense because work stress tends to come from my uncertainty with my job right now umm... and spending money and accruing more debt is not a good way to deal with that, but I think probably on a day that I’m most stressed out about work, I would... I tend to eat in front of my computer. I come in and I sit down here at my desk and I go through my email, most of which is advertisements from these retailers that we’ve talked about, and I find myself falling, you know. I think when I come to that it’s like after a really bad day at work, and then I feel like, you know, nobody takes care of me, I have to take care of me, I should treat myself.

Lisa explained that she has managed to keep her compulsive buying behavior from most of her friends and family. She admits that her obsession with appearance-related items brings her a lot of shame, and it is hard for her to admit to others that she is having trouble controlling her shopping and buying behavior, especially because most of

the items she buys are increasing her credit card debt. Thus, keeping her behavior private allows Lisa to avoid being judged by the people around her.

L: ...I don't discuss it with my friends partly because some of them just don't care, wouldn't care one way or the other. Some of them, you know, couldn't buy things for themselves so I wouldn't ever want to rub that in their faces. Some of them would be very critical of me, you know, charging things and would have some judgments about that. Yeah, it's something I'm not... it's something I wouldn't... There is a couple of friends that I share that with and discuss that with but umm... not many. I would consider it a shameful thing, really.

Lisa comments that she has a very good friend, Jennifer, with whom she has shared her issues with shopping and buying. Lisa enjoys going shopping with her but sometimes their trips to the mall have resulted in unnecessary purchases that, unlike Jennifer, Lisa cannot afford.

L: Umm... my friend Jennifer – is a friend I talk about this issue with a lot – she understands. I mean, because I've asked her specifically like, "*Let's not make shopping the focus of our time.*" [...] There are times that we will just go out, you know, "Hey! Let's go shopping." She is the only friend I have that we would just go shopping and look for stuff and I've learned that that's... has been a trigger for me, there were a couple of times this last year that was a trigger for me. And she can afford it and I can't. So I try not to get in those situations. I try not to go shopping with her.

Lisa's friendship with Jennifer has gotten very strong over the years. Lisa explained that they both had very similar relationships with their parents growing up. In large part, Lisa believes that this similar past has influenced their views on shopping and buying.

L: I think Jennifer and I both have in common that we had difficult relationships with our parents, and we weren't perhaps appropriately loved as children and sometimes to show love to ourselves we buy ourselves things. And I think we have that in common.

When I asked Lisa how much she enjoys the process of shopping and buying, she responded that her favorite part is the buying aspect of it. She explained that for her, it is not about the social aspect of shopping, but about the process of finding an item. She further explained that the purpose of her purchases, besides filling a gap in her wardrobe, is truly about filling a hole in her life. The problem with this is that after she buys an item that she thinks will “fix” her, in very little time she finds herself looking for something new.

L: Shopping to me is usually, like especially if I have to go to the store, it’s more like a chore, that it, you know, something to get done. I don’t enjoy the actual shopping much.

I: Ok, why is that?

L: You know, a lot of women shop socially, you know, they shop with their friends. I don’t have friends who shop, except for my friend Jennifer. So, I don’t... Maybe that’s part of the issue. It just never really become a social thing for me. It’s always for me, it’s always about finding this magical allusive piece of clothing that’s the unicorn of clothing, that it’s going to fix theoretically a hole in my wardrobe, but I know deep down really a hole in my life. You know, if I find the perfect fitting curvy black jeans, now what? Now I need to find something else perfect. It like, there’s never an end to it, you know. So I think it’s... for me it’s more about the buying it, but more like checking off a box. Like, now I have this thing that I think I need to be socially acceptable or, you know, to be dressed appropriately for something. *Ok, and now what? Now that I have this thing, now what?*

For Lisa, the challenge of searching for an item and being able to find it is “a big thrill.” She pointed out that coming home with the items she purchases and finding out that they work the way she hoped they would provides her with a great deal of satisfaction. She even describes it as “victory.”

L: I think it's more like I get an item and I come home and I start... I love, you know, I bring things home and try them on and when I try them on and they look like I thought they would or it goes with the thing I thought it would, I think that's the greatest sense of pleasure. It's like, *"Yes! I made a good choice. This fits, it feels good, I love it! It answers all the questions."* You know, *"I'm pleased with this purchase. I think I made a good buy. I think I got a good price on it"* and like when I try it on and see it with the outfit and it works, that's what I like. That's the best part for me, probably.

When talking about her favorite store, *Nordstrom*, Lisa explained that visiting it makes her feel special and, even more so, it reminds her of how far she has come.

L: ...they used to have a grand piano in the middle of the store and this guy would be playing the piano. I felt very fancy to go in there but umm... I think part of me is still the little girl that grew up without very much, that is like, *"Hey! I can actually shop here"* I can walk in this store and I can buy something. And I think that's... I think at some level that's important to me. To feel like, you know, *"Hey! I can walk into a Nordstrom and they are gonna sell me something."* And, you know, there was a time in my life when I would've sworn I can't ever shop in a store like that.

Although shopping allows Lisa to feel happy and better prepared for the social life she wants to have, she also recognized some major negative consequences. For one, Lisa's compulsive buying behavior has significantly affected her finances. The amount of money Lisa has spent on appearance-related products for herself and for others over the years adds up to approximately \$70,000 in debt. She has 10 credit cards, eight of them being store cards. Added to this debt is the insecurity Lisa feels with regards to her job, which has started to affect her peace of mind. She is now questioning what she will do if she loses her job and is unable to make her credit card payments. Lisa commented that she is working hard to control her purchases so she does not accrue more debt.

L: I'm basically charging things on credit cards. But I've gotten, I've started to be more concerned because of my job situation. Suddenly I have to think, "*What if I lost my job and I couldn't make the minimum payments on all these store cards?*" And so, I'm working really hard to get a handle on my credit card debt. I'm trying to be really mindful, you know, before I spend money on something.

According to Lisa, another concern "is that in the past year I've bought a lot of things and never actually worn them." When I asked her to explain why she thinks she has not used these items, she was unable to provide an immediate response.

L: I'm not sure honestly. It's something I'm struggling with. Umm... sometimes it's because I found something I really like and it's a really good deal and I think I might need in the future but maybe I don't have something to wear it with. Like I have this beautiful sweater that I wanted to wear on this date this weekend. [...] I have to remember – I haven't dated in so long – that you don't wear business suits on a date. You know, you need to wear something feminine. Like I don't know how to dress for dates! You know, I keep thinking, "*Not a turtle neck, something with a V-neck. You know, look like a female.*" And so, umm I tried that on and I realized that it was a great sweater, beautiful, flattering, I have earrings that match the sparkling stones. I don't have anything to put on the bottom. [...] So I tried it with grey jeans, "*Meh! It's ok.*" I tried it with black jeans, "*Meh!*" You know, it's like, I don't have anything to wear on the bottom. [...] I would be shopping today for something to wear on the bottom, for this date. Now I'm like, I still really like this top. I mean, I'm just like, sit here and something will turn up that I can wear it with, you know? And I start looking at other items.

Lisa sees the unused items as failures, not only her failure at being able to spend her money wisely, but of having the determination to return the items she knows she will not use. At the same time, Lisa explained that having all these items makes her feel somewhat secure.

L: I think now that I'm trying to change my behavior they represent failure. I mean, failure to use my money wisely. Failure to return something in a timely

manner. Failure to figure out how to wear this thing that I thought I had to have. I think it's failure kind of, partly. I mean, does that... I think that's a real honest answer. Part of that is failure to me. Umm... I think at some level, you know, if you ever were in a situation in life where you didn't have enough of something... Like, my mother was hungry, as a child, and she literally has this real fear of being hungry, yet she won't even enjoy her food because she is afraid to get too attached to food. It is this really interesting dynamic. But like because I've felt like I've never had anything growing up, part of me just likes knowing that I have this room full of clothes, even if it's things I'm not wearing, it's like I... I own these things, therefore, I must be important or something, or they must be important or... I don't know

Today, Lisa consistently works on her shopping and buying behaviors. She has found several blogs that have provided her with suggestions on how to make the most out of her wardrobe as well as how to stop buying compulsively. She explained that these blogs have helped her to get a better understanding of her compulsive buying behavior.

L: ...she [blogger] has written a lot about a full life instead of a full closet. When I started reading those things on her blog – and I also read *The Minimal Closet* that she has referred us to – and you start asking yourself these questions, “*Why am I really buying this?*” [...] “*Do I really need 101 pair of jeans?*” or “*Do I feel like I look fat in my others?*” I mean, what's the real motivation? I mean, and once we start to ask ourselves that, I think a lot of things start to become clear. You know, it's filling a need. Obviously, buying things fills some kind of a need whether it's actually my old jeans have a hole in them and I need new jeans, or I wanna look slimmer, I wanna feel accepted, I wanna, you know, somebody to think I'm sexy and ask me out... I mean, whatever that thing is and it is interesting.

Lisa has gained a lot of introspection about her buying behavior not only because of blog posts and other compulsive clothing buyers' comments but because of therapy. As part of her efforts to take control of her life, Lisa is attending counseling sessions once a month. In therapy, Lisa is not only working on ways to control her compulsive clothing buying, but of dealing with the other issues that cause her stress. Lisa described how self-

help books have also been very helpful. Thanks to these sources she has been able to realize how much shopping and buying is affecting her life, and that it will take some major changes in the way she shops to stop.

According to Lisa, being more mindful of her actions has allowed her to develop several strategies that help control her compulsive clothing buying behavior. For instance, following the suggestions of bloggers, Lisa has created a “master list” on which she includes the items she thinks she needs the most. When shopping, she tries to stick to the items on that list. That way, she not only buys what she deems necessary, but she minimizes the possibility of buying things that will end up unused. She has also created a list of questions she now asks herself before buying an item. In addition, when Lisa is buying online, she has made it her goal to wait at least 24 hours before making a purchase.

L: I’m doing better about [it], you know, returning things or sometimes I’ll put things in a little shopping cart online, you know you can put it in the cart but not actually pay for it, and make myself wait like 24 hours and think, you know, “*Do I really need this or I might just... did I just have a bad day?*” Like I said, I’m trying to work from my master list. Like if it’s not in the plan for shopping, [I won’t buy it.] [...] If I feel like I need to shop, I need to shop for those items, you know, and then that’s on the approved list but that’s at least a plan I’ve made. I mean, Debbie [blogger] writes a lot about, you know, shopping with a reason and a plan and not just randomly entertaining yourself and so... I do think I’m more mindful of it but I still do fall into that trap sometimes if I had a really crappy day... [...] I am trying to read fashion blogs less. [...] So I’m trying to avoid certain blogs that – I’m trying to read the blogs like [Recovering Shopaholic] and like Gretchen Writers, *The Minimal Closet* blog, umm more things that are focused on not shopping. There is another that is called *Shopping Break* and I’ve been reading those kinds of blogs instead of fashion blogs that are saying, “You need this outfit! You need this look! You need this!” you know. And enjoy the... I love the fashion stuff, I love clothes, I love to look pretty but I’m... I know that’s a trigger for me, so I’m avoiding it right now, kind of.

Lisa is also doing her best to return the things she does not think she will wear. In the past, she would hang on to such items for a variety of reasons. Now, she sets deadlines to ensure that she does not end up with part of her closet full of unused items. She explained that she also used to buy things to return at a later time, but she believes that this can easily become a problem. Consequently, she is now more mindful of her purchases.

L: I've noticed lately, I had these couple of snow days where I bought a lot of stuff. One was like things I needed, like underwear and the other was like "I will shop!" you know, I've returned all that stuff. [...] because for me, that's... that's, you know, the buying and returning... umm because I've always said "*Hey, you know, you shop at Nordstrom, if you ever do want to compulsive shop – I've given this advice to friends – buy something from Nordstrom and just return it because there are no shipping charges.*" So, it is like "no harm, no foul." [...] But at some point that becomes like your hobby, your entertainment, so I'm trying to be more mindful. I'm trying to take things back that aren't right so that I don't continue accumulating things and have that financial burden. 'Cause there were times I just wouldn't... I was often like too lazy to take it back or it wasn't convenient to take it back so I just accumulated all that stuff. Umm... now I'm trying to be, first of all, mindful of really buying things that have at least the chance of being a good thing, and then if it comes and it's not good, for fit or just whatever, does not work, actually make myself take it back. And I'm trying to make a deadline of like, if it's something local, take it back within the same week...

Lisa seemed to feel confident that she will be able to take control of her shopping and buying behaviors, to the point where she will only buy the things she really likes and that she will use. For now, she appears happy that she has been making continuous progress and that she has found the support she needs.

### **Dolores Goswick**

Dolores Goswick was born and raised in Ohio. She grew up in an urban area with her father, mother, and brother. After graduating from high school, she received a



Bachelor's degree in Communications. She then earned a Master's degree in Business Administration and a Ph.D. in Education. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor at a university in Ohio. She has been married to her husband Kurt for the past 35 years and has no children, although she has Joey, her dog, and she loves him as her child. Dolores lives by herself, as Kurt has been relocated to an assisted living facility due to health issues.

Most of Dolores' hobbies revolve around recovery-type activities. She is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict who has successfully managed to take control of these addictions. She attends recovery meetings on a bi-weekly basis. One of the things that she enjoys the most is traveling to her vacation house in Michigan. She also enjoys going out with her best friend of 26 years, whom she met in treatment. They enjoy going shopping for and buying collectibles, or as she calls it "going antiques."

One thing that makes Dolores feel unique is her sense of style. She sees appearance-related items as part of her extended self; especially her eyeglasses. According to Dolores, they help her communicate the type of person she is.

Dolores: And I guess the other thing that I would say about me is that I have a definite style about me. I have a wardrobe of umm... oh, probably 20 different pairs of glasses. So my style is very much kind of wrapped up, if you will, in the way that I wear my hair, the way that I wear my glasses, and those are things about me that certainly are worth stating.

Dolores' unique sense of style has cost her over \$40,000 in credit debt. She has acquired a wide variety of articles such as antiques, furniture, seasonal décor, clothing, shoes, handbags, jewelry, and other accessories. When it comes to clothes, she explained

that she has run out of space. Her closets are completely full of items that are both new and used. When I asked her what she was planning to do with all of the items she has, especially those she has never worn, she replied: “Right now I’m not planning to do anything with them. I’m just hanging on to them. They are... I get a lot of security through my clothing.”

In order to keep all of the items she has bought throughout the years, Dolores has rented a storage facility. She indicated that most of the items placed in storage do not fit her anymore – in fact, they have not fit her in years – but the emotional connection she has with them does not allow her to let them go. She explained, “I have talked to counselors about it and umm I just haven’t been willing to take the steps that are necessary to do it. So, that’s the reason why I haven’t done anything about it yet.”

According to Dolores, managing finances is not her strong suit. In contrast to her parents, who were very frugal and very good with their finances, Dolores shared that she has always struggled to manage her money. Indeed, her parents have helped her to pay off her credit card debt on more than one occasion.

Dolores recalled that she was about 35 years old when she first realized she had a problem with shopping and buying. She was overdrawn on her checking account by about \$300, and ended up asking her best friend for a loan. She described this experience as “shameful and dirty,”

I: When did you first notice that you had a problem with shopping?

D: The first time I noticed it was when I had overdrawn my checking account to the point where I had to ask my best friend for money. I had always sworn that I

would never ask my best friend and her husband for money and when I needed to do that that, was when I saw that there was really - I really had a problem.

I: So, how much was it? Can you share with me?

D: Yeah, I can't remember. I think it was probably only two or three hundred dollars but it was way too much for me. It felt... I felt very dirty that I had to borrow money from them... Yeah, it was very shameful.

Dolores explained that she paid them back right away but it was not too long after that she overdrew on her account again. At that point, she had to ask Kurt for help. As she explained, for a very long time, Dolores kept him from knowing about her compulsive buying behavior. Then, in a conversation over the phone, she confessed to him that she had been having trouble controlling her shopping and buying behaviors. She told him that she had overdrawn her account and that she needed to borrow some money from him. She explained that he decided to help her initially, but after it kept happening, he told her that he would no longer give her money and instead encouraged her to work on her shopping and buying behaviors.

According to Dolores, Kurt had also experienced addiction. Indeed, Dolores met him when they were both attending a recovery program for alcohol and drug addiction. Interestingly, Dolores pointed out that Kurt never asked her why she was buying excessively, and she believes that it is because he knows what it is like to have an addiction, stating, "He too is in recovery, so I guess we just assume that it is because it makes us feel good." Not being forced to reflect on her behavior may have allowed Dolores to continue with her excessive shopping and buying behaviors.

According to Dolores, this compulsive buying behavior began long before the point when she realized she had the problem. Instead, she thinks that she has been dealing with shopping problems since she was a little girl. Her mother used to take her on shopping trips quite often. She remembered that even as a child she managed to convince her mom to buy her the things she wanted.

D: I used to go shopping with my mother. That was one of the things that she and I did together and umm I would always convince her to buy me things and she would always make a joke and say that, you know, even though she came out to shop for herself, I was the one who was getting the things. So, I was even able at that point, as a little girl, to convince somebody to buy me things. And... umm then when I became older and had some of my own money to spend, I would not be able to hang on to money. I would spend it right away and I would always spend it on things for myself like clothes or makeup or jewelry or those kinds of things.

Dolores described how each shopping trip was a “magical” experience. She used to go downtown with her mother to meet her grandmother. Then, the three of them would spend the day looking around stores. Dolores not only recalled the things they did together, but treasures other details about the experiences. For instance, she remembered with a great deal of nostalgia the clothes people were wearing. Dolores’ shopping and buying behaviors today may be a way to try to re-experience the feelings and emotions that those moments evoked.

D: I like the fact that my mother and I would get dressed up and go downtown and go shopping. We’d meet my grandmother who worked downtown. And we’d meet her – she worked in a department store – and so, we’d get dressed up, we’d go downtown, we would have lunch umm I would get to see – this was back in the late 60s – and I would get to see all the people and all the women how they wear their furs, and it was just... it was very magical for me. It was very umm... it was a whole experience that I really fell in love with.

According to Dolores, her love for clothing was nurtured by her mother and grandmother. Dolores described her mother as a woman of impeccable taste. She used to make her clothes and to encourage her to have an original style.

D: My mother would make me my clothes from the time I was a little girl. So I always had really cool things to wear. Umm... and I just always was umm enjoyed -- my mother always encouraged me to dress the way I wanted to dress and not the way other people thought was the right thing to do. She always had -- my mother had impeccable taste. It was always -- I always trusted her judgement when it came to how to dress.

As a result, Dolores talked about how, when she was in school, she was not afraid to show her sense of style. She recalled that there was always some peer pressure to follow certain styles, but she liked to take some risks and try new things, just as her mother encouraged her to do. Even though Dolores' relationships with her mother and grandmother were good, they tended to put pressure on her regarding her weight and appearance.

D: ...my mother, [and] grandmother were a little bit harder on me regarding my weight. That was one of the things that was always a point of tension. It was always how much I weighed and what I looked like, but other than that that, I've always had really good relationships with [my] parents.

Dolores seems to have had a very happy upbringing. She talked about spending time at the lake with her family in their boat. They were also very active in their church, so they engaged in many church-related activities. Dolores talked about how birthdays and holidays were big celebrations at her house. She talked about how her mother would always find a way to make it special. There were always a lot of gifts and plenty of fun

things to do. She recalled that one of her favorite activities during Christmas was going downtown to look at the window displays of the local department stores and have pictures taken with Santa.

D: ...when I was a little girl, we would always go downtown and look at the windows at our local department store, they always had beautiful windows and then you would go in and sit on Santa's lap and have pictures taken and umm... let's see here... and then when we were home, as I mentioned, it was beautifully decorated. We always had a lovely tree and a lots of gifts, lots of gifts.

Dolores described how, when she was around 8 or 9 years old, she started earning her own money working around the house and helping her dad in his office. In addition, her parents used to give her an allowance and her grandparents provided her with some extra money to be spent on whatever she wanted. She also got money as a reward for good grades in school. Dolores recalled how the money she earned was quickly spent on things for herself. As an adult, she continues to do the same. If there is money at the end of the month, she finds a way to spend it.

For Dolores, shopping has become an almost unconscious activity. As she explained, there are times when she has no need or desire to buy anything in particular, but she still finds herself in front of the computer surfing the web.

D: Yeah... you know, I'll just be – this happens to me in the mornings – [...] I do a prayer and meditation in the morning. So, I'm all spiritually connected and grounded and all that kind of stuff, and the next thing I know I'm online looking something up and I don't necessarily buy it, but I'm doing all that preparation and looking it up and doing all the research and the hunt and that kind of thing, and it's not even something that I planned to do.

According to Dolores, she is more at risk to engage in compulsive buying when she feels depressed and when she has “extra money.” For her, a good shopping day is one in which she will follow her “shopping plan,” whereas a bad day is one in which she buys more than she planned to.

D: I start out with some kind of a plan, you know, umm “*I’m gonna spend ‘x’ amount of money*” and I will spend only as much as I have because I’ll be using cash. So that will be my plan. And a lot of times I’ll be having lunch in conjunction with the shopping and that - I will call that more of a good day because many times I stay within my shopping plan. It would be money that I could use on other things but I chose to use it on shopping, so that’s a good day. A bad day is when I set out with a plan and then continue to buy more, and more, and more with my debit card knowing that the money is not there.

During a “bad shopping day,” Dolores not only spends the money she has in cash, but also uses her debit card knowing that she does not have enough money to cover her expenses. The bank does not decline the purchases, therefore she keeps on buying. Even though Dolores admits that she is aware that every time she overdraws her checking account the bank charges her a fee of \$36.00, she still makes purchases. She explained that, throughout the years, she has applied for overdraft protection, but the bank has consistently denied her request due to her credit score.

I: Do you have any kind overdraft protection?

D: I don’t. No. I have been.... I have been denied that.

I: Ok. So, there have been instances when you are buying and at some point it says decline?

D: No, it doesn’t. My bank does not decline them. It just keeps letting me use it.

I: Oh!

D: Yeah... so they can charge the \$36 fee, aha! Yeah! They are good business people, aren't they?

I: Is it each day that you are overdrawn?

D: It's each item that I'm overdrawn. Yeah! So I could spend... I could be paying \$360 in overdraft fees, easily.

Dolores talked about how being in control is something she aspires to. Indeed, her shopping behavior seems to be a strategy that she uses to take control of her feelings and emotions. As she explained, it is through the process of shopping and buying for appearance-related items that she is able to find ways to feel secure and better about herself.

D: I guess [I like appearance-related items] because of the way it makes me feel to have these things. It's almost like -- it almost perpetuates the illusion that umm... that something is going to make me feel better. I guess by having -- by being able to wear something different, I'll feel better. By being able to look different in some way, I'll feel better, you know. It's bad. Umm those typical -- those types of things perpetuate the fact that I don't feel good about myself and can feel better if I buy those things and use them.

Dolores also talked about how her self-esteem was shaped in part by stereotypes presented by the media, along with comments her mother made to her when she was young. She remembers that during the 1960s and 1970s, television was an important part of her formation. Advertising portrayed the image of thin, small women as the ideal of beauty. Her mother confirmed such stereotypes by telling her that women who are thin are more desirable to men.

D: Well, just the fact that the 60s and 70s were part of the whole, you know, TV generation so I was affected in that umm I was exposed to a lot of advertising. I



was exposed to a lot of stereotypes about women, that was what I was first exposed to. Women being very thin and small and, you know... and that kind of look that I wasn't and never have been.

I: Ok. So that affected your self-esteem? The stereotype about women... That affected you?

D: I was never umm little. I was never small or thin or... and so, the messages were always, some of this messages I got from my mother too, were *"if a girl is little, she'll be more desirable to a boy, and if she is not, then she will be less desirable."*

According to Dolores, many years passed before she was able to realize that she was having trouble with shopping and buying enough to act on it. When reflecting on her past, she explained how the other issues in her life kept her from paying attention to her buying behavior. At the time, she needed to take control of her alcoholism and drug abuse, as these two issues were critical to her well-being.

D: I know. I think because I was so occupied/preoccupied with other issues in my life that were more prevalent. I think that, you know, the alcoholism, the drug addiction, the umm... those are the things that were really out of... very noticeably, out of control in my life, and so those are things that I needed to really address first. Even though I didn't know at that time, they were things that I needed to address first to, in other words, to kind of get those things out of control, in control, and so I could move on and live the rest of my life.

Dolores thinks that dealing with these other addictions prevented her from taking action on her compulsive buying. It was not until she acquired a substantial amount of debt and had overdrawn her account that she realized she had to find a way to put an end to her compulsive buying behavior. She first looked online for a 12-step Recovery Program, as she was familiar with the dynamics of such programs and has found them to be very helpful. However, her search turned out to be unsuccessful. There were no

recovery programs in her area, hence, she decided to “put that on the back burner.” At that time, Dolores did not try to seek treatment from a psychologist or psychiatrist, because, as she explained, “I guess there was something inside that said, because I’ve been so successful with my recovery with alcoholism I should be able to fix this myself.” Later on, she found a 12-step Recovery Program that was close enough to where she lived that she decided to join.

Attending meetings has allowed her to better manage her finances. Dolores said that she has stopped using her credit cards and started to make purchases using cash. She has also learned to create a spending plan. Dolores has since decided to seek therapy, in particular for help with binge eating (eating disorder), but she has taken the opportunity to also work on her shopping and buying behaviors.

Currently, Dolores is only dealing with compulsive buying behavior, as she said that she has managed to take control of the other compulsions and addictions that she has previously experienced. Undoubtedly, her past experiences have allowed Dolores to feel more in control of her life. Although not always effective, she has found ways to deal with shopping and buying.

D: Many times I will say, *“I’m not going to buy anything until I have waited 24, 48 hours”* and I’ve learned that’s something that is really important for me to do when it comes to online shopping. So, umm if I can, I wait. But sometimes I can’t. The compulsion just takes over and I have to buy it right away.

Dolores feels ashamed of her compulsive buying behavior. Before her husband went into assisted living, she used to hide her purchases from him. Now that she lives by herself, she does not feel the need to do that. However, she still puts things out of sight as

soon as she gets home. Although Dolores has been able to control her spending to some extent, as she put it, “Overall, I want to be much more deliberate with my shopping. I have improved a lot, but there is more work to do!”

### **Lynn Raise**

Lynn Raise was born in 1967 in Massachusetts. She is a writer and blogger who focuses her writing on experiences with being a compulsive clothing buyer. Lynn holds a Master’s degree in Counseling Psychology and is a Certified Life Coach. She has been married for the past thirteen years to Phil, who is a business man. They live in San Diego, California. Although they have no children, they consider their two cats to be their “kids.” Lynn enjoys going for walks along the bay or up the hill with her husband. She also likes going to the movies, reading, and dining out. Throughout her life, she has dealt with eating disorders as well as depression. While she has managed to control these two illnesses, she is also recovering from being a compulsive clothing buyer.

When I reached out to Lynn, I was hoping that she could help me recruit participants for my study. I wanted her to post the information about my research on her blog to see if some of her readers would volunteer to participate. After I explained to Lynn my goals and objectives, she was kind enough to not only post the announcement on her blog, but to take part in the study.

As Lynn explained, she is now in recovery, but is not recovered. She sees a significant difference between these two terms. According to Lynn, at this point in her life, she has managed to control her compulsive clothing buying behavior. She said that she does not buy as much as she used to, and has become better at managing her finances

and her wardrobe. Lynn expressed that even though she is doing much better, there are times of weakness. That is, she admits that, from time to time, she spends a significant amount of time and money on clothing items. When I asked her about her actual buying behavior, she responded that, in comparison to how it was before, she is doing much better now.

Lynn: Well, is a lot more controlled. I would say it's – I wouldn't say it is like, you know, I say I'm still recovering, not recovered. So I buy a lot less than I used to, and a lot of times I will buy more items in one shopping trip. But one difference is, before I used to shop a lot more often and I was never deliberate about it at all. It was always just go and whatever... It wasn't even about what I was buying. It was about the experience of shopping and it was about having, kind of an escaping trip. [It] was a lot of this for me too.

According to Lynn, her compulsive buying behavior is not completely about the items she is buying, but about their ability to help her feel better about herself. She explained that, particularly at that time, appearance-related items were everything for her. She used to think that she needed to have these items. For her, not being able to acquire them was devastating.

L: I didn't feel at the time that it wasn't about the item. I just say that in retrospect. At the time, I felt... I always said it was about the items and it was always, "*I have to have these things.*" And I would be heartbroken if I couldn't buy them, and then I [would] bring them home and they [would] sit in my closet so (laughs), obviously, it wasn't about them but I really at the moment I would feel like it was, you know.

As she explained, she now understands that none of the items she bought during these compulsive buying episodes were strictly "necessary." Thus, she is able to make better decisions when it comes to shopping and buying.

L: I think that the choices that I make when I buy things now are a lot better, and I think I overall buy a lot less than I used to buy. But I still buy too much, but it's probably like a quarter or less of what I used to buy, so it is a lot better.

Although Lynn recognizes that her behavior has significantly improved over the past couple of years, she still considers shopping to be her favorite hobby. When I asked her about the importance of shopping in her life, she responded that "it is still more important than it should be." Even though it is not as much as it used to be, Lynn talked about how she still spends time browsing online and reading posts about fashion items. She also explained that despite her love for blogging, this activity has kept her too close to the shopping experience.

L: It used to be like whenever I have any free time, you know, or not even if I had free time, but I would always try to make it happen. I [used to] browse online a lot more. I don't do much of that at all anymore. [...] I'm still on the computer a lot. I'm online a lot, but I'm not really doing shopping behavior as much. I don't read fashion forums. I used to spend a lot of time reading fashion forums and browsing e-commerce sites, and I do a lot less of that. But it's still too important and I think part of the reason why it is too important... well, it is a couple reasons and some of them are good and some of them maybe not so good, but part of the reason why [it] is so important to me is because I haven't found enough / other interest in hobbies to replace it and, you know, that's part of it. And then, part of it is because I... you know, blogging about this topic does kind of keep me engaged in it. So that's the part that is not so good because I like doing my blog and I think it is a good thing, but sometimes it does keep me engaged in it more than I would like.

For Lynn, blogging about compulsive buying has, in some ways, interfered with her recovery. As she explained, she enjoys writing about her experiences with shopping and buying, and sharing with her readers the strategies she has employed to deal with this behavior. Lynn shared that she derives a lot of satisfaction from helping others. However,

having this commitment has kept her from finding other activities that could potentially take her mind off of the shopping and buying process. Lynn has no doubt that sharing her experiences has had a positive impact on her recovery but she accepts that in some ways it might also be hindering the possibility of a full recovery.

L: Yeah, I mean it does both. I mean, I think for the most part, it [has] really helped me. I think that if I hadn't done the blog I would probably not be as far along in my recovery as I am, mostly because of the accountability aspect of it and knowing that I buy things and I'm, you know, I mean, accountable that I'm going to share it on the blog. So there is that part of it, and this feeling like I have, you know, wanting to be a role model to some degree to my readers, so there is that. But then I just think that because I spent a lot of time blogging, then that can get in the way a little bit of me developing some other interest or getting out and... what I [have] really come to understand is that I spend too much of my life online and I need to be spending more of my life in the world.

For Lynn, blogging has turned out to be more like a job than a hobby. She explained that it involves not only writing each post, but also following up with her readers. She receives plenty of messages about her posts, and takes the time to answer each person individually. She pointed out that this activity has taken most of the time she used to dedicate to shopping, in that, before creating the blog, Lynn used to spend her time browsing online, reading fashion blogs and fashion forums.

L: Yeah, it's like a job (laughs), it's definitely a lot of time. And so a lot of the time that I'm spending blogging, in the past, that time, a lot of that time – well, I was doing other things too – but at least a portion of that time would've been spent time shopping and looking, reading, reading fashion blogs, fashion forums, you know, looking at different retailers' websites and those kinds of things. So I do less of that now because this has just taken a lot of my time, to do the blog.

For a very long time, Lynn used shopping as a way to interact with other people. She indicated that she has few close relationships, therefore, shopping was a particular way to deal with the loneliness she was experiencing. That is, Lynn found in sales representatives the closest thing to a friendship. Now she recognizes that these were not real friendships. When talking about her favorite store, she explained that she used to love – and still loves – going to *Nordstrom*. Besides the merchandise selection and the shopping atmosphere, the most important attribute of this store for Lynn is the customer service.

L: Well, I like for one the selection that they have. I think they have good merchandise, but I really just like the customer service aspect and the fact that the sales people actually spend time with you and talk to you and they remember you. Like they remember my name and they remember things about me and they remember what kind of clothes I like, things like that. I think, you know, I consider it a friendship. I think it's because I was lonely. I mean I still am. My loneliness hasn't really changed, but I don't shop to try to deal with it anymore. I just haven't really figured out how to not be lonely but I know that doesn't help. I know that the shopping isn't... is not a real friendship. It might be a nice interaction in the moment, but it doesn't really help anything.

Loneliness was one of the reasons for Lynn's frequent visits to the shopping mall. For Lynn, feeling lonely was therefore one of the things that kept her engaged in compulsive buying. Through shopping she was able to build relationships with others, which at the time, felt more like friendships. As she explained, these interactions prompted her to buy things.

L: ...I felt like I was friends with the owner. I'll go in there and we'd chat but then I'd always buy something because I always thought like I should. We weren't really friends; we were kind of friends but like friends in a... not in a real way. I mean we had good conversations and everything, but I never saw her

outside of the store. Then that's not a real friend (laughs), but it suits that purpose for me. I was feeling lonely. I wanted to engage. I wanted to interact with somebody. I liked to get out of the house and... There are definitely things that really kept the obsession and addiction going for me. [Things] that I really see quite clearly now, that I didn't see before because before it was just kind of, "*Oh! There is something for me to do.*"

For Lynn, one of the biggest problems with doing this was that most of the time she felt obligated to buy something while in the store. Lynn explained that she would feel guilty if she left the store without making a purchase because the employees would spend considerable amounts of time taking care of her. This behavior would go as far as buying things she knew she would return at a later time. She knew that buying an item she did not want was a waste of her time and it would not really help the salesperson, yet she did not want to tell the employee that she was going to leave empty-handed.

L: Sometimes I would buy something knowing I would go to return it just because the salesperson -- I used to shop at *Nordstrom*, I still... I still do shop at *Nordstrom*, but I don't like it as much as I used to because it is the... the customer service I like but then I don't like it at the same time because I sometimes feel obligated. That's the same as going to the little boutiques. Like I don't go to the little boutiques anymore because I feel like if you know the person who owns it, then you feel guilty if you don't buy something. I'd rather be anonymous when I shop now. I'd rather go and like not really talk that much to the salesperson, not really have them talk to me all that much, because then I feel guilty if I don't buy stuff. And, you know, sometimes I would buy something 'cause this person spent like an hour helping me, then I [would] feel really guilty [if I don't buy anything] but then I'd be already thinking that I'm going to return it (laughs). Basically, I would be wasting my time. I mean, it wouldn't help them because they get a commission and then the commission will get reversed when you return it so... but I just couldn't face telling them, "*Oh, no, I'm not going to buy anything from you. Sorry!*" you know...



Lynn would usually go to a different store or to another department in the store to return the items. Basically, she explained that she would do whatever it took so she did not need to face the sales representative.

L: But another funny thing that I would do, is that I would go to a different store to return it, like a different one, or go to the same store but go to a different department so that I wouldn't have to return it to the person who sold it to me.

Lynn talked about how she grew up in a middle-class family. She explained that, while her mother was raised by both a mother and father, her father, on the other hand, was raised by a single mother. He did not have many resources, hence, he grew up with the desire to become wealthy. From him, Lynn learned to show love through material possessions. Lynn's parents divorced when she was 14 years old. Even though she has a good relationship with her parents, she is not particularly close to her dad. She described him as having a difficult personality and being a workaholic.

L: I grew up with both of my parents until my parents got a divorce when I was 14, but my dad wasn't really around a lot. He traveled a lot. He was a workaholic. He worked a lot and he traveled a lot for his work. So I mostly... it was my mom and my brother, and my brother is three years younger than me. I was around my mom and my brother, mostly, and my dad, sometimes.

I: And how would you describe your relationship with them? With your mom, your dad, and your brother?

L: Umm... (thinking) I don't know... I mean, I wasn't close to my dad, for sure. Definitely not close with my dad because he just wasn't around. And he also was kind of... had a very umm... kind of a Jekyll and Hyde personality, so you never knew what you were gonna get with him. You didn't know whether he was going to be yelling or whether a "*get out of my face*" or whether he was going to be nicer. So... and it's kind of still how he is (laughs) to this day. Less with the yelling, he doesn't really yell anymore but sometimes he still -- he can be kind of sarcastic and snide, and you kind of don't know, like when I talk to him, like I

don't really know how he is going to be towards me. Is he gonna be... is he gonna be, you know, nice and interested in me and what I have to say or is he gonna just be kind of aloof...

According to Lynn, growing up, she was very self-conscious. She said that her father was very critical about appearances and he used to make fun of her mother because of her weight, and would tell Lynn, "you better watch out or you are going to end up like your mom." Lynn explained that she used to compare herself with her friends, not only in terms of their purchasing power but their appearances. She recalled that she became interested in shopping at a very young age mostly because of her insecurities. She commented that feeling insecure about her looks made her resort to shopping, hoping that material possessions, more specifically appearance-related products, would make her feel "good enough." As Lynn explained, this behavior is strongly encouraged by society's idea that to be able to be "somebody," you need to fit a certain stereotype.

L: I started at a very young age. I mean, I don't remember when I wasn't into it. I was into it... but I was insecure and I think insecurity drives it a lot of times. I think that, you know, feeling like, "*Oh, you are never good enough...*" because you see all these images that are placed in front of you like, "This is what you are supposed to look like" or "This is the desired appearance" and so you start thinking, "*Well, maybe if I have the right clothes. Maybe if I find the right make up or if I find the right product then, maybe then, I can finally look good enough*" and then, "*If I look good enough, then I can have what I want in life,*" you know, it kind of -- but you are not conscious about it at the time necessarily but that's the trajectory that follows often.

Throughout her life, Lynn has acquired a wide variety of items that have served the purpose of enhancing her appearance. As an adult, she reflected on the real purpose of her purchases.

L: I think appearance-related things is because I just never thought I looked good enough. I never thought I was pretty enough, I never thought I was good enough. I thought I needed to look better in order to be better, you know. Still, I mean, I still have a lot of insecurities about my appearance. It's getting worse now, now [that] I'm getting so freaking old...

Lynn's obsession with appearance-related items ultimately caused her serious financial issues. In fact, it was a maxed-out credit card that made her realize that she was having trouble with shopping and buying.

I: When was the first time that you noticed that you were having a problem with shopping and buying?

L: I think, you know, probably when I first hit debt with it, which is probably in my early twenties. And that's when I had to go to my father and ask for his help because my umm... I had debt and I was not able to pay it because I was not making very much money. I didn't have very much money and so I was just paying umm the minimum payments.

I: On your credit cards?

L: Right. So, I had to ask for help and then he... he paid off my credit cards twice. I don't remember... I know the second time I had to promise that I wouldn't open up any more. I had to close the account and then I had to not -- [I had to] promise not to open them up and only use a debit card. And I did honor that for a few years, but not indefinitely.

Lynn described how, for a few years, she kept the promise she made to her father. However, at one point, things got out of control again and it was her boyfriend who helped her pay. For the most part, Lynn thinks she managed to control the use of her credit cards, as she would use them for a while and then stay away from the mall until the balances on the credit cards were low enough to use them once again. According to Lynn, this strategy worked for a while, but looking back she thinks it was not ideal. She

expressed the desire to be able to engage in shopping and buying with moderation. As she explained, shopping is a necessary part of our everyday lives, so she does not want to feel that it is between “shopping excessively” or “not shopping at all,” and no middle ground.

L: A few years... I don't know for sure the exact [time] but like a few years because I also had a boyfriend who paid down my credit cards too umm... when I was around 30, so probably... but I still had problems -- it just didn't get as bad. Like I would shop and then I would owe my credit cards, you know. I would pay them. It was always like and on and off thing. Like it was kind of like, *“Okay. I will stop for a while, so I can pay down some of my credit cards.”* So I did have some control over it. It wasn't like... like I would sometimes go, *“Okay, well...”* but my control was always *“stay away.”* It was always abstinence. It was always like... See, this is what I'm trying to have be different now. It is that I don't want to have to go, *“Well, my only way of controlling it is just to stay out of temptation all the time.”* Because it's part of life. I mean, I want to be able to do things in moderation. I don't want to have to be like, *“Oh, well I'm either doing it like crazy”* or *“I'm like completely staying away.”* Like, I just don't think that it has to be that way.

Lynn believes that she has been dealing with compulsive buying ever since she started generating her own income. She recalled that as a teenager she would spend any money she earned right away.

L: I think I had it ever since I had money. I mean, I think that in my teens. It started in my teens but it's really... it was more insignificant because I just didn't have a lot of money to spend, but whenever I did have money, it was spent almost immediately. Yeah, I mean, it was a problem early on, but when I didn't have credit cards or more means it wasn't as significant.

Lynn thinks that she was unable to realize that she had a problem with shopping and buying because, in the beginning it was not impacting her life in a negative way. Because of her limited income, she was not able to buy as much. Then, when she started accruing

debt, she attributed it to the fact that she was not earning enough money, and not to the fact that she was spending far above her means.

L: I think it wasn't impacting my life, exactly, you know. When it started impacting my life it was by having credit card bills that I couldn't pay then. But at the time, I really looked at this, "*Oh, I'm not making enough money!*" (laughs) It wasn't like, "*Oh, I'm spending too much!*" it was like, "*Well, that's because I'm not making enough money!*" You know? Which is true, but, you know, there is the whole thing about living within your means, but I wasn't really willing to do that.

Lynn thinks that what got her into compulsive buying was her insecurity and the idea that wearing the right thing would allow her to get what she wanted in life.

L: ...being insecure umm feeling like I, you know, being insecure about my appearance and feeling like if I had the right clothes, if I looked the right way, I will feel better about myself, that people would like me more, that I, you know, would be more attractive to men, you know, that I can be successful. Like all these things, like I thought it will help me get what I wanted in life and feel better about myself.

Lynn explained that she soon learned that, far from helping her achieving her goals, shopping was actually destroying her life. Lynn described how she would be at a higher risk of engaging in compulsive clothing buying when she was going through a negative situation. Specifically, she used shopping as a way to deal with an uncomfortable reality. As she explained, she resorted to shopping and buying as a way to get control over her life, but ironically, her shopping behavior ended up taking control over her.

L: I think I always was [at risk], but I think that whenever I go, when I go through some sort of a crisis situation in my life, like where umm... you know, I would be dealing with negative emotions... you know, some people, when they have negative emotions or bad experiences, they will drink, you know, or, you

know, eat, do drugs, whatever. For me, you know, I mean, I had an eating disorder before too, so that was – that came into play in my life too. But in terms of the shopping, you know, whenever I am under a lot of stress umm... a lot of stress, transitions, feeling out of control in areas of my life. So, it's kind of like, *"Oh, here is something I can..."* you know – I couldn't really control, but you think that in your head. – It was like, *"Oh, well, I can kind of control this experience of going out to the mall and buying something,"* you know. *"Ok, maybe my life is all chaotic and everything is falling down around me"* or *"I'm in a relationship and I fought with my boyfriend"* or *"Somebody broke up with me"* or whatever, you know. I can't control somebody else's behavior, but I can go and buy something nice for myself. So, it's definitely crisis time, negative emotions, umm I'm prone to shopping then.

Lynn talked about how her compulsive clothing buying reached a point where she was not able to decide between items. She explained that she used to go shopping without a concrete plan in mind. Most of the time, she would go just because she wanted to see what was new, because she received a promotion in the mail, or because she needed to return an item. Lynn explained that she used to think that she would be able to go to the mall, buy something for herself, and leave. However, according to her, many times the situation would get out of hand.

L: I often didn't go with a plan. It was often just like, *"Oh! I have some time. Oh! Let me see if I can find something cool."* Sometimes I would go because a particular store was having a sale or I got a coupon in the mail or, you know, something like that, or I would have to return something to a certain store and then I thought, I'm gonna return this and I'm gonna find something else that I like better. And so I would go and do that. But often... often I would go thinking that was... I just really didn't realize that it was going to get as out of hand as it did. I mean, a lot of times people really get out of hand but I just didn't realize that that was gonna happen. I just thought... sometimes I really thought, *"Oh, I can just go and buy something for myself."* Like, *"I'm just gonna buy a new shirt or something,"* you know, and then I'm like, I have 5 t-shirts and I'm sitting in the dressing room like crying because I can't make up my mind. I mean, seriously, I would get so stressed out about trying to decide what to buy.

Lynn talked about how, many times, the stress that was generated by not knowing what to buy made her cry. She confessed that there were times when she would be in a fitting room painfully stressed out, crying, and using her phone to calculate numbers, basically trying to figure out how many items she could buy. She recalled staying longer than intended in the mall just because she was unable to decide between items.

L: I get major anxiety and I start crying (laughs), *“I can’t decide!”* You know, *“I can’t decide between these things!”* I remember one time, a few years ago, maybe like a year or two before I started to blog – It’s like probably two years since I started the blog – I was shopping with a friend and she saw me getting all frenzied and upset, and everything and she was like, *“Okay, let’s just put this stuff...”* Like, *“Let’s just take these all and, you know, have them hold it for you and let’s go and get some coffee or whatever. Let’s get something to eat, let’s get some coffee”* and, I mean, that’s the kind of thing I advise to people in my blog, you know, take a breath or take some time away so that you can actually like have some perspective on it. Because when you are in the middle of it, you think that this is like a life or death choice (laughs). *“If I don’t buy this dress, my life is gonna come to an end as I know it”* or whatever (laughs). You really think *“I have to have this.”*

Lynn explained that the urgency she felt about having specific items, that is, the idea of needing the items so badly that not having them would ruin her life, would disappear as soon as she acquired them. She stated that this, at least, meant that one of the battles was over. Unfortunately, as she explained, another one would start. She remembered how on her way home she would start concocting a plan to hide her purchases so her husband would not notice.

L: And it’s so funny because then you have it and then [...] a lot of times the after part I would have such remorse. I’d be like driving home and I have these bags in my car and either be like feeling a lot of remorse about [it], *“Oh! I shouldn’t have bought all that,”* or I’ll be plotting, *“How can I like get these into the house without my husband seeing them? (laughs) Where can I hide them? Can*

*I hide that?* Sometimes I'd hide things under the seats in the car, you know... I'd kind of bury them in the back of the trunk. I'll take things out of the bags and I... put some things in like... if I have like a tote bag with me or in my purse, I'll take it out of the bag and I'll shove it in my purse so that I can bring it in the house and I can hide it without him seeing it, you know, like stuff like that. I'll be plotting. I will either be feeling terrible or I'll be plotting how I could umm... how I could kind of like get away with it, you know?

Another strategy Lynn talked about using is what she calls "shopping bulimia."

That is, when she felt the need to go shopping, she would look through her closet to see if there were items she could return so that she could buy something else without spending money.

L: ...I did it all the time. And sometimes I would do it unintentionally too. I mean, sometimes it would be very intentionally. Like I would want to shop and so I'd look in my closet and go, "*What do I have that I haven't worn that I can return so I will have the money to go shopping?*"

According to Lynn, her compulsive clothing buying behavior has caused serious financial and personal problems. When I asked her about the consequences of the behavior, she explained that both her marriage and relationships with some of her friends have been affected by her obsession with shopping and buying.

L: Well... you know, it has affected my marriage like I told you because I was lying to my husband and hiding things from him and spending too much money. So definitely that has an impact. I think, you know, it impacted some other relationships because I would always want to be shopping. Like I get together with somebody, like it became one dimensional... then that would be what I want to do. I wouldn't be like, "*Oh, let's go do maybe...*" or "*Do you want to go do this other thing?*" And I'd be like, "*No, you know, like I want to go shopping*" because that would be my favorite activity. You know... it got to be a little bit too one dimensional and then honestly like if I'm spending that much time and energy on shopping then that was time and energy I was not putting in either the relationships that I had or finding or building new ones.



Lynn described how finances were another major issue. Having a budget was not something she generally embraced. As she explained, most of the time she would go overboard buying clothes and other appearance-related items, but because she was managing the household finances, she found a way to play around with the numbers to make it look like she was not spending as much. As she pointed out, that way she would avoid having to explain to her husband what she was doing.

L: Oh, we had a lot of problems about it. We had... I mean not so much about me going to shop, but about me spending too much money. Umm, you know, because I had a budget. I mean, I didn't stick to my budget for 10 years. The first 10 years that we were married, I didn't stick to budget one year and, sometimes, I will be wi[iii]dely over it. And sometimes I tried to cover it up, because I did our finances. So like, we would use *QuickBooks*. And so sometimes I'd put my clothing purchases in other categories to hide it or adjust the date so I'd be in the next month instead of that month. So then I'd think, "*Oh well, then I just won't buy as much next month,*" but then I still buy more. Then I have to keep doing it, stuff like that...

Lynn talked about how credit cards were another problem for her. She remembered that when she was at the height of the behavior she acquired a credit card from every retailer she could. Between store cards and regular credit cards, she ended up with at least 10 credit cards. Lynn recalled that her first credit card was given to her by her dad. Although she was very careful about using that credit card, she said that she abused the cards that she opened on her own: "The one that he co-signed with me, I didn't abuse that one but I ended up getting cards on my own and I abused those."

Currently, Lynn does not feel the need to hide her purchases from her husband. She said that when she experiences a compulsive clothing buying episode, she is now able to face it. In other words, Lynn feels comfortable enough to talk to her husband

about her buying behavior. Indeed, it seems as though knowing she must disclose her purchases has helped her control her buying behavior.

L: Yeah, I don't do that anymore. I mean, sometimes I still feel like, "*Oh, you know, I'm gonna have to show...*" Like even last weekend, [I was like,] "*Oh, I have to show him that I bought this stuff. He's gonna go kind of like, 'why did you buy all this stuff?'*" you know, but I don't hide it anymore. I just kind of deal with whatever it is; I deal with it, you know. I'll show him. I'll say, "*I bought this. This is what I bought*" and he'll either be like, "*Oh, cool*" or maybe he'll be like, you know, "*Wow! Why did you buy that?*" So, I just face it now. I deal with it. I mean, the same thing with putting things on my blog. I mean, I've committed to being accountable every month. Like what I've bought, what I got rid of, how much I spent, and sometimes I'm kind of like, "*Oh, no, I gotta put this on my blog,*" you know, "*Oh, you know, what are people going to say,*" whatever... but I still do it. I mean, I have had like trepidation about it, but I still do it, whereas in the past I would lie. I did a lot of lying and hiding, but I definitely wasn't proud of it. I didn't feel good about myself at all when I did that.

Indeed, Lynn sees blogging as helping her to become more mindful of her purchases. She explained that the commitment she has to her readers has been what has stopped her from engaging in compulsive buying. She expressed that the fact that she would have to disclose her purchases to others, alongside a desire to be a role model for those that are now suffering from the behavior, keep her from buying and motivate her to heal.

Lynn thinks that her behavior is now mostly under control. According to Lynn, she is conscious of her actions and most of the time she is able to stop herself from buying things she does not need and that will end up unused.

L: I would say that it is mostly controlled as it is mostly conscious. Mostly conscious, even sometimes when I buy too much, I don't feel like it just happens as much as it used to. Like I think I'm a lot more able to say "*no*" to something or to recognize, "*Oh, I probably shouldn't do this*" and then not do it, a lot more than before. But it's... it's mostly conscious but there is some still compulsive in there... there is still some of that but I'm usually able to notice it and cut it off.

Lynn described the strategies she uses now versus in the past, when it was not uncommon for her to buy all the items she wanted, with the excuse that she would decide what she would keep and what she would return once she got home. She now forces herself to choose an item while in the store. She also explained that if she does not wear something within a one-month period or so, she returns it.

L: You know, I try to make myself choose now instead of being, *“Oh, I’ll just take them all.”* I used to go, *“Oh, I’ll bring it all home and then I will decide and I will return some of them.”* That’s problematic ‘cause then it makes it harder because once you bring them home it’s like you own it and then it’s harder to let it go. Not as much anymore but it was... because it’s like, *“Okay, well, these are my shirts or these are my shoes,”* like in the store they are not yours yet, you know? So, it’s easier to leave it behind when it’s not yours.

Another strategy to stop her compulsive clothing buying behavior that Lynn described is that she tracks the number of times she wears different items in her closet. After doing that for a year, she realized she could do better. This motivated her to start her blog, as she first saw the idea as a good way to help herself overcome her problem.

L: I had been doing tracking of how much I wear / how can I wear things. And in 2012 which is right, it was the year before I started the blog, I had half of the items in my closet, I had only worn once or not at all during the whole year. So that’s... that was kind of like, *“Wow! I got a problem here!”* Well, I knew I had a problem I just thought it was getting better because I tracked it in 2011 too, and I thought that I would... and I had had really bad numbers just like the same. Then I thought, *“Oh, well, I’ll do better.”* And then I didn’t do better, and so then I really realized, *“Okay, this is not working.”* That’s part of what made me decide to do the blog.

Lynn said that she plans to continue writing about compulsive clothing buying and helping others find strategies to control their behaviors. She believes that with every

day that passes, compulsive clothing buying, although present in her writing, is less present in her actions.

### **Julia Sanders**

Julia Sanders was born in California in 1985, but spent most of her childhood and adolescence in Virginia. Her father worked as a military officer while her mom stayed at home. She is the oldest child and has a younger brother, Thomas. Julia attended school in California until her parents moved to Virginia. She finished school and her Bachelor's degree there. She then moved to North Carolina to complete a doctoral degree in the sciences. At the time of data collection, she was in the process of getting the degree, and was in a relationship with her boyfriend of three years, Jason.

During data collection, Julia also worked as a research assistant. She said that in her spare time, she enjoys doing things like scrapbooking, going out with friends, going to the gym, and shopping. For Julia, having a hobby is critical. As she explained, she finds graduate school to be very stressful and these extracurricular activities allow her to relax.

Julia: Umm... like grad school is really stressful. And I feel like when I think about it all the time like it actually doesn't... it doesn't like help me perform better when I'm thinking about it all the time. It just like stresses me out and makes me like fail more often. So... yeah. I have like some hobbies, like we... I do trivia and, you know, I go out from there. And then I kind of like to do scrapbooking, type of card making things umm... I used to go to painting classes and the gym but I feel like with graduation everything is just pressing down. It's just not helpful.

According to Julia, she has been struggling with compulsive buying for quite some time. She expressed that it is the time and energy she devotes to it that has affected

her the most. That is, she feels that all of that effort could be put towards more productive activities, such as doing her school work. However, she explained that she finds herself incapable of understanding why she resorts to shopping so frequently. Sometimes she feels that she engages in it without even noticing.

J: I feel it takes up a lot of my time but I don't understand why, maybe. Like umm... Like I find myself doing it almost like reflexively, maybe because I get a lot of emails or you know, kind of sales for online or from a lot of like shopping bloggers... umm so I feel like I spend a ridiculous amount of time like browsing the web and kind of planning these trips...

According to Julia, she has made a lot of progress trying to curb her compulsive tendencies over the past year and a half. In doing so, she explained that she has come to understand that it is not just one aspect of her life that causes her compulsive buying behavior. Among the triggers are stress caused by the demands of her graduate program, the loneliness and lack of social interaction as a result of moving to North Carolina to work on the degree, the environment in which she grew up, the multiple promotions she receives through email, and her interest in fashion blogs.

Julia explained that she is more prone to engage in compulsive buying when she is under a lot of stress. She stated that during periods where she has no stress, she does not shop or buy as much. When she feels stressed out, she feels the need to go shopping. Interestingly, Julia expressed that she also feels "the need to kind of stock up more and have these things around me." For Julia this may be a way to exert control over some aspect of her life. That is, if she cannot control school work, then she can try to control the amount of material things surrounding her.

Julia talked about how sales and promotions are a big trigger for her compulsive buying behavior. Every day Julia receives multiple advertisements and promotions from her favorite stores. She explained that going through her email and looking through the websites takes most of the time she could be using to develop personal relationships. In her attempt to make a change in behavior, Julia said that she has made it her goal to focus less on material possessions and more on relationships with others.

For Julia, it also appears that suggestions from fashion bloggers can trigger her compulsive buying.

J: Yeah... They suggest something like, "*Oh, maybe you should try colored jeans because you can definitely make it work with multiple outfits*" or something like that. And I know colored jeans is not something, you know, ridiculous but like it's probably something that's more out of my comfort zone than like normal jeans or maybe they'll suggest a different silhouette that make the leg look more elegant or something like that umm and then so, you know, like, I wanna try it to see if I could also look like that.

Julia went on to describe how the content of fashion blogs will often seduce her into buying something. Most of the time, she said that she finds the posts useful but recognizes that she tends to get lost in the process.

J: ...So a lot of the fashion blogs they have affiliate linking [...] and often, like, they put a lot of... like fashion bloggers put a lot of time and like, you know, on their outfits, and not just their outfits, but like one of the bloggers that I follow explains, "*Oh, that fits your body better than this one*" or how you can make this outfit yourself with the pieces that you have, and then, "*Oh, look, you can click all these little tiny links on how to find your little things*" and then... so, I feel like I kind of get lost in that tunnel of, "*Oh! Look at this cute shoes!*" and then, "*that cute skirt!*" and then, "*I will go with that top!*" and so... A lot of it, too, like it looks really amazing on these bloggers and, you know, some of them, the bloggers don't pay for them. Like they just get, it gets sent to them so that they can advertise for us so... you know... kind of like wanting that look or that item

or maybe I think that look would work for them and maybe not me, but you know, it's nice to look at stuff...

According to Julia, suggestions from fashion bloggers tend to influence her buying behavior but do not always prompt an immediate purchase. That is, posts from fashion bloggers will spark her interest in different clothing items. After she sees the item on the blog, she will usually do some more research on it. Julia talked about how, now that she knows how fashion bloggers operate, she often questions the integrity of some of them. As she explained, the fact that some bloggers get paid to promote the products they feature makes her question the veracity and authenticity of the post. From her perspective, companies send bloggers higher quality products and provide them with better customer service than typical customers receive.

J: I don't make a purchase immediately because I think I'm getting more conscious, you know, after reading [about how blogging works], but often go to the item, like in the store, like *Target* or *H&M* or something like that. And that's because some fashion blog like will get, like their bloggers will get a better item than what's in the store or something and so like since I heard that, that's why I don't like to buy it immediately.

According to Julia, she was 25 years old when she first noticed that there was something wrong with her shopping and buying behaviors. However, she explained that it was not until she was 26 that she "consciously registered it as a problem." As she recalls, she was going through her things in the apartment with her boyfriend, when he made a comment that made her think about her buying behavior.

I: When was the first time that you realized that you were having a problem with shopping and buying?

J: I think it has to have been with him. I think I showed him, maybe I was cooking with him maybe for the first time or something and then he saw my pantry. So I think it has to be something like that... or maybe he saw my linen closet because I have tons of sheets that aren't even opened.

I: For the house, like for your bed?

J: Yeah, I have like at least two sets that I can think of right now. I probably have at least, you know, I probably have a couple more somewhere else that, you know, are still new and then I have ones that are open. Like at least one or two that are open... [...] I definitely think it has something to do with something that he said or like did and you know, maybe he like, like saw a closet or something...

For Julia, it is hard to pin point a specific time when she started buying compulsively, as she believes she has always behaved like this due to the environment in which she was raised. However, she does remember that moving to North Carolina to work on her doctoral degree served as a kind of “detonator.” Moving from Virginia not only meant a change in scenery but distance between her and her friends and family. On top of losing contact with some of the people she loved, she also started to have less time to engage in extracurricular activities. She indicated that her class schedule and responsibilities as a graduate assistant began to take most of her time. According to Julia, this was a big change for her. That is, all of a sudden she was alone in another state working in a very demanding graduate program. She also began earning her own income.

J: Well, I think... (pause thinking) When I came to grad school. I definitely like lost a lot of like people. I have a less... less people in my network here like to do things with and so... and I also was paid, so I have like my own income, it's not from my parents. So, I guess, you know, like it's not just like my parents from what I get to stock up, but I have my income and I'm doing what I want with my money so umm... maybe because I didn't really have like a lot of hobbies or something so I just like explore...

I: You didn't have a lot of what?



J: Like I didn't have like a lot of hobbies with other people so... yeah sometimes I just like walk around stores, I guess...

When I asked her about the moment she started buying compulsively, she explained "I don't know because I feel like I want to say I grew up kind of like buying [like that] but I don't... It makes my mom look bad (laughs)." Julia's parents emigrated to the United States when they were young. According to Julia, they both were very poor and placed a lot of value on material things. Julia remembered how they used to keep things until they were unusable. Julia explained that her parents always stressed that they were poor and so they needed to stick to a budget. Julia thinks that she learned from them not only the value of material possessions, but the message these items would communicate to others. Julia indicated that growing up in this environment influenced the importance she places on material possessions and makes her buying behavior more difficult to stop.

I: Why do you think it is not easy for you to stop?

J: Umm... I think part of it is because my family so... umm when I grew up like my family were really poor and they, so they both immigrated here umm... and like everything we had, we like really took care of everything and kept it forever and umm... so I think there were just such a high value placed on like what you have and what you can't have and what you need to show that you have to people who visit and so umm... I kind of see myself doing that like, "*Oh, like, maybe I should get like three bottles of a nice wine in case someone visits*" or something like that but, you know, it's not like I had a planned event in mind that I would need these. It was just like, "in case" type of thing. So I think umm... I think a lot of it is from that. And it's not like I can completely distance myself from my parents. Like I still see them and, you know, it's like falling back.

According to Julia, when the family's economic situation improved, they started to go shopping more often. Julia recalled that every weekend her parents would take her and her brother shopping. She talked about how they went to different department stores such as *JC Penney*, *Sears*, and *Montgomery Wards*, and, like other kids, she and her brother used to spend the time playing around. When it came to fun, Julia explained that she preferred other activities, such as family gatherings or church events, over shopping. It was not until she grew older that she became interested in fashion.

J: When I was younger I... I thought it was a little boring because, you know, it wasn't like... even when they were looking for clothing for me, I think I was more interested in playing with my brother, but I think as I got older and had more of a voice in what was being purchased and had more like a style, then I became a lot more interested.

As an adolescent, Julia described going shopping with her friends only sporadically. She said she was 16 years old when she first went to the shopping mall without parental supervision. She talked about how she and her friends used to gather at the food court to talk and then would go around to the different stores. Julia remembers that her group was not exactly the "coolest group." However, they had a very strong bond which allowed them to feel comfortable trying new styles and sharing their opinions about it.

J: I think my friends encouraged me to try new things. Like our group wasn't the super popular group so umm... I think we would try like that new bracelet or that new hairstyle or something but would be, you know, very safe. It would be within our group and then we would be able to share our opinions very honestly with each other.

According to Julia, she started working part-time for a fast food chain when she turned 16. This allowed her to generate her own income. Thanks to this job, Julia was not as dependent on her parents. She talked about how she was able to save the money she earned and then used it throughout the year. Julia was introduced to credit cards when she was in college. She explained that her parents got her a credit card under their names and because they could see all the transactions she would make, Julia used it for what she considered strictly necessary. Nowadays, Julia has only one credit card that she uses to pay for everything, given the fact that she gets rewards on everything she uses it for. Julia said she has no debt, as she tries to pay it in full at the end of each month.

Julia indicated that, over the years, her shopping behavior has become quite excessive. Indeed, she feels that sometimes shopping is the only way she has to build or maintain a relationship with certain people.

I: How would you evaluate your buying behavior?

J: I think our society probably labels it as normal. I think it's excessive umm... especially because it is all... I guess it is the only thing I can kind of do, like, whenever I'm home with my mom, that's what makes her happy, is to go shopping with her, you know. It's kind of, I think it is excessive that that's the only way that I can feel like I can connect with certain people umm and that I obviously have a lot of things that I don't need and you know, it's stored in my room, in my living room or something, you know things like that... excessive personally but that doesn't mean that it is easy to stop.

Julia asserts that she would like to take the shopping process more "lightly." For her, this does not necessarily mean that she needs to stop spending her money on shopping, but that she needs to dedicate less time and effort to it. From her perspective,

she feels like she spends way too much time planning her shopping trips and deciding which items she is going to buy.

I: So... what do you mean by “lightly?”

J: Umm... Like it should just kind of be like a casual day or “*Let’s go and spend loads of money*” and, you know, I’m not saying that I spend thousands and thousands of dollars, but I definitely think about every purchase, you know, whether it is clothes or groceries or greeting cards (laughs), something like that. Umm... I don’t know, I feel like I’m always very serious with everything that I do.

Julia explained that she takes the process of shopping and buying very seriously. She also stated that she would prefer that this was not the case. That is, she would like to shop and buy without having to spend significant amounts of time and energy planning each shopping trip.

J: Yeah, so... I’ll get like a... like an ad in my mailbox or something like that. So like I’ll plan my shopping trip. I will say, “*Oh! These are the best deals. I should get... I should do this. I should look at this item and this item and see if the store has this item,*” you know. I know there is a lot of people who would just go to the store and wander and then like find things and then leave and you know that’s ok. But I feel like I plan it a lot more than that.

When Julia and I were talking about the shopping and buying process, she confessed that she truly enjoys the shopping side of it. Julia explained that more than the acquisition, she actually enjoys the hunting. She explained that, most of the time the buying part makes her feel guilty, as it is this point where she realizes that she is maybe spending too much money or that she has spent too much time on this activity.

J: Well, sometimes when I realize how much, you know, everything cost, like individually maybe something won't be that expensive but if I'm buying seven items that day, so then I feel guilty but you know I'm already at the register, I'm there.

I: Got you, so how does the buying part feel?

J: Well, I mean, yeah, sometimes it is good, like when I like items or something like that. It's also good when the price is lower or, you know, maybe if... if it's just like, wow I came to the register and now it is \$130, like, you know, surprising and it's like, just makes me feel guilty that I spent all this time and money doing this thing.

Julia talked about the shopping process as an opportunity to learn about herself.

Specifically, she described it as not only being something she enjoys, but she likes trying on clothes and seeing the different options, as well as learning what looks the best on her.

J: I really do like the shopping process. I like, you know, I like going to the store and then I like seeing the mannequins in all the different possibilities. You know, I like trying the different possibilities on myself. I like, you know, figuring out what works better, even if I don't buy something, it's like, "*Oh, well now I know that I can't wear studs that are, you know, like this big compared to like studs that are this big*" or something like that. So I feel like it's almost... I really like the shopping process because it feels like learning but in a very umm... it's not like a high intensity level of learning.

I: That's very interesting. What are you learning about?

J: I think it is learning about me. I'm learning about, "*Oh, I really like this kind of green on me, near my face*" or, you know, I like, "*Oh, I can umm...*" you know, because of that jacket that I have on my closet, I noticed that, you know, wool makes me like really scratch near my neck sometimes, so I have to like, you know, like wear something different or you know not get a wool coat or something like that. So I think it's just like that process [...]

I: ...So you are learning more about preferences and tastes, is there anything else you are learning through the shopping process?

J: Umm... I guess I get inspiration too. Like, you know, from different stores, like piece different things together. Yeah, then I learned about that too or umm...

I feel like I've been trying to learn about how stores market so that I don't feel I'm falling into a trap too like umm... like the clearance section is always in a certain section. So, you know, if I just avoid that then, you know, like I feel better about me.

Julia confessed that she has plenty of items that she has never worn; from stockings, to shirts, to shoes, to jewelry. For her, these items mean a waste of money. She explained that some items are linked to memories, while others to points in time when she looked different. Likewise, she talked about some items that she bought hoping to look a certain way. Julia referred to these as "tester items," the majority of which were items a blogger suggested and she decided to follow their advice.

I: What do those [unused] items mean to you?

J: I feel like a lot of it is like wasted money and I... and a lot of it, it's like linked to the past, you know, maybe I bought it when it was, you know, when I was skinnier. Maybe I bought it when I was in a bad mood or something. Some items are linked to memories and some items are actually like linked to a point in time when I was one way or some items are – like I was saying – like a blogger, "*Oh! I want to look more elegant.*" So, you know, I want to try an item. So, they are like tester items that I just never eventually wore or sometimes umm... like they are just, you know, items that I bought multiples of because I thought that I liked them at that time so... for example, I have this one pair of shoes that I'm wearing right now, and at the time because it was like on sale umm... I think I bought like 3 or 4 [pairs] and the shoes lasted at least a year so I'm freaking out (laughs).

When I asked Julia why she keeps all the items she has not used, even when some of them do not fit her anymore, she responded that she still sees the value in them.

J: I mean, I know sometimes it is like it's like "*Oh...*" Like with the shoes. I really did like them, you know, in each color and they do still fit. Like my feet didn't get ridiculously fat or skinny so... you know, like, I'm... If I like one, of course I'm gonna keep the others. But things like shirts that maybe weren't my style or something, you know, I'm absolutely getting rid of those. If it is things

that were too small, I feel like it's harder for me to let go because I know that I, you know, was that size and if I work then I can, you know, get there. Obviously, after I graduate. So... yeah... So I guess it links to what you were saying about possibility, like I could do that thing or wear that thing...

According to Julia, when she engages in compulsive buying, she tends to buy appearance-related products. She thinks that it is the way they make her feel or look that attract her the most. She also indicated that they represent the possibility of having a good time.

J: ...I think with each garment there is like, just... you know, a way that it makes me feel or the way that it makes me look or like the possibility of doing something special in that, like having some fun experience or something like that umm with it.

It seems that Julia places a high importance on the articles she purchases because of their ability to make her feel or look a certain way. Ironically, Julia commented that most of the time, after she acquires something, she forgets that she has it.

J: Umm... So, I mean, when I purchase the item usually it is really important but then a lot of the time I forget about it, like once I put it in the closet. So I really like, you know, to try it on, like that kind of process. Sometimes I find [something and say,] "*Oh this would be great*" and sometimes I don't even use it.

Julia said that for a long time, she used to wait for a special occasion to wear her new items. As she pointed out, the problem with this practice is that, most of the time, that special moment never happened, and she ended up with new items that she either did not like anymore or that no longer fit. She said that now that she is aware of this issue,

she is trying to incorporate the new items she has in her closet into her “daily wear rotation.”

I: Why can't you get yourself to wear the new stuff?

J: Umm I am doing it now. I think part of it was that I was trying to like save it, you know, which is... yeah, so I was trying to save it for something special or you know, a different occasion but umm but it is not that my current clothes are bad, I just think I can upgrade all of them at the same time. So like I'm trying to add new purchases into the rotation of more daily wear or casual wear. So I'm not trying to save it and, you know, maybe I grow too short or too tall or I don't like that style anymore. I think now I'm trying to use it now.

For Julia, among the consequences of her compulsive buying behavior are the time and energy she devotes to it. Moreover, she feels that her behavior has affected her relationships with other people. At this point, Julia is trying to avoid going shopping altogether. However, since only her boyfriend knows about her struggles with compulsive buying, nobody else understands why she refuses to go to the mall.

J: Well, I know that... when... when I see certain people I've been trying to not go shopping with them or outlets I guess. And some people haven't taken that very well. Like my cousin, for example. So... when I say let's do something other than shopping, she is like, “*Oh! What is there to do?*” you know, and so like she kind of like rejects a lot of possibilities, kind of taking it like personal... It's getting better... like, you know I guess it is impacted that way.

Julia explained that once she became aware of the consequences of her behavior, she decided to seek help. She said that the first step was to look for information online. Her search led her to several blogs on the topic.

J: I think I went online and I started just like looking for different ways to change it. I think even though – you know, when you realize something but you don't



really realize it for a long time – so I feel like even though I had that switch turned on in my head, I didn't, you know, make like significant action towards like changing ways of thinking about people and items until now. I started like actively reading like blogs, there were different blogs, kind of like learning more about behaviors and feelings and what to avoid and things like that.

Julia thinks that she has successfully put into practice several of the strategies she learned from these blogs. For instance, she has created an inventory list to keep track of the clothing items she has.

J: *Recovery Shopaholic* actually suggested that I make an inventory list. So... umm I made the list and then that helped kind of realize all the stuff that I have. Umm and so... now when I purchase clothing, it is usually either for like a need, like a... not really a need but you know for a party or something like that or I don't have certain type of item or because I think that it was a great deal but it will also work with something else, you know, able to use other items. Like, you know, sometimes I have like a skirt, that's really great, but I don't have like a blouse, you know, a top that I can wear with it. So, like it's obviously just filling like that hole...

Julia feels that she has taken control of her shopping and buying behaviors. Specifically, she talked about leaving the store without buying anything or only buying what she deems necessary. She said that she is also spending less money on appearance-related items. The fact that she is able to control her behavior, especially that she can ignore retail promotions, has made her feel quite happy, as she expressed when talking about one of her most recent purchases.

J: Umm I think I felt pretty happy when I got home. [...] I noticed that I usually like buying stuff a lot when I'm really hungry or like, you know, just like noticing different things or when there is a really big sale. So I was happy that the thing that I got I liked and it wasn't like... it was cheaper but it wasn't like a clearance, like sale thing so I felt like I wasn't, you know, falling into a trap, I guess. Like I was buying it because I really liked it. That made me happy.

One new problem Julia talked about facing, however, is that it seems that her love for shopping is now migrating from appearance-related products to groceries. Groceries are cheaper and, in contrast to clothing items, she feels like she is able to make more out of them. However, that is not always the case. For example, Julia talked about finding herself buying six boxes of cake mix at a time, or six packages of frozen chicken. Similar to what she explained with regards to appearance-related items and stress, she thinks that she feels the need to stock up on groceries, possibly in an unconscious effort to avoid experiencing what her parents lived growing up.

J: ...at least like in clothing I've been kind of happy that I've been able to walk away from things but I think, as I mentioned before, definitely I feel like I transferred into something else because now I'm like buying like six boxes of cake mix (laughs) that I don't need.

Julia explained that she is not able to buy just one item. When things are on sale, she feels tempted to buy in bulk.

J: I bought 5 packages of chicken breast because Harris Teeter had a sale and I usually don't just buy one thing. So, usually if it's like, "*Oh! I should get popcorn.*" I won't just buy like one box, at least get two and then sometimes just go to more, so...

I: Why at least two?

J: Umm... maybe because I feel like there are so many different flavors and choices whereas... I guess if I relate that back to clothing, I feel like, you know, like we are older, we have seen a lot of different trends and I feel like a lot of these trends are coming back so I almost feel that I don't need like partake in like that... whereas something like a food product, like, "*Oh! I like chocolate. Maybe I like the white chocolate too.*" Like it's, I don't know, it's like easier to say "yes" to something that I know that I like as well and I know that maybe... I don't know, I guess always does come back but, you know...

Julia stated that she plans to continue monitoring her shopping and buying behavior as it turns into groceries. She ended our interview sessions by expressing confidence that she is on the path to recovery.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the personal narratives of each of the six participants. The narratives form the first level of interpretation of the participants' lived experiences with compulsive clothing buying. Each narrative was developed through consideration of the participant's experiences as expressed in the interviews and personal journals. In the next four chapters (i.e., Chapters V through VIII), I present the second level of interpretation, which is a thematic interpretation of the data. In these chapters, the themes that emerged across participants' lived experiences are examined, as are the similarities and differences among them relative to the objectives of the study.

**CHAPTER V**  
**THEMATIC INTERPRETATION PART I:**  
**THE PERSON**

As evidenced in Chapter IV, compulsive buying behavior (CBB) is a complex disorder that manifests itself differently from one individual to the next. As was illustrated by the personal narratives, each compulsive buyer in this study experiences shopping and buying in her own way, and these experiences shape her understanding of the behavior, triggers and motivations, shopping process, product preference, and views on the consequences of the behavior. However, across the six participants, certain elements of the CBB experience emerged as shared rather than unique. The purpose of this chapter, as well as the next three chapters, is to explore those aspects of the CBB experience that cut across the lived experiences of the six participants.

Analysis of the interview data and personal journals revealed four main thematic areas that are used to structure the thematic interpretation (see Figure 7). In order to provide a clear and thorough understanding of the compulsive clothing buying (CCB) experience as lived by participants in the study, the thematic interpretation is presented in four chapters, Chapters V - VIII. In Chapter V (the current chapter), participants' lived experiences with CCB are examined and their understandings of the behavior, triggers and motivations to engage, moments of realization and major struggles are identified. Then, in Chapter VI, I explore the process of shopping and buying compulsively for appearance-related items as explained by the participants. Next, a deeper examination of

participants' preference for appearance-related products is presented in Chapter VII. Finally, I explore the consequences of the behavior as experienced by participants and their paths to recovery in Chapter VIII. Examining each aspect of the experience across the chapters, both separately and as a whole, sheds light on the fundamental question of this dissertation, which is, *What is it like to be a compulsive clothing buyer?*

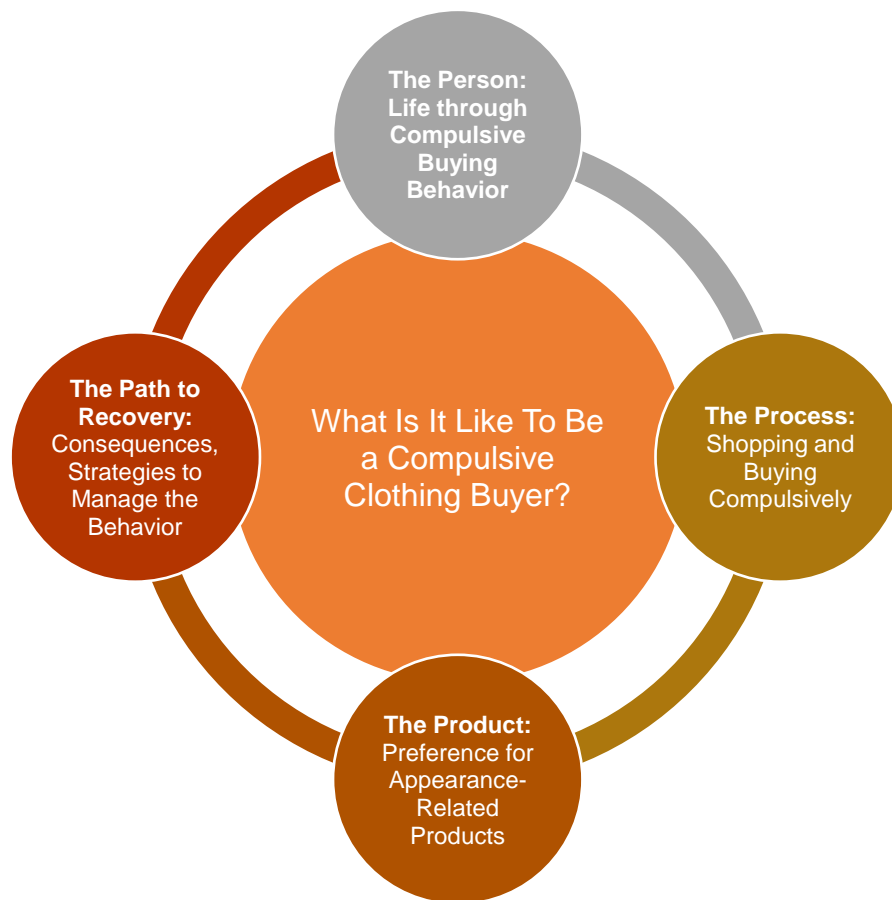


Figure 7. Thematic Interpretation Structure

In Part I of the Thematic Interpretation, participants' lived experiences are explored as a group to provide a deeper understanding of the overall compulsive buying experience. Upon examination of similarities and differences across participant narratives

and personal journals, five themes emerged and are used to structure the different sections of this chapter: (1) *Identity Crisis*, (2) *Evolving Affliction or Growing Addiction?* (3) *Uh-Oh, I Think I Have a Problem!* (4) *What Keeps Me Going Back for More?* and (5) *It Doesn't Get Any More Real Than This*. The first theme explores participants' understandings of CBB and their thoughts on the ways that cultural views on shopping and buying have bearing on general perceptions of the behavior within society.

### **Identity Crisis**

Even though CBB has been studied by researchers from different disciplines since the late 1980s, the disorder remains misunderstood and unclear among the general population (Martínez-Novoa & Hodges, 2016). Thus, each participant was asked about her understanding of the term CBB and what it entails. Each was asked to compare and contrast CBB with related behaviors and/or terms such as *retail therapy* and *shopaholism*. Based on participants' responses, it seems that CBB is currently suffering from an "identity crisis."

Although some participants believe that CBB is synonymous with shopaholism, others argued that the two differ in terms of severity. When it comes to the differences between retail therapy and CBB, some participants consider retail therapy to be an extension of CBB, whereas others see retail therapy as a precursor of CBB. Moreover, participants think that terms such as retail therapy and shopaholism are used to mask the importance of the problem, thereby making it a generally acceptable behavior in society. These issues are further explored through the following two key subthemes: *Making Sense out of the Behavior* and *Compulsive Buying is NO Joke*.

## **Making Sense Out of the Behavior**

Overall, participants indicated a basic understanding of what CBB is and what it entails. When defining the behavior, all but one participant relied on her own experiences to provide specifics. Two participants seemed to have spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on their actions before participating in the study. This effort was reflected in the level of detail provided and the promptness with which they replied to each question. For instance, when asked to explain what CBB means to her, Dolores quickly responded:

Dolores: I define it two different ways, either go out with a particular budget in mind and I go over my budget, and that's even if I go over by a small amount, I still -- if I go over, then that for me is compulsive. The second way is having actually no desire to be shopping and the next thing I know, I'm buying something.

According to Dolores, those who suffer from CBB tend to experience financial issues and lack of self-control. Julia brought up a similar point with regards to the lack of self-control, although with a little more difficulty.

Julia: Umm (thinking) I don't know, I thought kind of -- that it meant that when you find an item, you have to buy it or like you feel like you needed it; some part of your mind, I guess... umm (thinking) Yeah, I guess that's it.

Based on Julia's response, compulsive buyers tend to experience an intense desire to buy. This idea was also mentioned by other participants such as Kelly and Lynn. Alongside the uncontrollable need to buy that characterizes CBB, Kelly responded that the behavior affects an individual's capacity to control his or her actions. She explained that suffering

from CBB has truly affected her because this is the only aspect of her life that she is not able to exert control over.

Kelly: I would imagine that it just logically, that it would be like a strong internal urge to shop. Compulsively, you know, maybe suggest, without control, frankly.

I: Do you see it as a good thing, as a bad thing, what do you think?

Kelly: Umm, I see it as negative because it's the one thing in my life that I don't really have, like, 100% control over. I like to have a lot of control.

Lynn, on the other hand, explained that CBB can be viewed as an individual's "default behavior." That is, CBB acts as the primary response to everyday life situations.

Lynn: I think it is when, for one, shopping takes up far too much time and energy in your life when you don't have control over it, when you try to stop shopping so much and you are unable to do it. Like you say, I'm going to --I'm not going to shop this month or this week or whatever, you set some sort of goal or parameters around it and you are not able to do those. When you feel like you are not in control of your behavior. You know, you all of a sudden you are sitting in front of your computer and you just put a bunch of things in your shopping cart and hit buy. You don't even -- Like it's kind of -- you are not even consciously aware of your behavior. [...]

According to Lynn, compulsive buyers not only have trouble controlling their urges to buy, but tend to spend a significant amount of time and energy on this activity. She went on to explain that CBB is also driven by an individual's emotions and his or her quest to fix internal deficiencies or celebrate the absence of them.

Lynn: It is when your emotions are totally driving your behavior, when you use it as a coping mechanism, like you are upset about something in your life or even happy about something. I mean, all these reasons it's like, "*Ok, I'm stressed about something: Shop!*" "*Oh, something really good happened. Celebrate, shop!*" Or "*I want to go spend time with a friend: Shop!*" You know? "*I'm*



*lonely: Shop!*” I mean, all these like... It’s like the response to everything. It’s umm that’s what it was for me for many years. It was just my default behavior. It was what I would do, “*Oh! I have some free time: Shop! I have some extra money: Shop!*”

Given the comprehensiveness of Lynn’s definition of CBB, it is evident that she has spent more time than other participants trying to make sense out of her behavior. Indeed, she expressed that her understanding of CBB not only stems from years writing about the behavior, but from the experiences that readers of her blog have shared.

Helen added another dimension to the definition of CBB. She expressed that, for her, a compulsive buyer is an individual who not only buys excessively but is someone that feels guilt about it afterwards. She explained: “I would say somebody that likes to... buy a lot, but not just buying a lot but that person maybe feels guilty afterwards and is kind of addicted to shopping. That’s what I would say.”

Lisa was the only participant who distanced herself from the behavior by using words such as “people” and “they” to refer to those who suffer from CBB. She did not rely on her own experiences with shopping and buying to define CBB. When asked about her understanding of the behavior, she explained:

Lisa: Umm... to me that would be people who buy either things they don’t need, like they buy for the experience of buying not for the item itself. [...] I think it’s you know, uncontrolled, like you can’t control the urge. Like you are not making a conscious choice to buy something. You are just -- it’s like, an uncontrollable urge that leads to buying things you don’t want, you don’t need, it’s just more about the purchasing process.

When asked if she considers herself to be a compulsive buyer, Lisa responded, “Not, really.” She explained that in contrast to what she thinks a compulsive buyer does (i.e.,

buys without any particular reason), she always has a reason – even if it is imaginary – to purchase an item.

I: So, would you consider yourself to be a compulsive buyer?

Lisa: Not really. I don't think so because I always have at least some imaginary reason that I need something. I mean, I very rarely just randomly -- like I don't get online and just go to *Amazon* or something and just go "*Let's find something to buy.*" I always have something in mind, generally because I'm trying to fill, you know, a wardrobe gap that, again, this "fitting in."

In an effort to explain why she does not consider herself to be a compulsive buyer, Lisa shared the following anecdote during one of her interviews:

Lisa: I went to a conference in September. I wrote in a website and I said, "*Going to a conference [and] I don't want to be dressed wrong. You guys help me? But I don't want to go buy a bunch of things.*" And it really helped because, you know, I ended up buying like a dress on sale for \$14.00 in *Old Navy* and a jacket on sale on *Express* that... -- and I put together this whole wardrobe, everything coordinated. Almost everything was already in my closet. I felt like [I] was well dressed for the conference. I was proud that I didn't spend any money. Umm... (thinking) usually I have something else [in my closet to wear]. We could've debated all day long whether or not I needed those two pieces to go to this conference. [Because] I would've had something in my closet that I could've worn, but I don't just randomly go out and go "*Oh, I just want to buy something.*"

Based on this example, there seems to be some contradiction about what CBB is and what it entails. That is, Lisa states that she had plenty of items in her closet that she could have worn to the conference she was going to attend. However, she decided to buy two new pieces. This action fits with her own definition of CBB, which is that compulsive buyers buy things they do not need. Interestingly, she indicates pride in "not spending any money," yet she bought two new items. Thus, she did in fact spend money.

Because Lisa volunteered to participate in the study, it seemed odd that she did not appear to consider herself to be a compulsive buyer. Thus, I asked her if she had ever engaged in CBB. She confessed that there was a period of time when she was buying compulsively: “I think so. I think for several years, during my daughter’s college years, I think I probably was. Somewhat. Whether I was buying things for her [or myself.]” It seems that she sees CBB as a problem that other people have.

It may be that Lisa’s perspective on CBB stems from the fact that society encourages shopping and buying even when one does not need something. To illustrate, responses from both Julia and Kelly point to the grey area in which CBB seems to be positioned by society. As Julia explained,

Julia: I think our society probably labels it as normal. I think it’s excessive umm especially because it is all... I guess it is the only thing I can kind of do, like whenever I’m home with my mom, like that’s what makes her happy, is [for me] to go shopping with her, you know. It’s kind of -- I think it is excessive that that’s the only way that I can feel like I can connect with certain people umm... and that I obviously have a lot of things that I don’t need and, you know, it’s (laughs) stored in my room, in my living room or something, you know, things like that... excessive personally but that doesn’t mean that is easy to stop.

Likewise, Kelly responded:

Kelly: I would say that it’s definitely not normal. I would say I’m excessive and ... definitely compulsive because a lot of times I do feel like, “*Oh, geez, I haven’t bought for a while, I really need to, or I really want to*” or... I kind of classify it as a need, like most of time. Like, “*I really need to have this,*” and I know that logically it is not a need, but I feel that way a lot of times.

When I inquired about the perceptions and thoughts of others regarding Kelly’s shopping and buying behavior, she commented that her behavior would not raise any red flags

among family members and friends because (1) she has every other aspect of her life under control, and (2) society does not recognize shopping as a problem.

I: When I asked you about what people would think if they knew about your shopping and buying behavior, you told me that it might depend on what they know about it (*Kelly*: Right). So, if they knew enough, would they think that you have a problem or would they encourage you to go seek help?

*Kelly*: I don't know if they would go that far. Just because, like I said, I'm my opinion, society-wise, it's like, "*Oh! She is a shopaholic, it's not that serious,*" you know? 'Cause we are not... 'cause everything else... I guess that all my other ducks are in a row. And so maybe that's why I feel that way. Umm... but yeah, I worry that like if they knew every thought or every whatever, they would be, "*Yeah, that doesn't check out as normal.*" Like, "*I don't feel that way.*" You know, "*That's different than how I feel.*" And they would probably think that it is excessive or umm... (thinking). In a negative way, obviously.

Julia and Kelly's cases, together with the experiences of other participants, demonstrate that there is little awareness among the general population about the seriousness of CBB. Thus, it is not surprising that many are frustrated with this misperception.

### **Compulsive Buying is NO Joke**

Participants think that the way shopping and buying are viewed in American culture makes almost impossible for CBB to be taken seriously. Numerous jokes and funny sayings about shopping, including "I could give up shopping but I'm not a quitter," "I'm not a shopaholic, I'm just helping the economy," "I wish retail therapy was covered by my health insurance," "The best therapy is retail therapy," "There is no shame in emotional shopping," and "Shopping is the best medicine," to cite just a few, not only diminish the seriousness of the behavior, but, according to participants, are at the root of

the misunderstanding of the true meaning of CBB. Two points of departure for this frustration were articulated by participants and are discussed here: (1) confusion about terms and (2) encouragement of the behavior.

**CBB versus Shopaholism and Retail Therapy.** When participants were asked about the differences between CBB, retail therapy, and shopaholism, most reacted with confusion or irritation. Some see the terms as somewhat interrelated or used interchangeably. Others indicated that these terms have multiple meanings. The majority of participants, though, agreed that such terms are used as euphemisms to mask the severity of CBB.

For Dolores, shopaholism and CBB are the same thing. She said: “I think shopaholism and compulsive shopping are one and the same.” Lisa shares Dolores’ point of view. She considers CBB and shopaholism to be very similar terms/behaviors and that they might only differ in terms of the reasons individuals have to engage in either behavior.

Lisa: I would use those two terms... well, I would think those are pretty similar but... well... to me a shopaholic would be somebody just like a... any other addiction whether it’s online, you know, gambling or substance [abuse] or whatever, to me shopaholic would be like something you couldn’t stop. Very similar to compulsive buying. I would think there’ll be some overlap between shopaholic and compulsive buyer, maybe the reasons for the shopaholic are different but they... they totally, like, that’s what’s the most important thing in their lives, maybe, is shopping.

For Julia, however, the terms are only slightly related. She sees shopaholism as a trivial behavior and CBB as serious act that involves filling an internal gap. In other words, Julia thinks that the difference between shopaholic and compulsive buying

behavior is the level of involvement. That is, compulsive buyers seek to fill holes in their lives through the consumption of goods, whereas shopaholics seek to meet an ephemeral desire.

I: And do you think compulsive buying is different from [being a] shopaholic?

Julia: I thought it was, but I don't exactly know why. I think umm... (thinking) I guess the connotations are different. I think that a shopaholic is more like a teenager with a father's credit card, whereas a compulsive buyer, they see something and then that something makes them want that item or feel it fulfills a need.

Julia went on to say that she links the idea of retail therapy to shopaholism rather than to CBB, for similar reasons.

Julia: Umm... (thinking) I don't know. I think I would associate retail therapy more with being a shopaholic.

I: What do you mean?

Julia: Umm... (thinking) Like retail therapy, I guess, I don't know... I've never really associated that many negative connotations with retail therapy so... and so I guess I would put that with shopaholic because I guess the culture really makes shopping not negative, overshopping not negative, while I think compulsive shopping is.

According to Julia, neither "shopaholic" nor "retail therapy" are terms that carry strong negative connotations. Instead, they refer to behaviors that are perfectly acceptable in society and are, in fact, encouraged.

**Stop the Madness.** Participants expressed great deal of frustration over the fact that terms such as "shopaholism" and "retail therapy" are widely and lightly used among individuals in society. Participants believe that these terms deny the true severity and

impede understanding of the behavior. Indeed, some participants suggest that the use of these terms can even make compulsive buyers the target of ridicule and judgement. To this point, Lynn commented:

Lynn: I think the term “shopaholic” is used in a more of an ironic, kind of a non-serious manner. I think if somebody says “compulsive buying” that that’s often a more of a clinical way of saying it and more -- and maybe “compulsive buying” would also refer to other types of buying, like maybe, you know, people who buy collectibles or people who buy things for their home more or gifts for other people whereas shopaholic -- I feel like that goes more for the appearance driven things that I was just talking about, like the clothing and the cosmetics and that sort of thing. But often people don’t look -- it’s kind of like, “*Ha! Ha!*” ironically. “*Oh, shopaholic! I’m a shopaholic ha! ha!*” You know, like it’s not a real problem. I think if somebody says “compulsive buying,” I think that that’s more descriptive of an actual, you know, clinical problem.

In contrast, Kelly explained that she has heard people use the term “shopaholic” to refer to a serious issue as well as a joke.

Kelly: “Shopaholic” [...] you hear it both ways. Like a true shopaholic definitely has a negative connotation, you know. Obviously, a serious issue. But you also hear it “*Oh, I’m such a shopaholic! Oh, I really like shopping!*” So, you kind of get it both ways.

According to Kelly, the term “shopaholic” carries a “light,” almost positive connotation, and especially when compared to other terms of addiction, such as “alcoholic.” Although she understands that being a shopaholic is a serious issue, she believes that society does not see it as such. Rather, being a shopaholic seems to be encouraged by society, whereas being an alcoholic is not. As she explains,

Kelly: [Being a shopaholic is] more acceptable, for sure. It's like "*Oh, I'm a shopaholic!*" Like, "*Ha! Ha! Ha!*" Like, "*She does love to shop,*" you know. It doesn't have the same ring when you say "*Oh, I'm an alcoholic. Ha! Ha! Ha!*"

Dolores, a recovering alcoholic, explained that, for her, there is no difference between CBB and shopaholism. To Kelly's point, Dolores indicates that based on her experience, alcohol and shopping are very similar; they both provide her with the same degree of satisfaction. She explains that her alcoholism was a coping mechanism – a way for her to feel differently or to not feel at all. Once she was in recovery, shopping became the mechanism through which she started managing life situations.

I: So how do you see the two of them [shopping and alcohol]? How do you see these two things, do you think they are similar, like how they make you feel?

Dolores: Yes, definitely. Definitely. They are both umm... (thinking) I do both of them for the effect. It's about how they make me feel or how they make me not feel. That's probably the better way of describing it.

According to participants, the term "retail therapy" is equally problematic. Some participants, such as Lynn, even seem to despise the term, arguing that it belittles the seriousness of CBB.

Lynn: That's another one of those terms, kind of like... I hate that term! Like when I hear it, it is kind of like nails on the chalkboard to me because I just feel it is another way of not taking it seriously. I think part of why I don't like it too is because it really -- it like points out to me the belief that a lot of people have that "*If I shop or if I buy something it would make something better.*" Just having therapy in there, like "*Oh, it will just make it all better*" and I know full well from my own personal experiences, and also now the experiences of many other people, that it doesn't make things better, and if anything, it makes things worse, you know...



Lynn points out that the term “retail therapy” not only denies the seriousness of CBB, but it is completely misleading in that it gives the idea that shopping will solve the individual’s problems. She added that, based on her experience and that of her readers, shopping excessively does not solve anything; rather, it makes things worse.

Lynn: ...not only do you still have the problem that caused you to go and do the so called “retail therapy,” but you also now have either credit card debt, you know, you spent too much money, you have too many bills, or you have too much stuff. So you have a problem of this packed clothes. I mean, there is a lot of people that don’t have any debt but they have too many things and then that becomes a problem too. But then the problem for what they went to, you know, engage in the retail therapy, that is still there. They didn’t -- the shopping doesn’t solve anything, it just takes your mind off of it for a period of time and gives you a little bit of an ego boost or a mood boost, just for that time frame, [but] nothing really changed.

“Retail therapy” is indeed a term that Lynn intensely dislikes, as she thinks that it confuses individuals and takes away all negative connotations from CBB, thereby making it socially acceptable. As Lynn further explained, people do not make similar jokes about other types of addictive behaviors.

Lynn: ...I mean, I don’t see that happening with other things. I don’t see people making jokes about alcoholism or drug addiction. They are not making these little jokes about it. [...] I think a lot of people who were alcoholics or drug addicts don’t really realize that they are alcoholics or drug addicts and a lot of people who are shopaholics or compulsive shoppers or whatever you want to call it, don’t realize that they are either. So they are just kind of using these little euphemisms that are not really -- I mean, when I’m shopping I see people that are shopaholics all the time. I mean, I see people but they don’t realize that they are [shopaholics].

Beyond the joke-making, Lynn also pointed to the extent to which the disorder is often denied by individuals engaging in it.

Both Kelly and Dolores support Lynn's points. They contend that retail therapy is mostly seen as a "fun phrase" and not as a clinical or scientific term. Kelly asserts that retail therapy is popularly used to promote the use of shopping as a way to deal with negative life situations.

Kelly: Well, "retail therapy," isn't that just sort of a coined fun phrase? I don't know if that actually has, you know what I mean, like a scientific or medical terminology. You know, you always hear about retail therapy. It just makes you feel better, I guess. It's like, "*Oh I need a drink at the bar or I can use some retail therapy,*" you know, that's what I think of it anyway.

I: So, do you see retail therapy like something that is not as negative as compulsive buying?

Kelly: Definitely. I see retail therapy as just sort of a fun phrase.

Like Lynn, Dolores believes that this term diminishes the seriousness of CBB, making it humorous. She added that this is a notion that emerged from the media and is widely used by people in society.

Dolores: I think "retail therapy" is something that we have coined. A phrase to make compulsive shopping and compulsive buying into funny little things that some people do, or maybe I should say, a lot of people do. It makes it almost humorous and I think it does come from the media. I think it does come from society. And it is a very, very serious problem that a lot of people just haven't taken seriously.

Dolores furthered explained that, for her, the idea of retail therapy is closer to a fictional behavior than a real one. Indeed, for her, it is difficult to engage in "retail therapy" without it turning compulsive. Yet she thinks that retail therapy acts as a disguise for the real problem, which is CBB.

Dolores: Oh, (laughs) that's good. Yeah, you know, for me I don't know if there is such a thing as retail therapy because I don't know how to do it responsibly. Umm... I don't... I guess retail therapy could be something that I might do initially to feel better about something but it goes into compulsive shopping so, so quickly that I don't know if I can really separate the two. [...] And I also think that retail therapy is a way of naming -- can be a way of naming compulsive buying in a way that people can digest a little easier. It almost makes it not so scary. Where compulsive buying sounds very scary and very serious.

Like Dolores, Helen considers retail therapy to be very similar to CBB. As with Dolores who mentioned that she might initially engage in retail therapy to boost her mood, Helen thinks that some use shopping as a way to escape from negative feelings or emotions. She argued, though, that the main difference between the two is that retail therapy does not prompt guilt to the extent that CBB does.

Helen: Like you want to escape some kinds of feeling or stress or whatever and so you shop. That's retail therapy, right? Or, you know, like you feel stress after a whole day or whatever and you go shopping. So that's retail therapy, but then -- that's a part of also like compulsive buying. But I would say so, that's the part in compulsive buying.

Participants had different views and levels of understanding of their behaviors and shared some similar understandings of how society sees the excessive consumption of goods. All of their responses point to the extent to which the behavior and CBB in general is either dismissed or misunderstood. Although each participant has her own interpretation of CBB, they all experience being unable to control their urges to shop and buy. In the next theme, issues surrounding the genesis of these urges are examined.

## **Evolving Affliction or Growing Addiction?**

Is compulsive buying behavior (CBB) an evolving affliction or a growing addiction? Addressing this rhetorical question inevitably starts with the examination of an individual's upbringing. In this theme, participants' experiences that shed light on the development of the behavior are examined. As aforementioned, although each participant has her own unique experiences with CBB, there are issues that emerged from the data that are common across participants. These issues are explored in the following three subthemes: (1) *Quasi-Normal Kid*, (2) *Struggling Adolescent*, and (3) *Conflicted Adult*.

### **Quasi-Normal Kid**

From the Latin, *quasi* is defined as "in some sense or degree" whereas *normal* is defined as "usual or ordinary: not strange; mentally and physically healthy" (Merriam-Webster.com). *Quasi-Normal Kid* presents participants' relevant experiences with shopping and buying during childhood within a framework of a likely normality. For the most part, participants enjoyed healthy childhoods. All grew up in a two-parent family. Dolores, Lynn, and Julia had siblings while Helen, Kelly, and Lisa are only children.

Most participants talked about having very good relationships with their parents. Some remember doing different activities such as going boating or to church. Lisa was the one participant who had a more difficult childhood. Lisa explained that she and her parents did not go out and do much, and she recalled how, during their vacations, her parents spent most of the time arguing. Thus, vacations were not pleasant experiences for her. The following examines significant moments in the participants' childhoods that can be linked to their shopping and buying behavior as adults.

**Love, Celebrations, and Gifts.** During the interviews, participants were asked to talk about significant moments during their childhood and the role shopping played in them. Most expressed that family vacations or celebrations such as birthdays, holidays and graduations were the most memorable.

Some participants expressed that shopping, in its variety of forms, played an important role during celebrations. Dolores, for example, recalled that gifts were always part of the experience.

Dolores: Well there were always gift lists. In other words, I would always make a list for whatever gifts I wanted umm as I got older I would always be given money, so I always knew that after the holiday, whatever, be it a birthday or whatever -- my mother also did very fun things for Valentine's Day and umm Easter, you know, she really, she didn't miss a bit, she always was very, very good about that. So, as I got older then... all that I would be doing would be using the money for shopping. So shopping always played a very big part in all the holidays for me.

Similarly, as only children, Helen and Kelly typically received a lot of present for birthdays and holidays. In Helen's case, most of the gifts she received were items her parents and other family members bought according to her expressed desires. Kelly, however, received more sentimental gifts. She expressed that material things were not important to her parents. Instead, the focus was on letting her know that she was loved and valued. She recalled a specific time when her father, a carpenter, made her a small sailing boat, an activity they enjoyed doing as a family.

However, not all participants received such gifts while growing up. For instance, Lisa commented that she always wanted to dress in the latest trends, but due to her family's economic situation, she was forced to wear clothes that her mother made for her.

Lisa did not receive gifts for accomplishments, nor was she rewarded for good behavior or for doing chores. She remembered that even though her mother tried to provide Lisa with a nice experience for her birthday, “she did not know what was fun.” Lisa explained that her parents were not into shopping, as the family’s economic situation did not allow them to engage in spending that was considered frivolous. However, this was not the case for other participants. In the next section, the role of participants’ parents in their views on shopping and buying is discussed.

**My Parents, My Role Models.** Over and over again, participants mentioned how the activities they used to do with their parents influenced their views on shopping and buying. Some participants, such as Dolores, Julia, and Helen, expressed that they learned about shopping and buying through their parents. For instance, until this day, Dolores remembers the “magical experience” of going shopping downtown with her mother. She described her experience as follows:

Dolores: We would shop, we would buy things, mostly for me. We would typically have a meal along with that and we would umm... (thinking) we talked and we would enjoy each other’s company and so it was just really a special time that my mother and I shared.

Interestingly, the same person that provided Dolores with countless meaningful memories, was also the one who taught her how to shop and buy compulsively. As she explained, “Oh! Umm... we shopped together and so it was through her that I saw how to shop and how to find really cool stuff, but it was also through her that I learned to overshop.”

When I asked Julia about when she started buying compulsively, she could not pinpoint a specific moment in her life, pointing out that she grew up in an environment where shopping was considered very important. Julia added that shopping activities became a family affair once the economic situation got better. She remembered how her parents would buy a variety of items to send to other family members and their practice of stocking up if there was a “good deal.”

I: Do you remember when you started buying this way [compulsively]? How long ago?

Julia: It's probably... (thinking) I don't know because I feel like I want to say I grew up kind of like buying... but I don't... It makes my mom look bad (laughs).

I: Oh, no, don't worry! So you think you have always been like that?

Julia: Yeah so my mom and my dad, we like... we make boxes for family and well you know, we go to the stores often and like look for the super cheap jeans or the super cheap tops to ship them so they can have new items that are like from the U.S.! (Laughs) Yeah, so... it was definitely, you know, like stock up when it was good. Like, *“Oh, hey, look, there is a coupon! If we get just \$16.00 worth of items in this store, then we only have to pay like \$3.00.”*

Like Julia and Dolores, Helen talked about how her mother had a big impact on her current shopping and buying behaviors. She remembered that when she was a little kid, her mother would take her shopping every day. Helen did not enjoy it much; as any other child her age, she was more interested in play time than in trying on clothing. Helen's dad enjoyed shopping as well. She stated that it was because of what she saw in both of them that she thought shopping and buying excessively was normal.

Helen: So my mom has her shopping behavior and umm I think I saw that and so I always thought that was a normal thing; that there was nothing unusual if you

shop that much and also my dad... he doesn't shop with us but whenever he travels for work, which he did a lot when I was little, whenever he goes out of the country he would buy A LOT of things for me.

Most of the participants had pleasant memories of shopping with their families and during childhood in general. As we went deeper in our conversations, it became evident that participants carried these experiences with them into adolescence and later adulthood.

### **Struggling Adolescent**

Adolescence tends to be a difficult stage for everyone. It is at this stage that an individual's personality begins to be defined. Also, many changes occur, both physically and mentally. Thus, individuals are more sensitive to others' opinions and judgements. This was the case for those participants that grew up on a restricted budget, and therefore had difficulty living adolescence to the fullest. Lynn and Lisa, for example, commented that not having as much as their friends made them feel "less than" others. Lisa expressed that she "grew up wanting countless things." In contrast, Julia never had more than her friends did, but she said that she "wasn't super jealous" of them for it.

One participant, Dolores, talked about being affected by the stereotypes promoted by the media. As she explained, the celebrities featured on different advertisements affected her self-esteem, as she was never "small or thin" like they were.

I: When you say that you were affected by TV, what do you mean?

Dolores: Well, just the fact that the '60s and '70s were part of the whole, you know, TV generation so I was affected in that umm I was exposed to a lot of advertising. Umm I was exposed to umm a lot of umm stereotypes about women, that was what I was first exposed to. Women being very thin and small and you



know, and that kind of look that I wasn't and never have been. So that's what I mean when I say I was affected.

I: Ok. So that kind of affected your self-esteem? The stereotype about women? How did that affect you?

Dolores: I was never umm little. I was never small or thin or... and so, the messages were always, some of this messages I got from my mother too, were "*If a girl is little, she'll be more desirable to a boy, and if she is not, then she will be less desirable.*"

Clearly, a large part of the effect of such stereotypes on Dolores' self-esteem was actually nurtured by her own mother and grandmother, and it appears that the media only reinforced it. Not being able to have what others did or to look like the beauty ideal seems to have had a serious impact on some participants in adulthood. Frustrations alongside positive memories of childhood and adolescence combined to give form to a "conflicted adult." In the next section, significant experiences during adulthood are discussed and the impact of early experiences on current ones are highlighted.

### **Conflicted Adult**

Adulthood brings its own set of challenges. It is not only about living the present to the best of one's abilities, but learning how to deal with the frustrations of the past. All participants earned a high school degree, and five out of the six continued their journey into higher education. At the time of the interviews, two participants were working on doctoral degrees. As for the rest of them, one holds a doctoral degree, one holds a Master's degree, and one holds a professional degree. Thus, it is safe to say that most participants are well educated and able to develop their careers regardless of compulsive buying tendencies.

**From Lack to Excess.** According to participants, college is a very memorable time. Some met their husbands there, others forged friendships that remain until today. Yet there were also challenges. For instance, Kelly remembered the frustration she felt because she did not have the things that some of her friends had. She explained that even though she always had many things, it was “nothing like these other girls at school had.”

Kelly: It was a lot for me... and also growing up with... my mom always bought me nice clothes. It wasn't like I didn't have nice clothes or things but I never had anything like you went to college and it was that next level stuff. It was like, “OMG!” The girls that were there had just like... just such different things and I was like, “*I really want to have some of that, be like that*” And part of that was handbags, you know, that was the thing, which is funny because handbags really... don't do it for me anymore (laughs) but at that time it was like a thing and it was like, “*I really need that bag,*” you know, I really wanted it. That was probably the thing that started it all.

Kelly's desire to be like the other girls at college seemed to push her closer to shopping. Shopping became the medium through which she could be the somebody she wanted to be.

Similar to Kelly's situation is that of Lisa. According to Lisa, she grew up wanting a wide variety of things. Given her family's economic situation, she knew she had to wait until she could take care of herself to be able to acquire the things she wanted. Throughout all of our conversations, Lisa made it clear that appearance is very important to her. Perhaps it is because she was not able to have the things she considered appropriate while growing up, as she explained,

Lisa: I want to feel like I'm dressed appropriately for whatever the situation is, whether is work or church or umm a date. I want to feel like I fit in and I grew up -- I don't even know if lower or middle class would be -- I grew up in a family

without very much money. I never had the clothes, you know, that the other kids had. My mother made most of my clothes and I hated them. And so... all my adult life, even though I've never really had much money, I had a couple of mentors that helped me to dress like middle class white people dress, you know, like to fit in.

Fitting in has always been important to Lisa. Whether it was during her childhood, adolescence, or adulthood, she has always wanted to look appropriate. The difference between then and now is that she finally has the opportunity to acquire what she wants, yet with a debt of \$70,000, this opportunity it has become a problem for her.

**Time, Energy, and CBB.** Interestingly, participants note that engaging in CBB takes up much of their free time. As part of the personal journal, participants were asked to visually allocate the 24 hours of a day into a pie chart based on the activities they do. This exercise was intended to shed light on the amount of time and energy devoted to shopping and buying. Kelly's pie chart (Figure 8) indicates that she spends most of her day sleeping, doing chores, perusing online, engaging in leisure activities such as watching TV, and sharing time with her husband. It is worth noting that "computer, social media, shopping" time equals "leisure activities, TV, time with husband."

In her journal, Kelly wrote that it is during the time she is browsing online that she tends to make purchases. She added that this is a period of time in which she experiences boredom.

Kelly (personal journal): I spend a significant amount of time each day on the Internet / social media. That is most often when I shop. I browse sites, read articles and feel often bored or like I'm killing time. Oftentimes I enjoy it though. It helps me feel connected. This Internet time is often when I make purchases or happen upon something new I "need."

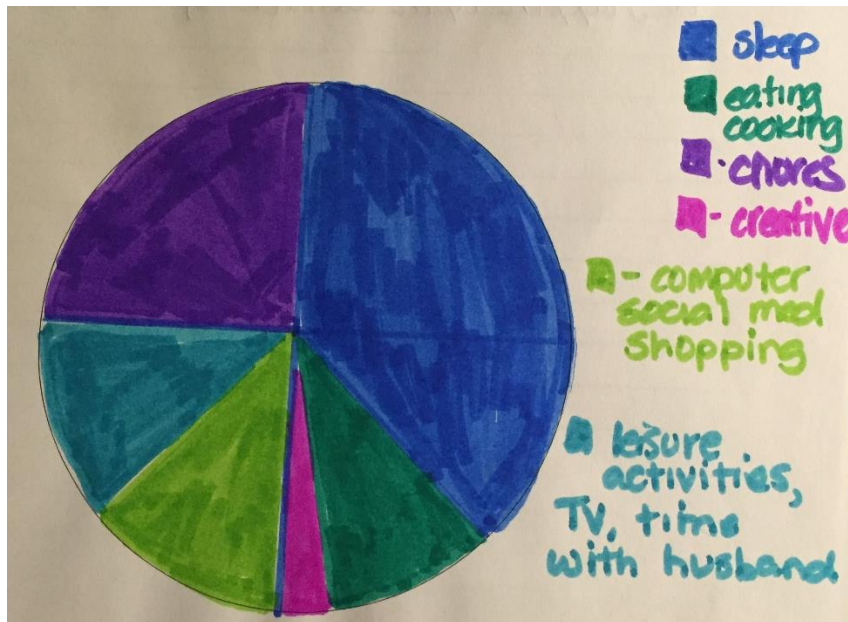


Figure 8. Kelly's Distribution of Time. (Source: Personal journal)

In contrast to Kelly, Julia spends most of her time working. According to the distribution of her time, as illustrated in Figure 9, Julia spends her days working, sleeping, cooking and eating, and shopping online. In her journal, Julia acknowledged that she spends a significant amount of time shopping. It is her belief that this time could be put to more productive use. She wrote,

Julia: I do spend a considerable amount of time shopping that would be better spent on other things, like hobbies or social activities. Since I feel like I am progressing by spending more time with people and less time online, I am becoming happier. I am working on myself – exercising more, spending more focus on my dissertation writing, spending time with people doing social activities on weekends and sometimes during the weeks. I have seen a lot of progress in myself just through this experience of thinking about purchasing.

Julia has noticed that since she stopped spending so much time shopping, she has felt happier. This is interesting, in that most participants, including Julia, engage in CBB in

an attempt to feel better about something. Instead, Julia has found that by distancing herself from the behavior, she is experiencing the positive effect that she was looking for when she engaged in CBB.

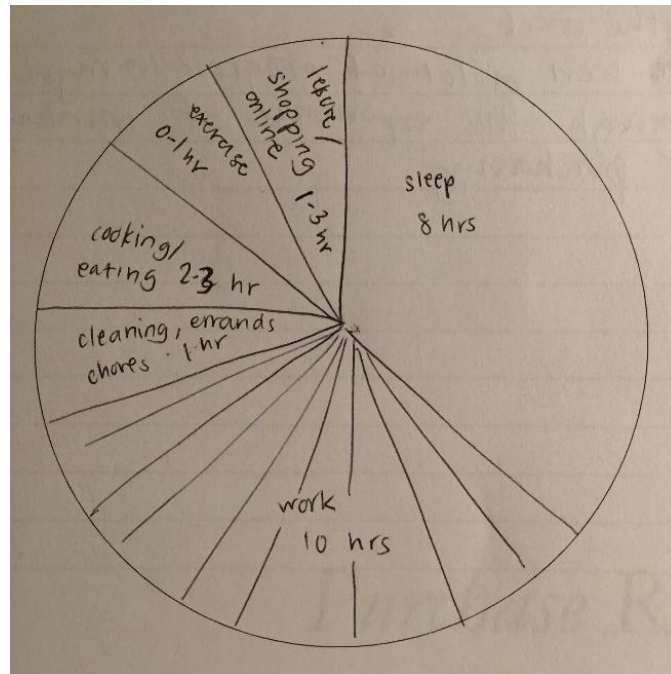


Figure 9. Julia's Distribution of Time. (Source: Personal journal)

Another example of how much time CBB can take comes from Lynn. She recalled that when she was at the height of the behavior, she used to spend countless hours in this activity. She wrote,

Lynn: I don't spend a lot of time on shopping and buying anymore, but I used to. I used to browse e-commerce stores every day and I also spent a lot of time reading style blogs and forums. I actually went to brick-and-mortar stores at least once or twice a week. Now it's more like once or twice a month – much better! Before I began my recovery, I probably spent 2-3 hrs. / day (or more) on shopping and shopping-related activities!

Obviously, as seen in the participants' interviews and journal excerpts, lived experiences during childhood and adolescence had an impact on their shopping and buying behaviors as adults. Participants, as compulsive clothing buyers, are the reflection of their lived experiences at different developmental stages. When examined as a whole, it is clear that even though participants come from different backgrounds (e.g., socio-economic status, relationship with parents, early experiences with shopping), as adults, they have all found in CCB a way to cope with everyday life. Awareness of this coping mechanism is discussed in the next theme.

### **Uh-Oh, I Think I Have a Problem!**

In a society where excessive shopping is encouraged and promoted, identifying the symptoms and behaviors associated with CBB can take years. Even though participants exhibited traits associated with the behavior for a long period of time, none of them considered it to be a problem until their accounts were overdrawn and/or their credit cards were maxed out. When asked about how and when they got to the "breaking point," some acted surprised, while others were clearly frustrated.

It was clear in the participants' faces that they were frustrated as to how it happened; that is, how they became compulsive buyers. Consequently, it was hard for them to explain why they started to buy compulsively. A thoughtful examination of their past experiences and behavior was necessary for them to be able to provide answers to these questions. Some participants questioned how, after so much education, they continued to be seduced by the desire of wanting to have more.

In this section, factors that contributed to participants' development of the awareness of the behavior are explored. The moment of realization and actions that led to it are also examined. Three subthemes are used to structure this discussion: (1) *How Did I Get Here?* (2) *Where Did the Money Go?* and (3) *Why Did It Take Me So Long?*

### **How Did I Get Here?**

As previously stated, for most participants it was difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when they started buying compulsively. Moreover, it was challenging for them to explain the reasons why they began engaging in CBB. For instance, when Helen was asked, she replied: "I don't know, I just... I feel really happy buying things... like at first I didn't buy that much, it kind of built up... over the years, it kind of built up." After much consideration, participants were usually able to identify what motivated them to initially engage in CBB. It seems that CBB was triggered by the fairly typical yet complex changes everyone experiences in life. Among these changes are the transition to college, getting married, and having an income.

As Kelly explained, moving from her parents' house provided her with a sense of freedom that she had not experienced before. This change not only presented her with a myriad of opportunities, but also with a great deal of challenges. Even though Kelly had always been interested in shopping and buying, it was not until she started college that it became an issue for her. She remembered that, in great part, her CBB came as a result of her efforts to define her image and a desire to fit in.

Kelly: Why did I buy so much, you mean?

I: Yes.

Kelly: You know, I don't know, I think it was just... (frustration) I think it was like trying to define -- I guess it is about personal image, right? I was like, "*You are trying to define your personal image.*" And in college there is a big part of that too where you are trying to define your personal image. And, you know, you have a lot of peer pressure – as dumb as that sounds – you know, other people around you that are dressing a certain way or doing a certain thing, and it's like, "*Well, I want to be like that too.*" So, I guess maybe I did it to fit in to some extent and also to define myself to some extent, and I don't know, it would feel really good to get something, you know, and it will be yours and you would look good in it, you know, fit in with it and so then I was like, "*Well, I need the next thing for that or I need more of that or...*" you know, whatever it was.

Like Kelly, Julia first engaged in CBB after she moved from her parents' house.

For her, it was a combination of factors that triggered the behavior.

I: Why do you think you started to shop excessively?

Julia: Well, I think (pause, thinking) ... When I came to grad school. I definitely lost a lot of like people. I have a less... less people in my network here, like to do things with and so... and I also was paid, so I have like my own income, it's not from my parents. So, I guess, you know, like it's not just like what I get to stock up on, but I have my income and I'm doing what I want with my money so umm... maybe because I didn't really have like a lot of hobbies or something, so I just like explore...

According to her explanation, Julia's CBB came as a reaction to feelings of loneliness and boredom, and generating her own income was the "something" that made CBB possible. Likewise, Dolores explained that having an income was definitely something that allowed her to start buying compulsively.

I: Ok. So, regular paychecks affected the way that you shopped?

Dolores: Definitely.

I: How so?



Dolores: I had more money. If I had money coming in regularly, I could shop more consistently.

Lynn's experience is similar to that of Dolores. She explained that ever since she had an income, she engaged in shopping and buying. As Lynn explained, in her teenage years engaging in shopping did not represent a threat because she did not have much money to spend. However, as her income got higher, her shopping and buying increased exponentially.

Lynn: I think I had it ever since I had money. I mean, I think that in my teens. It started in my teens but it's really -- it was more insignificant because I just didn't have a lot of money to spend but whenever I did have money it was spent almost immediately (laughs)... Yeah, I mean, it was a problem early on -- but when I didn't have credit cards or more means it wasn't as significant.

In contrast, for Lisa it was mostly loneliness and a need to feel safe that pushed her to CBB. Her second marriage was painful, in that after they got married she discovered her husband was abusive. When Lisa decided to divorce her husband, she learned that she was pregnant. Her husband refused to divorce mostly because of child support. When Lisa's daughter started to have a social life, Lisa found herself alone in the house with an abusive husband. Because of the multiple problems she had with him, and a fear of being hurt by him, she resorted to shopping and buying as a way to avoid any confrontations.

Lisa: Umm, [it] probably really turned to be a problem when shopping is therapy or shopping as an activity to replace other things. Probably when she [daughter] was in junior high, in high school. So, I'll say probably 12, 13 years ago. Is when, when it really started. And it changed in kind of taking on some different forms. But probably like, when I described those nights where she would be with her

church group or whatever, you know, [and] I'll be at loose ends and didn't feel safe going home with him [husband] there. So I would spend this time at the mall by myself then. Plus, it was always important because I have the job where I do have to wear suits and professional clothing. I mean, you could make a case, "*Oh, I need this for my work,*" you know, and I obviously bought other things.

Upon reflection, for participants, the challenges associated with changes in their lives usually triggered the CBB. At first it was just a coping mechanism, but after a while, most realized that it was not solving problems, but creating more. The point at which they came to this realization is explored next.

### **Where Did the Money Go?**

A common thread that emerged among all participants' narratives is the admission of poor financial management skills. Most of the participants expressed that they did not know how to manage their bank accounts and credit cards. They also mentioned that it was not until they had accumulated significant amounts of debt that they realized they were having problems controlling their shopping and buying behaviors.

**Nobody Taught Me How to Do This.** According to participants, successfully managing a budget is a hard thing to do. Several of them expressed that they were not taught about financial management. Thus, as adults they struggled to keep their finances afloat. Kelly explained that managing her money has always been a challenge, and this task became even harder after she started generating her own income during college. She also commented that she had very little understanding of how to manage credit cards.

Kelly: But budgeting was a hard thing. I wasn't taught budgeting growing up. So when I was off to college for the first time, I had a hard time budgeting just generally speaking. And then when you have a credit card it was like, "*Oh, I can buy, I can take it home.*" I don't think I had a full understanding of it either, at the

time. And then once the balance kept getting larger it was overwhelming and upsetting. And looking back on it, it's like "*That was dumb!*" but you know that is what you do when you are 19 years old.

In the same vein, Dolores recalled that she opened her first checking account when she was in college. She said that nobody taught her how to manage it. In response to questions about how she managed her account, she replied:

I: Did you tend to make regular deposits into your savings account?

Dolores: Probably not. I probably made more withdrawals than I did deposits.

I: Ok. Did your checking account ever go over the limit?

Dolores: Absolutely! Yeah, I started bouncing checks almost immediately.

I: Ok. And how did that go? You know, you knew that there were no funds and you still wrote the checks or you just didn't realize that there was no money in the account?

Dolores: Yeah, I didn't realize there was no money in the account.

According to Dolores, she no longer manages her checkbook this way and does not bounce checks today. However, she did admit that she uses her debit card knowing that she does not have sufficient funds because the bank will cover the amounts, although it will charge her \$36 per transaction.

**Do I Really Owe This Much?** Once participants realized the outstanding debt they had accrued, many became aware that they were suffering from CBB. In Lisa's case, it was a visit to her preferred bank that made her realize that she had accrued a significant amount of debt. She wanted to open a line of credit to pay for the expenses of her daughter's wedding.

Lisa: Probably one of the real eye openers was when I went to apply for a loan at my credit union, where I've done business for like 20 years, for my daughter's wedding and they would only give me a certain amount. I wanted to open up a line of credit so that, you know, I could just write a check to the catering, write a check... I needed a line of credit type situation so that we could go out and shop for the wedding things and they wouldn't give me the full amount that I wanted and, you know, it's like I've never made a late payment. I've always paid the minimum but just because of the outstanding amount of credit card debt that I had they wouldn't loan me the full amount that I wanted for her wedding and that was the first time I started really thinking, "*Well, how much do I have?*" you know, and started adding it. And so that would have been in early 2012 when I first went, "*Wow! Wait a minute! How much did I really spend?*"

Lisa was in fact surprised to learn that she had way more debt than she thought. Similarly, Dolores became aware of her problem when she was in her mid-30s. She had overdrawn her checking account and had no other option but to ask a friend for help.

Dolores: Umm, the first time I noticed it was when I had overdrawn my checking account to the point where I had to ask my best friend for money. I had always sworn that I would never ask my best friend and her husband for money and when I needed to do that, that was when I saw that there was really -- I really had a problem.

Lynn was in her early 20s when she realized she was dealing with CBB. She described how her debt became cause for concern, and remembered that she maxed out her multiple credit cards. Each time, Lynn had to ask for help. First from her dad and then from her boyfriend.

Lynn: Umm... It would be hard to remember specifics in that way, but I think, you know, probably when I first hit debt with it, which is probably in my early twenties. And that's when I had to go to my father and ask for his help because my umm my -- I had debt and I was not able to pay it because I was not making very much money -- didn't have very much money and I was just paying umm the minimum payment [on my credit cards]. So I had to ask for help and then umm and then he... he paid off my credit cards twice. I don't remember... I know the

second time I had to promise that I wouldn't open anymore – I had to close the account and then I had to not, promise not to open them up and normally use a debit card. And I did honor that for a few years but not indefinitely.

In contrast, for Kelly, it was the sum total of multiple incidents that made her realize that her fixation with shopping and buying was not normal. She explained,

Kelly: Umm... perhaps when I was getting... There is like a lot of little instances that kind of that add up. So it's hard because there are little instances in high school, little instances... so I don't know if there was really like that "aha moment." It was more the collection of them.

Later in the interviews, Kelly realized that there was a particular turning point. She explained that when she was in college, she maxed out a credit card and had to ask her parents for help.

Kelly: Well, the credit card thing in college got me. I had a credit card maxed out in college and my parents had to bail me out with that, and so that was kind of my first like, "*Oh, geez! That was dumb!*" and that was, you know. [...] and so that was like my first like real "*aha, there is more to this than just shopping.*" So that would be the first, like, you know, realization that I had [that my shopping behavior] may be a problem.

Helen also came to the realization while in school. Even though she has not accrued debt, Helen remembered that when she first realized she had trouble with her shopping and buying behaviors, it was because she was spending beyond her means. After she moved to California to start her Master's degree, Helen's parents sent her an allowance to cover her expenses. The amount was substantial and so Helen used part of it to engage in CCB. She recalled that if she had any money left at the end of the month, she felt the need to spend it. When she started working, she asked her parents to stop

sending her money. Because her income was now less than what she received for her allowance and she had already built up a specific lifestyle, she found herself with no money.

Helen: So like at first in college I didn't have that much money and then in San Francisco I had so much money with me and then, when I realized it was a problem it was because I ran out of money. [...] and then it's like, now I don't have that much money to spend anymore, but then I already kind of built up my shopping habits to be spending that much. So I realized, "*Ok, now I don't have that much money to spend,*" so then it becomes a problem. So that's why it became a problem for me.

Although the moment of realization differed by participants, one similarity that they seemed to share is that it took a while before they realized the nature and extent of their CBB.

### **Why Did It Take Me So Long?**

Participants indicated that it took them several years to realize that their shopping and buying behaviors were out of control. Some attributed this delay to the way they grew up. Others explained that it was mostly because of society's views on consumption. Participants also expressed that they did not pay attention to their shopping and buying behaviors because it was not posing a threat. That is, their compulsive buying had not caused any financial or familial problems.

Julia commented that she had difficulty seeing that she was having issues controlling her shopping and buying behaviors because of society's views on consumption and because of what she saw from her parents.

I: Why did you think it took you so long to realize that you actually had a problem?

Julia: I guess it is because you know some people don't think it is a problem, you know, the stock up mentality, like I've seen in my family...

In Helen's case, it was also her parents' shopping and buying behaviors that delayed her realization. She commented that it was also the absence of debt that kept her from seeing that she had a problem.

Helen: Well, 'cause at that time I didn't have that much money to spend anyway. And I don't have credit cards, I'm not umm... -- that's why I don't have any debts. Like I didn't use credit cards back then. I've never had a credit card and so... I could spend just a little amount of money but I would spend all my money every month. So umm I guess it was when I went to San Francisco, when I had like that big amount of money with me, then I didn't know how to control it.

Likewise, Lynn's behavior did not pose a threat, thereby delaying the moment of realization. She said: "I think it wasn't impacting my life, exactly, you know. When it started impacting my life it was by having credit card bills that I couldn't pay, then."

Most participants explained that it was changes in their lives that first prompted the CCB. Three out of the six participants explained that it was after they moved away from home that they started buying compulsively. All participants indicated that an increase in their income and/or access to credit cards also affected their shopping and buying behaviors. Moreover, having little to no knowledge of how to use credit cards responsibly and/or manage their bank accounts added to the problem. When participants realized they had a real issue, it was too late, in that most of them already had substantial debt and/or were facing other serious issues because of it. The fact that shopping is not

seen as a problem was among the reasons for a delay in realization. Interestingly, even though participants have a basic understanding of their behaviors and are aware of the consequences of them, they still engage in CCB. Participants' past and present experiences are examined next to explore the reasons why they keep buying compulsively.

### **What Keeps Me Going Back for More?**

While it is one thing to understand the factors that motivated and allowed participants to engage on compulsive clothing buying in the first place, it is another to understand what keeps them engaged in it. That is, what keeps them going back to the stores for more? Are the initial triggers keeping them engaged, or are there other factors that play into CCB? In this section, I explore how participants' past experiences as well as present ones converge to maintain their CCB. Issues in this section are further explored through the following subthemes: (1) *I Can't Shake the Past*, (2) *What Motivates Me Now*, and (3) *That World Out There*.

#### **I Can't Shake the Past**

Participants' past experiences, including the environments in which they grew up, seem to have played a significant role not only in the development of the behavior, but in its continuation. For instance, growing up in families that were economically stable allowed Dolores, Helen, and Kelly to acquire most, if not all, of the things they wanted. In contrast, Julia, Lynn, and Lisa, who did not grow up with a lot of money, indicated that they felt "less than" others for not having access to the same items. Today, all have the



opportunity to acquire almost anything they want. This may be why they are more prone to engage in CCB.

The following journal entry from Julia illustrates how previous experiences can shape a compulsive buyer's attitudes toward shopping and buying. As is the case with other participants, Julia's parents had an impact on how she sees the consumption of goods, especially appearance-related items. Upon reflection, she indicated a degree of preoccupation regarding the extent of her behavior. However, up until this point she had been unable to find a way to stop herself from buying things that she does not need.

Julia (personal journal): I've been thinking about my parents and a possible learned component to being a compulsive shopper. My parents are both immigrants, and they lived on very little initially. As they are both hard workers, of course they earned more money and status, but I think the thought of living on very little never left.

My parents have clothes that are older than me, still in their closet, and I have no idea why (other than memories and an attachment to the past). It is not only evident in their clothes, but also food (saved ketchup packets in the fridge) and hoarding tendencies (another rice cooker because it was on sale!). When I was growing up, trips to the mall were special, and to find something 1) that you liked, 2) fit you, and 3) on sale means it was a purchase. If it was on clearance, the first two categories often did not matter. Plus, once the item was purchased, we did not wear it until it was "needed," meaning our current items were somehow messed up. This meant we grew up with piles of clothes with tags from these purchases and shopping became a treat. Sometimes we would use these tagged items as gifts for others, like last minute birthday presents. This resulted in items never feeling like they were "ours" until they were on our body. It was like a museum of clothing in the bedroom.

With this entry, Julia puts in evidence how her behavior is a reflection of that of her parents. She is not only trying to understand her parents, but how she herself became a compulsive clothing buyer. Indeed, it may be that her current behavior of waiting for a

special occasion to wear some of her new purchases is a result of what she experienced growing up. It seems difficult for Julia to reconcile the messages she still receives from her parents (i.e., “You must buy”) and her actual economic situation (i.e., “I don’t have the means”).

Julia (personal journal): As their child, I am trying to understand where they come from without falling into the same spiral. I don’t have the funds, and they insist that I can’t live like them in their time of scarcity. This results in several items in my apartment that I did not even realize were there. I have chocolates stuck at the back of cupboards, stacks of bottled water, paper towels, toilet paper, cleaning supplies (sponges, soap...) and clothing which isn’t my style but might fit. Their way of showing has evolved into buying / giving me stuff, and I think I am that way as well. I am terrified of limiting my interactions to shopping, and yet I spend so much time doing it (not just for myself but for that “perfect” gift for someone else too). It needs to stop, so I can spend my time with the people I care about and not with their stuff. I want to say I am “better” since I have lessened purchasing (clothing), but the mental space shopping occupies suggests otherwise.

Julia indicated that she would be “terrified” to learn that her buying behavior is simply a natural reaction to the way she grew up. She wants to be able to have a healthy relationship with her relatives and friends, and to do so without having to include shopping “in the mix.” Although she is trying her best to distance herself from shopping and buying, it appears that she is still thinking about it more than she would like to.

Like Julia, Helen explained that her CCB can be traced back to her family’s focus on shopping and buying. Both her father and her mother enjoyed shopping. Her mother used to take her shopping almost every day when she was a child and her father used to go shopping every time he was on a business trip, returning with plenty of gifts for her. On vacation, they would go shopping rather than sightsee. She also explained that her extended family exhibited very similar behaviors.

Helen: I think it comes from like – I didn't think it was a problem before because my dad is like that (laughs). So he buys a lot and so I didn't see that as a problem. So it just kind of... it's a normal behavior for me, so I just kept on buying because I didn't know the value of money and how hard it is to earn money before I started working.

It was not until Helen started to work that she learned the value of money, and this opened her eyes to the fact that she needed to do something about her behavior. Along with past experiences, there are other things that influence participants' CCB. Current triggers and motivations are examined next.

### **What Motivates Me Now?**

Data from the interviews and personal journals reveal that it is the combination of multiple factors that triggers and often perpetuates CCB. Most participants attribute their shopping and buying behaviors to stress, depression, loneliness, boredom, low self-esteem and acceptance seeking, among other things. In one of the entries in Lisa's personal journal, she summarizes most of the factors that trigger her CCB. First she explains how stress gets the best of her. Then, she goes on to describe the purchasing of unnecessary items, being seduced by the sale price and seeking her daughter's approval.

Lisa (personal journal): Confession time: It's been a very stressful couple of weeks for me, with the fall semester starting at the university where I work, but I was looking forward to the holiday weekend, since it marked the end of the busiest two weeks of the year. By late in the week, I did some on-line shopping – a pair of \$50 Trina Turk enamel earrings that only go with a couple of things in my closet (weird, because I don't usually buy much jewelry) and a full length mirror I order from Wayfair when I found the one I've been waiting for about half the normal price and “needed” some way to show my OOTDs [outfits of the day] on this site.

On Friday, I wrapped up a big event at work that was physically exhausting, and looked forward to going home to clean up and then an evening of errands so that

my weekend calendar would be clear. My best friend's mother was unexpectedly hospitalized with a brain tumor they discovered during some testing Friday, so I changed clothes and went straight to the hospital, where I stayed for most of the next 24 hours, caring for my friend and her mother. My own mother's health is worsening lately, and this just seemed like too much bad mom health to go around.

Saturday evening, I left the hospital in time to return several items to stores that I had purchased on-line – so far, so good – returning things! I went into a local discount chain that carries some brand name merchandise to buy socks for my friend's mother and left with a *Calphalon* cooking pot. I had recently had a pan become unusable, but could probably have found something for much less than I paid for this one, even though it was half the retail price. I rarely cook and don't care at all about expensive kitchen equipment, so why did I think I needed a brand name pan? Probably to win my daughter's approval, as she has a kitchen full of *Calphalon*.

As Lisa's story progressed, her buying behavior during this Saturday evening got more excessive and/or uncontrolled. She not only achieved her goal of returning items she did not think she would use, but she also took home with her many other items that were not on her "list."

Lisa (personal journal, continuation): Then I went to *LOFT* to return over \$100 of on-line purchases and was proud that I decided to wait for a sale or coupon to buy a top and sweater that I found. So far, so good. Next[,] I went into *Chico's* to see if they had received this year's shipment of *Darcy* turtlenecks (a great sweater for those of us who live in fairly warm winter climates but still need some cold-sweater items.) I bought a turtleneck at full price so that I could get an expensive top for half price – both were unnecessary and completely frivolous at this point in the late summer.

Then I rushed across town to Nordstrom to return a \$70 scarf I bought during NAS [*Nordstrom Annual Sale*] before closing time. I was planning to use my \$40 shopping rewards to purchase one new eyeliner. I left the store with two colors of *MAC* eyeliner AND the special *MAC* sharpener for those pencils, spending \$14 of my own money in addition to the \$40 rewards coupons, and I don't normally splurge on makeup.

I was walking out of the store when I spotted some neutral tan flats for \$49 that looked comfortable. I decided on the spot that I must have them to wear with fall clothes, as my nude flats were much too spring-like. They didn't have them in stock, but I didn't let that deter me – I had them ordered and shipped to me. But while the clerk was looking for the shoes, I also picked up a pair of *Sam Edelman* “Penny” boots on sale for \$169 and bought them, too! I already have this style of boot in black and grey, which go well with my winter color palette. These are classic cognac color which goes with absolutely nothing in my closet, but for some reason I thought I had to have them in the heat of the moment. This evening was supposed to be about returning unneeded things, not accumulating even more. I went to bed feeling sick at my stomach, really disappointed in myself for not having self-control. I am concerned that I seem to always find an excuse for buying things that are not on my pre-determined shopping list, and just cannot seem to stop shopping during or immediately following periods of high stress.

Lisa's reflections on her behavior that day illustrate how difficult it is for her, as a compulsive buyer, to take control of her behavior. Her frustration is evident; she sounds almost heartbroken by the extent of her disappointment in herself.

Stress is also a big trigger of Helen's CBB. She explained that the stress generated by the work she does in graduate school pushes her to buy. When I asked her when is she more prone to engage in CBB, she replied:

Helen: When I'm stressed. Towards the end of the semester, that's like... I would have so many episodes of shopping.

I: How much would you spend?

Helen: I would spend a lot. Like last semester, towards the end, I spent a lot of money. I don't know, like... (thinking) At least like \$2,000 in a month, at least... Just buying random things that I don't know why I'm buying.

Likewise, stress is a big motivator for Julia's CBB. When talking about things that motivate her to engage in CBB, she commented: “I guess it is also stress because when I have... I feel like when I have periods with like low stress I don't shop as much.”

Moreover, participants commented that the experience of negative feelings often sends them directly to the mall (or website). Lynn, who sees herself as a recovering compulsive buyer, explained in retrospect:

Lynn: Usually, I would feel bad. Usually, the shopping would be a way to boost my mood. I mean, occasionally there were times when I would shop more as a celebratory thing. Like... like oh... you know, like to reward myself. *"Oh! I just accomplished something!"* or I just went through... -- I remember one time I went to a job interview that was particularly difficult. I mean, but it was kind of like, *"Oh well, I deserve to get something nice for myself because I just had to go through this difficult experience"* (laughs) or you know... but usually I felt bad. Usually, I was worried about something, sad, moody, nervous, umm any host of negative emotions it would propel me to get you know... because I would go into an altered state when I go shopping, like in an....

I: What do you mean by an "altered state?"

Lynn: I would go -- I just be in this like... I might be depressed before but I go in, and it's kind of like, *"Oh, I've enter into this mystic realm of all of this..."* you know. I'd be excited. I'd be very outgoing when I shop. I'm not all that outgoing in general but I when I shop, I am outgoing.

Lynn's account is illuminating. Of the participants, she is the only one who indicated that her personality used to change while shopping. The effect that shopping had on her was clearly very powerful.

In addition to stress and negative moods, participants also expressed that issues of self-esteem and rejection are among the triggers of their CBB. Dolores, for example, justifies her purchases of clothing items by arguing that the items will allow her to feel better about herself. She acknowledged that she is not at peace with her current appearance.

Dolores: Yeah, that's a great question. I... (thinking) I guess because of the way it makes me feel to have these things. It's almost like -- it almost perpetuates the illusion that umm... that something is going to make me feel better. I guess by having -- by being able to wear something different, I'll feel better. By being able to look different in some way, I'll feel better, you know. It's bad. [...] Those types of things perpetuate the fact that I don't feel good about myself and can feel better if I buy those things and use them.

Some participants talked about how engaging in CBB was a way to avoid feeling alone. For instance, Lynn commented that at the height of her affliction, it was the interaction with sales representatives that made her feel in contact with the world. When talking about the elements that made Nordstrom her favorite store, she explained:

Lynn: Well, I think I like... well I like for one the selection that they have, you know, they have, you know, I think they have good merchandise but I really just like the customer service aspect and the fact that the salespeople actually spend time with you and talk to you and they remember you. Like they remember my name and they remember things about me and they remember what kind of clothes I like, things like that. I think, you know, I consider it a friendship. I think it's 'cause I was lonely. I mean I still am. My loneliness hasn't really changed but I don't shop to try to deal with it anymore. I just haven't really figured out how to not be lonely, but I umm... I just... I know that doesn't help. I know that the shopping isn't... is not a real friendship, it's... it might be a nice interaction in the moment but it doesn't really help anything.

Oftentimes loneliness is experienced alongside boredom. Kelly, for instance, expressed that a lack of hobbies or extracurricular activities can trigger her CCB. When I asked her about the moments when she feel more prone to engage in CCB, she replied:

Kelly: Maybe, on like a given day I would be more prone to shop or something but not overall. Like... like on a given day if I'm like overly bored or overly... so, you know, I'll be perusing on my phone, you know what I mean? I'll be like, "*Oh, this is cute,*" you know, and then you kind of go down the rabbit hole a little bit. You know, it's like, "*Oh, this is cute! Oh!*" you know... Then you look at online reviews or people that are wearing it or... -- then you make it down the

rabbit hole and then it's like, "*Oh, yeah. Well, I really need this now,*" you know. And so maybe boredom to some extent plays a role.

Boredom is not the only factor that triggers Kelly's CCB. Among all of the participants, she is the one who most emphasized the effect of intrusive thoughts stemming from her shopping and buying behavior. Kelly expressed that most of the time she succumbs to the desires of her mind, hoping that by doing so she will be at peace. Specifically, once she decides on an item, she is not able to get it out of her mind until she purchases it, no matter how hard she tries.

Kelly: I don't know... I think maybe it wears me down too, at some point. Like I'll think about it for a while and I'll be like, "*Well, you know, I don't need that, let's not do it.*" But then several days later I will still be thinking about it. And it's like at some point it's just like my willpower just like... I'm like, "*You know, what does it really matter? Let me just get it.*"

I: Ok. Would you say that your willpower decreases?

Kelly: Yeah, when it comes to this, yeah.

I: It starts strong, I guess (*Kelly: Right*) because you resist the feeling (*Kelly: Right*) but it wears you down to the point that you say (*Kelly: Yeah*) "*I can't keep thinking about this, I just buy and I'll get it over with.*"

Kelly: Yeah. I know it sounds crazy. [...] It sounds logical to some extent in your head and now when you verbalize it, you are like, "*Wow! I'm taking crazy pills.*"

Finally, some participants mentioned that it is not just negative feelings that drive their CCB. For instance, Dolores expressed that she can engage in CCB when she is overly happy.



Dolores: Umm... I usually feel... well, a lot of times I would feel overly happy or overly sad. Umm sometimes I just feel curious, you know, wanting to find out about something, a particular item. You know, going online and researching it.

Participants talked about how CCB is triggered mostly by negative feelings and emotions such as loneliness, stress, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. However, these feelings are only one piece of the puzzle. Participants also explained that their shopping and buying behaviors can also be prompted by external cues, which is the focus of the next section.

### **That World Out There**

The combination of media messages, easy access to credit, and cultural expectations appears to have a negative effect on the development and perpetuation of CCB. According to participants, advertisements and promotions in particular have a strong influence on their shopping and buying behaviors for several reasons. For one, these messages basically force participants to be aware of a sale going on at a specific retailer. For another, messages promoting the consumption of products to become more desirable or accepted are very appealing to participants. For example, Lynn explained that exposure to different media messages regarding appearance has affected her self-esteem and led her to think that the solution to her insecurities lies in acquiring the “right clothes.”

Lynn: And I started at a very young age. I mean, I don't remember when I wasn't into it. I was into it... but I was insecure and I think insecurity drives it a lot of times. I think that, you know, feeling like you are never good enough because you see all these images that are placed in front of you like, “This is what you are supposed to look like” or “This is the desired appearance” and so you start thinking, “*Well, maybe if I have the right clothes, maybe if I find the right make*”

*up, or if I find the right product, then, maybe then, I can finally look good enough” and then, “If I look good enough, then I can have what I want in life,”* you know, it kind of -- but you are not conscious about it at the time necessarily, but that’s the trajectory that follows often.

Dolores explained that even though she tries to delete most of the promotions she receives in her email, there are times that she is “coerced into buying whatever it is they are selling.” Lisa also talked about the effectiveness of email promotions. She indicated that emails with suggestions based on previous purchases can be very persuasive for her. In one of our conversations, she gave an example of this type of marketing strategy. She explained that she visited the *Pottery Barn Kids* website to show a friend something she had previously bought and the next email she received from them reminded her of the item she viewed and encouraged her to purchase it.

Lisa: Now, one thing will lead to another. I’ll get on *Nordstrom* and *Nordstrom* does recommendations, you know, based on your past buying habits. They are very effective at that. Umm... I’ve noticed a couple of sites like they will email the next day. I looked at an item on *Pottery Barn Kids* and it’s something that I already bought and it’s on backorder and I looked at it yesterday because I wanted to show a friend a picture of it, I just wanted to look up the picture. Well, this morning I had an email from *Pottery Barn Kids* and it says, “*Hey! You looked at this bunny rabbit thing, don’t you want to buy the bunny rabbit thing*” and I had retailers doing that with clothing as well. And then you start thinking, “*Well, I should buy the thing, you know, I should buy that thing. They are right, I need this*”

Another example of the effect of promotions on participants’ CCB is found within Helen’s recollection of a recent purchase.

Helen: Umm like... like yesterday I was on one of the skin care websites. So, one of the biggest reasons that I go on these websites every day or the reasons that I chose these websites is because they keep on sending me emails. So, whenever I

check my email and then they say, “*Oh, there is a discount*” and then I just click on it and so I start shopping from that, there. So it’s like, you know, every day you get tons of emails from everybody.

Helen went on to explain:

Helen: So, sometimes I’m just like, “*Okay, let me check it out.*” Like every day I would pick something to check it out. Something that interests me and I would just go from there. So yesterday was skin care and drugstore.com. And sometimes I would go on several websites to check if they have any specials going on, like *Victoria’s Secret*. They often have a lot of specials going on and I just go on there and shop.

Kelly has also had trouble resisting the temptation of promotions. She expressed that she is more prone to shop when there is a promotion and when there is a new season.

I: So, when do you think that you are more at risk to engage in compulsive buying? Is there something that you think makes you more prone to engage in it?

Kelly: Umm... there are several things probably, like I said with promotions; with stores that run promotions. I’m always like, “*Oh, yes! Promotions, great!*” With new seasons and stuff coming out, you know. New clothes that come out with new prints, new... styles and stuff, [...] it’s like you see the new, I guess.

A specific promotional strategy that seems to be favored by participants is that of “gift with purchase.” Kelly considers herself to be a big fan of this kind of promotion and explained that they are a big motivating factor.

Kelly (personal journal): Another key reason for these most recent buys were because of a gift with purchase (GWP). My two most recent buys were inspired by a GWP offer. The better the GWP offer, the more likely I am to spend the required amount to get it. It is a big purchasing motivator for me.

Similarly, promotions offering customers free shipping with the purchase of “x” amount of money are very effective among participants in the study. Helen explained that she does not like to pay for shipping. Thus, with promotions like this, she spends whatever the minimum amount is, regardless of her need for the products.

Helen: So like, if they say like, “Free shipping if you buy \$100.” Then, I would buy \$100 just to get free shipping. I don’t want to pay for shipping, I don’t know why (laughs).

Julia also talked about buying more items than needed just to reach the amount required for free shipping. When reflecting on the last couple of purchases in her personal journal, she wrote: “Even when I purchased an item for others (the blankets) it was selfish because I purchased one for myself, rationalizing that ‘I needed free shipping.’”

It seems that in addition to the promotional efforts, most participants think that social media and fashion blogs play an important role in the continuation of their behaviors. For instance, Kelly thinks it is fun to be able to interact with other people about the new items that are coming out.

Kelly: I love to see like the new stuff and like, I’ll be on *Instagram* and stuff and, you know, they will have previews so the new stuff that’s coming out and it is like, “*OMG! It’s really fun*” and you talk to people on there about it and yeah...

Similarly, Julia and Lisa both commented that they enjoy fashion blogs. According to them, fashion bloggers’ opinions and posts influence their shopping and buying behaviors. When asked if fashion bloggers had an impact on her buying behavior, Lisa replied:

Lisa: Umm, yeah. “This is the perfect thing, must have. The ten must have,” you know? And I would admit though, like the boots turned out to be a really good purchase. I purchased some jeans umm... They are more like leggings, I guess. They are thin jeans but they do fit perfectly. Got those at *Nordstrom*, and it was like one of those things that like every blog in America was saying you have to have, and luckily I’m an odd enough size that I was able to get them. I find that they are very comfortable. I really love them, you know, but again, “*Do I really need those? Eh, maybe not,*” you know? But I do wear them a lot. They are very comfortable to have. [...] but like I’m trying to stay off those blogs because there is one lady I like, umm... like she buys most of her clothes like at *Target* and *TJ Maxx* and all, but I... I get on these quests, if I have a quest for something like, let’s say there is this sweater or top and she’s seen it at *Target*, I’m like, it becomes important to me to be able to find it.

For Lisa, fashion bloggers create the need to buy. She finds herself buying items just because a blogger suggested them and not because she has a real need for them.

It is important to point out that besides the psychological and sociocultural factors, some participants’ CCB is also prompted by situational factors. For example, Dolores explained that having extra money is one of the main triggers of her behavior. When asked when she was more at risk of engaging in CCB, Dolores stated: “When I’m feeling depressed. Umm... when I have extra money umm... (thinking) those are the two real triggers for me.” Having to find an item to wear with a previous purchase is a strong trigger of Lisa’s CCB. Lynn, on the other hand, commented that when she was at the height of the behavior, having items that she needed to return triggered her CCB.

As discussed in this theme, CCB is not only driven by the individual’s personal background, or by negative or positive feelings or emotions, or even by media and marketing efforts. Instead, participants’ experiences demonstrate that it is the sum of sociocultural, psychological, and situational factors that drives their CCB. In the next

theme, the severity of the behavior is highlighted through a discussion of some of the more obscure dimensions of CCB.

### **It Doesn't Get Any More Real Than This**

Thus far, the different sections in this chapter have illustrated that compulsive clothing buying is a complex and serious disorder. Those who experience it find both misery and comfort in it. It is evident that participants have had to deal with many ups and downs through their lives, many of which prompted participants to engage in CCB. In this section, some of the more obscure aspects of the behavior are discussed. Through examination of the data, two subthemes reflecting issues relevant to understanding the severity of the behavior emerged: (1) *Heaven and Hell* and (2) *Secrets and Lies*.

#### **Heaven and Hell**

According to participants, at the same time that CCB can make them feel very good, it can make them feel very bad. Regardless of the negative consequences that their compulsive buying behavior might cause, participants find a way to deal with these consequences, because for them, the positives outweigh the negatives. When Kelly was talking about her online purchases, she explained that she experiences a certain degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, she feels very excited that she got the item she wanted, but on the other, she questions the reasons behind her purchase and her lack of self-control.

Kelly: I feel like excited to see it but at the same time it is usually kind of like, "Oh, well, you know, I probably shouldn't have ordered this," like then when it comes in the mail. But I like getting it, still. Like if didn't come, I would feel sad but it's like... that's the moment – if I feel remorse, it's then, when it comes to the door and I'm like, you know. [...] So I think that kind of thing, you know. And

then you try to fit it in your in closet and I'm like, "*Gosh! Why?*" You know? "*It's so packed in here!*" Like, "*I really didn't need to get this.*"

Dolores truly enjoys shopping for and buying ARPs. She explained that, through clothing, she gets a lot of security, and specifically that when she is around her clothing she feels safe. Indeed, when asked if she derives the same kind of satisfaction from other consumer goods, she replied: "[No], it's clothing. It's clothing that really gets me, gets me that high." Dolores went on to explain that she when she engages in the CCB act, she feels high, elated, euphoric, and out of her body. However, after the positive consequences of the purchase fade away, she starts questioning her behavior.

Dolores: Oh, yeah... The consequences are the part that are really bad, you know... Umm the lack of money. The umm feeling badly about myself, you know, feeling out of control. Feeling like, you know, "*I'm smart. Why do I have to do this stuff?*" you know. Umm I... "*I have the ultimate in education, why do I have to go out and put myself through this*" and those are the things that come to mind, and these are the outcomes that happen as a result.

For Dolores, it is difficult to understand why she engages in a behavior that she knows will have such a negative impact on her life. This good-bad dichotomy can be seen as heaven and hell or as a love-hate relationship. The "heaven" refers to the "high" and all the other positive feelings participants experience while in the CCB act. "Hell" comes when the negative consequences kick in. It is at this point where the participant questions her behavior and starts regretting her actions. Yet the regret that comes from CCB also serves as a trigger for the behavior. Negative feelings, including regret, can prompt in the individual a desire to escape, and shopping serves as the main outlet. In the next section, shopping as a means of escape is explored.

**My Great Escape.** It is common for participants to use CCB as an escape mechanism. When an unpleasant situation is at hand, participants resort to CCB as a way to ease the burden. For instance, Helen expressed that CCB helps her to escape from her reality. In other words, it helps her to deal with the stress caused by graduate school.

Helen: Ok, so like, when I'm stressful, I have to shop! When I feel depressed, I have to shop! There is a lot of... I guess people would say, excuses to shop but for me that's just my escape. Like some people smoke, some people drink a lo[ooo]t, but I shop a lot. So that's my escape.

In Lisa's case, engaging in shopping and buying allowed her to escape from the reality of an abusive husband.

Lisa: I can say, I feel better about it now. But there are days that I come in tired and hungry and sit down and buy something online. That probably still applies, but not like it was like 10 years ago, that was a big part of my life. Because I... it was a safe place that I could be on a Friday, Saturday night when my daughter had social plans and I couldn't be home with my violent ex-husband.

For Dolores, shopping is a way to avoid dwelling on the things she does not like about herself. In particular, her compulsive behavior helps her to cope with body dissatisfaction.

Dolores: I feel not okay with the world pretty often. And umm... I feel like I'm not okay in the body I'm in, and the skin I'm in. So [shopping] it's a way for me to feel out [of] myself, out of my body.

Because CCB helps participants to cope with a variety of negative feelings, it is difficult for them to stop the behavior, even when the guilt takes over.



**The Guilt Doesn't Stop Me.** Participants expressed that the guilt that results from their excessive purchasing does not last long. Nor does it stop them from buying. For example, Helen expressed that her parents have told her to be more mindful about her purchases. She indicated that buying things regardless of what her parents advised makes her feel guilty. Moreover, Helen admitted feeling guilty after seeing how much she spends on a shopping trip or when she looks at her bank account. Interestingly, she confessed that her guilt quickly fades away and that she is soon buying again. When talking about how she feels when she looks at her purchases, Helen explained,

Helen: I just feel satisfied umm... I feel proud (laughs) I don't know why. I guess, like I feel proud that I found so much things that I like and that I bought so much. But then the guilt kind of comes in when I see -- like, when I see my receipt or when I look at my bank account...

I: So, then you start feeling bad (*Helen*: Yeah, a little bit). How long does it last, that guilt?

Helen: Not very long. I forget about it. Like a day... the next day I'll be shopping again.

Helen responded that even though she feels bad about her shopping habits, she "can't help it." Other participants explained that after a day of shopping they might experience guilt. However, this guilt disappears the next day, and therefore the next shopping quest starts on a "blank page." Kelly expressed that when she buys, she struggles with feelings of both excitement and guilt. In most cases, the excitement takes over and she ends up buying.

Kelly: ...it's like a combination of excitement and guilt, it's like, "*Well, I really shouldn't do this. It feels bad that I'm doing this. Why am I doing this right*"

*now?” but “Oh, look how cute it is! This would be cute! Let me pair it up with things in my head,” you know...*

For most people, guilt is a factor that might keep them from purchasing things that are unnecessary. Likewise, not having enough disposable income could deter someone from engaging in shopping and buying. However, neither seem to be the case for participants in the study.

**“La Última la Paga el Diablo.”** *The devil will pay for the last one* is a popular saying in Spanish used when someone buys things he or she cannot afford. It basically means that an individual will buy the items he or she wants, regardless of the financial repercussions, as he or she hopes that at some point something will happen and it will allow him or her to pay (if bought on credit) or to recover the investment (if bought with cash). Some participants seem to behave according to this idea. Dolores, for example, explained that when she was new to the idea of managing her budget, she unintentionally wrote checks without money in her account. However, she now spends money she does not have deliberately.

I: Would you have done it if you knew? Would you have done it anyway?

Dolores: Probably not. No, probably not.

I: And nowadays, would you do it?

Dolores: I have done it yes, yes. I have known that there is no money, yet I spent money.

I: And why is that?

Dolores: Because my bank will cover the expenses.

I: Will they charge you?

Dolores: Oh yeah! They charge me \$36 per item.

Dolores makes charges to her account because she knows the bank will process the request. However, she is also aware that each of these transactions represent additional charges. Nevertheless, this does not stop Dolores from buying the things she wants.

**Why Me?** For some participants, suffering from CCB signifies that there is something wrong with them. They tend to compare themselves with others in regards to their shopping and buying behaviors. They explained that most of the time, they do not understand why they are suffering from it, and why they are unable to control it. Kelly, for example, struggles with the idea of being a compulsive buyer.

Kelly: Umm... well before my parents knew about that, I would just be really... like, I just think about it a lot. Like it would just be on my mind, like you lay down to go to sleep at night and [it would] be like, in your thoughts. All of that, you know, like it was just like a burden on you, you know. It was like, *“Oh, I feel good that I have this stuff in my closet, but now I feel really... guilty and upset that I have this debt hanging over me.”* So that was really upsetting. And so, I would feel pretty bad about that. Then once my parents bailed me out with it, I felt guilty that, you know, they did that. Then I was, you know, there’s something wrong with me, obviously. Like I felt really, I don’t know, your self-worth is kind of low at that point because it was like, *“Why am I the one with this problem? Why am I broken?”*

To hear Kelly say that suffering from CCB made her feel like she was “broken” was surprising. When I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by “being broken,” she explained:

Kelly: Well, I just, you know, like everyone else doesn’t seem to have that issue, so it’s like, what’s wrong with me, why am I the one who is like, you know, not

normal, you know. Especially with my parents, they don't... my mom likes fashion, okay. My dad could care less. So like, from their point of view it was, they were as sweet and understanding as they could possibly be about it but at the same time it was just like, I was like an alien about it. You know, it was like they just could not... like, "*Why are you doing this,*" they could not wrap their heads around it. And it's not like I could be like, "*I'm doing this because of XYZ*" either but... you know, there wasn't any kind of understanding either.

Kelly's frustration was felt similarly by Julia. Julia thinks that she takes shopping more seriously than she should. When talking about her behavior and what triggers it, Julia commented that the whole situation does not make sense to her. She elaborated,

Julia: I think it doesn't make sense because a lot of people shop... I don't know, when they are not stressed? Or like they shop... I guess, yeah, they shop like for fun I guess. And I'm not saying I don't shop for fun. I'm just saying umm (thinking) I don't, umm (thinking) I guess I don't take it as lightly as I think I should be. I feel like I spend a lot more time...

I: And why do you think you should take it more lightly?

Julia: Oh, I think that's just the way that it should be...

I: So... what do you mean by "lightly?"

Julia: Umm... (thinking) Like it should just kind of be like a casual day or let's go and spend loads of money and, you know, I'm not saying that I spend thousands and thousands of dollars but I definitely think about every purchase, you know whether it is clothes, or groceries or greeting cards (laughs) something like that. Umm I don't know, I feel like I'm always very serious with everything that I do.

As evidenced in this section, participants struggle with the idea of being compulsive buyers. They wonder what is wrong with them. It is not surprising, then, that they seem to do whatever it takes to keep their behavior hidden from those around them.

## Secret and Lies

Disorders such as alcoholism, gambling, and drug abuse are generally acknowledged as addictions, and individuals affected have many opportunities for getting help from those around them. However, being a compulsive buyer is different. There is little awareness of the seriousness of the behavior among individuals in society. Thus, it is hard for those that struggle with the behavior to open up about it. In this section, the ways that participants deal with the behavior in the presence of others is explored.

**Please Don't Judge Me!** Most participants in the study indicate that they do not feel comfortable sharing the truth about their behavior with others. Since CBB is a poorly understood disorder, participants do whatever it takes to avoid judgement by family members, friends, or co-workers. To do this, one of the primary strategies is to keep the behavior to themselves.

When I asked Lisa to tell me what she thinks others would do if they knew about her shopping and buying behaviors, she explained that it is something she is trying to keep to herself. Thus, she has only shared it with some very close friends.

Lisa: Umm... that's something I'm trying and keep private because I... there is a couple people I work with for whom shopping is kind of a similar... you know, a competitive sport. But most of my friends are overweight, most of my friends are single women, you know, in their 40s and 50s, who can't afford a lot. I mean I have a friend who can't find a job right now. She has been unemployed for over a year now working on some temporary jobs. She always criticizes like the money I spend on clothes or if I have any outfit or something but like she won't dress nicely and then she doesn't present a good appearance and I think that's one of reasons she can't find a job. So, we kind of agree to disagree on that. 'Cause if I happen to mention buying anything like, *"I got a new pair of underwear,"* *"I thought you were going to stop using your credit card in case you lost your job."* I'm thinking, *"I don't remember having to ask your permission,"* but it's like, I don't discuss it with my friends partly because some of them just don't care,

wouldn't care one way or the other. Some of them... you know, couldn't buy things for themselves so I wouldn't ever want to rub that in their faces. Some of them would be very critical of me, you know, charging things and would have some judgments about that. Yeah, it's something I'm not... it's something I wouldn't... There is a couple of friends that I share that with and discuss that with but umm... not many. [...] I would consider it a shameful thing, really.

In contrast to Lisa, Dolores' situation is somewhat different. In our conversation, Dolores first mentioned that she is comfortable talking about her behavior with other people.

I: What do you think others would say if they knew about your shopping and buying behavior?

Dolores: Well, I actually do tell people because I think that there is something, there is... I think there is a message that needs to be gotten out to people but... I don't tell obviously people that I don't know but the people that I know, they find it very interesting that I have this and they ask me questions about it and so umm... I do try to... I do try to educate people on the compulsion.

However, later in our conversation, Dolores confessed that she has kept her behavior from her parents since day one.

I: Anybody else in your family [besides your husband] that is worried about your shopping habits, you know, that would try to tell you not to keep shopping?

Dolores: No, this has been something that I have I kept from my parents. My father is gone now, but my mother is still alive and I've kept it from her. She knows that I have a lot of nice things but she doesn't know that... the extent of the issue.

Likely, the fear of being judged by her mother has prevented Dolores from telling her about the CCB. Lynn, on the other hand, started a blog on the topic of compulsive buying and has published two books on the topic. Thus, it would be safe to say that she would

not have a problem talking to others about her behavior. When I asked her about it, Lynn said:

Lynn: Well, it is something that is kind of embarrassing. I mean, it definitely is embarrassing. I feel like it's less embarrassing now because I can say, "*Oh, it's more something that I'm putting behind me*" but it is still embarrassing because it just -- it just feels kind of frivolous and trivial in some ways. It is a real problem but because people don't recognize it as a real problem... they... a lot of people just kind of roll their eyes, "*Oh, you know, these women with their shopping,*" you know? Or "*Oh! There is a lot more important things you can do with your time.*" That sort of thing or "*Oh, it's not really a real problem.*" I mean, my mom, for example. My mom knows about it and she knows about my blog and everything. My mom has a compulsive overeating problem and I think that she thinks that her problem is way bigger and a way bigger deal than my problem. She has not actually said it in words but it's very clear to me that she thinks so.

According to Lynn, the lack of understanding among the general population is what makes CCB so embarrassing. In a similar vein, Dolores explained that when she engages in conversation with other people regarding CCB, those who do not like shopping are the most unable to understand how one can be addicted to it. However, those who like shopping can relate. She goes on to state that some even find it funny, basically making fun of it.

I: Yeah, have you ever had any kind of comment like just saying "how is that possible" you know, kind of like saying (Dolores: Yeah), "*How would you get addicted to shopping?*"

Dolores: Yeah. I certainly have. Because it's usually by people that don't like to shop and so, but people that like to shop they understand it completely.

I: So the people that don't like to shop are the ones that really don't understand the idea of it?

Dolores: Right. And a lot of times will make comments that are almost poking fun at it but because they don't like to do it so, they may think if they don't like to

do it then somebody else who does it, probably has a problem with it. And they find it a little humorous or funny.

In contrast to Dolores, Kelly expressed that she would not talk to anyone about her shopping and buying problem because she believes nobody would understand her.

I: Have you ever told anybody about it?

Kelly: My husband knows to a certain extent but like I said it's like foreign territory for him. And that's kind of how I feel. I feel like it's foreign territory for the people of my life. They don't understand or they wouldn't understand that type of emotion, you know...

Overall, participants talked about how they do not share the reality of their behavior with others because they fear they will be judged. This includes keeping the extent of the behavior to themselves, as well as hiding the evidence. That is, participants often hide their purchases from others to avoid getting into arguments or being questioned. Indeed, there are times that they even hide the purchases from themselves.

**Out of Sight, Out of Mind.** Hiding or putting things away is a popular strategy employed by participants to keep others from knowing about their shopping and buying behaviors. Most participants hide the items they buy from their family members, afraid of being judged or to avoid getting into an argument. Some participants even confessed to hiding their purchases from themselves as a way to evade facing the severity of the behavior.

As part of one of the activities included in the personal journal, participants were asked to reflect on the reasons they have to hide the things they buy. In response to this question, Helen explained, "I hide things from my parents & myself. I do this because I



was afraid of being judged for all the things I bought.” Kelly, on the other hand, expressed that she would hide the things she buys only if she considers it to be too much: “Perhaps if I’ve bought a lot, I will put it my closet immediately so it doesn’t look so bad to my husband.”

The importance that family plays in compulsive buyers’ actions is also exemplified in Dolores’ case. When I asked her about what she does after she gets home from a shopping trip, she replied: “I take things out of the bag as soon as I can. Occasionally, I will hide them from my husband. I don’t have to do that very often but occasionally, I will...” Julia, however, has a different approach to hiding things. It is through the way she organizes her items that she avoids facing the truth about her behavior. She explained: “My ‘organizing’ is another way I put things away and hide it from myself or others.” Lynn, as a recovering compulsive buyer, expressed that she does not hide things from her husband now as much as she used to.

Lynn (personal journal): Not so much anymore, but I used to do this a lot. I would put boxes or bags with clothing items (or shoes) in the closet and take them out later when my husband wasn’t around. I rarely do this anymore, but might do it if I have been buying a lot of things within a short period of time (to draw less attention to it).

Lynn added that when she was at the height of the behavior, there were times when she would plot ways to get purchases into the house without her husband noticing.

Lynn: A lot of times the after part [after shopping] I would feel such remorse. I’d be driving home and I have these bags in my car and either be like feeling a lot of remorse about [the fact that] I actually bought all that, and I’ll be plotting, “*How can I get these into the house without my husband seeing them?*” (Laughs) *Where can I hide them? Can I hide that?*” Sometimes I’ve hidden things under the seats

in the car, you know. I kind of put it in the back of the trunk. I'll take things out of the bags and... like if I have like a tote bag with me or in my purse, I'll take it out of the bag and I shove it into my purse so that I can bring it into the house and I can hide it without him seeing it. You know, like stuff like that I'll be plotting. I'll be plotting how I could kind of like get away with it, you know?

Participants' stories demonstrate that the fear of being judged makes them resort to secrets and lies. From hiding their purchases to not talking about the behavior, the data reveal the shame associated with CCB. Overall, participants in this study believe that CBB and CCB is a disorder that should be taken seriously, because making fun of it not only hinders awareness of the behavior, but impacts compulsive clothing buyers' relationships with others. Moreover, the data highlight the multiple triggers of CCB (i.e., psychological, sociocultural, and situational), and the self-perpetuating nature of the behavior. Most participants explained that they did not realize they were at risk for the behavior until they were already facing a significant amount of debt. Failure to recognize the symptoms of the behavior is not only a consequence of the lack of knowledge among the general population regarding what CCB is and what it entails, or the fact that shopping is typically encouraged as a coping mechanism, but of the fact that the behavior seems normal until the consequences are unbearable.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, an overview of what everyday life is like as a compulsive clothing buyer was provided. This discussion included explanation of participants' understanding of the behavior, experiences with shopping and buying at different stages, and early motivations to engage in the behavior, as well as realizations about suffering from CCB. In the next chapter, the shopping process is examined via the participants' experiences.

**CHAPTER VI**  
**THEMATIC INTERPRETATION PART II:**  
**THE PROCESS**

In this chapter, I present the second part of the thematic interpretation: *The Process of Shopping and Buying Compulsively*. Participants' lived experiences are explored relative to the act of shopping in order to develop an understanding of the behaviors comprising the compulsive clothing buying experience. Upon examination of similarities and differences across participant narratives as well as personal journals, five themes emerged that are used to structure the interpretation: (1) *Compulsive Clothing Buying Step-by-Step*, (2) *The Struggle of Decision-Making*, (3) *Emotional Triggers*, (4) *Stores and Their Charm*, and (5) *Living with the Consequences*. I begin with an examination of the behavior as a process.

**Compulsive Clothing Buying Step-by-Step**

The process of shopping and buying is a complicated one. Individuals take the approach that best suits their purposes. In the case of the compulsive clothing buyers participating in this study, it seems that they follow a clear behavioral pattern. Although each participant experiences shopping and buying in a very unique way, after examination of the data, several issues emerged that are common across participants. In this section, the process of shopping and buying, as lived by participants, is thoroughly examined. Subthemes include: (1) *Two Approaches*, (2) *Ok, They Are Mine. Now What?* and, (3) *A Little Help from My Friends*.

## Two Approaches

Participants engage in a variety of patterns of shopping and buying. Three out of the six participants indicated that they tend to go shopping without a specific plan, while the rest expressed that they tend to design a plan, whether related to the amount of money they can spend or the items they will look for. Characteristics of the first group, “*exploratory compulsive buyers*,” and the second “*plan-oriented compulsive buyers*” are discussed in turn.

**Exploratory Compulsive Buyers.** Kelly, Lynn, and Helen comprise the group of exploratory compulsive buyers. Each explained that she does not have a plan before engaging in the process of shopping and buying. According to these participants, browsing online or going to the store to see what is new is the norm. They indicated that most of the time their shopping trips are triggered by promotions they receive through email or by a special in-store sale.

In Kelly’s case, on a typical day she usually goes online, browses for a while, and then adds all the items she wants to her virtual shopping cart. As she explained, the items will stay in this “purgatory” until a “reason” to purchase the items emerges. Kelly tends to hesitate as to the right thing to do, but she usually ends up buying the items. As she explained,

Kelly: So, my typical thing, you know, I’d be perusing whether it is a new arrival or somebody is talking about it on a Facebook group or something, you know, and maybe I’ll look and see what they are looking at and then you know I might see something I like and I will add it to my virtual basket and then it will stay in purgatory in the virtual basket for like a while, you know what I mean? You kind of look for it. And then if like a promotion comes out or... you know, some reason to... like a reason to purchase it technically, and, you know, it is crazy

sounding, but anyway a reason to purchase it comes out. Then, I will look through the basket and decide what I want to get out of my favorites or one thing or 5 things or whatever it is. Umm... and then I will think about it even though it's there like, this will be that day, I'll be like... it will be on my mind, like "*Oh, should I do it? Should I not do it? I guess I should do it,*" you know. And eventually I'll purchase it, usually.

Similarly, Lynn explained that when she was at the height of her compulsive buying behavior, she would go shopping without a specific plan. She expressed that she went to the stores hoping to be surprised. Her shopping trips were usually triggered by a sale, a coupon, or the need to return an item. She explained that she never expected her behavior to get out of control. At that point, she believed she was able to control herself, but the stress she experienced and the multiple bags she ended up carrying home proved otherwise.

Lynn: I often didn't go with a plan. It was often just like, oh I have some time, "*Uh, let me see if I can find something cool.*" Sometimes I would go because a particular store was having a sale or I got a coupon in the mail or, you know, something like that, or I would have to return something to a certain store and then I thought, I'm gonna return this and I'm gonna find something else that I like better. And so I would go and do that. [...] I just really didn't realize that it was going to get as out of hand as it did. I mean, a lot of times people really get out of hand but I just didn't realize that that was gonna happen. I just thought... sometimes I really thought, "*Oh, I can just go and buy something for myself.*" Like, "*I'm just gonna buy a new shirt or something,*" you know, and then I'm like, I have five T-shirts and I'm sitting in the dressing room like crying because I can't make up my mind. I mean, seriously, I would get so stressed out about trying to decide what to buy.

In the same vein, Helen explained that she does not plan her trips. She visits the stores or websites without a specific item in mind.

Helen: Usually, I don't plan for the trip. It's usually unplanned. So, I usually walk into the store or start browsing online, it's the same. And then I don't like to spend too much time, especially if I go into a store, I browse really fast. And umm 'cause I know what I like and I know what looks good on me, so it doesn't take me that long.

Helen also explained that she feels like her shopping and buying behavior is basically automatic. That is, there are times when she does not even know how she ended up in front of her computer surfing the web.

Helen: Ok, the moment that I think about shopping.... I don't really think about shopping. I just... I think I'm on autopilot. When I start browsing, shopping like online shopping sites, I don't know how I get there and then I just start browsing around and umm I think I always see something that I like and then I start putting everything in the shopping cart and then when I go to the shopping cart, well I would cut down on the things that I would be like, "*Umm... Maybe that's not something that I really want,*" but then I still end up wanting to buy something. Especially with the free shipping thing.

Helen confessed that she adds the items she wants to the virtual basket, and then she narrows down her selection. She explained that she always ends up buying an item, especially when the store offers free shipping. These participants clearly look to the shopping process as a means of finding out what they want.

**Plan-Oriented Compulsive Buyers.** Dolores, Lisa, and Julia comprise the group of plan-oriented compulsive buyers. In contrast to the other group, their shopping trips do not start until they have a specific plan. In Dolores' case, the plan consists of the amount of money she will spend. However, she explained that most of the time, she does not abide by her plan, which causes her a great deal of frustration.

Dolores: Yes, umm (thinking) I start out with some kind of a plan, you know, umm I'm gonna spend "x" amount of money and I will spend only as much as I have because I'll be using cash. So that will be my plan. And a lot of times I'll be having lunch in conjunction with the shopping and that -- I will call that more of a good day because many times I stay within my shopping plan. It would be money that I could use on other things but I chose to use it on shopping, so that's a good day. A bad day is when I set out with a plan and then continue to buy more, and more, and more with my debit card knowing that the money is not there.

Lisa, on the other hand, will plan for the items that she is looking for. She tends to make a list of the items she wants and does her best to stick to it. Having a plan transforms her shopping trip into a quest and makes the process more enjoyable, while at the same time, more obsessive.

Lisa: Typically, I'm gonna be more of an online shopper. [...] Typically... well I mean, if I know, for example, that I need, you know, something to wear to this wedding, I know for a couple of weeks. I was looking online everywhere from *eBay* to the *Western Wear* store, 'cause I kept saying "*I'm not gonna buy something just to wear to this wedding that I can't wear someplace else*" and so something that was very overtly western or cowgirl looking wasn't gonna quite fit into my everyday life. [...] I guess, typically it's gonna start with, you know, looking online at... if I'm looking for a particular item, I'm gonna get online and compare prices on different websites umm... if I'm trying to find something and I can't find it, that's when it starts to turn into a quest kind of, the quest or the game umm... and I have to be aware of that trap. But typically I'll sit down -- like, for example, I've been trying to buy more clothing that contains wool because we've some -- a couple of really bad winters here. I don't have that much wool stuff and so I've been trying to shop and I'm mostly have to shop online. Texas is a bad place to try and buy a wool sweater so I have looked online and looked for wool turtleneck sweater and wool... items, you know. Some I've bought and returned some and there are some I've bought and kept. But like this year my shopping list for this winter was wool turtlenecks in every color and, you know, a couple of wool sweaters and stuff and so umm... you know, typically, I have some kind of an item in mind. I don't ever just sit down and go, "*I wonder what's on sale on Amazon,*" you know? [...] But typically I look online. I'll sit down, you know, with a particular item in mind and I shop three or four places and when I find what I think is a good deal, I'll, you know, get the credit card from that store and put it on there. [...] But, generally, I sit down and have an item in mind. I don't just randomly like go, "*Oh, what's on sale*" So... So, I guess it starts with kind of

a plan. So I stick to the plan. I usually sit down with the intention of looking for a specific thing like a wool turtleneck or a pair of black jeans in my size at *LOFT* or something.

Likewise, Julia's process starts with a plan. She explains that she usually receives emails from the stores she shops at. She tends to evaluate each promotion carefully and then she visits several blogs. She goes through the different links posted by the bloggers and also visits the store's website. This process gives her an idea of the items she will look at when she goes to the store. She is also able to decide if the promotions are good, or if it would be best for her to wait until a better deal comes up.

Julia: Ok, so... I'll look at bloggers' links. I'll look at other items and then I decide "*Oh! It looks like a lot of the items that they have that I particularly like are from Old Navy. So maybe I should plan to look at Old Navy.*" So, before I actually go to the store, I'll look up if they have like coupons or you know some kind of sale. Sometimes I actually go to like the *Old Navy* website and then just look around but not through the blogger's website, you know, so I can look at the whole picture of what they have. And then if I decide "*Oh, maybe everything is not on sale so I will just come back in another week or another two weeks.*" Then, you know, like I just kind of like ditch that shopping trip.

Julia went on to explain that if, after the information search process, she is convinced that there is a good deal, then she will visit the store. She said that she will first look for the item she had in mind, but then she often gets seduced by other items available on the site.

Julia: But then, let's say I decided that I really want those jeans or something, then I go to the store. And so, I first look for the item but then, then when I'm looking for the item, so I catch, other things catch my eye but then also, you know, let's say it is a clothing item, I don't just want to try that one item on, so I pick up the other things that catch my eye, the other options that are maybe like sitting next to those jeans, polka dots, or stripes and then I'll take all of those and try those on and maybe... you know, maybe I won't like it or maybe I will and if I



do, you know, then let's say I purchase it. Then I get home and put it with all my other clothes (laughs) and then yeah... I guess like, let's see if I wear it or not.

It is important to point out that even though plan-oriented compulsive buyers tend to start with a plan, it does not necessarily mean that they will follow it. Indeed, participants talked about how one thing usually leads to another and they wind up buying more than they intended to.

### **Ok, They Are Mine. Now What?**

As the narratives previously discussed reveal, participants in this study start the shopping process either with or without a plan. Most of them tend to do some research online before actually purchasing something. Some prefer to go to the store to see the physical item. Others order it online, wait until it arrives, try it on, and either return it or keep it.

When the shopping and buying process is over, what do participants generally do with their items? Those who purchase online try the items on after they arrive. Some will return the item if it does not fit. Others will keep it regardless. For instance, Dolores commented that if the item does not fit, she will return it. Similarly, Lynn explained that she will not cut the tags off until she is certain that she will keep the items.

Lynn: Umm, I never would cut the tickets off. I'd never do that until I'm absolutely certain I'm keeping it and usually bringing something home does not entail that I'm gonna keep it. In fact, when I'm driving home I'll be already thinking that I was going to return it.

Helen, on the other hand, expressed that she does not like to return items. She explained that when she orders online and the item does not fit or does not meet her

expectations, she will only return it if she can do it at the physical store. Otherwise, she will keep the item.

Helen: I don't like to do it umm... if I have to send it back. I think [it] is so much trouble, but if they have stores here, then I'm fine. Like, I'm ok with returning at stores but I don't like it. Umm so sometimes I would buy things and if they say "*You can only ship it back,*" then I would just keep it. That's why I end up with a lot of stuff.

Kelly explained that she usually opens her packages right away, examines the items, and then either wears them within a week or leaves them in the closet for several months until she decides to wear them.

Kelly: I usually open the package up and I will... usually I leave them out on like my dresser or my bed for a few days and then I would either wear them in the first week that I have them or a lot of times (laughs), I will hang them up and put them in my closet and leave them there for a period of months. I like to just know they are in there and then... when I get around to feeling like I want to wear it, then I'll wear them.

Kelly enjoys knowing that she owns the items. When asked to elaborate on that line of thought, she replied:

Kelly: I just... like it kind of goes back to that relief, like "*I own it, it's mine, it's there, I can see it now.*" Umm...but I also don't like to wear stuff all the time right away because it's in stores. I know that sounds weird but it's like, I don't want to go out in a dress that like is hanging in a store right now and especially with the brands I shop.

Kelly explained that she tends to wait a period of time before wearing some of her new items because she knows that other people are wearing similar items.

Like Kelly, Julia tends to wait to wear her new items. However, her reasons differ from those of Kelly. Julia explained that since she has too many items to choose from, she prefers to go with the those she has already worn. When asked what she does with her purchases after she gets home, she responded:

Julia: I take it out of the bag and like... I'll hang it up in my designated like located [place] for each thing umm... But I think [that] I just umm... I have like so many options, so you know, sometimes I don't like to pick the new things. Because I've already worn a shirt that I like, so I don't pick the other one [that] still has the tag on it.

Interestingly, most participants seem to prefer to wait to wear their new item. Some wait until they feel comfortable wearing it, while others wait for the perfect occasion. As will be discussed in Chapter VII, sometimes the perfect occasion never comes so the item is left in the closet and ultimately forgotten.

### **A Little Help from My Friends**

Shopping is often promoted as a recreational activity. That is, it is a way to enjoy a good time either by yourself or with friends and family. Indeed, visiting the shopping mall is often compared to a trip to the park or to an entertainment center, in as much as there are not only stores, but restaurants, cafés, movie theaters, etc. Thus, it is not surprising that participants in this study like to go to the mall when spending time with their friends and family.

By selecting the mall as a meeting point, participants in some way position their friends and relatives as accomplices, enforcers, supporters, or even distractors. Their friends and relatives go from being companions to actively participating in the

compulsive behavior. However, it is important to point out that, most of the time, family and friends are not aware of their position or role because, as discussed in Chapter V, participants tend to keep the extreme nature of the behavior to themselves.

**Friends, Relatives, and The Mall.** Most participants expressed that going shopping is the first thing that comes to mind when trying to agree on what to do when spending time with friends and family. For example, Julia described one of her most recent visits to the mall with a friend. She explained how one thing led to the other; that is, they went from lunch to shopping to buying.

Julia: Umm... yeah I think now I'm thinking about it more it was Saturday. So my friend and I were meeting we haven't seen each other for like a month I guess and so we started up with lunch and she just wanted to, you know, walk around, through different stores. They weren't really close by but I don't know, she just wanted to walk around and show me different things. She is a HUGE shopper too (laughs) umm... but because she is like a lot smaller than me, she has to order a lot of her clothes online. So, she just wanted to see, you know, if we could like see some of the textures and the materials and so we went to -- I think went to five different stores and I only bought like two things but that's way better than before (laughs).

Likewise, Julia said that shopping is the only way she has to connect with some of her relatives and friends. When we were talking about the extent of her behavior, she said: "I think it is excessive that that's [shopping] the only way that I can feel like I can connect with certain people." She further explained that it has become a little harder for her to distance herself from her CCB because her mother is always talking about sales and every time Julia visits her she wants to go shopping: "...whenever I go home my mom wants to go shopping. She also, you know, likes to talk about sales or talk about things like that on the phone."

In Julia's case, it can be argued that her relatives act in ways that prompt her CCB, even though they may not know it. Her boyfriend, on the other hand, has become more of an adversary of her CCB. She explained that he has been helpful in the process of overcoming her issues with shopping and buying.

Julia: I think actually [that] he has contributed a lot into trying to change, you know, this way of thinking. [To] focus more on people, like [on] experiences with people. So, I think he's really being helping me deemphasize.

Dolores explained that she typically enjoys going shopping with her best friend. Like Julia, Dolores said that they usually have lunch first and then they go shopping. When explaining her typical shopping and buying process, she stated: "...a lot of times I'll be having lunch in conjunction with the shopping and that -- I will call that more of a good day..." When we were talking about one her most recent shopping trips, I asked her if there was anything in particular that triggered her buying. She explained that there was nothing specific, just the fact that she had been looking forward to that shopping trip with her best friend.

Dolores: Well, I was with my best friend and we like to shop together. We were out of town, at a place where we like to shop and umm... I don't think there was anything emotional really going on, other than the fact that I really wanted to shop and, I've been looking forward to it. I planned on it. So that was something that I really wanted to do.

I: How much did you spend?

Dolores: I spent on that particular day... I think that I spent... (thinking) about \$300 and that was enough... yeah \$300, and that was enough to overdraw my checking account.

I: Ok. So how did that make you feel?

Dolores: Guilty, yeah guilty, very frustrated with myself. Umm remorseful... yeah. Lots of negativity goes along with that.

For Dolores, overdrawing on her checking account makes her feel guilty, remorseful, and frustrated. When I asked her what she does to deal with these negative feelings, and particularly in this instance, she replied that she talked to her best friend about it.

Dolores: Well, I talked to my best friend about it, 'cause she knows. She's been through this whole journey with me. So I talked to her about it and umm... I just knew... I kept telling myself that I will deal with it when I get back to Columbus. There wasn't really anything I could do about it while I was away and umm --- and just kind of put it aside, put it on the back burner and said, *"I'm just gonna have to enjoy the rest of my trip in spite of... of this problem"*

Dolores' best friend would not only be considered a passive accomplice, in that she knows about Dolores' problem but still goes shopping with her, but also as her support person. That is, her best friend seems to be the one who helps Dolores to (1) feel better about her lack of self-control and (2) recover the confidence she needs to be able to overcome her issues with shopping and buying.

In Helen's case, it was her friends who helped her to realize that she was having problems controlling her shopping and buying behaviors.

Helen: A lot of my friends tell me that... like they say, *"Oh, you buy like, whatever you want and you just really buy a lot of things."*

I: So, you have received comments from your friends with regard your buying behavior?

Helen: Yeah, a lot!

However, sometimes, Helen's friends also prompt her behavior. In her personal journal, Helen explained how a trip to accompany a friend to redeem a coupon ended up in the purchase of a pair of shoes and the mission to get an additional pair online.

Helen (personal journal): I intended to go to the store because my friend had a coupon. We drove to the store. We parked in front of the store. I didn't intend to buy anything going into the store. It was a shoe store. I thought I'd accompany my friend to buy shoes in order to use her coupon. I felt relaxed and not too excited because I wasn't there to buy anything.

We enter the store. It was in the afternoon. I was with my friend. It wasn't so crowded there. I was surrounded by women looking for shoes. I didn't notice too much about others as soon as I entered the store.

I looked around the store. I wasn't planning on buying anything, so I wasn't on a mission. But 10 minutes later, I saw these wedges. And I was thinking to myself that I didn't have the color. Then, next thing I know, I was already trying them on. I found my size and it fit perfectly. I was so excited and grabbed the box. Then, I saw another pair, exactly same style, same brand, just in different color, so I convinced myself I needed those, too. I was so excited and was determined to buy both pairs. But the second pair turned out to have a stain on it. So, I decided to go home and buy it online. I went to pay for my first pair, and grabbed some shoe cleaner on my way to the cashier. I felt great. Total amount... it was not cheap, but I still felt good about it.

I walk out of the store, feeling great and excited about my new pair of shoes and can't wait to get home to buy another pair.

Some may describe Helen's shopping and buying experience as "being in the right place at the right time." However, it is an example of her underlying need to buy things. For her, though, it was a pleasurable experience. Indeed, she mentioned that she was looking forward to ordering the pair of shoes online that she was unable to buy at the store. Even though Helen did not intend to buy anything, the simple fact that she visited the store

triggered her desire to buy. Thus, it might be argued that Helen's friend unknowingly contributed to her behavior.

In contrast to Helen, Lisa has come to realize that she needs to avoid going shopping with Jennifer, one of her closest friends, if she wants to take control of her CCB. She explained that Jennifer can afford to buy as much as she wants because she has the means to do so. Lisa confessed that there have been several instances whereby going shopping with Jennifer has triggered her CCB. Thus, Jennifer not only enables, but somehow enforces Lisa's compulsion.

Lisa: Umm... my friend Jennifer is the friend I talk about this issue with a lot [and] she understands. I mean, because I've asked her specifically like, "*Let's not make shopping the focus of our time together.*" 'Cause like, sometimes she likes to buy me things because, you know, she feels bad that I don't have the money, you know, to have the kind of things that she does. And sometimes she just says, "*I don't have any daughters so I want to buy you something today.*" And sometimes I let her do that umm... you know, but there are times that we will just go out, you know, "*Hey, let's go shopping.*" She is the only friend I have that we would just go shopping and look for stuff and I've learned that that has been a trigger for me. There were a couple of times since last year that that was a trigger for me, and she can afford it and I can't. So I try not to get in those situations. I try not to go shopping with her.

On the other hand, Kelly explained that for her, shopping is more about the social interaction than the buying. She enjoys the company of the people she is with, whether it is family members or friends. As she explained, it does not matter whether or not she finds something she likes because that is not the main objective of her shopping trip.

Kelly: ...usually when I go shopping I either go alone or I go with like friends. Umm... Sometimes my mom too, I guess. So I usually enjoy the company of the people I'm with mostly. Like I go shopping more as a social interaction really than to shop. 'Cause if I'm gonna like really shop for myself, I shop online. If I'm



going to go shopping in a store it's usually more of the social interaction and if I happen to pick something up, great. But it's not really the same umm... same thing, unless I'm out on a mission. Like, I know that *Dillard's* is having a sale and I must go see it. Then, I go and I'm usually by myself then.

Lynn confessed to experiencing high levels of anxiety due to her inability to decide between items. Thus, it is a good thing that she has had the support of her husband and close friends. When talking about her struggles with the decision making process, Lynn described how her friend helped her overcome a particularly unpleasant situation.

Lynn: I remember one time, a few years ago, maybe like a year or two before I started to blog. It's like probably two years since I started the blog. I was shopping with a friend and she saw me getting all frenzied and upset and everything, and she was like, *"Ok, let's just put this stuff..."* Like, *"Let's just take these all and, you know, have them hold it for you and let's go and get some coffee or whatever. Let's get something to eat. Let's get some coffee."*

Shopping as a recreational activity is a common practice among participants, in as much as the importance of friends and family as part of the shopping and buying process is evident. As discussed in this section, those close to compulsive buyers might be facilitating or even prompting their behaviors, without even knowing it. Yet, they may also act in ways that help to protect participants from the consequences of their own behavior.

**Me, Myself, and The Outsiders.** Most participants do not enjoy interacting with store personnel. Indeed, most do not see shopping and buying as a way to develop friendships. For instance, when asked if she enjoyed interacting with a salesperson, Helen replied: "No, I don't like it. So I like buying online."

Lisa, on the other hand, explained that even though she has had some unpleasant experiences with salespeople, she still enjoys taking to people at the store, regardless of whether they are employees or other customers. However, she clarified that she does not go shopping looking for “that bonding experience.”

Lisa: Umm... (thinking) it kind of depends. There are stores like *Ann Taylor* here locally that I won't go into in person because their clerks are snobby and rude and... so that can be a bad experience. You know, when standing with my *Ann Taylor* card it's like, “*I can buy anything in the store and you are getting snobby and rude to me?*” I used to buy things just to prove that they are being snobby and rude, pulled out my *Ann Taylor* card to buy something just to prove I could. You have to wait on me. I don't do that stuff anymore. I umm... (Pause, thinking) I love to talk to people, you know, I always usually will engage in conversations with the salesperson. [...] I'm very open to talking to people, [but] I don't feel I go shopping for that social interaction. I mean, I'm very happy. I have friends, I have family. I don't ever feel like I don't ever -- like I don't have somebody I can talk to so... [...] I mean, I'm very interactive with the salespeople. I always make it a point to ask their name if I ask them like to bring me something in a dressing room, or if I need another size I always try to remember, you know, their name, but I don't feel like I'm establishing a pseudo friendship. I don't feel like this is my new best friend because I bought a dress from her.

In contrast, Lynn recalled that when she was at the height of her compulsive behavior, she used to enjoy the attention she received from sales personnel. She would consider them her friends. Also, she recalled befriending the owner of a boutique located close to her home. She explained that even though they only saw each other at the store, Lynn considered this person to be her friend. Lynn explained that she later came to understand that it was not a real friendship, but at the time, it allowed her to feel less lonely.

Lynn: [...] and then, there was one in particular [boutique] where I was -- I felt like I was friends with the owner. I'd go in there and we'd chat but then I always

bought something because I always thought like, I should. We weren't really friends; we were kind of friends but like friends in a -- not in a real way. I mean we had good conversations and everything, but I never saw her outside of the store. Then that's not a real friend (laughs) but it suited that purpose for me. I was feeling lonely. I wanted to engage, I wanted to interact with somebody. I liked to get out of the house and umm... there are definitely things that really kept the... the obsession and addiction going for me that I really see quite clearly now[, but] that I didn't see before because before it was just kind of, "*Oh! There is something for me to do.*"

Like Lynn, Julia enjoys the social interaction that comes with shopping, whether it is with her friends, other customers, or the sales personnel. However, in contrast to Lynn, Julia does not feel like they were her "friends."

Julia: I enjoy interaction if I go with a friend umm... I guess sometimes with the sales personnel. I'll ask their opinion maybe if I want a second opinion. But usually, you know, if I'm going by myself then I just, I don't really feel like I want that interaction.

Participants' experiences with shopping and buying reveal that shopping is a way to share experiences with friends and family. Thus, it seems that shopping may not be as much about the buying as the interaction with others. Some participants explained that shopping is the only way they can connect with their friends and relatives. Yet, this form of recreation is not without its challenges. Conflicts that emerge during the decision-making process are discussed next.

### **The Struggle of Decision-Making**

Depending on the product, deciding between items can take most consumers a couple of minutes, several hours, or even a few days. Logically, the factors taken into consideration will vary depending on the desired item. Typically, a routine purchase takes

an individual very little time and effort. However, when buying an expensive item, consumers tend to spend more time weighing the options and analyzing the pros and cons of the potential purchase. When it comes to compulsive buyers, purchase decisions are not necessarily made based on price. For participants, the desire to have more and more is what requires them to spend a significant amount of time and energy on evaluating the options.

For instance, one of the participants in this study explained that she has spent a considerable amount of time deciding which striped blouse is the best choice, only to end up buying three of them, because she was unable to determine if any of them would turn out to be what she was looking for. Another participant confessed to having experienced major anxiety due to her inability to make a decision between 10 items that seemed to have the potential of filling a wardrobe gap.

Before delving into the challenges faced by participants while in the process of making purchasing decisions, I will first examine the aspects they take into consideration when evaluating an item; that is, the intrinsic (e.g., fit, color) and extrinsic (e.g., price) characteristics of the product. Issues relevant to this theme are discussed in the following two subthemes: (1) *Buying Considerations* and (2) *I Can't Decide. I Want Everything!*

### **Buying Considerations**

When shopping for and buying ARPs, consumers take a lot of factors into consideration. Participants in this study indicated that, for them, fit and style are the most important. For many, price and color are also critical. Typically, individuals consider the message that appearance-related items communicate to others. That is, how an individual

is perceived by others when wearing the item. Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned this as a reason for purchasing. Instead, participants seem to be more concerned with how they feel in the clothes or how the clothes make them feel than with others' opinions. Kelly, for example, explained that, for her, it is not only about the specific characteristics of the item (e.g., color, fit), but how much she likes it, how similar it is to other items she already has, and whether or not it fits with her personal style.

Kelly: Umm... I guess color, print, fit, price... umm... whether it is something similar to... well, similar is relative I guess but... Umm you know too similar to what I have now. Umm... you know is it something... you know, fit for sure. I'm not wearing anything that's like not gonna be cute. Umm, price is obviously a consideration... but yeah, usually the consideration is *"Do I like it? What is it about it that I like? Is it too similar to anything that I have currently? Is it, you know, something that I would wear and fit in with the rest of the closet?"*

Similarly, Lisa explained that she has learned to make fit her main priority. She confessed that in the past she made bad choices because she was only focusing on the style. Now she considers how the items look on her, how much she likes them, and how long she thinks she will be able to wear them.

Lisa: I've learned to make fit a priority because I made so many shopping mistakes not focusing on fit. I mean, I'm tall. I'm tall and thin. I have long arms. I have broad shoulders. I have a long waist. I have to buy something that fits. So, for me the first thing I'll ask is, *"Does this really fit?"* and then it kind of goes back to those questions, *"Do I love this?"* Like, *"Does this make my heart sing and dance?"* You know, next year, *"Am I going to remember why I had to have this?"* I know that with that black blazer, I will know next March why I bought this black blazer this year because like I said, I'm wearing it 2 and 3 times a week already. Umm that cashmere sweater that I spent \$200 for last year, I have to go put it on later just because I'm thinking I should at least wear that sweater around the house this weekend 'cause it's about to get warm and I have this sweater, but I remember I was so obsessed with this sweater [...]. I mean, price is obviously... I try to look at things I can afford or that – in what I consider my price range.

Technically, I have no real money, it is all play money on credit cards but... But I think fit for me has become the number one priority and then maybe whether or not it is flattering. Like, *“Does this really look good on me?”*

In line with Kelly and Lisa, Helen makes fit and style the main priorities.

However, she explained that for her, price is not a big determinant. She indicated that since she knows the brands she likes, she has an idea of how much the items cost and has no problem paying any particular amount of money. When asked if she considered price before making a purchase, she responded:

Helen: Umm... not that big of a consideration. ‘Cause I mean, when you are shopping you know what brand you are shopping at, so you kind of know the price already. So it’s not that big of a consideration if I’m already shopping there.

Helen went on to explain that she does not take other people’s opinions into consideration, saying, “Not that much. I don’t really... I want to say I don’t really care, but it’s that I don’t take into consideration that much people’s comments.” In other words, it is not necessarily that she does not care about what other people think, but that their opinions would not stop her from buying what she wants.

In contrast to Helen, for Julia, price is a major concern. She explained that she calculates an average price for the type of items she buys. When she goes shopping, she is more prone to buy something that is within her range. Her decisions are also influenced by suggestions from different websites. She seeks items in colors that will be flattering to her skin tone and that will make her look good.

Julia: Well, so, of course, I’m like more likely to buy something if it’s on sale and... umm well with the inventory sheet I also made like an average of what

each item costs and umm like the so like my sweater average it's like \$17.00 or something. So I find that I'm more likely to purchase something if it is something like within that range. So, like knowing, you know, having done some kind of research sometimes before going to the store, I'll look through that. I try to pick certain colors now because umm other websites who kind of recommend for certain tones, like skin tones and like hair colors, you should wear like certain colors. So I'm trying to wear more like intense colors. Umm like, you know, or something that won't look completely out of place.

In sum, when engaging in shopping and buying, most participants focus on the qualities of items that will make them look good. On the whole, they seem to be particularly concerned with image, but not to the point that they seek to please others with what they buy more than they seek to please themselves.

### **I Can't Decide. I Want Everything!**

As it will be discussed in depth within Chapter VII, participants tend to establish a deep connection with their possessions, and as a result, assign them multiple meanings. This deep connection suggests that participants value items not only for what the items are, but for what the items represent to them. Some explained that the items they buy help to fill a hole, others expressed that they help to make them feel safe or in control. The importance assigned to these items, combined with participants' resource limitations, provides a point of departure for understanding the difficulty they experience when choosing between options.

Lynn recalled that when she was at the height of her CCB, she would experience major anxiety from not being able to decide which items to buy.

Lynn: ...I was thinking there has been multiple times where I've been stressed out or crying or on the verge of tears in the fitting room sitting there, kind of... maybe taking out my phone and calculating numbers and kind of going on, "*What*

*should I do?"* And being in the store way longer than I intended to be because I couldn't make up my mind and that sort of thing.

Lynn further described the process she used to go through when she was not able to make a decision. She explained how difficult was for her to "make up her mind."

Lynn: Oh, it's really hard to decide between items! [...] I'll bring like arms full into the dressing room sometimes. Sometimes, you know, it would take an arm full to find one or two things that you like. But the times when I would end up in tears like I was talking about is when I would have ten things and I knew that I shouldn't be buying 10 things but I couldn't decide. Like I had a really hard time deciding which [one was] better. Like, and I would rationalize in my head and try to talk myself into that I could buy all 10 things because, you know, they were on sale, because I could wear this with this, this is different, they may look almost exactly the same but there is this subtle difference in this... you know, maybe I have two black dresses but they are different black dresses (laughs). I'll do all this... just talking myself into things, you know? It was really just agonizing for me. I mean, I've really gotten a lot better in that I've narrowed down what colors I wear. I've narrowed down what styles I wear. I really just kind of... I actually pay a lot more attention to like, *"Is this appropriate for the life that I actually live?"* Not like, *"Oh, I could wear this when I go out?"* and then like, *"Oh, but how often do you really go out? You don't really go out."* You know? *"You already have enough clothes for going out"* (laughs) [...] So, I've gotten a lot better at like making decisions like that. *"Is this comfortable? Do I already have something like this?"* You know, like... *"Do I actually have a real life event? Can I see myself wearing this in the next month?"* Like, *"Is this really like something that's appropriate for my life versus for this sort of like imaginary life or this fantasy?"*

Lynn feels that she is doing much better now. She explained that she can select items without having to go through the painful process she described. However, she shared a recent experience that suggests she still has a ways to go.

Lynn: More recently, I was at this jewelry store, we were on vacation, we were visiting my mom, my husband and I, and there is this store – they don't only have jewelry there, but they have this amazing jewelry and I always struggle with like, I want too many things and I can't make up my mind. But one time, I actually was



there and I called my husband because he was... – I forgot the whole circumstances of why I was there and he was not – and I called him and I'm, "*Oh, you know, I want you to come and get me, and help me because I can't figure it out*" (laughs). I mean, yes, I was just like, "*I can't make up my mind.*" Sometimes when he will shop with me, he goes – like I have 4 shirts that I want – and he would go, "*Ok, pick two*" and I could do it when I had somebody there helping me. I had to talk through it a little bit but I could actually do it.

Like Lynn, Kelly also struggles to make buying decisions. In a visualization exercise completed as part of the personal journal, Kelly described how she felt after learning that her favorite brand was on sale and her struggle deciding which items she would take with her and which items she was going to leave behind.

Kelly (personal journal): At a large markdown sale at *Dillard's* is where I visualized myself. My favorite brand was on sale, with additional markdowns, and there were many items still available, and in my size. My heart actually races thinking about this and I imagine my adrenaline pumping to make it to every rack to scoop up my size before the other shoppers do. I find at least 10 items and take them to the fitting room. They all fit. I start to do mental math to see how much each item is as I hand them up in the fitting room. I want them all. I had set a limit for myself before shopping of \$150, but in this moment I realize there is no way I'm sticking to it. I remind myself, "*Nothing haunts us like the things we didn't buy.*" I narrow my selection down to 7, which I deem "reasonable." I bring the 7 up to the counter and pay. Its \$350. Not the worst I tell myself. I get home and stash the bag in my closet for a while. The other 3 items I didn't buy stay in my mind. I search *eBay*, *Poshmark*, etc. for them just in case... I put them on my "watch list." I feel anxious about the items I didn't buy. I place a bid on one...

Even though Kelly did not buy all the items she wanted, she was unable to stick to her budget. In her narrative, Kelly justified this by reminding herself that not buying all of the items would probably cause her more trouble in the long run. As she predicted, she ended up on a quest to find the items online that she did not buy during that shopping trip.

In Dolores' case, the struggle takes a different form. She explained that she tends to make purchases fairly quickly. That way, she limits the opportunity for reflection. When asked if she considered items she already has when engaging in shopping and buying, Dolores responded,

Dolores: No, that's a really... That's a great question, and, no, I don't.

I: Why do you think that is?

Dolores: I think that's part of the impulsiveness and the compulsiveness. If I don't give myself... If I don't give myself the time – and I have experimented with this – if would give myself time to think about what I have already, then... Like if I say, "*I'm going to wait 24 hours,*" then it is not as... the punches don't hurt as much, put it that way. Umm... but when I don't take time to really think about it, then that's when I make the impulsive purchases.

I: So, do you take your time at the stores or do you like to shop quickly?

Dolores: I like to shop quickly. I like -- I stay there a long time, but I like to make decisions quickly. In fact, I... when I shop with my best friend, she makes her decisions more slowly and so that has forced me to make decisions more slowly. But I prefer to make things very quick.

I: Why?

Dolores: It's that addiction. That compulsion. That just grab and go.

I: Before something changes?

Dolores: That's it. Before I have time to think about it, just do it and get it over with.

Dolores explained that although she spends a considerable amount of time at the store, she goes through the buying process as fast as possible. She attributed this to the compulsive nature of her shopping and buying behaviors; that is, to her CCB.

Buying all of the items and then deciding which ones to keep is how Julia deals with her inability to decide. She also admitted that there are times when she walks out the door empty-handed, “Sometimes I just buy all of them, and then say that I’ll return them if I don’t want them, or I just walk out and then don’t get any of them and I think about it more.”

### **Emotional Triggers**

As discussed in Chapter V, participants’ buying behaviors can be triggered by feelings of loneliness, anxiety, boredom, and sadness, among other things. However, these are not the only feelings that participants experience. As will be discussed in this theme, each step of the process brings with it a unique set of emotions. These emotions are explored within the following sections: (1) *Like a Roller-Coaster*, (2) *Shopping is Not the Same as Buying*, and (3) *What Goes Around Comes Around*.

#### **Like a Roller-Coaster**

Participants’ stories reveal a similar pattern of emotions. Most experience negative emotions before engaging in CCB. While in the process of buying compulsively, participants confessed to feeling excited, happy, safe, and “in their own world.” Depending on whether they purchased online or at a physical store, afterwards, feelings range from happiness, relief, and satisfaction and then ultimately guilt, remorse, and anxiety. Lisa’s narrative illustrates this pattern.

Lisa: ...for the shopping that we are talking about that’s a problem I would say I typically feel maybe kind of down before I shop. I feel, you know, happy and excited when I find something that I think will work. And then sometimes afterwards, especially if it wasn’t really a wise purchase, then I may have regrets.

Lisa went on to clarify that she experiences these feelings only when she engages in CCB. She explained that need-driven purchases have little emotional impact on her. She commented, “Umm... (Thinking) if it’s a purchase that is just a necessity, like underwear... I don’t really have a lot of emotional reaction to shopping for something that is necessary...”

Dolores, on the other hand, explained that she may feel sad, happy, or simply curious before she engages in a compulsive buying act. While in the shopping process, she expressed feeling euphoric and “high,” and even described it as an “out-of-body experience.” After the shopping process, Dolores explained that she usually feels “down.” She compared her feelings to those she experienced when she was abusing drugs and alcohol.

I: How do you feel before you engage in the shopping process?

Dolores: Umm... I usually feel... well, a lot of times I would feel overly happy or overly sad. Umm sometimes I just feel curious, you know, wanting to find out about something, a particular item. You know, going online and researching it.

I: And then, how do you feel while you are shopping?

Dolores: I feel high. Yeah, I feel like a person that is doing drugs. It feels very high. It’s -- I even have my best friend describe it as my eyes glaze over. Yeah, I just kind of get that glazed look in my eyes, where I am... It’s like I’m having -- it’s like I’m high. That is the best way to describe it. So, you know, I feel euphoria... I feel elated. I feel out of my own body; it’s somewhat of an out-of-body experience.

I: After the shopping process, after you pay for that item, how do you usually feel?

Dolores: Usually I feel umm... kind of let down. Umm... It almost feels like it is an end of me, you know, the fun is over, you know? [...] It was very much the same way as I felt after I would be coming down from being drunk or being high

or something like that. The same kind of feeling, right, that feeling of “*I’m done now. So now let’s move on to the next thing.*” Yeah...

In a visualization exercise completed as part of the personal journal, Dolores’ words reinforce her description above. She visualized herself shopping with her best friend at one of her favorite stores. She described how this experience caused her to feel an overwhelming array of mixed emotions. On the one hand, she is upset for not being able to control her buying behavior. On the other, she is excited because she enjoys the possibility of buying all she wants. She described how shopping is the mechanism she uses to feel better about herself.

Dolores (personal journal): I am in *Chico’s* with my best friend. I bought an outfit of pants, shirt, jacket, jewelry, and shoes. I felt sick to my stomach. I know I don’t need any of the items. I feel excited because I want to be able to buy anything I want. I feel depressed and I need a fix. I need to go shopping at *Chico’s, Nordstrom, Von Maur, J. Peterman*. I am in love w/ the illusion of being enough, fairly enough, feeling enough. I feel restless, irritable, and discontent and I know shopping can make me feel better (different). The predominant pattern of thought is feeling “less than” and needing more I fill the hole in my gut. I feel like I’m not enough as I am... I need more to feel whole.

Like Dolores, Lynn also experiences negative feelings before engaging in CCB. She explained how she would use shopping as a “mood booster” and as a way to reward herself for an accomplishment.

Lynn: Usually, I would feel bad. Usually, the shopping would be a way to boost my mood. I mean, occasionally there were times when I would shop more as a celebratory thing. [...] but usually I felt bad. Usually, I was worried about something, sad, moody, and nervous, umm any host of negative emotions would propel me.

Lynn went on to explain that when she was in the process of shopping and buying she “would go into an altered state.” She described how this process would affect not only her mood, but her personality.

Lynn: I might be depressed before, but I go in and it’s kind of like, “*Oh, I’ve entered into this mystic realm of all of this*” you know. I’d be excited. I’d be very outgoing when I shop. I’m not all that outgoing in general, but I when I shop, I am outgoing...

Lynn talked about feeling guilty about buying items that she did not need. In a visualization exercise included in the personal journal, Lynn described her feelings from beginning to end. She described feeling excited as she enters the store. After deciding between items, she goes to pay for them and commented on feeling anxious and hesitant about her decision. After the purchase is completed, she confessed to feeling guilty, as she knows she does not need the items.

Lynn (personal journal): I am at *Nordstrom* in Fashion Valley Mall on the second floor where most of the women’s clothing is located. I am there to return something, but I have hopes of finding something else I might like better. As soon as I enter the store, my senses are heightened and I get excited. I notice all of the bright colors and take in the displays. I wander around a bit to take it all in. I am drawn to the jackets and the dresses. I pull a few items out to get a closer look and touch the fabric. I grab about 10 items to try on, a top, jackets and dresses (I don’t like trying on pants). I find multiple items I want to buy and try them on several times to better decide which ones work best for me. I have trouble making a decision and wrestle with it for a while. I end up buying one top and one dress but feel a bit guilty about it. I am anxious as I hand my credit card to the sales lady. I wonder if I’m making a mistake. I wonder if I will later return one or both items. I feel bad because the items weren’t specifically on my shopping list, I believe I will wear them, but I think maybe I should have held out for what I needed most. This is a pattern of mine – buying the good instead of holding out for the best. I think about what to do next time as I walk out of the store and I ponder what I might want to return later from today and earlier.

Kelly experiences a range of emotions as well, but they are somewhat different. For Kelly, the process of shopping tends to be relaxing. However, she explained that when she starts narrowing her selection, she experiences both guilt and excitement. According to Kelly, the excitement comes from specific attributes of the item and the possibilities it offers (i.e., the places she could wear it to, the items she already has that she can wear it with). The guilt comes as a result of knowing that it is not a real necessity.

Kelly: Umm, like while I'm shopping it's just like relaxing 'cause typically I'm just like adding things to my basket for fun. It's like... I'm not actually considering buying it at that moment. It's more just like... things are like, it is like a wish list kind of thing and whatever. And then, when I'm actively trying to narrow down what I want, you know, I guess it's just... it's like a combination of excitement and guilt, it's like, *"Well, I really shouldn't do this, it feels bad that I'm doing this, why am I doing this right now"* but *"Oh, look how cute it is, this would be cute, let me pair it up with things in my head,"*

Kelly described being trapped in-between two worlds. She questions her reasons to make the purchase over and over again, because deep down she is trying to make sure that she is "doing the right thing." She knows that buying the item might not be the most prudent thing to do, but at the same time, her thoughts are so powerful that she has no other choice.

Kelly's words are very similar to those used by Dolores when describing how she feels after making a purchase. Kelly expressed, *"Oh, well that's done. I can quit thinking about it now"* while Dolores commented, *"I'm done now. So now let's move on to the next thing."* Thus, it seems as though both tend to experience a sense of relief once the shopping and buying process is over. Unfortunately, both explained that the feeling of

relief does not last long. Soon after, there will be something else that they start to obsess over.

Kelly went on to explain that she often experiences excitement, guilt, and remorse after she makes a purchase. She expressed that the anticipation of receiving the package causes the excitement, while the fact that she knows that it was probably an unnecessary purchase makes her feel guilty and remorseful. However, these negative feelings do not tend to arise immediately after the purchase. As she explained, it is not until she gets the items in the mail and tries to find space in her closet that she is confronted with the guilt of knowing that it was a compulsive purchase.

Kelly: I don't usually feel remorse or guilt right afterward. It would be like, when it comes in the mail or when I go to put them my closet. [...] And I'm like, "*Clearly I did not need to purchase this. This was dumb.*" But I still really like it. It's hard to reconcile.

I: When it [the packages] comes into the mail, is it then when you feel guilty?

Kelly: Yeah

I: But you feel excited at the same time?

Kelly: I do feel excited. I feel like excited to see it, but at the same time it is usually kind of like, "*Oh well, you know, I probably shouldn't have ordered this,*" like then when it comes in the mail, but I like getting it still. Like if it didn't come, I would feel sad but it's like... that's the moment, if I feel remorse, it's then, when it comes to the door [...] And then you try to fit it in your closet and I'm like, "*Gosh! Why... you know, it's so packed in here!*" Like, "*I really didn't need to get this!*"

In contrast to most of the participants, Julia explained that she not only experiences negative feelings before engaging in CCB but she sometimes feels happy about it. While others enjoy the anticipation of receiving their packages, Julia enjoys the



anticipation that comes from knowing what she is going to find in the store. Since she searches for information before visiting the store, she explained that it is gratifying to have an idea of what to expect.

Julia: Umm... so, ok, so, I noticed that when I purchase items more I'm usually tired or hungry but I guess part of me feels a little bit happy because also, like I said, I looked up some of these items, like through the sale ad or the email. So I kind of already know what I want, so it's kind of gratifying to like go in and like kind of experience that hunt for that item.

I: So that gratification happens before or during the shopping?

Julia: Oh, so I guess is like a little bit of both. So, like, you know, on the way to the store, like "*Oh, I'm finally going*" and then in the store...

Julia's post-purchase feelings tend to vary with the situation. For instance, if she buys something that is necessary or that she can justify, then she feels happy. However, if she considers the purchase to be excessive, then she feels guilty.

Julia: Sometimes I'm happy and sometimes I feel guilty and sometimes... I guess it just depends. Some purchases like I have to get, like a gift, so I feel ok about that. If I needed the purchase or I can justify myself a little bit more, then I'm happier than if I come home and I realize that my purchase was excessive. Because oftentimes a lot of these grocery purchases like I realize it's excessive when you go home but I never feel like you can return groceries. Like I don't feel that that's appropriate. Umm yeah... that makes me feel even more guilty.

Julia is the only participant who has found that her CCB is migrating to groceries and household products. She explained that with appearance-related products, she is at least able to minimize the damage by returning the items. However, she does not consider it appropriate to return groceries. Consequently, her feelings of guilt increase.

## **Shopping is Not the Same as Buying**

Shopping and buying, although related activities, encompass different actions and generate different reactions. When asked about those aspects of the shopping and buying process that they enjoy the most, some participants pointed out that it is the *shopping* (e.g., browsing, trying on, go from store to store) process that draws them, while for others, the most exhilarating part is the *buying* (e.g., acquiring the item). For instance, Dolores said that for her “It’s the shopping. It’s the hunting. That’s what I enjoy the most.” When asked if she usually goes shopping with an idea of what she wants, or instead, if it is about the element of surprise, she focused on the latter, responding: “Yes, it’s definitely about what I’m going find.”

In contrast, Lisa does not enjoy the shopping aspect as much as she enjoys the buying. She explained that she has never been the type of shopper who likes to go window shopping or enters stores that sell items she knows she cannot afford. In fact, she explained that it would be like punishing herself.

Lisa: ...the looking has never been really fun for me. Like if I want to buy something, like I don’t go to the mall and just look. I go in the store where I think has the thing I want and I look for it and I come back out. Window shopping has never been fun for me. Browsing for things I can’t afford – I’ve just never really been that way ‘cause it... for me it is punishing yourself. Going and looking at all the things you can’t buy! So I just try to focus on what I do want to look at, you know.

Lisa went on to explain that, for her, shopping is more of a “chore” than something she does for fun. She expressed that for her, engaging in CCB has nothing to do with social

interaction, but with the ability to provide herself with something that helps her fix something “inside herself.”

Lisa: I don't typically shop -- like I know some people just shop for shopping, I'm not... I don't do that as much. Shopping to me is usually, like especially if I have to go to the store, it's more like a chore, you know, something to get done. I don't enjoy the actual shopping much.

I: Ok, why is that?

Lisa: You know, a lot of women shop socially, you know, they shop with their friends. I don't have friends who shop, except for my friend Jennifer. So, I don't... maybe that's part of the issue. It [has] never become a social thing for me. It's always for me, it's always about finding this magical allusive piece of clothing that's going to fix, theoretically, a hole in my wardrobe, but I know deep-down [that is] really a hole in my life.

Likewise, Helen explained that buying provides her with more satisfaction than shopping. When asked to elaborate on how buying differs from shopping in terms of the feelings the two activities provoke, she replied,

Helen: Like umm making a purchase is more satisfying than just shopping. Like just shopping and browsing is not as satisfying as umm purchasing. I think the whole point of shopping for me is to purchase something, that I like, or just to buy something.

Helen's intention when engaging in the process of shopping is to acquire something. In contrast to all of the other participants, for Helen, the item itself is not as important as the act of purchase.

As a recovering compulsive clothing buyer, Lynn explained that, for her, it was about the buying. Although she enjoyed all aspects of shopping and buying, making the purchase used to make her feel rewarded. That is, after all the time and energy she spent

in the process, getting something out of it that she enjoyed was one of her greatest satisfactions. As she explained,

Lynn: I think because... 'cause then it's like a reward for your time. Like even now, I mean... not so much now, because now I'm kind of more okay with it. But now what happens [is that] I go looking for something specific and sometimes I don't find that, so I'm disappointed that I didn't find it, whereas in the past, I would go to have a feeling, you know. I would go to have an experience. But yeah... it wasn't enough to just go and look at things and... window shop as it were, with more like, you know, having that sort of something to bring home with me. Like... it was like... it was kind of like your reward for your experience, your time or it's like a way to do something nice for yourself, like, "*Oh! Look! I got this little thing for myself, to make myself feel good.*"

For Julia, shopping is the most enjoyable part of the process. She commented that she enjoys "the whole trying on process; finding and item," the window displays, the store layout, among other possibilities. Indeed, she explained that, for her, shopping is a process that allows her to learn more about herself.

Julia: I really do like the shopping process. I like, you know, I like going to the store and then I like seeing the mannequins in all the different possibilities. You know, I like trying the different possibilities on myself. I like, you know, figuring out what work better, even if I don't buy something, it's like, "*Oh, well now I know that I can't wear studs that are, you know, like this big compared to like studs that are this big*" or something like that. So I feel like it's almost --I really like the shopping process because it feels like learning but in a very, umm, it's not like a high intensity level of learning.

I: So, you feel that is like learning. What is it that you are learning?

Julia: I think it is learning about me. I'm learning about "*Oh, I really like this kind of green on me, near my face*" or, you know, like, "*Oh, I can umm...*" you know, because of that jacket that I have on my closet I noticed that, you know, wool makes me like really scratch near my neck sometimes, so I have to like wear something different or not get a wool coat or something like that. So I think it's just like that process.

For Julia, the shopping process allows her to discover things about herself. She explained that, for the most part, this learning experience is linked to her tastes and preferences for appearance-related products. When asked about how the buying part makes her feel, she replied:

Julia: Well, I mean, sometimes it is good, like when I like items or something like that. It's also good when the price is lower or, you know, maybe if... if it's just like, "*Wow! I came to the register and now it is \$130,*" like, you know, surprising and it's like, just makes me feel guilty that I spent all this time and money doing this thing.

Julia remarked that the buying aspect can sometimes be frustrating, especially when she has spent a lot of time and energy shopping for something and then at the cash register she discovers that the price was higher than what she initially expected. She commented that not being able to buy the item after all the effort she put into it makes her feel guilty. Julia explained that she is now trying to focus on developing relationships and enjoying different experiences, therefore, trying to be mindful of the idea that "the time spent shopping and going through this process is something that I could've spent with some friends."

Kelly explained that she likes all aspects of the consumption act. For her, the process of shopping and buying is a hobby, something she does to relax.

Kelly: It's a favorite hobby, frankly. It's something that I really enjoy doing. It's relaxing... (pause, thinking) It's... I don't want to say mindless, but at the same time it's just like, I don't know, it's just, not stressful for me. It's just like a fun activity that's relaxing.

Since her husband does not like to engage in any kind of shopping activity, Kelly is the one in charge of buying everything for the house, including clothes for her husband and their daughter. However, while she explained that she enjoys shopping and buying clothes for the family, she does not necessarily derive any satisfaction from shopping and buying things other than clothing, such as household supplies.

Kelly: They are not fulfilling at all. They are as benign as like vacuuming the house. It's like something you have to do. You know, just like... I need this and I ordered it. You know, it's definitely more utilitarian.

### **What Goes Around Comes Around**

Compulsive buying behavior can be viewed as a self-reinforcing disorder. That is, individuals resort to it seeking to alleviate negative experiences and emotions. During the process of shopping and buying, individuals are able to escape from whatever the reality is that is causing them pain. After the act is completed, most individuals experience a temporary relief, but it is soon replaced by feelings of guilt and/or remorse. These feelings, when combined with the particular reality the individual seeks to escape from, appear to set a vicious cycle in motion.

Kelly explained that she usually turns her “wants” into “needs.” For her, a need is something she does not have to question. Thus, she is able to follow through with the purchase. After the shopping and buying process is over, she focuses on something else. Needless to say, the cycle starts all over again.

Kelly: Yeah. It's like... I like to create false needs for myself. Do you know what I mean? Like I'll see something and it's like I justify wanting it and then it's like, “*Well, I really do need it*” and because it's a need I should buy it and you know...

And then I obsess over it, and then eventually I buy it, and then I'm like, "*Oh I'm good,*" and then shortly after there will be some other thing that perks my interest. And then I'll do that again.

The happiness experienced by compulsive buyers after making a purchase tends to be ephemeral. Dolores described how happy and excited she feels when she is either expecting a package or going from store to store with a handful of bags. Unfortunately, the happiness and excitement disappears after she has it in her hands.

I: Is there any moment after the purchase where you feel happy?

Dolores: Yes. I think probably... I think that as I reflect on what I had purchased that would make me feel happy. You know, as I'm walking from store to store, for example, I'll be happy with my purchases and what I purchased. I would be happy when I'm -- I'm feeling after an online purchase. I would be until I -- because I'm anticipating receiving it.

I: Ok. So what happens when you receive it?

Dolores: It's so interesting because I... I get it, I open it and as soon as I see it, then the high is over for me. It's like I get, you know, I get that same kind of feeling by getting it in the mail, opening it, seeing it but then it's -- then I'm done.

According to Dolores, it is the anticipation of receiving an item that makes her "heart sing and dance." However, after opening the package or taking the items out of the bags, the happiness is over and then she needs another "fix." Similarly, Helen explained that after she purchases an item she feels satisfied. However, that feeling does not last long.

I: Ok. And after that purchase, how do you feel?

Helen: So, after that purchase I feel satisfied

I: For how long that satisfaction like last?

Helen: Not very long (comments while laughing)

I: Why is that?

Helen: I don't know, like umm I lose umm I lose the satisfaction pretty fast. It's like I lose interest in different things very fast. Umm... I'm someone that likes new things so... yeah, I lose that satisfaction pretty fast and then I need another... it's kind of like when you drink coffee and you feel the caffeine kicking – I don't drink coffee but that's what people tell me – but then when you lose the caffeine and then you feel your energy is going down and you need another, another coffee, it's like that.

I: So you need another...

Helen: I need another [shopping] trip.

Similar to Dolores, Helen explained that she loses interest very quickly in the items she buys. Likewise, the satisfaction she experiences after a purchase vanishes almost immediately. She compares her feelings to those a coffee drinker experiences when the effect of the caffeine is gone; just like that person needs another cup of coffee, she needs another shopping trip. In other words, the cycle starts all over again.

As is the case for both Dolores and Helen, Julia also experiences a temporary feeling of happiness after a purchase. She explained that by the time she puts the item away, the happiness is already gone.

I: Does that happiness last for a long time?

Julia: Umm (thinking) I guess... I mean, I think it is very temporary, actually. I think like I'm happy, like after the shopping and maybe after I like, told someone about the shopping, but you know once it's completed and maybe it's put away, often I don't, you know, it's like that feeling is already done.



Likewise, Lisa talked about how purchases tend to leave her with some unanswered questions. She commented that after she buys the item she is looking for, she feels like she can check it off of her list. However, she will then feel the need to find another target.

Lisa: You know, if I find the perfect fitting curvy black jeans now... now I need to find something else. It is never ending... there is never an end to it, you know. So I think it's -- for me it's more about the buying, but more like checking off a box. Like, now I have this thing that I think I need to be socially acceptable or you know, to be dressed appropriately for something. "*Ok, and now what? Now I have this thing, now what?*"

Participants in this study find that even though they experience positive feelings after they make a purchase, the happiness is only temporary. After a short period of time, the happiness turns into either guilt or emptiness. To deal with these feelings, participants seem to have no other choice but to engage in CCB once again.

### **Stores and Their Charm**

Retail stores seem to have power over many consumers, seeking to gain and hold their attention via merchandise selection, ambience, customer service, sales and promotions, among other offerings. Participants in this study were asked to indicate their favorite store, the characteristics they enjoy the most about the store, and how they feel when they visit the store. Common themes across the data are discussed within the following subthemes: (1) *Happiness is Just a Click Away*, (2) *The Enchanted Place*, and (3) *A Magical Relationship*.

#### **Happiness is Just a Click Away**

Most participants seem to prefer online shopping over brick-and-mortar, and the predominant reason for this is convenience. Participants indicated that online shopping

allows them to buy pretty much anything they like, at any time and from anywhere. They do not have to wait in line or deal with the noises or the crowds. Moreover, they do not have to dress up, drive, and look for a parking space. All of these things are avoided by shopping online.

Dolores explained that she prefers online shopping because of the convenience of finding anything she wants in a single place. When I asked her to elaborate on what convenience meant to her, Dolores responded:

Dolores: Convenience of not having to go out to the store. So, convenience umm being able to find whatever I want in one form, so to speak; in one, you know, just a click away type of thing.

Kelly also prefers online shopping. She explained that because she lives far away from the mall that has the stores she likes to shop at, she prefers to buy online.

Kelly: I do a lot of online shopping, that's mostly where I shop. I do go to physical stores also but the majority of what I buy is online.

I: Why is that?

Kelly: For one, I don't live near stores that are like... I live over on the beach and it's like an hour plus drive to stores that I care for. So it's like a big chunk of day just to go shopping and it just seems like kind of a hassle to do that. So, I'll do it online a lot, you know. Plus, it's right there, it's easy to go online. So, I do that.

Similarly, Lisa explained that most of her shopping is done online, especially because most stores offer free shipping. Lisa also enjoys having the opportunity to read other customers' reviews, as they help her make an informed decision.

Lisa: Most of my shopping now is done online ‘cause just about everybody has free shipping and I kind of know my brands well enough and know my size in most things. I also find the reviews really helpful. Like on you know, *Old Navy* or *LOFT* or *Gap*, I’ll read the reviews of the item because they put very detailed things. They’ll say, “*I weigh this much and I’m size so... you know, and this tall, and I weigh this much and a size 6 fits me*” So I’ll go and say, “*Then I must be an 8.*”

Helen, on the other hand explained that after she moved to North Carolina she turned into an online shopper. While in San Francisco, she used to enjoy going to physical stores but the absence of stores she likes has affected the way she shops. When asked about the reasons she migrated from brick-and-mortar to online shopping, Helen replied,

Helen: ‘Cause we don’t have [many stores]. We don’t have that many you know like choices here. We don’t even have *Zara*, so it’s like I really like to go online and it’s easy. Like you don’t have to get out. Even though we have shops here like *Express* or whatever, I still like buying online.

Helen went on to explain that she enjoys buying online because there are no time limits, the selection is superior, and she does not have to deal with sales personnel.

Helen: You can browse as long as you want. You don’t have the pressure of somebody umm like keep on asking you, “*Do you need help?*” And also they have more sizes, ‘cause in stores they usually don’t have my size, so... and then they end up saying that “*I’ll ship it to you,*” it is the same thing then.

In sum, participants value the convenience and merchandise selection of online shopping, as both are better online than in the physical store. Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned special promotions or better prices as something that they enjoy

from shopping online. Some, however, did comment on the fact that most stores offer free shipping, making the online option even more attractive.

### **The Enchanted Place**

At first sight, it seems like online shopping has everything over its brick-and-mortar counterpart. However, there is one thing that online shopping is not able to provide participants with: the in-person experience. According to participants, it is at the store where magical things happen. Most participants indicated that the store of choice for their compulsive purchases is *Nordstrom*. Two participants mentioned *LOFT*, while others mentioned *Victoria's Secret*, *J. Crew*, *Dillard's*, *Old Navy*, *The Gap*, and *Belk*. Among the main reasons they prefer these stores are the merchandise selection, atmospherics (e.g., layout, displays), return policy, and sales.

When I asked Dolores about the aspects she enjoys the most about her favorite stores, *Chico's* and *Nordstrom*, she explained that it is mostly the styles, layout, sales, and brands that attract her the most.

Dolores: Umm... I love the styles. At *Chico's* that's the style that I wear very well. It's kind of that casual chic kind of look, so I always find things there that I like. I like their sales, they have good sales. I like their jewelry really well and... umm I like the colors and the patterns and that kind of thing, styles. And for *Nordstrom* it's... I like the layout of the store. That's for obviously, when I'm, you know, actually shopping at the store, like the layout. I like the brands. They carry some brands that I was not familiar with before I started shopping at *Nordstrom* and I really like them. I like the fact that they have a little restaurant there. So, my best friend and I can go there and have lunch and shop and that kind of thing.

Like Dolores, Kelly is also driven by the merchandise selection. When asked about the most important feature of her favorite store, Kelly promptly responded:

Kelly: I definitely think it's the product. I mean the physical store it's exciting to go see the products and it's a nice environment so I enjoy going to it but it really all boils down to the product. It's like, I really enjoy finding things that would fit into my current wardrobe or finding a new print that I like, or finding, you know, just things like that. It kind of goes back to the collection thing. It's like... a collection. What fits into that, umm... you know. And so the actual clothes is what is exciting to me.

Kelly explained that she truly enjoys searching for items that will go along with what she already has. When Kelly has the opportunity to go to the store, she also enjoys the environment and the opportunity to see the products in person.

Kelly: Yeah. Like, how heavy is this sweater, what is it made out of, is it soft, is it itchy, is it lined, you know. What does it look like up close...

Among all stores, Lynn likes *Nordstrom* the most. For her, merchandise selection is very important. However, the thing she enjoys the most about *Nordstrom* is the customer service. She values the fact that sales personnel learn her name and are concerned about her tastes and preferences.

Lynn: The selection that they have, you know, I think they have good merchandise but I really just like the customer service aspect and the fact that the sales people actually spend time with you and talk to you and they remember you. Like they remember my name and they remember things about me and they remember what kind of clothes I like, things like that.

Lynn went on to explain that she also finds the displays and music played at *Nordstrom* enticing. However, she does not like the lightning because she feels like it makes her look old.

Lynn: Yeah, I'd liked the displays and even now like I'll go, like maybe I'll go to return something or I'll go to buy something really specific. I still kind of get like... the displays kind of grab me and like the music and just sort of the atmosphere when I go there. I don't like the lighting; I feel like the lighting makes me look old (laughs) I don't like the lighting at all. I wish they had better lighting in store [...] I do like the displays and all the colors and just, you know, just the way... when they put like the mannequin with full outfit, I like that or the displays, like the way the colors are arranged, and umm, I enjoy seeing that.

Helen explained that for her it is the merchandise selection and the models that she considers most attractive about her favorite store. She commented: "I think for *Victoria's Secret*... I think they have so many beautiful things and beautiful models. I think that's something that's attractive."

Participants explained that overall, it is the merchandise selection that they like the most about being in their favorite stores. They also mentioned aspects of atmospherics, and the customer service, that make the store a "magical place," outside of ordinary life. These aspects of the retail store seem to help nurture a very fruitful relationship between the business and the customer. This relationship is discussed next.

### **A Magical Relationship**

Participants talked about how visiting their favorite stores evokes all manner of positive feelings, from happiness to excitement to safety. For example, Kelly explained that, for her, visiting *Lilly Pulitzer* is very exciting, as she has the opportunity to see the items she has been looking at online. She expressed that being able to appreciate the patterns, quality of the fabric, colors, among other possibilities, is something she truly enjoys.

Kelly: Umm, it's usually kind of exciting. It's like, I like to be able to see stuff in real life, you know, 'cause like I've usually seen whatever they have online already. Like, I already know what's in there and so there are certain pieces that I want to like, see in real life. So, it's like, "*Oh this looks so much prettier in person!*" or "*I'm glad I didn't order that! This doesn't look like I thought it would!*" or you know, things like that. So it's usually kind of exciting to see. And also I test sizes a lot too. If stuff came out, like new and I'm not necessarily 100% interested in purchasing it right then, I might still try it on to see what size I would take for a later sale day or something.

Interestingly, when asked if she experiences the same kind of excitement when she visits the online store, Kelly explained that for her visiting the physical store and browsing online is not the same thing. She explained that she derives satisfaction from communicative exchanges on social media, but not from browsing the brand's website.

Kelly: I guess the excitement comes more from like the social media aspect of it. Umm... than just the physical website. The website itself like they are fine. Like, they just have the stuff and you can see the things but it's really the social groups that talk about [it], like the fan pages, kind of thing. That's what's more exciting online because then you have people that did try it on or that have opinions about it or they have like insider scoop on what's coming next or... you know and so that's like, "*Oh, this is really cool to talk about this and find out more about this,*" you know. It's not really the retailer website online, it's the clothes online but it's also like the talk about it through these groups.

Kelly went on to explain that the only way she tends to experience excitement from online shopping is when she finds an item she has been looking for.

Kelly: Umm... I don't think so. I only feel that real excitement if something like pops up on *eBay* or something that I've been looking for. Then it's like, how could I purchase [the] item before someone else snags it, or you know, something like that. Because usually online there such a large quantity too. You don't have to worry about like... because if that store [is] sold out, there's like 15 other stores that sell the same, you know. You don't really worry about like, "*Is it gonna be available?*"

Lynn explained that she no longer experiences the same level of excitement she used to feel when she was at the height of her behavior. She commented that back then, it was like she was on drugs. Lynn talked about the excitement that used to come from the unexpected aspects of the shopping experience. Not knowing what she was going to find and the possibility of finding something wonderful was very exciting for her, she said.

Lynn: I don't feel this as much as I used to, but I used to, just really like kind of get a high. Like immediately upon entering. Like immediately. I still like I would get a little bit now but then I'll notice it and then I'll kind of like say, "*It's not real,*" like... it's not... I recognize now that it doesn't really mean anything, like it's not... I'm not really "high," like I'm not, you know... but I would feel that sort of "*Oh! You know, I'm here! You know, cool!*" Like, it's the treasure hunt aspect of it. Like you never know what you will find. It's kind of like, "*Uh, I wonder what's new here now. What's exciting? What am I gonna like.*" You know, be super jazzed about seeing or I can't wait to try this on, you know. Just that whole newness... you know, novelty aspect.

Lisa explained that she loves having the opportunity to listen to live music while visiting *Nordstrom*, one of her favorite stores. She remarked that this makes her feel special and content. Indeed, she commented that it is very rewarding for her to know that she is able to buy things at this store. Growing up with very little, she never thought she would be able to buy things from a store like *Nordstrom*.

Lisa: [...] I like how *Nordstrom* smells. I don't know what that is, I just like how *Nordstrom* smells when I walk in there. They use to have a grand piano in the middle of the store and this guy would be playing the piano. I felt very fancy to go in there but umm I think part of me is still the little girl that grew up without very much, that is like "*Hey! I can actually shop here*" [...] I think that at some level that's important to me. To feel like, you know, hey! I can walk into a *Nordstrom* and they are gonna sell me something. And you know, there was a time in my life when I would've sworn I can't ever shop in a store like that.



I: And how do you feel when you go to *Nordstrom*? How does that make you feel, when you enter?

Lisa: Again, I don't shop in person all that much. I've really become... I love the convenience of online shopping. Umm, in store shopping is usually kind of a hassle for me because I can usually only go at times, you know, like I can't go in the middle of the day because I work. So it's gonna be crowded. A lot of times I'm gonna be tired, you know, on my way. I work a total of three jobs... so a lot of times maybe I'm tired or... yeah, in-person shopping is not really fun for me.

Similar to Kelly, visiting the online store does not generate the same kind of excitement for Lisa. She explained that it just sparks her interest in different items and allows her to find items more easily with the use of search filters.

Lisa: Umm more just like interested in... you know, I mean, like I said if I'm looking for a particular thing. [...] Let's say I decided -- 'cause they carry better brands of shoes, and I have funny feet -- let's say I've decided I'm gonna look for some black flats. I'll get on their website and I will search, you know, narrow it down by -- they have a great website in terms of style of shoe, heel height, you know, different types eliminating factors and umm I think I always feel fairly confident with *Nordstrom* that I'm probably gonna find what I need but I don't... I don't really get too excited or... yeah or too emotional about just sitting down and going to their website.

In contrast to Kelly and Lisa, Helen explained that visiting the website of her favorite store is exciting for her. She explained that she has higher expectations when visiting the *Victoria's Secret* website, which is one of her favorite stores, than visiting other retail websites. She indicated that the expectation of finding something she likes is higher, thus the anticipation makes the experience very exciting.

Helen: Yeah, 'cause I think I'm more like, I'm more looking forward to something on those sites. Instead of other sites, I'm just kind of browsing, but those sites I'm looking forward to like special or looking forward to finding something that I like. So it's more exciting for me.

Dolores, on the other hand, explained that going to *Chico's* or *Nordstrom* makes her “feel excited... I feel happy... umm... (thinking) I feel really ok with the world, that’s how I feel. You know, just that feeling of ‘I’m ok with the world.’ ” Dolores’ remark opened the door to questions about the aspects of her life that do not make her feel comfortable. When asked what it was that made her feel uncomfortable, she responded,

Dolores: I feel not ok with the world pretty often. And umm I feel like I’m not ok in the body I’m in, and the skin I’m in so it’s a way for me to feel out of myself, out of my body -- the shopping is, that is.

The paradoxical relationship between shopping and the body that Dolores experiences is interesting. On the one hand, she sees shopping as an opportunity to avoid dealing with feelings of dissatisfaction with her body. On the other, she is engaging in an activity that forces her to pay attention to it; that is, to be mindful of her body’s shape and structure as she buys clothing and other appearance-related products.

Based on the participants’ experiences, it seems that online shopping facilitates the compulsion to buy appearance-related products. The convenience of online shopping allows participants to acquire multiple items from the comfort of their own homes at any time of the day or night. A trip to the physical store, on the other hand, is seen more as a recreational activity, as it provides participants with the opportunity to share experiences with family and friends, and to experience the atmospherics of the physical store

## Living with the Consequences

The consequences of compulsive clothing buying vary depending on the severity of the behavior. That is, for some, the consequences can be minimal (e.g., inability to be friends with those who do not enjoy shopping), while for others, the consequences can be acute (e.g., substantial personal debt).

Data from the interviews and the personal journals revealed that the finances of all participants have been affected to some extent by their compulsive buying behaviors. Most participants expressed that it was not until they maxed out their credit cards or were overdrawn on their checking accounts that they realized they were having trouble with shopping and buying. At this point, though some have taken control of their finances, Dolores and Lisa are still struggling.

Dolores explained that one of the most critical consequences of her CCB is the substantial debt she has accrued. She commented that even though she has a good salary, most of it goes to pay loans, credit cards, and utilities.

Dolores: Oh, yeah... The consequences are the part that are really bad, you know... Umm the lack of money, the feeling badly about myself, you know, feeling out of control. Feeling like, you know, *"I'm smart. Why do I have to do this stuff?"* you know? *"I have the ultimate in education, why do I have to go out and put myself through this?"* And those are the things that come to mind, and these are the outcomes that happen as a result.

Dolores pointed out how she struggles to understand why she engages in CCB. She described how frustrating it is for her to know that, regardless of her education and intelligence, she has failed to take control over her shopping and buying behaviors. She also explained that among the consequences of such behavior is the lack of space. Due to

the excessive number of things she owns, she has no room left in her house. Since she cannot tolerate cluttered spaces, she rented a storage unit to store the items she no longer uses but cannot get rid of.

Among all participants, Lisa has accrued the greatest amount of debt. She explained that over the years she has accumulated over \$70,000 in credit card debt. Lisa confessed that there are times when she fears losing her job, as this would result in the inability to pay her mortgage and to make the minimum payments on her credit cards, which is, on average, \$2,000 a month. Nevertheless, for Lisa, not everything is negative. She commented that her CCB has prepared her for the life she has always wanted to have, where she can go out to a nice restaurant, go to concerts, and plays, among other possibilities.

Lisa: Umm ... (thinking) I hate to say, in a way I feel like better prepared to have a social life because I've accumulated this wardrobe. I don't, you know, I don't use shopping as a social activity. I don't think I spend time shopping that I would normally spend -- I don't think I've withdrawn from people because of shopping. I don't umm... I would say I feel better prepared to confront the world umm because I do feel like I finally kind of found my style and found a wardrobe that works. I don't... I do spend a lot of time online between reading the blogs and shopping online but again I'm trying to work on that. Spending a lot of time lately cleaning out my house. [...] Again I do not [have] a lot of time to socialize because of my jobs, but now that I'm looking at dating and this guy is coming to my house to pick me up tomorrow, I'm gonna spend the rest of the night cleaning up. So, time I would've spent online either shopping or reading fashion blogs, I try to spend cleaning out my house and doing some productive things, but it's not like it's kept me from having relationships...

Lisa does not think that her shopping and buying behaviors have affected her relationships with friends and family, or kept her from either developing new relationships or preserving the ones she already has. However, she recognized that the

time she spends reading fashion blogs and browsing the web could be devoted to more productive activities.

Unlike Lisa, Lynn's personal relationships have been affected by her compulsive behavior. Lynn recalled that when she was deeply invested in shopping and buying, she used to lie to her husband about her purchases. Indeed, she still remembers how she used to spend large sums of money on appearance-related products and how she was able to hide this from her husband. She confessed that since she was responsible for the household finances, she would only disclose part of her expenses. The other part she would manage to include under other items. This strategy allowed Lynn to avoid any confrontation with her husband. Lynn also explained how her relationships with friends were affected by her CCB. She recalled that if friends wanted to spend time with her, they had to be willing to go shopping.

Lynn: Well... you know, it has affected my marriage like I told you because I was lying to my husband and hiding things from him and spending too much money. So definitely that has an impact. I think, you know, it impacted some other relationships because I would always want to be shopping. Like I get together with somebody, like it became one dimensional... That [going shopping] would be what I wanted to do. Like, I wouldn't be like, "*Oh, let's go do this. Do you want to go do this other thing?*" And I'd be like, "*No, you know, like I want to go shopping because that would be my favorite activity.*" You know? It got to be a little bit too one dimensional and then honestly if I'm spending that much time and energy on shopping then that was time and energy I was not putting in either the relationships that I had or finding or building new ones.

Lynn acknowledged that the time and energy she was spending shopping and buying was time and energy she was not spending nurturing existing relationships or developing new ones. In a similar vein, Kelly explained that she spends a considerable amount of time

perusing the web. Even though this is not affecting her significantly, she recognized that this is time that she could be spending finding other activities that might be as fulfilling as shopping.

Kelly: Umm... It's affected [me] in the sense that I spend a lot of my free time shopping. Like I'll be on my phone perusing stuff, you know, but then again it's not really like a negative... well, it's time spent. 'Cause like my husband, he will... like, we will sit in the evening to watch a program and then after a while we both just like play on the Internet. He plays like a game on his phone or reads, you know, he's into music and stuff, so he'll look at that and I'll look at shopping and stuff. So, it's not really like negative time spent, but I do spend a lot of time doing that. Umm... I'm trying to think of other social... you know, I shop with my friend occasionally, but there is not really a negative thing with that. I mean, I suppose that there are just better things that I could be doing with my time, you know what I mean? But it's hard 'cause, you know, you have to shop, like just generally, you know, not only for clothing but you always have to shop, theoretically, and it's something that I really enjoy. So it's kind of like the preferred thing I like to do. I don't know.

Kelly expressed concern over her preference for shopping and buying and the fact that there is no simple solution to her situation. She explained that since shopping is a common and necessary exercise, distancing herself from it seems almost impossible. Even if she managed to stop her compulsive clothing buying behavior, she feels like one way or the other, she would always be bound to the activity, especially because her husband does not do any of the shopping.

For Helen, the consequences of shopping and buying seem to be minimal. She explained that when she was living with her parents, she used to work very hard to generate enough money to spend on the things she wanted. These purchases are something that provided Helen with a great deal of satisfaction. However, she confessed

that she is now concerned about her future. Not having as much money saved as she would like to is something that she is starting to feel guilty about.

Helen: I think umm well, like professionally, like work-wise, umm at home I had to -- well, not that I had to, but I really enjoyed working like several different jobs. I was working a lot, even on weekends. I was working and I was earning a lot more than other people just because then I'll get the satisfaction of buying afterwards. So, I spend all my money buying things and I'm happy about it. But then I know that like at some point I gotta save more. Umm I started saving but not that much (laughs) and umm so I think it's... it's... yeah, it makes me think that I should save more instead of keep on buying and being -- kind of being more responsible I guess of my life because I never really worry about what I'm gonna do about retirement. Like people talk about like saving up for retirement when I really never thought about it. Umm I guess I never had to worry about it. But I just think that maybe I should be a little more responsible.

When asked whether relationships with her friends have been affected, Helen replied that there have been no major changes. However, she explained that she is unable to establish a friendship with someone who does not enjoy shopping. For one, she spends most of her free time shopping and, second, she explained feeling distracted if her friends do not dress well.

Helen: Shopping I don't think so... umm but I don't know. I can't really be friends with people that don't like shopping (laughs).

I: How is that?

Helen: I don't know. I mean, because most of my free time is [spent] shopping so... I don't know... and we talk about things, about shopping, so it's like... I'm spending, like, you know, that much time and money on shopping I feel -- I guess I [would] feel a little bad if I have a friend that doesn't like shopping or that doesn't even spend money on shopping or, I mean, like or dress bad (laughs). I get really distracted by people that dresses bad (laughs). I know it's a really mean thing to say but... (laughs)

Helen added that part of the consequences of her compulsive clothing buying behavior is having to deal with feelings of guilt and anxiety. However, she explained that these feelings do not last long: “[The guilt does] not last very long. I forget about it in like a day... The next day, I’ll be shopping again.”

In sum, participants indicated that their compulsive clothing buying behavior has affected their personal and social lives, though for some more than others. Some participants expressed that devoting a considerable amount of time and energy to CCB has reduced their opportunities to discover new ways of enjoying life apart from shopping and buying. In addition, participants talked about being so invested in the process of shopping and buying that it has affected their relationships with friends and family members. That is, some have lied in order to avoid arguments, while others push people away because of their obsession with shopping and buying. Last, CCB has had a great impact on most participants’ finances. Indeed, some of them are literally drowning in debt.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the process of shopping and buying compulsively was explored, including the behaviors comprising the compulsive clothing buying act, and the challenges compulsive buyers face when they have to decide between items. Feelings and emotions associated with the behavior, channel preferences, and consequences of the behavior were examined. In the next chapter, which is the third part of the Thematic Interpretation, the role of appearance-related products within participants’ compulsive buying behaviors is examined.



## **CHAPTER VII**

### **THEMATIC INTERPRETATION PART III: THE PRODUCT**

As mentioned in Chapter V, the goal of the Thematic Interpretation (Chapters V to VIII) is to provide a deeper understanding of the compulsive clothing buying experience as lived by the six participants in this study. In the previous two chapters of the Thematic Interpretation, I explored *the person* and *the process of shopping and buying*, Parts I and II respectively. In the current chapter, Part III of the Thematic Interpretation, the focus is shifted to *the product*. That is, I specifically explore compulsive buyers' preference for appearance-related products (ARPs). The importance of these items in participants' lives as well as the meanings assigned to them are examined. Participants' reasons for purchasing, as well as whether or not they wear the ARPs, are also explored.

After examination of similarities and differences across participants' narratives, three themes emerged and are used to structure the sections of this chapter: (1) *My One True Love*, (2) *Made for Each Other*, and (3) *Long Distance Love Affair*. In the next section, the first theme is explored via participants' product preferences and their reasons for acquiring ARPs when engaging in CBB.

#### **My One True Love**

As mentioned in Chapter II, in this study the term *compulsive clothing buying* not only refers to the excessive purchasing of clothing, but the compulsive purchasing of

products used to alter an individual's appearance. In other words, the term *clothing* is synonymous with ARPs, which can include make-up, jewelry, shoes, handbags, accessories, etc. As one of the objectives of this dissertation is to investigate the role of ARPs in compulsive buying behavior (CBB), it is important to not only examine participants' preference for ARPs, but to explore the reasons why they prefer these items over other types of consumer goods. Because the intensity of their preference for ARPs appears akin to devotion, the themes reflect the level of commitment that participants exhibit. These issues are explored in the following subthemes: (1) *Only You*, (2) *Above All Others*, and (3) *Soul Mates*.

### **Only You**

Although participants in the study were purposely recruited because of their compulsive clothing buying behaviors, it nevertheless was important to confirm their preference for ARPs and to investigate if there are other products that they tended to buy compulsively. To this end, questions about product preference were included in the personal journal and asked during the interviews. In the personal journal, participants were prompted to indicate which products they frequently acquire compulsively. As part of this exercise, they were also asked to indicate the items that create the most trouble for them. That is, products that they are unable to stop themselves from purchasing, or that receive more time and effort during the decision-making process.

As shown in Table 7, ARPs (under *Clothing* and *Self-Care* categories) are not only the most frequently purchased by participants in this study, but also the items that create the most difficulty for them to *not* purchase. These items are followed by gifts,

books, magazines, newspapers, greeting cards, and stationary. Home furnishing and décor items such as candles, vases, art, bed and bath items, and linens are also preferred, though to a lesser degree. Interestingly, participants spend the least on entertainment, recreation, and hobbies, suggesting the strong focus on shopping for ARPs.

Table 7

Types of Products, Services, or Experiences Participants Buy/Acquire More Often

	Helen	Kelly	Dolores	Julia	Lynn	Lisa
<b>Clothing</b>						
• Business clothes	X		X*	X	X*	X
• Leisure clothes	X	X*			X*	X*
• Outerwear	X*	X	X*	X	X	
• Special-occasion clothes	X*			X	X	X
• Lingerie, underwear, and hosiery	X*	X		X	X*	
• Shoes	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Handbags	X		X*	X	X*	
• Jewelry or watches	X	X	X*	X	X	X
• Other accessories (belts, scarfs)	X	X	X*	X	X*	X

	Helen	Kelly	Dolores	Julia	Lynn	Lisa
<b>Self-Care</b>						
• Toiletries	X	X	X*		X	X
• Haircuts, coloring, etc.	X		X		X	X
• Waxing, manicures, pedicures, etc.	X		X		X	X
• Cosmetics/Hair products	X	X*	X	X	X*	X
• Massages and other body treatments	X*		X		X	
• Botox, fillers						X
• Other, please specify:			Bath products*		Supplements	
<b>Home Furnishings and Décor</b>						
• Furniture, occasional pieces (indoor)	X	X	X			
• Art, prints, and pictures	X	X			X	
• Candles, vases, scents, and so on	X		X*	X		
• Kitchenware	X				X	
• Tabletop china, linens, baskets, boxes, etc.	X	X		X		
• Bed and bath items	X*	X		X	X	
• Holiday and seasonal décor			X*			X

	Helen	Kelly	Dolores	Julia	Lynn	Lisa
• Antiques and collectibles		X	X*			
• Materials for home improvement	X				X	
<b>Entertainment, Recreation, Hobbies, Gifts, and Home Office</b>						
• Books, magazines, newspapers, and other print materials	X		X*	X	X*	X
• CDs, DVDs, etc.					X	X*
• Software, computers and video games					X	
• Movies, video rentals	X				X	
• Telephones, including cellular	X				X	
• Concert, ballet, theater, museum	X		X			X
• Computers, TVs, DVD players, and the like	X				X	
• Musical equipment (for listening or playing)	X					
• Gizmos or gadgets (such as iPods)	X					
• Greeting cards and stationery			X	X	X*	X
• Writing implements				X		
• Toys, books, classes for children		X*				

	Helen	Kelly	Dolores	Julia	Lynn	Lisa
• Craft, sewing, and knitting supplies				X		
• Other hobby supplies			X			
• Photography equipment and supplies	X					
• Sports/exercise equipment	X					
• Outdoor adventures	X					
• Pet food/supplies					X	X
• Entertaining others	X					
• Alcohol, cigarettes, recreational drugs	X*		Cigarettes			
• Gifts: Birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions	X		X	X	X*	X*
• Vacations	X		X		X	

*Note.* \* Indicates items that create the most difficulty for the participant.

Participants were also asked during the interviews about the products they buy most often. Responses were consistent with those in the personal journals. For instance, when I asked Lynn, a recovering compulsive clothing buyer, what type of items she used to buy the most when she was at the height of her behavior, she explained:

Lynn: Mostly, you know, clothing umm jewelry... oh, it's so much jewelry! I've gotten rid of a lot of that... lots and lots of jewelry, lots of clothes and shoes... umm I had many scarves, many shoes umm just... you know, the whole gamut.

Lots of cosmetics, lots of... you know, lots of makeup, skin care, haircare, that kind of stuff too.

Lynn further explained that the purchasing of books also caused her trouble: "I bought a lot of books. I had a lot of books and that was one of the things that I [used to] buy that wasn't appearance-related." She explained that due to the amount of books she had, it was impossible for her to read them all.

Like Lynn, Lisa and Kelly buy mostly clothing items when they engage in compulsive buying. They both indicated a preference for clothing over other types of ARPs. Lisa commented that she does not spend much on make-up, jewelry, and other accessories. Her focus is on clothing and more recently, on shoes.

Lisa: Umm clothing. Predominantly clothing. Clothing for myself. I've worked on -- I really hadn't bought in years and my shoes were all kind of falling apart and I walk a lot at work, so this year I focused on making a few strategic shoe purchases. [...] but typically it's gonna be apparel for myself. I don't buy a lot of jewelry. I only buy makeup when I need to replace an existing [one] [...], you know, I go to *Ulta* and I buy whatever hair product I need or replace makeup, but I don't experiment much with beauty products. Umm so, that's not an area umm... and typically accessories I go low budget on accessories. It's pretty much for me the clothing.

Kelly also has a strong preference for clothing, especially printed dresses. She added that she enjoys buying shoes and jewelry, but made clear that there is nothing that she likes more than clothing.

Kelly: Number one will probably be dresses. I love dresses. And then after that it's really just like prints. Like I enjoy printed shorts, printed tops, sweaters, you know. I like shoes as well but that's definitely... but really shoes are in there but they are definitely lower than clothing. Like it's clothing first and foremost and then probably jewelry and then shoes.

Since her husband dislikes shopping, Kelly buys his clothing, as well as clothing for their daughter. However, she explained that she does not derive satisfaction from buying ARPs for them.

Kelly: Not really. They are not part of my collection, they go in his closet (laughs). So, I like him to have nice things, just like I like my daughter to have nice things. I like them to look nice. I like them to have appropriate clothing. I like them to have, you know, nice things, but I don't sit and get excited about their stuff. Like for me, this morning was a big deal because *Lilly Pulitzer* is doing a collaboration with *Target* and they had a segment today on the *Today Show* about it, and then *Target* released their look book this morning, all the *Lilly Pulitzer* stuff, so I can see exactly what they are going to offer. So I'm making a mental list of things I want and what are online only and how early I'm gonna have to get to *Target* in order to purchase these things so it's like I get all crawled up about it. Whereas with him it's like, "*Oh, I found you a pair of cool Dockers at TJ Maxx, here you go.*" You know? It's not... yeah, it's definitely not the same reaction.

According to Kelly, the excitement she experiences when buying things for herself – especially when it has to do with her favorite brand – disappears when buying things for her husband and daughter. Indeed, she explained that she considers these purchases to be more utilitarian in nature, that is, more like a task or a chore that she must complete.

Kelly: It's the same with my daughter's clothing. I like to get her like nice... it's not like I have all these great clothes and my husband is in rags, no. He gets nice clothes and my daughter gets nice clothes and I purchase them really nice things, but it's definitely more utilitarian for me. Like I probably purchase clothes for them like other people purchase clothes for themselves. But I don't purchase clothes for myself that way.

Similarly, Dolores explained that she derives less satisfaction from buying things that are not clothing-related. When asked if she feels as excited when buying things for



her home as she feels when buying ARPs, she responded: “It’s clothing. It’s clothing that really gets me, gets me that high.”

Participants’ preference for ARPs is obvious. For all of them, non-ARPs do not provide them with the same degree of satisfaction as ARPs, nor they are as meaningful. Both the interview data and the personal journals reveal the extent to which participants expressed why they prefer clothing items when engaging in compulsive buying.

### **Above All Others**

After more than 25 years of research, there are still many aspects of compulsive buying behavior (CBB) that have not been explored. One of these aspects is compulsive buyers’ preference for ARPs. Until this day, questions such as, *why do compulsive buyers prefer ARPs over other consumer goods* and *what do ARPs provide individuals that other products do not*, remain unanswered. However, data provided by the participants in this study offer insight into these, thus far, unanswered questions.

Upon examination of participants’ narratives and personal journals, three main reasons surfaced as to why they prefer ARPs over other products. First, the physical attributes, or tangible aspect of ARPs (i.e., *Because of Who You Are*). Second, the feelings evoked, or the intangible aspects of ARPs (i.e., *Because of How you Make Me Feel*). Third, the combination of tangible and intangible aspects, or the things that ARPs allow participants to do (i.e., *Because of What You Allow Me to Do*).

As part of the activities included in the personal journal, participants were asked to indicate what they tell themselves in order to justify the compulsive purchasing of ARPs. In Table 8, the top eight reasons that they use to justify the behavior are presented.

All participants indicated that they purchase clothing items because these items make them feel good and because they consider the product(s) to be either pretty, interesting, and/or “perfect.” The majority acknowledged that ARPs make them feel special as well as closer to their ideal self-image. Participants’ responses to this activity in the personal journal are consistent with the experiences they shared during the interview process.

Table 8

Top 8 Reasons Used to Justify the Compulsive Purchasing of ARPs

	<b>Helen</b>	<b>Kelly</b>	<b>Dolores</b>	<b>Julia</b>	<b>Lynn</b>	<b>Lisa</b>
It just makes me feel good	X	X	X	X	X	X
It’s so pretty! (or “interesting!” or “perfect!”)	X	X	X	X	X	X
It makes me feel special		X	X	X	X	X
It makes me feel more like my ideal self-image	X	X	X		X	X
I deserve it		X	X	X	X	X
It’s such a good value			X	X	X	X
It’s to replace an item that’s worn or outdated	X		X		X	X
I can afford it	X	X	X		X	

*Source:* Personal Journals.

**Because of Who You Are.** Participants in this study explained that ARPs are especially appealing to them because of their physical attributes (e.g., color, pattern, style, fit) and properties (e.g., easy to use, simple, affordable, accessible, versatile). For

example, Kelly explained that she has a collection of printed dresses and she enjoys finding unique prints that she can add to her collection. She also described that her preference for dresses is, in part, motivated by how simple they are and easy to use.

Kelly: (Thinking) I don't know... I guess the dresses in particular I really like because they are... it is going back to that collection stuff too. I like to get different prints and so it's like to have these dresses with these different, unusual prints. And I like dresses just to wear generally because they are simple. You only have to put one thing on. Like I don't have to coordinate a shirt and shorts. I just put that one thing on and you are done. So for me, ease of use too, you know. Like with my daughter in the mornings we are going somewhere or doing something I just throw a dress on and be done.

Similarly, Julia commented that she prefers dresses because of how convenient they are. That is, she does not need to spend too much time thinking about how she is going to style it.

Julia: I think just dresses in general make me feel more feminine and put together, I guess because a dress it's just really easy to wear and you know it's like a complete outfit, you don't really need to think about coordinating it with other stuff.

Helen, on the other hand, prefers ARPs – clothing in particular – because of their price and accessibility. She explained that clothing is easier to acquire and cheaper than other consumer goods.

Helen: Umm I don't know. It's just easy. It's very easy. Like clothes... clothes [are] everywhere and they are not that expensive so you could buy... I mean they could be very expensive, but they could be very cheap too. So, no matter how much [money] you have, you can buy clothes.

Helen also commented that she has a particular affinity for ARPs because of the way they are made and how they look. When talking about one of her favorite items in her closet, a *Balenciaga* handbag she has had for over 10 years, she explained that she saw the bag and “I fell in love with it and it was like, ‘*I have to have it*’.” She commented that this handbag has been traveling with her everywhere. When asked what it is about the handbag that is so special for her, she responded:

Helen: I have no idea. I think at first I liked the color because it just goes with everything, cause it’s like this “lighthish” blue and then like it has the straps, so that when you go traveling it’s really easy, you just put it on you and then you don’t have to hold on to it. And I guess like the capacity is pretty nice I guess, like you could fit a lot of things in there. Umm and... I don’t know, I just love the bag.

Lisa talked about one of her favorite items in her closet, a black and white houndstooth jacket that she bought at Dillard’s 4 or 5 years ago. She explained that she loves it because it is easy to coordinate and easy to wear. She explained how she can dress it up and down and wear it almost everywhere and she looks perfect.

Lisa: I can put this on with black dress pants and a... – my favorite thing to wear with this is a black cashmere turtleneck and my really good dark bootcut jeans and a pair of high heels boots and you put on a string of long pearls with it and I got some earrings that are black and pearl. It’s like I feel like I can go anywhere in this jacket. I can dress it up, you can... I can wear it over a skirt to church. I can wear it... and it is actually pretty warm on the arms, like it’s lined. I can wear this on a fairly mild winter day because it’s wool, you know [...] This is something I know I can put on and like it’s going to be perfect. You know, it’s going to be like... it would be like the right thing to wear.

Lisa further explained that what she likes about the jacket is that it is her style, it is tailored and classic. She also commented on the fact that it is black, which is one of the

colors she enjoys the most. When asked to talk about what she liked the most about the item, she responded:

Lisa: It's just... this is very much the style I like, you know, it's very tailored, pretty classic and I just felt like I don't know, I've always love the black, you know, I'm all about the black and ivory, that's seems to be kind of what I gravitate towards, especially for work clothes, maybe because they are safe? But umm... I don't know, every time I put it on it makes me feel good. I feel like I'm dressed – I've told you before how important it is to be to be appropriately dressed for something. I feel very appropriately dressed when I wear this.

It is not just the physical characteristics of the item that are important to Lisa. She also enjoys how the item makes her feel. For her, as it is for other participants in this study, ARPs evoke feelings that no other product category can. An exploration of those feelings is presented in the next section.

**Because of How You Make Me Feel.** The majority of participants explained that there is an intangible element that drives them to purchase ARPs. In other words, participants expressed that, in part, it is the way ARPs make them feel that prompts them to prefer these items over others. For example, Dolores explained that she has been having problems with shopping and buying clothes since she was a little girl. She said that she used to go shopping with her mother, and that she had the ability to make her mom buy the clothing items she wanted. Dolores also explained that when she was old enough to generate income, she “would not be able to hang on to money. I would spend it right away and I would always spend it on things for myself like clothes or makeup or jewelry or those kind of things.” When asked why she has always preferred ARPs, it took her a couple of minutes to gather her thoughts before responding that it might be related

to the way they make her feel. That is, the fact that clothing makes her feel better about herself.

Dolores: Yeah, that's a great question. I... (thinking) I guess because of the way it makes me feel to have these things. It's almost like -- it almost perpetuates the illusion that umm... that something is going to make me feel better. I guess by having -- by being able to wear something different, I'll feel better. By being able to look different in some way, I'll feel better, you know. It's bad. Umm... those typical -- those types of things perpetuate the fact that I don't feel good about myself and can feel better if I buy those things and use them.

For Dolores, ARPs represent "hope." She explained, "I think I'd be hoping for... feeling better about myself." Similarly, Lynn's preference for ARPs was initially motivated by issues of insecurity and her belief that by purchasing these items, she will feel and look better.

Lynn: ...I think appearance-related things is because I just never thought I looked good enough. I never thought I was pretty enough, I never thought I was good enough. I thought I needed to look better in order to be better, you know. Still, I mean, I still have a lot of insecurities about my appearance. It's getting worse now, now that I'm getting so freaking old.

Likewise, Julia offered several reasons for preferring ARPs, from the way they make her feel, to the way they make her look, to the possibility of having a memorable experience while wearing them.

Julia: I think with each garment there is like, just... you know, a way that it makes me feel or the way that it makes me look or like the possibility of doing something special in that, like having some fun experience or something like that umm with it.

Dresses are one of Julia's favorite types of clothing items. She explained that when she wears them she not only feels prettier, but happier, "they make me feel pretty. Umm... I think generally I'm happier too as I'm feeling pretty and confident."

In contrast, for Kelly ARPs have always been a tool to build and maintain the image she has of herself. When Kelly and I were talking about why she started buying compulsively, she explained that it was the ability ARPs have to communicate who she is that shaped her preference.

Kelly: I guess, clothing and fashion has the unique ability to kind of display what you are on the inside, on the outside. You know, it's kind of like almost an art form in a sense. It's like, you can express who you are without even saying a word. And obviously who you are changes throughout the years, and so does fashion and what you like, but you kind of have the unique opportunity and so for me in college it started off like, "*This is who I want to be,*" you know, and obviously also to fit in. And then, as I've gotten older it has just been, "*This is who I am. This is what I see myself as.*" Not necessarily fitting in so much, you kind of lose interest in that or I have, anyway, lost interest in that. Umm... but initially, yeah.

Kelly further explained that she is still using clothes to maintain the image she has of herself and one that is validated by how others see her.

Kelly: Umm... I think it just goes back to... like I just I'm trying to keep the image of myself that I have in my head, the way I want to be. I don't know... I just like to have things that resonate with what I think, you know, I like... Like usually, like, even my friends know that they can look at something and be like, "*Oh, that's something totally Kelly. [She] would wear that, like that's her,*" you know?

Lisa explained that her obsession with ARPs is linked to her childhood. She was born into a working-class family; her father had little regard for work and her mother

stayed at home. Lisa described her mother as a simple woman that never cared for fashion. She said that, growing up, she wanted to look like other girls her age, but having her clothes made by her mother left little chance for that. As an adult, Lisa has taken every opportunity to make up for the old days. Having no access to the things she wanted has had a strong impact on her shopping and buying behaviors, and especially on her desire to acquire ARPs that will help her fit in and look “appropriate.”

Lisa: (Thinking) Probably to make sure I have the right thing to fit in, you know, in any situation. I think that’s that constant quest for not being, like when I was a kid [...] we struggled financially a lot and we lived in this old run down house our yard was just full of crap [...] and like I say, my mother would make my clothes and she wouldn’t ... like you can sew, I mean I learned to sew. If you can sew current styles of clothing, but my mother wouldn’t -- you know, my mom doesn’t care about fashion or looks or any of that. My mom doesn’t wear makeup. She has always been very plain. Never has cared about anything like that and always thought it was wrong for me to care about it. Even now, my mother would be my greatest critic umm if she thought I was spending money on myself like on clothes, anything for my own appearance, that would just be vanity and that would be wrong and totally unnecessary.

**Because of What You Allow Me to Do.** As evidenced in the previous sections, ARPs are very important to participants. These items not only serve a functional purpose, but they prompt feelings in participants that other objects do not. Examination of interview data and personal journals revealed that participants tend to use ARPs as tools to communicate who they are, to alter/fix their appearance, and to fill a hole in their lives. They also expressed that ARPs are very meaningful to them, as they help them gain or regain control of their lives. These issues are further discussed within the following subsections: (1) *Expressing Who I Am*, (2) *Transforming My Appearance*, and (3) *Filling a Hole and Gaining Control*.



*Expressing Who I Am.* The ability clothing has to allow individuals to express who they are is of particular importance to compulsive clothing buyers. For example, Lisa expressed that she uses her clothes to send messages to others about who she is. She wants her clothing to communicate her roles and her commitment to what she does.

Lisa: I mean, I think our clothes always send a message. I always try to tell my... teach my kids that we dress respectfully to go to church because it's you know, God doesn't really care if we wear our ballerina suit or our bathing suit or our church dress, but we show respect by dressing in certain way, you know, to go [to church]. Like with your job, I wanna show up at work and I want my clothes to send a message that says, "*I'm here to work.*" [...] I want my clothes to always say, "*I'm here to work. I'm serious about this. I'm a professional. I'm here to work. I'm here to help you. I'm here to work.*"

Fitting in and looking appropriate is critical for Lisa. She talked about how a lack of experience with different social settings impacts how she goes about presenting herself.

Lisa: Umm... but I do think that our clothes do send a message and again a lot of it, it's just my insecurity because I feel like I'm constantly going into a new situation. Like I've never been to an adult party, like a cocktail party or something at somebody's house. I've never been to one. I've never been to a function where you wear a long dress, like a thing with a formal theme. So, luckily I have friends who have, you know, they always coach me.

Having had little opportunity to enjoy certain social events has reinforced Lisa's insecurities with respect to her image. Her obsession over looking appropriate makes her question her ability to put together an outfit that would be suitable for the occasion. However, she explained that she is fortunate to have friends that can guide her through the process. In one of our multiple conversations, Lisa shared an experience that is still

with her: the time she attended a formal event. She described how she felt that night, and how every aspect of her appearance was perfect.

Lisa: But the first time I went to the symphony it was the very first day that I went out after my divorce. This rich airline pilot asked me out. It could have been a horrible night but this guy drives a silver *Jaguar* and we are going to go to the Meyerson Theater in Dallas. [...] I was so pumped and so I spent – I had a gift certificate to *Dillard's* for Christmas from my boss. I got a dress [that] I still wear – a black velvet V-neck, wrapped across the front, ruching on the sides, knee-length, long sleeves – beautiful dress. [...] I borrowed jewelry from friends. I borrowed an evening bag from friends. I think I already had a pair of black pumps that worked for this. And I had this really beautiful coat. It's black cashmere with a black faux fox collar on it that I bought for my dad's funeral [...] I remember being at the Meyerson and it was the first time in my life that I've been anywhere and I was so satisfied with my total look. Like, normally, I would've looked and gone "*Oh, yeah! I like my dress but her shoes would look so much better with it*" or "*Wow! That coat! I really need a coat like that to go with this!*" Like every piece of what I -- and most of it was borrowed -- but everything I had on I felt so confident and I felt like I fit in to this rich people place that I've never been and even though the date itself turned out to be a disaster, yet it was the first time in my life that I felt that I really hit it, I really nailed it, you know, it was like, I look exactly right. There was not a woman in this place, even the really rich women, that looked any more appropriate, any different than I do.

Lisa went on to explain that now, every time she is going out, she wants to find the perfect outfit. That is, an outfit that will make her feel the same way she did during her experience at the Meyerson Theater. She commented that she knows it is possible because she did it once.

Lisa: You know, and it was like -- and that's the feeling I want to go for anytime I go someplace. So, I do a lot of research -- I mean I'll talk to students of mine who were waiters and waitresses at places and go "*So, ok, what does a woman wear there?*" You know, if I'm going to somebody's church, I'll say, "*So, what does a grown up woman my...*" -- 'cause people go, "*Oh! Just jeans*" and I'm like, "*No, I want to know what people my age wear to your church. I know you wear jeans to your church, you are 23. What do people my age wear to your church?*" You know? So, I'm always looking for that feeling that I made the right

choice. That I've chosen appropriate... And it's like, I know it's possible 'cause I hit it that night at the Meyerson and I -- that was so fun to feel like umm, like I said, there were other problems with that date, but how I looked was not one of them. I felt so confident and it's like... it's almost like armor, you know, your clothes send a message like, "*I fit in here. I know what's going on. I understand what's appropriate.*" Like, I want to send that message with my clothes and it was possible to do it because I've done it.

During this experience Lisa felt confident and secure. She compared her clothing to an armor that protects and/or prepares her for the unknown. Interestingly, Lisa did not speak about others' reviews of her outfit, but instead, how she felt while in the theater and comparing herself to others. Lisa does not look to others for approval. Rather, she wants to meet her own standards. From our conversations, it was evident that looking for advice is important for Lisa to create the image that is appropriate for the occasion. However, the main goal is to feel good about herself. For Lisa, it is important to know that she made the right choices and that even though she did not have the example growing up, she is now able to look like a "middle-class white woman."

Kelly, on the other hand, expressed that her clothing allows her to communicate what she loves about her lifestyle. She explained that she wants her clothes to convey that she is a "Florida girl" and to exude happiness.

Kelly: I guess what I try to communicate... I don't know, I like Florida living and I like color and I just typically like to exude kind of like a joyful, happy-type exterior, I don't know. I've always been kind of like into color and stuff and so it's just that... I guess it just something like the clothes that I have now just kind of resonate -- it's like I see them and I kind of identify with them.

Kelly further explained that wearing colorful outfits is her way to tell the world that she is not afraid of being who she is.

Kelly: I tend to like those loud prints and the bright colors and it's like... I guess it just expresses that, you know, I'm not afraid of color... I like, you know, I'm bright and happy, that's what I want to express, you know. I guess, yeah, like I'm not afraid to do that. I don't shy away from stuff.

According to Kelly, bright colors are a must in her wardrobe. She commented that wearing bright colored ARPs (e.g., printed dresses, pink lipstick) along with bold pieces (e.g., elephant earrings, necklaces) allows her to feel like herself. Indeed, these items resonate with her image to the point that she considers them to be her "costume."

Kelly: Umm... because like without my clothes, if I have to dress in like black leggings and a black shirt all day, I would still feel like me if were able to wear like a bright pink lipstick on and some elephant earrings or something but that's still like... I feel like it wouldn't feel like myself if I couldn't have that type of, you know, it's like your costume, right?

Likewise, Lynn thinks that ARPs allow her to express who she is. When purchasing items, she makes sure that each piece reflects her personality. She does not consider herself to be a "flashy" person. She commented that her clothes show that she is feminine but not "girly." When talking about her preference for stripes, she explained:

Lynn: Yes, it is like my signature item. It's kind of hard for me to say why, I just -- for years I've been really into stripes. I think that I like that it is a pattern, but it's not like a busy pattern, and you will see when you look at my clothes, I'm kind of minimal in my style. I'm not minimal because I still have too many clothes, but I don't really like anything that is too flashy. I tend to like things that are like -- that there is something kind of special about them, that they are not, you know, they are not too out there. It's not like flowers, you know, and flowers are a bit girly, and I'm not super girly. I like to be -- I mean, I like to be feminine to a degree, but I don't want to be girly.

In sum, using ARPs as a tool to express the self is a common thing for the compulsive clothing buyers participating in this study. But participants also use ARPs to transform themselves, either by changing a part of who they are that they are dissatisfied with, or by changing their overall looks.

***Transforming My Appearance.*** Participants' ARPs are very meaningful to them, as these objects allow them to transform or even "fix" different aspects of their appearances. Specifically, participants expressed that ARPs provide them with the opportunity to mask or overcome insecurities related to appearance. They also explained that ARPs allow them to explore, assess, and change who they are. For instance, Lynn commented that her obsession with ARPs is the result of insecurities with regards to her appearance. She did not feel like she was good enough, therefore, her clothes became a tool used to achieve the perfect look as defined by the media.

Lynn: And I started a very young age. I mean, I don't remember when I wasn't into it. I was into it... but I was insecure and I think insecurity drives it a lot of times. I think that, you know, feeling like you are never good enough because you see all these images that are placed in front of you like, "This is what you are supposed to look like" or "This is the desired appearance" and so you start thinking, "*Well, maybe if I have the right clothes, maybe if I find the right make up, or if I find the right product, then, maybe then, I can finally look good enough*" and then, "*If I look good enough, then I can have what I want in life,*" you know, it kind of -- but you are not conscious about it at the time necessarily, but that's the trajectory that follows often.

According to Lynn, ARPs had a special place in her life, as they used to fill her days with hope. That is, the idea that by having the right items, she can look the right way, and this will, in turn, grant her access to the things she has always wanted for herself. In a similar vein, Dolores explained that she grew up with a distorted idea of how

she was supposed to look. During her childhood, messages in the media promoted the image of a thin and small women as the ideal. Her mother further instilled this stereotypical image of the perfect woman by telling her that thin girls were more desirable to boys than plus-size girls.

Dolores: I was never, umm, little. I was never small or thin or... and so, the messages were always – some of this messages I got from my mother too – were, “if a girl is little, she’ll be more desirable to a boy, and if she is not, then she will be less desirable.”

Dolores commented that shopping for clothing items (e.g., dresses, shirts, pants) is something that she currently does not enjoy as much as she used to because she is in a transition period. That is, because of her binge eating, she gained a significant amount of weight and she is now in the process of losing it with the help of a personal trainer. Interestingly, the fact that she feels that she is not at her ideal weight has not stopped her from buying clothes altogether. When talking about the items that provide her with the most satisfaction, she explained:

Dolores: Mostly it’s purses – that’s a big item for me – glasses too umm... not many clothes. I’m at a real transition period right now in my life where I’m quite a bit heavier than I’m used to be, so clothes right now are not my friends (laughs).

I: Ok. You don’t enjoy buying them that much...?

Dolores: Right. I buy a lot ... you know, the thing is -- that’s so interesting! -- [the thing] is that I do buy clothes, but then I find that I don’t really care to wear them. So, but I do buy them. I just... I just have some things that I go to because it’s easier, so I don’t go to the new things.

Throughout her life, Dolores has had to deal with different addictive behaviors, among them alcoholism and binge eating. The latter has significantly contributed to Dolores' body dissatisfaction. Logically, one may think that feelings of dissatisfaction with regards to her body would prompt her to avoid clothing shopping, as buying clothing items force her to consider her body size. However, she explained that she keeps buying clothing items "because I have to buy them and I thought it would make me feel different about myself." She further explained that by buying clothes she is able to "perpetuate the illusion" that she is going to be okay. That is, by wearing something different, she will feel different.

Dolores: I guess because of the way it makes me feel to have these things. It's almost like -- it almost perpetuates the illusion that umm... that something is going to make me feel better. I guess by having -- by being able to wear something different, I'll feel better. By being able to look different in some way, I'll feel better, you know. It's bad. Umm those typical -- those types of things perpetuate the fact that I don't feel good about myself and can feel better if I buy those things and use them.

For Lisa, ARPs are extremely important as they allow her to explore and transform who she is. Having little to no access to fashion growing up positioned Lisa in a state of limbo with regards to her appearance. She expressed that as she grew older she did not know who she wanted to be. Thus, she started experimenting with clothing items hoping to be able to find her style, and in that process, find and accept herself.

Lisa: [...] I've done a lot of reading and umm self-help type of books and websites on how to define your style. I didn't know how I wanted to look like quite well. You know, I just bought these random things and... -- I don't know if you are familiar with Sally McGraw's blog, it's called *Already Pretty*. It deals a lot with body image issues. [...] So I've been reading her website for a couple of

years and that led me to other sites [...] Her whole thing is, you are already pretty, you know, nothing you are gonna buy... like you are already pretty. It is not what you wear, you know, you are already pretty. [...] But I mean, I think we can chose, for example, I know that a regular round t-shirt neck, like a crew neck is not flattering for some reason, even though, I mean my body is pretty proportional. I don't... -- Sally writes a lot about dressing to camouflage parts of your body; I don't really have to do that, but a V-neck is much better than a little round crew neck on me. Just, you know, there are just things that you can chose that are more flattering, but I really worked hard at figuring out a definite style...

Lisa explained that working in an environment in which most of her peers are men prompted her to wear clothes that help to mask her femininity. However, she is now trying to change that by acquiring items she considers more delicate and/or lady-like.

Lisa: I work with mostly men, with scientists and engineers, and so I've always tried to wear [clothes] like kind of downplaying my femininity -- and I've never been very feminine, but I find that I like... I like something maybe a little ruffle. [...] And like I've tried to get more like soft blouses, blouses with a bow. I'm working on becoming a little more feminine, not quite so severe [though].

Helen's case is different from that of Dolores, Lynn, and Lisa. She explained that she tends to use ARPs to create a different version of herself. She commented that she usually buys a significant amount of clothes when she starts dating somebody. Helen explained that she tends to make changes to her appearance seeking to look more attractive to the person she is dating.

Helen: I think I buy the most clothes when... when I'm dating someone new. And I think... 'cause I know that everybody has different preferences. I mean, like every guy has different preferences on what they like the girls to wear, so I would kind of buy that kind of clothes.



Helen added that she uses ARPs to enhance her appearance and to adapt to her partner's preferences.

Helen: Right, it is kind of like that, like I wanna look better. Like if they tell me, "Oh, you look good!" but I wanna look better than good. So, I wanna know what their preferences [are]... 'cause some guys like, maybe they like you, I don't know in a white shirt or something and some guys like you in more preppy styles.

In sum, ARPs are preferred by participants because of the ability these items have to help them manage their appearances. Appearance-related products are also attractive to participants because they can be used as a compensation mechanism and/or as a way to feel in control.

***Filling a Hole and Gaining Control.*** Some participants explained that clothing items allow them to compensate for things they have lost or are missing in their lives. Others expressed that when they feel like a situation is out of their control, they turn to the acquisition of ARPs to provide a measure of control.

Julia explained that among the factors that initially triggered her CCB were feelings of loneliness. She explained: "When I came to grad school. I definitely lost a lot of like people. I have a less... less people in my network here like to do things with..." The emptiness she experienced when she moved to North Carolina, leaving behind friends and family members, was filled by ARPs. Julia further explained that she did not have extracurricular activities she could spend time on, therefore shopping became her hobby: "I didn't have like a lot of hobbies with other people so... yeah, sometimes I just like walk around stores."

Like Julia, Lisa uses ARPs to alleviate feelings of emptiness. When explaining why she enjoys the act of buying and not the shopping process in itself, she stated: "...for me, it's always about finding this magical allusive piece of clothing that's going to fix, theoretically, a hole in my wardrobe, but I know deep-down [that is] really a hole in my life." Since the void Lisa wants to fill is an internal one, her ARPs can only help her so much. She explained that she is always after an item that will make her feel complete. In one of our conversations, Lisa implied that part of her issues with shopping and buying are a result of having grown up with very little. She expressed that the idea of having a full closet is very comforting, as it makes her feel important.

Lisa: I think at some level, you know, if you ever were in a situation in life where you didn't have enough of something... my mother was hungry as a child and she literally has this real fear of being hungry, yet she won't even enjoy her food because she is afraid to get too attached to food. It is this really interesting dynamic but like because I've felt like I've never had anything growing up, part of me just likes knowing that I have this room full of clothes, even if it's things I'm not wearing, it's like I... I own these things, therefore, I must be important or something, or they must be important or...

In one of the anecdotes Lisa shared, she described how she justifies some of her purchases based on the fact that she did not have a specific item when she was younger. Specifically, Lisa talked about a pair of *Vera Wang* flats, for which she paid \$200.00. To feel better about that purchase, she told herself that these flats were the prom dress she never had. In other words, Lisa seemed to be compensating for the lack of the prom experience through the purchase of her "Cinderella shoes."

Lisa: I found these *Vera Wang* lavender flats at *Nordstrom Rack* and on sale at *Nordstrom Rack* I paid \$200 for them. They were three or four hundred dollar

shoes. It's obscene how much I spent for these shoes. [...] and I love them beyond words and they are this weird sort of mauve lavender kind of grey color, really soft ballet slippers type shoes and on the toes they have these sparkly like *Swarovski* crystals [...] and then in my mind, what I said when I bought them, "*this is the prom dress I never had*" 'cause I never got to go to prom, I didn't have a prom dress. I'm like, this is the prom dress I never had. These are my Cinderella shoes.

Dolores explained that having ARPs is how she exerts control over aspects of her life. Specifically, she described how complications with her husband's health has affected her relationship with her clothes.

Dolores: Last Labor Day, my husband disappeared for three days and as you can imagine I was worried sick. Well since that time, he has -- since they found him, and he thank God was ok, he had... umm... what it happened was he had... it won't pass oxygen to his brain, so he went into dementia and he's been needing oxygen for many years now and he has refused to use oxygen. So, just after years of him continuing to smoke and needing oxygen, he just... his body just broke down. So he has been taken from me. He is now in long term care. So I am really feeling the loss of him and I that has a lot to do with why I am keeping all my things around me right now because one of my big safe things has been taken from me.

In a similar vein, Lynn expressed that she used to use shopping as a way to feel "in control." When asked whether there were certain times that she was more at risk to engage in CCB, she responded that it was usually every time she experienced a difficult situation, whether it involved negative emotions or a sudden transition. Lynn described how shopping was the activity she used to feel "in charge" of her life.

Lynn: I think I always was, but I think that whenever I go, when I go through some sort of a crisis situation in my life where, you know, I would... be dealing with negative emotions, you know, some people when they have negative emotions or bad experiences they will drink or eat, do drugs, whatever. For me, I mean, I had an eating disorder before too so that was -- that came into play in my

life too, but in terms of the shopping you know, whenever I am under a lot of stress. Umm a lot of stress, transitions, feeling out of control in areas of my life. So, it's kind of like, "*Oh, here is something...*" you know, I really couldn't control, but you think that in your head, "*Oh, well, I can kind of control this experience of going out to the mall and buying something.*"

Based on participants' narratives, it is clear that as compulsive buyers they prefer ARPs for several reasons, including: (1) the physical properties of ARPs; (2) the way ARPs make them feel; and (3) because ARPs help them express who they are, transform aspects of their appearance, fill holes in their lives, and help them take control over their lives. In the next section, the significance of ARPs for participants is further considered through the different ways that they go about selecting these items.

### **Soul Mates**

Most of the ARPs in participants' closets did not end up there by accident. Every participant explained that each item she has is selected with care and thought about the purpose it will serve, whether functional or emotional. For example, Lisa described how she looks for clothing that fits her style and that is "age appropriate." In our conversations, she provided very detailed descriptions of the items she liked or was looking to buy.

Lisa: I'm trying to, you know, kind of hone in a look umm like -- well, as first thing goal I would, you know the kind of top you would wear like out, going out, you know, bars, pubs, when I'm 40 and can pull that off, you know; not so much now. So, I'm trying to make sure that I look at things that are age appropriate. Like, I love the  $\frac{3}{4}$  sleeves. I have the  $\frac{3}{4}$  sleeves umm you know, I bought certain features but I think I'm doing better about honing in -- not just buying something 'cause it is on sale or it is this random color.

Lisa recalled that when she was in the process of defining her style, she paid for a color guide that provided her with shades that work with her skin tone. She then spent time, energy, and a significant amount of money trying to find items in the suggested colors. The result was a large number of ARPs that ended up unused. When talking about the colors she likes for herself, she explained:

Lisa: ...Like that mustard color is the color I could never wear unless I find a really, really cool purse that color. It would be very likely to buy the flats and then get the purse and then buy a top even though this is a color I can't wear, it is like that magenta stuff. That's not a good color for me but I put together a lot of cool outfits with it. So I wear flattering color. I try to wear black next to my face if I wear it but it is just like that... I need to stop buying the wrong colors. And now that's one reason I had colors professionally analyzed. I spent \$400 on that. It was not worth it. Was not worth it but at least I had a professional color analysis. So I got a little fan thing, little swatches of color. Like I can take it in store and go, "*These are my colors. Show me these colors.*" You know, so I have that as a guide. I'm not following it real strictly. I'm finally narrowing it down to... not just 2 or 3 but like, I've got some colors in mind that I'm trying to adhere to. I wear a lot of black and ivory.

Kelly sees her closet as a museum collection. She expressed that "there's nothing in there by accident." When talking about how important her "little collection of things" is, Kelly explained that she has always had a collection of some kind, and that it therefore felt natural for her to move into clothing because these are items that women seem to have a particular affinity for. She commented that once she started to collect dresses, she decided to "curate" her collection by only getting those items that would resonate with who she is.

Kelly: I'm not sure. I guess it's because I've always had a collection of some kind, right. So, if it wasn't this, it will be something else maybe? I feel like I've always had one. Naturally, as you know, a woman, it seems pretty easy to have,

you know, you have to have clothing, and I thought... but you know, you kind of – it's like you already have it, you might as well curate your closet. There is always a thousand articles about, the perfect closet, how to curate it, you know, what pieces, 15 items you need to have in your closet. So it already, you know, is one of those things women tend to focus on so for me... I already was focusing on it and it just kind of naturally evolved that way to make it better, making it what I want. And I'm not sure why necessarily I have to have a collection, period. I just always had. I don't know, if it is just something I do... I don't know. I wish I had more insight.

Kelly explained that she is so clear on what she likes, that even when she purchases an item impulsively, upon reflection it is still something she would have bought. She commented that she rarely returns any of her purchases and there are not many things she regrets buying. What she would like is to gain control over how much she buys and spends.

Kelly: ...if I do some impulsive buy it's still something I would've bought anyway, you know, I'm pretty good about that. I don't have a lot of things that are returned. I don't have a lot of things that I regret buying other than the sheer volume of it. Like I say, "*Oh, God, I shouldn't have spent so much money on this,*" but it is not a particular item that I regret buying.

Julia commented that she spends a significant amount of time planning her purchases. She does not go to stores just to browse, but with the intention of finding something that will serve a specific purpose. She might not wear it after all, but she will not purchase something without seeing herself in it. When talking about how important shopping is in her life, she stated: "I feel it takes up a lot of my time but I don't understand why, maybe like umm... [...] so I feel like I spend a ridiculous amount of time like browsing the web and kind of planning these trips..."

Lynn expressed that even at this point, while she is in recovery, the items she purchases are a reflection of who she is. Thus, when engaging in CCB, she does not buy the first thing she sees. On the contrary, she meticulously evaluates each piece to make sure it conveys the right message about herself. For instance, she described how stripes are her “signature item.” She enjoys the fact that they are a pattern, yet not something “too flashy,” and as mentioned earlier, she considers herself to be feminine but not “girly.”

It is evident that there is a deep connection and affinity between participants as compulsive buyers and the ARPs they acquire. Clearly, for them it is not about buying for the sake of buying, but buying with a clear purpose, whether it is about filling a hole in their lives, achieving a specific goal, expressing who they are, or being that somebody they always wanted to be. As participants explained, there is nothing in their wardrobes that got there by accident. Even when there are times that they do not use what they purchase, they still spend a significant amount of time and energy selecting the items they buy. Each participant uses ARPs in different ways, though they all share a deep affinity for and strong devotion to ARPs in general. The next theme explores this devotion further by examining the meanings participants assign to their ARPs.

### **Made for Each Other**

According to participants, the significance of ARPs goes beyond the mere function of covering their bodies. Each expressed having an emotional connection with her possessions. Every item, whether or not she wears it, has a special meaning attached

to it. Such meanings are explored in the following subthemes: (1) *Everything and Nothing*, (2) *A Special Bond*, and (3) *Part of Me*.

### **Everything and Nothing**

Not using an item or forgetting about it after purchasing might very well indicate that it has no significance or special value to the owner. However, for participants in this study, that is not necessarily the case. Even though they tend to forget about many items they buy, or never use them, these items still carry a strong significance for them. For example, Dolores explained that all of her ARPs are very important to her, as they represent hope for a better future.

Dolores: They are pretty important. I umm... even though I don't treat them that way once they are purchased umm... at the time they are very important to me.

I: Can you elaborate on that?

Dolores: Yeah, umm... they are means to an end for me. So, for -- you know, they are like the umm... they are like the glass that the alcoholic puts the alcohol in, you know? It's like the means to an end for me. So, by choosing the things that I choose, by looking at the things that I look at and by actually buying those things that's... that's where the umm -- well, like we were talking about, that's where the hope comes in. It is that I'm going to feel differently once I get this thing.

Dolores also thinks that her ARPs are important because they make her feel safe and secure; they provide her with comfort. When talking about some of her most recent purchases, Dolores explained that she not only likes certain specifics about the items but the process of imagining herself wearing them. She stated: "I love the colors. That goes -- I think that goes along with how they make me feel. Umm... I love imagining how I'm going to feel in them. I love that process." She further explained, "I experience that every



day 'cause when I start thinking about what I'm going to wear, then I go off into this, this imagination -- this imaginary land, so to speak."

In a similar vein, Julia explained that although the items she purchases are very important to her, once in her closet, she tends to forget they exist. However, she does enjoy trying them on and knowing that she owns them.

Julia: Umm... So, I mean, when I purchase the item usually it is really important, but then a lot of the time I forget about it, like once I put it in the closet. So, I really like, you know, to try it on and that kind of process, and then I find [something and I think], "*Oh, this would be great!*" And sometimes I don't even use it.

Julia also linked the significance of her clothing items to the ability that these items have to make her feel better prepared for the future. To some extent, ARPs provide her with hope and help her persevere.

Julia: ...so, I feel like it's kind of the place that I am right now as well, we are both in graduate school and you know we don't really know what the future is, so sometimes my anxiety [kicks in]... like I like career clothes, but, you know, I don't know if I'm gonna be wearing it every day, but at least I know that I have them. So that possibility is still there.

For Helen, clothes are not as important to her as handbags. She explained that having the opportunity to wear or to talk about them provides her with a great deal of satisfaction.

Helen: I don't know. I get a lot more excited when I talk about my bags or when I use my bags I just feel really good. I don't know why. Yeah, that kind of started in college. So like when my dad got me my first *Coach* bag and I was like "*Oh! It's a nice bag, nice leather.*" And then I kind got into the whole luxury bag thing.

It was very difficult for Helen to put in words how her clothing items make her feel. After some thought, she indicated that acquiring something new makes her feel like there is something different in her life.

Helen: I guess I just feel like I have something new and umm and I kind of... I don't know, that kind of giving me like a umm... how do you say that? Like, I don't know how to express that. You feel like you dye your hair. Like you did something different to yourself. So I feel like something is different in my life.

Lisa and Kelly also confessed their love for their clothing. Lisa explained that finding items that fit her well at the right price is something that she enjoys tremendously.

Lisa: I... (thinking) clothing is important. I mean, I love it. I think fashion is not a terrible word. I do obsess umm it's... if I find something that you know, fits well and I feel like was a good deal and it flatters me, it's like that's the best [feeling]. I really -- It's important to me. I'll admit, it's very important to me. Clothes are very important to me.

Kelly described how much she cares for the items in her closet and shared her fear of losing them. Specifically, when asked how important her ARPs are to her, she responded:

Kelly: They are quite important. I really like... I enjoy wearing them, I enjoy looking at them in my closet, you know, like... I really like them a lot. I would have / I would feel a high level of anxiety if trying to get rid of them or... if they were to be destroyed or lost. I would feel very upset about that.

Kelly added that "it is weird. It's like, I know logically they are just clothing, like I know that, but not for me, I don't know why." ARPs are so important to Kelly that she considers them to be a collection. She commented that she gets upset and somewhat anxious when she thinks that she will not be able to acquire the thing that she wants, such

as when something she wants is sold out. To avoid these feelings, as soon as she becomes aware of an item that she likes, she pre-orders it.

Kelly: Right. I feel really pissed if there is something I really want and I don't have it yet or I'm worried it will sell out. Or whatever, I really... I need to have it. Like I need to, you know, it needs to come... it needs to be part of my collection. And that's why I pre-order things sometimes too because it's like, you know, I know how shopping is. It's like, they know you are on their list, they send you look books and they send you, you know, so it's like I know it's coming. So it's like, oh well this is coming. I'm gonna definitely need that. So I'm just gonna order it now so I don't have to worry about it, 'cause if I weren't to do that, I think that I will feel anxious about it.

Kelly's ARPs – especially her dresses – are so important to her that it is not until she finds the perfect way to style them that she will wear them. She explained that she likes to “figure out, you know, how it fits, what I [will] wear with it, before it's like fully integrated into my closet,” and went on to describe:

Kelly: I guess it's like you know, you bought it for... you bought it because it's a pretty dress and you wanted to wear it and it's like... I don't know, you feel almost like you owe it... Like you owe the dress the time to figure out what to do with it I guess as opposed to just throwing on flip flops with it and running out the door. I don't know, it's like, it has some kind of special significance.

For Kelly, the process of wearing an item it is almost like a ritual. She first needs to find the perfect dress, then she must figure out the perfect way to style it, and, finally, she has to find the perfect occasion to wear it for. After the process is complete, the item is fully integrated into her closet and she can wear it whenever she wants, with whatever she wants.

Lynn said that her ARPs are important to her because they reflect her personality. She described herself as a “reserved” person, someone that does not have a “flashy personality” or is “super duper outgoing” if she does not know the people she is surrounded by. Because of that, she does not like her clothes to draw too much attention to herself. When asked why she felt that way, she replied,

Lynn: (Thinking) Well, first I’m tall and so when you are tall, you always kind of draw attention to you anyway so I didn’t umm... I didn’t really want to have too much attention on me. I just don’t have a flashy style. I don’t have a flashy personality. I’m not super duper outgoing. I’m outgoing but I’m not like... umm... I mean I’m outgoing once I get to know people but I’m not really the type that likes to go to parties and go out and start talking to a bunch of strangers. I’m more of kind of more reserved than that. So I guess my style kind of matches my personality.

Lynn commented that her ARPs are particularly important to her because they express something distinctive about who she is. She explained that she does not want to look like everybody else, but instead, she tries to make a subtle statement. In stripes and jeweled tones she has found the opportunity of showing her casual, yet sophisticated style.

Lynn: I think it’s like I want to have something that is sort of distinctive about me. I don’t want to look like everybody else, and so with the stripes that’s a signature about me. I think that stripes and jeweled tones are like signature styles for me and umm you know, but I want to be casual and sophisticated at the same time so I’m always trying to sort of bridge that gap between being casual and being sophisticated.

Whether or not participants use the items they buy, there is no doubt that these items represent something special to them. The narratives included in this section suggest

that there is a strong and unique bond between participants and the items they possess.

Further validation of this notion is provided next.

### **A Special Bond**

Whether it is a necklace given by parents, a dress worn to a best friend's wedding, or a pair of shoes purchased as a reward, everyone owns items that represent something special, carry strong significance, and serve as reminder of a moment in time. Participants in this study are no exception, yet the difference between them and "normal" consumers is the level of attachment they have to their ARPs and the deep meanings that they assign to them.

One of Julia's favorite items is a printed scarf that she received as a gift. She explained that she has worn it countless times and that every time she wears it, she feels "put together and happy." When asked to elaborate on what it is about this scarf that makes her feel this way, she replied:

Julia: I think it's because, okay, so if I'm wearing a scarf, well, probably I took the time to work on my outfit a little bit more and I'm probably, you know, generally more confident in what I'm wearing, and I guess I also feel kind of secure.

From Julia's narrative, it is evident that her scarf is not just a scarf, but a tool she uses to feel better about herself. Similarly, Dolores explained that she has a deep emotional connection with some of her possessions. She mentioned that she has several favorite items, among them antiques, glasses, and some pieces of clothing. During one of our conversations, she spent quite some time talking about her new favorite item, a *J.*

*Peterman* "coat that is lined in leather" that she bought on sale for \$150.00. Dolores

explained that she bought this coat “on a shopping binge that I was having” during her birthday weekend. She described her buying experience as follows:

Dolores: I was in my vacation home in Michigan for the weekend. I had a certain amount of money but I had just gotten paid as well and, unfortunately, I had my debit card with me. And when I have my debit card with me then problems happen. So I did, I bought some other things that I have here. Actually, I am going to show you two of them that still have the tags on. [I] bought some other things and that was fine, but then I started perusing the website of *J. Peterman*, which is where this is from [...] I went into some -- I had some serious financial consequences from that. I had lot of overdraft charges and it was, it was a bad one.

Upon reflection, Dolores explained that purchasing the coat – along with the other clothing items she bought that day – was not a very wise decision, not because it was too expensive, but because at the time, she did not have the means to purchase it: “So, it wasn’t like I spent a fortune on it. I just couldn’t afford it.” When asked what it was about the coat that made her purchase it and overlook the potential consequences of her decision, she responded: “I love the fact of how it’s tailored. It’s very umm... it’s fitted, it has pockets, it’s lined beautifully with a nice satin fabric. I really like the things that are from *J. Peterman*...” For Dolores, this *J. Peterman* coat is not a simple garment. She explained that wearing it makes her feel put together and in control of her life.

Dolores: I love the way that I felt in it. I felt very umm... I felt like I was very “vintagy” because it’s a style from like the 50s, 60s, that type of style. So I felt like I was wearing something vintage even though it’s not. It’s a new umm a new piece. How else did I feel? Umm... (thinking) I felt very umm regal. You know, like it was -- it made me feel very put together and very much in charge of my life, and that kind of thing.

Dolores further explained that acquiring this coat put in evidence that things were changing for her. After gaining weight, she lost access to one of her favorite brands (i.e., *J. Peterman*). Being able to find a coat that fit made her feel like she was able to reconnect with some part of her previous self. When asked what the coat means to her, she took a deep breath and said:

Dolores: Oh! It means umm... that I could wear something from *J. Peterman*. I used to be a lot thinner and since I gained weight, *J. Peterman* hasn't had the umm... they typically don't have the sizes that I need. Well, they expanded their stock now, they are including some larger sizes. So, I'm able now to get back in their clothing. So... that's one of the things. I love to be able to get into clothing that I love...

Kelly's most prized possessions are her *Lilly Pulitzer* dresses. She commented that she loves colorful prints, to the point that she describes herself as a "print hoarder." Kelly explained that her dresses, specifically one that features a sailboat print and another one with pink flamingos, express who she is and resonate with the things she enjoys the most.

Kelly: Umm... probably because the prints are so cheerful. I like the print mostly, that's why I like the garment. The prints are so cheerful. I like how bright they are. I like that they are... I feel like they express me to a certain extent. Umm you know I think they (thinking) I like sailing, I like the water, I like boating. So it's like, "*Oh well, this print is really joyful and pretty and it's... and, you know, it is turquoise and pink and its got sailboats and, what's not to like?*", umm and then the other one, flamingos, you know, it's kind of like a Florida thing right? And umm you know, they are pink flamingos, right? There is this saying that -- there is a quote I like that gets passed around the Internet a lot that like, "*Be a flamingo in a flock of pigeons*" and it's like... that's kind of how I like to dress.

When asked about the significance of these dresses, Kelly explained that, beyond their sentimental value as individual pieces, they are important because they are a part of a collection she has worked really hard to build.

Kelly: I guess only in the sense that they are part of a collection, right? So they are part of my collection, so I like them and I keep them because they are part of something, you know, that I keep. But sentimentally... There is a few of them that are sentimental because you know, *“Oh, I wore this once for, you know, my bridal shower or I wore something for you know, whatever reason.”* So there is a few of them for which I had some sentiment but for the most part, no, not necessarily.

When wearing her dresses, Kelly feels happy and joyful. She expressed that she is not afraid of being too “out there.” On the contrary, she likes to make big bold statements with the things she wears.

Kelly: Oh! I love wearing them. It’s like umm... I feel just really joyful and happy and I love how bright and colorful they are. And you know, it’s just kind of like... I don’t really tend to put it out there, but I’m not afraid to be seen, kind of, you know? That is nice.

Lynn talked about one of her new favorite items, a pair of shoes she bought to replace another pair that had worn out. She described the shoes as being very “comfortable. They have like a little bit of something, they are not just like a plain flat [...] [they have] some sort of detailing, again, without being over the top.” Lynn explained that when wearing them, the shoes make her feel like herself. They match her personality and her style.

Lynn: I feel like when I wear these kinds of shoes, I feel like me. Like, I feel like my style or like what I want my style to be. I feel like it’s sort of minimalist but sophisticated and then I’m trying to add the edge into it, but that’s sort of like a



newer thing. Not a lot of it, just like a little edge, but I feel you know, I want to feel comfortable physically, but I also want to feel like I have some sort style, some sort of, you know, sophistication. But again sort of minimalist because I don't want to be having anything that's too like, "*Look at me!*" I want to be more subdued.

The special bond between participants and their favorite items highlights how meaningful ARPs are for them. Participants' experiences suggest that ARPs are valued as a means to express themselves, dream about who they can be, and deal with body image issues, among other possibilities. Evidently, clothing items are a very important part of participants' lives, to the point where they are extended versions of the self, whether actual or ideal. Further exploration of this idea is provided next.

### **Part of Me**

Some participants in this study think that their ARPs are an extension of the self. That is, these participants see clothing items as part of who they are as individuals. Other participants explained that their ARPs are a reflection of the person they want to become. In other words, they see these items as a means to achieve the ideal self.

**My "Extended-Self."** Participants explained that ARPs are very important to them because they represent who they are. For example, Dolores explained that no other objects provide her with the kind of satisfaction that clothing does. When asked what it is about clothing that does this, she responded: "It's an extension of me. It's my image. It's my style." Dolores also explained that she cannot get rid of her possessions, whether she wears them or not, because they are way too important to her. She said: "When I have my clothes and my stuff around me [...] when I have all those kinds of things around me, I feel safe."

Similarly, Kelly explained that her clothes are an extension of who she is. For her, ARPs provide her with the opportunity to show herself to others. When asked what it is that ARPs represent in her life, she responded:

Kelly: I guess, you know, they are an extension of myself. Right? You know, they represent, you know, I carefully select them. I make sure they fit. They express something that I want to express. So when you wear them, I mean, it's just like anything, it's how you present yourself to the world, you know... It's not necessarily about first impression but it's just... I wouldn't feel like myself if I were wearing a black t-shirt and jeans, I just would not. Umm... and so it's like I guess an extension of myself, right. So express it on the outside.

When talking about the possibility of losing her possessions, Kelly indicated a high level of concern. For Kelly, most of her ARPs are irreplaceable. She even described waiting for years to find certain prints.

Kelly: And I feel that way, I feel that way about a lot of my possessions. Clothing as well 'cause I don't view it just like as clothing. I think about certain things in my home. You know, I got things that are technically, that are just irreplaceable. There are things of like, you know, my grandmother's and they are just, if they were gone, like you are never gonna find it again. Like it is just not gonna be around. And I think that way sometimes with my clothing too, 'cause it's like I amassed these like prints that I really care for and it's like to find the print again it's really difficult. There are certain prints that are on my like wish list that I have that I'm like, "*Oh, if that ever pops up I'm gonna buy it!*" And I have been looking for certain prints for years and I've not come across them, like years. And it's like, if I were to lose all of them, not that you have to replace every single print, but what are the chances of replacing them, like really slim. It's just not... I don't know. It stresses me out to think about it.

**My Ideal Self.** Some participants expressed that they acquire specific ARPs hoping to achieve a goal in their lives. For instance, Julia explained that she tends to buy "work clothes" because it makes her feel like there is a possibility that she will end up

having her dream job. Indeed, she explained that by acquiring these items, there are more possibilities for her to become that person she wants to be.

I: Do you believe that by acquiring these things, by buying all these things, there are more possibilities to become that person?

Julia: Oh! Definitely! Yeah.

I: Why is that?

Julia: Because I think that... I guess it's like if you (thinking) if you believe or act like... it is like that quote, I forgot what it is but it is like, you know, "dress like the position that you want to be" or something. So, yeah, so it's like connecting the things you are wearing with you know, what do you want in the future, so I definitely do that.

Likewise, Helen explained that she tends to buy items thinking about the possibility of the ideal self. She commented that some of the items she has never worn are a result of her idea of wanting to become somebody else. She stated: "It's like I really don't want to, but still, I look at the image and I'm like, *'That's a good identity, I guess. That's a good image that... yeah, I'll buy the clothes'* (laughs)." Interestingly, she admits that the ARPs she buys for that particular image are not going to be worn any time soon. It might happen "at some point, but it's just not happening soon and I can't imagine myself like that. It's weird." Helen struggles with this future version of herself. She has the desire to look different but not the willingness to actually change aspects of her appearance. She expressed: "I guess it is an identity that I want to achieve, maybe someday."

Lynn explained that she often purchases ARPs that highlight a different version of herself. She explained that she is now pushing her own boundaries by trying to develop an “edgier” style. When talking about some of her unworn items, Lynn stated:

Lynn: They represent a different style for me; it’s a little bit edgier... It’s not what I typically wear. The jacket has definitely more edge. I think the top is too. But they are both kind of fancy. I mean, it might not look, [but] it’s fancy for here, fancy for where I live.

Lynn further explained that she is not only trying to add some edginess into her new/ideal self but she is working on being comfortable wearing what she likes, regardless of the styles other people wear where she lives.

Lynn: Yeah, I think so. I’m trying to move into a direction that has a little more edginess in my style and also really just want to wear things because I like them and not because... even if it’s a little bit too fancy for where I live it’s kind of like, “*So what?*” If I like it, why not wear it?

This section further demonstrates the importance participants place on their ARPs. From participants’ narratives, it is obvious that they see in their items a reflection of who they are, as well as who they could be. However, as will be discussed next, many times participants do not actually wear what they purchase, making it seem rather difficult to fully realize the meanings they attribute to these objects.

### **Long Distance Love Affair**

As aforementioned, participants tend to buy ARPs with the purpose of filling a void in their lives, to feel better about themselves, or to communicate who they are, among other possibilities. However, if they do not wear the items they buy, then how are

such goals ever achieved? For most participants, it seems that owning the item is the achievement in itself. That is, they might not ever wear it, but having it available provides a sense of security and comfort, knowing that they could wear it if they wanted to simply because they own it.

### **The Unworn**

As discussed in Chapter II, according to existing studies on compulsive buying behavior, the purchasing of items that go unused is a characteristic strongly associated with compulsive buyers. All participants in this study indicated that they have plenty of items they have never worn, including clothes, shoes, jewelry, and handbags.

Participants' reasons for purchasing these items, and their reasons for not wearing them are two aspects that are worth considering when talking about "the unworn."

Participants indicated that some of their unused items have been with them for years, while others are very recent purchases (past 6 months). For the purposes of the interpretation, all unworn items are considered, regardless of the time of purchase. Doing so highlights the extent to which participants as compulsive clothing buyers continue purchasing items, regardless of how many they already have.

The other aspect worth considering is the scope of unworn items. Participants differentiated between items they have never worn – whether or not they still have the tags on – and items they have only worn once or twice and then have been "abandoned" in the closet. For the purpose of the interpretation, "unworn items" refers to both types. That is, any item participants have never worn, as well as lightly worn items that have not been used in more than a year.

**Unused Items.** Participants have many unused items in their closets. For instance, Helen commented that she has “jackets, sweaters, blouses, shirts... yeah, I think sweaters mostly. I don’t know why.” Dolores, on the other hand, explained that even though she is making an effort to wear most of the things she buys, she still has many items she has not worn at all, or that she has worn once or twice and then abandoned. She commented that among the items she has not worn yet are “shirts that I have that I haven’t worn, umm... (thinking) a couple of pairs of pants, there are purses that I haven’t carried. There are shoes that I haven’t worn and that’s all that I can think of, at least at this point.”

Dolores further explained that using the items at least once or twice makes her feel better about her purchases. That is, using the items makes her feel that she needed them, that she made the right decision when she purchased them, and, consequently, that her CCB is not that bad. When asked if she feels any different when using the item a few times and then “discarding” it, versus not using it at all, she replied:

Dolores: Yeah, if I don’t use it at all, it makes me feel like I wasted my money. Yeah, and that’s -- and also too if I don’t use it, it really hones in on the fact that I got a problem -- there is something, you know, if I use it then there is something about me that says, you know, maybe I -- I know I have a problem but there is something in that moment that says, “*Maybe my problem isn’t that bad.*”

Lynn recalled having many unused items in her closet. She explained that one of the things at the height of her CCB that motivated her to start her blog was noticing that she was barely using her clothes. She tracked the amount of times she wore her clothes and found that half of the items in her closet were only worn once or not at all.

Lynn: Oh, yeah! Big time. That was a lot of what propelled me to start the blog. Is that I had been doing tracking of how much I wear / how can I wear things. And in 2012 which is right, it was the year before I started the blog, I had half of the items in my closet. I had only worn once or not at all during the whole year. So that's... that was kind of like, "*Wow, I got a problem here!*"

Kelly also has plenty of unused items in her closet. She stated: "mostly dresses 'cause that's mostly what I buy but mostly dresses, some sweaters, a jacket, there's a couple pairs of shoes... umm there might be a pair of shorts, just different, just different things." Kelly went on to describe some of her most recent purchases, as well other items that are still new that she plans to wear soon.

Kelly: I have a little pile right here, there is more in there (points to the closet). So here is my current little pile, right here that... these are the ones that I've ordered recently that I've told you about. So, I got the dress that I ordered recently, a t-shirt that I ordered recently, the other dress, you know, another t-shirt, an Easter dress, and then these were older ones but I haven't worn them yet. So they kind of sit here because I will be wearing them soon.

Kelly commented that she when she wants to be reminded of the items she has – so she can wear them – she will take them out of the closet and put them in a visible place. She also explained that not all of her new items are "completely new." There are times that she has missed the opportunity to purchase an item in-store, so she makes the extra effort to find it second hand in places such as *eBay* or *Poshmark*. Thus, she has some items that are not brand new, but that are instead new to her.

Kelly: Yeah... Like sometimes like if I know that something has the tags on it and I want to wear it soon, I just pull it out and put it out here so I wear it, so I remember. But there is a bunch that don't, like umm... here... let me show you. So, that lighthouse print dress still has its tags, the... there is one right here, this shift dress still has its tags. This one right here still has the tags umm... I'm sure

there is a few more in here too... let's see. I pulled out, like I said, those I... and there those too that umm... you know, I have a few things that don't have tags but are new to me that I have not worn because I will buy things like on resale basically. You know, if it's a print that got away, kind of thing (laughs). And so I will find it second-hand or you know, some other way. So I'll have things like that are in here that don't necessarily have tags but are new to me.

Julia explained that at least 30% of the items in her closet still have the tags on them, and some of them have been with her for 3 to 4 years. She has items from every category, from outerwear to underwear to workout clothes. She commented that some of these unused items are the result of shopping trips with friends or family, or gifts that she has received that do not quite fit her style. The cases of Julia, Lisa, Lynn, and Dolores raise an unavoidable question: Why did they purchase the item?

**Reasons for Purchase.** When discussing the unused items in their closets, participants were asked to share the reasons for purchasing the items in the first place. Their answers varied (see Table 9), although a common response was an instant love for the item. That is, when in the store or on the webpage they saw the item and were not able to resist the temptation of buying it. That is, they had to have it.



Table 9

## Unworn Items: Reasons for Purchase

	Dolores	Kelly	Lynn	Lisa	Julia	Helen
I loved it / I couldn't help myself	X	X	X	X	X	X
I was experimenting with my style			X	X	X	
I was in a bad mood, so I went shopping			X		X	
It was such a good price! / It was on sale.			X	X	X	
I was looking for acceptance / to conform with others				X		X
Somebody else thought it was a good idea / Suggestions from bloggers or magazine articles			X	X	X	
To be prepared for the next chapter in my life				X	X	
To feel better about myself	X			X		
To go with other things I have in my closet			X	X		
To exert control over an aspect of my life	X		X			
To compensate for something that is missing in my life			X	X		
To look like the person I am/was supposed to be				X		X

As mentioned in the previous section, Julia has plenty of items that she has never worn. She explained that most of these unused items are the result of social shopping

(i.e., shopping with family and/or friends). When with other people, Julia tends to buy things she does not need or things that others think look good on her.

Julia: Umm... a lot of the purchases I made with other people and umm so I think we all kind of shop together and so I bought something maybe that I didn't need.

I: So, you would say that you bought it because you were in a social kind of environment?

Julia: Or someone said that it would be a good idea to try that color or that style or something.

Julia commented that she follows other people's advice when shopping because their opinions about her appearance are important to her. Indeed, when I asked her how important others' opinions were, she responded while laughing: "I put a lot of importance on it." Julia explained that in the past she made choices with regards to her style that other people did not approve of. As a result, she lost trust in herself and her ability to buy "the right thing." When asked why other people's opinions are important to her, she responded:

Julia: (Thinking) Because I guess I just don't trust myself.

I: Do you know why that is?

Julia: (Thinking) I don't know maybe because I had some idea of my style or something, that I liked before and then, you know, other people said it wasn't a good idea so I learned not to trust myself before.

Julia shared an experience while shopping with her brother that contributed to her losing trust in her ability to dress herself appropriately and, subsequently, to putting other people's opinions before her own.

Julia: I can't think of particular experiences, but I can remember several shopping trips where I'd gone with my brother in particular and I would always happen to like certain items and then I would just show it to him and then his face will tell me everything (laughs). It would almost be like, "*Please don't wear that! Please walk away from that item, about 20 feet! Don't ever look at that color or that item again!*"

Julia further explained that some of her unused items are the result of going shopping while in a bad mood or suggestions from bloggers. She commented that she tends to follow bloggers recommendations about "must-have items," or for ARPs that will help her achieve a different style. Thus, her desire to look a certain way has led to the purchasing of a significant amount of what she calls "tester items." Other ARPs end up unused because she bought several of the same item as they were on sale and she liked them a lot. For instance, she mentioned that she has bought 3 or 4 pairs of the same style of shoes however, the first pair has yet to wear out.

Julia: ...Maybe I bought it when I was in a bad mood or something [...] some items are like, like I was saying, like a blogger, "*Oh! I want to look more elegant.*" So, you know, I want to try an item. So, they are like tester items that I just never eventually wore or sometimes umm like they are just, you know, items that I bought multiples of because I thought that I liked them at that time so... for example, I have this one pair of shoes that I'm wearing right now, and at the time because it was like on sale umm... I think I bought like 3 or 4 [pairs] and the shoes lasted at least a year so I'm freaking out (laughs).

Like Julia, Lisa also confessed to having many unused items in her closet. She explained that she tends to fall in love with an item, but then she realizes that there is nothing in her closet that she can wear it with. This triggers the purchase of multiple additional items that she usually does not wear.

Lisa: Umm, typically, it starts with me buying a pair of shoes that I love, like the reddish orange flats that go with the striped top and the sweater. That was a \$200 pair of shoes, they are reddish orange. I have nothing else reddish orange. I saw them, I loved them, I had to have them. I'm still glad I bought them, [because] they are really good shoes. They have tiny little gold studs on them, which for me means that then I have to have all gold. Like I don't mix metals, so I found the purse at *Dillard's* for about \$99 that was on sale that I bought to go with them, so I have a matching bag. I'm so big on that. This whole brown purse, black shoe thing does not do well for me. Umm then I started buying clothes with that color and I bought this shirt that has stripes, that has the red stripes. Umm, I got a couple more tops. It was like, to justify the \$200 shoes I then had to buy things to wear.

For Lisa, being color coordinated is a must. As she pointed out, she does not like to mix metals or to wear mismatched handbags and shoes. Another of her excerpts exemplifies how the effort to find something to match a particular item usually results in unworn items.

Lisa: I found these *Vera Wang* lavender flats at *Nordstrom Rack* and on sale at *Nordstrom Rack* I paid \$200 for them. They were three or four hundred dollar shoes. It's obscene how much I spent for these shoes. It's the only -- at the time was the most expensive pair of shoes I have ever bought and I love them beyond words and they are this weird sort of mauve lavender kind of grey color, really soft ballet slippers type shoes and on the toes they have these sparkly like *Swarovski* crystals [...] But then you gotta have something to wear them with, right?! So I bought all this stuff, this weird purply grey mauve color, that's a terrible color on me. I have to currently agree with myself that I'm not going to wear any of those. One blouse I bought that's -- it's a shiny, it's kind of a sand silky material. I wear that blouse with like cute little dark grey jeans and those flats and I'm getting rid of all those other tops that color because I haven't worn them. I don't wear the flats. I don't wear these tops I bought to go with them. Umm I haven't worn most of them ever and so I am just gonna get rid of them and keep the one shirt that actually looks good and so I have one shirt to go with my \$200 Cinderella shoes. It's crazy!

Lisa refers to the items she has never worn as "closet orphans" because she has nothing to wear with them. She commented that "a lot of times with my closet orphans or

my things that I bought that I didn't wear, it used to be because I found a good deal, it was on sale and[/or] I didn't have anything [to wear it with]." As described earlier, in an effort to find her own style, she paid a color analyst to provide her with a guide of the colors that go better with her skin tone. This guide significantly impacted Lisa's shopping and buying. She described how she started to purchase ARPs in the suggested colors and how they ultimately ended up not being worn.

Lisa: I've also had my colors analyzed and I'm having trouble adopting all of that advice that did cause some shopping 'cause I was like, "*Oh my God, These are my colors! I need to buy things in these colors!*" and that ended up with a lot of what I call "closet orphans." You know, yeah I have this great teal color top but it doesn't go with anything so I don't wear it. It still has tags on it. I'm gonna wear it tomorrow night, though. I figured I'm gonna wear it with black jeans and a black jacket and this pretty teal color top and it's gonna make my eyes look green. So, it's been sitting there and I bought it at *Nordstrom* last summer during that summer sale they have where they put the winter, the new winter stuff on sale [...]. Like it's a good top, I think. It's not low on cleavage, but it's feminine looking. It looks like a woman instead of the turtleneck sweater that's kind of my instinct to wear, you know.

Buying ARPs that will fit Lynn's ideal or future self used to be a very common practice. She explained that she used to buy ARPs thinking of the person she wanted to be or the life she wanted to have. Because she liked clothes so much, she justified her purchases by telling herself that at some point she would have the opportunity to wear the item.

Lynn: Yeah, yeah I think to a large degree it's kind of... you know, I just like the clothes so much that I rationalize it in my mind, "*Oh, well, yeah, I will go out some time.*" So you know, because a lot of time that's the danger of those bloggers that we were talking about. You might read the blog and either that person has a very different life or doesn't do these things. I mean a lot of those people they put on the clothes to take pictures and then they are sitting in their

sweatpants typing in the computer. I don't know this for sure, but that's my assumption. I think a lot of them don't actually wear the clothes or maybe it's just somebody who did have that life and you think, "*Oh, I [want to have that life]*" you know or you read a magazine and you see these clothes and I really like the clothes. Like I want to have the life and I want to be able to wear something like that, but that's not my life, you know? I want to be able to have, you know, the beautiful dresses and go out to dinner and... but I don't really have that life and I would buy those kinds of clothes and then sometimes I'd wear them and I feel like tremendously out of place. And I either don't wear them or wear them and I feel like I don't fit in. Like I'm wearing these to go run errands and everyone else is wearing like jeans and t-shirts and I'm like wearing like a dress and heels, you know (laughs). That's what I would do, just because I like the clothes and so now I'm telling myself, "*Well, I don't care if I like the clothes. They don't fit my life, I'm not buying it.*"

Similarly, Helen explained that most of her unworn ARPs were purchased because she liked how they looked on the models wearing them. She confessed that she has a habit of buying ARPs knowing that they are not her style and that she probably will not wear them.

Helen: I guess like... ok, so like, you know, umm most of this stuff is from online sites, so they would have like models wearing them and they would look good on the models and then, I mean like I know that I don't usually wear that style, but I'm like "*Let me just... I mean it looks good on the model, so let me just buy it.*" And then I buy it and I know I'm not gonna wear it. And I really don't wear it.

Helen further explained that her unworn items may be a direct consequence of the conflict between the person she is and the person she thinks she is supposed to be. She commented that she was raised to look more "lady-like," but she does not enjoy that style. When asked why she buys ARPs that she knows she will not wear because they are not her style, she replied:

Helen: I guess it's like in a way I want to become like that. Maybe... like I think maybe one day I'll be like that and maybe I'll be more lady-like (laughs). And style wise, I'll be more lady-like, so I buy those things, but then I know I'm not gonna wear them.

In addition to the reasons why participants purchase items they know they will not wear, they also have a variety of reasons why they do not wear what they purchase, which will now be explained in depth.

**Reasons Not to Wear It.** Buying a clothing item that prompts love but then never wearing it seems illogical. However, participants in this study provided plenty of reasons why they do not wear what was at the time of purchase a highly desirable item. A summary of these reasons as identified through examination of participants' narratives and personal journals is presented in Table 10.

In one of our multiple conversations, Dolores explained that she has way too many items, therefore, she has very little opportunity to wear everything in her closet. Most of her never worn items do not have the tags on. She explained that she usually cuts the tags off with the intention of wearing them, but instead she ends up wearing something that she has already worn. She commented: "I cut them off with the intention of wearing the things and then I never, I never get around to it, because I have so many things." Dolores also mentioned that one of the reasons she does not wear the items is because they do not fit her. When asked if she was planning on wearing any of her unused items, she responded: "I'm sure to, you know, at some point I plan to, but I don't know if I'll ever go around to it now, because a lot of it [doesn't] fit anymore."

Table 10

Reasons Provided by Participants for Not Wearing ARPs

	<b>Dolores</b>	<b>Kelly</b>	<b>Lynn</b>	<b>Lisa</b>	<b>Julia</b>	<b>Helen</b>
I have too many items	X	X	X	X	X	
I'm waiting for the right time (e.g., season, special occasion)	X	X			X	
I didn't remember that I have it		X	X		X	
I don't have a place to wear it			X	X		
I haven't figured out how to wear it			X	X		
It doesn't fit anymore	X				X	
I bought it for the things I will do in my future life				X		X
I like to wait to wear some of my things		X				
I don't have anything to wear it with				X		
It's not my style / I don't like it anymore						X

Like Dolores, Kelly and Julia both commented that because of the significant amount of clothing they have, it is difficult, if not impossible, to wear everything. Kelly explained that she tries her best to wear an item at least once.

Kelly: Yeah... I guess the issue with me is, you know, you have just this number of clothing... Like if you do the math, you can't possibly wear it all in a year.



There is just so much that you could wear just a different outfit everyday technically if you want it. Umm and so, even though things are my favorite I don't wear them over and over again. I usually just wear them, you know, once in a while. I enjoy looking at them though (laughs).

Julia, on the other hand, explained that since she has so many items, she is waiting for the ones she is currently using to get worn out. This practice may have to do with the fact that while growing up, her family used everything that was purchased.

Julia: Sometimes it's just that I have a lot of items already in that category. I think I actually have a lot of items and so I am either waiting for my current items to like be, you know, like I guess... fall out of the rotation of wearing.

In the same vein, Lisa explained that she does not get to wear everything she has because of the "excessive amount" of clothing she has. She added that she does not have as many opportunities to go out, therefore, she does not have places to go to wear it all. Indeed, she explained that some of her unworn items were bought for a "fantasy life" she does not have. Thus, she has no real opportunity to wear them. When asked why she has not been able to wear the new items she has, she responded:

Lisa: I don't know. I mean sometimes... you know... part of it is that I have an excessive amount of casual – I used to have no casual clothing, now I have much more casual than I have opportunities to wear. In other words, 'cause like I don't - like I'm working three jobs, so I don't go out, hardly at all. I'm trying not to spend money so I'm not going out, however, this dating on the horizon has now given me, you know... things to go out... But it's like, a lot of these clothes that I bought, again for this fantasy life that I'm not exactly living yet, but hope to be some day, but then again, sometimes I buy like five or six things that match this color pair of shoes and then I never end up wearing them.

Lisa added that she has not been able to wear some of her items because she feels like she has nothing to wear with them. She bought some of these items while in the process of finding her style, but after she discovered what look she wanted, the items were almost useless to her.

Lisa: But some of them are color orphans and some of it is just I found a good deal and I didn't know what my style was at the time. I'm making better choices now. Like this shopping year, I'm gonna make a lot better choices.

Not knowing how to wear a specific item is another reason provided by participants for letting an item sit unused for months or years. Lynn described her experience with a blouse she loves but has yet to find the right thing to wear it with or the right time to wear it.

Lynn: Well a couple things, one is kind of fancy because it has some sort of chiffon and sort of...and the arms are not warm. The rare thing about it is that you can't really wear something over it because it kind of ruins it but because of that sheer fabric on the arms it is not warm. So, I have to kind of wear it in between seasons but I don't know why I didn't wear it. Like it's stupid because I really like it, so I'm kind of irritated with myself because I like it. I mean, I like the way it looks on, I like the style of it, I like the way it looks on me, you know, it's just one of those things.

This blouse is not the only clothing item of Lynn's like this. Lynn explained that she has had a dress for a year and has not been able to wear it because she does not have a place to wear it to. Reflecting on that purchase, she explained that having to find an occasion to wear an item is not the right way to do things. In her opinion, it should be the other way around.

Lynn: I mean, I was just showing my husband, I've made a purchase of a dress a year ago that I haven't worn it yet because it's beautiful, it looks great on me but it just has no place in my life. Like, we have to go out so that I can wear this dress (laughs) I haven't worn it, I had it for a year. We are gonna go out so I can wear it (laughs). If you have to find occasions for your clothes, that's not the way you do that, that's backwards. You buy the clothes to suit the occasions that you actually have. Like you don't go and... You know, I would buy clothes that... the only thing that would be appropriate to do in them is go to the mall, so that I could buy more clothes and that doesn't make any sense, you know? It's like I would have all these clothes and they would only be really appropriate for shopping.

Dolores explained that she has not worn some of her new items because she is waiting for the right season. Similarly, Kelly is waiting for the right occasion to wear some of her new things. When asked about items she has had for a long time and not worn at all, Kelly talked about "a couple pair of shoes that are like that, and there is... I'm trying to think what dress. I know there is a couple dresses like that." As she was looking through her closet, she found "a really pretty dress and I bought it almost a year ago and I have not worn it yet (laughs)." When asked the reason she had not worn it, Kelly responded:

Kelly: That one... I guess, I don't know. It's kind of a dressier one and I purchased it because I really liked it, but I don't really have a lot of places to wear it so it kind of sits there because I probably could wear it if I wear a cardigan over it or something. But I just haven't yet because it also seems like... I don't know, it just seems like a really special dress, so I feel like I should have something to wear it to, but I haven't, so it's just sitting there.

Kelly went on to explain that she tends to let new items "settle" in her closet. She has no explanation as to why she likes to do that, but she expressed that it is important for her to admire her purchases and to think about the many possibilities of how to wear the items.

Kelly: I don't know. I kind of like to let things settle in there. I don't know why. It's like I'll get something, I'll try it on, make sure it fits and then just like to let things settle in my closet and I don't know why exactly but I do. I like to look at it for a bit and contemplate how I would wear it and then I would wear it and then once I wear it, like I wear it... not that there is a rule for this, but, you know, I'll just wear [it] for leisure then. You know... but I like to let things settle in a little.

Kelly said that she usually attaches a special meaning to the first time she wears an item.

She wants that first time to be significant and/or memorable somehow. She explained that she likes to take her time with each piece.

Kelly: Yeah or / and special occasions doesn't have to be necessarily actual special occasions, it's just like when I have something I don't want to be in a hurry to get ready in the morning and just throw it on. I want to be able to like, you know, figure out how I want to style it, take some time with it, you know? Do that kind of thing. I don't know if that makes sense. So, if I'm like running out the door, I just throw on a dress that I had a dress for whatever 'cause I've worn it 50 times so I don't care, it is fine. But something new it's like I want to take the time to like, figure out exactly what I want to do with it.

Waiting to figure out how to style a specific item is very important to Kelly. She explained that she feels like she owes it to the item to spend time with it "before it's like fully integrated into my closet." Interestingly, after she wears it for the first time, the item loses part of its significance. She commented: "Once it is [worn], then it's like, you can throw that on with whatever, whenever." Similarly, Julia used to save her new items for a special occasion. She also does not feel comfortable moving on to new clothes before the other clothes are worn out. Julia explained that to avoid having to get rid of the items, she is now working on integrating some of those new items into her wardrobe.

Julia: Umm... I'm doing it now. I think part of it was that I was trying to save it, you know, which is... yeah, so I was trying to save it for something special or you

know, a different occasion but umm but it is not that my current clothes are bad. I just think I can't upgrade all of them at the same time. So like I'm trying to add new purchases into the rotation of more daily wear or casual wear. So I'm not trying to save it and you know, maybe I grow too short or too tall or I don't like that style anymore. I think now I'm trying to use it.

Julia said that before she started to read about CCB, she used to have a lot more items than what she currently has in her closet. The amount of clothes made it impossible for her to remember the pieces she had. She said: "Before, like before I started this process, I had double the items I have, so I definitely did not know what I had. And now, umm I am a lot more familiar with what I have." Other reasons provided by Julia for not wearing her items are (1) the fact that they do not fit her anymore and (2) she is waiting to have the life for which her clothes will be appropriate.

On the other hand, Helen expressed that for her it is not about waiting for the right time to wear an item or not being able to find something to wear it with, but the simple fact that "I don't feel like wearing them." When asked if she would return the items, since she did not feel like she was going to wear them, she explained:

Helen: No. I don't know why (laughs) 'Cause I think that maybe I will wear it someday... but I know, like, deep down, I know I'm not gonna wear it. So they are gonna go to donations one day.

Like Julia, Helen contemplates the possibility of wearing her new items but she cannot get herself to wear them. She explained that this happens mostly with the items she buys when thinking about her ideal self. She likes the idea of becoming that version of herself but not the reality of it.

Participants explained that, for them, ARPs represent more than simple material possessions. That is, participants assign special meanings to their ARPs, whether they use them or not. In the next section, meanings specific to unworn ARPs are explored.

### **Unworn but not Unimportant**

Participants explained that even though they have many ARPs they have not worn, and that there are times they forget about these items, they are nonetheless still meaningful. For some, having unused items in their closets represents the possibility of achieving a personal or professional goal. For others, unworn items represent guilt, failure, and a waste of money. Below, the “pros” and “cons” of keeping unused items in the closet are explored.

**A Closet Full of Dreams.** Even though a lot of the participants’ purchases go unused, they explained that these items are still very meaningful to them. That is, just the idea of being able to wear their ARPs if they choose to seems to be enough. For example, Dolores said that she assigns a lot of meaning to her items, whether she wears them or not. She explained that her ARPs mean comfort, glamour, style, fun, and being cool.

Dolores: Oh! Umm they mean comfort. They mean glamour. Umm... (thinking) They mean fun. They mean style. They mean cool as in being cool as opposed to the weather kind of cool (laughs). Yeah... I think that’s, that’s what they mean to me.

Dolores learned that what she truly enjoys about the process of shopping and buying is the emotions evoked by searching for the items and being able to buy them. She explained that knowing she has those items available to her makes her feel good. Indeed, she described that having them actually calms and comforts her.

Dolores: Well, I think that what I found out about myself is I like the umm... I really like the hunt, you know, finding things, being -- the thrill of the hunt and being able to buy the things, that's what really makes me feel better and then having the things available to me makes me feel better as well. It just... even if I don't use them, having them around me, umm allows me to see that things are going to be ok, that I'm ok.

Dolores confessed her love for her ARPs when stating, "I really love my stuff, it's cool. It's umm I just love what I have. I love the things I have around me." She further explained that some of her "used-but-abandoned" items are meaningful to her because of the reason she had to wear them the first time. Other items are significant to her just because of their characteristics. When asked what it was about the items that made them so meaningful to her, she responded: "They're things that I wear that I really love because of the reason why I wore it, but then there's other things that I just love for the pieces that they are."

Julia explained that her unused items are meaningful to her because they are representative of multiple possibilities. Having these items allows her to fantasize about different versions of herself. In other words, they provide her with the opportunity to dream about the possibility of being a different person in the near future, and to achieve a personal or professional goal.

Julia: Sometimes I feel like they represent a lot of like different potential. Like I, you know, I could be that business person or whatever I got that *Coach*, that blazer for... or I can be that *Lilly* [*Pulitzer*] chic casual person who, you know, like it just is like a lot of different potential versions of myself.

In a similar vein, Lisa explained that most of her unworn clothes were bought for a life she does not have, but that she hopes to have in the future. She stated: "But it's like,

a lot of these clothes that I bought, again for this fantasy life that I'm not exactly living yet, but hope to be some day..." Regardless of the financial consequences Lisa is facing, she feels like her behavior has allowed her to become better prepared for that future she is contemplating.

Lisa: I hate to say [it], [but] in a way I feel like better prepared to have a social life because I've accumulated a wardrobe. [...] I would say I feel better prepared to confront the world because I do feel like I finally kind of found my style and found a wardrobe that works.

As with Lisa, Lynn commented that she used to purchase a significant amount of clothing items for a life she hoped to have. Through her recovery process, she discovered that buying clothing items in hopes of finding an occasion to wear them for was not the right thing to do because she was not only accumulating unused items, but spending money, time, and energy unnecessarily.

Lynn: ...I think a lot of them [bloggers] don't actually wear the clothes or maybe it's just somebody who did have that life and you think, "*Oh, I [want to have that life]*" you know [...]. Like I want to have the life and I want to be able to wear something like that, but that's not my life, you know? [...] So now I'm telling myself, "*Well, I don't care if I like the clothes. They don't fit my life, I'm not buying it.*"

When talking about unworn items that she had recently purchased, Lynn explained that they represented a new style for her, almost like a new version of herself that she was hoping to create. When asked about the meaning of a jacket and a blouse she has had for a year, she explained:



Lynn: They represent a different style for me; it's a little bit edgier... It's not what I typically wear. The jacket has definitely more edge. I think the top is too. But they both are kind of fancy. I mean, it might not look... it's fancy for here, fancy for where I live.

Along with being reminders of the potential lives that participants could lead, unused/unworn items also act as reflections of their inability to control their shopping and buying behaviors. This quality is explored next.

**Oh! What Have I Done?** Some participants expressed that the amount of ARPs they have not worn or that have been in their closets for years and only worn once or twice makes them feel guilty. They also mentioned that these items represent failure, in terms of buying items that they did not need or did not serve the intended purpose.

Even though Lisa feels like her purchases have prepared her for the life she would like to have, she also sees some of them as representative of failure. That is, failure to use her money wisely, failure to return the items on time, and failure to decipher how to wear them. However, Lisa also mentioned that having grown up with very little makes the idea of a full closet particularly special. She explained that knowing that she has all these items available to her helps her feel important.

For Lynn, unused items represent guilt. Not being able to wear the pieces she bought made her question her decisions to buy them. She added that there were times when she would make an effort to wear the piece, but ended up not liking how it looked on her. However, most of the time, rather than giving the item away, she would hang on to it out of guilt.

Lynn: Umm... they meant a lot of guilt. I felt a lot of guilt about them. I did feel like you know, now I feel like, well if I'm not using something I'd like to pass it on to somebody else who will use it." At the time, I was kind of like, every time I see it, I should... and sometimes when I would wear something it was only because I felt guilty. Because I felt *"Oh, I should wear this"* but I should've never bought it in the first place, you know, and I sometimes I would wear it and I wouldn't like it but then I still keep it because I'd be, *"Well, I just bought this, and I've only worn it once, so I better keep it and wear it again."*

Lynn went on to explain that she began questioning her ability to make good decisions every time she had to deal with the unused items in her closet.

Lynn: Yeah... well, just like, *"I shouldn't have bought it! It's a waste of money!"* You know, *"Why did I wear this? Why did I buy this?"* You know, sometimes I look at something and go, *"What the heck was I thinking?"*

Like Lynn, Helen tends to feel guilty about her unworn items. She explained that she usually cuts the tags off as a way to avoid experiencing feelings of guilt. Helen commented that there are some items she will wear right way. However, there are other purchases that end up unworn and forgotten.

I: So... What do you do with your items, with the clothing you buy?

Helen: What do I do? Like... I think like most clothes, I would wear right away or the next day when I'm going out, but some items, I don't know, for some reason I just buy them, I put them in my closet, and I never wear them.

I: You never wear them... You take the tags off you told me?

Helen: I take all the tags off. I don't know why, I think because umm seeing the tags there make me feel guilty and makes me feel like they are calling out my name. Like they are telling me to wear them but I don't want to wear them.

Julia explained that most of her unused items represent a waste of her money. She also mentioned that some of them are linked to memories from the past, while others remind her of the way she was.

Julia: I feel like a lot of it is like wasted money and I... and a lot of it, it's like linked to the past, you know, maybe I bought it when it was, you know, when I was skinnier. Maybe I bought it when I was in a bad mood or something. Some items are linked to memories and some items are actually like linked to a point in time when I was one way...

As is evidenced in this section, participants assign a wide array of meaning to the items they have not worn at all, as well as to those that were “worn-but-abandoned.” For some participants, these items represent the opportunity to become a different version of themselves, while for others they are means of safety and security. Based on the data, it can be argued that the deeper the meanings assigned to the items, the harder it is for participants to let them go. It is worth mentioning that even though some items can be seen as failure or represent guilt, they are still kept because, in the end, those meanings are overshadowed by positive ones. In the next section, issues related to “letting go” of items and the consequences of not being able to do so are discussed.

### **Letting Go**

Discarding ARPs is not something participants like to do. Most participants expressed that it is very difficult for them to discard, give away, or donate their items. For instance, Dolores explained that the idea of letting go of her items scares her.

I: And what about getting rid of it, like just donating. How do you feel about that?

Dolores: That feels very scary to me.

I: Why does it feel scary?

Dolores: Because I don't want to let go of my stuff.

I: Why?

Dolores: [Because] it's part of who I am.

When asked if she would at least be able to donate some of the items that no longer fit her or that she is not using, Dolores replied: "As of today, I'm gonna say no. At some point I may, but right now, no. I'm too -- I can't think of donating. It's too painful." For Dolores, getting rid of her possessions is like getting rid of a part of herself, even to the extent that she has had to rent a storage unit so that she can keep all of her items.

Dolores acknowledged that she needs to work on getting rid of some of her clothes. However, this is now more difficult than ever. She described how, after her husband was taken to a long-term care facility due to health complications, she has not been able to change anything in the house, including her own clothes. She said:

Dolores: So that's one reason why I still... So his things, I mean, everything is still intact. Nothing has been moved. Umm everything is just the way that he left it when he disappeared for those three days. I haven't done anything and even though I... umm I take care of the house but I haven't moved any of these things. I haven't put anything away. It's all very much still very surreal to me.

Dolores went on to explain that it is difficult for her to let go, as she derives a lot of security from her ARPs. When asked what she is planning on doing with her items, she responded: "I... right now, I'm not planning to do anything with them. I'm just hanging

on to them. They are -- I get a lot of security through my clothing.” She further described how having her ARPs around makes her feel:

Dolores: Yeah, I feel like it’s -- when I have my clothing and my stuff around me -- so when I say clothing I mean purses, shoes, makeup, jewelry -- when I have all those kinds of things around me, I feel safe. I feel like I’m umm I’m just -- I feel like I have cushy things around me.

In contrast to Dolores, Kelly has no problem letting go of some of her items. She commented that she is very good at purging her closet and getting rid of things. However, she clarified that it is very hard for her to donate or consign her *Lilly Pulitzer* dresses, as she sees them as part of a collection.

Kelly: Umm... yes. I’m good at purging but only certain things (laughs). I’m good at purging like... I do not like, like a cluttered space. I like things organized and nice. So I’m good at purging as far as my house goes. My closet is a little trickier because I don’t like to get rid of things that I see as sort of a collectible for me. Like there are certain prints, especially. Because even though I might not wear it all the time, well, that print is never going to exist again in the history of human kind and I like the print. So, if I were to get rid of it, it would be very difficult to track it back down. Umm... so I would get rid of things and purge things routinely like, you know, jeans that I like a different design or plain t-shirt or things like that but when it comes to prints, I’m kind of a print hoarder.

Kelly went on to explain that when she has decided to narrow down the selection in her closet, she has ended up regretting it. When asked if she has ever given away a *Lilly Pulitzer* dress, she responded:

Kelly: Consigned. I’ve consigned a couple of *Lilly [Pulitzer]* dresses and a couple of pants and different stuff and I tell you, it’s not a good idea ‘cause I still obsess over it ‘til this day. Isn’t that crazy?

I: So you regret it?

Kelly: I totally regret it! I know. I don't know what to do about it.

I: Do you to try to find it again?

Kelly: No, because then I will be mad at myself for buying it twice, but no... but I've been mad at myself for getting rid of it. It's like, "*Why did you do that, you should've kept it*" I don't know... But I can get rid of like other clothes, no problem. Like I could be ruthless, like jeans I don't like, whatever it is. Home stuff that doesn't look right, get rid of it, no problem but yeah...

There are times when Kelly has felt determined to make changes in her closet. However, she confessed that after she consigns or donates something, she usually ends up buying more things to compensate for the loss.

Kelly: I've gone in before like, "*I'm gonna clean out my closet and get rid of a bunch of stuff!*" And I have, I have done that. And you know, I'm like, "*I'm gonna be more minimalistic!*" all that stuff, and all I end up doing is taking to consignment only to like have basically a flip out, like a week or so later and like practically wanting to buy stuff again to like replace stuff I got rid of. And it really only applies to that because you know my home and stuff is not cluttered or crazy or anything umm... and my closet is really organized, you saw it... it looks like that all the time. But it's like I have a really hard time letting go of stuff in there. It's like... I feel like, it's part of the collection, right? Like I don't want to break it up.

Losing her collection of print dresses would be unbearable for Kelly. She explained that just thinking about the possibility of it stresses her out. Kelly commented that even though she loves living in Florida, she fears the possibility of losing her possessions due to a natural disaster: "I love Florida, this is my home, I identify with everything around here [but] it stresses me out living here though, to some extent, because I worry about the hurricanes. During hurricane season I am like a nervous

wreck.” In our conversation, she described how for her it is not only about the money she spent on all of her items, but the time and energy invested in finding them.

Kelly: Yeah, that drives me crazy. I have a high level of anxiety about any of that kind of stuff, just generally ‘cause living out on the beach so it’s like hurricanes and stuff... Not just with that, but just in general like the idea of just losing all your stuff it’s really scary. And so part of that like, obviously, upsets me too ‘cause it’s like I would hate to lose all that plus it’s a significant investment, not just in money but in the time like it has taken to acquire certain prints and certain... like it really is like a little collection of things and I would feel very sad to have lost all of this effort and, you know, it’s something I really like, so I would be really upset if it were gone.

Kelly went on to explain how she has even thought about devising a plan in case something unexpected happens that requires the evacuation of her house.

Kelly: I stress about that a lot (laughs). Like I already think about, if I had to evacuate for a hurricane, how many [dresses] I can shove in my trunk, you know what I mean? (Laughs) Like it’s like, we need food and water and that is... and how many *Lilly [Pulitzer]* dresses I can shove in my trunk (comments while laughing).

Lisa indicated that she is working energetically to reorganize her closet. Since she considers her unworn items to be representative of failure, she wants to get rid of some of them so she does not have to live with that “failure” around her. She explained that she is taking some of her clothing items to consignment stores so she can at least get some of her money back. She has given away some to co-workers or donated to charity.

Lisa: I’m kind of working through this closet purge and I found a consignment shop that would buy a lot -- and you’ll never get back what you spent, you won’t get back 5% of what you spent but I’m... donating some things. I’m... umm consigning some things. I’m giving things away. There is a little girl in our office, one of the academic advisors has an autistic son and a lot of their money goes to

medical bills and so, she loves cute clothes and she is just a pretty, pretty little girl. She and I are the same size, although she is petite. [...] I can't give her like pants and stuff, but she can wear a lot of tops and she -- colors that don't look good on me, tend to look good on her. So a lot of my color orphans, like the mauve stuff, is going to her. I've taken a lot of the pink stuff that I bought when I was trying... going through trying to be my daughter and wear pink. So... some things I give away, some things I donate, you know, to like a charity.

Like Lisa, Julia explained that she is giving away some of her unworn items, mostly to family members and charities. She commented that she is also trying to incorporate some of her unused items into her daily wear "rotation." However, some of the items she does not actually see herself wearing. When asked what she was planning on doing with these unused items, she replied:

Julia: Well, I have been giving some items away to like my family and I have given some to -- I think that we have like I think four different charities that I've given to, just depending, you know, what the focus of the charity is. Like a lot of my work clothes kind of goes to different ones and things like that.

Julia further explained that she is keeping some items that do not fit her anymore. When asked why she does not intend to get rid of them, she explained that "there's still the potential that maybe someday I will [be able to fit in them]." Lynn, on the other hand said that she used to have a difficult time getting rid of her ARPs. Like Dolores, she would hang onto these items for a long period of time, but, like Kelly, she would sporadically give away some things to charity or people that she knew. Lynn recalled how she used to buy many things that were similar because she did not remember the things she already had. Most of these items ended up unused in her closet.



Lynn: Well, I used to hang on to things for a lot longer. I always had a really big packed closet and I didn't get rid of things that often but sometimes I will give things away to the Goodwill. Occasionally, I will give things to somebody I knew but usually I didn't have people that wore, you know 'cause I'm tall and everything, you know, I didn't necessarily have people that I give things to. But I often hang on to things for kind of a while though.

Obviously, being so attached to their items means that some participants encounter problems with having enough space for storage. Different ways of dealing with this issue are discussed next.

**Dealing with the Chaos.** The inability to get rid of their ARPs has created major space issues for some participants. For example, Dolores explained that she has no space left in her house to keep her clothes. She said that she is working on controlling her purchases but is still struggling.

Dolores: I am out of room. I'm completely out of room. There is no place more for me to put the stuff. So I either have -- so I'm trying to really curb my spending, but it's very challenging to do that.

Aesthetics are very important to Dolores, thus, having things out of place makes her feel uncomfortable. When asked if she has done something to deal with the situation, she explained: "No. In fact, it's getting worse. I have not remedied the situation at all and I need to. I need to really... I know that I need to take care of this clothing issue. I just haven't yet." Dolores explained that, in order to provide a temporary remedy to her situation, she has tried different strategies, from using small hangers and vacuum storage bags to having her "clothes off-site in a storage area that I pay for every month."

The clothes that Dolores keeps in a storage unit, are “all clothes that are too small for me and have been too small for many years.” She explained that she does not see herself giving it away. According to Dolores, her love for her clothes as well as the complications of her husband’s health condition make having the storage space as a consequence of keeping her ARPs somewhat bearable. When talking about the reasons she has had for not getting rid of her unworn items, Dolores explained that after a period of reflection, she understood that her issues with letting go not only have to do with the meanings of her clothes, but with the absence of her husband.

Dolores: But I thought that was important to know because that has a lot to do with why at this point in time I’m not getting rid of my things and how I’m willing to suffer the consequences for it, because I am suffering for it. I have no room left in my closets.

Helen described the type of clutter in her house as a “closet explosion” (Personal Journal). She explained that when she runs out of space, she donates the unworn clothes and then replaces them with new items. Helen commented that after a purchase, she usually cuts the tags off, washes the items, and then puts them in the closet where they will stay, probably unworn, for an undetermined period of time.

Helen: No, just put them there and maybe like --for example, clothes I just put them there... I wash them. I take the tag off. Like, I don’t know why, I just like to take the tags off and then I just put them there [in the closet] for a couple of years and I don’t wear them... and then I look at my closet and when it’s exploding, when I need new space for new clothes, then I start donating everything. So I end up donating a lot of the stuff that I’ve never worn.

Both Julia and Lynn commented in their journals about the clutter in their homes. Julia expressed that, while others disagree, she thinks she has way too many things. She stated: “I think my home is cluttered while others do not agree. This is because I have surfaces which cannot be used immediately, meaning there is too much on it.” Lynn, on the other hand, expressed that at this point she does not have as much clutter as she used to. She said: “Very little at this point, as my husband and I have been making a concerted effort do downsize in recent years...”

Like Lynn, Kelly explained that she has little to no clutter in her house. However, she confessed to having a completely full closet. Indeed, she has ARPs in the closet in her bedroom and the closet in the spare bedroom. Since Kelly mentioned that she has a lot of clothes, to the point that she can wear something different every day for a whole year, I inquired if she had ever thought about not buying anything until she uses all of her new items. Kelly explained that she has tried, but she has not been able to resist the temptation of buying more.

Kelly: I have said that before and haven't made it very far because then there is something shiny and pretty out there and I'm like, Oh! I really have to have that. Just this one thing. I have really hard time with willpower when it comes to this, you know? I have good discipline in every other area in my life but when it comes to this I'm just... you know, I really struggle.

Throughout this chapter, the data highlight the extent to which participants focus on ARPs as compulsive consumers. Several facets of this fixation have been examined in this chapter, including the what, why and how of participants' “love affair” with ARPs. Based on the data gathered through in-depth interviews and personal journals, reasons to

prefer ARPs over other consumer goods were examined. The data reveal that participants' preference for ARPs is the result of the physical properties of the products, the way these products make participants feel, and the different goals that can be achieved through the acquisition of ARPs. Meanings assigned to items, both worn and unworn, and participants' issues with getting rid of these items were also explored. From the interpretation it is clear that, whether they are used or not, ARPs carry strong significance, and, therefore represent more than mere objects to participants. ARPs not only represent a reminder of the inability to control their shopping and buying behaviors, but help them to hang on to the possibility of a better future. In sum, there is no doubt that ARPs play a central role within the compulsive buying experience.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, participants' preference for appearance-related products (ARPs) was explored. Included were reasons to buy ARPs as well as meanings assigned to and derived from these items. The importance and significance of unused ARPs was also explored. In the next chapter, Part IV of the Thematic Interpretation, I examine the path to recovery. That is, strategies to cope with compulsive clothing buying are explored through participants' experiences.

**CHAPTER VIII**  
**THEMATIC INTERPRETATION PART IV:**  
**THE PATH TO RECOVERY**

As indicated in Chapter V, the goal of the Thematic Interpretation (Chapters V to VIII) is to provide a deeper understanding of the compulsive clothing buying experience as lived by the six participants in this study. In the preceding three chapters, I examined *the person, the process of shopping and buying, and product preference*, Parts I, II, and III respectively. In the current chapter, the final part of the Thematic Interpretation, I delve into *the path to recovery*. That is, I specifically examine the strategies that participants, as compulsive clothing buyers, use to manage the behavior.

As demonstrated in previous chapters, the compulsive clothing buying experience is far from being a simple phenomenon. Each participant has unique reasons for engaging in the behavior. They all expressed reasons, sometimes similar, sometimes different, as to why they prefer appearance-related products over other types of consumer goods. The strategies used to try to take control of their CCB also vary. In this chapter, these strategies are explored through the following four subthemes: (1) *The Impact of My Overshopping*, (2) *What's Stopping Me from Stopping?* (3) *Management Strategies*, and (4) *The Long Journey*. Each is discussed in turn.

**The Impact of My Overshopping**

Most participants expressed that their compulsive clothing buying behaviors have had a negative impact on their lives. However, some indicated that there are a few

positive consequences of the behavior. Table 11 summarizes the positive and negative consequences of CCB as expressed by participants in the study. These consequences are divided into internal (within the self) and external (relationship with others) and are categorized as either positive or negative.

Table 11

Consequences of CCB

	Positive	Negative
<b>Internal</b> <i>(within the self)</i>	Experiencing positive feelings and emotions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Excitement</li> <li>▪ Happiness</li> <li>▪ Relief</li> <li>▪ Satisfaction</li> <li>▪ Victory</li> <li>▪ Pride</li> </ul>	Experiencing negative feelings and emotions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Anxiety</li> <li>▪ Defeat</li> <li>▪ Embarrassment</li> <li>▪ Fear</li> <li>▪ Frustration</li> <li>▪ Guilt</li> <li>▪ Let down</li> <li>▪ Regret</li> <li>▪ Remorse</li> <li>▪ Shame</li> </ul>
<b>External</b> <i>(with others)</i>	Prepared for a future life (e.g., occupation, relationship)	<p>Relationship issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Marital problems</i>: Engaging in arguments due to excessive spending</li> <li>▪ <i>Familial problems</i>: Engaging in arguments about the extent of the behavior; Not being able to be honest for fear of being judged</li> <li>▪ <i>Friendship problems</i>: No time to spend with friends unless it is shopping; Not being able to be friends with people that do not like shopping</li> </ul> <p>Issues of space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Out of storage space</li> <li>▪ Cluttered space</li> </ul> <p>Amount of time, energy, and effort devoted to the activity (could be put towards other activities)</p>

Kelly currently has no debt issues, however, she acknowledged that the money she spends on shopping could be better used for family activities, such as traveling, or simply set aside for an emergency. She also admitted that there are times when she loses track of how much she spends. Although she is mindful of her behavior, she will often end up spending a significant amount of money on ARPs. Even though she usually does not spend “too much” on one single purchase, she can end up spending a substantial amount of money if she buys things from different places or when shopping multiple times over the course of a week. For instance, Kelly commented that she recently spent about \$900 on four transactions. When asked how she felt about it, she explained:

Kelly: I mean that part when you add it up it makes me feel very guilty. It's like, “Geez!” Like I know, logically, I know I would not spend \$900 in like a moment, you know what I mean? Like, I know I wouldn't, but it's like, \$100 here, a couple [hundreds] here... It's like -- it doesn't feel the same, do you know what I mean? And I know it is, but it doesn't feel that way.

Like Kelly, Helen has no debt issues. However, she regrets the fact that she does not have as much savings as she would like. Even though her family tends to spend a lot of money on shopping, they have always made sure to save enough to pass to their children, and they have stressed that value in many of their conversations. Thinking about this makes Helen feel guilty. When talking about her family's values and how they react to Helen's spending habits, she explained,

I: Do you think they [your parents] will judge you? That they will think that you are doing something wrong? (*Helen*: Right) That you are not saving the money? (*Helen*: Yeah) To what extent would that affect you?

Helen: I mean, I think that it would kind of make me think that I'm spending too much money, so then I feel like guilty for a little while (laughs), after they say that to me. I would just feel guilty after like buying things.

Interestingly, feelings of guilt do not stop Helen from continuing to buy. When asked if the guilt will help her to curb her behavior, she replied: "No. That only, like, makes me feel guilty, but only for a little while and then I just forget about it (laughs)."

Dolores' financial situation has been significantly affected by her buying behaviors. She commented that at one point she had \$40,000 in credit card debt. She eventually paid it off and now she owes around \$6,000. Even though Dolores has been able to pay off the majority of her credit card debt, she still faces consequences from it. When asked about the consequences of her behavior, she expressed:

Dolores: Well, very high amount of debt. Umm... my debt to income ratio is so high that it is challenging for me to get any kind of good rates when it comes to car loans, refinance on the home, so that's definitely a consequence.

The clutter that comes as a result of her shopping and buying behavior is another consequence for Dolores. She expressed, "I am out of room. I'm completely out of room. There is no place more for me to put the stuff." Because of this situation, Dolores is trying her best "to really curb my spending, but it's very challenging to do that." Similarly, Julia expressed that one of the main consequences resulting from her shopping and buying behavior is the clutter in her house. As she explained, keeping an excessive amount of things at both her own place and that of her family's makes her feel overwhelmed.



Julia (personal journal): The clutter inhibits my life and makes it more stressful. My items left at my mom's house are a burden to my mind even though I am not there. I feel like there is a lot of stuff holding me there.

In a similar vein, Lisa explained that her shopping and buying behavior has not directly impacted her relationships with other people. However, she admitted that she has clothes everywhere in her house and that "I don't invite friends or family over" (personal journal), because she does not feel comfortable letting others see the consequences of her buying behavior.

When it comes to marital problems, participants explained that these are mostly associated with excessive spending. For example, Lynn explained that when she was at the height of her behavior, her financial health was seriously affected, and it caused problems between her and her husband.

Lynn (personal journal): My overspending used to put a major strain on my marriage because I overspent my budget almost all the time and I often lied about my behavior. My husband and I got into regular arguments about my shopping, but this rarely happens anymore, as I have been able to stick to my yearly budget for the past two years, and no longer lie about what I buy and how much I spend.

Another consequence that comes as a result of CCB are feelings of frustration and/or disappointment. For example, Dolores talked about feeling bad about herself for not being able to control her shopping and buying behaviors. As she reflected on her behavior, she questions how it is possible for her to engage in CCB when she is so well educated, and therefore knows better about what she should and should not do.

Dolores: Oh, yeah... The consequences are the part that are really bad, you know... Umm the lack of money. The umm feeling badly about myself, you

know, feeling out of control. Feeling like, you know, *“I’m smart. Why do I have to do this stuff?”* you know.

Kelly explained that the time she spends shopping and buying is time she is taking away from engaging in other activities, such as spending time with her family. In her personal journal, Kelly expressed, “I feel like I become so engrossed in shopping / buying and collecting that I miss out on other fun or more meaningful experiences with my family.” Similarly, Julia explained that her shopping and buying behavior takes time away from her studies. She commented, “I feel like I spend a ridiculous amount of time like browsing the web and kind of planning these [shopping] trips.”

In sum, CCB can result in negative and positive consequences at internal and external levels. At the internal level, participants as compulsive clothing buyers experience positive short-term feelings (e.g., excitement, happiness, satisfaction, relief) followed by long-term negative feelings (e.g., frustration, guilt, remorse, shame). At the external level, outcomes of the behavior (i.e., owning the item) can make compulsive clothing buyers feel better prepared for a future life or version of the self. On the negative side, the behavior affects interpersonal relationships, limits the time they can spend on other activities, and leaves them with little to no room to store items, which is overwhelming to them. Although the consequences of CCB can be very negative, most have continued with their compulsive shopping and buying behaviors. In the next section, factors that impede participants’ recovery as compulsive clothing buyers are discussed.

## **What's Stopping Me from Stopping?**

Even though participants have faced significant consequences due to their compulsive shopping and buying behaviors, they continue to engage in it. Thus, it is worth asking what is stopping them from stopping. Issues related to this question are addressed in the following three sections: (1) *Fear of the Unknown*, (2) *Everybody Does It*, and (3) *There's Always Something*.

### **Fear of the Unknown**

One of the reasons provided by participants as to why they have not stopped engaging in CCB has to do with the fear of not knowing what will happen if they stop. That is, they do not know how they will employ the time they used to use for shopping and how they would feel about it. Some fear finding a new hobby and then obsessing over this new activity, or the new activity triggering more shopping.

Some participants expressed that the thought of living without their things or without shopping is unbearable. For instance, Dolores thinks that it is very hard to visualize her life without shopping. She described how that life would look,

I: How does that look at the other side? How do you think it looks at the other side, like if you were to make the decision [of stopping your overshopping]?

Dolores: It feels very empty to me. That's what it feels like, empty umm. You know, it feels like it wouldn't be very fun. Life wouldn't be very fun umm.... It feels very sad. Those are some of the things that it feels like on the other side.

I: It's empty, sad, it's not fun if you stop shopping (*Dolores: Right*). So... you feel like that's stopping you from not moving on?

Dolores: Yes.

Dolores went on to explain that she does not want to experience the emptiness that, according to her, would result from stopping her shopping and buying behaviors.

Interestingly, in another conversation she said that she felt empty. When I asked her about this dichotomy, she stressed that even though it is a paradox, that is exactly how she feels.

I: You just don't want to experience that emptiness (*Dolores: Yes*), although you were telling me that you're already empty

Dolores: I know, exactly. It is... it is such a paradox.

Throughout our conversations, Dolores demonstrated having reflected on her behavior for quite some time. Indeed, she commented that she knows herself very well and that she understands the particularities of her behavior. However, knowing about it does not necessarily result in the decision to change. She explained that no matter how much she knows about the behavior, she can only do so much about it. She fears the change, or in other words, what her life would be like after she stops.

I: So, what is stopping you from the next step? What do you think?

Dolores: 'Cause I could know a lot about it – you are right, I do. I know a lot. I think a lot about it, but the behavior is something that no matter how much I know, I can't stop the behavior. So, I guess what's stopping the next step would be fear. Fear of change.

Similarly, Kelly expressed that she would like to stop the intrusive thoughts associated with her compulsive clothing buying behavior. She commented that it would be nice to find a hobby that she enjoys as much as she enjoys shopping. However, she

explained that she fears that she will, in turn, obsess over this new “thing.” This fear pushes her to stay with what she already knows and prevents her from stopping.

Kelly: Yeah, it might do with control because it’s true, it’s like I’m kind of afraid of changing anything because what I do now, you know, my family is not in debt, it’s in our budget to buy this stuff. Like I’m not... I mean like we talked, we can be using the money for better things, but I’m not doing like any real harm, you know what I mean? Like, I’m not doing any actual harm. And so it’s like I’m afraid that like, once I do something else and like, the obsessive thoughts, those anxiety thoughts that I think about get out of control, and like, I worry about that, you know?

Kelly went on to explain that even though what is out there to discover might be better than what she is experiencing right now, she would rather stay with what she knows than venture into something that might be significantly harmful and, potentially affect not only herself but her family.

I: So you would rather stay with what you know than to actually try something different that might result in something even worse than what you are experiencing now?

Kelly: Right. And I know that the possibilities out there could be better. That I would focus on something else and I would lose focus on the closet and that it will be fine and it will be all puppies and rainbows but it’s just like, you know, part of me is like concerned about it too. It’s like, you know, either the new thing wouldn’t keep my focus and I will still do this or do it worse because it brought stress or did something else, or, you know, that I will obsess over whatever the new thing is in a way that it will be harmful.

### **Everybody Does It**

Another aspect that gets in the way of participants’ recovery is the fact that shopping and buying are common activities. Because American society is built upon consumption, individuals have no choice but to engage in this process one way or

another. For instance, Kelly explained that since shopping is a common and necessary activity, distancing herself from it seems almost impossible. Even if she manages to stop her CCB, she feels like one way or the other, she will always be bound to the activity, especially because her husband does not do any of the shopping and she has a little girl to take care of.

Kelly explained that consuming ARPs is her form of entertainment and she enjoys it. She expressed that it is difficult for her to stop her CCB as she feels that there is a balanced trade-off between the consequences of the behavior and the satisfaction she derives from it. Specifically, she explained that she tends to feel guilty because she is aware that she does not need another clothing item, but at the same time, she knows that she has the means and there would be no further consequences. Indeed, she commented that she tends to justify her behavior by comparing herself to others. That is, she tells herself that other people spend as much money as she does on the things they enjoy, whether it is a lottery or a concert ticket, therefore, it is okay for her to buy as many clothes as she wants, as this is her “thing.”

Kelly: I sometimes I just feel guilty about it, you know, cause it's like, “*Well, obviously I don't need another shirt dress, clearly,*” but at the same time it's like, “*Well, you know, I really want it, we have money for it,*” it's something... I don't know, I justify it in my head a lot. You know, people buy concert tickets or they buy a lottery [ticket] every day or they buy... I don't know, and they buy all of this other stuff and it's like I literally the only thing that I buy for myself, I buy dresses and stuff like this, I buy clothes, like that's what I like. I don't spend a penny on pretty much anything else. So, this is like my form of entertainment and enjoyment. So, I know that's probably a horrible justification, but that's kind of what goes through my head, you know...

The fact that shopping is generally seen as a recreational activity also makes it difficult for participants to distance themselves from it. Julia, for example, explained that it is hard for her to stop shopping because, in part, that is the activity her mother enjoys the most.

Julia: Umm... I think part of it is because my family so... umm when I grew up like my family were really poor and they, so they both immigrated here umm... and like everything we had, we like really took care of everything and kept it forever and umm... so I think there were just such a high value placed on like what you have and what you can't have and what you need to show that you have to people who visit and so umm... I kind of see myself doing that like, "*Oh, like, maybe I should get like three bottles of a nice wine in case someone visits*" or something like that but, you know, it's not like I had a planned event in mind that I would need these. It was just like, "in case" type of thing. So I think umm... I think a lot of it is from that. And it's not like I can completely distance myself from my parents. Like I still see them and, you know, it's like falling back.

I: Oh, so you feel like being in contact with your parents somehow triggers your shopping behavior?

Julia: Umm... I think sometimes umm since like I already told you, you know, whenever I go home my mom wants to go shopping. She also, you know, like we talk about sales or talk about things like that on the phone umm and I think my brother is pretty similar to her in kind of like, you know, shopping and hoarding stuff, things like that.

Even though Julia would like to distance herself from shopping and buying, the truth is that having others asking her to go shopping or talking to her about shopping makes it more difficult for her. In a sense, it is like offering a drink to an alcoholic.

### **There's Always Something**

When talking about the number of items she has in her closet, Kelly explained that she has so much to the point that she could wear a different item every single day for a year and there would still be items left unworn. When asked why she keeps buying, she

explained that she cannot resist the new items that are coming out. She said that she feels the need to own them.

Kelly: I know, that's like that million-dollar question, right? I don't know. The only reason that I can think of is, you know, they keep coming out, new prints that I really like. It's just like, "*Wow, that print it's really special. I really need to have that,*" you know... I like that print so much like, you know, that needs to come into the closet. So, I'll get the things and, you know, it's tricky.

Kelly went on to explain that to some extent it is frustrating for her to know that she is not able to stop herself from shopping and buying compulsively. She explained that due to the nature of her obsession, there is always an item that can fit into her collection that will never be complete.

Kelly: Yeah and that's what's really frustrating about it because like I think if I were collecting umm... I don't know... tiny babies or something (laughs) there are so many of them and you can just collect them and be done with them or, you know, you have 10 left in your collection. This is kind of like an ever evolving one. So it's like, "*Oh! I need this for it. I don't need this any longer.*" So it's really -- it's kind of like... it's dangerous in that sense 'cause it's not ever complete, frankly.

For Kelly, there is always going to be a new print. She explained that even though she has reflected on her behavior, she always ends up in the same place. When asked if she thinks her collection will ever be completed, she replied,

Kelly: I don't know! And that's like... that's something I've tried to think about myself. I'm like, "*Man! Like, what if I don't buy anything from this new collection?*" But it's so difficult not to 'cause it's like, "*I really like it!*" You know, it's like, "*Oh! I really like that.*" So, I don't know the answer. I would love to find that answer. That answer is the ticket but... I don't know when my collection will be complete.



For Helen, the problem is that she quickly loses interest in her purchases. Therefore, she is in constant need of finding items that will make her feel happy and satisfied. When asked why she loses satisfaction so fast, she replied:

Helen: I don't know, like I lose the satisfaction pretty fast. It's like I lose interest in different things very fast. Umm I'm someone that likes new things so umm... yeah, I lose that satisfaction pretty fast and then I need another...

Dolores and Lisa have experiences similar to those of Helen. Dolores explained that after the purchase is completed she feels like "the fun is over" and thus she needs to "move on to the next thing." Lisa, on the other hand, stated that she is always on a quest to find the perfect item "probably to make sure I have the right thing to fit in, you know, in any situation." When talking about how buying makes her feel, Lisa explained that, for her, it is always about finding that special item that will fill a hole in her life. When she thinks she has found it, another item turns into a quest and the story repeats itself.

Lisa: [...] You know, if I find the perfect fitting curvy black jeans now... now I need to find something else. It is never ending... there is never an end to it, you know. So I think it's -- for me it's more about the buying, but more like checking off a box. Like, now I have this thing that I think I need to be socially acceptable or you know, to be dressed appropriately for something. *"Ok and now what? Now I have this thing, now what?"*

Even though it is challenging for participants to control their behaviors, they have remained strong in the desire to recover. Indeed, all have found ways to overcome these difficulties, and thus have taken steps towards recovery. In the next section, strategies

used by participants to take control over their shopping and buying behaviors are discussed.

### **Management Strategies**

Most participants think that they are taking steps towards recovery. In the process, they have developed strategies that have helped them either curb the behavior or even stop it altogether. For some participants, being a compulsive clothing buyer does not seem to be of much concern, thus, recovery is not necessarily a priority. In those cases, strategies to minimize the consequences resulting from the behavior are usually employed. For others, the consequences of not stopping their shopping and buying compulsions are too great. Thus, they seek to put an end to it. Table 12 summarizes the strategies used by participants to manage the behavior.

Table 12

Management Strategies

<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Effectiveness</b>
<b>Slow down</b>	Develop an inventory list / master list	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps focus on items that are more essential / needed.</li> </ul>
	Develop a list of questions to be asked before completing a purchase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows for more mindful purchase decisions</li> </ul>
	Learn to develop and stick to a budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid financial consequences</li> <li>• Allows for more mindful purchase decisions</li> </ul>
	Wait from 24 to 48 hours before purchasing an item	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides time for reflection</li> <li>• Allows for more mindful purchase decisions</li> </ul>

Purpose	Strategy	Effectiveness
	<p>“Shop my own closet”</p> <p>Wear items similar to the one she will find at the store</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps make the most out of what she already has.</li> <li>• Serves as a reminder of how much she already has or how similar the items in the store are to the ones she already has</li> </ul>
<b>Stop</b>	<p>Seek counseling / psychotherapy</p> <p>Stop reading fashion blogs</p> <p>Identify and engage in new activities / hobbies</p> <p>Track the amount of times she wears items</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides the opportunity to learn about deeper issues related to her behavior</li> <li>• Provides the opportunity to learn new (more personalized) strategies to stop</li> <li>• Reduces exposure to shopping suggestions</li> <li>• Reduces curiosity</li> <li>• Allows time and energy to be put towards less harmful activities</li> <li>• Helps with loneliness and boredom</li> <li>• Identify the items/styles she wears the most</li> <li>• Allows for more mindful purchase decisions</li> <li>• Declutter - Helps to identify and get rid of unworn items</li> </ul>

As illustrated in Table 12, participants have developed a variety of strategies to manage their shopping and buying behaviors. Some of these strategies are meant to help participants “slow down,” while others are employed seeking to “stop” the behavior altogether. Both types of strategies are discussed in turn.

### **Slowing Down**

Decreasing but not stopping overshopping is the idea behind “slowing down” strategies. Participants, such as Dolores and Lisa, talked about how they try their best to

look into their own closets before engaging in shopping and buying. Dolores specifically explained that she will sometimes “shop my own closet.” She added that, when going shopping, she now tries to wear clothes similar to the ones offered in the stores she frequents, as this helps her remember how many things she already has.

Dolores: ...and sometimes I will purposely -- if I'm going shopping, I would purposely wear something that is like what I'm going to be around, so that I can then be reminded of the fact that I already have this item. I do that a lot when I'm in an antique store 'cause I love antique jewelry. So, instead of buying more antique jewelry, I wear my antique jewelry to remind me how much I have.

Similar to Dolores, Lynn used to “shop her own closet,” however she had a totally different reason for doing so. She explained that when she was at the height of her behavior, she used to purchase things and then take them back. She would sometimes do it unintentionally, while at other times completely purposefully. For instance, when she felt the desire to purchase, she would go through her closet to find unused items so she could return them and get her money back, only to spend it on something else. According to Lynn, this “shopping bulimia,” as she calls it, is a common thing among compulsive buyers.

Lynn: Oh! It's major, it's a major thing. It's definitely -- I mean, I wonder if you will hear it from other people, but it's a major thing that is going on that people do. I mean, and I did it all the time, and sometimes I would do it unintentionally too. I mean, sometimes it would be very intentionally. Like I would want to shop and so I look into my closet and go, “*What do I have that I haven't worn that I can return so I will have the money to go shopping?*” But other times I would go just to return something just like innocently, “*Oh! I need to return this thing or these couple things.*” And I was just going fully intending that I was just going to return, but then I end up shopping and buying a bunch of other things and spending more money than what I returned. And that's a cycle that you keep going.

Lynn's strategy allowed her to slow down the behavior, in that she returned what she already had purchased, and although she often bought another item, she could at least avoid the financial impact. Likewise, Lisa explained that she has become more mindful of her shopping and buying behaviors. For example, she now thinks about the financial consequences of her purchases. She explained that she is now concerned about her job situation and she questions what would happen if she suddenly lost her job and is, in turn, unable to make her credit card payments. She rationalized her behavior in different ways.

Lisa: But I look at clothing as an investment. Like I would rather pay a \$100 for a blazer that I'll wear for five years, than to get a \$60 blazer that doesn't quite fit right, it's gonna have to be altered, it's a little short, you know. So, I'm okay with spending and I don't really have the money [...] I'm basically charging things on credit cards. But I've gotten, I've started to be more concerned because of my job situation. Suddenly I have to think, "*What if I lost my job and I couldn't make the minimum payments on all these store cards?*" And so, I'm working really hard to get a handle on my credit card debt. I'm trying to be really mindful, you know, before I spend money on something. Umm... I came up with a list of like, I don't want to call it necessities although I think we can probably live forever if we never went to the pool again, but like I haven't had a bathing suit in about 10 years. So, one of the things on my list for this summer is a swimsuit.

Lisa is not only trying to get control over her credit card debt, but to buy things with a sense of purpose. To that end, she has come up with what she calls a "master list." This list includes items she considers to be necessities or priorities.

Lisa: Umm like I said I'm trying to work from my master list. Like if it's not in the plan for shopping umm you know, and right know what's on the plan for shopping is low heel summer sandals, [...] and possibly a swimsuit and some white jeans, and some underwear that fits and like that's really what's on my future shopping list. Yeah, so... if it's any of those items -- if I feel like I need to shop, I need to shop for those items, you know, and then that's on the approved list but that's at least a plan I've made.

Lisa went on to explain that the strategy of developing a list of items she needs or really wants to buy comes from reading blogs on the topic of over-consumption. She is committed to reading these type of blogs more instead of fashion blogs, as the latter trigger her desire to acquire more ARPs.

Lisa: I mean, Debbie [blogger] writes a lot about, you know, shopping with a reason and a plan and not just randomly entertaining yourself and so... I do think I'm more mindful of it, but I still do fall into that trap sometimes if I had a really crappy day [...] I am trying to read fashion blogs less. There's a couple of blogs that I have followed. Women who have a very similar style to mine or who's style I would like to emulate and... it's like, you know, when they have their must have items, I have to been guilty of that [...] I look at the pictures on *Pinterest* sometimes, but I don't read her blog anymore because I feel like I'm very susceptible or suggestable, you know, "*you need this, this is perfect.*" Well, I don't really need it right now, you know. So I'm trying to avoid certain blogs that -- I'm trying to read the blogs like Debbie's and like Gretchen Writers, *The Minimal Closet* blog, umm more things that are focused on not shopping. There is another that is called *Shopping Break* and I've been reading those kinds of blogs instead of fashion blogs that are saying, "*You need this outfit. You need this look. You need this.*" You know? And enjoy the... I love the fashion stuff, I love clothes, I love to look pretty but I'm -- I know that's a trigger for me, so I'm avoiding it right now, kind of.

Lisa also indicated that following the suggestions of different bloggers, she has developed a list of questions to ask herself either during the shopping and buying process or when she is cleaning out her closet. She explained that this practice allows her to make better purchase decisions.

Lisa: I have this list of questions to ask myself about every, you know, piece of clothing and it's a combination of questions that Debbie suggested and Gretchen suggested [bloggers]. [...] So these are the questions... umm I think it was Debbie [the one] that suggested that you should do like a first impression test, like in 30 seconds or less [ask yourself:] "*Do I love this?*" Don't over think it, just, "*Do I love this? Do I feel good wearing it?*" [...] "*Does it fit with my lifestyle?*" Like, "*Does it fit the life I am living today?*" If it's something -- If I'm cleaning out the

closet, I have to ask myself, “*Would I buy it today?*” Like, if I found this piece in the store, “*Would I buy it today?*” [...] I think that’s important because if you wouldn’t buy it today, you need to throw it out or donate it or consign it. “*Would I choose this piece over [another] similar?*” For example, if it’s a black blazer and I have a few other black blazers, “*Is this the black blazer that I will chose over the other two black blazers that are already hanging in my closet?* And this one I think I made it up myself, “*Do I like this in theory or in reality? Do I like the idea of it or do I really like this actual item that’s sitting before me, that I’m holding in my hand? Why am I not wearing this?*” If it’s in my closet and I’m cleaning out the closet, “*Why don’t I wear this?*” [...] Now I’m trying to be more mindful as I’m choosing things. [I ask myself,] “*Is this gonna be next year’s thing that I’m going to be like, ‘Why did I need this? Why did I buy this?’*” So, you know, having gone through that last year has made me more aware of not repeating that this year.

When talking about the moments when she is more prone to engage in CCB, Lisa explained that it is usually after a stressful day at work. However, she thinks that she is doing much better now that she is more mindful of her behavior. She commented that she is more likely to return the items she feels she will not use. One strategy she is employing when shopping online is to put items in her virtual basket and wait 24 hours before purchasing them. This extra time provides her with a little bit of breathing room to clear her mind and be more objective about why she wants to make the potential purchase. It also allows her to reflect on the impact of the potential purchase.

Lisa: I’m doing better about you know, returning things or sometimes I’ll put things in a little shopping cart online, you know you can put it in the cart but not actually pay for it and make myself wait like 24 hours and think, you know, “*Do I really need this or I might just... did I just have a bad day?*”

Dolores and Kelly employ the same strategy as Lisa. After they have identified an item they truly like, they tend to wait a period of time before following through with the purchase. Dolores expressed that when shopping online, she tries her best to wait for

about 24 to 48 hours before buying something. However, she confessed that this is not always the case, in that there are times that her compulsion takes over, making it really difficult for her to resist the temptation of buying.

Dolores: ...many times I will say I'm not going to buy anything until I have waited 24, 48 hours and I've learned that's something that is really important to me to do when it comes to online shopping. So, umm if I can, I wait. But sometimes I can't. The compulsion just takes over and I have to buy it right away.

Dolores further explained that "when I don't take time to really think about it, then that's when I make the impulsive purchases." Similarly, Kelly tries to wait to make a purchase. She expressed that she tends to put the items she likes in the virtual basket and wait until a promotion comes up, as she considers this to be a good "reason" for purchasing something. When she receives notice of a promotion, she then goes through the items she placed in her virtual basket to decide what to buy.

Kelly: So, my typical thing, you know, I'd be perusing whether it is something new or somebody is talking about it on a FB [*Facebook*] group or something, you know, and maybe I'll look and see what they are looking at and then you know I might see something I like and I will add it to my virtual basket and then it will stay in purgatory in the virtual basket for like a while, you know what I mean? You kind of look for it. And then if like a promotion comes out or... you know, some reason to... like a reason to purchase it technically, and you know it is crazy sounding, but anyway a reason to purchase it comes out, then, you know, I will look through the basket and decide what I want to get out of my favorites or one thing or 5 things or whatever it is. Umm and then I will think about it even though it's there like, this will be that day, I'll be like... it will be on my mind like, "*Oh, should I do it? Should I not do it? I guess I should do it,*" you know. And eventually I'll purchase it, usually.



Kelly does not take her decisions lightly. She said that even though there may ultimately be a promotion, she still questions whether or not purchasing the item is the right thing to do.

### **Stopping Altogether**

Some participants are trying to find ways to shift the focus from shopping to other activities that will be as fulfilling. For instance, Kelly explained that she is looking for other activities she can spend time on. She does not want to go back to work full-time because she wants to be able to have the flexibility to spend time with her daughter. Thus, she is looking more for places she can volunteer and get involved with other women her age.

Kelly: Yeah I've been thinking a lot about it. [...] Yeah, I think that I need some more of that in my life. I don't really know how to get it right now because I don't want a full-time job because I've got a child at home still. You know, a part-time job, even at this point, is quite stressful. But I would love to do some volunteering. I do volunteer for my church now but I would like to do something with -- I guess women my age. Because church is really older people.

The possibility that a new hobby would trigger Kelly's compulsive clothing buying behavior is latent. When asked if she was worried about her strategy becoming part of her problem, she replied:

Kelly: I mean, maybe to some extent. But I think -- I think it will be fulfilling in the sense that I think I'll get to meet some other women that -- I really would like to meet more people in my area. I have a hard time because my one girlfriend who like, I love and adore, she lives so far away from me. So it's like, we only get to talk on the phone and I get to see her pretty rare. And like I have some other friends here but it's really hard with schedules and stuff. So, I do feel isolated a lot of the time. So, it will be kind of nice to get out and have that social interaction again. And, yes, there probably is some degree... some of that pressure too.

Writing about the behavior has been one of the things that has helped Lynn overcome her CCB. She said that being a role model for others and the accountability that comes from this helps her to think twice before purchasing something.

Lynn: I mean, I think for the most part it really helped me. I think that if I hadn't done the blog I would probably not be as far along in my recovery as I am, mostly because of the accountability aspect of it and knowing that I buy things and I'm, you know, I mean, accountable that I'm going to share it on the blog so there is that part of it and this feeling like I have, you know, wanting to be a role model to some degree to my readers, so there is that. But then I just think that because I spent a lot of time blogging, then that can get in the way a little bit of me developing some other interests or getting out.

Lynn explained that even though her blog has been a significant tool in her recovery, to a certain extent it has also kept her engaged in CCB. She thinks that spending so much of her time writing and answering her reader's messages takes away the opportunity for developing other interests.

Lynn: I place a lot of focus on it. It's not the focus of "*Oh, I want more,*" but it is just the focus on the whole issue in general and I think that that's, you know... I mean, I've seen that with other people with other issues too. That they, you know, they can... they are placing a lot of focus on something, even in a positive respect, but then that can get in the way of their recovery sometimes.

For Lynn, keeping track of the amount of times she wears each item she owns has proven to be a very effective means of stopping the behavior.

Lynn: Well, it's taking a long time. I mean, and I think a lot of it is through doing the blog and really getting... really and doing a lot of tracking of my clothes too. Like that, that has helped me a lot. Like tracking how often I actually wear things. Because, you know, and then I started to see what a tremendous waste it was. Not just like a waste of money, I mean there is that, there is definitely the waste of money, but just the waste of like, you know, I get rid of things that were still in

perfect condition, you know, or I get rid of them because they weren't in style anymore. I just liked them but they hadn't served their usefulness. You know, you get rid of something that you wore once or twice. You know, I want to get rid of something I've worn like a whole bunch of times and I loved it into the ground and then it's worn out and that's why I'm getting rid of it. I'm sad because it's worn out.

Lynn went on to explain how her mindset about wearing things has changed and how this has helped her take control of the behavior.

Lynn: I mean, I had this whole other perspective. Like I never used to wear things out. I mean it was never like... now I'm sad sometimes because there is things that are wearing out, I'm like "*Oh! That's wearing out!*" you know, but I never had that before. [...] So, I think a lot of it is just getting present to the waste, really getting present to the reality of like how little things are actually getting worn so then, you know, I could see, "*Oh, I shouldn't buy that kind of thing anymore.*"

Another strategy that has helped Lynn in her recovery is creating a list of the items she really needs or wants to buy. Then, when she goes shopping she tries to follow the list of items and resist the temptation to purchase other things. She explained that she also takes time to consider the likelihood of wearing the item. In other words, she thinks through how appropriate the item is for the life she has, rather than the life she would like to have.

Lynn: So, if I was standing in a dressing room... I mean, they say [...] not to try something on unless it's actually, it's on my list. You see, they are on my list of things that I want to buy or like kind of in the case with the shopping that I did last Monday, not all the things were on my list, but every single one of them was something that I can see myself wearing like very soon. Like, for my real life not for some imagined event that isn't going to occur.

It is worth pointing out that even though Lisa uses the same strategy as Lynn (i.e., developing a master list), her focus is on cutting back on her spending and not on completely stopping the behavior.

In contrast to all of the other participants, Helen expressed that she has done nothing to stop her behavior. Since CCB has not negatively affected her life – or, as she stated, it has not resulted in debt – she does not feel the need to make any changes in her behavior. When asked if she had taken any actions to stop her CCB, she replied:

Helen: Not really.

I: Why is that?

Helen: I think it is because I've never really been in debt, I think. 'Cause, you know, usually people get in debt and then they realize that they have a bigger problem than just buying. So, I've never really been in debt and I think that is one of the major reasons and... so I never thought it was such a problem. I've never seen it as problematic.

Even though Helen recognizes that she buys too much, she still does not see her behavior as a problem. She explained that as long as she generates enough income, she will be fine. Indeed, for her, it is a matter of being “flexible.” That is, because she does not have as much disposable income as she used to, now she just buys cheaper goods. As she stated,

Helen: I think I'm pretty flexible. So, umm... before I started earning money and I was using my parents' money, I was buying a lot. At that time, I was buying the amount that I could afford and then, I mean, comparing to now that I have a lot less money to buy... but then I still now... I just buy cheaper items, but I can still buy. So it's just a matter of being flexible on your purchases, I guess.

In sum, participants talked about a variety of strategies they employ to seek control over the behavior, or to at least minimize the effects of it. These actions represent the hope that at some point, the participant will be able to look back with satisfaction that her issues with shopping and buying are a thing of the past. Some are almost there, while others have been there for a while. One participant, however, does not see her behavior as problematic and therefore has not employed any strategy to curb it. How participants see themselves at the present time is explored in the final section.

### **The Long Journey**

The path to recovery is different for each participant. Each experiences the behavior differently and so the strategies each uses to overcome the challenges she faces are different. In this section, I examine how each participant sees herself at the present time and what her hopes are for the future.

#### **Lynn Raise**

Lynn, who has been in recovery for a while, expressed that her blog has helped her tremendously in her quest to overcome her CCB. Writing allows Lynn to become more mindful of her behavior due to the reflection this process requires. As she commented, she is now focused on establishing relationships and finding things in life that she can enjoy.

Lynn (personal journal): ...I have realized how much my overshopping adversely impacted my life. I spent far too much time, energy, and money on shopping. I was not a well-rounded or balanced person. I am now working on developing new hobbies and interests and meeting new people, so I won't shop as a social outlet anymore. I still have issues around shopping and still make quite a few mistakes, but I definitely feel that I am on the road to recovery!

Lynn believes that she is now much more in control of her shopping and buying behaviors. She explained that she is more comfortable with getting rid of the clothes she does not use and that this has positively affected the value of the items she decides to keep.

Lynn: ...I feel like the more I get rid of, the more I like my clothes, the more I like my wardrobe. And so now I actually like getting rid of stuff. But umm it's, you know, it's an evolution that happens.

Moving forward, Lynn plans to continue writing about the topic and helping others find strategies to overcome their own obsessions with ARPs. She believes that her recovery is an ongoing process and she is confident that she is on the right path.

### **Kelly Knox**

For Kelly, the worst part of her behavior is the fact that it makes her feel bad about herself and that it does not allow her to save as much money as she would like. She explained that she considers her behavior to be a “flaw” and talked about how suffering from CCB is embarrassing for her.

Kelly: I just feel really bad about it. I feel kind of embarrassed that I have this flaw and I feel like... I feel defeated a lot because it's like I try to not be like that and yet I still am. So for the worst part it is usually just kind of I guess the toll that it takes on my self-worth umm... cause it's something like obviously I should be able to control but I can't. And then from like the outside-of-me perspective the worst part is not saving the money that I would like to save for the family, because of this.

Kelly explained that she started reading blogs about compulsive buying hoping to find strategies that will help her take control of her behavior. Reading about CBB gave

Kelly some perspective regarding her behavior. That is, she was not only able to learn about the disorder, but she found out that she was not alone in it. Through such online platforms, Kelly has found strategies that have been helping her control her shopping and buying.

Even though Kelly has seen progress, she feels that she still has work to do. To this end, she intends to engage in other activities, such as volunteering, that hopefully will keep her mind off of shopping. Looking to the future, Kelly explained that whatever it is that she is doing, it will be better than staying at home perusing the web. Indeed, she commented that she believes her behavior cannot get any worse than it currently is.

Kelly: I mean, I don't think it could really be too much -- not like, "*Oh! I'm so like the worst in the world.*" I don't think it could be too much worse. I'm already -- I'm at a point where I buy like 80 to 90% of what I want. Do you know what I mean? So it's not like -- Not like it couldn't be worse I guess, but I feel like it's not gonna trigger additional -- I feel like it is only gonna help me feel less isolated and less, like, do you know what I mean? I think it will give me some kind of connection that I think I would really enjoy.

Kelly wants to be able to control her shopping and buying behaviors. Specifically, she hopes to be able to change the way she feels about shopping, though she does not know how she will do this. In her personal journal, Kelly wrote: "Something needs to change, but I am at an utter loss of how to change."

### **Helen Crawley**

Helen reflected on the overall impact of her behavior and explained that she tends to get tired of her items fairly quickly, which perpetuates the behavior.

Helen (personal journal): I buy things I am not going to use, but I still buy them (for no specific reason). And I get tired of things very easily. However, I do have several favorite and nostalgic items that I've used and kept for years and I feel lack of security without them.

In our conversations, Helen expressed that she does not see herself stopping her overshopping. Since it is not affecting her financially, she feels comfortable with it, so will likely continue. However, she did mention that now she is mindful of her future and feels like she should be more responsible with regards to the money she spends and the money she saves for when she retires.

Helen: I started saving but not that much (laughs) and umm... so I think it's... yeah, it's made me think that I should save more instead of keep on buying and being -- kind of being more responsible I guess of my life because I never really worry about what I'm gonna do about retirement. Like, people talk about, like, saving up for retirement when I really -- I never thought about it. Umm I guess I never had to worry about it, but I just think that maybe I should be a little more responsible.

### **Julia Sanders**

For Julia, the worst part of her shopping and buying behaviors has been not being in control of her time. She said, "I just feel like I'm just clicking, clicking, and clicking, and falling into other people's [web]sites and then, *'Oh! Three hours have gone by.'*" She thinks that she needs to be more mindful about the amount of time she is spending on shopping and buying. Indeed, she indicated that she is planning on setting a timer when she is shopping online to avoid staying on the web for too long.

One thing that concerns Julia is the fact that her behavior is now migrating from ARPs to groceries. She explained that groceries are cheaper and, in contrast to clothing



items, she feels like she is able to make more out of them. However, that is not always the case. For instance, Julia talked about how she sometimes buys in bulk just because there is a sale, only to have to throw it away later because she is not able to eat it all.

Although Julia has seen some changes in her behavior, she explained that she still needs to see more permanent progress. For example, she commented that she has been able to resist seasonal sales, coupons received through email, and fashion bloggers' suggestions. However, she wonders if she has been able to do so for the right reasons. That is, if she has been able to resist temptation because she is really on the path to recovery or because she is busy with school work and other activities. Regardless of the reason, Julia expressed that she is at least more mindful of her shopping and buying behaviors and is aware of the changes that need to be made, communicating in her personal journal that: "I think my behavior is more thoughtful." Julia indicated that she plans to continue monitoring her shopping and buying behaviors and believes that by doing this, along with reading self-help books and blogs, she will be able to see a significant improvement.

### **Dolores Goswick**

Dolores explained that she has been able to control her spending to some extent. However, she still feels like there is more work to do, as she stated, "Overall, I want to be much more deliberate with my shopping. I have improved a lot, but there is more work to do!" She commented that attending Debtors Anonymous meetings has helped her a great deal. She described how some of her experiences have played a significant role in the path to recovery.

Dolores: I have done that so many times, meaning I have gone ahead with the purchase, even though I didn't have the money, and the pain that comes from that is so great, that I am not doing that anymore. It's a terrible feeling to not have any money left when it's, you know, three days after payday and I have not purchased the things I'm supposed to purchase for myself.

I: Like what?

Dolores: Well, I have been in those situations where I haven't paid my student loan or I haven't purchased for myself what I needed because I've shopped instead.

Dolores explained that at times the pain resulting from her behavior is far greater than the satisfaction she derives from it, thereby making her think twice before engaging in CCB again. She stated that this is, for her, an indication that she is really working towards her recovery. Dolores expressed that she has no regrets about her CCB. Although there is a part of her that somewhat regrets having the debt that she has right now, she feels like her experiences have made her the person she is today.

Dolores: No, because it has gotten me to where I am right now. It took a lot of pain and a lot of shopping behavior to get me to the place where I am right now, which is me not wanting to shop.

Dolores confessed that a complete recovery is far away. When asked if she sees herself at a point where she has stopped fully, she explained: "I really don't. I just don't. I think I will always be shopping for something." However, she is positive that she will find a way to shop more responsibly. In this regard, she is making efforts to find hobbies that will take away some of the time she dedicates to shopping and buying.

## **Lisa Nedina**

Lisa is currently working on taking control of her shopping and buying behaviors. With the help of bloggers' suggestions, self-help books, and counseling, Lisa has been able to identify areas in her life that are in need of attention. Through blogs, she has learned how to make the most out her wardrobe, as well as strategies to minimize her spending. In one of our conversations, Lisa explained how these blogs have helped her to gain a better understanding of her CCB.

L: ...she [blogger] has written a lot about a full life instead of a full closet. When I started reading those things on her blog – and I also read *The Minimal Closet* that she has referred us to – and you start asking yourself these questions, “*Why am I really buying this?*” [...] “*Do I really need 101 pair of jeans?*” or “*Do I feel like I look fat in my others?*” I mean, what’s the real motivation? I mean, and once we start to ask ourselves that, I think a lot of things start to become clear.

Therapy has also been really helpful during Lisa’s path to recovery. As part of her efforts to take control of her life, Lisa is attending counseling sessions once a month. In therapy, Lisa is not only working on ways to control her CCB, but on the other issues that cause her stress, such as her relationship with her daughter, her mother’s health condition, and issues at work. Self-help books have also been very helpful in her recovery. Thanks to these sources, Lisa has realized how much shopping and buying is affecting her life and it has led her to make some major changes in the way she shops.

For Lisa, the path to recovery has proven to be somewhat difficult. Toward the end of her participation in the study, Lisa wrote about the feelings brought on by the inability to ever fully complete her reflections in the personal journal. She expressed that

a complete recovery does not seem possible, therefore she will always have something more to add to it.

Lisa (personal journal): I have realized there is no end to this; I am not going to get to a point where I am “fixed” and can “finish” this report. I have good days and bad days, and bad days tend to turn into shopping. I am shopping less and buying better things, but still it continues. In the past month I bought a \$500 *Coach* purse new with tags on *eBay* for \$400 and some handmade jewelry from *French Kande* for around \$140. I did wait ‘til they ran a special to get free earrings with the necklace, but still – seriously??? I love it, but it’s a silver tassel necklace for \$140. I have been caring for my best friend’s mom, who is dying [...]. That has been a distraction and kept me from shopping some. But today I bought a dress from *Nordstrom* (on line [*sic*], \$98), to wear to a wedding next spring, and also a grey suede purse on *eBay* for \$26.00 – vintage *Anne Klein* to match my grey suede boots, but STILL.

Lisa later recognized that she has been making progress and that even though she might feel frustrated at times, she is convinced that she is taking steps in the right direction. As she wrote: “It [participating in the study] has made me much more mindful about not only the amount of shopping I do, but the deeper issues that trigger my shopping. Still a work in progress, but I do feel I have made some progress...” Lisa seems confident that she will be able to take control over her CCB, to the point where she only buys the items she really needs and likes, and that she will actually use. For now, she appears satisfied with the progress and feels that she has found the support she needs.

Overall, participants’ paths to recovery are filled with obstacles that, for some, are easy to overcome, while for others, only time will tell. The discussion in this chapter demonstrates that regardless of the negative and painful consequences resulting from CCB, participants are unable to stop their behavior easily. Participants’ inability to stop comes as a result of both internal and external cues. On the one hand, they are afraid of

how unfamiliar a life without shopping and buying would be. On the other, they acknowledge the fact that shopping is a common activity, therefore difficult if not impossible to avoid. Indeed, there will always be something out there to buy. However, in spite of the challenges, participants seem to be persevering in the pursuit of strategies that will help them slowly take control of the compulsion to shop and to buy.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, participants' various paths to recovery were explored. The impact of their shopping and buying behaviors, as well as factors impeding their complete recovery were examined. Strategies employed with the purpose of stopping, minimizing or continuing with their compulsive clothing buying were also explored. Finally, participants' reflections and thoughts on the possibility of a life without CCB were discussed. In the next chapter, I present the third level of interpretation, wherein I consider the theoretical implications of participants' lived experiences with compulsive clothing buying.

## **CHAPTER IX**

### **THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

A phenomenological approach to inquiry provided a framework for the thematic interpretation that gives shape to the purpose of this dissertation, which was to develop an in-depth understanding of the compulsive clothing buying experience. The four-part interpretation also sheds light on the behaviors that comprise compulsive clothing buying (CCB), as well as the role of appearance-related products (ARPs) relative to these behaviors. The interpretation allows for a deep understanding of the meanings assigned to and derived from the acquisition and ownership of ARPs among the participants as compulsive clothing buyers.

In this chapter, the conceptual relevance of the thematic interpretation is discussed. To this end, the chapter is divided into three parts: (1) *Who is the Compulsive Clothing Buyer?* (2) *What is it Like to be a Compulsive Clothing Buyer?* and (3) *Why Appearance-Related Products?* Moving from the particular to the general, issues and theories that were discussed as important to shaping the study in Chapter II are examined in light of the personal narratives and thematic interpretation of the data and are considered relative to the broader research goals and objectives guiding the study.

#### **Who is the Compulsive Clothing Buyer?**

Previous research on CBB offers little insight into the characteristics of compulsive clothing buyers. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter II, most research on the

topic has been conducted with the “general” compulsive buyer in mind and little effort has been put toward the exploration of characteristics specific to those exhibiting preference for a particular product category. By virtue of the phenomenological method of inquiry, the data collected for this dissertation offer deeper understanding of compulsive buyers, and particularly those who have a preference for ARPs (e.g., clothing, shoes, jewelry, and makeup).

In this section, qualities of compulsive clothing buyers that emerged from the interpretation of data are discussed. Emphasis is given to the ways in which compulsive clothing buyers likely differ from “general” compulsive buyers. This discussion is vital in addressing the first objective of this dissertation, which is to examine the behaviors that comprise compulsive *clothing* buying. Moreover, this dissertation allows for a better understanding of how CCB manifests itself and is experienced differently by participants. Dimensions of this discussion are presented in two subsections: (1) *Personal Characteristics* and (2) *Paths to the Behavior*.

### **Personal Characteristics**

According to Benson (2000), research describes the typical compulsive buyer as a woman in her 30s “who experiences irresistible urges, uncontrollable needs, or mounting tension that can be relieved only by the compulsive buying of clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics, and who has been buying compulsively since her late teens or early twenties” (p. xxv). Participants in this study fit this description in part in several ways. One, they are all females who reported experiencing irresistible urges, uncontrollable needs, or mounting tension that can only be relieved by purchasing ARPs. Two, several

participants indicated that they have been buying compulsively since their late teens or early twenties. However, when it comes to age, no specific age group was identified as typical or predominant. Rather, participants in this study belong to different age groups. Specific ages ranged from 28 to 55 years old, and the mean age was 41 years old.

The data collected for this study highlight how it is not always clear when the behavior actually begins. To identify a point in time, each participant was asked her age of onset and “moment of realization.” As shown in Table 13, these ages and moments of realization varied significantly. For example, Helen and Julia were in their mid-20s when they realized they were having issues controlling their shopping and buying behaviors. Kelly was in her late teens, early 20s, while Dolores and Lisa were in their mid-30s and mid-40s, respectively. Interestingly, Lynn explained that the first time she realized she was having trouble with her shopping and buying behaviors she was in her early 20s. She commented that it was after she maxed out her credit card and had no money to pay it off that she first became aware of her CCB. Roughly 20 years later, Lynn had another “aha” moment. She explained that she decided to track the amount of times she wore her purchases and that the results of her inquiry were not what she had expected. From that point on, she started blogging about CCB, hoping that doing so would help her gain control over the behavior.



Table 13

## Participants' Moment of Realization and Age of Onset

Participant (Age)	Moment of Realization		Age of Onset	Reason(s) for delay in realization
	Age	Reason(s)		
Helen (32)	Mid-20s	Did not have the means to afford the lifestyle she was accustomed to.  Friends noticed and told her about it	Late teens	Thought her behavior was the norm  Grew up buying like that; saw it from parents  It was not impacting her life negatively
Julia (28)	Mid-20s	Noticed that she had too many unused items  Boyfriend noticed and mentioned it to her	Since she was young	Thought her behavior was the norm  Grew up buying like that; saw it from parents
Kelly (30)	Late teens, early 20s	Maxed out credit card	Since she was young	It was not impacting her life negatively
Dolores (51)	Mid-30s	Overdrawn checking account and had to ask best friend for money  Noticed she was spending more than she had	Early teens	Dealing with other compulsive behaviors that required more attention at that moment
Lisa (55)	Early 40s	Bank denied line of credit due to outstanding credit card debt	Late 20s	Dealing with other situations that were more important at the time
Lynn (48)	1 <sup>st</sup> time: Early 20s  2 <sup>nd</sup> time: Mid-40s	Maxed out credit card  Tracked how much she was wearing her ARPs for two years in a row and discovered no real change.	Teens	It was not impacting her life negatively

Previous studies suggest that the age of onset of CBB generally occurs in the late teens or early 20s, but the realization of the behavior does not occur until the mid- to late-20s (Christenson et al., 1994; Schlosser et al., 1994). Although participants in this study were not able to pinpoint a specific age of onset, most indicated that they started to shop excessively early in their lives and that the behavior evolved over time. For instance, when asked if she could remember her first experiences with CCB, Julia replied, while laughing: “I don’t know because I feel like I want to say [that] I grew up kind of buying like that...” She explained that she learned from her parents to “stock up when it [the sale] was good” and to take advantage of coupons even when the items were not completely necessary at the time.

According to Faber (2011), CBB does not fully manifest until the individual reaches financial independence. Five out the six participants indicated becoming aware of their issues with shopping and buying due to financial problems (i.e., maxed out credit card, overdrawn checking account). The fact that participants had a credit card and/or a checking account suggests that they were probably generating income, which points to some sort of financial independence, hence offering support for Faber’s claim. However, the data also suggest that initial traits of the behavior could be observed long before participants achieved financial independence. For instance, Dolores admitted that she had been having issues with shopping and buying since she was a little girl. She described how she was able to convince her mother to purchase all the items she wanted.

Dolores: I think I had this problem since I was a little girl.

I: How is that?

Dolores: I used to go shopping with my mother. That was one of the things that she and I did together and umm, I would always convince her to buy me things and she would always make a joke and say that, you know, even though she came out to shop for herself, I was the one who was getting the things.

Dolores explained that as a child she was unable to save money. Every time she found herself with some cash, she would spend it right away on ARPs. Likewise, Lynn expressed that her issues with shopping and buying began when she started generating some income of her own.

Lynn: I think I had it ever since I had money. I mean, I think that in my teens. It started in my teens but it's really --it was more insignificant because I just didn't have a lot of money to spend, but whenever I did have money, it was spent almost immediately (laughs) yeah, I mean, it was a problem early on – but when I didn't have credit cards or more means it wasn't as significant.

Both Dolores and Lynn demonstrate how CCB can manifest itself in behaviors at a young age. However, the consequences of the behavior do not become severe until the individual reaches financial independence, thereby suggesting that it has become a problem.

As previously mentioned, findings support the claim by existing research (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989) that compulsive buyers experience irresistible urges, uncontrollable needs, or mounting tension that can only be relieved by the act of purchasing. For example, Kelly described how the intrusive nature of her thoughts make it almost impossible for her to resist the urge to buy. She explained that she thinks about the items she wants for long periods of time, stating that, "it will be on my mind for a

whole day, a few days, whatever it is.” She said that the only way to silence the voices in her head is to purchase the item: “When I make a purchase it’s like, *‘I can quit thinking about it.’*” However, Kelly expressed that shortly after the purchase, she usually starts obsessing over a new item.

Kelly also explained how experiencing an uncontrollable need to acquire an item keeps her from fully enjoying some of the things she likes to do.

Kelly: There is a lot of things that I really enjoy doing. I like being outside, I like doing water activities and umm... like shell collecting and paddle-boarding and... you know, I enjoy doing all those things that are fun, but even when I’m doing those I like, I’m thinking about how shopping could make them better.

Similarly, Lynn reflected on how she used to think of purchase decisions as akin to a “life or death situation.”

Lynn: I remember one time, a few years ago [...] I was shopping with a friend and she saw me getting all frenzied and upset, and everything and she was like, *“Ok, let’s just put this stuff...”* Like, *“Let’s just take these all and, you know, have them hold it for you and let’s go and get some coffee or whatever. Let’s get something to eat. Let’s get some coffee.”* And I mean, that’s the kind of thing I advise people [to do], you know, *“take a breath or take some time away so that you can actually like have some perspective on it.”* Because when you are in the middle of it, you think that this is like a life or death choice (laughs). [...] You really think, *“I have to have this.”*

As both Kelly and Lynn demonstrate, compulsive clothing buyers do in fact experience irresistible urges and uncontrollable needs to acquire products. However, for the participants in this study, it is not just any product that alleviates the negative state. As discussed in Chapter VII, it is specifically the buying of ARPs that makes participants feel better. For example, Dolores explained that she derives less satisfaction from buying

things that are not clothing related and that “it’s clothing that really gets me, gets me that high.” Interestingly, some participants went so far as to state that they only derive satisfaction when purchasing ARPs for themselves rather than others. For instance, Kelly explained that she sees the purchasing of ARPs for her husband and daughter as a task that she must perform, not as a means of satisfying her urge. When asked if she derived satisfaction from purchasing ARPs for her family, Kelly replied:

Kelly: Not really. They are not part of my collection, they go in his [her husband] closet (laughs). So, I like him to have nice things, just like I like my daughter to have nice things. I like them to look nice. I like them to have appropriate clothing. I like them to have, you know, nice things, but I don’t sit and get excited about their stuff.

As will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, participants’ preference for ARPs largely stems from their particular experiences during childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Participants also explained that ARPs are preferred over other consumer goods because of the ability of ARPs to make them feel a certain way and because these items help them to achieve specific goals. This makes sense in light of their focus on buying ARPs for themselves rather than others. That is, participants’ purchases are more a function of the desire to feel better about themselves than the desire to impress others or change others’ perceptions of them.

Consistent with Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al.’s (2010) suggestion, compulsive clothing buyers participating in this study reported experiencing a constant preoccupation with shopping and buying, to the extent that they devote most of their resources to these activities. As discussed in Chapter VIII, participants devote an incredible amount of time,

energy, and money to the shopping activity. Julia, for example, explained that she spends a significant amount of time and energy browsing e-commerce sites and reading fashion blogs in preparation for her actual shopping trips. She commented that she regrets her behavior and explained that she would like to be able to take shopping more “lightly.”

When talking about the importance of shopping in her life, Julia explained,

Julia: I feel it takes up a lot of my time but I don't understand why... Like I find myself doing it almost like reflexively, maybe because I get a lot of emails or you know, kind of sales for online or from a lot of like shopping bloggers, umm, so I feel like I spend a ridiculous amount of time like browsing the web and kind of planning these trips.

Lisa not only spends a significant amount of time and energy on shopping and buying activities, but she also spends a substantial amount of money. She confessed that over the years she has accrued approximately \$70,000 in credit card debt. Due to her debt, Lisa has been forced to work two part-time jobs in addition to her full-time job. Similarly, Dolores explained that her love for ARPs has cost her more than \$40,000. Although she has paid most of her debt, she commented that she is still not financially stable. The inability to control her spending has resulted in her checking account being repeatedly overdrawn, which not only leaves her without money, but with additional debt due to overdraft fees.

Consistent with previous research, participants in this study tend to buy alone most of the time (Schlosser et al., 1994), and their shopping/buying episodes can occur in any venue (e.g., department stores, boutiques, consignment shops) (Black, 2007a, 2007b). However, most participants prefer online shopping highlighting its convenience and

efficiency. That is, online shopping is accessible at all times, they do not have to leave the house, and they can find all they want in one place. They can find a wider variety of items and sizes on the Internet, and it also affords participants the opportunity to compare options and prices. These findings are consistent with Dittmar, Long, and Meek's (2004) study suggesting that online shopping is preferred over conventional shopping due to its advantages (e.g., convenience, efficiency, access to goods and cheaper prices). However, Dittmar et al. suggest that online shopping helps consumers control their spending. This was clearly not the case for participants in this study, as they talked about conducting most of their compulsive purchases online.

In line with Kukar-Kinney et al.'s (2012) findings, participants in this study were found to be price conscious and derive great transaction value from price promotions. For them, it is important to find the best prices, and to do so, they engage in comprehensive searches for information. The following excerpt from an interview with Lisa highlights these characteristics:

Lisa: I was bidding on *eBay* and shopping for stuff and spending all kinds of money and you can actually find some amazing deals on *eBay* like items that are new, you know, I bought a *Tahari* dress for – that had the tags on it for \$159 – I got it for \$32 brand new, tags, you know, so you -- that gets to be -- I like feeling like I got a good deal. It's like if shopping was competitive Olympic sport, I would want to be team captain. So it's important to me to feel like -- that I got a good deal, like I don't... I rarely pay full price for anything. [...] I would do a lot of research online and see what that particular type of shirt, you know, how much is it at *Neiman Marcus*, how much is it at *JC Penney*, how much is it at *Nordstrom* or *Belk* and I would then, you know, kind of narrow it down to probably a mid-ranged. Not the highest, not the lowest.

As illustrated by Lisa's excerpt, participants are knowledgeable of store prices mostly due to the amount of time spent browsing the web and on information searches.

Moreover, as suggested by Kukar-Kinney et al. (2012), participants were found to be particularly susceptible to sales. That is, most of them indicated that direct marketing efforts (i.e., promotions received through email), such as discount coupons, gift-with-purchase, and free shipping with the purchase of "x" amount, have a strong impact on their CCB. For example, when talking about what motivated one of her most recent purchases, Helen explained:

Helen: It was from like an email, and then I just clicked it and one thing led to another and I just... I was like, "*Ok, I think... I'll just buy it, just in case.*"

I: So, are you susceptible to those direct marketing strategies?

Helen: Very! Although I know it's a strategy, I get pulled into it (laughs).

Interpretation of the data revealed that participants are brand conscious, as also suggested by Kukar-Kinney et al. (2012). During the interviews, they referred to a variety of brands as their favorites either because they were high-quality or fit well. Indeed, some participants used the links between brand and quality or brand and fit to justify their purchases. For instance, Dolores explained that being able to find a *J. Peterman* coat that she liked and that fit her was very rewarding. Even though she could not afford it at the time, she still bought it. However, in contrast to Kukar-Kinney et al.'s study, participants were not found to be prestige sensitive. Although they enjoy purchasing specific brands, they prefer them mostly because of the quality and not because of the messages these brands send to others. Kelly, for example, explained that she is loyal to some brands not



because of the status they communicate but because she somehow develops a connection with them.

Kelly: I think brands have always been important for me. Not necessarily that they had to be like high class or something, but there're just brands that I've always liked and I've always been really like brand loyal when it comes to that. It's like, I remember in middle school or high school, you know, *Gap*, for instance. I got into *Gap*. I used to wear *Gap* kids a lot and when I fit in adult *Gap*, it was like, "*Oh! Adult Gap. I really love adult Gap.*" And that's where I wanted to buy my stuff from.

I: So, it is more about the fact that you have used the brand and became loyal to that brand, than the fact that it is an expensive kind of brand or luxury brand, if you want...

Kelly: Right. Yeah. I mean, usually the brands I like tend to be like the good brands. You know what I mean. You feel like -- I don't know, I guess you kind of feel like you relate to that brand.

The interpretation of the data also supports previous studies indicating that compulsive buyers are typically educated women (Christenson et al., 1994; Kyrios et al., 2004). Five out of six participants in the study have a graduate degree, and three of them either have or are working towards a doctoral degree. Although one participant does not have a Bachelor's degree, she works at an institution of higher education, suggesting that she is well prepared professionally. Consistent with previous studies, demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, marital status, and income level varied among the participants (e.g., O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Koran et al., 2006; Workman & Paper, 2010).

Results of this dissertation support findings indicating that compulsive buyers typically suffer from depression and anxiety, and tend to have low self-esteem (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Scherhorn et al., 1990). Participants explained that feelings of depression

and anxiety precede the compulsive clothing buying act. They also talked about how CCB was used as a way to improve self-esteem. Data gathered also supports claims from clinical studies suggesting that compulsive buyers tend to suffer from eating disorders (Christenson et al., 1994; Faber et al., 1995; Marčinko et al., 2006). Three out of six participants expressed having suffered from an eating disorder, specifically binge eating or bulimia nervosa. However, findings do not provide evidence for the relationship between CCB and other impulse control disorders such as pathological gambling and kleptomania (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Black, et al., 2010; Schlosser et al., 1994). In contrast to previous research, findings of this dissertation suggest that family composition does not necessarily influence CCB. Rindfleisch et al. (1997) found that individuals raised in disrupted families show higher levels of CCB than those reared in intact families. In the present study, except for Lynn, whose parents got divorced when she was 14, all of the participants grew up with both parents (i.e., “intact families”).

In sum, findings of this study suggest that compulsive clothing buyers come from all walks of life. In other words, the interpretation suggests that there is no specific demographic group that can be clearly identified (or labeled) as compulsive clothing buyers. Aside from gender and education, there were no other demographic similarities among the participants, though this is as likely a function of the sample as it is the phenomenon. However, consistent with findings of previous research, the participants did experience very similar patterns of behavior and psychological characteristics. For instance, they tend to experience irresistible urges and uncontrollable needs that can only

be alleviated by acquiring ARPs. In addition, they tend to devote most of their time, energy, and money to shopping and buying activities.

As the data highlight, compulsive clothing buyers are far from being a homogeneous group of consumers. Interpretation of the in-depth interviews and information in the personal journals illustrate the fact that, even though the outcome of the disorder is the same (i.e., engaging in CCB), participants follow very different paths to get there. These differences are explored next.

### **Paths to the Behavior**

As discussed in the narratives and thematic interpretation chapters, each participant in this study experiences CCB in her own unique way. Each described having gone through different situations during her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Participants' backgrounds shape the ways in which they experience the behavior as well as the motivations to engage in it. Indeed, several researchers have argued that compulsive buyers are a heterogeneous group and therefore efforts to develop a profile of the "typical compulsive buyer" would likely be unsuccessful (Benson, 2000; DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996). Further, Benson (2000) explained that compulsive buyers not only differ from one another in terms of demographic characteristics but "in patterns of buying, in the intensity of their compulsion, and in underlying motivation" (p. xxvi).

To highlight the ways that the data collected for this study reflect these ideas, Figures 10 to 15 provide illustration of how each participant experiences CCB. The model included in these figures aids in illustrating the complexities of CCB by highlighting participants' early experiences as well as emotions, cognitions, and

behaviors during the different stages of the compulsive buying act. In other words, the figures provide visual representation of the CCB experience as lived by each participant. Data from the in-depth interviews and personal journals, as interpreted throughout the personal narratives and thematic interpretation chapters, are used to inform and shape each model.

As discussed in Chapter II, most research on CBB does not offer continuity or consistency in terms of frameworks depicting the behavior. Researchers tend to develop their own unique frameworks and rarely acknowledge and/or further develop what has been done previously. To try to break this pattern, rather than creating a new framework, it was deemed appropriate to build upon existing research. Specifically, the model used in this section builds upon Kellett and Bolton's (2009) *Compulsive Buying Cognitive Behavioural Model* presented in Chapter II (see page 86). Although the overall structure of the model was retained, several areas were modified in order to serve the intended purpose. For example, cognitions and behaviors experienced during specific stages of the consumption process were added. In addition, situational factors were incorporated under Part II of the model to account for participants' responses (see Figures 10 - 15). External consequences of the behavior were also included, as these aspects can exacerbate the emotional consequences of CCB, thereby acting as triggers for the behavior.

The sequence of the models as presented is based on the intensity of the behavior; ranging from mild, to moderate, to severe. Helen and Julia (Figures 10 and 11, respectively) represent the *mild* version of the behavior. Kelly's model (Figure 12) represents a *moderate* case of CCB. Dolores and Lisa (Figures 13 and 14, respectively)

are the most *severe* cases. Although Lynn's model (Figure 15) is also an example of a severe manifestation of the behavior, it does not reflect how she is currently experiencing the behavior. Instead, her model is a look at CCB in retrospect. That is, because Lynn has been in recovery for the past several years, her model reflects her experiences when she was at the height of the behavior.

Following Kellett and Bolton's (2009) original idea, the model is comprised of four phases, however, they are labeled slightly differently and, as discussed, some of the content differs from the original model. Phase I of the model, *Background*, is divided into two subsections – childhood/adolescence and adulthood – and considers factors that influence the development of CCB:

- *Economic situation growing up* (e.g., lower-, middle-, or upper-class; access to fashion)
- *Relationship with family members* (e.g., good, close, difficult)
- *External influences* (e.g., media exposure; stereotypes)
- *Significant personal experiences* (e.g., emotional abuse; parents' criticism; parents' divorce; gift-giving practice)
- *Early experiences with shopping and buying* (e.g., shopping as a recreational activity; shopping as a family affair)
- *Related disorders* (e.g., eating disorders; depression; alcoholism)
- *Personal characteristics* (e.g., self-consciousness; insecurity; importance placed on appearance)

- *Reasons to engage* (e.g., moving out of parents' home; increase in income; desire to fit in; search for personal image)
- *Moment of realization* (i.e., age and manner of occurrence)

Phases II to IV of the model distinguish between cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors, thus allowing for the complexities of the behavior to be illustrated. Phase II, *Pre-Purchase*, considers the triggers of the behavior as well as cognitions and behaviors before engaging in shopping and buying. Under *triggers*, the individual's internal state (psychological factors) as well as external cues (sociocultural factors) are included. In contrast to the original model, the current version considers situational factors (e.g., need to return previous purchases, having extra money) that were found to prompt participants' CCB. These factors have been minimally addressed in the CBB literature, and Faber and Vohs (2010) refer to them as *shopping-related stimuli*. The authors explained that factors such as being around malls or stores or having extra money can significantly influence CCB. Under the *cognitions* subsection, thoughts that arise before engaging in CCB are highlighted. For example, consideration is given to thoughts about the effectiveness of shopping and buying for soothing disruptions in the participant's internal state. Finally, the *behavior* subsection consists of specific actions performed by the participant before engaging in CCB, including a search for information, discussions on social media, and formulation of a shopping plan.

The third phase of the model, the *Compulsive Clothing Buying Act*, considers the participant's emotions, cognitions, and behavior while in the process of shopping and buying ARPs. Tensions experienced during the shopping and buying process are shown

under *emotions* and *cognitions*. For example, some participants expressed feeling happy and anxious at the same time, while others explained feeling guilty because they knew they should not be engaging in CCB but could not stop themselves because of how much they wanted something. Under *behavior*, a description of the participant's conduct during the compulsive clothing buying act is provided. Aspects considered in this subsection are: how the behavior starts (i.e., with or without a plan); specific actions during the shopping and buying process; and time spent on this activity. Participant's channel preference (i.e., online or brick-and-mortar) and intensifiers (e.g., price, promotions) of the behavior are also considered.

Lastly, Phase Four of the model, *Pre-Purchase*, considers the consequences of CCB as well as participant's cognitions and behaviors after the purchase. The *consequences* of the behavior are divided into *internal* and *external*. Internal consequences refer to the emotions participants experience in the short- and long-term (e.g., happiness, sense of relief, guilt, remorse, shame). External consequences refer to aspects of the individual's life that are affected by her shopping and buying behaviors (e.g., finances – debt; time and energy spent; space issues). Under *cognitions*, tensions participants experience after the purchase are illustrated. For example, some participants experience cognitive dissonance. That is, they enjoy the purchase, but are conflicted by the fact that they spent a significant amount of time and money that could have been spent on something else. Others experience awareness of a breakdown in self-regulation. In other words, they become aware that they were not able to control their urges to shop. Finally, in the *behavior* subsection, the participant's actions after the purchase are

considered. For example, some participants return their purchases, while others hide them from themselves or others. When evaluated as a whole, the model illustrates how CCB can turn into an ongoing behavioral cycle.

As aforementioned, Helen and Julia represent *mild* cases of CCB. Although both explained that their behavior has had a negative impact on their lives, the consequences are not as severe as in other cases (e.g., Lisa, Dolores). Figure 10 illustrates how Helen experiences CCB. According to Helen, the example provided by her parents and other family members led her to believe that shopping excessively was normal. For her, CCB is a way to escape from negative feelings and to deal with issues of the self. Helen explained that she is more at risk to engage in CCB when she is stressed due to school work. She stated: “When I’m stressed. Towards the end of the semester, that’s like... I would have so many episodes of shopping.” Also, discrepancies between her actual and ideal selves act as triggers of her CCB. That is, she purchases items not only for the person she is, but for the person she was brought up to be. Helen also explained that she feels the need to stock up on beauty products in particular because she fears she will run out of things.

Helen described her behavior as habitual and sometimes automatic. She indicated that she does not spend much time in the process of shopping and buying. After the purchase, she tends to experience a variety of feelings such as satisfaction, excitement, pride, guilt, and anxiety. She confessed that she experiences all these feelings for a very short period of time. For instance, on any given day she could purchase a variety of items and experience guilt, but the next day she finds herself buying again.



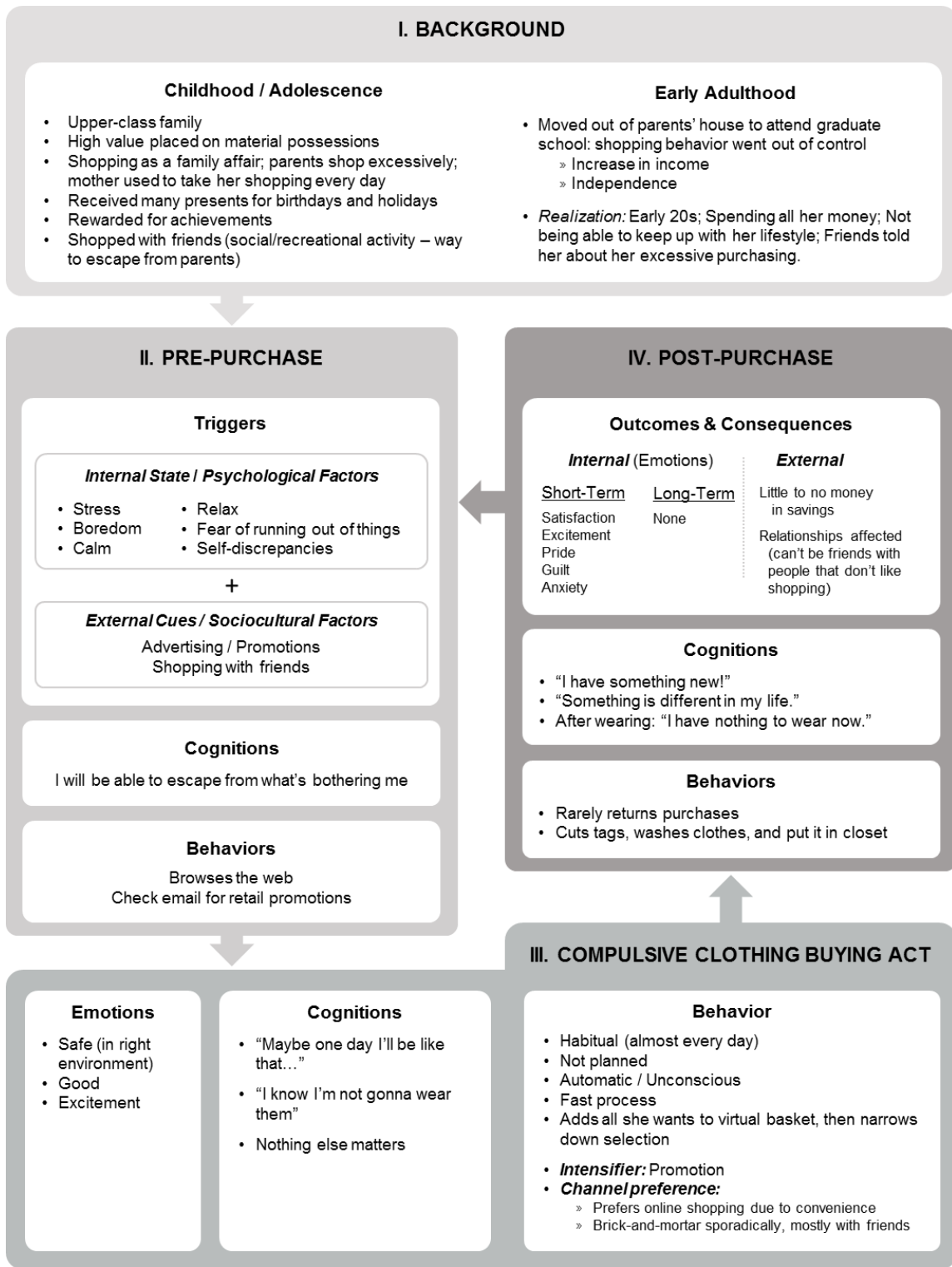


Figure 10. CCB as Experienced by Helen

Figure 11 illustrates how Julia experiences CCB. Typically, Julia's behavior comes as a result of negative feelings, such as stress, boredom, and loneliness. Yet she indicated that there are times that happiness and excitement will also prompt her behavior. Suggestions from fashion bloggers and promotions received through email play a critical role in Julia's behavior as well. In the pre-purchase stage, Julia struggles with thoughts regarding the time and energy she devotes to shopping and buying. On the one hand, she truly enjoys the process of shopping and buying, but, on the other, she thinks she should be using her time and energy for more productive activities such as school work and/or building/strengthening relationships with people.

Before Julia engages in the CCB act, she generally conducts an extensive information search and compares all possible options. Then, she develops a plan as to the items she will look for once she gets to the mall. However, what starts with a plan, most of the time, goes out of control. During the CCB act, Julia usually experiences happiness and a sense of gratification. She enjoys trying on different items because she sees it as a learning process. There are times when she experiences guilt because, again, she feels like she should not be buying. Price acts as an intensifier of Julia's behavior. She explained that there have been times when she has bought multiples of the same item because she liked it and it was a "good" price. Online shopping is sometimes an automatic behavior for her. When engaging in physical shopping, she explained that her purchases are easily influenced by others' opinions. Consequences of the behavior are happiness in the short-term and guilt in the long-term. Cluttered space is also a problem

for Julia. Typically, she waits to wear items or never wears them because she forgets about them.

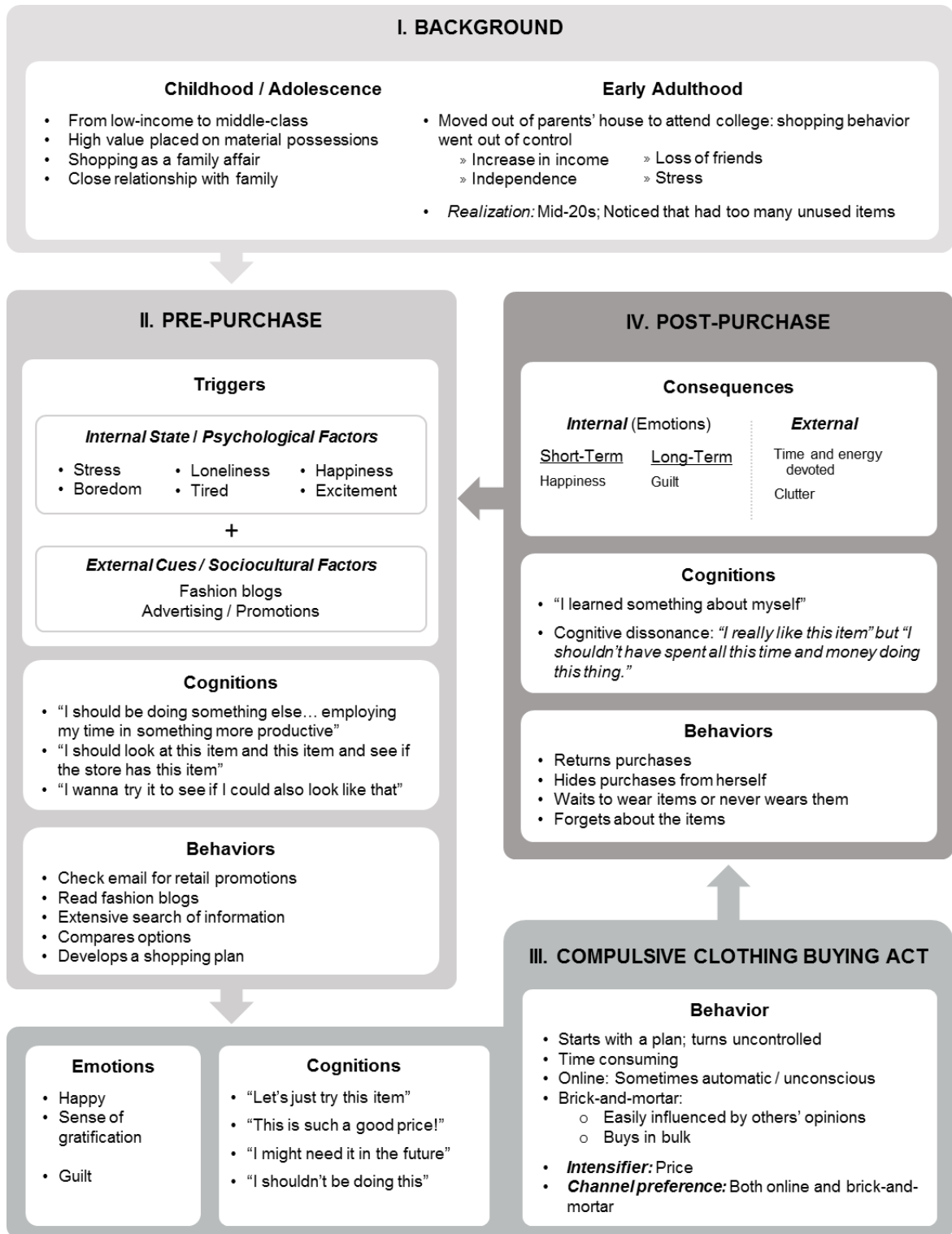


Figure 11. CCB as Experienced by Julia

Figure 12 illustrates how Kelly experiences CCB. Boredom, intrusive thoughts, and “gift-with-purchase” promotions are major triggers of Kelly’s behavior. She explained that a lack of social life or hobbies drives her to shopping and buying as a way to “kill time.” She also expressed that after she sets her sights on an item, she is unable to get it out of her mind until she purchases it. Kelly stated that, for her, it is not enough to see the items online or at the store. Instead, she needs to own them. At times, she transforms her desire for an item into a need, that way it is easier for her to justify the purchase. Kelly expressed that she enjoys reading and sharing her thoughts about her favorite brand, *Lilly Pulitzer*, on social media.

Kelly tends to spend a significant amount of time on CCB. She explained that she struggles narrowing down her selection and that during this phase, she experiences cognitive dissonance. On the one hand, she knows that she should not be buying because she does not really need anything, but, on the other, she cannot help it because she loves the item too much. After the purchase, Kelly feels relieved because she can finally stop thinking about that item. She also feels satisfied and excited, but these feelings vanish as soon as she receives her purchases in the mail. Then, she experiences guilt, remorse, anxiety, and embarrassment. She even expressed feeling defeated because she was not able to control the urge to buy. When she sees the amount of items in her closet, she questions her purchase decisions. However, she clarified that not getting the item would make her feel as bad or even worse. Kelly explained that she derives satisfaction from seeing her purchases in her closet. Her ARPs, specifically her *Lilly Pulitzer* dresses, are seen as a collection, therefore, she struggles with the idea of getting rid of any of them.

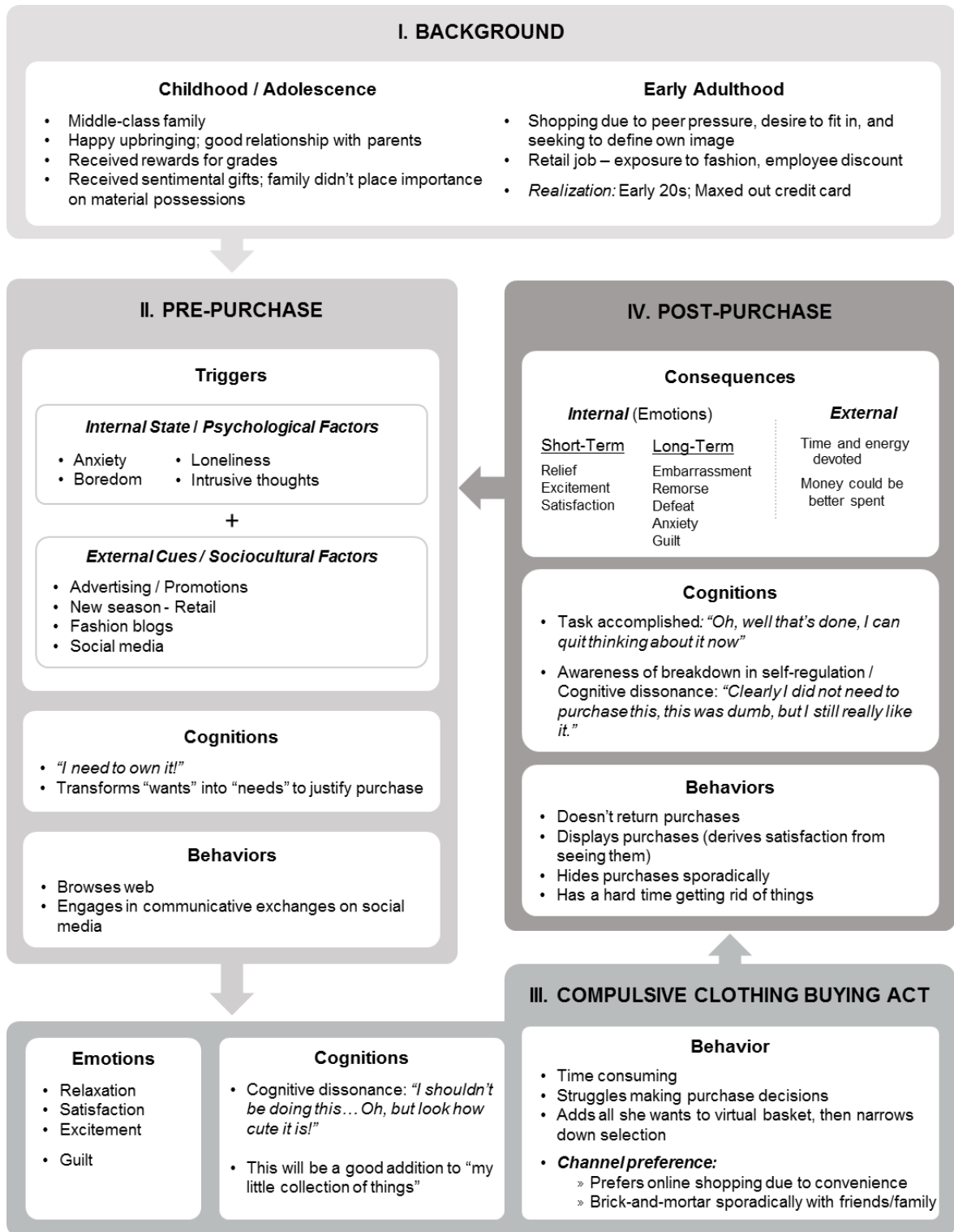


Figure 12. CCB as Experienced by Kelly

Figure 13 illustrates how Dolores experiences CCB. Dolores explained that the major triggers of her behavior are feelings of depression and low self-esteem, as well as having extra money. Since she was a child, she had trouble saving her money. She remembered that when she was given money, she immediately spent it on ARPs. CCB is Dolores' way to feel better about herself. She thinks that by purchasing ARPs, she perpetuates the illusion that everything is going to be okay, and that her life is under control.

Usually Dolores sets a spending limit before engaging in shopping. However, she tends to lose control and ends up spending more than intended. Dolores explained that during the CCB act she feels "high," elated, euphoric, excited, and happy. She even described the process as an "out-of-body" experience. When she engages in physical shopping, she tends to have lunch with her best friend and spends most of the day in this activity. However, when it comes to making purchasing decisions, she usually does so quickly. She also mentioned that she rarely tries on the items because "it interrupts the compulsion." Dolores explained that by making quick decisions and not trying on the items, she avoids reflecting on her actions.

After the purchase, Dolores feels relieved, happy, excited, and satisfied. However, it was noted that the duration of these feelings varied based on the channel. Waiting for the items to arrive prolongs the positive consequences of the behavior. When shopping at physical stores, positive feelings vanish as soon as she leaves the mall. Negative consequences include feelings of frustration, guilt, shame, and remorse, substantial debt, and lack of storage space. Dolores explained that she has run out of space and, therefore

she has been forced to rent a storage unit to keep her items, most of which she does not use anymore. Clearly Dolores has difficulty getting get rid of items. She explained that, for her, these items are part of herself and something that she derives a lot of security from.

During the post-purchase phase, Dolores usually becomes aware of the breakdown in self-regulation. It is hard for her to reconcile the fact that she engages in the behavior given what she knows about the consequences of it. Such thoughts then intensify the negative feelings resulting from the purchase.



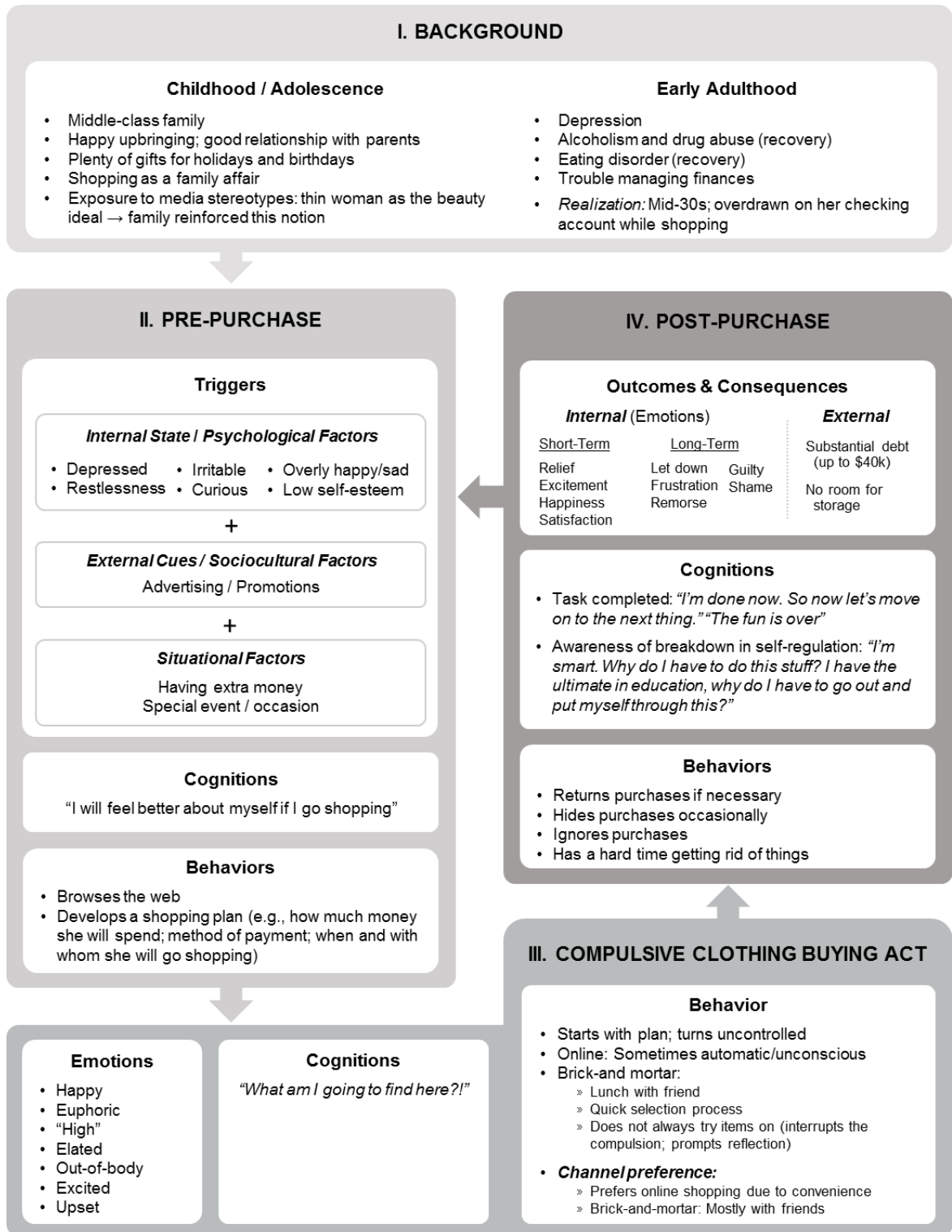


Figure 13. CCB as Experienced by Dolores

Figure 14 illustrates the CCB process as experienced by Lisa. Interpretation of the data indicates that Lisa's CCB is a result of her early childhood experiences. Because she grew up in a low-income family, she was not able to enjoy the same things as other children. She resents the fact that her clothes were never in fashion. Appearance is now extremely important to Lisa and it is the desire to look appropriate and to fit in that motivates her to engage in CCB.

Lisa explained that stress, promotions, and posts by fashion bloggers are the main triggers of her behavior. As discussed in Chapter IV, the relationship with her daughter, the health issues of her mother, and the uncertainty of her job causes her a great deal of stress. Also, Lisa is particularly susceptible to fashion bloggers' suggestions regarding "must-have" items. She tends to turn the search for these items into a quest. Lisa is also seduced by the promotions she receives through email. Although she knows the effect of these communications on her shopping and buying behaviors, Lisa is unable to delete them without reading them first because she fears she will miss out on a good deal.

The need to find an item to wear with a previous item purchased is also a strong motivation to engage in CCB. Lisa spends a great deal of time searching for information and evaluating options before she goes ahead with the purchase. During the CCB act, she tends to experience happiness, excitement, and relief. Because of a humble background, she even feels accomplished, as she never thought that she would be able to shop at the stores she visits. Price acts as an intensifier of Lisa's CCB. She explains that many of her unused items were bought because they were on sale. Consequences of her behavior include happiness, satisfaction and a sense of victory, which comes as a result of having

found the item on the quest. As these positive consequences vanish, Lisa starts experiencing guilt, regret, and shame. She also experiences fear because she starts thinking about the possibility of losing her job and not being able to pay her monthly bills. A major consequence of Lisa's CCB is substantial credit card debt. In fact, it is so substantial that she sometimes disregards it when in the process of shopping and buying by telling herself something like, "When you are spending \$12,000 on something, what's another \$50 here and \$75 there. Seem like small numbers compared with this overall thing."

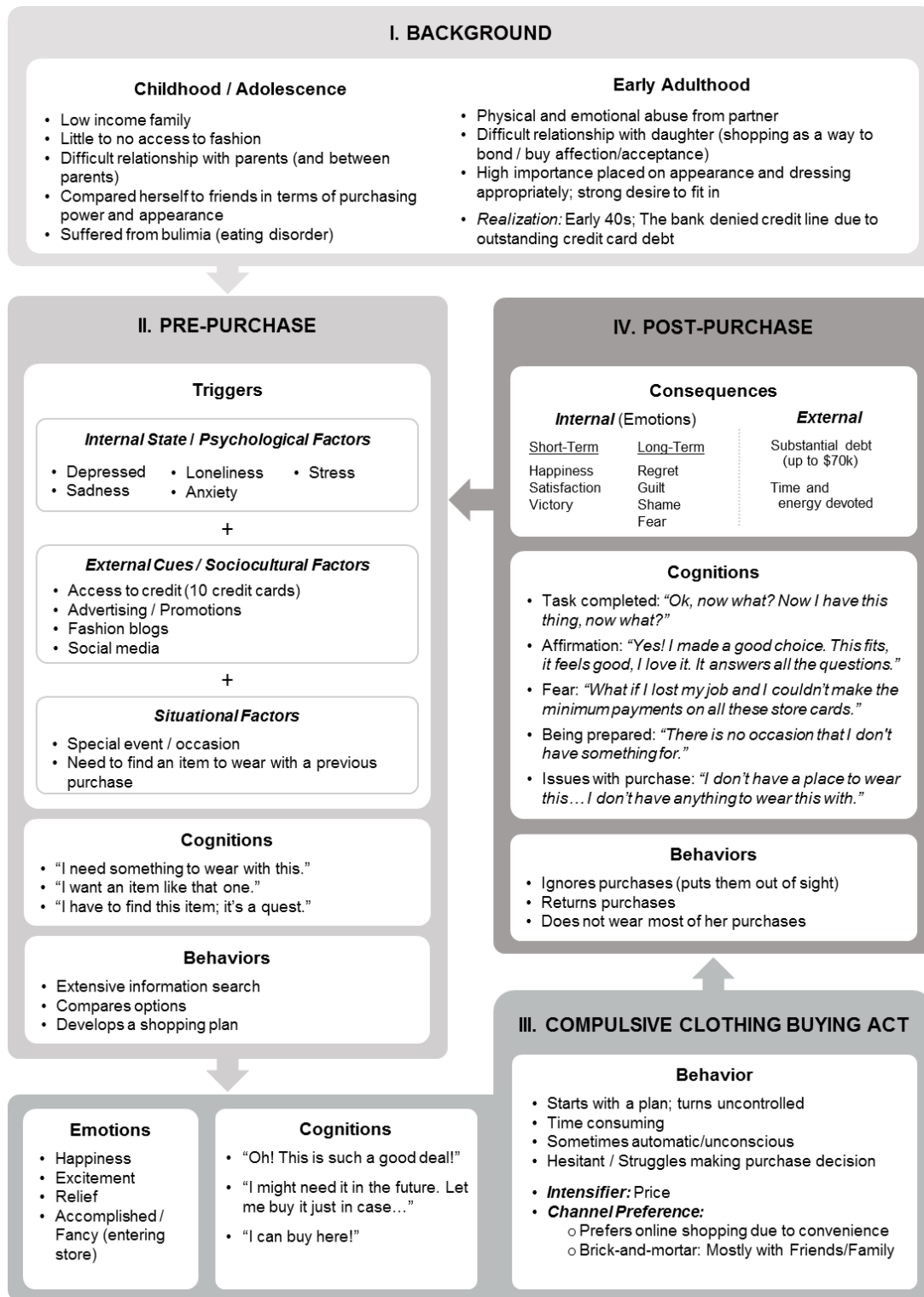


Figure 14. CCB as Experienced by Lisa

Figure 15 represents how Lynn experienced CCB when she was at the height of her behavior. Lynn explained that, growing up, she was very self-conscious and insecure about her looks. Before CCB she suffered from an eating disorder and depression. These factors negatively affected her views on the consumption of goods. Lynn considered shopping to be an outlet to escape from negative feelings. Her behavior was mostly triggered by feelings of depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem, as well as suggestions from fashion bloggers, and the need to return an item. Lynn remembers that she also used to enjoy the interaction with sales personnel. Indeed, she saw it as a friendship, which allowed her to alleviate feelings of loneliness. However, her relationship with the salesperson would also have a negative effect on her behavior because she sometimes felt obliged to purchase something to sort of pay the individual for his/her effort.

Lynn's behavior was so severe that there were times that she would go through her closet to find items that still had tags, so she could take them back and buy something else. Also, there were many times that the struggle of deciding between items left her in tears in the fitting room. For her, each purchase was a life or death situation, to the point where she often purchased all the items with the intention of returning some of them. However, she explained that once she felt they were her items, it was really difficult to let them go. Finally, Lynn was so focused on shopping that she would not go out with friends unless shopping was part of the plan.

CCB was a time consuming activity that caused Lynn not only a substantial amount of debt, but issues with her husband. During the first 10 years of their marriage,

Lynn never kept to her budget. To avoid arguments with her husband, Lynn not only physically hid purchases, but when working on the household finances, she added her clothing expenses under different categories or to different budget months. Immediately following the purchase, Lynn used to feel relieved and excited, but after a while, feelings of remorse and guilt emerged, primarily due to a failure to self-regulate.

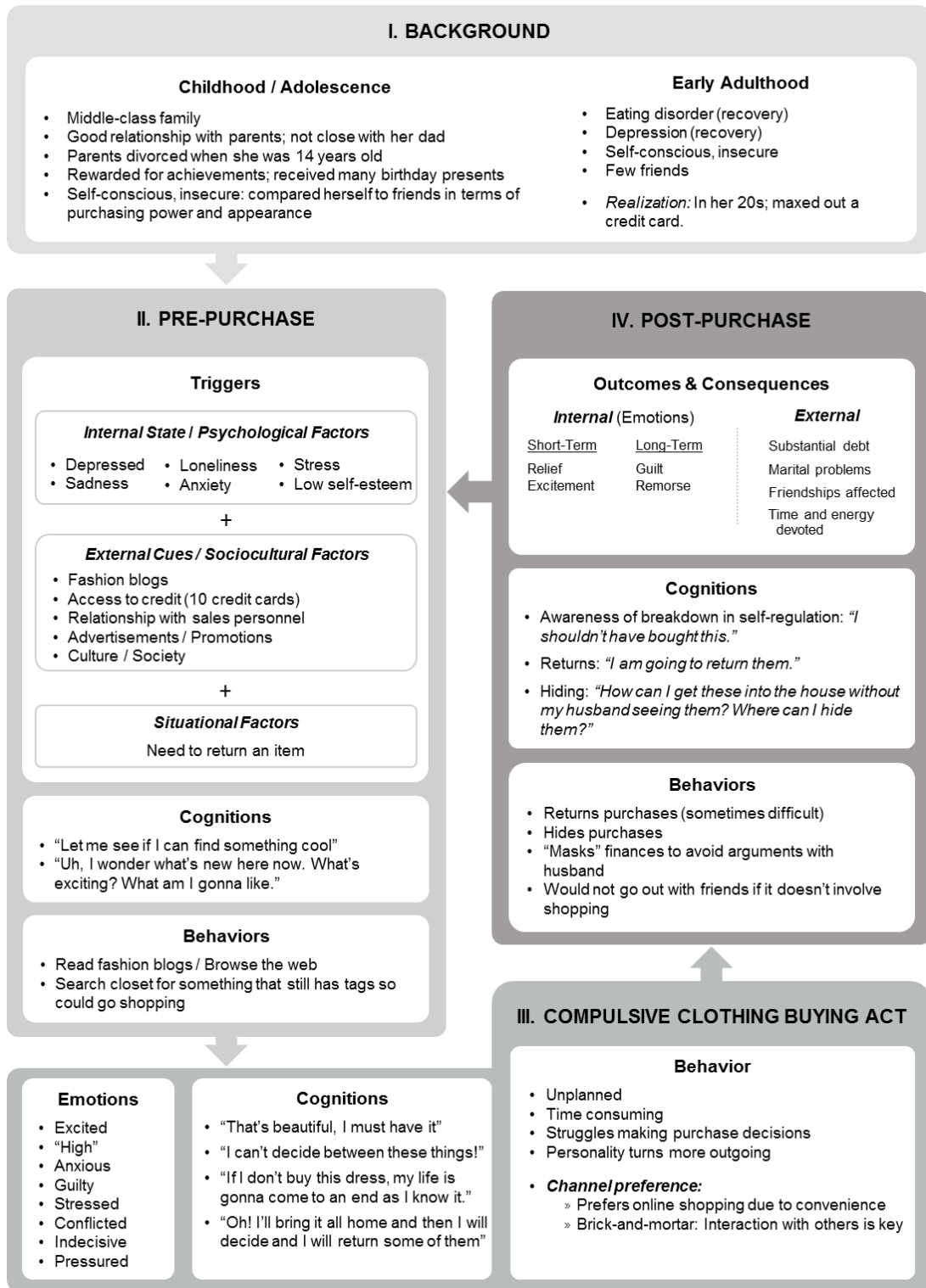


Figure 15. CCB as Experienced by Lynn

Figures 10 - 15 illustrate how different paths to the behavior generally lead to the same outcome: repeated behavior. Although participants' experiences growing up varied, some similarities were found. With one exception, all participants had close relationships with their parents. Some participants suffered from eating disorders, which has been found to be comorbid with CBB in previous studies (e.g., Claes et al., 2011; Christenson et al., 1994). These behaviors are often motivated by the desire to take control over an aspect of one's life, much like CBB.

For most participants, their behavior got out of control after they experienced a level of independence. Increased income levels was also observed as a factor that allowed participants to engage in CCB. Moreover, all participants reported experiencing negative feelings before engaging in CCB. These feelings were alleviated by engaging in the behavior, but resurfaced shortly after the purchase. Some participants, however, indicated that there are times when even positive feelings prompt the behavior. When it comes to external factors promoting CCB, fashion blogs were found to be a common trigger among participants (especially Julia, Lynn, Lisa, and Kelly). The association between fashion blogs and CCB has not been observed in previous studies, thus this dissertation appears to be the first to uncover this relationship. Email promotions were also found to be particularly effective in triggering participants' CCB. Situational factors were only observed in three of the six participants in the study (Dolores, Lynn, and Lisa), which interestingly, were identified as the most severe cases of CCB.

Most of the emotions experienced during the CCB act were found to be positive. However, because some participants also experience a degree of conflict, some negative



feelings were also reported (e.g., stress, guilt, anxiety). With the exception of Dolores and Helen, participants think that their shopping and buying behaviors are too time consuming. With regards to the consequences of CCB, five out of the six participants experience short-term positive consequences followed by long-term negative consequences. One interesting finding is the issue of space. Several participants indicated having a difficult time discarding items, which has resulted in cluttered living spaces. Substantial debt was found to be more common among the severe cases of the behavior (i.e., Dolores, Lynn, and Lisa). Mild and moderate cases (Helen and Julia, and Kelly, respectively) did not exhibit major financial issues.

### **What is it Like to be a Compulsive Clothing Buyer?**

By using an adapted version of Kellett and Bolton's (2009) *Cognitive Behavioural Model*, continuity is given to existing theory. The adaptation of this model to account for compulsive buying behaviors in a product-specific context allows for the identification of new relationships among concepts and stimulates future research on the topic. Moreover, applying the model to each individual case allows for the examination of the different paths to the behavior and demonstrates that compulsive buyers are in fact a heterogeneous group (Benson, 2000). The model shows that there is no single path or specific route to CCB, therefore it illustrates the true complexity of the disorder. Evaluating the cases individually and as a whole provides greater insight into the question of *what is it like to be a compulsive clothing buyer*. In this theme, issues relevant to this question are discussed in the following four subsections: (1) *Motivations and Triggers*, (2) *The Role of Emotions*, (3) *Consequences*, and (4) *Behavioral Outcomes*.

## **Motivations and Triggers**

Studies on CBB have suggested that reasons to engage in the behavior tend to vary. That is, researchers have argued that compulsive buyers may resort to CBB in an effort to boost their moods, improve self-esteem, and/or escape from reality (e.g., Faber & Vohs, 2010; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). In addition, existing research has found a wide range of factors that act as triggers of the behavior, most of which are categorized as either biological, psychological, or sociocultural factors. In this section, both motivations and triggers of CBB are examined in the context of ARPs.

**Motivations.** As discussed in Chapter II, researchers have identified several reasons for individuals to engage in shopping. Tauber (1972) posited that shopping should be explored beyond its mere function of satisfying a need. That is, this process must be examined based on personal and social motives. Babin et al. (1994) as well as Arnold and Reynolds (2003) discussed utilitarian and/or hedonic motivations as reasons for consumers to engage in shopping and buying. Considering these early and fundamental studies on motivations as well as the interpretation of the data collected for this dissertation, ARPs are acquired not only for their utility, but for the psychological benefits that can be derived from them. Likewise, the data further revealed that compulsive clothing buyers are primarily driven by hedonic motivations. In other words, participants are driven to shop in an effort to be entertained and to experience enjoyment and happiness.

Moreover, research on CBB suggests that compulsive buyers present a variety of reasons to engage in the behavior. Among these reasons are: mood improvement (e.g.,

Faber & Christenson, 1996; Faber & O’Guinn, 1988), self-esteem improvement (e.g., Faber & O’Guinn, 1988; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989), changes in arousal (Faber & Vohs, 2010), and a need to escape from painful situations or emotions (e.g., Faber 2006; O’Guinn & Faber, 2005). Another motivation to engage in CBB mentioned in the literature is that of revenge (Eccles, 2002; Elliot, Eccles, & Gournay, 1996a, 1996b). Findings of this study support each of the motivations above mentioned except for the latter. Participants did not appear to use CCB as a way to get back at a partner and/or family member.

According to Faber and Vohs (2010), CBB is seen by compulsive buyers as a strategy of self-regulation. Individuals resort to the behavior because of its ability to alter mood. However, the results are far from desired, as the mood improves only temporarily. Indeed, the authors posit that popular phrases such as “*When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping,*” puts in evidence the general belief that behaviors such as shopping and buying can alter one’s mood. Feelings of self-esteem can also be improved by engaging in shopping, as individuals have the opportunity to receive compliments from the salesperson or from other customers (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989). Faber and Vohs (2010) theorized that the ways compulsive buyers tend to describe feelings experienced while shopping (e.g., high, elated, exited, out of control) suggest that they see in shopping and buying a way to change their arousal levels.

Results from this dissertation provide support to the findings discussed above. First, changes in mood occur as participants engage in CCB. That is, they tend to go from negative feelings to positive ones, thereby suggesting that CCB serves as a mood booster.

Second, several participants reported low levels of self-esteem that improved as the shopping experience progressed. Interacting with others, either sales personnel, other customers, family or friends, as well as fantasizing about the idea of wearing the item all seem to aid in improving participant's self-esteem. Owning the item is also helpful, as it makes participants feel that they are "enough."

In recent years, researchers have paid particular attention to "the need to escape" as a primary motivation to engage in CBB (e.g., Elliot, 1994; Faber, 2006; Faber & Vohs, 2010; O'Guinn & Faber, 2005). Faber (2006) explained that even though mood improvement seems to be a plausible reason for individuals to engage in CBB, it does not consider the negative consequences resulting from it. The author added that research on self-defeating behaviors suggests that individuals are not prone to hurt themselves and, if they engage in harmful behaviors, it is either because of "poor strategy choices that don't work as intended, or from a conscious decision to engage in a negative behavior to avoid even more painful ones" (p. 131). The latter explanation led Faber (2006) to examine CBB through the lens of Escape Theory (Baumeister, 1990; Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991).

As discussed in Chapter II, Escape Theory was developed in an effort to explain why people may engage in self-destructive actions (O'Guinn & Faber, 2005). This theory proposes that, for some individuals, self-awareness can be very painful. Therefore, to temporarily relieve these painful feelings, they shift their attention to specific tasks, such as buying, which helps them to block out negative, self-destructive thoughts. O'Guinn and Faber (2005) explain that this "cognitive narrowing" not only prevents individuals

from experiencing painful thoughts, but also “creates disinhibition and prevents considerations of the long-term consequences of the action” (p. 14).

Both O’Guinn and Faber (2005) and Faber (2006) suggest that Escape Theory is perhaps the best theory to explain why individuals engage in CBB. Faber (2006) argues that this theory can provide a theoretical account of CBB, in that compulsive buyers: (1) experience negative and painful self-awareness; (2) tend to be perfectionists and hold themselves to impossibly high standards; (3) perceived failure and negative self-feelings trigger their compulsive buying episodes; (4) experience compulsive buying episodes characterized by a high level of absorption and cognitive narrowing; (5) engage in fanciful and magical thinking during compulsive buying episodes; and (6) block out long range consequences when engaged in compulsive buying (p. 132).

Findings of this dissertation expand on those suggestions made by O’Guinn and Faber (2005) and Faber (2006), as applied to compulsive buying in a product-specific context (i.e., appearance-related products). Interpretation of the data revealed that participants use the compulsive acquisition of ARPs to cope with painful self-awareness (e.g., low self-esteem, depression, anxiety). Moreover, several participants showed traits of perfectionism and seemed to hold themselves to almost unattainably high standards. For example, some participants talked about going on a quest to find the “perfect” item, especially those that will enhance aspects of their appearance somehow. Others explained experiencing an unavoidable desire to not just look appropriate, but *perfect* for a specific occasion.

In line with the postulates of Escape Theory, as outlined by Faber (2006), negative self-feelings (e.g., boredom, loneliness, anxiety, depression) were observed to trigger participants' CCB, and when in the CCB act, they showed high levels of absorption and cognitive narrowing. Faber and Vohs (2010) describe *absorption* as the tendency to become completely immersed in an activity or experience. Cognitive narrowing, on the other hand, is described by the authors as a form of misregulation that "creates disinhibition and prevents consideration of the longer-term consequences of an action" (p. 545). In the context of CCB, cognitive narrowing occurs when the compulsive buyer focuses on shopping and buying for ARPs seeking to avoid painful self-awareness. The following quote from Helen illustrates this:

Helen: Like when I'm shopping it's just like umm (thinking) I just feel like I'm in the right environment and I forget about all the, you know, the stressful things in life. It's kind of escape from reality at that moment, that's why I like shopping. It kind of drags me into another world.

Findings of this dissertation also support the notion of compulsive buyers engaging in fantasizing. Participants indicated that while in the CCB act, they fantasize about wearing an item and about the feelings they will have about themselves while wearing it. The ability to fantasize allows participants to not only figuratively consume the product before actually acquiring it, but to distance themselves from reality, especially from the imminent consequences of the behavior, which, in turn, permits them to follow through with the purchase. This finding supports the final point of Faber's (2006) conceptualization of Escape Theory, which is that compulsive buyers block out the negative consequences that result from CCB. Indeed, several participants indicated

that they recognize the consequences of the behavior but will disregard them in order to complete the purchase.

Although Escape Theory does provide a good foundation to understand one of the motivations to engage in CCB, in this dissertation, other motivations to engage in CCB were found that are not fully explained by the theory. For example, examination of the data revealed that some participants use CCB as a way to exert control over their lives rather than escaping from them. When talking about the instances in which she is more prone to engage in CCB, Lynn confessed that she used to use shopping and buying as a strategy to feel “in control.”

Lynn: I think I always was, but I think that whenever I go, when I go through some sort of a crisis situation in my life where umm, you know, I would... be dealing with negative emotions, you know, some people when they have negative emotions or bad experiences they will drink or eat, do drugs, whatever. For me, you know, I mean, I had an eating disorder before too so that was --that came into play in my life too, but in terms of the shopping, you know, whenever I am under a lot of stress umm... a lot of stress, transitions, feeling out of control in areas of my life. So, it was kind of like, “*Oh, here is something...*” you know - I really couldn’t control, but you think that in your head - “*Oh, well, I can kind of control this experience of going out to the mall and buying something.*” Ok, maybe my life is all chaotic and everything is falling down around me, I’m in a relationship and I fight with my boyfriend or somebody broke up with me or whatever, you know. I can’t control somebody else’s behavior, but I can go and buy something nice for myself. It’s definitely, crisis time, negative emotions, umm I’m prone to shopping then.

Finally, a motivation to engage in CBB that has been rejected in previous research is that of the desire for the items, specifically, for items that are related to appearance. Participants explained that they obsess over the items they want to the point that they cannot stop thinking about them. They talked about how the purchase of the desired

product not only provides them with satisfaction but with relief. This sense of relief is seen from two different perspectives. Firstly, participants experience a sense of relief as they are no longer tormented by intrusive thoughts about the item. Secondly, they feel relieved that they own/possess the item. The latter explanation provides further support for the notion that the acquisition and ownership of a specific product acts as a motivation to engage in CBB. The desire for the item as a motivation to engage in CBB is illustrated in Kelly's excerpt below. In it, she explained how the major issue with her CCB is not how much she has – even though she acknowledged having more than what she really needs – but the fact that she cannot stop thinking about the items she wants until she purchases them.

Kelly: Right, and I think that's kind of the key thing because I think that the thought process is what makes this abnormal because I think that there are girls that don't have shopping problems that have much larger closets than this. I think that there are girls that have a lot more clothes than I do, that don't go through the same thought process. There are girls that have less clothes, that go through the same thought process. I think that it is the thought process, it is about that thing of being worried about it, and wanting to acquire it and feeling anxious if I can't... So my closet product obsessing, yeah, there is a lot of clothes in there, but it's not necessarily alarming. It's what it's in here [pointing to the brain], that's kind of alarming, and no one really sees that.

Kelly's remarks demonstrate that objects have a primary role to play within participants' CBB. Although it is true that the desires to ease the burden resulting from negative feelings and emotions is a motivation to engage in CCB, in spite of research stating otherwise (e.g., O'Guinn & Faber, 1989, 2005), it also appears that the acquisition and ownership of ARPs is a key motivation to engage in the behavior.



**Triggers.** When it comes to specific triggers of CBB, researchers have suggested that it is the interplay of multiple biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors, rather than a single factor, that prompts the behavior (e.g., DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996; Faber, 1992; Faber & Christenson, 1996; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; O’Guinn & Faber, 2005). Findings of this dissertation support and enhance previous research suggesting that CBB results from the interplay of several factors. For example, Kelly’s CCB (Figure 12) tends to come as a result of boredom, loneliness, intrusive thoughts, retail promotions, and interactions with others via social media. In Helen’s case (Figure 10), CCB can come as a result of stress, boredom, fear of running out of things, and retail promotions. DeSarbo and Edwards (1996) found two clusters of compulsive buyers. The first cluster appeared to be more motivated by internal feelings and exhibited a lack of feelings of power or control. The second cluster appeared to be influenced by external feelings or circumstances. The sample in the present study seem to be comprised of a combination of both. That is, participants’ CCB is triggered by both internal feelings (low self-esteem, anxiety, depression) and external cues or situational factors (e.g., loneliness, boredom, relationship with salesperson, having extra money).

Interpretation of the data revealed that there are other factors influencing CCB beyond the psychological and sociocultural factors. Indeed, situational factors appear to play an important role in participants’ motivations to engage in CCB. For example, Lisa’s CCB (Figure 14) is not only triggered by psychological (e.g., low self-esteem, stress, anxiety) and sociocultural factors (e.g., fashion bloggers’ suggestions, access to credit) but by situational factors, such as needing to find an item to wear with a previous

purchase. Lisa explained that there are times when she falls in love with an item and feels the urge to buy it. After she purchases it, she realizes that she does not have anything in her closet to wear it with, therefore she “needs” to go shopping again.

Lisa: Typically, it starts with me buying a pair of shoes that I love, like the reddish orange flats that go with the stripe and the sweater. That was a \$200 pair of shoes, they are reddish orange. I have nothing else reddish orange. I saw them. I loved them. I had to have them. I’m still glad I bought them, they are really good shoes. They have tiny little gold studs on them, which for me means that then I have to have all gold. Like, I don’t mix metals. So I found a purse at *Dillard’s* for about \$99, it was on sale, and I bought it to go with them, so I have a matching bag. I’m so big on that. This whole brown purse, black shoe thing does not do well for me. Then I started buying clothes with that color and I bought this shirt that has stripes, that has the red stripes. Umm, I got a couple more tops. It was like, to justify the \$200 shoes, I then had to buy things to wear [them with].

Similarly, Dolores’ CCB (Figure 13) is triggered by psychological, sociocultural, and situational factors. She explained that her behavior is the result of feelings of depression, low self-esteem, restlessness, and having extra money (situational factor). Table 14 lists all of the factors found to trigger participants’ CCB.

Table 14

## Triggers of CCB

Category	Triggers		
<b>Psychological Factors</b>	<i>Positive</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Happiness</li> <li>• Excitement</li> </ul>	<i>Neutral</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Novelty seeking</li> </ul>	<i>Negative</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress</li> <li>• Boredom</li> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> <li>• Loneliness</li> <li>• Self-discrepancies</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Tired</li> <li>• Sadness</li> <li>• Intrusive thoughts</li> <li>• Insecurity</li> <li>• Preoccupation</li> <li>• Fear of running out of things</li> </ul>
<b>Sociocultural Factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advertising and Promotions</li> <li>• Fashion blogs</li> <li>• Shopping with friends</li> <li>• Social media</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to credit</li> <li>• Relationship with sales personnel</li> <li>• Culture / Society</li> </ul>
<b>Situational Factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having extra money</li> <li>• Special event or occasion</li> <li>• Need to return an item</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to find an item to wear with a previous purchase</li> </ul>

As shown in Table 14, fashion blogs, social media sites, relationships with sales personnel, and advertisements and promotions are among the sociocultural factors found to trigger CCB. Participants explained that fashion bloggers' suggestions on the latest trends or "must-have" items are very effective in prompting the behavior. They also mentioned that social media sites such as *Pinterest* and private groups about specific brands on *Facebook* have a strong impact on their shopping and buying behaviors. For example, Lisa explained that she is making an effort to stop reading fashion blogs

“because I feel like I’m very susceptible or suggestible, you know, ‘*you need this, this is perfect.*’” She also explained that being on *Pinterest* takes a lot of her time and it prompts her shopping and buying behaviors.

Lisa: I haven’t had the opportunity to get into *Pinterest* because when I get into *Pinterest* it takes me a while to get out of it. Yeah, it’s like falling into a rabbit hole. It totally is. And then... I have excuses for staying on *Pinterest*, like, “*Oh! I need to look at things for the baby’s [grandchild] room or whatever.*” There are times that I’ll say, “*Pinterest* has encouraged me to shop” and there is even a website called “*Pinterest Made Me Do It.*” Like, I had to try this because someone on *Pinterest* said this was the “thing.” [However,] *Pinterest* has [also] helped me. It has created some shopping, but it has also really helped me define... my look that I’m going for. [...] I can use it for good or use it for evil. You know, if I just get on there randomly [and] start looking at stuff, it can make me want to buy things. So, usually I won’t click on the picture or click through the link, like even if I really like something.

Interactions with sales personnel used to be very important for Lynn and a trigger of her CCB. Interpretation of the data revealed that she engaged in CCB not only to escape from painful self-awareness, but to avoid feelings of loneliness. The interaction with the salesperson provided her with enhanced feelings of self-worth and served a compensatory function. Similar benefits derived from the shopping experience were observed by O’Guinn and Faber (1989). The authors explained that for compulsive buyers, interactions with store employees serve two important functions. First, they improve feelings of self-esteem. Second, they compensate for feelings of loneliness by seeing in the salesperson a friend they are in need of.

According to participants, advertisements and promotions are also a major trigger of CCB. For example, Dolores explained that she grew up thinking that thin women were the beauty ideal, and the fact that she never was thin affected her self-esteem and caused

a series of personal issues that worsened over time (alcoholism, drug addiction, binge eating, compulsive clothing buying). This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that advertisements tend to create unrealistic expectations and affect individuals' evaluations of themselves. Researchers have suggested that individuals who grow up exposed to a specific beauty ideal may develop low self-esteem, eating disorders, and excessive consumption behaviors if they do not meet such standards (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Saraneva & Sääksjärvi, 2008). Moreover, retail promotions such as "buy one, get one 50% off" or "free shipping on orders over xxx" are very effective in prompting participants CCB.

Finally, situational factors such as having extra money, planning to attend a special event, the need to return an item, and the need to find an item to wear with a previous purchase, were all found to prompt participants' CCB. As previously mentioned, research on CBB has paid little attention to these factors as triggers of the behavior. In this study, however, they surfaced as strong predictors of CCB. Participants expressed that having extra money, either in cash or as a balance on their credit cards, is a temptation. Having extra money basically represents a possibility of feeling better, in as much as they use shopping and buying as a coping mechanism. Moreover, several participants explained that some of their purchases actually generate more purchases. That is, they make a purchase and later learn that they "do not have anything in their closet" to wear it with. Therefore, they see no other choice but to shop again.

The examination of motivations and triggers of CCB reaffirms the fact that CCB is a complex behavior brought on by multiple factors. In the next section, the role of emotions throughout the overall CCB process is discussed.

### **The Role of Emotions**

As revealed in Chapter VI, as compulsive clothing buyers, participants experience a wide array of emotions before, during, and after engaging in CCB. Before they engage in CCB, they commonly find themselves in negative mood states (e.g., depressed, anxious, stressed). During the buying process, they talked about how these negative feelings are replaced by feelings of euphoria, satisfaction, and excitement, among other possibilities. After the buying act, participants tend to experience positive feelings such as relief, excitement, and happiness. The down side is that these feelings are only temporary. Participants explained that these feelings are quickly replaced with negative ones, such as shame, guilt, frustration, and anxiety. Table 15 summarizes the feelings participants reported experiencing before, during, and after engaging in CCB.

As found in previous research on the topic (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; DeSarbo & Edwards 1996; Faber & Christenson, 1996; Faber et al., 1987; Lejoyeux et al., 1997; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989), participants in this study experience feelings of depression, low self-esteem, boredom, loneliness, anxiety, and stress before engaging in CCB. However, the data collected for this study adds to the list of feelings and emotions experienced by these individuals. Specifically, participants in this study described feeling restless, curious, tired, and fearful.

Table 15

## Feelings and Emotions Experienced Before, During, and After Engaging in CCB

Before	During	After	
		Short-Term	Long-Term
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Anxiety</li> <li>▪ Boredom</li> <li>▪ Conflicted (self-discrepancy)</li> <li>▪ Curious*</li> <li>▪ Depression</li> <li>▪ Fear*</li> <li>▪ Irritated</li> <li>▪ Loneliness</li> <li>▪ Low self-esteem</li> <li>▪ Restlessness*</li> <li>▪ Stress</li> <li>▪ Sadness</li> <li>▪ Tired*</li> <li>▪ Torment (intrusive thoughts)</li> <li>▪ Excitement</li> <li>▪ Happiness</li> <li>▪ Calm*</li> <li>▪ Relaxed*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Elated</li> <li>▪ Euphoria</li> <li>▪ Excitement</li> <li>▪ Fancy*</li> <li>▪ Gratification</li> <li>▪ Good</li> <li>▪ Happiness</li> <li>▪ High</li> <li>▪ Out-of-body</li> <li>▪ Relief</li> <li>▪ Relaxed*</li> <li>▪ Safe</li> <li>▪ Satisfaction</li> <li>▪ Sense of accomplishment*</li> <li>▪ Anxiety</li> <li>▪ Conflicted</li> <li>▪ Guilt*</li> <li>▪ Indecisive</li> <li>▪ Pressure</li> <li>▪ Stress</li> <li>▪ Upset*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Excitement</li> <li>▪ Happiness</li> <li>▪ Pride</li> <li>▪ Relief</li> <li>▪ Satisfaction</li> <li>▪ Victory*</li> <li>▪ Anxiety</li> <li>▪ Guilt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Anxiety</li> <li>▪ Defeat</li> <li>▪ Disappointment</li> <li>▪ Embarrassment</li> <li>▪ Fear</li> <li>▪ Frustration</li> <li>▪ Guilt</li> <li>▪ Regret</li> <li>▪ Remorse</li> <li>▪ Shame</li> </ul>

\* = Not mentioned in previous research on CBB.

Another interesting finding, and one that is in contrast with what has been primarily discussed in previous research, is that not all feelings/emotions that participants experienced before engaging in CCB were negative. Participants also expressed feeling happy, calm, relaxed, and even excited, before browsing the web or visiting the mall. For instance, Helen talked about feeling calm and relaxed before engaging in shopping and buying: “I think I feel calm that I know I’m going shopping ‘cause it’s somewhere that I feel comfortable, so I feel relaxed and calm before I go shopping.” Faber and Christenson

(1996) observed that participants in their study experienced positive feelings at least sometimes before engaging on CBB. Feeling happy, excited, and powerful before engaging in shopping were the three primary positive feelings reported by participants in their study. The fact that these positive feelings were sporadically experienced by participants led the authors to conclude that “for many compulsive buyers, the decision to go shopping often appears to be a reaction to experiencing a negative mood state” (p. 811). Findings of the present study add calm and relaxed to the list of positive emotions.

During the CCB act, participants tend to experience positive feelings, such as excitement, happiness, satisfaction, and gratification. Some participants described their feelings through analogies to alcoholism or drug addiction. This finding is consistent with previous research in which participants have reported that engaging in CBB made them feel “high” (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989; Saraneva & Sääksjärvi, 2008). In the present study, both Dolores and Lynn used adjectives typically employed when explaining feelings derived from alcohol and drug use to describe their state of mind while in the shopping and buying process. Specifically, they expressed feeling high, elated, and/or euphoric during the compulsive buying act:

Dolores: I feel high. Yeah, I feel like a person that is doing drugs. It feels very high. It’s -- I even had my best friend describe it as my eyes glaze over. Yeah, I just kind of get that glazed look in my eyes, where I am -- it’s like I’m having -- it’s like I’m high. That is the best way to describe it. So, you know, I feel euphoria... umm I feel elated. I feel out of my own body; it’s somewhat of an out-of-body experience.

Lynn: I don’t feel this as much as I used to, but I used to really kind of get a “high,” like immediately upon entering [a store]. I still would get a little bit now, but then I’ll notice it and then I’ll kind of like say, “*It’s not real.*” I recognize now that it doesn’t really mean anything, like it’s not... I’m not really high, like



I'm not, you know? But I would feel that sort of, "*Oh! I'm here!*" You know? "*Cool!*" Like, it's the treasure hunt aspect of it. Like you never know what you are going find. It's kind of like, "*Uh, I wonder what's new here now. What's exciting? What am I gonna like?*" You know, I'll be super jazzed about seeing [what's available] or "*I can't wait to try this on,*" you know?

Participants also described feeling excited, happy, accomplished, safe, and relieved during the CCB act. However, it is worth mentioning that feelings during the CCB act were not always positive. There are times when participants experienced negative feelings such as guilt, anxiety, and stress. Faber and Christenson (1996) found similar results. Most participants in their study reported feeling happy, excited, and powerful during the shopping and buying process. However, half of the compulsive buyers in the sample also indicated experiencing negative feelings during the CBB act, specifically, irritability and sadness/depression. Emotions mentioned in the present study that have not been observed in previous research include accomplished, relaxed, fancy, guilty, and upset. As will be discussed in greater detail later in this section, some of these feelings are a result of participants' inability to decide between items and/or conflicts between needs and wants.

After the purchase, participants generally experience short-term positive feelings/emotions and then long-term negative feelings/emotions. That is, after the purchase is completed, participants continue experiencing positive feelings such as happiness, satisfaction, and excitement. However, as aforementioned, these feelings are only temporary. Most participants explained that they are quickly replaced by negative feelings such as guilt, regret, shame, remorse, and frustration. Furthermore, participants explained that the post-purchase feelings tend to be associated with the type of purchase.

For example, Lisa explained that purchasing an item that she sees as a necessity, such as buying underwear, does not provoke the same emotions as buying something that is more of a desire or want. As she explained,

Lisa: I don't really have a lot of emotional reaction to shopping for something that is necessary, but for the shopping that we are talking about, [the kind] that is a problem, I would say I typically feel maybe kind of down before I shop. I feel, you know, happy and excited when I find something that I think works. And then sometimes afterwards, especially if it wasn't really a wise purchase, then I may have regrets.

In sum, the interpretation of the data revealed that participants experience a wide array of emotions before, during, and after engaging in CCB. Findings also demonstrate that there are several instances within the overall CCB process wherein participants experience mixed feelings. Such instances are explored next.

**Points of Tension.** Although shopping is an activity participants enjoy a great deal, it does not come without struggles. Most participants expressed experiencing a variety of tensions while in the process of shopping for and buying ARPs. At the pre-purchase stage, participants experience tension as they become aware of the time and energy they are devoting to shopping and buying. Although they enjoy the activities in preparation for going shopping (e.g., browsing the web, comparing options, reading fashion blogs), they acknowledge that the time could be better spent on other activities. During the CCB act, they also regret the fact that they are devoting a significant amount of time and energy to shopping and buying. At this stage, they also struggle with making purchase decisions (e.g., what to buy, how much to buy, or whether or not to purchase an item) and experience cognitive dissonance. That is, there is a conflict between needs (“I

don't really need this") and wants ("Oh! But look how cute it is!"). At the post-purchase stage, conflicts reflect awareness of a breakdown in self-regulation as well as cognitive dissonance. Feeling regret, remorse, shame, disappointment, frustration, and guilt is indicative of participants' awareness of this breakdown. At this point, they question their ability to resist the urge to shop and the apparent inconsistency between their thoughts (e.g., knowledge of the consequences resulting from CCB) and actions (i.e., engaging in the behavior).

These tensions are another element that illustrate the complexities of CCB. Rather than being a linear process in terms of emotions and cognitions (e.g., negative → positive → negative → repeat), the behavior can be quite unconventional and, therefore, can manifest itself differently. For example, an individual can experience negative feelings pre-purchase, but during the CCB act she might experience a combination of positive and negative feelings, perhaps due to the recognition that she does not really need the item. After the purchase, she experiences positive feelings which are later replaced by negative ones. Another individual can start the experience with positive feelings but being aware of the time and energy spent in the activity can evoke negative feelings. During the CCB act she might experience positive feelings, but after the purchase she only experiences negative feelings because the satisfaction derived from the purchase fades immediately after completing the purchase.

Moreover, as aforementioned, interpretation of the data revealed that during the CCB act, most participants experience self-absorption and cognitive narrowing. In other words, while in the CCB act, participants are able to separate themselves from reality,

forgetting about what brought them to that point and what is going to happen after the purchase is completed. This feeling of being immersed in the process is explored next.

**Immersed in the Process.** As discussed within the Motivations and Triggers section, negative feelings/emotions experienced by participants become unbearable prompting the desire to escape. When in the process of shopping and buying, several participants reported that they not only find refuge in these activities, but that they are capable of blocking out the feelings that drove them to the behavior, as well as the consequences they know will result from it. Indeed, participants expressed that they tend to lose themselves in the shopping experience and some even described it as an “out-of-body” experience. As explained earlier in the chapter, this phenomenon is explained by the concepts of cognitive narrowing and self-absorption proposed by Escape Theory. However, another way to explain it is through some of the principles of Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

Before explaining how Flow Theory helps to better understand the experiences of compulsive clothing buyers during the shopping and buying process, it is important to address the nature and application of this theory within the literature. Flow Theory has been applied to the study of enjoyment and happiness as well as creativity (e.g., Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012; Collins, Sarkisian, & Winner, 2009; Nistor, 2011; Tsaor, Yen, & Hsiao, 2013). Because this theory has been used to study positive emotions and behaviors, its application to the study of CCB could be considered inappropriate, as this is a behavior that, for the most part, is negative. However, because motivations to engage in CCB are linked to individuals’ desires to escape from painful

realities and thus achieve a degree of happiness or fulfillment, even if only temporary, this theory does offer insight into some of the nuances of the CCB act.

Flow Theory emerged from Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) desire to understand why individuals engross themselves in intrinsically motivated activities, and rapidly lose interest in the outcome, once achieved (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). When discussing a theoretical model for *enjoyment*, Csikszentmihalyi (1975) explained that there are autotelic activities people engage in from which they derive a great deal of satisfaction. People devote time and effort to these activities "because they gain a peculiar state of experience from it, an experience that is not accessible in 'everyday life'" (p. 35). The author explained that individuals engage in the activity motivated by its intrinsic rewards. Indeed, he asserted that intrinsic rewards appear to overshadow extrinsic ones as the main incentives for pursuing the activity (p. 35).

Again, since this theory focuses on how to achieve happiness, enjoyment, and creativity, some of its principles seem applicable to the experiences compulsive clothing buyers have during the CCB act. The author described the autotelic experience or *flow* state as follows:

The autotelic experience is one of complete involvement of the actor with his [*sic*] activity. The activity presents constant challenges. There is no time to get bored or to worry about what may or may not happen. A person in such situation can make full use of whatever skills are required and receive clear feedback to his actions; hence, he belongs to a rational cause-and-effect system in which what he does has realistic and predictable consequences. (p. 36)

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) further explains that when in the flow state, actions are consecutive with little to no need for consciousness or reflection. The individual feels in

control of his/her actions and there is minimal distinction between the self and the environment in which he/she is immersed, the stimulus and his/her response, and/or between his/her past, present, and future.

In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flow from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future. (p. 36)

Interpretation of the data suggests that some participants seem to enter into a state of flow when they engage in CCB. Specifically, participants explained how CCB allows them to detach and distance themselves from a reality that is unpleasant or painful. For them, CCB is a way to achieve happiness and fulfillment, even though it is temporary. When participants become immersed in shopping and buying, distractions are ignored. For example, one participant explained that while in the shopping and buying process she does not try items on because this action interrupts the compulsion. Shopping lets compulsive clothing buyers feel in control. Moreover, participants are able to block out the consequences resulting from CCB during the act, also suggesting a state of flow.

Although the connection has yet to be made in the existing CBB literature, Flow Theory, and more specifically the concept of flow, provides a partial framework for understanding how CCB comes to be the compulsive behavior of choice rather than others. For most compulsive clothing buyers participating in this study, shopping is an activity from which a variety of positive rewards are derived. Thus, shopping can be seen as a particular autotelic activity that participants choose to engage in and one that is

motivated by the intrinsic rewards it offers them (e.g., mood booster, self-esteem improvement).

### **Consequences**

In regards to the consequences resulting from CBB, researchers have found that compulsive buyers experience both short-term, positive consequences right after the buying act, and long-term, negative consequences after a period of time (e.g., Elliot et al., 1996a; Faber & O'Guinn, 1992; Kellett & Bolton, 2009; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Findings of this dissertation appear to support this idea. As illustrated in Figures 10 - 15, participants reported experiencing positive feelings immediately after the compulsive buying act (e.g., excitement, happiness, satisfaction). However, they all talked about how these feelings were soon replaced by negative feelings (e.g., guilt, shame, remorse, regret).

As discussed in Chapter II, the consequences of CBB have received little attention in the literature. In particular, the positive consequences of CBB have not been explored. Findings of the present study suggest that the positive consequences resulting from CCB are one of the reasons why participants keep engaging in the behavior. They seem to try to replicate the feelings they experience after the purchase. Moreover, results suggest that the positive consequences resulting from CCB are sometimes dependent on the reason for the purchase. For example, Julia explained that when she buys something she considers to be necessary, she feels happy. However, when she sees the purchase as being unnecessary or excessive, she feels guilty. Furthermore, the duration of these positive feelings could be associated with the channel used to complete the purchase. For

instance, Kelly, who prefers online shopping over brick-and-mortar, explained that the post-purchase excitement lasts until she receives the package in the mail. As soon as it is delivered, feelings of guilt and remorse emerge. Likewise, Dolores explained that when she shops online, she feels happy up to the point when the package is delivered. When she engages in physical shopping, she experiences feelings of happiness as she walks from store to store, but as she leaves the mall, that feeling disappears. From our conversations, it was clear that, for Dolores, the anticipation of receiving the item prolongs the positive feelings that result from her CCB. When asked if there was any moment after the purchase in which she experiences positive feelings, Dolores replied:

Dolores: Yes. I think that as I reflect on what I had purchased, that would make me feel happy. You know, as I'm walking from store to store, for example, I'll be happy with my purchases and with what I've purchased. I would be happy after an online purchase. I would be [happy] until I -- because I'm anticipating receiving it.

I: So what happens when you receive it?

Dolores: It's so interesting because I... I get it, I open it, and as soon as I see it, then the high is over for me. It's like I get, you know, I get that same kind of feeling by getting it in the mail, opening it, seeing it but then it's -- then I'm done.

Findings of this dissertation also support previous research arguing that compulsive buyers face substantial debt and have familial problems (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; Koran et al., 2006; Roberts, 1998). In this dissertation, substantial debt was observed in the most extreme cases of CCB (i.e., Dolores, Lisa, and Lynn). Mild and moderate cases (Helen and Julia, and Kelly, respectively) did not have debt, but



expressed concern regarding the fact that they are not saving as much money as they would like to or that they are spending money that could be put towards a better use.

Familial problems resulting from CCB are mostly related to secrecy and excessive spending. Some participants expressed that they hide their behaviors from family members out of fear of being judged or to avoid arguments. For example, Lynn explained that when she was at the height of her behavior, she not only hid her purchases from her husband, but because she was the one in charge of the household finances, she put her clothing purchases in other categories or adjusted the date so they went into a different budget month. These strategies gave Lynn's husband the impression that she was not buying as much, and, hence saved her from having to explain what was really going on. She said,

Lynn: Oh, we had a lot of problems about it. I mean not so much about me going to shop, but about me spending too much money. Umm, you know, because I had a budget... I didn't stick to my budget for 10 years. The first 10 years that we were married (laughs), I didn't stick to my budget one year and sometimes I will be widely over it and sometimes I tried to cover it up because I did our finances. So, like, we would use *QuickBooks* and so sometimes I'd put my clothing purchases in other categories to hide it (laughs) or adjust the date so it'd be in the next month instead of that month. Then I would I think, "*Oh well, then I just won't buy as much next month,*" but then I would still buy more.

Participants explained that relationships with friends have also been affected by CCB. For example, Helen explained that it is really hard for her to be friends with people that do not like shopping. Lynn stated that she was so focused on shopping and buying that in order for her to spend time with her friends, they needed to include shopping as part of the experience. Julia, on the other hand, explained that now that she is trying to

curb her spending, she wants to avoid situations that prompt her CCB. Unfortunately, she has found that some of her friends and relatives “haven’t taken that very well.” She explained, “My cousin for example, when I say, ‘*Oh, let’s do something other than shopping,*’ she is like, ‘*Oh! What is there to do?*’ you know, and so like she kind of rejects a lot of possibilities...”

External consequences of the behavior mentioned by participants include limited storage space and the excessive amount of time and energy devoted to CCB. Most participants indicated having trouble discarding items which results in cluttered spaces. For example, Dolores’ inability to discard her items forced her to rent storage space just for her clothes. Likewise, both Julia and Helen talked about how their closets are packed with clothes and how they tend to “stock-up” out of fear of running out of things. The clutter that comes as a result of an individual’s failure to discard items and the purchase of extra items to avoid being caught without a needed thing are characteristics of compulsive hoarding (Müller & Frost, 2011), yet few studies have explored the connection between compulsive buying and compulsive hoarding.

Kyrios et al. (2004) suggested a link between hoarders and compulsive buyers, and explained that hoarders tend to see their possessions as extensions of themselves, considering them to be “safety signals because of the sense of security derived from them” (p. 244). The authors then theorized that, under these circumstances, objects or possessions can be seen as having special meanings because of their specific qualities, and that great deal of satisfaction can be derived from their compulsive acquisition (Kyrios et al., 2004). Dolores specifically indicated that she has difficulty discarding her

ARPs because they are an extension of herself and they provide her with a sense of security. When asked if she had thought about the possibility of this being a sign of hoarding, she replied:

Dolores: No, it's not a hoarding behavior. I mean, put it this way, it's not hoarding to me because I don't buy things or use things that are meaningless, you know, I have couches and lamps and I mean, I have a nicely decorated home. It's just not... there is just not any space left in it for anything else. So, I... I don't / I don't bring things in just to bring them in, I want a house that looks nice and all that kind of thing.

Research on behavioral addictions suggests that behaviors that produce short-term rewards are likely to be positively reinforced and, despite knowledge of negative consequences, they may become conditioned responses to negative emotions or situations (Baker, Mathur, Fatt, Moschis, & Rigdon, 2013; Grant, Schreiber, & Odlaug, 2013). Studies on CBB indicate that regardless of the negative consequences, efforts to stop the behavior prove unsuccessful (e.g., Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010) and the negative feelings resulting from it actually reinforce the behavior. That is, the behavior turns into an ongoing cycle. Findings of this dissertation clearly support these ideas. Participants pointed out that, when the satisfaction derived from a purchase fades away, they feel the need to buy again. The following quote from Helen illustrates this phenomenon:

Helen: I don't know, like umm I lose the satisfaction pretty fast. It's like I lose interest in different things very fast. Umm I'm someone that likes new things so umm yeah I lose that satisfaction pretty fast and then I need another... it's kind of like when you drink coffee and you feel the caffeine kicking – I don't drink coffee but that's what people tell me – but then when you lose the caffeine and then you

feel your energy is going down and you need another, another coffee, it's like that.

Interpretation of the data revealed that the consequences of CCB, in turn, become triggers for the behavior. Because the positive consequences of CCB are only temporary, participants quickly experience feelings similar to those that they were trying to escape from in the first place.

### **Behavioral Outcomes**

Findings of this study support the idea that compulsive buyers typically do not use their purchases (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Schlosser et al., 1994). Instead, they tend to hide, hoard, give away, return, or simply forget about them (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al. 2010). All participants in this study indicated that they have plenty of items they have never worn and, as illustrated in Figures 10 - 15, most participants do in fact tend to forget, put away, or deliberately hide the items they purchase. For example, Lynn explained how she used to hide her purchases from her husband,

Lynn: A lot of times the after part [after shopping] I would feel such remorse. I'd be driving home and I have these bags in my car and either be like feeling a lot of remorse about [the fact that] I actually bought all that, and I'll be plotting, "*How can I get these into the house without my husband seeing them?*" (Laughs) *Where can I hide them? Can I hide that?*" Sometimes I've hidden things under the seats in the car, you know. I kind of put it in the back of the trunk. I'll take things out of the bags and I... put some things, like if I have like a tote bag with me or in my purse, I'll take it out of the bag and I shove it into my purse so that I can bring it into the house and I can hide it without him seeing it. You know, like stuff like that I'll be plotting. I'll be plotting how I could kind of like get away with it, you know?

Although previous research has consistently suggested that compulsive buyers typically do not wear clothing-related purchases (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989; Schlosser et al., 1994), none offer a thorough explanation as to why this is the case. O’Guinn and Faber (2005) theorized that compulsive buyers leave items in the bag or put them out of sight because these items are a reminder of their issues with shopping and buying, or because they are trying to hide their behavior from others. The authors state,

One explanation for this is that these items are seen as object reminders and concrete evidence of the presence of a problematic behavior. If left unopened and out of sight, then they are less ego threatening. Another explanation is that the objects are being hidden in the way an alcoholic hides or disposes of evidence of the secreted behavior. While both of these explanations probably play some role, the explanation to which we give most credence is that compulsive buying is not about acquisitions; it is more about the act of buying rather than possessing. (p. 10)

Although O’Guinn and Faber’s (2005) conjecture provides some idea as to why compulsive buyers typically do not wear their items, but rather hide, hoard, give away, return, or put them away, more investigation is needed to truly understand the reasons behind compulsive buyers’ behaviors. Data collected for this dissertation addresses this gap. As discussed in Chapter VII, participants provided several reasons for why they do not wear the items they purchase. For instance, five out of the six participants explained that they do not wear their ARPs because they simply have too many things to wear. Kelly, Lynn and Julia explained that sometimes they forget about the items they have. Lynn and Lisa commented that they have not worn some of their items because they do not have a place to wear them to and/or because they have not yet figured out how to

wear them. Lisa also mentioned that many of the items end up unused because she does not “have anything to wear them with.”

Some participants talked about how just knowing that they own the item is enough. Others explained that owning the item allows them to fantasize about the possibility of having a different life, or even becoming somebody else. Such findings have not been revealed in existing studies on CBB and, in fact, contradict previous research suggesting that compulsive buyers are more concerned with the act of buying rather than with the possession of specific items (e.g., O’Guinn & Faber, 1989, 2005).

In a similar vein, the interpretation of the data suggests several ways by which compulsive clothing buyers disrupt the accepted consumption cycle. Winakor (1969) proposed a model to explain how individuals consume apparel products, whereby the process is generally comprised of three phases: (1) acquisition, (2) inventory (use, care, active storage), and (3) disposition of goods. This process was found to be different among several participants in this study. That is, participants typically do not use many of the items they purchase. Thus, it could be argued that the process of consumption becomes merely a process of acquisition. Fantasizing plays an important role in this process, as participants seem to fantasize or play with the idea of wearing the item in the future (e.g., special event, future life). It appears that these participants figuratively “consume” the item before and after acquiring it, and therefore the act of acquisition becomes, for some, the act of storage, and, for others, the act of disposition. For instance, Dolores explained that she fantasizes about the idea of wearing an item during the shopping process and after the purchase. In one of our conversations, Dolores said:

Dolores: I love imagining how I'm going to feel in them. I love that process.

I: So, how often do you imagine yourself experiencing all those things that you think that are going to happen?

Dolores: Oh! I experience that every day. 'Cause when I start thinking about what I'm going to wear, then I go off into this imagination, this imaginary land (laughs), so to speak.

The role of fantasizing in CBB was first suggested by O'Guinn and Faber (1989), who found that compulsive buyers are more prone to fantasize than those who are non-compulsive. The authors explained that fantasizing may allow compulsive buyers to put aside thoughts regarding the negative consequences of the behavior, and therefore go through with the purchase. In the present study, however, fantasizing was found to have more of an impact on the actual consumption of ARPs, not just the decision-making process. Moreover, fantasizing was not used to set aside negative consequences, but to justify the purchase.

For participants in the present study, inventory can either involve the actual care of an item without wearing it, keeping the item in the closet without any type of care, or wearing and taking care of the item. For example, there are times that Helen buys an item, takes proper care of it, but then leaves it in her closet. She explained that after a purchase, she typically cuts off the tags and washes it. Then, she hangs the piece in the closet and it stays there for an undetermined period of time. When asked if she usually wears the items she purchases, Helen responded:

Helen: No, I just put them there and maybe like -- for example, clothes I just put them there [in the closet]... I wash them. I take the tag off. Like, I don't know why, I just like to take the tags off and then I just put them there and I don't wear

them for a couple of years and then I look at my closet and when it's exploding, when I need new space for new clothes, then I start donating everything. So I end up donating a lot of the stuff that I've never worn.

With regards to the act of disposition, data interpretation revealed that participants value their ARPs and experience difficulties with getting rid of them. For instance, Dolores explained that letting go of her ARPs scares her because they are part of who she is. Generally, Kelly has no issues getting rid of her items but when it comes to her *Lilly Pulitzer* dresses, donating or consigning them is not an option because she sees them as part of a collection. Participants also indicated having issues with clutter, which indicates a problem with getting rid of things. Ultimately, outcomes of individual acts of CCB add up to a practice that for many, has negative consequences.

In sum, even though CCB can be counterproductive, given the negative consequences that result from it, compulsive clothing buyers consider it to be the only way to escape from negative feelings and emotions, and improve mood and self-esteem. Interpretation of the data also revealed that the desire to acquire and own ARPs is a strong motivator to engage in CCB. The significance of these products for participants in this study is examined next.

### **Why Appearance-Related Products?**

As discussed in Chapter II, clinical as well as consumer behavior research suggests that compulsive buyers tend to purchase ARPs (e.g., clothing, shoes, makeup, and jewelry) when engaging in the behavior (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; McElroy et al., 1994, Mitchell et al., 2006; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Schlosser et al., 1994). However, to date, most research on CBB focuses on general compulsive buying as opposed to



compulsive buying in a product specific context. Therefore, a primary goal of this dissertation was to address this gap in the literature by exploring what ARP consumption means relative to the phenomenon of compulsive buying. Specifically, the second objective of this dissertation was to investigate the role of appearance-related products relative to the behaviors comprising CBB. To this end, this section of the chapter includes a discussion of what led participants to choose ARPs as their preferred products, as well as what these products mean to them. This discussion is organized under the following two sections: (1) *Life Experiences, ARPs, and CCB* and (2) *CBB, ARPs, and The Self*.

### **Life Experiences, ARPs, and CCB**

Examination of the data gathered for this dissertation reveals that participants' preference for ARPs largely stems from their experiences during childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. As illustrated in Figures 10 - 15, there are many aspects influencing the development of CCB, including family economic situation, relationships with family and friends, exposure to media, development of other disorders, and personal characteristics. Most of these aspects have had an impact on each participant's views on the self, particularly on how she evaluates her appearance. Because of their life experiences, participants see in the acquisition and ownership of ARPs the one and only solution to each and every problem they face. For example, one of the issues participants face is the belief that they are not good enough and/or do not look good enough. These issues of appearance, and, consequently, of the self, are temporarily resolved through the acquisition and ownership of ARPs.

According to participants, it is the communicative aspects of ARPs, their ability to transform the self, and the psychological benefits of these products that draws participants to them. In other words, ARPs allow participants to transform a conflicted sense of self into a more balanced self, and an insecure self into a confident self, even if the effects are only temporary. Golden (2000) explains that clothing “shapes our psychology as much as it reflects it. It influences how we see ourselves, and it serves as an active interface between ourselves and the non-self world – a membrane regulating what we allow in and out” (p. 135). Likewise, as compulsive clothing buyers, participants appear to consider ARPs as tools to help them mediate their private and public selves (Eicher, 1981). The notion of limiting or transforming what others see seems particularly important to participants, as this allows for solving inconsistencies or insecurities within the self.

Issues of appearance seem to emerge early on. Most participants confessed having had self-esteem issues growing up. Indeed, some even engaged in eating disorders due to a negative self-concept. Like any disease, if left untreated, it could become worse. That is, during adulthood participants faced new personal challenges, which become harder to address in light of existing “baggage.” In the following subsections, *Early Influences* and *Ongoing Influences*, how past and current life experiences impact participants’ sense of self is explored, especially in terms of how these experiences have led to ARPs being the “drug-of-choice.”

**Early Influences.** Researchers have suggested that compulsive buyers tend to be particularly concerned about their appearance (e.g., Faber et al., 1987; Krueger, 1988;

Trautmann-Attmann & Johnson, 2009; Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004). Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009) suggested that compulsive buyers may use ARPs as: (1) a way to enhance their own impressions or those of others, (2) a symbol to define the self, increase self-confidence, and project an ideal image, and (3) a way to obtain approval or recognition (p. 271). Similarly, Krueger (1988) posited that CBB “occurs in individuals who are very conscious of how they look and appear to others, who attempt to be pleasing to others, and whose fragile esteem and sense of self depends on the responses of others” (p. 575).

Results of this dissertation concur with most of these findings. For instance, interpretation of the data provides partial support for Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson’s (2009) claims. That is, findings of this dissertation suggest that ARPs are used as symbols to define the self, increase self-confidence, and project an ideal image (Trautmann-Attmann & Johnson, 2009). Whether participants end up using their purchases or not, they develop a special bond with most of their items. Participants expressed that they carefully select each item based on its physical attributes and on the purpose they want it to serve. They explained that these products help them define a sense of self. They all indicated having experimented with ARPs to find a style that suits them and to thereby boost self-confidence. Indeed, some explicitly stated that ARPs speak to who they are as individuals.

Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson’s (2009) suggestions that ARPs are used to enhance impressions or as a way to obtain approval or recognition do not necessarily hold true for compulsive clothing buyers participating in the present study. Interpretation of

the data revealed that the purchase of ARPs has more to do with enhancing impressions participants have of themselves than the impressions that others have of them. Thus, the relationship between compulsive buyers and their preference for ARPs seem to be more personal than social. It is worth mentioning, however, that there are certain situations (e.g., special events, work environment) in which participants do consider the impressions they will make on others when purchasing ARPs, but this is not the primary factor in their decisions.

Krueger (1988) posited that CBB tends to occur among highly conscious individuals who place paramount importance on others' opinions and whose actions are driven by the desire to please others. Participants in this study were in fact very self-conscious. Yet, again, they do not seem to place much importance on others' opinions. Instead, they seem to look inside themselves to find validation through ARP use. Indeed, all participants indicated that although compliments are nice, they are not as important as feeling good and being comfortable with what they wear.

To further illustrate how the data collected supports, enhances, and even differs from previous research on CBB and CCB, the cases of Helen and Lisa are explored in detail next. Both cases demonstrate how childhood, adolescence and early adulthood experiences, or Early Influences, affect their evaluations of the self and shape participants' preference for ARPs. They also illustrate how ARPs come to be the solution to the problems that participants face.

***Early Influences: Helen (Figure 10).*** Helen grew up in a high-income family, surrounded by love and material possessions. Growing up, she experienced shopping as a

family activity. She explained that all of her relatives not only enjoyed shopping, but did it excessively. Helen remembered that when she was a child, her mother used to take her shopping every day of the week and that she made Helen try on many apparel items. Helen explained that she did not enjoy this experience because, as a child, she was more concerned with playing than with shopping. Her father used to travel a lot for work, but every time he went on a business trip, he bought her many gifts. Most of these gifts were clothing items that ended up unused because Helen did not like them. Moreover, Helen recalled receiving many presents on special occasions (e.g., birthdays, holidays) and being rewarded for her achievements with gifts. When examining Helen's experiences as a whole, there are signs that her shopping and buying behavior is, in part, the result of the way she was raised. That is, being surrounded by material possessions and believing that it was normal to purchase excessively, and particularly ARPs, had significant impact on her behavior.

When she was in high school, she started to go shopping with her friends as a way to escape from the control of her father. Even though Helen grew up with the idea that shopping excessively was normal, her behavior did not get out of control until she was an adult. When she moved out of her parents' house to attend graduate school, it was a habit for her to go shopping. Her purchases would be mostly ARPs such as handbags, clothes, and shoes. Her friends noticed that her behavior was excessive and started to make comments about it. When Helen got a job and decided to stop receiving money from her parents, she noticed that she was spending all of her money on shopping and that it was impossible for her to maintain this lifestyle.

Although Helen has always enjoyed purchasing ARPs, she started noticing a real affinity for these items after her moment of realization. In one of our conversations, Helen explained that she struggles with reconciling her actual self and her ideal self. She explained that she was brought up to have a more conservative look, and that her ideal self has more of a “lady-like” style. However, her actual self enjoys trendy, stylish items. This conflict between the actual and the ideal self experienced by Helen was observed by Dittmar (2005a). The author suggested that CBB is characterized by the motivation to move closer to an “ideal self.” To do so, the individual must acquire material goods, typically those related to appearance, as they allow for self-expression. Thus, Helen’s preference for ARPs may in part be a result of a conflict between her upbringing and the person she came to be.

When engaging in CCB, Helen finds herself buying for the two different versions of the self. That is, she buys items that she considers to be characteristic of her ideal self, and also buys items for her actual self. Interestingly, she buys the former items knowing that she is not going to wear them. Perhaps it is the option of wearing them or the possibility of wearing them if she wants to that she is looking for. Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009) suggested that compulsive buyers use ARPs to project an ideal image. It seems that, for Helen, the projection of her ideal image occurs only in her mind and not in reality. In sum, it is safe to conclude that, for the most part, Helen’s preference for ARPs is rooted in the ability of these items to transform her into the person she is supposed to be, though only in an imaginary sense.

*Early Influences: Lisa (Figure 14).* Lisa's childhood laid the foundation for her obsession with ARPs. Growing up in a low-income family, Lisa missed out on many of the things other children her age had. She explained that her mother used to make most of her clothes and that she hated it because it was not in line with the fashions of the time. She grew up having little to no access to fashion. As an adult, ARPs are important to her because they allow her to look appropriate and to fit in. Lisa commented that due to her family's economic situation, she did not have the opportunity to dress and look like a "middle-class white woman." She explained:

Lisa: The most important [thing] to me is clothes overall. It is not to have a certain brand, I want to feel like I'm dressed appropriately for whatever the situation is. I want to feel like I fit in and I grew up – I don't even know if lower or middle class would be – I grew up in a family without very much money. I never had the clothes, you know, that the other kids had. My mother made most of my clothes and I hated them. And so... all my adult life, even though I've never really had much money, I had a couple of mentors that helped me to dress like middle-class white people dress, you know, like to fit in.

Shopping was never an activity that Lisa enjoyed with her family. Indeed, in one of our conversations, Lisa explained that she blamed her CCB on her few experiences with going shopping while growing up. Specifically, she stated: "I blamed it on the fact that my mother never took me shopping." However, there are two experiences that are still with her. The first is the very first memory she has about shopping. It was around Christmas time and she and her mother went looking for a pair of corrective shoes. Lisa explained that this was a very exciting experience because it was the first time that her mother bought something for her. After the purchase, Lisa's mother made it clear that she needed to take care of those shoes because they were expensive and, given their

economic situation, it would be hard for them to acquire another pair. Lisa said that she wore those shoes everywhere. The second and most memorable shopping experience with her mother happened when she was in high school. Interestingly, it also involved shoes. Lisa explained that this time they ended up at *Neiman Marcus*. She expressed that she felt like “I didn’t belong there.” Lisa commented that this was “such a different experience for me, to be shopping with my mom in the most expensive store in town and finding shoes that fit and having a sandwich.” Up until this day, Lisa recalls specific details about that shopping trip, such as the smell of the shoes and the kind of sandwich she ate. She said that she never had another experience like that with her mother.

Lisa’s relationship with her parents was not ideal. She described her father as being a “difficult person.” She explained that he was not very responsible and did not work very much. There were times that he would forget to pay the bills or that they did not have money to eat. Lisa commented that he was very friendly, but was not emotionally mature. He could barely handle alcohol and when he drank, he would turn into a “mean person.” Her mother, on the other hand, was very responsible but was not a fun person to be around. She raised her in church and Lisa is very thankful about that. Lisa’s parents got into arguments quite frequently. Because of this, Lisa’s mother would promise that they would leave her dad, but they never did. In fact, she stayed married to him for 54 years before he died.

Seeking to escape the situation at her parent’s house, Lisa decided to get married at 17. She explained that her first husband was “as bad as dad.” After a year she got divorced and after a while she married again. Her second marriage was also difficult; her



husband turned out to be abusive. While in the process of getting divorced, Lisa got pregnant. At that point, her husband refused to divorce because, among other things, he did not want pay child support. Lisa made a deal with him and they stayed married until their daughter was 18 years old. During these years, Lisa had many issues with her husband. Because she did not feel safe in her house, she used the mall as a safe place. When her daughter was old enough to go out with friends, Lisa went shopping to avoid being alone with her husband. These two marriages left Lisa hoping for a different life, one that involved going out and having fun. After her divorce, she started to shop more and more often. For her, the acquisition of ARPs was a way to build a new life.

During Lisa's childhood and adolescence, she explained that birthdays and other celebrations were not big at her house. She recalled that her mother tried her best to provide her with a good experience, but "she just didn't know how to." Gifts were not a big part of her life either. She was not rewarded for getting good grades, and during special celebrations, the gifts were not exactly what she expected. Lisa explained that her mother would give her things that had no relevance to her life. She stated: "My mother has never understood the joy of giving somebody something that is perfect for them or even the concept that something could be perfect for somebody." As an adult, Lisa places significant importance on gifts. She enjoys the practice of gift-giving and resents the fact that family members (her mother and daughter) do not make any effort to give her thoughtful gifts. Thus, she tends to reward herself.

As a teenager, Lisa suffered from bulimia. She explained that, for her, it was a way to exert control over an aspect of her life. She stated: "It [bulimia] was something I

could control. She [my mother] could make me eat things, but then I could go in the bathroom and throw it up. And I just thought I was brilliant, because it didn't have a name back then. There weren't all these self-help things. I just thought I discovered this brilliant way to get around my mom." Lisa did not specifically state that her bulimia had an impact on her CCB. However, it is possible that because the nature of the disorder draws attention to appearance, it could have been an indirect motivation to engage in CCB.

In summary, Lisa's experiences during her childhood, adolescence and early adulthood had a strong impact on her shopping and buying behaviors as well as on her preference for ARPs. Growing up, she remembers wanting countless items and never getting them. As an adult, she compensates by buying herself all the things she wants, especially items related to appearance. This confirms previous research suggesting that CCB is used as compensation mechanism (Lejoyeux et al., 1996). Consistent with Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009) and Krueger (1988), appearance plays an important role in Lisa's CCB. Her affinity for ARPs started because of her desire to look appropriate and fit in, and, up until this day, this has not changed. Due to a humble upbringing, Lisa did not have the opportunity to dress in the latest fashions or look like other people her age. As she gained independence, she started to see the purchase of ARPs as an opportunity to achieve her goals: fitting in and having a personal style that could define her. Lisa's behavior exemplifies how compulsive buyers use ARPs as symbols to define the self, increase self-confidence, and project an ideal image (Trautmann-Attmann & Johnson, 2009).

Examination of participants' experiences during childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood confirms that CCB and therefore individuals' preference for ARPs, does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, CCB is a reflection of an individual's lived experiences. These lived experiences, in turn, predispose the individual to prefer ARPs over other types of products. In the next section, an examination of what ARPs mean in the context of participants' current life experiences is explained.

**Ongoing Influences.** As demonstrated in the previous section, experiences during childhood and adolescence affect participants' sense of self and their views on the consumption of ARPs, thereby facilitating CCB. As with all people, past experiences shape the person one becomes. In the case of participants, their past experiences have, to a certain extent, predisposed them to an obsession with ARPs. Further examination of the data demonstrates that, as adults, participants' affinity for ARPs has not only continued, but intensified. They explained that besides serving a utilitarian purpose, ARPs provide important psychological benefits. Indeed, participants provided a variety of reasons to prefer ARPs. Some of these reasons are:

1. Physical attributes
2. Feelings evoked
3. Allows for managing the self
  - a. Self-expression (Express who I am)
  - b. Self-transformation (Transform one's appearance)
  - c. Fulfillment (To fill an internal void)
  - d. Self-empowerment (To gain control over aspects of one's life)

In this section, each of these reasons for the preference for ARPs is discussed and the significance of each within the overall lived experience of CCB is explored.

*Physical Attributes.* Participants expressed being drawn to ARPs due to their specific attributes and properties. Specifically, they explained that colors, patterns, style, and fit are very appealing attributes. Ease of use, versatility, simplicity, affordability, and accessibility are also properties attached to ARPs that make them very attractive to participants. The following comments illustrate the appeal of ARPs:

Helen: It's just easy. It's very easy. Like clothes... clothes is [are] everywhere and they are not that expensive so you could buy... I mean they could be very expensive, but they could be very cheap too. So, no matter how much [money] you have, you can buy clothes.

Julia: I really like clothing. Like, I love all the details that some designers put [on them]. And some... some clothes are not... obviously not very well made, but you know, like, I like small little touches and I really do appreciate things like special buttons or tailoring to make things fit better and things like that.

Participants' preference for ARPs could in part be explained via the literature on aesthetics. Bloch, Brunel, and Arnold (2003) contend that the visual attributes of a product have a symbolic function "that influences how a product is comprehended and evaluated" (p. 551). The authors explain that consumers exhibiting high levels of centrality of visual product aesthetics derive satisfaction from the aesthetic properties of the product and "may define themselves in part by the value that design plays in their life, and they may see themselves as connoisseurs who get substantial benefit from owning beautiful objects" (p. 552). The data revealed that participants derive satisfaction not only from acquiring the ARP but also from knowing they own it and from being able to

admire it. Indeed, some participants commented that they enjoy contemplating their purchases and some even treat their ARPs as if they comprised a museum-worthy collection. Thus, it is clear that aesthetics play an important role in participants' preference for ARPs.

Another plausible explanation for the importance participants place on the physical attributes of ARPs can be found in the self-image congruence model. This model proposes that products (e.g., dress) are chosen when their attributes match some aspect of the self (actual or ideal) (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987). Literature in consumer behavior contends that the image individuals have of themselves dictates specific behavioral patterns (Hosany & Martin, 2012). Given the previous discussion highlighting how participants use ARPs to define the self, increase self-confidence, and project an ideal image (Trautmann-Attmann & Johnson, 2009), it can be argued that participants pay attention to those physical attributes of a product that they associate with certain aspects of the self to enhance the self-concept.

***Feelings Evoked.*** Participants also prefer ARPs because of the feelings these items evoke. That is, ARPs allow participants to feel better about themselves. In particular, how they look and how they present themselves in society. The following comments illustrate the variety of feelings evoked by ARPs,

Dolores: I guess because of the way it makes me feel to have these things. It's almost like -- it almost perpetuates the illusion that umm... that something is going to make me feel better. I guess by having -- by being able to wear something different, I'll feel better. By being able to look different in some way, I'll feel better, you know.

Julia: They make me feel pretty. Umm... I think generally I'm happier too as I'm feeling pretty and confident. [...] I think just dresses in general make me feel more feminine and put together...

Lisa: ...I remember being at the Meyerson [theater] and it was the first time in my life that I've been anywhere and I was so satisfied with my total look. Like, normally, I would've looked and gone "*Oh, yeah! I like my dress but her shoes would look so much better with it*" or "*Wow! That coat! I really need a coat like that to go with this!*" Like every piece of what I -- and most of it was borrowed -- but everything I had on I felt so confident and I felt like I fit in to this rich people place that I've never been...

Because of the key role that ARPs play in shaping the self-concept (Golden, 2000), participants use these products to enhance feelings of self-worth. As Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009) suggested, compulsive clothing buyers see in ARPs a way to enhance their own impressions of themselves and to increase self-confidence, and the participants in this dissertation are no exception.

***Managing the Self.*** Participants indicated preferring ARPs over other consumer goods because these items help them achieve a variety of goals. Interpretation of the data revealed four main goals: (1) self-expression, (2) self-enhancement, (3) fulfillment, and (4) self-empowerment. Some of these goals are linked to presentations of the self in society (i.e., self-expression, self-enhancement) whereas others are more related to personal aspects of the self (i.e., fulfillment, self-empowerment). These goals are discussed in turn.

***Self-expression.*** Self-expression refers to the ability that ARPs have to allow participants to express who they are. For example, Kelly explained that her ARPs allow her to communicate that she is a "Florida girl." She commented that she enjoys wearing colorful outfits, and that by doing so, she seeks to communicate that she is "bright and

happy” and not afraid of who she is. Similarly, Lisa sees her ARPs as tools to communicate to others her role at work and her commitment to what she does. Lisa expressed that for her it is important to be dressed appropriately. Thus, Lisa uses her clothes to communicate that she understands and/or has knowledge of the situation she is in.

According to Storm (1987), dress has a strong impact on individuals’ self-concept. The author states:

Clothes are tools that can be used by individuals to express or to conceal and/or enhance their self-concept. Of course, we will reveal our assets and conceal our debits. Thus, the more positively we perceive ourselves, the more we will use dress to reveal this wonderful “me” and vice versa. Dress can boost our confidence and thereby temporarily enhance our self-esteem. Clothes become valuable when they have a positive effect upon us. (p. 267)

Storm’s (1987) remarks suggest that individuals use dress to reveal what they are proud of and comfortable with, in terms of their appearance. Thus, it could be argued that as compulsive clothing buyers, participants seek to use dress not only to achieve but to present a “wonderful me” or “the best me.”

*Self-transformation.* Self-transformation refers to the use of ARPs to become a different version of oneself or to “fix” aspects of one’s appearance that are seen to be lacking. Participants such as Lynn and Dolores indicated that ARPs provide them with the opportunity to mask or overcome insecurities related to their appearances. Helen, on the other hand, uses ARPs to become a different version of herself. Consistent with Trautmann-Attmann and Johnson (2009), in this way, ARPs are used as tools to transform and ultimately enhance the self.

*Fulfillment.* Fulfillment refers to the use of ARPs to fill a void in one's life. Some participants explained that ARPs allow them to compensate for things they have lost or are missing in their lives. Lisa, for example, indicated that she uses ARPs to alleviate feelings of emptiness. Specifically, she explained that even though she is always looking for the perfect item that fills a hole in her wardrobe, she is in fact trying to fill a hole in her life. Julia, on the other hand, started engaging in CCB as a way to mask feelings of loneliness. At present, she finds in the purchasing of ARPs a way to learn about herself, which makes her feel happier and more fulfilled. In this way, findings relative to fulfillment suggest that ARPs are an easy compensation mechanism to employ.

*Self-Empowerment.* Self-empowerment refers to the use of ARPs to help individuals gain control over aspects of their lives. Research on CBB has suggested that compulsive buyers seek in the behavior a way to exert control over an aspect of their lives (e.g., DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996). In the present study, some participants expressed that when they face a situation that seems out of their control, they turn to the acquisition of ARPs as a way to gain control. For example, Lynn explained that her CCB was a way for her to feel "in control" of her life. She stated:

Lynn: So, it's kind of like, "*Oh, here is something...*" you know, I really couldn't control, but you think that in your head, "*Oh, well, I can kind of control this experience of going out to the mall and buying something.*"

As Lynn's excerpt suggests, a preference for ARPs may arise because they foster feelings of being in control and may function as tools to resolve conflicts with others or even with the self.



It is important to note that due to the scant research on CCB, little is known about the reasons behind the tendency for compulsive buyers to prefer ARPs. The present study helps to address this gap in the literature, pointing to the importance of these items in creating, maintaining and communicating the various selves. In the next two sections, the role of these selves are explained within the context of the relationship between ARPs and CBB, as well as thorough theories related the self.

### **CBB, ARPs, and The Self**

Clothing has been proven to be a powerful non-verbal communication tool (Kaiser, 1998) as it has the ability to communicate multiple messages about the wearer to both the wearer and the observer (Miller-Spillman et al., 2012). Thus, individuals, whether consciously or unconsciously may shop, buy, and/or consume ARPs to communicate a wide range of messages, from the many roles they play to the multiple identities they have. Kang et al. (2011) argued that individuals expect dress and appearance to correlate with the different roles people hold in society. The authors posited that these expectations motivate individuals to make an effort to select and wear the “right” dress to communicate the “right” identity. Based on the interpretation of participants’ behaviors relative to ARPs, these claims seem to hold up. Even if participants do not ever wear their purchases, during the decision-making process they make an incredible effort to select the items that will precisely communicate their various identities. From a symbolic interactionist perspective (Stone, 1995), it is clear that participants see in ARPs opportunities to display their actual or ideal identities.

Participants stated that their purchases are carefully selected and that almost nothing in their closet is there by accident. When engaging in shopping and buying, participants tend to think about a desired identity they would like to “wear.” Whether they actually end up communicating that identity to others does not seem to be of great concern. What is most important to them is knowing that they own the item and that they can take on that specific identity if they would like to or if they have the opportunity to do so.

The fact that participants spend a lot of time and effort selecting the items they purchase is consistent with research suggesting that individuals appear to prefer products that communicate images that are similar to the images they have of themselves (Feinberg et al., 1992; Onvisit & Shaw, 1987). For example, Kelly explained that she wants her clothes to communicate who she is, and that, in fact, other people have seen clothing items and recognized qualities of her personality in them.

Researchers have suggested that to understand people we must understand their relationships with objects (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). The things that an individual possesses serve more than a utilitarian purpose, in that they are embedded with meaning and therefore can carry strong sentimental and psychological value. Indeed, things can help to define an individual relative to others and to the world. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) explained,

The things with which people interact are not simply tools for survival, or for making survival easier and more comfortable. Things embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape the identities of their users. Man is not only *homo sapiens* or *homo ludens*, he is also *homo faber*, the maker and user of objects, his self to a

large extent a reflection of things with which he interacts. Thus[,] objects also make and use their makers and users. (p. 1)

As an object, clothing serves many purposes, including protection, decoration, and communication. From a psychosocial perspective, clothing allows individuals to become and be acknowledged as “somebody.” As Golden (2000) contended, the fact that we are always dressed makes clothing a tool for moderating the tensions between the self and the outside world. As noted by the author, clothing has no meaning in and of itself. It is individuals who assign meaning to clothing. Thus, it can be argued that the meanings of ARPs to the self are both personal and subjective. As Golden stated: “The psychological importance of clothing is invented by the individual wearer in the service of safe exploration of the self and not-self worlds” (p. 138).

As discussed in Chapter II, researchers have used a variety of theories to attempt to explain the “why” behind CBB, and specifically, the role of the self within it. Among these theories are Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), Escape Theory (Baumeister, 1990; Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991), Empty Self Theory (Cushman, 1990), and Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Another theory that has not yet been applied to the study of CBB, but one that seems to help explain some aspects of the behavior (i.e., struggles of the self when in the decision-making process) is the Dialogical Self Theory (Bahl & Milne, 2010; Hermans et al., 1992). All of these theories propose that there is a conflicted self that is in need of assistance.

Given the heterogeneous nature of CCB, not all theories can be used to explain the CCB phenomenon. Conversely, a single theory cannot explain all CCB related

behaviors. That is, the effectiveness of the theory in explaining participants' behavior depends on their lived experiences. With the aid of the abovementioned theories of the self, this section includes an explanation of the role of ARPs in compulsive clothing buyers' sense of self. Issues relevant to this relationship are presented in the following four subthemes: (1) *Actual, Ideal, and Future Self*, (2) *Escaping From the Self*, (3) *Filling the Empty Self*, and (4) *Voices of the Self*.

**Actual, Ideal, and Future Self.** Self-discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) proposes that the self is comprised of the actual, ideal and ought selves. The theory suggests that these different selves can contradict each other, resulting in self-discrepancies. Dittmar (2005a) found evidence that actual-ideal self-discrepancies act as motivators of CBB, aimed at reducing the perceived gaps between how the individual sees him/herself (actual self) and how he/she would like to be (ideal self). Findings of this dissertation support this notion. That is, participants in this study reported experiencing discrepancies between their actual and ideal selves.

ARPs were found to be helpful in solving these self-discrepancies. That is, the purchase of ARPs allows the individual to close the gaps between the two versions of the self by getting her closer to the ideal self. For instance, Helen struggled with the notion of her ideal self. She commented that some of her purchases are items that are more akin to her idea of who she was brought up to be, which is a woman with a conservative, lady-like, proper/preppy style. Even though she knows she would not wear them – because they do not fit her actual self – she is drawn to items that will fit that image of the ideal self. Lawson (2006) stated something very similar when talking about her own

experiences with overshopping, “For we don’t truly believe that we will wear clothes that don’t belong in our true lives; we just want the pleasure of indulging the fantasy of the lives unlived...” (p. 166).

Self-discrepancies are also examined under the light of Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). This theory suggests that individuals tend to use material possessions to compensate for discrepancies between the actual and the ideal self. Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) explained that when important indicators of an individual’s self-definition are lacking, the individual experiences a sense of incompleteness and therefore feels the need to self-symbolize. By engaging in activities or acquiring products associated with a particular self-definition, the individual is able to convince others, and consequently him/herself, that he/she possesses a particular self-definition and thus achieves self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Research on CBB suggests that compulsive buyers tend to use material possessions, and particularly ARPs, symbolically to complete the sense of self (e.g., Dittmar, 2005a; Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004). Data collected for this study support these findings. That is, participants in the present study acquire ARPs seeking to complete an incomplete sense of self.

Lisa’s story illustrates how ARPs are symbolically used for the purposes of self-completion. In one of our conversations, Lisa explained that one of her motivations to engage in CCB was her desire to look like a “middle-class white woman” (self-definition). Her family’s economic situation growing up as well as her experiences with marriage denied Lisa the opportunity to achieve her desired self-definition. However,

once she achieved personal and financial independence, she initiated a quest for self-completion. That is, through the acquisition of ARPs, it has been her goal to feel and to present herself in society as a “middle-class white woman.” In sum, consistent with findings from previous research, Symbolic Self-Completion Theory seems to be useful in explaining the role of ARPs relative to the self, and in providing motivations to engage in the behavior.

While talking about the reasons that they do not wear some of the items they purchase, it surfaced that some participants purchase ARPs not for the actual or the ideal self, but for the future or ought self. Participants have many items that were bought based on their idea of a future version of themselves. That is, they buy ARPs that they will use when they become that person. Julia, for example, has a wide variety of new work clothes in her closet that she bought thinking about her professional self. She does not yet have a life where she can wear these clothes, but she is convinced that she will have it and so wants to be prepared for it.

Similarly, Lisa expressed that most of her unworn items were bought with her future self in mind. As she stated: “But it’s like, a lot of these clothes that I bought, again for this fantasy life that I’m not exactly living yet, but hope to be some day...” Lisa explained that she has purchased many ARPs thinking about the idea of a life in which she is able to engage in different social activities, things that she has not had the opportunity to do as of yet.

Lisa: I think that all along I was buying for this future life. This after my mad marriage life and a lot of those things I’m still glad I have in my closet even

though I'm not, you know, I still want that life. I want a life where I get to go to a nice restaurant. I get to go out on a date or go to a fancy wedding or whatever.

Although the future self may never come true, participants still hope for it and continue to purchase items that will make them feel that they are completely prepared. Indeed, despite the negative consequences of buying items they will not use (at least not at the moment), participants do not seem to regret the purchases, again because they feel these items are necessary tools in their quest to create a different version of the self. Perhaps the purchase of ARPs is a way for them to feel closer to this ultimate goal.

It is worth noting that some ideas of future selves seem more plausible than others. That is, there are future versions of the self over which individuals have some control (they can take steps toward it), and there are others that are completely uncertain. For example, Julia's idea of a future self seems to be closer to becoming a reality than Lisa's. Julia is working towards her doctoral degree, thus the possibilities of her becoming a professional in her field seem plausible. However, Lisa is hoping for a life in which she can, for instance, go out on a date, and achieving this, to a certain extent, is unpredictable. Thus, the likelihood of Lisa becoming her future self seems more challenging than it does for Julia. However, overall, it can be argued that compulsive clothing buyers use ARPs as means to solve the gaps that exist between different versions of the self.

**Escaping From the Self.** Previous studies have positioned CBB as a strategy used to escape from reality (e.g., Faber, 2006; O'Guinn & Faber, 2005; Yi, 2012), due to the fact that compulsive buyers typically experience negative feelings before engaging in

shopping and buying, and because engaging in the behavior replaces those feelings with positive ones. As previously established, data collected for this study revealed that CCB is in fact used as a means to escape. However, a question that remains unanswered is why ARPs are preferred when the individual feels the need to escape.

Both Faber et al. (1987) and Krueger argued that the purchase of ARPs can be used as a coping mechanism. That is, ARPs can be used to alleviate negative feelings such as loneliness, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. For example, O'Guinn and Faber (1989) explained that shopping helps compulsive buyers cope with feelings of loneliness through interactions with sales personnel and other customers. When visiting the store, individuals have the opportunity to try on a variety of items and receive feedback from others, which could improve self-esteem (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989).

In understanding the role of ARPs in escaping from the self, two concepts are important: fantasy and flow. Fantasy refers to the act of imagining something (Fantasy, n.d.). As discussed earlier in this chapter, flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), on the other hand, refers to a mind state an individual engrosses him/herself in when engaging in a specific activity. This state allows him/her to break away from previous mind states and, while in this flow state, to put aside the consequences resulting from him/her engaging in the activity.

Consistent with previous research on the topic (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Schlosser et al., 1994), the interpretation of the data revealed that the ability to fantasize is a common trait among participants in this study. Most participants in this study fantasize about the idea of having a different life or appearance (e.g., future self).



Because of these fantasies, participants are able to justify some of their purchases, especially those that end up unworn. For example, when in the decision-making process, they are likely to fantasize about the idea of attending an event, and, in turn, to transform the item they are considering from a want to a need.

Fantasy helps participants to escape from reality. When combined with the state of flow, they are likely to imagine themselves in a specific situation, wearing the items they are considering for purchase. This exercise allows participants to forget about the reasons that prompted them to shop in the first place, and instead be filled with joy. Likewise, participants appear to use the purchasing of ARPs to create an alternative version of the self, most importantly, one that is not painful. Miller-Spillman et al. (2012) talked about the concept of *escapist fantasy* or, “a way to temporarily escape day-to-day problems or boredom” (p. 482). In their discussion, the authors explained that individuals who engage in costuming and/or reenactments share the desire for escapist fantasy, in that they use clothing to experience another time and place. Compulsive clothing buyers seem to share some similarities with these individuals, particularly as they use dress to imagine themselves experiencing a specific situation. Fantasizing provides participants with the opportunity to temporarily experience the life they will live if they own the item and/or the life that item will allow them to have. In sum, fantasizing about wearing ARPs, when occurring during a state of flow, seems to help participants escape from a conflicted self.

**Filling the Empty Self.** Research on CBB suggests that compulsive buyers seem to need external stimulation, possibly as an escape from negative self-awareness, and

therefore turn to external, yet ineffectual, sources of gratification, such as shopping and buying, to compensate for these internal deficiencies (Reeves et al., 2012). Reeves et al. (2012) found Empty Self Theory (Cushman, 1990) to be effective in explaining why compulsive buyers engage in the compulsive acquisition of material possessions. This theory proposes a version of the self that is characterized by self-contained individualism, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and attempts to master the environment for one's own needs. Under this view, the self is expected to be able to soothe itself in order to be able to function autonomously. As the empty self experiences a variety of negative emotions, such as isolation, depression, low self-esteem, and poor relationships with others, the acquisition of material goods is used to compensate. Reeves et al. (2012) suggest that the empty self creates a nonspecific, chronic emotional need that the individual seeks to remedy by the continuous acquisition of non-essential goods. In support of Reeves et al.'s (2012) claim, participants in this study seem to use the compulsive acquisition of ARPs as a tool to remedy internal deficiencies. In fact, due to the nature of ARPs as tools to manage the self, it is understandable why participants seek to fill an empty sense of self through the acquisition of ARPs.

The Empty Self Theory also sheds light on a compulsive clothing buyer's state of mind before engaging in CCB. When Cushman (1990) proposed this theory, he argued that a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning led the self to experience a lack of personal conviction and worth, and an emotional hunger that was reflected in the acquisition and consumption of nonessential goods as a compensation mechanism. Interpretation of the data revealed that CCB is likely a way for participants

to fill an internal void. For instance, Dolores explained that her behavior is a direct result of her not feeling comfortable with herself. Before engaging in CCB, Dolores faced other addictions such as alcoholism and drug abuse. Now in recovery, it seems that Dolores has found in CCB a new tool to fill the empty self.

It should be pointed out that participants in the study experience a series of conflicts or tensions at different points throughout the shopping and buying process. These tensions illustrate the complexities of CCB, thereby differentiating it from more normal modes of buying behavior (e.g., impulsive buying). How participants both experience and seek to resolve these conflicts is discussed next.

**Voices of the Self.** As discussed earlier in this chapter, participants tend to experience a series of tensions throughout the CCB process. Specifically, these tensions can occur before the individual engages in the CCB act, while in the process of shopping and buying compulsively, and/or after she has completed the purchase. Research exploring the decision-making process of compulsive buyers is scant. Lo and Harvey (2012) examined compulsive buyers' decision-making process but focused on behaviors and not cognitions. That is, the authors did not specifically consider the thought process of compulsive buyers.

A framework that may be useful to explain this phenomenon is that of the Dialogical Self Theory (Bahl & Milne, 2010; Hermans et al., 1992). Bahl and Milne (2010) explained that this theory recognizes multiple selves and allows each to have its own voice. The authors argue that "By understanding consumption preferences at the level of multiple I-positions, we can identify the source of mixed feelings expressed at

the meta-self level and gain a better understanding of the actual consumption experience” (p. 183). They also suggest that Dialogical Self-Theory is particularly helpful in explaining negative consumption behaviors, which includes CBB.

Examination of the data collected for this dissertation alongside the main tenets of Dialogical Self Theory suggests that this theory is useful in explaining and understanding the tensions compulsive buyers experience at different points within the shopping and buying process. These tensions occur as their multiple selves speak from different “I” positions. In other words, multiple selves have different perspectives regarding a decision the individual is about to make. The tension caused by the disagreement between “I” positions is resolved only when one of the voices or “I” positions overshadows the rest. In the case of participants, it is the voice of the compulsive self that typically overshadows the others. For instance, before engaging in CCB, the participant questions whether or not engaging in the behavior is a good idea. During this process, one or multiple “I” positions might provide her with reasons not to engage, but the compulsive self overshadows these other “I” positions by providing a more convincing argument. The same thing occurs when the individual engages in the CCB act. At this stage, the individual might be struggling between options. Some “I” positions will remind her of the many items she has at home, the amount of money she will be spending and the consequences of her behavior. The compulsive self, on the other hand, will highlight how “cute,” unique, special that item is, the many purposes it will serve, how good it will feel to own it and not to worry about the consequences. In the end, the voice of the compulsive self is the one that prevails. Positive feelings after the purchase make the self

think that the compulsive self was right. However, as the positive consequences fade away and are replaced by negative ones, the meta-self experiences new tensions. This time it will question the decisions made, and particularly the failure in self-regulation. Voices of the self will hope the meta-self learns from the experience and will try to deter the individual from engaging in the behavior again. However, the voice of the compulsive self will make sure that the individual sees CCB as the ultimate solution.

In conclusion, each of these theories of the self offer the same message about compulsive clothing buyers: that a fragmented sense of self can only be repaired by the purchasing and possession of ARPs. In this chapter, a discussion of how the data support, enhance, and even differ from previous research on CBB and CCB was provided. Using literature from a variety of fields, a thorough exploration of compulsive clothing buyer characteristics, experiences, and preferences for ARPs was provided. Interpretation of the data revealed that even though compulsive clothing buyers share many similarities with general compulsive buyers, they also present unique characteristics. For compulsive clothing buyers, the consumption of ARPs is the only thing that allows them to resolve perceived internal deficiencies. Ultimately, compulsive clothing buyers believe that each ARP purchase is “the one” that will finally help them achieve solace in the self.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I developed the third level of interpretation of data by theorizing about the experiences and behaviors associated with compulsive clothing buying as shared by the six participants. I began with a discussion of the characteristics associated with compulsive clothing buyers and employed an existing model that maps the process

across the six participants. In the second part, I examined participants' experiences as compulsive clothing buyers to shed light on the commonalities they share in terms of motivations, emotions and outcomes. In the third part of the chapter, I considered the participants' preference for ARPs and discussed how the meanings assigned to these products translate into meanings of the self. In the next chapter, I reflect on the research process, discuss the contributions of this study for theory and practice, and suggest avenues for future research.

## **CHAPTER X**

### **REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the phenomenon of compulsive buying behavior relative to the acquisition of appearance-related products by addressing the question: *What is it like to be a compulsive clothing buyer?* Specifically, in this dissertation, I sought to examine the behaviors that comprise compulsive clothing buying, investigate the role of appearance-related products relative to these behaviors, and explore the meanings compulsive clothing buyers assign to appearance-related products. This study addresses gaps within the consumer research literature regarding the preference among compulsive buyers for appearance-related products by examining the experiences of as well as the overall shopping and buying process among six women who are compulsive clothing buyers.

As the final chapter in this dissertation, this chapter is organized into two parts: (1) *Reflections on the Process*, and (2) *Implications and Future Research*. In the first part, I reflect on the process of data collection and interpretation related to the research purpose and objectives. In the second part, I discuss the implications of the key outcomes that emerged from the interpretation, and suggest future avenues for research based on these outcomes.

## **Reflections on the Process**

The American philosopher and educator John Dewey once said, “We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience” (1933, p. 78). Reflection is a purposeful and thoughtful activity that allows individuals to make sense of experiences and construct meanings and knowledge that guides actions in practice (Taylor, 2000). Taking this perspective, I use reflection as a tool to analyze my experiences with collecting data, as well as during the process of interpretation. This section is organized into three parts, each of which address my experiences as a researcher: (1) *Negotiating Voice*, (2) *Articulating Experience*, and (3) *Personal Reflections*.

### **Negotiating Voice**

In this study, I used an interpretive approach to inquiry to examine the lived experiences of compulsive clothing buyers. Specifically, a phenomenological framework was employed, as it allows for the development of an in-depth understanding of the nature and meaning of everyday experiences (van Manen, 1984). To understand the compulsive clothing buying experience, and therefore achieve the purpose and objectives of the study, I collected data with six women through in-depth interviews and personal journals. I also used a demographic questionnaire to gather participants’ background information.

Since the purpose of this dissertation was not to generalize but to develop a deeper understanding of an aspect of human existence as it is experienced, a small sample was used. Researchers tend to believe that small samples are only useful for preliminary studies because it is assumed that the goal of all “good” research is to be able to



generalize findings to a broader population (Hodges, 2011). However, qualitative research is more concerned with quality than with quantity. An appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research questions, thereby allowing the researcher to achieve the goals and objectives of the study (Mason, 1996). In this dissertation, the number of required informants was based upon the in-depth nature of the methodology. Saturation was achieved with each participant. Fusch and Nes (2015) explain that the point of data saturation varies among qualitative research approaches. The authors suggest to think about data in terms of both “rich” and “thick,” and explain,

Thick data is a lot of data; rich data is many layered, intricate, detailed, nuanced, and more. One can have a lot of thick data that is not rich; conversely, one can have rich data but not a lot of it. The trick, if you will, is to have both. (p. 1409)

Data collected for this dissertation is both rich and thick. An indication lies in the fact that participants in the study were experiencing the behavior at different stages (i.e., mild, moderate, severe), which allowed for a greater understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, during the final interview, each participant was asked to share any other topics she felt needed to be discussed. None of the participants indicated that there were more relevant experiences to be discussed. However, it is worth mentioning that, as explained in Chapter IX, each participant experiences the behavior in her own unique way. Therefore, replication of the study would likely lead to the discovery of new and/or different meanings of the CCB experience.

The six participants’ perspectives and experiences emerged through the telling of their individual stories, which is where I began the interpretation process. Personal

narratives of the participants were developed based on the data gathered through in-depth interviews, participants' journals and demographic questionnaires. These narratives served as a starting point for understanding participants' experiences, as well as a basis for the second and third levels of interpretation (Chapters V to VIII and Chapter IX, respectively). Thus, I sought to position participants' voices as central to the entire process of interpretation.

As I was telling their stories, I also sought to remain cognizant of my own role in shaping the ways their voices were heard. Because this study was designed with specific goals and objectives in mind, it must be acknowledged that my expectations as a researcher had an impact on the outcome. Specifically, the topics that I intended to cover and the interview questions that I prepared in advance, as well as the content of the personal journal, influenced the nature of the data collected. However, the phenomenological approach was deliberately used in order to explore each participant's unique experiences with shopping and buying, and to do so through her own words as much as possible.

As previously mentioned, the in-depth interview was one of the primary methods of data collection in this dissertation. I met with and interviewed each of the participants a total of five times. As discussed in Chapter III, each interview session was designed to address a specific facet of the behavior. Out of the series of five interviews, I found the second one to be the most challenging for participants and the third to be the one they enjoyed the most. In the second interview, we talked about childhood experiences (e.g., relationship with family and friends growing up, family views on consumption, economic

situation, money management). For some participants, it was difficult to re-live certain experiences, whereas for others it was challenging to remember details about them. The third interview was designed to explore participants' preference for appearance-related products as well as attitudes toward money. As part of this interview, I asked participants to show me their favorite items in their closets. As soon as they started talking about these items, I noticed excitement and enthusiasm. They were, indeed, quite enthusiastic about the opportunity to share the significance of these items in their lives.

Some of questions asked were somewhat difficult for participants to answer. In those instances, I told participants to take their time and reminded them that it was okay if they did not know the answer to the question. I also reiterated that there was no right or wrong answers and that my role was not to judge them, but to listen to what they had to say about their experiences. I made sure they knew I was there to learn from them. At times, I had to politely and carefully remind participants that I was not a psychologist but a researcher. This is because there were moments during the interview process when I felt some participants were looking for advice, or for some sort of comfort. I not only wanted to protect them, but also the research-participant relationship. That is, I did not want participants to feel deceived after I left the field.

Because participants resided in different parts of the U.S., interviews were conducted using Skype or FaceTime (online video based calls). Most participants felt comfortable using these applications, except for Lynn, who preferred to be interviewed by phone. To conduct her interviews, I used the "speaker" feature of my mobile phone to be able to record the conversation. To protect participants' identity and to avoid any

breach in confidentiality, I conducted all interviews from home using my personal computer or mobile phone. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 3 hours and were transcribed verbatim. Detailed notes were taken during each interview. Since I talked with participants several times, these notes helped me reconnect with their stories and allowed for continuity throughout our conversations.

It is important to note that, because I had not established a relationship with most of the women prior to doing the research, they had to develop a degree of trust in me before they felt comfortable enough to share their stories. Given the nature of the topic at hand, which tends to be mocked and/or misunderstood by many in the general public, establishing trust was harder to attain in some cases more so than others. For example, Lisa and Dolores were very enthusiastic about sharing memories and their experiences with shopping and buying. Julia, however, was a little more guarded about sharing her experiences. Regardless of how enthusiastic or willing to share participants were, I decided to share some of my own experiences with shopping and buying to help them relate to me and to the process of data collection. Sharing my personal stories was particularly helpful when touching on aspects of the behavior that are typically seen as shameful or embarrassing. Indeed, I noticed that the more I told participants about my experiences, the more willing they were to talk to me about their own.

Interestingly, several participants inquired about my interest in the topic. Specifically, they asked if my interest in studying compulsive clothing buying behavior stemmed from my own personal experience; that is, from me being a compulsive clothing buyer. I explained to them that in my early twenties I got out of control with credit cards

and accrued a significant amount of debt purchasing ARPs. I further explained that I was not in fact a compulsive clothing buyer, but that I did exhibit some traits that are typically associated with the behavior and that this was part of the reason why I wanted to explore the topic in more depth. I think that being honest in this way strengthened my relationship with participants, as they felt that I had some level of lived understanding about what they were experiencing.

Because some participants were more inclined to provide a lot of detail than others, I also rearranged and rephrased some of the interview questions to facilitate maximum interaction with each participant. Likewise, I asked different types of follow-up questions to get clarification on some of their responses. As a result, the interviews often followed different paths, sometimes jumping from one topic to the next, then circling back to a topic we had discussed previously. This approach required that I be flexible during the interview process, which, in turn, allowed participants to tell their stories as the thoughts, feelings/emotions, and memories surfaced. As I was working on the personal narratives and thematic interpretation, there were times when I had to email, call or send text messages to the participants to ask for further details or clarification. Maintaining this kind of relationship with the participants allowed me to fully develop and understand the interpretation as it unfolded.

As part of the data collection process, participants were also asked to complete a semi-structured personal journal that was specifically created for this study based on the work of Benson (2008), Catalano and Sonenberg (1993), and Mitchell (2011). The journal included three main sections. The first section included activities designed to help

participants in documenting their behaviors and experiences. The second section was a purchase record, which allowed them to not only keep track of their purchases but to reflect on their purchasing decisions. The third and final section of the journal allowed participants to make free entries about any random experiences, feelings, and thoughts they had about shopping and buying. Participants were asked to complete specific journal activities prior to each interview. This not only kept them engaged in the journaling process, but facilitated discussion, as it helped participants to further their understanding of their own behaviors.

None of the participants had issues completing the journal. Julia, for example, found it so helpful that she indicated that she was going to keep a copy of it for further reflection. Lisa, on the other hand, struggled with putting an end to the journaling process. In several email messages, she expressed her frustration with not being able to finish it and referred to the process as “a never-ending story.” Five out of the six participants received their journals through regular mail and sent them back using a pre-paid envelope included in the initial package. One participant preferred that her journal be emailed to her. After she completed it, she then mailed it to me via regular mail.

Participants told me that working on the journal helped them to think more critically about their shopping and buying behaviors. For example, Lynn, Lisa, and Julia said that it was a good experience because it allowed them to think about their actions and to explore and discover the reasons behind them. Participants also expressed that, at times, knowing that they “had” to report their purchases stopped them from actually following through on them. For instance, in one of our conversations, I asked Dolores if

she had gone shopping recently, to which she replied: “I’ll be honest with you, I haven’t had a shopping binge since that [time]. So, I really think that me writing about it – I put it as an entry in my journal – that that really helped...” Thus, journaling helped participants to in part be more mindful of their behaviors and provided a level of accountability that, at times, allowed them to resist the urge to buy. Interestingly, journaling also became somewhat stressful, because it required participants to reflect on their behaviors and emotions, which some found challenging. However, it is worth mentioning that these feelings of stress were not seen as “a bad thing,” but as a “much needed exercise.”

In summary, alongside the interviews, journals were particularly helpful as a data collection method because they allowed participants to record their thoughts and feelings about their shopping and buying experiences as they occurred, without the presence of an “outsider,” and at their own pace. Data from personal journals provided a significant amount of detail and insight that enriched the interview data, while also confirming information already gathered through the interviews.

Moreover, I can say with relative certainty that combining the method of interviews with journaling enhanced the overall quality of the interpretation. To arrive at an interpretation that best reflected the nature of participants’ experiences, I relied on the process of participant confirmation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As mentioned previously, I kept in contact with the participants throughout the data collection and interpretation process, confirming the accuracy of the data in several different ways. First, I communicated with them often, usually through email, phone or text messages. Once the personal narratives were written, I emailed each participant a copy of her narrative and

asked her to provide feedback. None of the participants had any major problems or disagreements with the narratives, but two of them did clarify some points about their stories. Two of the participants asked for certain details to be eliminated and for some information to be modified to further protect their identities.

As the researcher, my relationship with the participants is worth mentioning, as it is possible that it played a role in their involvement with the interpretation process. I had no previous relationship with five of the six participants, Lisa, Kelly, Lynn, Dolores, and Julia, but I had known Helen for quite some time. However, it was not obvious to me that my prior relationship with her influenced her level of involvement more than the other participants. In fact, it is possible that it could have been more difficult for her to explain her experiences in detail out of fear that I would judge her. However, when comparing the data gathered from her with that from the other participants, I can say with relative confidence that she provided the same, if not more detail, about her experiences with shopping and buying. For the most part, all of the participants were committed to providing me with good quality, in-depth information throughout the process.

### **Articulating Experience**

In this dissertation, the phenomenological approach to interpretive inquiry places the experiences of the six women at the heart of the research process. After data collection, three levels of interpretation were developed: (1) *Personal Narratives*, (2) *Thematic Interpretation*, and (3) *Theoretical Considerations*. The thematic interpretation began early in the process of data collection. While in this process, I took detailed notes that helped me to identify repetition of responses and identify patterns in the data. As I



was transcribing the interviews, I would jot down my thoughts and ideas for themes. I noted that regardless of how different participants were, they all shared certain experiences and behaviors. Doing this at such an early stage proved to be extremely helpful. As I started working on the different levels of interpretation, I noticed my initial thoughts were only scratching the surface of the phenomenon, but I was indeed on the right track. In the next three sections, I provide a succinct reflection on each of the three levels of interpretation.

**Personal Narratives.** Chapter IV, *Personal Narratives*, constituted the first level of interpretation. The narratives reflect the unique experiences with compulsive clothing buying behavior as told by the six women during data collection. These narratives were developed based on information gathered through in-depth interviews, participants' journals and demographic questionnaires.

Through the thematic interpretation of the personal narratives, I discussed participant's personal background and family situation and early experiences with shopping and buying. I also described the point when the participant realized that her behavior was compulsive, her particular thoughts about shopping and buying, and the importance of shopping and buying in her life. A discussion of the factors that trigger her compulsive clothing buying behavior and some of the issues and/or concerns she faces throughout the shopping and buying process was also included. Additionally, narratives explored each participant's preference for appearance-related items and concluded with a discussion of the consequences of the behavior as well as any actions taken towards recovery.

**Thematic Interpretation.** Through the personal narratives, I sought to illustrate the uniqueness of each participant's experience with shopping for and buying ARPs, yet I recognize that their experiences are also meaningful when considered as parts of a larger whole. This led to the second level of interpretation, the thematic interpretation of the data (Chapters V to VIII). I examined the collection of participants' experiences as a whole to understand the compulsive buying experience and, specifically, the role of ARPs within that experience. I sought to discover the essence of this phenomenon and to understand reasons for their behaviors. While each participant provided a distinctive perspective, comparisons of these perspectives among and across the six women revealed similarities and differences that were used to identify themes. The themes that surfaced in the interpretation were then structured into four chapters pertaining to key aspects of the CCB phenomenon: *The Person*, *The Process*, *The Product*, and *The Path to Recovery*. As discussed in the next four subsections, within each of these chapters, I sought to organize and synthesize the data gathered to illustrate the dimensionality of perspectives as a means of offering insight on CCB and addressing the gaps in the consumer research literature.

***The Person.*** In Chapter V, I focused on *The Person*. That is, I looked at participants' lived experiences with CCB and their understandings of the behavior, triggers and motivations to engage, as well as moments of realization. Struggles during the decision-making process as well as consequences of the behavior were also discussed. Participants explained that the way shopping and buying is viewed in American culture makes it almost impossible for CBB to be taken seriously. Some participants expressed

that terms such as “shopaholism” and “retail therapy” are widely and lightly used among individuals in society. They believe that these terms deny the true severity of CBB and impede understanding of the behavior. In fact, some participants suggested that the use of these terms can make compulsive buyers the target of ridicule and judgement.

In this chapter, I also explored participants’ upbringings. Specifically, commonalities across their lived experiences in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Examination of the data revealed that for most participants, shopping and buying played a significant role throughout these three life stages. As children, participants enjoyed going shopping with family, mostly with their mothers. As adolescents they also engaged in shopping, but at this point it was viewed more as a way to fit in, a way to feel better about the self, a recreational and social activity, and/or a way to escape from the control of their parents. When participants reached adulthood, the relationship with shopping intensified. Those that grew up with very little saw in shopping a way to fix the past by acquiring as much as they could, regardless of the consequences. Those that felt they were not good enough or that they were not attractive enough viewed shopping and buying ARPs as the solution to the problem. By acquiring these items, they were able to become the desired version of themselves.

The amount of time and energy devoted to the activity, coupled with the credit card debt accrued, served as a wake-up call for most participants. Findings indicate that it was not until participants took on debt that they started to realize they had trouble controlling their shopping and buying behaviors. Most participants expressed that it took them several years to realize they were suffering from CCB. Some point to the way they

grew up, while others blamed society's views on consumption as reasons for the delay in realization. Interpretation of the data also point to the extent to which CCB comes as a result of individuals' backgrounds, internal states (e.g., depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, boredom, loneliness), external cues (e.g., advertising and promotions, culture, family and friends), and in some cases, situational factors (e.g., having extra money, need to return purchases).

Chapter V ended with a discussion of the severity of the behavior among participants. Findings indicate that compulsive clothing buyers do not feel comfortable sharing their affliction with others, usually out of fear of being judged or misunderstood. Indeed, they consider the behavior to be shameful and embarrassing. Throughout the process of interpretation, it was also found that compulsive clothing buyers experience mixed feelings about the behavior. On the one hand, they derive a great deal of satisfaction from shopping and buying. On the other, the fact that they are unable to control their urges makes them feel guilty and ashamed. Some participants, seeking to avoid these negative feelings, will hide or put away their purchases. However, negative feelings will eventually surface, prompting them to engage in CCB once again.

***The Process.*** In Chapter VI, I looked at *The Process* of shopping and buying compulsively for ARPs, as explained by the participants. In other words, I explored participants' lived experiences relative to the act of shopping in order to develop an understanding of the behaviors comprising the compulsive clothing buying experience. Through analysis of the data collected, I discussed two approaches to shopping. The first approach is plan-oriented and the second is exploratory. Plan-oriented compulsive buyers

tend to develop a plan prior to buying an item. Exploratory compulsive buyers, on the other hand, do not have a specific plan, but enjoy going shopping to be surprised by the items that their preferred stores offer. Findings also point to the role of family, friends, and sales personnel in the CCB experience. Specifically, these individuals can either knowingly or unknowingly act as accomplices, enforcers, supporters, or even distractors.

The data revealed that participants experience significant struggles while in the decision-making process. For participants, the desire to have more and more prompts them to spend a significant amount of time and energy on evaluating the options. They also struggle between “right and wrong,” specifically, how to reconcile their thoughts about not needing another piece of clothing with the uncontrollable need to purchase. Moreover, when exploring the emotions experienced during the shopping process, findings suggest that compulsive clothing buyers tend to experience negative feelings before engaging in the behavior. However, some participants explained that they also experience positive feelings before engaging in the behavior. During the process of shopping, most participants feel happy and excited, and some even described it as feeling “high.” The aforementioned tension between right or wrong appears to affect their feelings and emotions during the compulsive buying act, making them feel excited yet guilty at the same time. After the purchase, participants tend to experience positive feelings, which are shortly replaced by negative feelings (e.g., guilt, remorse, shame, frustration). Some participants also explained that post-purchase feelings tend to vary with the situation. That is, if the purchase is considered to be a need, then they experience

happiness and satisfaction. However, if the purchase is seen as unnecessary, excessive, and compulsive, then they experience guilt and remorse.

Findings also revealed that participants experience shopping and buying differently. Indeed, some enjoy the process of shopping more than the act of buying, while others enjoy the buying more than the shopping. Shopping-driven compulsive clothing buyers explained that, for them, shopping is: (1) a way to learn something about themselves, (2) an opportunity to escape from reality, and (3) a chance to spend time with family and friends. Interestingly, findings indicate that shopping even has the ability to make participants avoid feelings of loneliness through interaction with sales representatives and other customers. It also allows individuals to boost their moods and to deal with self-discrepancies. Participants said that they enjoy the “hunting” and being surprised by the items offered by retailers. After the act of buying, participants tend to experience happiness, satisfaction, and a sense of relief, but, at the same time, they also think that the “fun is over.”

In contrast, buying-driven compulsive clothing buyers explained that they consider shopping to be more of a “chore” than a fun activity. Feelings of satisfaction come only after they find that special item and are able to acquire/own it. Some explained that acquiring the item is in fact the reward for the time, energy, and effort spent on finding it.

Findings within this thematic area also point to the notion that CCB is a self-reinforcing disorder. That is, individuals resort to it when seeking to alleviate negative experiences and emotions, which they are able to do throughout the shopping and buying

process. However, after the act is completed, most individuals experience only a temporary sense of relief, and this relief is soon replaced by feelings of guilt and/or remorse. These feelings, combined with the particular reality the individual seeks to escape from, facilitates a vicious cycle of compulsive clothing buying.

Interestingly, it was found that as compulsive buyers, most participants prefer to shop online due to the convenience it affords. It is not only accessible to them at any time, but they do not have to go through the “hassle” of going to the mall (e.g., having to find a parking space, wait in line). Shopping online allows participants to compare prices and options, to find everything they want in one single place, and to complete the buying transaction much faster, thereby saving them time, that, perhaps, could be used to engage in some other activities. At a deeper level, online shopping could also be a way for participants to avoid issues of the self (e.g., negative body image).

It is worth mentioning that despite their use of the Internet, participants consider physical shopping to have a special appeal. Stores offer a unique experience that cannot be mimicked online. Indeed, visiting a store evokes many different feelings for participants. For instance, one participant explained that going to her favorite store makes her feel accomplished, as she never thought she would be able to afford purchasing clothing there. Others talked about elements of the store ambience, such as music, lighting, and window displays as key aspects of the shopping and buying experience in the brick-and-mortar setting.

Chapter VI concluded with an examination of the consequences of CCB. Findings position financial issues as the most common negative consequence of the behavior. In

the more severe cases, participants have accrued between \$40,000 and \$70,000 in credit card debt. Two participants confessed that at some point they had approximately 10 credit cards in use. Familial problems, marital problems, and the time and energy devoted to this activity were also found to be negative consequences of the behavior.

***The Product.*** In Chapter VII, *The Product*, a deeper examination of participants' preference for ARPs was presented. The importance of these items in participants' lives as well as the meanings assigned to them were discussed. In Chapter VII, I also explored participants' reasons for purchasing, as well as for whether or not they wear the ARPs. Overall, themes in this chapter reflect participants' love for ARPs.

Findings revealed that all participants preferred ARPs when engaging in CBB. They explained that ARPs provide them with a level of satisfaction like no other consumer good. The reasons they prefer ARPs were classified into three major categories:

1. *Physical attributes or tangible aspects of ARPs.* Participants explained that ARPs are especially appealing because of their physical attributes (e.g., color, pattern, style, fit) and properties (e.g., easy to use, simple, affordable).
2. *The feelings evoked or intangible aspects of ARPs.* The intangible aspects of ARPs refers to the way these items make participants feel. They explained that they prefer ARPs over other types of goods because ARPs have the potential to make them feel happy, prettier, good about



themselves, that they are good enough, and/or that they are dressed suitably for the occasion.

3. *The combination of tangible and intangible aspects, or the things that ARPs allow participants to do.* ARPs are also preferred by participants because they are used as tools to communicate who they are, to alter/fix appearance, to fill a hole in their lives, and to help them gain or regain control of their lives.

Although all of the reasons why they prefer ARPs are meaningful, the third seemed to be of particular significance to participants. When using ARPs to communicate who they are, participants expressed that they use their clothing to send messages to others regarding their commitments to what they do or the things they enjoy doing. For instance, Lisa explained that she wanted others to derive specific meaning from her clothing. As she explained, through her clothing she wants to communicate: “I’m here to work. I’m serious about this. I’m a professional. I’m here to work. I’m here to help you. I’m here to work.”

Another important feature of ARPs lies in its use by participants to mask or overcome insecurities related to appearance. Likewise, participants also explained that ARPs allow them to explore, assess, and change/transform who they are. For example, Lynn explained that her preference for ARPs is the result of insecurities with regards to her appearance. She said that for a long time she did not feel like she was good enough, therefore, her clothes became a tool used to achieve the perfect look. For Lisa, on the other hand, ARPs are tools that allow her to explore and transform her actual self. Her

early experiences (e.g., little to no access to fashion, low income family) shaped her ideas about how she is supposed to look (i.e., white middle class woman). Also, her personal experiences as an adult impacted her feelings of self-worth, feelings that are also reflected in the way she purchases. Lisa hopes for her reality to be transformed and she is convinced that ARPs will allow her to be prepared for when that moment comes.

Finally, participants see ARPs as a way to fill holes in their lives or to gain control over some aspect of their lives. The acquisition of ARPs allows participants to compensate for things they have lost or are missing in their lives. For instance, Julia explained that she started to buy compulsively after she moved to North Carolina to pursue her doctoral degree. To accomplish her professional goals, she had to leave behind her family and friends. It was in great part the loneliness she experienced that drove her to the mall. Other participants talked about using shopping to compensate for experiences they were never able to have. Lisa, for example, purchased a \$200 pair of *Vera Wang* shoes and justified it by telling herself that they were the prom dress she never had. Moreover, Lynn explained that she used to use shopping as a way to feel in control.

Interestingly, findings of this study reveal that compulsive clothing buyers' purchases are less impulsive and actually more deliberate. In other words, they do not necessarily buy the first item they see, rather, they spend time and energy evaluating their options. This is in contrast to research that tends to lump compulsive buying tendencies in with impulsive buying tendencies. Indeed, participants expressed that sometimes the shopping and buying process turns into a quest to find the perfect item. Interestingly, most participants confessed that there are many occasions for which those perfect items

end up unused. Among the reasons given by participants for not wearing the items, some are (see Chapter VII for a complete list):

- I have too many items
- I'm waiting for the right time (e.g., season, special occasion)
- I didn't remember that I have it
- I don't have a place to wear it
- I haven't figured out how to wear it
- I bought it for the things I will do in my future life

Almost all participants mentioned “having too many items” as a reason not to wear their purchases. For example, Lisa and Dolores talked about having too many items and very little opportunity to wear them because of a minimal social life. Participants like Kelly and Julia expressed that they tend to wait for a special occasion to wear some of their purchases. While waiting for that time to come, they can easily forget about the items. Another reason mentioned by participants for not wearing their purchases was the fact that they had not “figured out” how to wear the item. That is, the outfits they go with or what to wear them with. Some participants purchase items because of properties that make them feel a certain way, but do not think about the items they already have, or how that piece actually fits into their overall wardrobes. The latter situation can also trigger participants' CCB, in that they will further engage in CCB in order to find items that can go with a previous CCB-driven purchase.

Findings indicate that whether or not participants actually wear their purchases, what they buy is still very meaningful. Some consider their purchases to be extensions of the self. Others explained that owning these items helps them to feel safe, secure, and happy. In addition, several participants expressed that there are times when the mere idea of being able to wear their ARPs if they so choose is enough for them. In this regard, unworn items represent possibility.

Because of the meanings assigned to ARPs, participants find it very difficult to get rid of the items they buy. Findings revealed that most participants hang on to items for several years. Indeed, there are participants that have even developed space issues. Dolores, for example, has run out of space and had to rent a storage unit to be able to keep all of her ARPs. Julia, on the other hand, described how her apartment is cluttered with linens, clothing, shoes, etc. The inability to let go of items, whether worn or unworn, has not been revealed in research on CBB, offering an interesting and new finding related to the topic.

*The Path to Recovery.* Finally, in Chapter VIII, I focused on *The Path to Recovery*. To this end, I explored the consequences of the behavior and reasons participants have to continue engaging in it. Strategies used to either continue or stop the behavior, and their thoughts on going forward were also discussed.

As previously mentioned, some of the consequences of engaging in CCB are: negative feelings, substantial debt, relationship issues (spouse, family, friends), time and energy devoted to shopping and buying, and space issues. Yet regardless of the consequences, participants keep shopping. The interpretation indicates that participants

continue shopping not only because of the nature of the behavior (compulsion), but because they fear what will happen if they stop shopping and buying. For example, Dolores expressed that a life without shopping “feels very empty.” Kelly, on the other hand, explained that she is afraid to change her behavior because she does not know if the next thing she decides to engage in will actually cause her more harm than her CCB is causing.

The interpretation of data also reveals the extent to which CCB is a difficult behavior to fully eradicate because, in essence, it is a common activity. Participants expressed that everybody engages in shopping and buying in one way or another, therefore, trying to stay away from it altogether is almost impossible. The fact that there is always going to be something new in the stores also makes it difficult for participants to stop engaging in CCB. One key insight provided by the data is that compulsive clothing buyers are quite sensitive to suggestions from fashion bloggers as to the latest trends, and are they also susceptible to advertising and promotions via email. These results have yet to be seen in other studies on the topic.

Even though participants face a lot of difficulty controlling their shopping and buying behaviors, it has not stopped them from developing strategies to put an end to it. Among these strategies are (see Chapter VIII for a complete list):

- Develop an inventory list / master shopping list
- Wait 24 to 48 hours before purchasing an item
- Learn to develop and stick to a budget
- Track the amount of times an item is worn

- Seek counseling / psychotherapy
- Stop reading fashion blogs
- Identify other activities / hobbies instead of shopping

Several participants expressed that waiting for a specific period of time before making a purchase has been an effective strategy. Others indicated that developing a master list of the items they truly want or really need has helped them when in the process of shopping and buying. That is, if the item is not on the list, then they do not buy it. However, this can also act as a double-edged sword, as some will turn the list into individual buying “quests.” Avoiding fashion blogs is another strategy that has been beneficial for participants. They explained that suggestions from these sites trigger their CCB, therefore they have replaced these sites with sites about stopping the tendency to overshop.

It is important to note that not all participants want to stop shopping and buying compulsively altogether. Thus, they have found ways to continue engaging in the behavior without experiencing major consequences. For instance, it was found that some participants will search through their closets looking for items that still have the tags on. The goal is to take these items back and use the money to buy something else. This way, they can satisfy the immediate desire to acquire something new. One participant even called this practice “shopping bulimia.”

A discussion of how participants see themselves going forward closed this chapter. Most participants were hopeful that they will overcome their issues with shopping and buying. Others explained that there is still a lot of work to do. One

participant said that she does not intend to stop her behavior because she does not believe it has a negative impact in her life. Each sees her own path to either overcome CCB or to cope with it.

**Theoretical Considerations.** Building on the personal narratives as well as the thematic interpretation, in Chapter IX I sought to further interpret the data for its theoretical relevance. This level of interpretation allowed me to explore how the themes reflect the overall importance of ARPs in developing a sense of self. The significance of the findings of this study for established theories, such as the Escape Theory, Empty Self Theory, Symbolic Self-Completion Theory, and Dialogical Self Theory was also examined and provides a foundation for further study.

In sum, each level of interpretation contributes to the overall understanding of the compulsive clothing buying experience. Participants' experiences helped to explain the behaviors comprising CCB, the reasons they engage in CCB and prefer ARPs over other consumer goods, and the meanings of ARPs in their lives. Together, each part of the interpretation forms the whole of the lived experience of the compulsive clothing buying phenomenon.

Considering the relatively few qualitative studies on CBB and the scant research regarding compulsive buyers' preference for ARPs, this dissertation provides a comprehensive investigation not found in the current consumer research literature, thereby helping to address major existing gaps. Findings highlight the complex nature of the compulsive clothing buying experience and shed light on the role of ARPs within this experience, as well as the meanings assigned to such products, both of which help to

address the purpose and objectives of the dissertation. In the next section, I provide a brief reflection on my experiences in the field.

### **Personal Reflections**

I have learned that conducting a project on the magnitude of a dissertation requires a great deal of patience, perseverance, and resilience. As any other student, I began to design my research with a great deal of enthusiasm. My thoughts were, “I will work on something that will have a positive impact on others.” After defending my dissertation proposal in May 2014, I was ready to go into the field and I started the recruitment process. The plan was to get in contact with local mental health providers so they could mention my research to clients that were suffering from the behavior. I tried contacting mental health providers over the phone but from the multiple calls I made, I only received about five calls back, all responding that they were unable to help me. I decided to send the recruitment letters to those that I could not establish communication with. I sent a total of 18 letters but, again, received no answer. I once again called practitioners to confirm that they received the letter. Some acknowledged receipt but told me that they were unable to help. I also posted flyers in two mental health clinics around the Greensboro area and tried on several occasions to contact the leader of a compulsive spending self-help group, but had no luck.

After six months of recruitment efforts, I had zero participants enrolled in my study. Needless to say, I started to doubt the feasibility of my dissertation. As a last-ditch effort, I decided to contact several renowned researchers on the topic of compulsive buying to ask for help. One of them is the author of several books on CBB (e.g., *I Shop*



*Therefore I Am: Compulsive Buying and the Search for Self, To Buy or Not to Buy: Why We Overshop and Why to Stop*), named April Benson. She referred me to the author of a blog on the topic, and I reached out to her immediately. Fortunately, after I explained the goals and objectives of the study to her, she not only posted the information about my study on her blog, but decided to take part in it too. From this effort, I was able to recruit five of the six participants.

I also faced several challenges during the process of data collection and interpretation. First, I struggled putting aside pre-existing understandings about the behavior. I have been studying CBB since working on my Master's degree, which has provided me with a great deal of understanding about the topic. However, at the same time, this prior knowledge made it harder for me to enter the field without any preconceived notions of what I was going to hear. Consequently, I had to remind myself of my role as a researcher and that the whole idea of doing the study was to uncover new meanings. For that, I needed to bracket my experiences and allow myself to be surprised by the data (Husserl, 1970b; van Manen, 1990).

Moreover, as I listened to participants' stories I noticed in myself an increasing desire to shop. As was to be expected, my conversations with participants revolved around their experiences with shopping and buying. At times, participants recalled their shopping trips in such vivid ways that it would spark the desire to go shopping in me. I managed to control these feelings, but it is worth mentioning the effect of participants' stories on my own interest in shopping and buying.

At different stages of the data collection process, and especially during the last interview in the series of five, participants often expressed how participating in the study was helpful to them. They explained that by talking to me about their experiences, they were able to reflect on their behaviors and identify areas of their lives that were acting as triggers for their CCB. For instance, in one of our last conversations, I asked Dolores about her recent purchases and she explained to me that she had not been engaging in shopping and buying as much as she used to before taking part in the study. Lisa, on the other hand, said that she enjoyed participating in the study because it allowed her to gain a deeper understanding of her relationship with shopping and buying. She stated,

Lisa (personal journal): I am grateful for allowing me to be part of this study. It has made me more mindful about not only the amount of shopping I do, but the deeper issues that trigger my shopping. Still a work in progress, but I do feel I have made some progress.

In conclusion, it is very rewarding to know that this dissertation not only addressed several gaps in the literature but also helped informants on their path to recovery. In fact, selecting the topic was in part driven by a personal desire to have a positive impact on society. I did not want my dissertation to be considered a book on a shelf, but a thoughtful piece that not only advanced our knowledge about CBB but gave voice to those who are struggling with it. I not only take with me many personal and professional lessons, but the satisfaction of having done something for the good of others in the process of completing the degree. In the next section, I discuss the implications of the findings for theory and practice, and suggest areas for future research related to the findings.

## Implications and Future Research

Through this dissertation, I sought to understand the complex nature of compulsive buying behaviors and the role of ARPs relative to these behaviors. While the six women have unique experiences and perspectives regarding shopping and buying compulsively, all shared the preference for ARPs and place importance on how these items help them shape the sense of self. Overall there are several findings of this study that have implications for the current state of research on the topic of CBB and specifically CCB. I will discuss these implications in terms of how findings not only support existing knowledge, but add to the knowledge base in important ways.

Findings of this study point to tensions participants experienced at different stages of the shopping and buying process, whether before, during, or after. For instance, *before* engaging in CBB, participants struggle to decide whether or not they should be spending such time and energy on the activity. At the same time, their negative mood states prompt them to think that the only way for them to escape whatever is bothering them is by engaging in the behavior. Cognitions associated with this schema are: “I should be doing something else... employing my time in something more productive” but “I want to try it to see if I could also look like that.” *During* the act of buying, participants also experience tension. Some have difficulties making purchase decisions because they want to have all of the items. Others debate with themselves about whether or not the purchase is necessary. Cognitions associated with this debate are: “I shouldn’t be doing this... Oh, but look how cute it is!” *After* the purchase, participants also struggle with mixed feelings. On the one hand, they experience happiness, excitement, satisfaction, and a

sense of relief that comes as result of owning the item. On the other hand, they regret the behavior and experience guilt, shame, and frustration due to the inability to control it. Cognitions associated with this tension are: “Clearly I did not need to purchase this, this was dumb, but I still really like it” and “Why do I have to do this stuff? I have the ultimate in education, why do I have to go out and put myself through this?”

As discussed in Chapter IX, the Dialogical Self Theory (Bahl & Milne, 2010; Hermans et al., 1992) is useful in explaining and understanding the tensions compulsive buyers experience during the shopping and buying process. Individuals tend to experience tension because their multiple selves are in conflict. That is, they speak from different “I” positions, or, said differently, they have different perspectives operating internally. The tension caused by the disagreement between “I” positions is solved only when one of the voices or “I” positions overshadows the rest. In the case of the six women that took part in this study, it is the voice of the compulsive self that typically prevails. As CBB or CCB has yet to be examined via the Dialogical Self framework, this finding serves as a foundation for future research exploring the consumer decision-making process of compulsive buyers, and the thought processes they engage in throughout the different stages of compulsive buying experience (pre-purchase, compulsive buying act, post-purchase). Further examination of the tensions experienced by compulsive buyers and how they solve these tensions is needed.

When it comes to motivations and triggers for the behavior, findings of this dissertation support previous research suggesting that CBB is a result of the interplay between psychological and sociocultural factors (e.g., DeSarbo & Edwards, 1996; Faber,

1992; Faber & Christenson, 1996; Mueller, Mitchell, Marino, et al., 2010; O'Guinn & Faber, 2005). Previous research also suggests the presence of biological factors as triggers of the behavior (e.g., Mueller et al., 2010; Raab et al., 2011; Racine et al., 2014), but examination of these factors was beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, several of the aspects that were found to trigger participants' CCB have yet to be explored in the consumer research literature, including curiosity and the fear of running out of things. That is, participants explained that there are times when feelings of curiosity or being without actually trigger their CCB.

Another major trigger for participants' CCB is email advertisements / promotions (external cue). Indeed, participants indicated being particularly susceptible to such marketing efforts. They explained that most of the time their behavior is triggered by coupons received through email, as well as store promotions such as gift-with-purchase. Even though most research on compulsive buying behavior in general acknowledges advertisements and promotions as marketing strategies that trigger the behavior, there is little research that specifically examines this relationship. Moreover, another interesting finding from this study is the situational factors that seem to act as triggers of compulsive clothing buying in particular. Typically, biological, sociocultural, and psychological factors tend to be the focus of CBB inquiry. This dissertation found that situational factors, such as having extra money and the need to return a product, can also serve as triggers of CCB. Thus, future research should further examine the influence of these factors on compulsive buying behavior more generally.

Another external cue that was found to act as a major driving force of CCB is the fashion blog. Participants explained that fashion bloggers' opinions and posts influence their shopping and buying behaviors by positioning products as latest trends and "must-haves." Since this dissertation is the first study to reveal a link between fashion blogs and CCB, future research should examine this relationship in depth. It is likely that the scant research on CBB and the preference for ARPs has hindered the revelation of this somewhat obvious connection.

As discussed in Chapter IX, Escape Theory is particularly helpful in explaining individuals' motivations to engage in CCB. Most participants mentioned using CCB as way to escape from their everyday realities. In other words, it is used as a coping strategy. Future research should further explore the effectiveness of Escape Theory relative to CCB. It may be that there are commonalities among those who engage in CCB that could be a starting point for articulating why ARPs are used for escape purposes.

Findings of this study revealed that compulsive buyers prefer ARPs over other consumer goods due to their physical attributes, the way these items make them feel, and the fact that these products allow individuals to fix/alter who they are, communicate who they are, fill a gap in their lives and/or take control over an aspect of their lives. Even though this dissertation provides an in-depth understanding of the reasons why compulsive buyers prefer ARPs over other products, more research is needed. It would be interesting to explore if these reasons vary with the age or marital status of the participant or due to other personal characteristics. Moreover, it would be interesting to develop a typology of compulsive buyers based on product preference. For example, previous

research has suggested that men are more inclined to purchase electronics or collectibles while women are more prone to acquiring ARPs.

Interestingly, none of the women mentioned purchasing ARPs specifically to please others. Rather, the preference for ARPs stems from a personal desire to feel better about themselves. Thus, it is not surprising to learn that most of the time purchases end up unused. However, it appears that compulsive buyers still assign meaning to these items. Some see them as a failure to manage the behavior, but others see them as a refuge, or a kind of armor to protect them from negative emotions and/or the unknown.

For some participants, owning the item is enough, therefore actually using / wearing it becomes secondary. Acquiring the item provides participants with a great deal of satisfaction. Some even explained enjoying fanaticizing about the feelings they will experience when they eventually get to wear the item. Future research should examine the role of fantasizing in CCB, particularly as it may further explain why compulsive clothing buyers tend to not wear what they purchase.

Further understanding of the manifestation of CBB in male consumers is needed. Although this research sought to recruit both men and women, the sample ended up being all females, which did not allow for exploration of similarities and differences between the genders with regards to the compulsive buying experience. The fact that this research focused on a specific product category (i.e., ARPs) may have influenced the sample composition. Even though previous research has suggested that CBB is a “female disorder” (e.g., Christenson et al., 1994; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989), there is evidence suggesting that women and men are affected to nearly the same extent, and that once

buying is transformed into an addiction, gender differences are minimal (e.g., Koran et al., 2006.; Reisch & Scherhorn as cited in Reisch, 1999, p. 76). Future research could explore the manifestation of the behavior among men, and particularly whether they differ from women in terms of product preference or motivations to engage in the behavior. By researching how males experience CBB, a greater understanding of the behavior can be attained.

On a different note, results of this dissertation revealed that terms such as “shopaholism” and “retail therapy” distort the idea of what CBB is and what it entails. These terms make the behavior acceptable and contribute to delays in the recognition of the behavior among those who are currently suffering from it or who are at risk. Participants expressed a great deal of frustration over the fact that these terms are widely and lightly used among individuals in society. By using these terms in advertisements, marketers are not only neglecting the seriousness of the behavior, but hindering efforts to create awareness of CBB among individuals in society. Findings of this dissertation suggest that the word “therapy” should not be associated with retail because it fosters the belief that the acquisition of products is the solution to one’s problems, however severe they may be.

Findings highlight how the severity of participants’ shopping and buying behaviors does not allow them to see another solution the problems they face. Indeed, for participants, living in the world is reduced to the act of shopping for and buying ARPs. Perhaps this behavior is the consequence of many years of media messages about the “benefits” of consumption and/or a direct consequence of the value society places on



material possessions. In this light, it is worth asking, what is more important for human existence, to have or to be? Based on our consumption-driven society, many might argue that *having* is more important than *being* present in the world, thereby placing acquisition as central to human existence.

Others might also argue that *being* present in the world is more important than *having*. Indeed, movements such as *The Minimalists* and *Simply Living* are examples of efforts toward achieving this mind set. The Minimalists, for example, is a movement started by two millennials who discovered that they were not happy living a life of abundance (The Minimalists, n.d.). Their philosophy is to be more mindful of the things one possesses and to own what is considered truly important. Other movements such as *Slow Fashion* also promote the consumption of fewer ARP items of higher quality (Fletcher, 2008). Perhaps these movements are an indication of significant changes in society that will promote the acquisition of experiences rather than material goods. Further research linking social trends with psychosocial conditions like CCB would help us better understand how to mitigate the damaging effects of the drive to overconsume on people, as well as the planet.

In conclusion, findings from this dissertation demonstrate that the compulsive clothing buying experience is far from simple. As illustrated by the interpretation of the six women's experiences presented here, CCB represents more than just a series of shopping trips or purchase transactions. CCB is an opportunity for individuals to escape from reality and to learn meanings of the self. CCB is about how the process of shopping and the act of buying are lived by consumers to the point of obsession. Likewise, being a

compulsive clothing buyer goes far beyond buying excessively. Being a compulsive clothing buyer means engaging in a constant battle between the many voices of the self in the process of trying to control one's compulsive behaviors. Being a compulsive clothing buyer means both the attachment of deep meanings to ARPs and the struggle to let such products go. In sum, a compulsive clothing buyer is, in one way or another, consumed by consumption.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

During the interview process I would like us to explore your experiences with excessive shopping/buying. I am going to ask you several questions, but let me point out that there are no right or wrong answers. The goal is to focus on your perceptions of and experiences with shopping and buying. Therefore, it will be very helpful if you can explain things in as much detail as possible. Feel free to share your feelings, thoughts or observations as you reflect on what I ask you during the interview.

As we discussed in the informed consent process, I will be audio-taping our conversation with the aim to revisit it in the process of analysis of my research. I want to emphasize that no one will have access to this recording except for me. Your name will be substituted by a pseudonym. Would you like to choose that pseudonym?

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#### **A. First Interview**

##### *Introduction*

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself (e.g., what do you enjoy doing on your free time?)
2. Describe when you last engaged in a buying activity. Where did you go? What did you buy?
3. Please tell me the place buying has in your life at the present time.

##### *Understanding the behavior*

1. Do you know what compulsive buying behavior is? Can you define it for me?
2. Can you describe the difference between compulsive buying and impulsive buying? The difference between compulsive buying and retail therapy, or between compulsive buying and being a shopaholic?

3. How would you evaluate your shopping/buying behavior? Would you consider that it is normal, impulsive, or excessive? Why?
4. What do you think other people would think if they knew about your shopping/buying behavior?

#### *Moment of realization*

1. When was the first time you noticed you might have a problem with shopping/buying?
2. How old were you when you noticed it?
3. At that point in time, what made you think you had a problem?
4. How long do you think you had it before you realized what was going on?
5. Why do you think it took you that amount of time to realize that you were having a problem with shopping/buying?
6. What did you do about it?

#### *Triggers/Motivations*

1. Why do you think you started shopping/buying like this? What motivated you?
2. When are you most at risk of engaging in compulsive buying?

#### *The Process*

1. Describe your typical shopping/buying process. Start from the moment you begin thinking about going shopping and consider the entire process.
2. How do you feel before, during and after you go shopping/buying?
3. Does making a purchase make you feel different than just shopping? How so?
4. When you go shopping/buying, what do you enjoy the most? The interaction with others? The process of shopping/buying in itself? Something else?

#### *Store preference*

1. Do you have a favorite store? Is there a store you always go to in order to buy or shop compulsively?

2. How do you feel when you go to your favorite store?
3. What is it about your favorite store (or the stores you visit) that makes you feel that way (e.g., products, atmospherics)?

#### *Product Preferences*

1. Which type of items do you buy the most? Why do you prefer these items? How do they make you feel?
2. How important are the items you buy?
3. How do you decide between items? Which aspects do you take into consideration (e.g., price, style, how they are going to make you look, colors, fit, function)?
4. What do you do with these items?
5. Do you have items you have not used in your closet? What are they? Why have you not used them?
6. What do these unused items mean to you? Do they represent anything in particular?

#### *Outcomes*

1. Can you tell me if your shopping/buying behavior has affected your personal and social life?

### **B. Second Interview**

#### *Early Family Influences*

1. What is your first memory about shopping?
2. What do you remember about shopping trips when you were a child?
3. Who did you grow up with?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your relatives (i.e., mother, father, siblings, and grandparents)?
5. What did your family do for fun? Did shopping and buying figure into your family's recreation and vacations? If so, how?

6. When you were a child, how were birthdays and holidays celebrated? What part, if any, did shopping and buying play in those celebrations?
7. Did you get presents when you were sick? Did you get them for achievements (e.g., grades, graduation, winning a competition, cleaning your room)? If so, how do you feel about it?
8. Do you remember really wanting something badly and not getting it? If so, what was it?
9. Do you feel that others had more material possessions than you? Do you feel you had more material possessions than others? If so, how does that make you feel?
10. What was the economic situation of your family when you were growing up?
11. Do you think that your family's economic situation affects your views and attitudes about shopping, buying, and owing? If so, how?
12. How do you feel about your family's economic situation growing up?
13. Were there any issues, such as mental or physical illnesses, or life circumstances (either positive or negative) that affected your family's views and attitudes about shopping, buying and/or having things? If so, how were these resolved?
  - a. How do you think that circumstances affected your shopping and buying practices?
14. Do you remember discussions or arguments in your family about shopping? About accumulating stuff? About getting rid of stuff? If so, how were they resolved?
15. Whose attitudes or beliefs dominated the family view? What effect, if any, did this have on you?
16. Were there shopping or buying secrets in your family? If so, what were they? (For example, did anyone hide their purchases, have bills sent to other addresses, forge checks, or open credit cards in someone else's name?) If so, how did the secrecy affect you? Is it still going on?

### *Peers, Community, and Media Influences*

1. How old were you when you first went shopping without parental supervision? Describe the scene: who was there, how did you feel, where did you go, and what happened?

2. As a child and then as a teen, how often did you go shopping with your friends? (Never, rarely, sometimes, often?) What was the experience like?
3. Did you and your peers determine what was “cool” or “in” in terms of clothes, music and so forth? How important were brands?
4. Did your peers’ tastes or attitudes affect your shopping or buying as a child? As a teen? Now as an adult?
5. Were you allowed to use your parents’ credit card to go shopping? If so, did you have a spending limit? Were there any problems surrounding the use of their credit card?
6. Can you remember a specific incident involving your peers and shopping that is still with you today? If so, what were the circumstances? How did you feel at the time? Does this still affect you?
7. What messages about shopping, buying or having material things did you get from your religious community? From your town or neighborhood?
8. Were there differences in the messages about shopping/buying that you got from your family, your peers, and your community? If so, what was the conflict and how did you react to it?
9. Looking back, were there celebrities, specific television shows, or television commercials that you think influenced your shopping or buying as a child, as a teen? If so, what were they, and what influence did they have?

### **C. Third Interview**

#### *Product Preference and Usage*

1. Would you show me your favorite item in your closet? Why do you like it?
2. How many times have you worn this item?
3. How do you feel when you wear it? Does it say anything about who you are?
4. What does this item mean to you?
5. Can you show me the items in your closet that you do not wear and possibly still have the tags on?

6. Why did you buy these items?
7. Why have you have not used these items?
8. How long have these items been in your closet?
9. What do you plan to do with these items? Why?
10. What do these items mean to you?
11. Are you hiding these items from somebody in your family, circle of friends, partner? If so, why?
12. When you are about to purchase an item, do you consider the items you already have?
13. What are some of the reasons you have to buy more of these items?
14. While you are shopping, are you able to recall the items you have purchased and have not used?

### *Money Attitudes*

1. Can you tell me about the methods you used to pay for these items?
2. Do you have credit cards? If so, how many credit cards do you have?
3. Can you share with me an approximate credit limit you have on your cards?
4. Does the current balance on your cards exceed 50% of the credit limit?
5. Who pays for your credit cards?
6. How much do you (or the person who is in charge of paying the card) pay on a monthly basis? If you make the minimum payment, why is that?
7. As a child, did you get an allowance? Tell me about that.
8. At what age did you start to buy gifts for friends and family for birthdays and/or holidays? How did you decide what to give and how much to spend (if you bought the gifts)? How did you pay for the gifts? Does this practice affect how you see the practice of gift giving now? If so, how?

9. When did you get your first savings account? Your first checking account? Did someone teach you how to use these accounts? Did you make regular deposits in your savings account? Does your checking account ever go over the limit?
10. When did you get your first paycheck from a regular part-time job? From your first full-time job? Did having regular paychecks affect how you shopped and what you bought?
11. When did you get your first credit card? Did anyone teach you about using it? Did you pay your bill in full, or did you run up a balance?
12. Were you ever out of control with your credit cards as an adolescent or young adult? If so, what were the circumstances and what happened?
13. If you went to college or other training after school, who paid for it, and what were your thoughts and feelings about how your tuition was being paid?
14. What messages did you receive from your parents about supporting yourself?
15. Looking back on your childhood, what positive/negative shopping models did you have?
16. What unfulfilled expectations or unsatisfied dreams might be currently influencing your shopping or buying behavior?

#### **D. Fourth Interview**

##### *Outcomes of the Behavior*

1. Are there consequences of your shopping/buying behavior? If so, what are they?
2. Has anyone in your family been affected because of your shopping/buying practices? If so, how?
3. Have you take any action to remedy the consequences of your behavior? If so, can you describe those actions?
4. Have you tried to stop yourself from going shopping/buying?
5. What strategies have you employed in the hope to stop shopping or buying compulsively?



## **E. Fifth Interview**

### *Closing*

1. What would you consider to be the worst part of having a problem with shopping and buying?
2. Is there anything else you would like to say about your shopping behavior that we did not talk about?
3. Can you tell me a little bit about your experiences with our interviews? Your journaling? What was the most positive? Negative?

Thanks for your help. If you are willing, I will be in touch with you to ask you to review and to provide feedback on a draft of the written summary.

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW OUTLINE

Interview	Issues to cover
Phone Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide information about the study</li><li>• Assess:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Age (18 years or older)</li><li>○ Awareness of the behavior (introspection)</li><li>○ If the individual is undergoing treatment</li><li>○ Product preference (if buys clothing)</li></ul></li><li>• Rule out mania (no presence of bipolar disorder)</li></ul>
Screening Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide more information about study and the participation requirements</li><li>• Administer screening questionnaires</li></ul>
Introductory Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discuss the informed consent</li><li>• Explain goal and objectives of the study</li><li>• Explain how the participant will be collaborating</li><li>• Complete demographic questionnaire</li><li>• Provide journal and explain how to complete it</li><li>• Clarify questions</li><li>• Set up tentative interview schedule</li></ul>
First Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduction</li><li>• Participant's understanding of the behavior</li><li>• Moment of realization</li><li>• Triggers/Motivations</li><li>• The shopping/buying process</li><li>• Store and product preferences</li><li>• Go over journal entries</li></ul>
Second Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Early family influences</li><li>• Peers, community, and media influences</li><li>• Go over journal entries</li></ul>
Third Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Product preference and usage<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Appearance-related items ("closet" interview)</li></ul></li><li>• Money attitudes</li><li>• Go over journal entries</li></ul>

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<b>Interview</b>	<b>Issues to cover</b>
Fourth Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Outcomes of the behavior</li><li>• Go over journal entries</li></ul>
Fifth Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Closing<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Assess feelings/thoughts/emotions aroused through the data collection process</li><li>○ Inquiry for other experiences as well as thoughts/emotions/feelings that the participant would like to share</li></ul></li><li>• Collect journal</li></ul>

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## APPENDIX C

### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

<b>1. Personal Information</b>			
Name:		Gender:	<input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> M
Birth (maiden) name:			
Age:		Birth place (State/Country):	
Occupation:			

<b>2. Contact Information</b>			
Address:			
City:		State:	
Phone number:	(    )		
Zip code:			
Email:			

<b>3. Marital Status</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> Single	<input type="checkbox"/> Married	<input type="checkbox"/> In a committed relationship
<input type="checkbox"/> Separated	<input type="checkbox"/> Divorced	<input type="checkbox"/> Widowed

<b>4. Household composition</b> <i>(Please include the people you live with)</i>			
<i>Full Name</i>	<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>

5. Children			
Name	Age	Gender	Now living in
		<input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> M	
		<input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> M	
		<input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> M	
		<input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/> M	

6. Relatives (Please provide the following information about your immediate family)				
Name	Age	Living?	If some of your relatives have died, please indicate the year and age.	
<b>Mother</b>				
x		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
<b>Father</b>				
x		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
<b>Siblings</b>				
x		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
x		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
x		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
x		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
x		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		

7. Race/Ethnicity		
<input type="checkbox"/> White/Caucasian	<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic/Latino	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian
<input type="checkbox"/> Black/African American	<input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaska Native	<input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
<input type="checkbox"/> Other, please specify: _____		

8. Employment Status		
<input type="checkbox"/> Full-time (40+ hours/week)	<input type="checkbox"/> Part-time (less than 40 hours/week)	<input type="checkbox"/> I do not work
<p>If you are currently not working, please indicate why.</p> <hr/> <hr/>		

9. Average Annual Income	
Personal Income:	
Spouse/Partner Income:	

10. Education	
<input type="checkbox"/> High School degree or less	<input type="checkbox"/> Master's degree
<input type="checkbox"/> Some college	<input type="checkbox"/> Doctoral degree
<input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's degree	<input type="checkbox"/> Professional degree

**APPENDIX D**

**JOURNAL ACTIVITIES**

**Activity 1: The Purpose of the Purchase<sup>1</sup>**

**Instructions:** In the space provided below, please list your most recent purchases.

Most recent purchases	Approximate purchase date	Assign a reason
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Choose the reason(s) for buying the item:

1. A pick-me-up
2. Something I really needed and set out to buy
3. Impulsive gift for someone
4. Necessary gift for someone
5. I deserve it (even if I can't afford it)
6. I deserve it (and I can afford it)
7. There was extra money in my wallet
8. Specific item to improve home
9. To fill time
10. To replace something worn or broken
11. To please (or annoy) someone
12. To match an incomplete outfit or set
13. I don't know
14. "Necessary" reason not listed: \_\_\_\_\_
15. "Unnecessary/Irrational" reason not listed: \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from "Consuming Passions: Help for Compulsive Shoppers," by E. M. Catalano and N. Sonohberg, 1993, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.





**Activity 2:** Visualization Exercise - Remembering my last shopping venture<sup>2</sup>

**Instructions:** A *visualization* is an imaginary scene that you create in your mind to help you re-experience and examine a problem or situation in your life. You can also use visualizations simply to help you relax and experience scenes of happiness and contentment.

To do a visualization about shopping and buying, you will first need to get comfortable, Put yourself in a quiet place, one where you will not be interrupted for at least twenty or thirty minutes. Practicing relaxation exercises for a few minutes at the start of your visualization period will help you focus and get in the mood.

To start this exercise, you can use the following suggested visualization script:

I allow myself to see the scene. I'm walking toward the store. Where am I? What kind of store is it? What am I thinking as I approach the store? What am I feeling?

I enter the store. What time of day is it? Am I with someone? Is the store crowded? Who's around me?

What am I looking at to buy? I grab the item. How do I feel? How does this item makes me feel? Do I want to buy it?

I take the item to the sales counter. I find my money or debit or credit card. As I pay for it I notice my thoughts. What are they? What do I feel?

I walk out of the store. I am feeling...

If you have trouble re-creating this scene or if you feel uncomfortable attempting it, do not worry. Sometimes it takes several tries to allow yourself to have this imaginary conversation.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from "Consuming Passions: Help for Compulsive Shoppers," by E. M. Catalano and N. Sonohberg, 1993, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.



### Activity 3: You and Your Stuff<sup>3</sup>

**Instructions:** Now it's time to take a look at your relationship with actual items you've acquired. What's the relationship been like? A hot romance followed by a quick break up? A lovely honeymoon but then a gradual loss of interest? Was there a lifelong happy marriage? Have you grown to hate some of the items or already thrown them out? Try answering these twenty question and find out! First, try to answer the questions "off the top of your head" and then go back and reflect to see if you have any further observations. Use the blank sheets in your journal to answer these questions.

1. What are some of your most prized possessions?
2. For each of these prized possessions, when and how did you acquire it?
3. What sorts of items that you typically acquire bring you the greatest joy or satisfaction, both immediately and over the long term? (Refer to the categories in the *Shopping Patterns Checklist*)
4. What sorts of items that you typically acquire bring you the greatest disappointment or dissatisfaction, either immediately or over the long term? (Refer to the categories on the *Shopping Patterns Checklist*)
5. After an item arrives in your home (you bring in the bag, UPS delivers an order, or whatever), how soon do you tend to unpack it?
6. What do you do with it after you've unpacked it?
7. Do you try to hide it somewhere? If so, how and where do you hide it?
8. If you hide it, who, including yourself, are you hiding it from, and why are you hiding it from them?
9. If you do not hide a new purchase, how long does it normally take you to install it in your life – to start enjoying it or consuming it fully?
10. Do you usually remember what you bought, or is it a surprise when you see it again?
11. For what percentage of the items you acquire do you have in mind a specific planned use? (That is, you picture to whom you will give the gift and when, or you envision the specific event to which you will wear the shoes or take the camera.)

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from "To Buy or Not to Buy: Why we Overshop and How to Stop," by A. Benson, 2008, Boston, MA: Trumpeter Books.

12. How often do you actually use the item for that planned purpose?
13. If you do not use it for that specific purpose, what do you normally do with it?
14. What percentage of the time do you purchase an item with the idea that you might return it?
15. How many items are in your possession right now that you intend to return?
16. How often, after purchasing or acquiring an item do your initial positive feelings become neutral or negative? Over time, does excitement turn to guilt? Disgust? Embarrassment? Sadness?
17. What do you do with possessions you no longer want?
18. What kind of clutter do you have in your home?
19. What is the impact of your overshopping – and any clutter you may have – on the significant relationships (partner, parents, children) in your life?
20. After all the work you have done here, and all you have noticed, what are your thoughts about your shopping and buying behavior?

#### Activity 4: The Shopping Patterns Checklist<sup>4</sup>

**Instructions:** In this activity you will look at what you shop for, where you shop, with whom you shop, and for whom you shop. You will also look at the way you shop, the kinds of goods, services, and experiences you buy or acquire, your shopping signature, and the “justifiers” you use to give yourself permission to overshop. As you read over each list below, check all items that apply. Then look over the lists and star the items in each category that create the most trouble for you.

*What kinds of goods, services, or experiences do you buy/acquire?*

##### Clothing

- Business clothes
- Leisure clothes
- Outwear
- Special-occasion clothes
- Lingerie, underwear, hosiery
- Shoes
- Handbags
- Fashion or other accessories (belts, scarfs)
- Jewelry or watches
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

##### Self-care

- Toiletries
- Haircuts, coloring, perms, and the like
- Waxing, manicures, pedicures, and so forth
- Cosmetics
- Massage, other body treatments
- Plastic surgery; laser, Botox, fillers, or other treatments
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

##### Home furnishings and décor

- Furniture, occasional pieces (indoor)
- Art, prints, and pictures
- Indoor plants (flowers)
- Candles, vases, scents, and so on
- Kitchenware

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<sup>4</sup> *Note.* Adapted from “To Buy or Not to Buy: Why we Overshop and How to Stop,” by A. Benson, 2008, Boston, MA: Trumpeter Books.

- Tabletop china, table top linens, baskets, boxes, and so forth
- Bed and bath items
- Holiday and seasonal décor
- Antiques and collectibles
- Furniture (outdoor), garden equipment
- Materials for home improvement
- Outdoor plant materials
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

Entertainment, recreation, hobbies, gifts, and home office

- Books, magazines, newspapers, other print materials
- Prerecorded videos, CDs, DVDs, and so on
- Software, computer and video games
- Movies, video rentals
- Telephones, including cellular
- Concert, ballet, theater, museum
- Computers, TVs, DVD players, and the like
- Musical equipment (for listening or playing)
- Gizmos or gadgets (such as iPods)
- Greeting cards and stationery
- Writing implements
- Toys, books, classes for children
- Craft, sewing, and knitting supplies
- Other hobby supplies
- Photography equipment and supplies
- Sports/exercise equipment
- Tickets to sport events
- Outdoor adventures
- Pet food/supplies
- Entertaining others
- Alcohol, cigarettes, recreational drugs
- Casino or other gambling
- Gifts: birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions
- Vacations
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions considering your shopping/buying experiences for *appearance related products* (e.g., clothing, make-up, shoes, and jewelry). Check all that apply.

*When* do you shop/buy?

- Before work
- On my lunch hour
- After work
- Weekend days
- Weekend evenings
- While others are sleeping
- Before holidays or special events
- After holidays
- Before the start of a new season
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

*Where* do you shop/buy?

- Stores or malls
- Department stores
- Specialty stores or boutiques
- Discount stores
- Consignment shops
- Flea markets, garage sales, or auctions
- Trunk shows, sample sales, or using a personal shopper
- Internet shopping
- TV shopping
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

*With whom* do you shop/buy?

- Alone
- Alone, with help from one or more salesperson in stores
- Alone, with help from a telephone salesperson
- Alone, with help from an online salesperson
- With a spouse or significant other who actively participates
- With a spouse or significant other who just tags along (waits while I shop)
- With another family member who actively participates
- With a family member who mostly tags along (waits while I shop)
- With a friend who actively participates

- With a friend who mostly just tags along (waits while I shop)
- With a friend who knows about my overshopping problem and helps me resist
- With two or more friends
- With a friend who may also have an overshopping problem
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

*For whom do you shop/buy?*

- For myself, primarily for my own pleasure or satisfaction
- For myself, but primarily to impact (please, impress, appease, anger, and so forth) someone else
- For my spouse or significant other
- For my child/children
- For my parent(s) or grandparent(s)
- For my sibling(s)
- For members of my extended family
- For my friend(s)
- For my acquaintance(w), such as club member(s)
- For my coworkers(s)
- For use by a group (for example, art supplies for my son's classroom) without me
- For use by a group (such as at a party) that includes me
- For someone specific, but I often don't actually give away the gifts
- For no one specific, and I often don't actually give away the gifts
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

*How do you acquire something you want?*

- Cash
- Debit card
- Credit card that I pay off completely
- Credit card that I don't pay off in full
- Get it for free (off the curb or from someone giving it away)
- Money I've borrowed from a domestic partner, family member, or friend
- Money I've borrowed from a financial institution (payday, bank loan, student loan)
- Direct request that someone buy it for me as a gift (right now or very soon)
- Indirect request or hint for someone to buy it for me as a gift (right now or very soon)
- Direct request that someone buy it for me for me for a birthday, holiday, or special occasion



- Indirect request or hint that someone buy it for me for a birthday, holiday, or special occasion
- Barter my services in exchange
- Promise to barter my services but don't follow through (so actually get it for free)
- Scrape together cash laying around the house
- Return/exchange something I've bought
- Sell/trade something to get the money
- Help myself to products that belong to my company, church or other organization
- Deceive someone intentionally
- Shoplift
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

*What's your shopping signature?*

- Free items, giveaways, or great bargains
- Inexpensive items for comfort or delight (flowers, candles, soap, lipstick, and so forth)
- Practical or necessary items, but I buy more quality or features than I need or can afford (designer styles, status brands)
- Luxuries or extravagances that express my lifestyle, values interests, or passions (e.g., collectibles, fine jewelry)
- Going shopping with a particular item or goal in mind but then buying something else
- Impulsive purchasing, enjoying the "find"
- Extensive planning or researching, enjoying the anticipation as much as the purchase
- Shopping "just to look," as entertainment
- Unplanned shopping trips to brick-and-mortar venues
- Unplanned browsing on internet or TV shopping venues
- Spending more money than intended
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

*What do you tell yourself?*

How do you give yourself "permission" to overshop? "It's OK to buy this because..."

- It will improve my quality of life
- It just makes me feel good
- It makes me feel special
- I've had a hard day
- It will help me relax, and I need to relax!

- I deserve it
- I'm bored
- It makes me laugh
- I need this to distract myself
- It's so pretty! (or "interesting!" or "perfect!")
- It's such a good value
- It makes me feel more like my ideal image
- It gives me a feeling of having made it
- I'm worth it
- It will impress someone
- It will really please someone
- It will really annoy someone
- It will help me to get closer to someone
- It will beautify my home
- It's for education (or some other good cause)
- It's to replace an item that's worn or outdated
- I didn't remember if I already have one, so I'll get it just in case
- It might come in handy someday
- It's for my hobby or special interest
- It expresses something unique about me
- I need to get a gift for an occasion
- It's not for me; it's for someone else
- I've got the money
- I can afford it
- I can do whatever I want
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

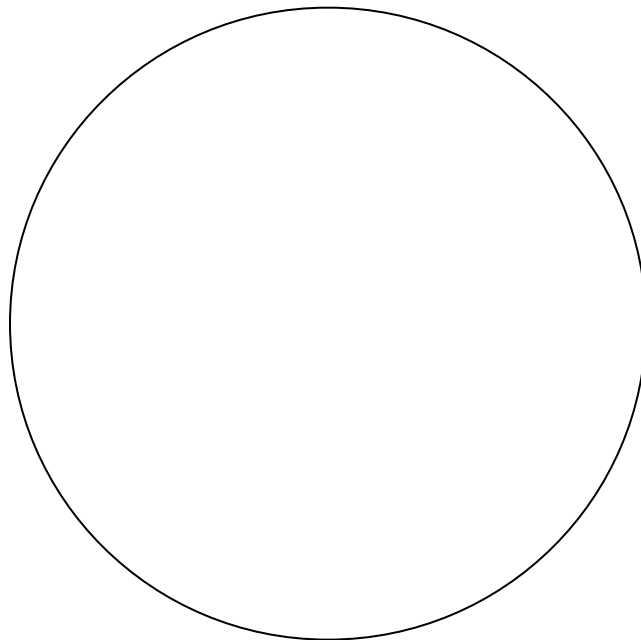
### Activity 5: Time and Energy Pie<sup>5</sup>

**Instructions:** To get an idea of the relative time and energy you devote to shopping and buying, consider the “pie” below. The entire pie represents a 24-hour day, which is yours to cut up or divide.

Begin by shading in the *time you spend sleeping*. Next, shade the amount of *time you spend working* on a typical weekday. If you work outside the home, include commuting time. What’s left, after you have marked out time for working and sleeping, is your disposable time. But wait – it is not free leisure time yet.

Shade in the amount of *time you spend eating*. Include meal preparation and cleanup time too. Shade in the amount of *time you spend doing regular chores*. For example, walking the dog, cleaning the house, driving the kids around, whatever keeps your daily life running smoothly.

Now, take a look at the remaining wedge. That is your truly free time. Ask yourself, *how much of that wedge is taken up by shopping?* (Other options are hobbies, relaxation, reading, going to cultural events, walking, meeting friends, and so on).



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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from “Consuming Passions: Help for Compulsive Shoppers,” by E. M. Catalano and N. Sonohberg, 1993, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.



## APPENDIX E

### PURCHASE RECORD<sup>6</sup>

Date:		Time of the day you went shopping/buying:	
-------	--	---	--

1. Please list the items you bought in the table below. You can attach receipts or any other document that helps you in the process of providing the required information.

<i>Item description</i>	<i>What attracted you about that item?</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Cost</i>
How much money did you spend in <b>total</b> ?			

2. Describe your thoughts and feelings with regard to your shopping/buying experience. Please record how you felt before, during and after going shopping/buying. Feel free to use an additional page.

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<sup>6</sup> Note. Adapted from “Compulsive Buying: Clinical Foundations and Treatments,” by A. Müller and J. E. Mitchell (Eds.), 2011, NY: Routledge.

3. How much time did you spend planning for or thinking about shopping or buying?

---

4. How much time did you spend shopping or buying?

---

5. Please list the stores you visited.

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

d. \_\_\_\_\_

e. \_\_\_\_\_

6. In the space below please include any other thoughts you would like to share.

## APPENDIX F

### PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS – SUMMARY

1. Participants must be 18 years old or older
2. Score above average on the Edward's Compulsive Buying Scale – Modified Version
3. Meet McElroy et al.'s Diagnosis Criteria
4. Fill out questionnaire designed to assess frequency of clothing purchase, withdrawal symptoms, and social, personal and work/study impact of the behavior. Results should show significant impairment due to his or her shopping and/or buying behavior.
5. Current or past mental health conditions
  - a. Participants in the study cannot have a history of (or currently suffering from):
    - i. Bipolar disorder
    - ii. Schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder
    - iii. Suicidal behavior
    - iv. Current substance abuse (past six months)
6. Willingness to be voice-recorded
7. Willingness to devote the time required to data collection (including keeping a journal)
8. Willingness to participate in at least five interview sessions (one to three hours, each interview, for up to 15 hours)
9. Agree to the publication of the findings (with pseudonyms)

*Note:* Preference will be given to individuals undergoing psychotherapeutic treatment with a mental health professional due to their shopping and buying behaviors or are interested in receiving therapeutic treatment.

## APPENDIX G

### McELROY'S ET AL. (1994) DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR COMPULSIVE BUYING BEHAVIOR

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#### Diagnostic Criteria

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- A. Maladaptive preoccupation with buying or shopping, or maladaptive buying or shopping impulses or behavior, as indicated by at least one of the following:
  - 1. Frequent preoccupation with buying or impulses to buy that is/are experienced as irresistible, intrusive, and/or senseless.
  - 2. Frequent buying of more than can be afforded, frequent buying of items that are not needed, or shopping for longer periods of time than intended.
- B. The buying preoccupations, impulses, or behaviors cause marked distress, are time-consuming, significantly interfere with social or occupational functioning, or result in financial problems (e.g., indebtedness or bankruptcy).
- C. The excessive buying or shopping behavior does not occur exclusively during periods of hypomania or mania.

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*Source:* "Compulsive Buying: A Report of 20 Cases," by S. L. McElroy, P. E., Keck, H. G. Pope, J. M. R. Smith, and S. M. Strakowski, 1994, *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 55(6), p. 247.



## APPENDIX H

### EDWARDS' COMPULSIVE BUYING SCALE<sup>7</sup> (MODIFIED VERSION)

- I feel driven to shop for clothing and spend, even when I don't have the time or money
- I get little or no pleasure from shopping for clothing
- I hate to go shopping for clothing
- I go on clothing buying sprees
  
- I feel euphoric when I go on a clothing buying spree
- I buy clothing even when I don't need anything
- I go on a clothing buying binge when I'm upset, disappointed, depressed, or angry
- I worry about my spending habits but still go out and shop for and spend money on clothing
  
- I feel anxious after I go on a clothing buying spree
- I buy clothing even though I cannot afford it
- I feel guilty or ashamed after I go on a clothing buying spree
- I buy clothing I don't need or won't use
- I sometimes feel compelled to go shopping for clothing

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<sup>7</sup> The modified version of Edwards' Compulsive Buying Scale is comprised of 13-items measured using a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

## APPENDIX I

### ADDITIONAL SCREENING QUESTIONS

*Description.* The following are a series of questions related to your frequency of purchase, feelings associated with shopping and/or buying and the impact of your shopping/buying behavior on several areas of your life. Before answering the questions, please take a minute to read the definitions of shopping and buying that are included below. For the purpose of this study, it is important to make clear that they are two different actions.

*Definitions.* Although you might use shopping as a synonym for buying, for the purpose of this research they represent different actions. **Shopping** refers to the act of going to a shopping mall or a store to look around, examine, try, or evaluate products. Shopping does not necessarily involve buying a product. **Buying**, on the other hand, is concerned with the act of purchasing a product. Buying does not necessarily require shopping for the product.

---

1. On average, how many times a month do you go *shopping*?

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Once a month                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Once a week         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 to 3 times a month         | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 to 3 times a week |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Once every two weeks         | <input type="checkbox"/> Daily               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other, please specify: _____ |  |

2. How often do you go **shopping** and actually end up **buying**?

From \_\_\_\_\_ times I go, \_\_\_\_\_ times I end up buying something.

3. How do you feel when you do not go **shopping**?

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Preoccupied |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nervous                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Frustrated  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stressed                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Relieved    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Angry                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Calm        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sad                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Happy       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other, please specify: _____ |                                      |

4. How do you feel when time passes and you have not **bought** something?

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Preoccupied |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nervous                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Frustrated  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stressed                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Relieved    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Angry                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Calm        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sad                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Happy       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other, please specify: _____ |                                      |

5. Please indicate how each of these areas of your life might be affected by your buying behavior.

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>How they have been affected?</b> <i>(For example, I can't dedicate the time needed)</i>
a. Family	
i. Spouse or partner	
ii. Children	
iii. Parents	
iv. Siblings	
b. Friends	
c. Work	
d. School	
e. Household responsibilities	

## APPENDIX J

### SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

**General Instructions:** This questionnaire is designed to determine if you meet the requirements to participate in this study. There are no right or wrong answers. The goal is to focus on your feelings, actions and/or experiences. Feel free to ask me any questions if you find unclear items or if you do not know how to answer any of them. Your participation is completely voluntary; thus, there will be no consequences for you if you do not participate in the study. Any information you provide on this form will be kept in strict confidence. It will only be used for the purposes of the study.

<b>Name:</b> _____	<b>Age:</b> _____
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#### PART I. DETERMINING PRESENCE OF THE BEHAVIOR

##### Section A

*Instructions:* For each statement below, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement. Place a check mark (☑) inside the box under the heading that best describes how you feel about the statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I feel driven to shop for clothing and spend, even when I don't have the time or money.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I get little or no pleasure from shopping for clothing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I hate to go shopping for clothing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I go on buying sprees	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I feel euphoric when I go on a clothing buying spree	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I buy clothing even when I don't need anything	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
7. I go on a clothing buying spree when I'm upset, disappointed, depressed, or angry	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I worry about my spending habits but still go out and shop and spend money on clothing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I feel anxious after I go on a clothing buying spree	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I buy clothing even though I cannot afford it	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. I feel guilty or ashamed after I go on a clothing buying spree	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. I buy clothing I don't need or won't use	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. I sometimes feel compelled to go shopping for clothing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Section B<sup>8</sup>

*Instructions:* Each of the questions below contains two choices, yes and no. Please place a checkmark next to the choice that best describes the way you act and feel. Do not leave any blanks and please respond to all questions with only one answer.

- Have you ever had the irresistible urge to spend money on anything at all?  
 Yes                       No
- Have you ever bought something that you later found useless?  
 Yes                               No
- Have you ever felt on edge, agitated, or irritable when you haven't been able to buy something?  
 Yes                               No

<sup>8</sup> Source: "Study of Compulsive Buying Depressed Patients," by M. Lejoyeux, V. Tassain, J. Solomon, and J. Adés, 1997, *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 58(4), p. 173.

4. Have you ever avoided certain stores because you were afraid you would buy too much?  
 Yes                       No
5. Have you ever asked someone to go shopping with you so you wouldn't buy too much?  
 Yes                       No
6. Have you ever hidden your purchases from your family or friends?  
 Yes                       No
7. Has the craving to buy something ever caused you to miss a date with friends?  
 Yes                       No
8. Have you ever left work in order to buy something?  
 Yes                       No
9. Has one or several of your purchases ever provoked the reproach of your family or friends?  
 Yes                       No
10. Has one or several of your purchases ever provoked a prolonged misunderstanding or separation?  
 Yes                       No
11. Has any of your purchases ever resulted in problems with your bank?  
 Yes                       No
12. Has any of your purchases ever resulted in legal problems?  
 Yes                       No
13. Have you ever continued to buy things in spite of the financial and family problems your purchases caused?  
 Yes                       No
14. Do you regularly regret your purchases?  
 Yes                       No
15. Do you regularly feel tense or nervous before you buy something?  
 Yes                       No
16. Do you regularly feel relieved after you've bought something?  
 Yes                       No

17. Do you have excessive buying periods accompanied by overwhelming feelings of generosity?

- Yes  No

18. Do you buy something “on the spur of the moment” at least once a month?

- Yes  No

19. Do your “spur-of-the-moment” or excessive purchase represents at least 25 percent of your wages?

- Yes  No
- 

## **PART II. MENTAL HEALTH SCREENING<sup>9</sup>**

### **Section A**

*Instructions:* Please answer the following questions by placing a checkmark in the box that best represents your feelings or actions. Please note, each item refers to your entire life history, not just your current situation, this is why each question begins with “*Have you ever...*” Use the spaces provided to explain your responses, when needed.

1. Have you ever talked to a psychiatrist, psychologist, therapist, social worker, or counselor about an emotional or behavioral problem?

- Yes  No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Have you ever felt you needed help with your emotional or behavioral problems, or have you had people tell you that you should get help for your emotional or behavioral problems?

- Yes  No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from “Mental Health Screening Form III,” by J. F. X. Carroll and J. J. McGinley, 2000, Iowa Department of Public Health. Retrieved from [http://www.idph.state.ia.us/bh/common/pdf/substance\\_abuse/integrated\\_services/jackson\\_mentalhealth\\_screeningtool.pdf](http://www.idph.state.ia.us/bh/common/pdf/substance_abuse/integrated_services/jackson_mentalhealth_screeningtool.pdf).

3. Have you ever been seen in a psychiatric emergency room or been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons?

Yes  No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Have you ever heard voices no one else could hear or seen objects or things which others could not see?

Yes  No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Have you ever had thoughts about killing yourself?

Yes  No

If yes, when was the last time? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Have you ever attempted to kill yourself?

Yes  No

If yes, how long ago? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

7. Have you ever had nightmares or flashbacks as a result of being involved in some traumatic/terrible event? For example, warfare, gang fights, fire, domestic violence, rape, incest, car accident, being shot or stabbed?

Yes  No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

8. Have you ever experienced any strong fears? For example, of heights, insects, animals, dirt, attending social events, being in a crowd, being alone, being in places where it may be hard to escape or get help?

Yes  No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



9. Have you ever given in to an aggressive urge or impulse that resulted in serious harm to other or led to the destruction of property?

- Yes                       No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

10. Have you ever felt that people had something against you, without them necessarily saying so, or that someone or some group may be trying to influence your thoughts or behavior?

- Yes                       No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

11. Was there ever a period in your life when you spent a lot of time thinking and worrying about gaining weight, becoming fat, or controlling your eating? For example, by repeatedly dieting or fasting, engaging in much exercise to compensate for binge eating, taking enemas, or forcing yourself to throw up?

- Yes                       No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

12. Have you ever had spells or attacks when you suddenly felt anxious, frightened, uneasy to the extent that you began sweating, your heart began to beat rapidly, you were shaking or trembling, your stomach was upset, you felt dizzy or unsteady, as if you would faint?

- Yes                       No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

13. Have you ever had a period of time when you:

- Were so full of energy and your ideas came very rapidly
- Talked nearly non-stop
- Moved quickly from one activity to another
- Needed little sleep
- Believed you could do almost anything

If none of the above apply, please continue to the next question (#14). If you marked any of the above, please explain your response in the space below.

\_\_\_\_\_

14. Have you ever had a persistent, lasting thought or impulse to do something over and over that caused you considerable distress and interfered with normal routines, work, or your social relations? Examples could include repeatedly counting things, checking and rechecking on things you had done, washing and rewashing your hands, praying, or maintaining a very rigid schedule of daily activities from which you could not deviate.

Yes  No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

15. Have you ever lost considerable sums of money through gambling or had problems at work, in school, with your family and friends as a result of your gambling?

Yes  No

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

---

### Section B

*Instructions:* Please answer the following questions by making a checkmark in the box that best represents your current situation. Use the spaces provided to explain your responses, when needed.

1. Have you ever received psychotherapeutic treatment with a mental health provider (e.g., psychologist, psychiatrist, or counselor) due to any emotional or behavioral problem?

Yes  No

2. Are you currently receiving psychotherapeutic treatment with a mental health provider due to any emotional or behavioral problem?

Yes  No

3. Are you currently receiving psychotherapeutic treatment with a mental health provider due to your shopping and buying behavior? (*If your answer is NO, please continue to question #5.*)

Yes  No

4. If so, for how long you have been receiving treatment for your shopping and buying behavior?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Using a scale from 1 to 5, where “1” represents “*not at all*” and “5” represents “very much,” indicate how much your shopping/buying behaviors interfere with your everyday life?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

6. Are you currently taking any medication as for any emotional or behavioral condition?

Yes                       No

If yes, please list the medications you are taking

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### PART III. MOOD MEASURES

#### Section A

*Instructions:* Please read each statement and circle the number 0, 1, 2 or 3 that indicates how much the statement applied to you *over the past week*. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any statement.

	Did not apply to me at all	Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time	Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of the time	Applied to me very much, or most of the time
1. I was aware of dryness of my mouth	0	1	2	3
2. I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all	0	1	2	3
3. I experienced breathing difficulty (e.g., excessively rapid breathing, breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion)	0	1	2	3
4. I tended to over-react to situations	0	1	2	3
5. I experienced trembling (e.g., in the hands)	0	1	2	3

	Did not apply to me at all	Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time	Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of the time	Applied to me very much, or most of the time
6. I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy	0	1	2	3
7. I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself	0	1	2	3
8. I felt down-hearted and blue	0	1	2	3
9. I felt I was close to panic	0	1	2	3
10. I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything	0	1	2	3
11. I felt I wasn't worth much as a person	0	1	2	3
12. I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (e.g., sense of heart rate increase, heart missing a beat)	0	1	2	3
13. I felt scared without any good reason	0	1	2	3
14. I felt that life was meaningless	0	1	2	3

## Section B

*Instructions:* Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. At times I think I am not good at all.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I certainly feel useless at times.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## APPENDIX K

### IRB CONSENT FORM

#### UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

#### CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: A Phenomenological Exploration of Compulsive Clothing Buying

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable):

Lorraine M. Martinez-Novoa, Principal Investigator  
Dr. Nancy Hodges, Faculty Advisor

#### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

#### **What is the study about?**

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to develop an in-depth understanding of the compulsive buying experience through the exploration of the role of appearance related products (e.g., clothing, shoes, jewelry, and makeup) relative to this experience.

#### **Why are you asking me?**

I am asking you to participate because as an individual who has been affected by compulsive buying, your behaviors and experiences with shopping and buying can help increasing the understanding of this form of consumption behavior. I am also asking you to take part in this study because you meet all the participation requirements, as listed below.

#### *Participation requirements*

1. Be 18 years old or older
2. Score above average on the Edward's Compulsive Buying Scale – Modified Version
3. Meet McElroy et al.'s Compulsive Buying Behavior Diagnosis Criteria
4. Fill out screening questionnaires

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5. Have compulsive buying behavior as a primary condition (e.g., participants must not have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder)\*
6. Have no current substance abuse problem (past six months)
7. Agree to be voice-recorded
8. Be willing to devote the time required to data collection:
  - a. Keeping a journal for four weeks
  - b. Participate in at least five interview sessions (one to three hours, each interview, for up to 15 hours)
9. Agree to the publication of the findings (with pseudonyms)

*\* Research studies indicate that bipolar disorder may lead to inappropriate buying and spending, particularly when in the manic stage, and therefore might represent compulsive buying as a secondary rather than a primary disorder.*

**What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?**

You will be asked to engage in a minimum of five interviews regarding your shopping and buying behaviors and experiences for appearance-related products. Interviews might either be conducted in person or online, through software such as Skype or Google Hangout. On agreement to be interviewed, the interviews will last approximately between 1-3 hours. As part of this interview process, you will be asked to take pictures of your closet and the appearance-related items you have bought during compulsive buying episodes, and to bring those pictures to one of the interviews.

You will also be asked to maintain a personal journal for a period of four weeks. In this journal you will have the opportunity reflect on your shopping and buying behavior and experiences. For example, you will be asked to describe your thoughts, moods, feelings, and emotions, before, during, and after shopping and buying act. Moreover, I will also ask you to be available for review your personal narrative once completed. This review will take approximately 1 hour.

**Is there any audio/video recording?**

Digital audio recording will be used to ensure reliability of data collected and to capture your experiences and perspectives on shopping and buying for appearance-related products. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below.

**What are the risks to me?**

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. As stated above, there is a slight risk of a breach of confidentiality. Measures that will be implemented to minimize this risk are described in the confidentiality section below.

Also, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, there is a minimal risk of emotional distress. To minimize the risk, at the beginning of each interview, the principal investigator will remind you that your participation in the study is completely voluntary and that you have the right to refuse to answer any of the questions. You will be also informed that you can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If any of the questions asked makes you feel uncomfortable, you

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computer, be password protected (using a different password than the rest of the data), and will be erased no more than seven years after the close of the study.

As previously stated, some of the interviews may be conducted via Skype or Google Hangout. Absolute confidentiality of data provided through the Internet cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access. Please be sure to close your browser when finished so no one will be able to see what you have been doing.

**What if I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By taking part in this study you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to participate in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By taking part in this study, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older, meet all the participation criteria as described in this document, and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Lorraine M. Martinez-Novoa.

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