

Article

Personal Projects' Appraisals and Compulsive Buying among University Students: Evidence from Galicia, Spain

José Manuel Otero-López ^{*}, María José Santiago and María Cristina Castro

Department of Clinical Psychology and Psychobiology, Faculty of Psychology, C/ Xosé María Suárez Núñez, s/n, Campus Vida, 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain; mariajose.santiago@usc.es (M.J.S.); mariacristina.castro@usc.es (M.C.C.)

* Correspondence: josemanuel.otero.lopez@usc.es; Tel.: +34-8818-13882

Abstract: The appraisal of goal-related constructs, generally, and of personal projects (PP) in particular, is one of the most solid research paths with regard to subjective well-being and health. In the last few years, the appraisal of PP has been linked to such problems as excessive alcohol and marijuana use, but no study has been conducted in the field of compulsive buying (CB). In this study, using Little's personal-projects-analysis (PPA) methodology, the differences in university students were analyzed in both broad domains (meaning, structure, community, efficacy, and stress) and specific appraisal dimensions in groups with low ($n = 293$), moderate ($n = 191$), and high ($n = 41$) compulsive-buying propensities. The results confirm that the high-propensity group presented the highest significant levels in the domain of stress and the lowest in efficacy, meaning, and structure. As to appraisal dimensions, the group with a high propensity to CB attained statistically lower appraisals in the dimensions of importance, enjoyment, self-identity, absorption, control, time adequacy, progress, and outcome of their projects; the appraisal of the level of stress, difficulty, and conflict increased as the level of involvement in CB increased. These findings have major implications for the design of prevention and intervention programs for this behavioral problem.

Keywords: personal projects; appraisal dimensions; compulsive buying; university students



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1. Introduction

The goal-related constructs, articulated in frameworks under such rubrics as “middle-level-units” [1], “characteristics adaptations” [2], or “personal concerns” [3], have become, in the last few decades, key personal factors in explaining and regulating behavior [4–6]. Indeed, from contemporary approaches, besides the basic tendencies represented by traits [2], plans, intentions, and purposes are the raw material of knowledge for a personality psychology that is interested in both personal (as well as collective) well-being and the exploration of the dynamics that underlie behavior.

In this context of growing interest in the motivational processes, a plethora of units have emerged that are aimed at action including “current concerns” [7], “life tasks” [8], “personal strivings” [9], “personal projects” [10], and “future goals” [11], which seek to capture the intentions underlying what people do or are trying to do in their lives.

The PP, conceptualized by Little [10] as a “set of interrelated acts extending over time, which is intended to maintain or attain a state of affairs foreseen by the individual” (p. 276), has been one of the motivational units with the greatest heuristic value in the study of the relationships between the appraisal of personal projects and well-being. This construct is rooted in the social-ecological framework of human development [12], integrating the present and future meanings and purposes of the individual that are the result of an interaction of influences from biological, environmental, and social/cultural systems [13,14].

The ways in which PP are rated on several appraisal dimensions put forward by Little in 1983 (e.g., importance, enjoyment, control, visibility, progress, and stress) make

it possible to look into the motivational dynamics underlying personal goals. Little [13] grouped these dimensions in five core domains of a more-general nature such as *meaning* (whether one's pursuits are seen as worthwhile or worthless), *structure* (the extent to which projects are organized or in disarray), *community* (the extent to which projects are both known and supported by others), *efficacy* (whether one's undertakings have been, and will continue to be, progressing well), and *stress* (whether the demands of our projects exceed our capacity to cope with them).

The appraisal dimensions for PP put forward by Little [10,13] have been widely echoed in research and have led to an important set of findings on their association to well-being, [15–17], stress [18], depression [19,20], physical health [21,22], and a number of psychosocial problems including the use of alcohol [23] and marijuana [24].

Specifically, a finding that emerges forcefully in this field of study is that when PP are appraised as meaningful, well-organized, and supported by others and seen as efficacious and not too stressful, subjective well-being is enhanced [25–27]. Thus, life satisfaction is higher in those people involved in projects they appraised as important, which were highly enjoyable and which were perceived as moderately difficult to attain [28]. Emotional distress has also been a major focus of interest for researchers in the field [29,30], thus showing that anxiety and depression are associated with those PP that are appraised as highly stressing and difficult, poorly structured, and before which subjects perceived themselves as individuals with few skills and poor positive-outcome expectancy.

Over the last few years, the use of alcohol and marijuana among university students has been a problem that has been more widely studied with regard to the appraisal of PP. As to alcohol consumption among this group, it has been confirmed that the appraisal dimensions of self-efficacy, meaningfulness, and social support have a protective factor, while distress is a risk factor [23]; other studies [31–33] also show that those university students who appraise their projects as low in meaning report more heavy drinking episodes and more alcohol-related consequences. As to marijuana consumption, it has been confirmed that university students who appraise their PP as high in meaning and high in efficacy use this substance less frequently [24].

In spite of the fact that research has shown that knowing the appraisal of PP entails major gains in the understanding and explanation of a variety of cases (well-being, psychopathological manifestations, and alcohol and marijuana use, for example), it is extremely surprising that there is no single study that explores the appraisal of PP in CB. This circumstance seriously limits our understanding of how people who have this behavioral problem appraise PP.

CB has been defined as a chronic and excessive form of shopping and spending characterized by intrusive thoughts and uncontrollable urges to buy that lead to repetitive purchasing episodes [34,35]. The growing prevalence of this problem, as well as the high (humane, social, economic, and health-related) costs associated make CB a focal aim in research in order to strengthen prevention, thus contributing to a more sustainable society.

Young adults, particularly university students, have become the focus of attention of researchers as they are, in the light of the findings, a high-risk group as far as CB is concerned. Different studies conducted over the last decade in samples of university students [36–39] have found high rates of CB prevalence, as they range between 5.9% and 18.3%.

The university period, in so far as it is a life transition stage [40] characterized by greater independence, entails a new future-oriented approach in which young adults internalize and pursue new goals that will ultimately shape their identity. It is therefore important to know how students appraise the PP that shape their sense of purpose in life at this age bracket and in these contexts so that we are able to grasp a more-comprehensive understanding of their behaviors (CB, to mention but one). Previous literature [41] has shown that identity seeking plays a key role in CB. Other authors [42,43], although working from neighboring fields, point out that considering consumers as “goal-striving individuals”

could contribute to better understanding the purposes, the needs, and the meanings of both product-buying and the consumption of products and services.

In sum, previous research has identified the appraisal of PP as a particularly useful framework to progress in the understanding and/or the explanation of well-being, of different psychopathological manifestations (anxiety, depression, etc.) and other psychosocial problems (consumption of alcohol, marijuana, etc.). However, as we have already noted, there is no previous study that analyzed the appraisals of PP in relation to CB. Therefore, this study, in order to fill this gap, put forward a twofold aim: (a) to establish the appraisal profiles of the PP based both on broad domains and specific dimensions in university students with low, moderate, and high propensities to CB and (b) to elucidate whether significant differences exist in each and every one of the broad domains of appraisal of PP and their corresponding dimensions among the distinct groups established as a function of their CB propensity.

The results as to what appraisal profiles of PP entail a greater risk for engaging in CB will provide information of great relevance to design future interventions at a community or a personal level, which will, in turn, have a positive impact on social sustainability.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Procedure and Participants

This study is part of a wide spectrum research project examining the compulsive buying and its associated psychological variables in the region of Galicia (Spain). Data collection was made in a variety of schools of the Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, between November 2017 and February 2018. Evaluative material was administered by researchers, who had been previously trained for field work, during the class (a more-detailed description of the procedure has been provided elsewhere [44]). Participation was voluntary, and both the anonymity and confidentiality of the data were guaranteed.

The sample of this study consisted of 527 Spanish first-year undergraduate students. Of them, 282 were female (53.5%), and 245 were male (46.5%). Their age ranged between 18 and 20 years ($M_{age} = 18.61$). The distribution of students according to their field of study was as follows: 38.2% from the social sciences and law, 33.6% from health care, and 28.2% from the sciences.

The study met and was conducted in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and its protocol was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Santiago de Compostela. No incentives were offered for participation in the study.

2.2. Measurements

2.2.1. Compulsive Buying

The Spanish translated version of the German Addictive Buying Scale (GCBS; [45]) was employed to evaluate the tendency to CB. This is a self-report instrument that contains 16 items (e.g., “Sometimes I buy somethings that I cannot afford,” “I often feel a sudden, inexplicable urge to go out immediately and buy things that I want,” and “For me, shopping is a way of facing the stress of my daily life and relaxing”) each rated on a four-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The total score (ranging from 16–64) was used as an index of CB tendency. The adequate psychometric properties of the GCBS were confirmed by previous research conducted with Spanish samples [46,47]. In this study, internal consistency was measured using Cronbach’s alpha, which was 0.92. For the purposes of the current research, participants were classified into three groups according to their GCBS total score. Specifically, in line with some previous studies [48], we considered a score of 30 in GCBS as the upper limit for the establishment of group of non-compulsive buyers and two standard deviations beyond the mean of the global sample in GCBS as the criterion for classifying participants as compulsive buyers. Thus, in the current study, subjects whose score in GCBS ranged from 16 to 30 were included in the “Low” propensity group ($n = 293$; 55.6%), while participants with a score ranging from 42 to 64 were classified in the group with a “High” propensity for CB ($n = 43$; 8.2%). Finally, subjects with a

score ranging from 31 to 41 were included in the “Moderate” group ($n = 191$; 36.2%). No significant differences were found in relation to gender and age.

2.2.2. Personal Projects

Participants completed the standard format of the Personal Projects Analysis (PPA) [10,13], which was translated into Spanish by Otero-López, Luengo, Romero, Gómez, and Castro [49]. They were first asked to describe their nine current PP. Subsequently, participants proceeded to rate each project they had listed along 17 appraisal dimensions (on a scale from 0 to 10). The different dimensions were grouped into the five core domains put forward by Little [13]. Specifically, *meaning* includes the dimensions of *importance* (“how important each project is to you at the present moment”), *enjoyment* (“how you enjoy working on each project”), *value congruency* (“to what extent is each project consistent with the values which guide your life”), *self-identity* (“how typical of you each project is”), and *absorption* (“to what extent you become engrossed or deeply involved in a project”). *Structure* encompasses the dimensions of *control* (“how much you feel you are in control of each project”), *initiation* (“how much you feel responsible for having initiated each project”), *time adequacy* (“how much you feel that the amount of time you spend working on each project is adequate”), *positive impact* (“how much you feel each project helps the others”), and *negative impact* (“how much you feel each project hinders other projects”). *Communality* includes the dimensions of *visibility* (“how visible each project is to the relevant people who are close to you i.e., how aware they are that you are engaged in this project”) and *others’ view* (“how important each project is seen to be by relevant people who are close to you”). *Efficacy* refers to the dimensions of *progress* (“how successful you have been in a project so far”) and *outcome* (“what you anticipate the outcome of each project to be”). Lastly, the domain of *stress* includes the dimensions of *stress* (“how stressful it is for you to carry out each project”), *difficulty* (“how difficult you find it to carry out each project”), and *challenge* (“to what extent each project is demanding and challenging to you”).

Each of the previous dimensions was explained to participants following the protocol by Little [10]. The scores from the different dimensions of appraisal were calculated by averaging participants’ scores across all 10 PP. The psychometric properties of this instrument have been demonstrated through a variety of studies [16,28,50]. In this study, Cronbach’s alphas in the different dimensions of appraisal of the PP ranged from 0.68 for progress to 0.76 for difficulty. The dynamic nature of the project systems influences, according to Little and Coulombe [51], the moderate alpha coefficients for appraisal dimensions.

2.3. Statistical Analyses

Statistical analyses were conducted using the IBM-SPSS Statistics software, version 27 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). First, personality profiles based on the estimated marginal means for the broad domains of PP and dimensions for low, moderate, and high compulsive buying groups were represented following a procedure similar to that used in previous studies with other variables [52,53]. Then, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was run considering CB propensity groups as the independent variables, domains and dimensions of PP as criterion variables, and gender and age as covariates. Levene’s statistic was used for testing the assumption of homogeneity of variance across groups, and no large violations were detected. The statistical significance of differences was adjusted through Bonferroni’s correction. Thus, the significance levels 0.05, 0.01, and 0.001 were divided by the number of comparisons established, with five comparisons for domains ($0.05/5 = 0.01$; $0.01/5 = 0.002$; $0.001/5 = 0.0002$) and 17 comparisons for dimensions ($0.05/17 = 0.0029$; $0.01/17 = 0.0058$; $0.001/17 = 0.0000$). Post-hoc comparisons were based on Bonferroni’s test. Effect sizes were estimated using partial η^2 , whose values of 0.0099, 0.0588, and 0.1379 would correspond, as stated by Cohen [54], to small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively.

3. Results

The appraisal profiles for the different domains of the PP show (see Figure 1) that it is the group with a high risk of CB, when compared to the rest of the groups, and that it is the one that perceives its projects as more stressing and with lower efficacy. As to meaning and structure, the resulting profiles show that the lower the risk of CB the better is the appraisal of meaning and project organization.

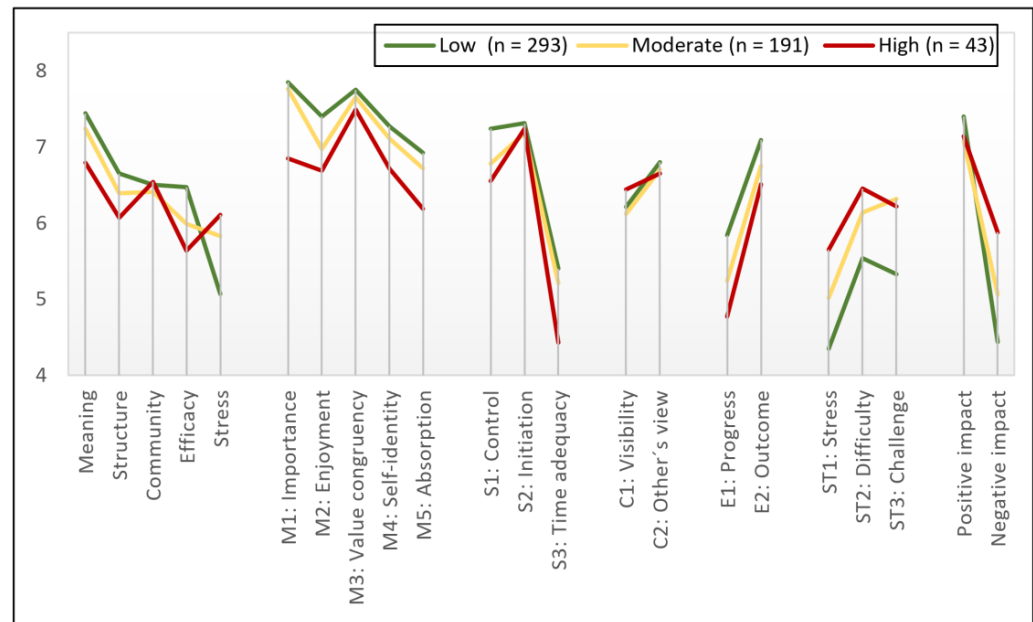


Figure 1. Personal-project-appraisal profile of low, moderate, and high compulsive-buying-propensity groups.

As to the different appraisal dimensions of the PP, the group with a high risk of CB obtained the lowest levels in all the dimensions of efficacy (progress and outcome) and of meaning (absorption, enjoyment, self-identity, importance, and value congruency). Besides, this group, as far as the dimension of structure is concerned, is the one with the worst appraisal of both time adequacy and the degree of control over its projects and the one that considers to a greater extent that some projects make the accomplishment of others more difficult (negative impact). Lastly, it should be mentioned profiles showed that the greater the propensity to CB, the higher the appraisals of the projects as stressful and difficult to accomplish.

The results of the MANCOVAs performed (see Table 1) with respect to the domains of PP confirm the existence of statistically significant differences among groups. Specifically, the subjects from the group with a high propensity to CB, compared to those with a low propensity, scored significantly higher in stress and lower on structure and efficacy. Meaning establishes statistically significant differences among the three groups, the one with the lowest levels being the group with the highest propensity to CB. No statistically significant differences were found between groups for community.

The analysis conducted on the basis of different dimensions of appraisals of the PP showed that for all the dimensions of meaning, with the exception of value congruency, statistically significant differences were found among the three groups defined on the basis of propensity to CB; the high propensity group, when compared to the other two, was the one reporting the lowest meaning for its PP.

Table 1. Means of personal projects appraisals dimensions and facets for low, moderate, and high compulsive buying propensity groups.

Project Dimensions	Low (n = 293)	Moderate (n = 191)	High (n = 43)	F	Partial η^2
Meaning	7.44 (0.05) ^a	7.24 (0.06) ^b	6.79 (0.15) ^c	10.33 ***	0.038
Structure	6.65 (0.06) ^a	6.39 (0.07) ^b	6.07 (0.18) ^b	7.09 **	0.027
Community	6.50 (0.07)	6.41 (0.09)	6.54 (0.22)	0.38	0.001
Efficacy	6.47 (0.07) ^a	5.99 (0.09) ^b	5.64 (0.22) ^b	13.37 ***	0.049
Stress	5.07 (0.07) ^a	5.83 (0.09) ^b	6.11 (0.22) ^b	24.72 ***	0.087
M1: Importance	7.85 (0.06) ^a	7.76 (0.07) ^a	6.85 (0.18) ^b	14.38 ***	0.052
M2: Enjoyment	7.40 (0.08) ^a	6.97 (0.10) ^b	6.69 (0.26) ^b	7.65 **	0.029
M3: Value Congruency	7.75 (0.07)	7.65 (0.09)	7.49 (0.22)	0.83	0.003
M4: Identity	7.27 (0.07) ^a	7.11 (0.09) ^{ab}	6.71 (0.22) ^b	3.51 *	0.013
M5: Absortion	6.92 (0.08) ^a	6.72 (0.10) ^{ab}	6.19 (0.24) ^b	4.73 **	0.018
S1: Control	7.24 (0.07) ^a	6.78 (0.09) ^b	6.55 (0.23) ^b	10.69 ***	0.039
S2: Initiation	7.31 (0.08)	7.18 (0.11)	7.24 (0.27)	0.40	0.002
S3: Time adequacy	5.40 (0.09) ^a	5.21 (0.12) ^a	4.43 (0.29) ^b	5.37 **	0.020
C1: Visibility	6.21 (0.08)	6.12 (0.10)	6.44 (0.26)	0.71	0.003
C2: Other 's view	6.80 (0.08)	6.70 (0.10)	6.65 (0.25)	0.35	0.001
E1: Progress	5.84 (0.10) ^a	5.24 (0.13) ^b	4.77 (0.32) ^b	10.28 ***	0.038
E2: Outcome	7.09 (0.07) ^a	6.75 (0.09) ^b	6.51 (0.22) ^b	6.90 **	0.026
ST1: Stress	4.35 (0.09) ^a	5.02 (0.12) ^b	5.65 (0.29) ^b	16.40 ***	0.059
ST2: Difficulty	5.54 (0.09) ^a	6.14 (0.12) ^b	6.45 (0.29) ^b	10.62 ***	0.039
ST3: Challenge	5.33 (0.09) ^a	6.32 (0.12) ^b	6.22(0.30) ^b	23.22 ***	0.082
Positive impact	7.40 (0.10)	7.08 (0.13)	7.14 (0.32)	2.03	0.008
Negative impact	4.44 (0.10) ^a	5.06 (0.13) ^b	5.88 (0.33) ^b	13.45 ***	0.049

Note. Estimated marginal means (Standard Errors), F test, and effect sizes computed after controlling sex, and age. Superscripts indicate the existence of significant differences at level $p < 0.05$; ^a: statistically significant in comparison with Low group, ^b: statistically significant in comparison with Moderate group, ^{ab}: statistically significant in comparison with Low and Moderate groups. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$ after Bonferroni correction.

As to the dimensions of progress and outcome (from the domain of efficacy), differences between groups were confirmed ($F = 10.28$ and $F = 6.90$, respectively; $p < 0.001$), the lowest scores were for the high-propensity group. Additionally, this was the group that reported a lower control ($F = 10.69$, $p < 0.001$) and adequacy time over its PP ($F = 5.37$, $p < 0.01$) (both dimensions of structure). The pattern of differences between groups was the inverse both for challenge, stress, and difficulty (dimensions of the domain of stress) and negative impact (dimension of structure). Thus, it was the group with the highest propensity to CB that also had the highest scores in all three dimensions of stress (F values ranging from 23.22 to 10.62, $p < 0.001$). This group was also characterized by having a greater conflict between projects ($F = 13.45$, $p < 0.001$). Lastly, it should be noted that none of the dimensions of communality (visibility and other 's view) established significant differences between groups with different levels of risk to CB.

4. Discussion

Research has documented that the ways in which people appraise PP are linked not only to subjective well-being [27] but also to the excessive use of substances such as alcohol [23,31–33] and marijuana [24]. However, CB, in spite of being a behavioral problem that is clearly on the rise in modern consumption societies, has not been analyzed in relation to this emerging motivational perspective of PP appraisal. This study sought to fill this gap by exploring and comparing appraisal profiles of PP on the basis of propensity to CB among university students.

The results obtained generally indicate that in both the different PP appraisal dimensions and the different domains they are grouped into (meaning, structure, community, efficacy, and stress), there are significant differences between groups on the basis of the

level of propensity to CB. A finding that undoubtedly validates the starting hypothesis that underlies the design and implementation of this study: compulsive buyers are significantly different from non-compulsive buyers in their PP appraisals. As to the broad domains, and as expected, it is those students with a high risk of CB, as opposed to the rest of the levels of CB, who appraised their PP as more stressing, with lower meaning, less organization and structure, and lower self-efficacy to accomplish them.

More specifically, and elaborating on both the findings made with regard to broad domains and the specific dimensions, we should begin by noting that as the propensity to CB increases so does the appraisal of the stress generated by PP. Indeed, the subjects who made up the group with a high propensity to CB appraised their PP as more stressing, challenging, and personally demanding and with greater perceived difficulty. These findings are consistent with those obtained in previous studies that point to stress as an important risk factor for CB [55–57]. Supplementary evidence that underpins this pattern of results is provided by a great deal of studies that have confirmed a strong link between PP appraisals as stressing and poor psychological health [25,30,58,59]. There is no shortage of studies in the specific domain of substance use showing that the level of distress associated with the pursuit of a life goal is an important predictor of high alcohol consumption in university students [23].

In sum, we present next some hypotheses that could explain, at least partially, the finding on the link between CB and PP appraisal as stressful. It might be argued first that the appraisal of PP as stressing, challenging, and hard to accomplish by the group high in CB could be linked to their high scores in neuroticism, and some of its facets—anxiety, depression, and vulnerability to stress, for instance—have been widely documented in previous research [60–62]. It may also be that those students with a high propensity to CB, as they present negative emotionality, build their goals more pessimistically, being less realistic; sometimes these goals are unattainable, and, consequently, the effort they make to try to attain them ends up generating stress. Another plausible hypothesis could be that even when there are no previous negative emotions, the appraisal of the projects as challenging and struggling has a negative effect on mood, which results in a lower involvement and success in accomplishing the PP. Lastly, it could also be argued that dispositional traits may also play a relevant role in the stressing appraisal of the PP–CB pair. By way of reference to the latter point, we mention the finding by Little, Lecci, and Watkinson [50] with regard to the positive association between neuroticism and stress of PP.

Another finding of this study is that the groups with a greater propensity to CB are different at a statistically significant level from the group with a low propensity to this problem in their appraisal of their efficacy in the accomplishment of their projects. It is subjects with high CB propensity that have the lowest expectations of a successful outcome and that report less progress in their projects. On the contrary, the group with low propensity to CB expects good results and has a positive appraisal of its progress.

These results are consistent with those in very recent studies [36,38,63,64] that show a negative relationship between CB and self-efficacy. The lack of confidence by compulsive buyers in the ability to attain intrinsic goals of self-acceptance (to feel competent and autonomous, for instance) documented in some studies [53] is consistent with the results in this study. As to PP appraisals with regard to other problems such as alcohol [23] and marijuana use [24], it has been found, in line with the results of this study, that a high score in efficacy is linked to a lower consumption of both substances.

Additional evidence of the link between the appraisal of efficacy of PP and individuals' well-being (or lack of it) is found in previous literature. Evidence was found, for instance, of the positive effect of successful goal pursuit on well-being [13], happiness [65], and academic-achievement-related satisfaction [66] in university students. As to negative emotionality, the findings confirm that a high amount of depressive symptoms was associated with a low level of goal accomplishment [30].

In sum, all these findings not only agree with the idea defended from the theories of goals and self-regulation [67,68], whereby the achievement of goals is in itself a source of

well-being, but they also agree with the thesis of Cervone and Little [69], which suggests that “the most potent determinant (of well-being) is the perception that one’s projects are likely to be successfully completed” (p. 20).

It might be tentatively suggested that the low perception of efficacy with respect to the development and performance of the PP that characterizes compulsive buyers may be due, at least partially, to the lowest score in the conscientiousness trait that characterizes them according to recent studies [60,62]. Thus, as the conscientiousness trait of the Five Factor Model [2] presents positive and statistically significant associations with the dimensions of appraisal of progress and results (both within the domain of efficacy) [50], it could be argued that the feeling of lack of competence and/or ability to initiate tasks and accomplish them could explain the low appraisal of project efficacy in the group with a high risk of CB.

As to the appraisal of the domain of meaning of PP, there are statistically significant differences between the different a priori groups. It has been found that as propensity to CB increases, the attribution of meaning to PP decreases. Taking the appraisal of the different dimensions of the meaning of PP into account, the subjects in the group with a high risk of CB, when compared to the other levels of CB propensity, are less identified with their projects, they give them less importance, and they have a lower level of commitment and a lower enjoyment of their performance. These findings are consistent with those in other studies that show that the high meaning of PP is linked to a lower consumption of alcohol [23,31–33] and marijuana [24]. Indirect evidence of this is also provided by recent studies that suggest that meaning or purpose in life acts as a protective factor against a variety of behavioral additions such as Internet addiction [70] or gambling disorders [71,72].

More specifically and taking into account the different dimensions of meaning in PP, the profile of the subjects with high CB may be reflecting some prototypical characteristics of this problem. It may be argued that the low scores in self-identity of PP may perhaps explain that, in some cases, CB may be understood as way of searching for compensation and/or restoring identity. The activity of buying may, in some cases, be a search for additional stimulation and compensates for that hedonic tone of low enjoyment with the projects in the group with a greater propensity to CB. These theses are supported and underpinned by previous studies that show not only greater life dissatisfaction in compulsive buyers [73] and impulsive buyers [74] but also thoughts of nostalgia or worries in panic buying [75].

Structure, as a judgement that one’s PP are under control and are organized in a manageable fashion [25], is yet another domain of PP that may be appraised. Our results confirm that the low-risk group showed statistically significant differences with the high-risk group in the control and time-adequacy dimensions. Compulsive buyers feel that the situation is not fully under their own influence, and they have a decreased adjustment in the timing for their projects. These findings were consistent with those found in the previous literature that showed that the attribution of reduced control or mastery over goals is associated with decreased psychological well-being [13,30]. In this regard, it was recently confirmed in a sample of adolescents [76] that the external locus of control was associated with more psychopathological symptoms such as anxiety and depression.

A final finding of interest is that the greater the propensity to CB, the greater the probability that some projects seriously hinder the accomplishment of others (negative impact). Previous empirical evidence is in line with this as it confirms that the conflict between goals is associated with distress [77], that low life satisfaction is associated with a conflictive system of projects [28], and that the conflict between strivings is associated with high levels of negative affect, depression, neuroticism, and psychosomatic complaints [78]. Besides, the dimension of conflict of PP is positively associated to alcohol use [23]. The hypothesis could be made in discussing these findings that most likely the lack of organization and the conflict between projects that characterizes CB could be explained, at least in part, by their lower score in the conscientiousness trait—particularly in the facets of competence, self-discipline, and deliberation—[62], by their high negative emotionality [79], and by their greater pessimism [39].

In sum, this study has shown the suitability of studying PP appraisals to gain a deeper understanding of CB in young university students. The students with higher CB had a variety of profiles and statistically significant differences when compared to the low-propensity group in most domains and dimensions; the appraisal of projects as highly stressing and with low meaning, structure, and efficacy clearly characterized compulsive buyers. It seems, therefore, in view of these findings, that actions addressing this problem perhaps should look at, among other aspects, the appraisal of what the subject does or intends to do.

Lastly, we discuss some of the strengths and limitations of this study. As to its strengths, it should be underscored that this is the first study in which PP—a prominent motivational unit in the field of personality psychology—were analyzed in connection to CB. Any research which, beyond dispositional traits—around which a significant number of findings has been made—has as its reference goal-oriented behavior, where the purposes and intentions lie, will be an important contribution to the understanding and explanation of CB. The selection of a sample of young people—an evolutionary stage that is particularly prone to spending and CB [80]—who come into contact with a new educational context (the university), which entails important changes and challenges [40] and before which it is necessary to build and/or develop new goals whose appraisal often involves an indicator of subjective well-being [81], is also a major strength.

As far as its limitations, this was a cross-sectional study, which lacks the advantage of a longitudinal study, which would be able to account for stability vs. change in the appraisal of the PP with the passing of time. The exclusive use of self-reports, while frequent in this field of study, may affect the quality of data, making it desirable that other supplementary measurements are included. Although the appraisal instrument of the PP (Personal Projects Analysis: PPA) has been widely used in previous literature, the data might be biased due to social-desirability issues (for instance, reflecting high levels of efficacy in the accomplishment of the project to provide a most-favorable self-representation). Additionally, the selection of a sample of university students in Spain limits the generalization of results to other age brackets and sociocultural contexts; transcultural or cross-cultural studies that share the appraisal of PP at different evolutionary stages and in different types of samples (general population, clinical population, etc.) will undoubtedly contribute to advancement in the field.

5. Conclusions, Implications for Practice, and Future Perspectives

The driving force behind this research was the clear determination to advance our understanding of CB from the analysis of one of the motivational units with the greatest heuristic value—the personal projects—which however have never been studied in relation to this contemporary behavioral problem. More specifically, the aim was to elucidate to what extent university students with different levels of propensity to CB (low, moderate, and high) have different profiles and statistically significant differences in the appraisal of their PP (with regard to both general domains and specific dimensions). The obtained results show that the approach taken in this study was doubly suitable: there were indeed statistically significant differences among the groups with different propensity to CB, and these differences occurred in both specific dimensions and the themes or domains that group them together.

The conclusion may be drawn, as far as the broad domains are concerned, that as propensity to CB increases, the appraisal of meaning, structure, and efficacy of the projects decreases, and the stress generated by these increases. Specifically, as far as the dimensions are concerned, the group with a high propensity for CB attained statistically lower appraisals in the importance, enjoyment, self-identity, and absorption dimensions. They also had a lower level of control, time adequacy, progress, and outcome of its projects. The appraisal of the level of stress, difficulty, and conflict among PP was higher in the group with a high risk of CB.

The appraisal of PP, in light of our findings, is not only a promising path for the elucidation of the motivational background of CB behavior among the young, but it also has major practical implications. Indeed, the evidence that there are different profiles and statistically significant differences in the appraisal of the different dimensions of the PP makes it possible to outline some observations that may be added to the design of prevention and treatment proposals.

A first observation has to do with the need to identify the stress associated to PP and to provide the subject with adequate strategies to successfully cope with it. Besides, the evidence provided by some studies [82,83], whereby university students have high levels of stress, and the finding that CB is sometimes a maladaptive response to negative emotional states [44,84], stresses even more the need for finding efficient strategies (for example, relaxation, meditation, time management, problem solving, cognitive restructuring, and a search for social support) for the control of stress in subjects prone to it.

Another potential line of action, on the basis of the results of this study, may focus on encouraging and promoting reflection among the students that engage in CB as to the meaning attributed to each of their PP (to what extent they reflect on who they are and who they want to be, what level of importance these PP have, and to what extent they are worthwhile, etc.); strengthening the critical analysis on how advertising messages and marketing campaigns contribute to “creating needs” (by associating products to symbolic qualities, for instance) and to the setting of goals, reflecting on the social repercussions of unplanned buying and high consumerism and delving into the advantages of orienting some goals towards a more sustainable and responsible consumption are also some further potential strategies to reduce CB. Encouraging intrinsic goals to reduce materialistic goal orientation in young-adult samples as Parker, Kasser, Bardi, Gatersleben, and Druckman [85] have recently proposed is a valuable example of how to channel the praxis at these ages, and, to our minds, this type of action could be the necessary link to start generating a greater awareness about sustainability among the young.

Lastly, and in view of the low scores achieved by compulsive buyers in the structure and efficacy domains, raising awareness among students that an organized system of projects where there is no conflict between them will greatly facilitate their progress and successful accomplishment may prove advisable. It may also be expected that by training students with a propensity to CB in skills aimed at planning their actions and tolerating potential difficulties, their self-efficacy should increase, and PP-related stress may be reduced, which, most likely, will have a positive impact on their subjective well-being. Goal setting and planning (GAP) [86] is, in this regard, an excellent resource that should be taken into account.

In sum, any line of action that results in a reduction in stress, an increase in meaning, a strengthening of structure, and an enhancement of the efficacy of PP may be considered, in light of our findings, as a valid option to address the preventive and/or intervention management of CB in university students.

Finally, and looking ahead, future research should look at how different middle-level units (personal projects, strivings, life tasks, etc.) are connected and how they supplement the influence of traits on CB or, to put it differently, at how the convergence of the “basic tendencies” (Level I) and the “characteristics adaptations” (Level II) may lead to further our understanding and provide explanations for this behavioral problem. Elucidating what the risk factors for CB are and what characteristics, as far as the appraisal of the PP is concerned, may become paths of personal well-being of the younger generations will contribute to the design of prevention campaigns aimed at raising awareness on the negative impact that high consumerism has at a variety of levels (whether economic, environmental, social, economic, or otherwise), thus ultimately promoting sustainability.

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