

Beyond the Big Five: The role of extrinsic life aspirations in compulsive buying

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Abstract

Background: The integration of units of differing natures which are found in different parts of some multilevel personality models is one of the most thought-provoking paths in contemporary research. In the field of compulsive buying, little is known about the interrelationships between the comparative and stable units such as personality traits (basic tendencies or Level I units) and goals (a kind of middle-level unit) which are more related to motivational processes and intentions governing people's behavior. **Method:** Self-reporting measures of compulsive buying, Big Five personality traits, and extrinsic life aspirations were administered to a general population sample consisting of 2,159 participants aged 15 to 65 (48.1% males; Mage= 35.4, SD= 13.24). **Results:** Our results confirmed statistically significant associations with compulsive buying for the traits as well as the extrinsic goals. Furthermore, an important relationship between both levels in personality – traits vs. extrinsic life aspirations – was found. Finally, extrinsic life aspirations (specially, image, popularity, and conformity) contribute to the potentiation of the prediction of compulsive buying beyond the Five Factor Model. **Conclusions:** Current findings emphasize the advisability of considering both levels in personality, traits and middle-level units like life aspirations, not only in the prediction of compulsive buying, but also as potential targets for preventive and treatment programs.

Keywords: Compulsive buying, Five Factor Model, life aspirations, personality levels, traits.

Resumen

Más allá de los Cinco Grandes: papel de las metas vitales extrínsecas en la compra compulsiva. Antecedentes: la integración de unidades de distinta naturaleza, incluidas en distintos niveles en algunos de los modelos multinivel de personalidad, constituye una de las más sugerentes trayectorias de la investigación contemporánea. En el campo de estudio de la compra compulsiva se conoce muy poco acerca de la interrelación entre unidades comparativas y estables como son los rasgos (tendencias básicas o unidades de Nivel I) y las metas (un tipo de unidad de nivel medio) más vinculadas con procesos motivacionales y con las intenciones que dirigen la conducta de las personas. **Método:** se administraron autoinformes de compra compulsiva, Cinco Grandes rasgos de la personalidad y aspiraciones vitales extrínsecas a una muestra de población general formada por 2.159 participantes entre 15 y 65 años de edad (48,1% hombres; Edad= 35,4, DT= 13,24). **Resultados:** los resultados confirman que la compra compulsiva se asocia significativamente tanto con los rasgos como con las metas extrínsecas. Además, se constata una importante relación entre ambos niveles de la personalidad. Por último, se confirma que, más allá de la contribución del Modelo de los Cinco Grandes, las metas extrínsecas (en particular, imagen, popularidad y conformidad) potencian la explicación de la compra compulsiva. **Conclusiones:** se confirma la idoneidad de considerar ambos niveles explicativos de la personalidad, rasgos y unidades de nivel-medio tales como las metas vitales, no solo en la predicción de la compra compulsiva sino también como dianas potenciales de los programas preventivos y de intervención.

Palabras clave: compra compulsiva, Modelo de Cinco Factores, metas vitales, niveles de personalidad, rasgos.

Compulsive buying represents one of the most severe problems in current consumer societies. It has been commonly defined as a chronic behavioral pattern, involving repetitive buying episodes which often constitute a primary response to negative emotions providing immediate gratification, but ultimately leading to harmful consequences and impairments in the quality of life for the person and significant others (e.g., O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). Some recent studies exploring the

prevalence of this phenomenon in different countries over time have revealed a substantial increase in the numbers of compulsive buyers (e.g., Hubert, Hubert, Gwozdz, Raab, & Reisch, 2014; Maraz, Griffiths, & Demetrovics, 2016; Neuner, Raab, & Reisch, 2005). The growing incidence of the problem, along with its significant associated costs (e.g. psychological, family, economic), have led to intense research activity over the last few years.

Accordingly, there is a large number of studies which have confirmed the existence of solid links between compulsive buying and a variety of personality determinants like personality traits (e.g., Mueller et al., 2010), materialistic values (e.g., Dittmar, 2005), and the negative emotions of anxiety and depression (e.g., Faber & Christenson, 1996).

Beyond the isolated study of personal determinants, the appearance over the last few decades of schemas and/or models –such as those by McAdams (1995) and McCrae and Costa (1999)– with a determined effort to articulate and integrate the personality units paying attention fundamentally to their contextualization and stability has opened new avenues for future research.

The Five Factor Theory by McCrae and Costa (1999) assumes the existence of personality traits or “basic tendencies” which represent relative stable and consistent patterns of conduct and feelings, what some authors have labelled as the “having” side of personality (Cantor, 1990), and which would be placed, in the McAdams’ approach, in the Level I of personality. The Five Factor Model (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992) is the most widespread perspective on the study of the human trait structure. It proposes that there are five basic factors underlying differences in personality: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Beyond the FFM, McCrae and Costa (1999) have included other kinds of personality components under the label of “characteristic adaptations” that represent the motivational or “doing” side in personality and include a variety of elements like values, goals, strivings, skills, and plans. This kind of units is grouped in the proposal of levels for the study of personality by McAdams (1995) under the heading of “personal concerns”, and would reside in the Level II of personality (the personal narratives-life stories would be placed in the third and last level). This Level II brings together a wide assortment of units defined in terms of motivation, strategies and development which, unlike traits, are contextualized in time, place, or role (McAdams, 1995); goals and future-oriented personal action units play a particularly prominent role in this level. In other words, both proposals place traits (“basic tendencies” or Level I units) in a first location that contrasts with “personal concerns” that make up level II (McAdams, 1995) or “characteristic adaptations” (McCrae & Costa, 1999), which suggests an opportunity for advancing research from these integrative perspectives of personality units.

The relationship of compulsive buying with the units in each of the levels, the interrelationship between units from both domains, and the clarification of to what extent middle-level units (goals, for instance) complement the influence of the traits (Big Five) in behavior (in this study, compulsive buying) represent innovative efforts of this research.

In reviewing previous literature focused on the examination of the role of the Big Five in compulsive buying, the work by Mueller et al. (2010) should be noted. Starting with a group of compulsive buyers and using a cluster analysis, these authors identified two distinct personality prototypes for this behavioral problem based on the Big Five. Their results revealed that subjects in cluster II scored significantly higher on neuroticism and lower on extraversion, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness than those in cluster I. Accordingly, they concluded that whilst participants in the former might experience more severe symptoms of the problem, the latter could be considered to be excessive buyers who did not fulfil all the requirements for the compulsive buying diagnostic. More recently, Andreassen et al. (2013), in exploring the links between the FFM and a variety of behavioral addictions (e.g., compulsive buying, Internet addiction) in a group of students, confirmed that compulsive buying was positively associated with neuroticism, and negatively associated with conscientiousness and agreeableness. A similar pattern of findings was obtained by Otero-López and Villardefrancos (2013) who, starting from

a general population based sample, confirmed that people with high scores in neuroticism, and low levels in agreeableness and conscientiousness had a high propensity to become compulsive buyers. Taking these findings together, the conclusion may be drawn – as other notable researchers in the field (Claes & Müller, 2011) have pointed out – that regardless of the sample used, the high levels in neuroticism, and the low scores in conscientiousness may constitute a risk factor for compulsive buying.

In any case, new studies need to be developed which allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the specific roles of the personality traits or the determinants for the first level of personality in the configuration of the problem under study.

As far as the examination of the potential role of the “middle-level units” of personality in compulsive buying is concerned, research is still very scarce. Thus, while a variety of studies support the prominent role of materialism in compulsive buying (e.g., Dittmar, 2005), it is also true that other determinants within this level like life aspirations have remained practically unexplored. Life aspirations are considered to be the cornerstone of behavior motivation by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Extrinsic life aspirations, which are generally viewed as a means to get contingent external approval or rewards (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1996), have been linked in numerous studies with low levels of subjective well-being (e.g., Kasser, 2002, 2016). However, we know of few studies examining the potential role of extrinsic life aspirations in compulsive buying. In this regard, Roberts and Pirog (2004) confirmed that the life aspirations of financial success and attractive appearance constituted significant predictors of the compulsive buying phenomenon in a sample of students.

Consequently, there were three important factors which served as starting points for the development of this study. The first was the opportunity to conduct new studies which look into the role of the Big Five and extrinsic life aspirations in the compulsive buying phenomenon. The second was the interest in exploring the links between Level I and Level II variables in personality. The third factor was the lack of research in the field of compulsive buying devoted to the combination of units from distinct levels of personality in order to get a better understanding of the manner in which these variables interplay in the configuration of this behavioral problem. Therefore, the main objectives in this study were: a) to examine the associations between Big Five-compulsive buying and life aspirations-compulsive buying, b) to analyze the relationships among the variables placed in Level I and Level II in personality, that is, the Big Five and the extrinsic life aspirations, and c) to determine if, once the Big Five personality traits have been considered, the extrinsic life aspirations further explain the compulsive buying phenomenon.

Method

Participants

The participants included in the present study have been described elsewhere (Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2014). It should be noted, however, that it consisted of a large and representative sample taken from the general population in Autonomous Community of Galicia (Spain). It comprised 2,159 adults (1,038 men and 1,121 women), aged between 15 and 65 (mean age= 35.4 years; SD= 13.24).

Instruments

Compulsive buying

Compulsive buying was assessed using the Spanish translated version of the German Compulsive Buying Scale (GCBS; Reisch, 2001). The GCBS is a self-report assessment that includes 16 items (e.g., “When I have money, I have to spend it”) with responses on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The global score in GCBS has been considered an indicator of compulsive buying propensity in previous studies (e.g., Neuner et al., 2005). In this research Cronbach’s alpha was .91.

Big Five personality traits

Personality traits were evaluated using the Spanish version (Benet-Martínez & John, 1998) of the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). This is a self-report instrument which includes 44 short phrases measuring the core features of the Big Five. Items are introduced with the stem “I see myself as someone who...” and the endings change in order to assess the distinct personality traits: neuroticism (e.g., “worries a lot”), extraversion (e.g., “is talkative”), openness (e.g., “has an active imagination”), agreeableness (e.g., “is generally trusting”) and conscientiousness (e.g., “does a thorough job”). Statements are answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1= disagree strongly, 5= agree strongly). In the current study, Cronbach’s alphas for the Big Five personality traits ranged from .76 for openness to .88 for neuroticism.

Extrinsic life aspirations

Extrinsic life aspirations were assessed by means of the Aspiration Index (Grouzet et al., 2005). This self-report instrument comprises 57 items measuring eleven personal goals. For the purposes of this study, we have only considered the levels of importance attained for the following four extrinsic aspirations: financial success (4 items; e.g., “I will have many expensive possessions”), image (5 items; e.g., “People will often comment about how attractive I look”), popularity (3 items; e.g., “I will be admired by many people”), and conformity (4 items; e.g., “I will live up to the expectations of my society”). Items are answered

on the basis of the importance assigned using a five-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “extremely”. Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .78 for conformity to .92 for image.

Procedure

This research is part of a wider research project examining the compulsive buying phenomenon among the general population in the region of Galicia (Spain). Questionnaires were administered by researchers and hired personnel, who were previously trained for field work. The anonymity and confidentiality of the data was guaranteed. Volunteer participants were given information on how to complete the questionnaires and a period of time was set (3-4 weeks) for posting the questionnaires back (respondents were given a pre-addressed, postage paid envelope). The return rate was 41.6% (for further details see Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2014).

Data analysis

Data analyses were performed using SPSS 20.0. In exploring the associations between compulsive buying, the Big Five personality traits, and extrinsic life aspirations, the Pearson’s correlation coefficients were initially calculated. Subsequently, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to clarify whether extrinsic life aspirations accounted for an additional amount of explained variance of compulsive buying once the Big Five had been considered.

Results

As far as the first objective of this study is concerned, the correlations between the compulsive buying propensity, the Big Five personality traits, and the levels of importance assigned to extrinsic life aspirations have been shown in Table 1. Our results indicated that compulsive buying revealed a positive correlation with neuroticism ($r=.29, p<.001$), and negative correlations with conscientiousness and agreeableness ($r=-.18, r=-.12, p<.001$, respectively). As to the relationships between compulsive buying and life aspirations, findings revealed that compulsive buying was positively and significantly associated with the levels of

Table 1
Correlations between compulsive buying, Big Five personality traits, and the levels of importance of extrinsic aspirations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Compulsive buying	–									
2. Neuroticism	.29***	–								
3. Extraversion	-.02	-.07***	–							
4. Openness	-.04	-.07***	.30***	–						
5. Agreeableness	-.12***	-.13***	.13***	.09***	–					
6. Conscientiousness	-.18***	-.15***	.12***	.05*	.14***	–				
7. Financial success-I	.25***	.17***	.04*	-.04	-.12***	-.09***	–			
8. Image-I	.36***	.16***	.08***	.05*	-.11***	-.05*	.57***	–		
9. Popularity-I	.27***	.11***	.10***	.10***	-.02	-.08***	.39***	.51***	–	
10. Conformity-I	.22***	.09***	.03	-.12***	.09***	.05*	.36***	.44***	.43***	–
Mean	29.09	25.45	25.97	35.26	31.48	30.33	9.97	10.61	6.76	9.43
SD	8.03	5.06	5.37	5.78	4.38	5.61	2.49	3.11	1.95	2.22

* $p<.05$; *** $p<.001$

importance assigned to extrinsic life aspirations (namely, financial success, image, popularity, and conformity), where the correlation between compulsive buying and image importance ($r=.36, p<.001$) was particularly prominent. Moreover, our results confirmed in general the existence of significant associations between the Big Five personality traits and extrinsic life aspirations. In particular, neuroticism was the personality trait which had the highest correlations with the extrinsic life aspirations, the largest coefficients corresponding to financial success and image ($r=.17$ and $r=.16, p<.001$, respectively). Agreeableness and conscientiousness were negatively associated with financial success and image, and positively with conformity. As for the remaining personality traits, positive associations between extraversion and extrinsic life aspirations (the only exception was its association with conformity) were confirmed. We also obtained evidence indicating that openness was negatively associated with conformity, and positively with image and popularity.

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis (see Table 2) revealed that gender and age were statistically significant predictors of compulsive buying ($R^2=7.8\%$). Moreover, after controlling these variables in the first step, the Big Five personality traits accounted for a significant increase of the explained variance in compulsive buying ($\Delta R^2=.09, p<.001$) at the second step. More specifically, we found that whilst neuroticism was positively related to compulsive buying, both agreeableness and conscientiousness showed a negative association with this phenomenon. The addition of the extrinsic life aspirations of financial success, image, popularity, and conformity to the Big Five in step 3 added significantly to the prediction of compulsive buying ($\Delta R^2=.08, p<.001$). The final regression equation accounted for the 24.7% of explained variance of compulsive buying.

In conclusion, our results revealed that the levels of importance attained for extrinsic life aspirations significantly contributed to the prediction of the compulsive buying phenomenon above and beyond the Big Five personality traits.

Discussion

In general, our results confirmed the interrelationships between the Big Five personality traits and extrinsic life aspirations with compulsive buying. Additionally, statistically significant associations between the Big Five and extrinsic life aspirations were confirmed. As for the last objective of this research, empirical evidence regarding the additional explanatory capability of extrinsic life aspirations in compulsive buying after analysis using the Big Five personality traits was obtained.

A more comprehensive analysis of our findings for traits-level revealed the existence of statistically significant associations between compulsive buying and three of the Big Five. Specifically, a statistically significant positive correlation between this phenomenon and neuroticism was confirmed, and negative correlations with conscientiousness and agreeableness were likewise confirmed. This pattern of results was consistent with those obtained in previous studies which, in general, have pointed to subjects showing high levels of neuroticism and low scores in conscientiousness and agreeableness as being especially prone to the development of different behavioral risk patterns like tobacco consumption (e.g., Terracciano & Costa, 2004), Internet addiction (e.g., Andreassen et al., 2013), and particularly to the compulsive buying phenomenon (e.g., Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2013). Furthermore, statistically significant positive correlations among compulsive buying and each and every one of the extrinsic life

Table 2

Hierarchical regression analysis for the relationship between the Big Five personality traits, the importance of extrinsic life aspirations (independent variables) and the compulsive buying propensity (dependent variable) controlling for gender and age

	B	SE B	β	F	Adjusted R ²	ΔR^2
Step 1				92.04***	.078	–
Gender (0=male; 1= female)	3.85	.33	.24***			
Age	-.09	.01	-.15***			
Step 2				61.89***	.165	.09
Gender	3.59	.33	.22***			
Age	-.07	.01	-.12***			
Neuroticism	.34	.03	.22***			
Extraversion	.02	.03	.01			
Openness	-.03	.03	-.02			
Agreeableness	-.12	.04	-.07***			
Conscientiousness	-.21	.03	-.15***			
Step 3				65.15***	.246	.08
Gender	3.1	.32	.19***			
Age	-.03	.01	-.04*			
Neuroticism	.27	.03	.17***			
Extraversion	-.02	.03	-.01			
Openness	-.03	.03	-.02			
Agreeableness	-.11	.04	-.06**			
Conscientiousness	-.21	.03	-.15***			
Financial success-I	.04	.08	.01			
Image-I	.51	.07	.20***			
Popularity-I	.40	.10	.10***			
Conformity-I	.23	.08	.06**			

* $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$

aspirations (middle-level units) were obtained. In this regard, these results are consistent with the preliminary evidence provided by a select number of studies (e.g., Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2015; Roberts & Pirog, 2004) which have explored the role of life aspirations in compulsive buying and have pointed out the existence of positive links between this behavioral problem and the level of importance attained for extrinsic aspirations.

As for the analysis of the relationships between Level I (basic tendencies) and the characteristic adaptations (Level II) represented in this study by extrinsic life aspirations, current findings showed that neuroticism was the personality trait with the strongest links with extrinsic life aspirations, in particular, with financial success and image. These results are consistent with those obtained in previous studies developed in the framework of the SDT which have confirmed that the endorsement of extrinsic life aspirations was related to negative emotionality and low levels of subjective well-being (see, for a review, Kasser, 2002). Our results are also in agreement with the evidence provided by Little, Lecci and Watkinson (1992) who analyzed other middle-level units (specifically, personal projects) and confirmed that neuroticism was positively correlated with stress and the perceived difficulty with the attainment of personal projects. Finally, the statistically significant positive association between conscientiousness and conformity found in this study, which was previously documented by Roberts and Robins (2000), in combination with the openness-conformity negative correlation, might be understood by taking into account the fact that people showing a high level of conformity are mainly focused on the search for approval from others and fitting in with societal expectations.

Current findings revealed also that once the Big Five have shown their predictive capability for compulsive buying, goals constituted significant predictors of this phenomenon above and beyond the traits. As for the personality traits level, it should be noted that neuroticism emerged as the main predictor of compulsive buying. This finding is consistent with those obtained in previous studies (e.g., Andreassen et al., 2013; Mueller et al., 2010) where neuroticism has been shown to be one of the most important risk factors for compulsive buying. Besides the relevance of neuroticism, it was confirmed that agreeableness and conscientiousness were also significant predictors of compulsive buying. Additional evidence in this vein has been provided by Hong and Paunonen (2009) who demonstrated that the low levels in conscientiousness and agreeableness were linked with a variety of health-risk behaviors including tobacco, alcohol consumption, and car speeding.

The extrinsic life aspirations of image, popularity, and conformity presented a high predictive capability (financial success was not statistically significant) for compulsive buying that complements and adds variance beyond the Big Five. The strength with which the “extrinsic” domain has been related to negative emotions (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1993), and low levels of subjective well-being (e.g., Kasser, 2002, 2016) seems to confer, in light of our findings a prominent role to this type of second-level-units in the explanation of compulsive buying. Thus, the results obtained in this study revealed, in line with previous evidence in the field (e.g., Roberts & Pirog, 2004), that the importance attained for image emerged as a powerful predictor of compulsive buying. In view of our findings, it should be noted that it is precisely the extrinsic aspirations of image, popularity, and conformity, which seem to be linked to some potential socio-psychological benefits

such as physical attractiveness, recognition and admiration from others, or fitting in with general societal expectations, and to a lesser degree the goal of accumulating money or possessions (i.e., financial success) that might represent important risk factors in relation to compulsive buying.

In summary, this study has contributed to underscore the suitability of including variables from the distinct contemporary frameworks which consider different levels or domains of analysis in the study of personality (e.g., McAdams, 1995; McCrae & Costa, 1999) in order to go one step beyond in the explanation of the compulsive buying phenomenon. Specifically, the results from this work arising from the consideration of traits (Level I, “basic tendencies”) and extrinsic goals (Level II, “characteristic adaptations”) have confirmed that: 1) each of the levels are importantly linked with compulsive buying, which suggests an opportunity to reconcile and consider different fronts of analysis (dispositional vs. motivational) for gaining a better understanding of this phenomenon, 2) there is an important relationship between both levels in personality. This fact, in conjunction with the lack of studies analyzing this aspect, turns this approach into a promising prospect for future research, 3) the second level contributes to the potentiation, beyond the dispositional, of the prediction of compulsive buying, findings that are undoubtedly in agreement with the thesis defended by McCrae & Costa (1999) which points out that the characteristic adaptations channel the influences of the traits on behavior. Additionally, this second scenario contributes towards explaining how the intentions-goals-purposes influence directly on the behavior.

Among the strengths of this study are the use of a representative sample of the general population, and the combination of units from distinct levels in personality in the prediction of compulsive buying. The cross-sectional nature of this study and the use of self-report questionnaires as the only method for data collection constitute limitations that should be borne in mind. In this regard, it would be advisable to use longitudinal designs and consider other sources of data as well. One possible line for future exploration is to empirically test whether extrinsic goals (image, for example) mediate the effect of traits (neuroticism, in particular). The clarification of the role of gender, age, and socio-cultural context could also prove extremely useful for this field of study. A more complete and thorough exploration of the person’s goals system seems to be a necessary challenge for the advancement of this subject area (the inclusion of intrinsic goals and the assessment of the likelihood of attainment are some proposals). The examination of to what extent other middle-level units that have been seldom analyzed in relation to compulsive buying (personal projects, strivings, life tasks, coping strategies, for example) channel the influence of the traits could definitely contribute to a better understanding of the personal dynamics underlying this behavior.

There are some clinical implications that could be drawn from the conclusions of this work. First, there is the need to design preventive and treatment strategies aimed at lowering negative emotionality not only in order to increase the perceived level of well-being, but also to indirectly influence the importance assigned to the extrinsic goals (e.g., image, popularity, conformity) as the channeling vehicle in the search for life satisfaction. The identification of the irrational beliefs and/or cognitive schemes that make up the basis of the importance for the extrinsic goals opposite the intrinsic goals as motivating elements would also be, to our minds, a positive aspect for clinical practice; promoting

self-esteem, the ability to reduce the impact of stressful life events and the pursuit of meaningful goals of prosocial character are undoubtedly necessary ingredients for this highly desired undermining of the importance and/or dependence given to others as a source of social approval. Working in parallel, the encouragement of the use of the social networks with close others (family and friends), with its more than likely influence on feelings of self-confidence and personal responsibility, would

contribute to the further strengthening of both natural tendencies of self-actualization and personal growth. These types of activities that go beyond efficacious influencing of the Level I personality units (more emotional stability, for example), in the middle-level units (e.g., the strengthening of the intrinsic goals), and the aforementioned interaction between both levels, would also contribute to reducing the occurrence of the object of this study – compulsive buying.

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