The lived experiences of women as addictive consumers


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Abstract

Addictive consumption is an extreme form of consumer behaviour which, until recently, has been relatively unexplored and understudied. Addictive consumers buy for motives unrelated to the actual possession of the goods, and most purchases remain unused. Feelings of anticipation and excitement prior to and during the shopping experience are replaced by guilt and shame afterwards. Patterns of behavior are developed and maintained in secret over a period of time. This paper presents the results of a study of forty-six women in the UK who identified themselves as addictive consumers. Through phenomenological interviews, they describe their thoughts and experiences both within the shopping environment and in their everyday lives. A rich picture of the reality of being an addictive consumer emerges, not only in terms of the consumption activity but also the precursors to, the consequences, and the means of self-managing the activity. Addictive consumers are presented here as women who have adopted what is traditionally considered to be a male-based mechanism for coping with depression or unsatisfactory situations -that is, doing something rather than thinking about their problems. These women have chosen to engage in a familiar, enjoyable and socially acceptable activity, shopping, to gain some kind of control in their lives. Paradoxically, the activity is developed and maintained to such an extent that it controls them. The consumption behavior itself is almost identical in each case, but addictive consumers are not a homogeneous group. Four patterns or sub-groups of addictive consumers emerge - the existential addict, the revenge addict, the mood repair addict and the serial addict.

The psychodynamic elements from addictive experiences described by patients may contribute to supporting the discussion about eating disorders as “addictive behaviors” beyond the “addiction model of eating disorders” as a physiological model of “addictive” or “toxic” food dependence. Eating disorders experienced as addiction were found affecting the response to treatment. This study investigated the narratives of women who dropped out of treatment from a specialized outpatient unit for eating disorders (ED). Psychodynamics aspects involved were discussed regarding the issue of adherence and dropout, since it was found to be directly affected by addictive aspects.