



## Mental health: Would excessive buying be a crisis coping strategy?

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic shined a light on mental health care and led to a deepening of the study of people's consumption habits. Individuals to dampen negative emotions experienced in crisis and to try to feel in control of their lives engaged in excessive buying. When we analyzed the predictive power of anxiety, depression, and stress over excessive buying as a coping strategy in a sample of Brazilian participants that a questionnaire throughout May 2020, we concluded depression and stress were statistically significant predictors of excessive buying as a coping strategy. Excessive buying functions as a coping strategy at an endangered time, as a way for individuals to protect themselves, decrease fear, and relieve negative feelings. It is imperative to focus on mental health literacy so that individuals appropriately identify signs of mental distress and seek professional help, and to educate society to conscientious consumption habits.

### Dear editor,

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed various aspects of health apart from the precautions one must have with this respiratory disease. Governments' policies to contain the spread of SARS-CoV-2 involved imposed lockdowns, teleworking, and social distancing. These circumstances were unfamiliar to people who underwent a lack of control over many aspects of their life. Consequently, mental health care has become urgent as people were feeling more anxious, stressed, and depressed (Goularte et al., 2021). These happened, partially, because the confinements imposed did not allow people to go out of their homes, stay with friends, gather family, and be assisted with presential proceedings from mental health professionals.

Behavior changes such as people's consumption habits also were ensued, mostly waves of panic buying registered worldwide (Billore and Anisimova, 2021). These waves emphasized the relevance individuals attribute to purchasing and how it is seen as a coping behavior to manage challenging situations. Individuals turn to purchase more than usual, impacted by fear and panic at disruptive situations, and it is the main definition of panic buying (Lins and Aquino, 2020).

Hence, buying stuff in excessive quantities would dampen negative emotions experienced in crisis and help individuals feel in control of their lives, to some step. In threatening situations, such occurs in the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals sought something they could control, engaging in excessive buying as a coping strategy.

When people become conscious of the unavoidable death and existential threat have, they tend to take steps towards fending off this baffling uncertainty. According to the Terror Management Theory, this psychological conflict produces a self-preservation instinct, so these individuals protect themselves and search for meaning, order, and stability by acting in different ways (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997).

This combination of factors makes it relevant to investigate relationships between mental health variables and excessive buying as a coping strategy. Therefore, we conducted a study to analyze the

predictive power of anxiety, depression, and stress over excessive buying as a coping strategy. This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Fortaleza, Brazil (Protocol no 4.014.996).

Throughout May 2020, using a snowball sample technique, a sample of 1897 participants from Brazil (520 men and 1377 women, aged 18 to 85) answered an online questionnaire that was shared through web links on social media platforms. The questionnaire was composed of socio-demographic questions, the Excessive Buying as Coping Strategy Scale to assess excessive buying ( $\alpha = .94$ ) (Aquino and Lins, 2020); the General Health Questionnaire to assess anxiety ( $\alpha = .76$ ), and depression ( $\alpha = .72$ ) (Pasquali et al., 1994); and the Perceived Stress Scale to measure stress ( $\alpha = .83$ ) (Luft et al., 2007).

According to the results we obtained, by conducting a multiple linear regression ("Enter" method), depression ( $\beta = .13$ ), and stress ( $\beta = .14$ ), were statistically significant predictors of excessive buying as a coping strategy. The regression model was statistically significant,  $R^2 = .29$ ,  $F(3,1893) = 57.66$ ,  $p < .001$ , and explains 8.4% of the variance of excessive buying values, meaning higher levels of depression and higher levels of stress lead to higher levels of excessive buying.

When individuals feel they cannot handle their problems properly or are nervous, stressed, and angry about aspects that are not in their control, they could buy things in excessive quantities with the expectation of themselves sense own lives control, calm down, and decrease fear (Billore and Anisimova, 2021). Excessive buying would function as a coping strategy at an endangered time, as a way for individuals to protect themselves, and relieve negative feelings.

One assumes that, even though it is a coping strategy, can result in negative consequences to individuals and societies. It is imperative to alert mental health would be imperiled with the increase of financial debts, the disruption in supply chains, or the perpetuation of prejudicial buying behaviors leading to pathological and chronic consumption habits. Hence, it is of utmost importance to educate individuals, health authorities, and institutions on this dysfunctional behavior, focusing on

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mental health literacy so that individuals appropriately identify signs of mental distress and seek professional help and on conscientious consumption habits.

The assessment of excessive buying with an acceptable psychometric scale developed in the Brazilian context consists of the opening of a relevant pathway for research in the field of consumer psychology. Nevertheless, it has some limitations since it does not consider the influence of variables strongly related to consumer behavior and mental health, for example, gender, income, and level of education in its analysis. Future investigations could collect distinct cultural contexts with more diverse samples and variables, to understand the role of excessive buying between more mental health variables and coping strategies. To what extent can excessively buy act as a shield to negative emotions or from what point can it jeopardize mental health?

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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