ABSTRACT. This paper presents evidence of a type of consumption which can be called "compulsive." It further demonstrates that this type of consumption is related to certain aspects of materialism, but not possessiveness. This suggests that the actual consumption experience may possess aspects akin to those observed in other abusive behaviors, but may be essentially unrelated to desires for material objects for their intrinsic qualities.

For several years, a number of researchers have been concerned about the mounting levels of consumer debt among households in the United States (Galbraith, 1958; Raske, 1979; Rice, 1979). This growth has been particularly rapid in recent years. Between 1950 and 1985, debt payments as a percentage of disposable income grew from 10.5% to 23.9%. The most recent figures compiled indicate consumer debt reached an historical high in August of 1985 at $2.4 trillion. This represented a 64% increase in just five years (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1986).

Not only is there an increase in the overall amount of consumer debt, but there is also an even greater increase in the number of people who are unable to keep pace with their debts. Between 1950 and 1975, after controlling for the growth in the population, there was still a 462% increase in the number of personal bankruptcies (Raske, 1979). One recent estimate indicates that approximately one in every twelve Americans is overwhelmed by debt and that "20,000,000 Americans are only one paycheck ahead of catastrophe" (Mundis, 1986, p. 23).

Credit experts consider anything above a 20% ratio of debt to take home pay (not including mortgage payments) to be a dangerous level of debt. The 1985 Federal Reserve estimate indicates that in the United States the mean debt to take home pay ratio is 23.9%; and it must be remembered that not all families have consumer debts. Raske (1979) estimated that at the end of the 1970's about 25% of U.S. families had no consumer debts (aside from home mortgages) and that approximately 45% used less than ten percent of their income to retire past debts. The remaining 30% of households however needed to devote between 35 and 52 percent of their income to consumer debts.
income to paying for past purchases. Consumer debt is clearly a problem for these people.

While research on consumer credit problems exists, it has generally focused on how institutions can detect people who are likely to have credit problems, or on ways to control the problem through counseling or educational programs. Very little effort has been directed toward understanding why this problem is occurring.

The most obvious reasons for credit problems may be slowdowns in the economy or catastrophic occurrences which catch people unprepared to meet their existing credit obligations. Another possibility is that people have not been taught to plan or budget and therefore lack the skills necessary to live within their means. This is the general assumption which seems to guide most credit counseling services.

Another recently proposed idea which may help explain some of the causes of this growing debt problem involves the subtle, but widespread, influence the mass media can have on consumer socialization (O'Guinn & Faber, 1987). This can occur in several ways. First, researchers investigating television effects have found that over time heavy TV viewers begin to believe that the real world is similar to the world as it is portrayed on TV (Gerbner, Brown, Elley, Jackson-Beck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorelli, 1978). Television portrays a world where wealth is seen as both desirable and common. Characters are generally cast in professional occupations and are shown in affluent surroundings. If this is accepted as an accurate view of real life, then viewers may overestimate the amount of things that other people have. The result of this misperception may be chronic unhappiness or malaise because of the belief that others have more than we do. This social comparison may also spur a desire to have “what everyone else has” and this may lead to spending beyond our means and, ultimately, credit abuse.

Alternatively, seeing others with more than we have may serve to reduce our guilt about acquiring possessions (Lasch, 1979). This is similar to the notion of disinhibition which is one theory used to account for the effects of television violence on children (Berkowitz, 1965).

Finally, since time is very limited on television programs and commercials, information about a character's background or personality is often conveyed visually through the opulence of the setting they are placed in or by the style of their clothes or the