

Confessions of a *real* shopaholic

Even before a cash bonus lands in the wallets of about 12 million Australians, there are plenty who need no excuse to shop 'til they drop. **Kylie Welsh** reports on our latest addiction

The new movie *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, which will be in cinemas from 12 March, may well have audiences laughing at one woman's over-the-top obsession with shopping but you don't have to look too far to find real-life examples of the film's lead character Rebecca Bloomwood. After all, who doesn't love to go out and spend money? And with a sizeable cash bonus about to land in the pockets and purses of about 12 million Australians soon, retailers are rubbing their hands together with glee. The money is being given with a clear mandate from the government to spend, spend, spend.

Twenty-four-year-old Julia, an event co-ordinator who used to work in the city and is now based in the Valley, needs no encouragement. In fact, apart from the fact that *Confessions of a Shopaholic* was the brainchild of a British author, Julia could well have been the role model for the supposedly fictitious Rebecca Bloomwood. On the day she spoke to *bmag*, Julia had, of course, been shopping, managing to bag a new dress and a pair of earrings in her lunch hour. This wouldn't seem unusual except that Julia is in the shops every day, and even though she may not purchase something every single day, she is at least looking and planning her next purchase. And to make up for the "slow" days when

she's not buying, Julia may go shopping twice on other days. "I get the biggest thrill out of shopping. I like finding little gems that are a bit quirky, a bit different," Julia says. To

that end she doesn't discriminate and, while she prefers boutiques, particularly ones that may be off the well-beaten shoppers track, she also shops at markets and has her favourite finds in both the city and the Valley.

"It's the quickest way to get rid of a headache. If I'm feeling stressed or if I have a headache I will go and buy something and I come back happy and the headache is gone," she says, cheerfully thrilled by her own medical discovery.

Fortunately for Julia, her sister has moved out of the family home making more room for Julia's expanding wardrobe. Now her clothes take up all the wardrobe and dresser



Isla Fisher in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*

space in two rooms, as well as utilising under-the-bed space for further storage.

Julia admits it's getting out of hand. "I don't really like putting things under the bed because I can forget they

are there," she says. Every now and then she has a cull and donates clothes to charity but she estimates about 15 percent of her clothes or accessories have never been worn and, on occasion, even Julia can still find herself in a quandary without the right thing to wear.

While Julia has pragmatically organised her wardrobe into categories, including work wear, gym wear, camping wear (that also comes under the banner of "gross clothes") and the larger sub-categories of summer and winter wear, she finds it hard to put a number on exactly how much she really does have. However, she's willing to

guesstimate that she has at least 40 pairs of shoes (that's high heels and not counting joggers, thongs and sandals), 17 pairs of jeans (because "they never wear out and you never throw them away"), more than 60 tops (and that's not counting the singlets that she wears to the gym, for example, because, well, she'd never wear them anywhere but the gym).

Julia unashamedly admits she just loves to have nice things. "Some things I just like to look at," she says. Such as? "I've got some necklaces that are just not practical to wear during the day...and some handbags look lovely but you can't fit everything in so I think I'm never going to use them."

Julia knows she shops a lot but she doesn't feel guilty about it. She rarely buys on credit and while she's living at home with her parents she has no bills to pay except for her gym membership and her mobile phone. She even saves money and says that her shopping days will be numbered if and when she ever commits to anything like a mortgage. One thing she is adamant about is that her passion for shopping will not send her into a debt spiral.

Not everyone has Julia's sense of spend-control. Our predilection for a bit of 'retail therapy' has helped us accumulate a national credit card debt to the tune of a record \$44billion. Figures also show that

amount continues to blow out, rising a further 3.5 percent in the last 12 months. That \$1.5 billion increase has alarmed experts, if not shoppers who are now carrying an average credit card debt of more than \$3,200 per person.

Interest rates that hover around the 20 percent mark are proving to be no deterrent to spending. Seven in 10 adult Australians have a credit card and one in six of those have more than three credit cards.

A recent study on young people's spending in Australia found that "compulsive young buyers are more likely to perceive money as a source of power and prestige" and this is their motivation for over-spending which is based on looking good now with little regard for the future. According to another study conducted by Lifelounge Urban Market Research (UMR) in 2008, Gen Y spends \$48 billion a year on "hedonistic pursuits". Their spending habits are focused on living the good life and revolve around five "lifestyle pillars" which are entertainment, fashion, sport, travel and music.

This is confirmed by Professor Michael Kyrios who has conducted research into compulsive shopping recently through Melbourne's Swinburne University. "Our society as a whole is far more materialistic and our young people, such as Gen Ys, have been brought up on rampant consumerism. They now have money to burn and are spending big. They can afford to spend this way for the time being, but time will tell if it becomes a real problem for them later on," he said.

Professor Kyrios' study found that 12 percent of the population has a full-blown buying compulsion while an additional

18 percent have a serious buying problem. According to Kyrios an "over-spender" can regulate his/her spending and is motivated by prestige, whereas a "compulsive shopper" cannot regulate their behaviour. The study revealed that shopping was believed to be an effective way to improve mood and self-esteem, which provided researchers with important predictors of who was more likely to develop a problem. Doubts about self-worth also were seen to be a powerful indicator for compulsive shoppers. Interestingly, and perhaps contrary to popular belief, the study showed that women were not necessarily more prone to over-spending or compulsive shopping than men and it could affect people of all ages, as well as both sexes.

The difference between an over-spender and a compulsive shopper is crucial to determining the correct course of treatment. Compulsive shopping disorders are treated with psychological therapy, whereas problems with over-spending can be helped by financial counselling.

Professor David Kavanagh from Queensland University of Technology says it is natural that people get pleasure from shopping. However, it becomes a problem when it starts affecting other areas in your life when you keep spending money you don't have. "Typically a person will recognise they have a problem but will still continue to spend. This is where shopping addiction spirals," he says.

Financial counsellors often recommend the first step to avoid the debt trap when



Isla Fisher buys up big as Rebecca Bloomwood

shopping is to remember that "cash is king". Professor Kyrios concurs. "Trying to get happiness from shopping is never going to work. As a society we need to move away from this over-emphasis on mass consumerism and avoid debt as much as we can. We need to adopt the lifestyle of the ancient Greeks 'everything in moderation'," he says.

WIN

This is your last chance to win tickets to our preview of *Confessions of a Shopaholic* on Monday 9 March at the Myer Centre cinemas, City, at 6.45pm. Simply enter at our website at www.bmag.com.au. Or you can write your name, address and daytime contact details on the back of an envelope and send to Shopaholic, bmag, PO Box 477, Albion Qld 4010. Entries close 5pm this Thursday 26 February 2009. Terms and Conditions on the website.

Curb your shopping addiction

QUT's Professor David Kavanagh says shopping addiction is like any addictive behaviour, it is largely controlled by imagery. "If you are thinking all day about the perfume counter at DJs, what you will buy there, how you will smell, your big smile and the excitement you will feel, for example, you really have to divert your thinking to other areas before this behaviour will change."

Stop the spending cycle:

- Become more engrossed in your work. Work on a task where you have to concentrate fully, instead of one that allows you to fantasise and visualise.
- Telling yourself 'not to think' about shopping won't work. You need to replace your thinking with something more interesting.
- Become involved in other activities that give you pleasure. Instead of going shopping at lunch time, for example, do something else you really enjoy such as walking in the park. If you can get yourself over this period of risk, it will help you get control back in your life.