

Buying to feel better? dark triad personality and emotional intelligence in adolescent shopping addiction: A narrative review

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Abstract

Shopping addiction — compulsive buying-shopping disorder, to use its clinical name — is now widely treated as a behavioral addiction: a preoccupation with buying that a person cannot rein in and does not stop even once the costs are obvious. Its symptoms cluster most heavily in late adolescence and emerging adulthood, which makes the near-total absence of adolescent research on the topic rather striking. Personality work on compulsive buying has, so far, stayed almost entirely within normal-range trait frameworks; the Dark Triad of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy — traits that are socially costly rather than simply unusual — has scarcely been examined here, and adolescent samples are all but nonexistent. This narrative review draws on work published between 2010 and 2026, identified through Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Google Scholar, to examine how Dark Triad traits and emotional intelligence (EI) relate to shopping addiction among young people. Two pathways emerge from the literature. Psychopathy and Machiavellianism both carry built-in EI deficits and appear to lead to addictive buying by way of poorly regulated negative affect and mood-repair purchasing that is negatively reinforced over time — buying to feel better, taken almost literally. Psychopathic disinhibition contributes something further on top of that. Narcissism travels a different road, one that largely sidesteps EI and instead runs through materialism, status consumption, and self-esteem that depends on external validation. However, the emptiness associated with vulnerable narcissism occasionally pulls the affective route back into play. Because EI sits at the center of these pathways and, unlike a personality trait, can be trained, it looks like the most promising target for prevention efforts. Adolescent-specific work is thin everywhere, and Indian work on the subject is essentially absent — a gap that matters given how fast youth consumption in India has migrated online. We close by considering what this could mean for school-based EI programs under the National Education Policy 2020.

Keywords: Dark triad, narcissism, machiavellianism, psychopathy, emotional intelligence, shopping addiction, compulsive buying, adolescents, India

Introduction

Adolescents make for unusually exposed consumers. Their sense of self is still forming, they are acutely tuned to how peers see them, and materialistic aspirations tend to take root right around the time they get their first real taste of financial independence. At the same moment, the gap between wanting something and owning it has all but closed — one-click checkout, buy-now-pay-later financing, influencer marketing, and algorithmically targeted advertising have seen to that. Within this environment, a subset of adolescents develop buying patterns that are excessive, poorly controlled, and persist despite consequences that are plain to see. The literature has attached several labels to this — compulsive buying, pathological buying, oniomania, buying-shopping disorder, shopping addiction (Andreassen *et al.*, 2015; Maraz *et al.*, 2016) ^[1, 16] — and because the problem is most common in late adolescence and emerging adulthood, and tends to recede with age, there is a genuine urgency to understanding what produces it in young people specifically.

Personality research has been the most productive avenue so far, though nearly all of it draws on normal-range models. Within the Five Factor Model, for instance, neuroticism is the chief risk factor and conscientiousness the main protective factor (Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2013) ^[25]. Comparatively little work has looked at the socially aversive Dark Triad — narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) ^[26] — which is a

somewhat curious omission given how reliably these traits track with impulsivity, weak self-control, sensation seeking, materialism, and a long roster of substance and behavioral addictions (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019; Sindermann *et al.*, 2018) ^[8, 32]. Every one of those correlates is also an established feature of compulsive buying. Still, research linking dark traits directly to compulsive shopping remains at an early stage, and evidence involving adolescents is thinner still.

The argument organizing this review is fairly simple: compulsive buying functions, at its core, as a strategy for managing emotion — an attempt to escape or repair negative feelings through purchasing (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Brand *et al.*, 2016) ^[3, 24]. If that is right, two questions follow. First, which dispositions supply the negative affect, the shaky self-worth, or the regulatory shortfalls that make mood-repair buying so appealing in the first place? Second, what protects against that pathway? Our answer to the first question is the Dark Triad; to the second, it is emotional intelligence (EI) — the capacity to perceive, understand, and manage emotion (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Petrides, 2010) ^[17, 28] — which we treat as functioning both as a mediator and a moderator. We searched Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Google Scholar from January 2010 through 2026, combining terms including Dark Triad, narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, Dirty Dozen, emotional intelligence, emotion regulation, compulsive buying, shopping addiction, pathological

buying, and adolescents. This turned up 28 relevant sources within the search window, to which we added six earlier works of foundational importance, for a final corpus of 34 sources.

Shopping Addiction in Adolescence

Compulsive buying-shopping disorder is characterized by preoccupations, urges, and behaviors around shopping that are excessive or poorly controlled, together with the distress, financial strain, family friction, and functional impairment that tend to follow (Müller *et al.*, 2021). It has not been formally codified in DSM-5. Yet, the field has largely settled on treating it as a behavioral addiction: it shows salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse (Andreassen *et al.*, 2015)^[1], and the I-PACE model frames it as the product of predisposing person variables — personality and affective vulnerability among them — combining with weakened inhibitory control and a negatively reinforced habit of buying as a way to cope with negative emotion (Brand *et al.*, 2016)^[3]. The lived experience tells much the same story on its own: compulsive buyers describe a cycle of anticipatory tension, relief or euphoria at the moment of purchase, and guilt afterward — a rhythm that looks a great deal like other addictions.

Prevalence figures vary enormously, anywhere from roughly 1% to 20%, largely because the field has never agreed on a single way to measure the construct (Maraz *et al.*, 2016)^[16]. The seven-item Bergen Shopping Addiction Scale, validated on more than 23,000 participants, marked a shift toward explicit addiction-component theory (Andreassen *et al.*, 2015)^[1], and online-specific instruments have since followed as adolescent purchasing has moved onto digital platforms. Two demographic patterns turn up again and again across this literature: shopping addiction tracks inversely with age, peaking in late adolescence and emerging adulthood, and most studies find higher scores among females than males (Andreassen *et al.*, 2015; Maraz *et al.*, 2016)^[1, 16].

Adolescence itself compounds the risk in several distinct ways—susceptibility to interpersonal influence peaks during precisely these years (Roberts *et al.*, 2008)^[30]. Materialism — one of the strongest proximal predictors of compulsive buying among young people — takes shape through family and media socialization over time. Moreover, social media layers relentless social comparison and influencer-curated consumption ideals atop the purchasing functions built directly into the platform. Indian research on the topic is beginning to emerge, though it remains scattered. Compulsive buying has been linked to anxiety and emotional maladjustment among late adolescents (Ghani, 2024)^[7]; it was found to be widespread and correlated with internet addiction and emotional distress among nursing undergraduates (Dixit *et al.*, 2024)^[6]; and it has been tied to social media use, peer influence, and e-commerce discounting strategies in a college sample (CM *et al.*, 2025). None of these studies examined dark personality traits, and none tested EI as a protective factor — which is exactly the gap this review takes up.

The Dark Triad: Conceptualization and Measurement

The Dark Triad refers to three distinct but overlapping subclinical traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002)^[26]. Narcissism combines grandiosity, entitlement, and a craving for admiration, all built on a self-image that is inflated yet

surprisingly fragile. Machiavellianism describes a cynical, manipulative, strategically exploitative interpersonal style. Psychopathy brings together impulsivity, thrill-seeking, and antisocial tendencies with low empathy and low anxiety. What unites the three is a shared core of callousness and interpersonal antagonism; evolutionary accounts frame them as expressions of a "fast" life-history strategy oriented toward immediate reward (Jonason *et al.*, 2010)^[9], a framing with obvious bearing on consumption pathology. Because the standard instruments together total more than ninety items, the twelve-item Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010)^[10] has become the go-to brief measure. It has been validated across numerous translations and applied successfully with at-risk adolescents, reproducing the expected links to impulsivity, low self-control, substance use, and risk behavior in that population (Pechorro *et al.*, 2021)^[27].

Three measurement caveats apply to everything that follows. First, brevity narrows what the construct captures: The Dirty Dozen picks up mainly grandiose narcissism and the manipulative core of Machiavellianism, while leaving out vulnerable narcissism and the anxiety-related facets of psychopathy (Miller *et al.*, 2012; Jones & Paulhus, 2014)^[11, 20]. Second, the factor-analytic evidence is genuinely mixed, with three-factor, two-factor, and single "dark core" solutions all represented in the literature. Third, subscale reliability is uneven, and the psychopathy subscale in particular often dips below conventional thresholds. Taken together, these limitations argue for controlling shared trait variance in any analysis and for corroborating Dirty Dozen findings against longer instruments such as the Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014)^[11].

Dark Triad Traits and Shopping Addiction

Research linking dark personality to consumption pathology has grown since 2010^[9], though it remains fair to describe the area as still in its infancy (Piper *et al.*, 2024)^[29]. Existing reviews converge on a conclusion that helps organize what follows: narcissism and psychopathy show reliable associations with substance-related and behavioral addictions generally, whereas Machiavellianism typically does not — a pattern consistent with the first two traits' placement on the externalizing spectrum. Even so, similar-looking addictive behavior may arise through quite different trait-specific mechanisms: affect regulation for narcissism, disinhibition for psychopathy (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019)^[8].

1. Narcissism: Buying for the Self

Of the three traits, narcissism is the one most consistently tied to compulsive buying. Rose (2007)^[31] reported positive associations among narcissism, materialism, and compulsive buying across 238 undergraduates, with both materialism and impaired impulse control mediating the narcissism–buying relationship. Broader reviews tell a fairly coherent story: narcissistic consumption is guided by self-enhancement rather than anything resembling rational economic calculation. Narcissists gravitate toward wealth and status, show consistent links to materialism, and are prone to compulsive buying, treating exclusive, branded, conspicuous goods as props for the self (Cisek *et al.*, 2014)^[4]. Status signaling is not the whole picture, however. Narcissistic self-esteem is contingent and unstable, meaning purchases can also function as ego repair following a threat to the self; in an adult sample, chronic emptiness mediated

the link between narcissistic vulnerability and compulsive buying (Zerach, 2016) ^[34]. Narcissism, then, appears to engage a direct materialism–status route and an indirect emotion-regulation route at the same time. Both plausibly intensify during adolescence. Social media rewards narcissistic self-presentation, ties self-worth to quantified peer approval, and builds frictionless purchasing directly into the spaces where that self-presentation happens; narcissism has, separately, been linked to problematic social media use in its own right (Barberis *et al.*, 2023) ^[2].

2. Psychopathy: Buying Without Brakes

The psychopathy pathway operates through failed behavioral regulation. Subclinical psychopathy is defined by impulsivity, sensation seeking, present-orientation, and weak inhibitory control — precisely the deficits that form the transdiagnostic engine of behavioral addiction more generally (Brand *et al.*, 2016) ^[16]. Consistent with that, psychopathy shows some of the most reliable associations across the full range of addictive behaviors (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019) ^[8], and dark traits have separately been tied to problematic online shopping tendencies within the internet-use disorders (Sindermann *et al.*, 2018) ^[32]. Life-history theory offers a parsimonious reading here: unplanned, thrill-driven, consequence-insensitive purchasing is a fairly direct expression of a "fast" strategy built around immediate reward (Jonason *et al.*, 2010) ^[9]. There is also reason to think psychopathic disinhibition matters most at the later stages of the addiction cycle, once control over an already-established behavior starts to give way (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019) ^[8]. In adolescents, whose prefrontal regulatory systems are still maturing, this trait-level disinhibition sits atop a normatively weak baseline of top-down control. Direct adolescent tests of the psychopathy–shopping addiction link, however, are conspicuously absent from the literature.

3. Machiavellianism: The Ambivalent Trait

Machiavellianism shows the weakest and least consistent links to addictive buying of the three traits, and reasonable expectations genuinely pull in opposite directions here. On one hand, its calculating, long-horizon orientation should, in principle, protect against impulsive spending, and of the three traits it is the one least reliably tied to addiction generally (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019) ^[8]. On the other hand, two routes could still produce a positive association. Possessions serve Machiavellian goals instrumentally, which connects the trait to materialism and status consumption (Piper *et al.*, 2024) ^[29]. More relevant to our purposes, Machiavellianism is robustly associated with deficits in EI and emotion regulation (Miao *et al.*, 2019; Michels & Schulze, 2021) ^[18, 19], so under stress its usual strategic control may give way to less adaptive coping — mood-repair buying among the possibilities. Recent empirical findings are correspondingly mixed: one study pairing the Dirty Dozen with the Pathological Buying Screener found no significant association between dark traits and buying-related criminal behavior (Laskowski *et al.*, 2026) ^[13]. The most defensible reading, in our view, is that Machiavellianism contributes to adolescent shopping addiction conditionally — through emotional-regulatory capacity — rather than as a direct effect.

Emotional Intelligence: The Missing Link

Whether one treats EI as a cognitive ability (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) ^[17] or a trait disposition (Petrides, 2010) ^[28], the prediction for compulsive buying works out the same either way: if addictive purchasing functions mainly as a means of regulating negative affect, then people with stronger emotion-regulatory resources should need it less. The evidence supports this across the impulsive-to-compulsive spectrum. In what appears to be the earliest direct adolescent test, high-EI adolescents among 574 surveyed reported significantly less impulsive buying (Lin & Chuang, 2005) ^[15]. Consumer research more broadly finds that people with limited capacity to regulate emotion tend to use buying as a way to manage or repair their emotions (Kemp & Kopp, 2011) ^[12]. Most tellingly, an ability-based EI training program raised students' EI while reducing both their materialism and their compulsive buying relative to controls (Lekavičienė *et al.*, 2022) ^[14]. The EI–buying relationship therefore appears causal in at least one direction, and unusually for this literature, the protective factor in question can actually be trained.

That compulsive buying is, at its heart, a disorder of affect regulation is among the most consistently replicated findings in the field. Relief from negative feelings was already identified as the primary motive in the earliest clinical descriptions (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989) ^[24]; ecological momentary assessment confirms that negative affect climbs before a buying episode and falls afterward (Müller *et al.*, 2012); and the I-PACE framework assigns deficient coping with negative emotion a central role in the disorder's origins (Brand *et al.*, 2016) ^[3]. "Buying to feel better" is not, then, simply a figure of speech — it is the empirically documented functional core of the disorder, and EI indexes one's resistance to it.

The relationship between EI and the Dark Triad has by now been settled meta-analytically. Miao *et al.* (2019) ^[18] found EI negatively related to Machiavellianism ($\rho = -.29$) and psychopathy ($\rho = -.17$), but essentially unrelated to narcissism ($\rho = .02$); Michels and Schulze (2021) ^[19], pooling 109 effect sizes, reproduced that same pattern, with the one exception being a small positive correlation between narcissism and trait EI that is plausibly an artifact of self-favoring responding. This asymmetry matters considerably for the argument being made here. For Machiavellianism and psychopathy, the emotion-regulation deficit that drives mood-repair buying is essentially built into the trait profile from the start. Narcissism's link to compulsive buying, by contrast, must run primarily through materialism, status motives, and contingent self-esteem, with vulnerable narcissistic affect drawing on the emotion-regulation pathway only episodically. Related evidence from neighboring addictions strengthens this picture: the Dark Triad and trait EI jointly predicted problematic social media use among 788 young adults (Barberis *et al.*, 2023) ^[2], and Dark Triad traits mediated the relationship between ostracism and social media addiction in adolescents (Turan *et al.*, 2024) ^[33]. As far as we can tell, no published study has yet tested the full Dark Triad $\rightarrow$ EI $\rightarrow$ shopping addiction pathway in an adolescent sample.

Toward an Integrative Model

Taken as a whole, this evidence supports a dual-pathway model of adolescent shopping addiction. One pathway —

call it the emotion-regulation route — runs from psychopathy and Machiavellianism, through deficient EI, to shopping addiction. Both traits carry built-in EI deficits (Miao *et al.*, 2019; Michels & Schulze, 2021)^[18, 19]; low EI leaves negative affect unmanaged; and unmanaged negative affect recruits buying as a form of negatively reinforced mood repair (Brand *et al.*, 2016; Müller *et al.*, 2012)^[3, 22]. Psychopathy adds a further, direct contribution through disinhibition (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019)^[8]. In contrast, Machiavellianism's contribution, we suspect, is almost entirely indirect and only becomes visible once emotional resources are already depleted — which would help explain its weak zero-order associations in the literature. The second pathway belongs to narcissism and largely bypasses EI altogether: it runs through materialistic value orientation, status consumption, and contingent self-esteem (Rose, 2007; Cisek *et al.*, 2014)^[4, 31], with vulnerable narcissistic emptiness supplying an auxiliary affective input after episodes of ego threat (Zerach, 2016)^[34]. It also produces a distinctive purchasing signature — branded, conspicuous, identity-relevant — quite unlike the more indiscriminate, urge-driven buying characteristic of the psychopathy route. Within this architecture, EI serves a dual role: it mediates the first pathway. It moderates both pathways, since high EI appears to buffer the effects of negative affect and ego threat on purchasing behavior. The model also identifies four moderators of particular relevance to adolescence — gender, materialism, social media exposure, and financial autonomy — and generates several testable predictions. The psychopathy– and Machiavellianism–addiction links should weaken substantially once EI is statistically controlled, while the narcissism–addiction link should not. EI training ought to reduce buying pathology most among adolescents high in psychopathy or Machiavellianism. Moreover, narcissism should predict addiction severity most strongly under conditions of heavy social media exposure. Dual-pathway conceptual model of Dark Triad traits, emotional intelligence, and adolescent shopping addiction. Solid arrows denote hypothesized direct or mediated effects; dashed arrows denote moderating or episodic effects. Model developed by the authors, synthesizing evidence reviewed in Sections 3–6 (Brand *et al.*, 2016; Miao *et al.*, 2019; Michels & Schulze, 2021; Jauk & Dieterich, 2019; Rose, 2007; Cisek *et al.*, 2014; Zerach, 2016)^[3, 4, 8, 18, 19, 31, 34].

Implications for the Indian Context

Nowhere does this model feel more pressing than in contemporary India, home to one of the largest populations of digitally connected adolescent consumers worldwide. Cheap mobile data, deep smartphone penetration among the young, and the frictionless Unified Payments Interface have dismantled the transactional barriers that once kept adolescent spending in check, while mega-sale events, gamified discounting, buy-now-pay-later schemes, and a thriving vernacular influencer economy supply consumption stimuli of unusual intensity. Each feature of this environment maps onto the model fairly neatly. Frictionless payment lowers the threshold at which psychopathic disinhibition converts an urge into an actual purchase. Influencer-curated status display feeds directly into the materialism and social-comparison inputs of the narcissistic pathway. Round-the-clock online shopping keeps mood-repair buying permanently within reach of the emotionally dysregulated adolescent. The digital-payments revolution

has also compressed, within a single generation, what used to be a slower, parent-mediated transition to autonomous spending, and it has likely outpaced the family norms and self-regulatory skills that would ordinarily scaffold that transition — while stigma around help-seeking makes clinical identification unlikely, strengthening the case for school-based screening instead.

However, no published Indian study has examined dark personality traits in relation to adolescent shopping addiction, and none has tested EI as a protective mechanism (Ghani, 2024; Dixit *et al.*, 2024^[6, 7]; CM *et al.*, 2025). This omission carries real weight, because the model's intervention implications are unusually actionable in this setting. India has validated indigenous EI instruments suitable for school administration. The National Education Policy 2020^[21] explicitly commits the school system to socio-emotional learning (Ministry of Education, 2020)^[21] — a ready-made policy vehicle for exactly the kind of EI-based emotion-regulation training that has already been shown experimentally to reduce materialism and compulsive buying (Lekavičienė *et al.*, 2022)^[14]. Financial literacy modules on digital credit, parental guidance around payment-app autonomy, and age-sensitive regulation of dark-pattern marketing all follow fairly naturally from the model's set of moderators.

Gaps and Future Research Directions

Five gaps, taken together, sketch out a research agenda. The first is that the direct evidence base is simply immature: research linking dark traits to compulsive shopping remains scarce, most studies examine a single trait in isolation, and shared trait variance is rarely controlled for. Future work should model all three traits simultaneously and weigh the Dirty Dozen against longer instruments. The second is the adolescent lacuna: virtually all Dark Triad–buying research relies on adult or university samples, even though symptoms peak in late adolescence, so school-based studies of 13–18-year-olds using age-appropriate, validated instruments are badly needed. The third is that the mediation–moderation architecture proposed here remains untested as a whole — each component is documented individually. However, no study has examined the full sequence or its differential predictions, and confirming the causal claims will require longitudinal and experimental designs, including tests of whether EI training benefits adolescents high in dark traits more than others. Fourth, online shopping addiction deserves attention as a partially distinct phenotype in its own right, since algorithmic recommendation, one-click checkout, and social commerce may interact with dark traits differently than traditional brick-and-mortar shopping does. Fifth, there is the cultural gap: the near-total absence of non-Western, and specifically Indian, studies. Limits how far any of this generalizes, and Indian adolescent samples are theoretically well-suited for closing that gap precisely because of the unusually wide range of environmental moderators found there.

Conclusion

This review has pulled together evidence published between 2010^[9] and 2026 in support of a dual-pathway account of adolescent shopping addiction rooted in dark personality and emotional intelligence. Psychopathy and Machiavellianism, both marked from the outset by emotion-regulatory deficits, appear to reach addictive buying through

low EI and negatively reinforced mood repair — buying, quite literally, to feel better. Narcissism travels a largely separate route through materialism, status consumption, and contingent self-esteem. However, the emptiness bound up with vulnerable narcissism draws the affective pathway back in from time to time. EI emerges from this synthesis as the pivotal protective construct: it is intrinsically low in two of the three traits, causally linked to compulsive buying, and — unlike the traits themselves — demonstrably trainable, which together make it the natural target for prevention efforts. For India, where a demographic bulge of adolescents has acquired frictionless purchasing power within a single decade, testing this model is as much a public health priority as an academic one. Each piece of the account is empirically well-supported on its own; what remains is to examine their conjunction in adolescent samples.

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