



From traits to buying: Emotional Intelligence as a psychological mechanism linking personality and shopping addiction in adolescents

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/ijmrd.2026.13.3.13385>

Abstract

Personality traits are well-known predictors of compulsive buying, yet how stable dispositions translate into addictive shopping, especially among adolescents, is not fully understood. This conceptual paper argues that emotional intelligence (EI) functions not as a protective buffer but as the mechanism through which personality influences shopping addiction. Drawing on the Five-Factor Model, the ability model of EI, and the behavioral-addiction framework behind the Bergen Shopping Addiction Scale, it proposes that traits like neuroticism and low conscientiousness first shape adolescents' emotional regulation skills, which in turn influence reliance on compulsive buying as mood repair. The paper reviews evidence that EI mediates the materialism–compulsive buying link, that negative affect mediates the neuroticism–EI relationship in adolescents, and that personality's effects on buying are largely indirect. It presents a mediation model, five testable hypotheses, a bootstrapped mediation approach, and implications and limitations for future research.

Keywords: Shopping addiction, compulsive buying, personality traits, big five, emotional intelligence, mediation analysis, adolescents, indirect effects

Introduction

Why do some adolescents with a given personality profile develop compulsive shopping patterns while others with similar profiles do not? One account treats a third variable as a boundary condition that strengthens or weakens the personality–shopping addiction link, a moderation account. Another treats it as the mechanism that carries personality's effect onto shopping addiction, a mediation account. The two imply different interventions: a moderator suggests a buffer worth strengthening regardless of the underlying trait, while a mediator identifies the process that must be interrupted. This paper develops the mediation account, proposing that emotional intelligence is the operative mechanism, not merely a protective buffer, linking personality to adolescent shopping addiction.

Adolescence brings greater financial autonomy and exposure to social commerce and influencer marketing, conditions under which some adolescents develop shopping patterns resembling other behavioral addictions: preoccupation with buying, buying to regulate mood, and continued buying despite negative consequences (Andreassen *et al.*, 2015) ^[1]. Personality traits, particularly neuroticism, extraversion, low conscientiousness, and low agreeableness, are consistently linked to such patterns (Sofi, 2020; Uzarska *et al.*, 2023) ^[16, 17], and hierarchical models of compulsive buying have long proposed that broad traits operate through more specific, proximal tendencies rather than directly (Mowen & Spears, 1999) ^[12]. This is, in effect, an implicit mediation claim; this paper makes it explicit and identifies emotional intelligence as the intervening mechanism.

Several lines of evidence converge on this proposal. EI mediates the relationship between materialism and compulsive buying, and emotion-management ability is associated with lower materialism and compulsive buying (Šeinauskienė *et al.*, 2021) ^[15]. Among adolescents, negative

affect mediates the relationship between neuroticism and EI, an effect itself moderated by self-esteem (Oropesa Ruiz *et al.*, 2022) ^[13]. More broadly, EI functions as both a moderator and a mediator of behavioral addictions, including compulsive buying, and brief EI training causally reduces materialism and compulsive buying (Biolcati *et al.*, 2025; Lekavičienė *et al.*, 2022) ^[3, 9]. Separately, personality's effects on impulsive buying operate substantially through intervening variables rather than directly (Xie *et al.*, 2025) ^[18]. This paper synthesizes these findings into a mediation model distinct from an EI-as-moderator account, with testable hypotheses and a proposed validation methodology.

Literature Review

1. Shopping Addiction Among Adolescents

Clinically, compulsive buying disorder is characterized by preoccupation with shopping, escalating urges, and continued purchasing despite financial or relational harm (Black, 2007) ^[4]. Lifetime prevalence estimates vary widely, from roughly 2% to 16%, with an oft-cited United States figure near 5.8% (Black, 2007) ^[4]. Whereas earlier frameworks treated this pattern as an impulse-control problem, the Bergen Shopping Addiction Scale (Andreassen *et al.*, 2015) ^[1] operationalizes it using seven addiction components, salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, relapse, and problems, foregrounding the mood-repair function of buying on which this paper's mediation account depends.

Data on adolescent prevalence remains limited. However, materialism tends to grow during childhood, peaks in early to middle adolescence, and is inversely linked to self-esteem at that stage (Chaplin & John, 2007) ^[5]. This suggests some adolescents may turn to material possessions to boost self-worth during a crucial developmental phase, a period when the influences described here could potentially emerge earlier than initially proposed.

2. Personality and Compulsive Buying: A Case for an Indirect Effect

The Five-Factor Model, neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992) ^[6], is central to personality-consumption research. Mowen and Spears (1999) ^[12] did not suggest broad traits directly influence purchasing behavior; instead, their hierarchical model proposes these traits give rise to more specific tendencies like materialism or need for arousal, which then predict compulsive buying, implying an implicit mediation that raises the question of which immediate mechanism actually drives the effect.

Recent research emphasizes addressing the mediation model's broader aspects. Personality traits significantly influence impulsive purchasing among young Indian consumers (Sofi, 2020) ^[16]. Similarly, shopping addiction in Polish undergraduates is linked to higher extraversion, narcissism, and social anxiety, alongside lower agreeableness and self-efficacy (Uzarska *et al.*, 2023). Importantly, Xie *et al.* (2025) ^[17, 18] found that neuroticism and agreeableness predict impulsive buying among Chinese college students primarily through a chain of mediating factors involving family dynamics and self-control, with direct effects becoming negligible once these mediators are accounted for. This suggests personality shapes behavior mainly through intermediary processes rather than directly, a pattern also seen beyond the EI context.

This body of work suggests viewing EI as a key pathway through which personality impacts buying behavior, alongside self-control and materialism, rather than as an external buffer over a fixed effect. Also, because adolescent personality is still developing compared to adults (Costa & McCrae, 1992) ^[6], the more flexible mechanisms active during this stage, like EI, might explain more variation than the traits alone.

3. Emotional Intelligence: Conceptual Foundations

Among competing definitions, the ability model developed by Mayer and Salovey (1997) ^[10] and extended by Mayer *et al.* (2004) ^[11] offers the most precise account, treating EI as four interlocking skills: accurately perceiving emotion, harnessing emotion to guide thought, understanding what emotions mean, and managing emotion effectively. Broader accounts, Goleman's (1995) ^[7] popular treatment of EI as a competency set tied to life success and Bar-On's (2006) ^[2] emotional-social intelligence model, extend the construct further to include stress tolerance and adaptability.

In a mediation account, EI's developmental stage is equally important as its content. Unlike more stable personality traits, EI can be developed through targeted interventions

(Mayer *et al.*, 2004) ^[11] and responds well to short-term training (Lekavičienė *et al.*, 2022) ^[9]. It likely sits downstream of personality but upstream of behavior, making it both a promising mediator and a potential target for intervention.

4. Emotional Intelligence as a Mediating Mechanism

The clearest direct evidence comes from Šeinauskienė *et al.* (2021) ^[15], who found that EI substantially affects compulsive buying through materialism: emotion-management ability predicted lower materialism, which in turn predicted higher compulsive buying, a serial pathway supporting EI as a mechanism rather than only a boundary condition. Among adolescents, Oropesa Ruiz *et al.* (2022) ^[13], studying 742 Spanish adolescents aged 13–19, found that negative affect mediated the neuroticism–emotional-intelligence relationship, a mediation stronger when self-esteem was low, establishing in an adolescent sample that this link is substantially indirect rather than direct.

A comprehensive review of 43 studies indicates that EI functions both as a mediator and moderator in behavioral addictions. Specifically, in compulsive buying, trait EI is negatively associated with impulsive purchases and mediates the link between mindfulness and compulsive buying (Biolcati *et al.*, 2025) ^[3]. Furthermore, Lekavičienė *et al.* (2022) ^[9] showed through experiments that short-term EI training enhances emotional intelligence and decreases materialism and compulsive buying, implying this aspect can be consciously shaped rather than being purely correlational.

This mechanism follows from the mood-regulatory conceptualization of shopping addiction itself (Andreassen *et al.*, 2015) ^[1]: if neuroticism and low conscientiousness first compromise emotional regulation, diminished EI, rather than the trait itself, becomes the proximal driver of buying as mood repair. Personality sets the initial conditions; EI does the causal work.

Proposed Conceptual Model

Combining these components creates a mediation model where personality traits influence emotional intelligence (path a), which then impacts shopping addiction (path b). The overall effect of personality on shopping addiction through EI is the indirect pathway. A direct path (c') assesses whether EI fully or partly explains how personality affects shopping addiction, as illustrated in Figure 1. Materialism is also considered a secondary, serial mediator downstream of EI (Šeinauskienė *et al.*, 2021) ^[15], but this study mainly concentrates on the simpler pathway, which is the central focus.

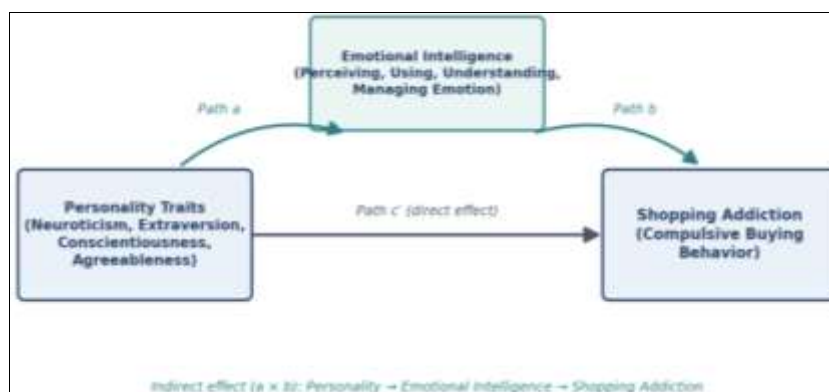


Fig 1: Proposed mediation model: Emotional intelligence as the mechanism linking personality traits to shopping addiction among adolescents.

Proposed Hypotheses

1. Personality traits will be associated with shopping addiction among adolescents (total effect): neuroticism and extraversion positively, conscientiousness and agreeableness negatively.
2. Personality traits will predict emotional intelligence (path a): neuroticism negatively, conscientiousness and agreeableness positively.
3. Emotional intelligence will be negatively associated with shopping addiction, controlling for personality (path b).
4. Emotional intelligence will significantly mediate the personality–shopping addiction relationship, with a bootstrapped indirect effect (path a × path b) excluding zero.
5. The direct effect of personality on shopping addiction (path c') will remain significant, indicating partial rather than full mediation.

Proposed Methodology for Empirical Validation

Testing this model requires moving from synthesis to primary data; none is presented here. A practical starting point is a cross-sectional survey analyzed through path-based mediation rather than moderated regression, since the two techniques answer different questions even when applied to identical measures. Participants would ideally come from secondary schools or early undergraduate settings spanning roughly ages 13 to 19, balancing gender and age given documented score differences across both (Uzarska *et al.*, 2023) ^[17]; because minors are involved throughout much of this range, guardian consent alongside adolescent assent would be required.

Instruments should carry adolescent norms rather than adult-validated tools applied downward, an adolescent-adapted Bergen Shopping Addiction Scale (Andreassen *et al.*, 2015) ^[1] is preferable to the original for this reason. Personality would be captured with a brief Five-Factor inventory such as the BFI-2, and materialism, an exploratory secondary variable given its documented mediating role between EI and compulsive buying (Šeinauskienė *et al.*, 2021) ^[15], with the Richins and Dawson (1992) ^[14] scale. Rather than testing interaction effects, analysis would estimate the indirect path from personality through EI to shopping addiction directly, using bootstrapped confidence intervals around the product-of-coefficients estimate (Hayes, 2018) ^[8], the standard alternative to older causal-steps approaches. Given the sensitive content involved, any such study would need a clear protocol for referring participants who disclose distress.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this paper formalizes the implicit mediation logic of hierarchical trait models (Mowen & Spears, 1999) ^[12], specifying EI as an empirically supported mechanism distinct from a protective-moderator role, and extends EI–addiction research (Biolcati *et al.*, 2025; Šeinauskienė *et al.*, 2021) ^[15] into an adolescent-specific mediation framework that complements sequential-mediation findings in adjacent personality-and-buying research (Xie *et al.*, 2025) ^[18].

Practically, a mediation framing implies that interventions raising EI should reduce shopping-addiction risk even among adolescents whose personality cannot itself be changed. Because brief EI training has already reduced

materialism and compulsive buying experimentally (Lekavičienė *et al.*, 2022) ^[9], school-based social-emotional learning has a plausible causal target, the emotion-perception and regulation skills implicated in this pathway, not general wellness alone. Personality-informed screening could identify students who would most benefit from such support, and interventions targeting emotional purchase triggers may more directly address this mechanism than generic spending caps.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The evidence assembled here is convergent rather than integrated: each link, personality to EI, EI to buying, materialism as a downstream extension, rests on published findings, but no single dataset has yet estimated paths a, b, and c' together in a single adolescent sample. Oropesa Ruiz *et al.* (2022) ^[13] comes closest, establishing the personality-to-EI segment in 13- to 19-year-olds, but did not measure shopping addiction, so the second half of the pathway remains inferred rather than directly observed in this age group; most remaining evidence (Mowen & Spears, 1999; Sofi, 2020; Uzarska *et al.*, 2023; Šeinauskienė *et al.*, 2021; Xie *et al.*, 2025) ^[12, 15, 16, 17, 18] comes from college-student or adult samples, a limitation any adolescent-focused claim inherits until directly tested.

A second set of concerns is methodological. Mediation based on cross-sectional data assumes a causal order the data cannot verify; the arrow may run partly in reverse, with repeated compulsive buying eroding emotional regulation rather than the other way around. Resolving this requires a longitudinal design or an experimental manipulation of EI itself, as used by Lekavičienė *et al.* (2022) ^[9] with university students, adapted to measure shopping addiction rather than materialism. Self-report bias is a further concern common to all three constructs, compounded by adolescents' likely underreporting of behaviors they recognize as problematic. Socioeconomic and cultural context, which shapes materialism and platform access alike, has not been built into the model. Finally, materialism is included here only as a secondary, exploratory extension; formally testing personality → EI → materialism → shopping addiction as a serial model is a natural next step once this simpler pathway is validated.

Conclusion

This account redefines a common question by shifting focus from which adolescents are most at risk or what buffers exist once risk is present, to understanding how the risk originates, primarily through emotional intelligence. Each part of this claim is supported independently: personality influences the affective processes associated with EI; EI, in turn, affects reliance on buying as a way to repair mood; and existing research on personality and buying behavior increasingly prefers explanations involving indirect effects over direct ones. The next step is to test the entire chain within the relevant population. If the mediation is confirmed, the benefits are targeted: prevention efforts could focus on developing emotion-perception and regulation skills, rather than trying to change personality itself, which is more stable. Longitudinal and experimental studies with adolescents, building on training methods proven effective with university students, are the logical next steps.

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