

Emotional Regulation via Spending: Do Adolescents Use Digital Purchases as a Coping Mechanism for Negative Emotions?

Abstract

The rapid evolution of digital commerce has reshaped consumer behavior and altered how adolescents manage their emotional states. This study examines whether adolescents utilize online purchasing as a coping mechanism for negative affective states, including stress, boredom, sadness, and discomfort. A quantitative survey was administered to an initial sample of 83 adolescents aged 16 to 19. Incomplete and invalid responses were excluded following data cleaning procedures, yielding a final dataset of fully completed, valid questionnaires. The study assessed emotional states, digital spending habits, perceived mood improvement following purchases, post-purchase regret, dependency on spending, and social media influence on consumption. Results indicate that a substantial proportion of adolescents perceive online purchases as providing transient mood improvement. However, the majority did not report high levels of dependency on digital spending. Social media was found to exert a significant influence on emotionally-driven purchasing behavior. These findings suggest a meaningful connection between emotion-regulation strategies and digital consumption during adolescence. As internet use continues to expand across daily life, understanding this relationship becomes increasingly important for promoting healthy digital habits among young consumers.

Keywords: Emotional regulation, digital spending, adolescents, online shopping, coping mechanisms, negative emotions, social media influence, impulsive buying, teenage behavior, digital commerce

Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by heightened emotional reactivity, identity exploration, and increased vulnerability to stress. In recent years, the accessibility of online purchasing platforms has fundamentally transformed adolescent spending patterns. Young people can now purchase games, subscriptions, and consumer goods through social media platforms with minimal friction. These purchases extend beyond utilitarian need; they often serve hedonic or emotion-regulatory functions.

Emotion regulation refers to the processes by which individuals influence the experience and expression of their emotions. Because adolescents have not yet fully developed mature self-regulatory capacities, they may adopt maladaptive coping strategies, including excessive spending, compulsive internet use, or over-reliance on sources of immediate gratification. Online purchasing provides immediate, accessible mood enhancement, which can reinforce the behavior as a repeated coping strategy.

Social media compounds this vulnerability by exposing adolescents to influencer content, targeted advertisements, and social comparison with peers. These environmental cues can amplify the impulse to purchase during emotional distress. The present research investigates whether adolescents use digital purchases as a deliberate or automatic strategy for managing negative emotions, and whether this behavior constitutes a form of emotion regulation.

Research Objectives

To examine the relationship between negative emotional states and digital purchasing behavior among adolescents.

To investigate whether online spending provides temporary emotional relief.

To analyze adolescents' difficulty in controlling emotionally driven digital purchases.

To study the role of social media in influencing emotional spending tendencies.

Research Question

Do adolescents use digital purchases as a coping mechanism for negative emotions?

Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis (H0): There is no significant relationship between negative emotional states and digital purchasing behavior among adolescents.

Alternative Hypothesis (H1): Adolescents use digital purchases as a coping mechanism for Negative emotions.

Literature Review

Prior research in behavioral psychology has established that negative affective states frequently precede impulsive purchasing behavior. The concept of retail therapy is well documented in consumer research; individuals often engage in unplanned purchasing to achieve temporary mood repair. Adolescents are particularly susceptible to this pattern because neurodevelopmental changes in the prefrontal cortex limit their capacity for impulse control and executive function.

The digital environment amplifies these tendencies in several ways. Online shopping platforms reduce the cognitive and temporal barriers to purchasing compared to physical retail, encouraging spontaneous decision-making. Social media influencers and targeted advertisements further normalize aspirational consumption, increasing materialistic values among young user. Some studies have identified escapism and avoidance coping as key predictors of problematic digital consumption, where individuals use online purchasing to distract themselves from stress, boredom, or loneliness.

Despite this growing body of evidence, research specifically targeting the relationship between emotion regulation and digital-only purchasing among adolescents remains limited. Most studies have focused on adult populations or on pathological gambling and gaming rather than shopping behaviour. The present study addresses this gap by examining whether and how adolescents use digital purchasing as a coping strategy for negative emotions.

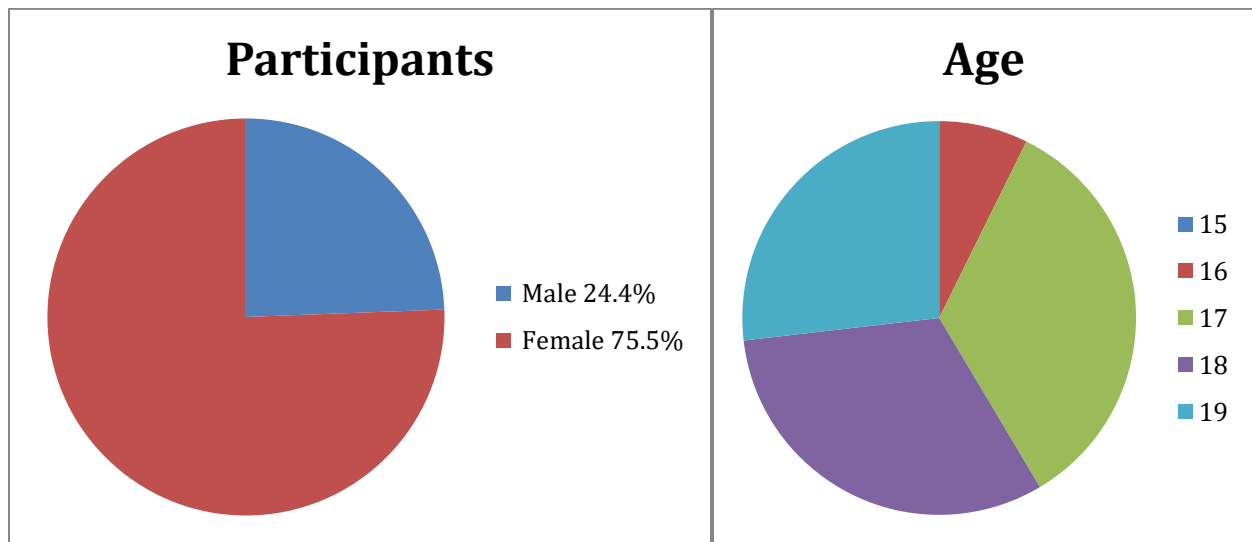
Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. Data were collected through a structured online survey designed to capture self-reported measures of emotional states, purchasing behavior, and social media engagement.

Participants

The initial sample comprised 83 adolescents aged 16 to 19 years. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling via online platforms. Data screening procedures excluded incomplete or inconsistent responses, as well as those showing evidence of non-compliance. The final analytic sample included only fully completed and logically consistent questionnaires. All participants reported regular daily use of digital devices, including computers and smartphones.



Sampling Technique

A non-probability, voluntary response sampling method was used. The survey was distributed through online channels and participation was self-selected.

Data Interpretation

Emotional Distress among Adolescents

A substantial proportion of respondents reported experiencing frequent stress, boredom, and sadness. Many endorsed items indicating general unhappiness, confirming that negative affect is a common experience within this age group. This finding aligns with existing literature on adolescent emotional vulnerability.

Digital Purchases and Mood Improvement

A considerable number of adolescents reported that online purchasing improves their mood, at least temporarily. While some respondents denied that negative emotions triggered their spending, others explicitly identified sadness or boredom as antecedents to online purchases. This suggests that a subset of adolescents actively uses digital purchasing as a mood-regulation tool.

Relief and Regret Cycle

Some participants described a characteristic pattern: immediate emotional relief following a purchase, followed by guilt or regret. This cycle is consistent with established models of impulse buying, where initial hedonic satisfaction is quickly overtaken by awareness of negative consequences.

Dependency and Control

The majority of respondents did not endorse items suggesting excessive dependency on digital purchasing. However, a subset reported difficulty controlling spending urges when emotionally distressed. These individuals characterized online shopping as a coping strategy that they found difficult to regulate, indicating nascent maladaptive consumption patterns.

Social Media Influence

Social media emerged as a significant moderating factor in emotionally-driven spending. Participants who reported higher social media use were more likely to experience purchase urges after viewing peer activities or influencer content, particularly during low mood states. This finding underscores the role of digital environments in shaping adolescent consumption behavior.

Discussion

The findings indicate that digital purchasing functions as an emotion-regulation strategy for a subset of adolescents. The prevalence of stress, boredom, and sadness among participants creates an emotional vulnerability that online commerce platforms are well-positioned to exploit. The immediacy and accessibility of smartphone-based purchasing provides a low-effort pathway to mood improvement, consistent with digital emotion regulation models.

A notable finding was the role of social media in amplifying these tendencies. Adolescents who engage heavily with social media are exposed to constant cues for consumption: influencer endorsements, targeted advertisements, and peer displays of material possessions. These cues can trigger social comparison processes that motivate spending as a means of closing the perceived gap between self and others. This aligns with research showing that personal relative deprivation mediates the relationship between social comparison and materialistic consumption. The relief-and-regret cycle reported by some participants highlights the potential for problematic patterns to develop. Although the immediate effect of a purchase may be positive, the subsequent guilt or regret may itself become a source of negative affect, potentially perpetuating the cycle. This dynamic is similar to that observed in other behavioral addictions, where the behavior functions as both a solution to and a cause of emotional distress.

Importantly, most participants did not exhibit signs of chronic shopping dependency. This suggests that emotionally-driven digital spending, while present, has not reached pathological levels for the majority of adolescents. Nevertheless, as digital environments become more immersive and persuasive, the risk of escalation warrants continued attention.

Conclusion

This study concludes that digital purchasing can serve as a coping mechanism for negative emotions among some adolescents. Stress, boredom, and sadness were frequently reported triggers for online spending, and many participants described transient mood improvement following purchases. Social media plays a significant role in this process by exposing adolescents to advertising, trends, and peer consumption cues. Although most participants did not demonstrate excessive dependency, a subset exhibited impulse-driven purchasing patterns linked to emotional states.

These findings highlight a growing intersection between emotion regulation and digital commerce during adolescence. As online shopping and social media become increasingly embedded in daily life, understanding the psychological drivers of emotional spending is essential. Further research should explore longitudinal trajectories of this behavior and evaluate interventions aimed at fostering emotional resilience and responsible digital consumption among young people.

References

- Wadley, G., Smith, W., Koval, P., & Gross, J. (2020). Digital emotion regulation. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 29(4), 412-418.
- Brand, M., Wegmann, E., Stark, R., Muller, A., Wolfling, K., Robbins, T. W., & Potenza, M. N. (2019). The I-PACE model for addictive behaviors. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 104, 1-10.
- Lou, C., & Kim, H. K. (2019). Fancying the new rich and famous? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2567.
- Muller, A., et al. (2021). Proposed diagnostic criteria for compulsive buying-shopping disorder. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 10(2), 208-219.
- Nyrhinen, J., et al. (2023). Online antecedents for young consumers' impulse buying behavior. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 149, 108129.
- Rose, S., & Dhandayudham, A. (2014). Towards an understanding of Internet-based problem shopping behaviour. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 3(2), 83-89.
- Beikverdi, L., Sipila, J., & Tarkiainen, A. (2023). Post-purchase effects of impulse buying. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 23(2), 381-398.
- Granero, R., et al. (2016). Compulsive buying behavior: Clinical comparison with other behavioral addictions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 914.
- Otero-Lopez, J. M., et al. (2021). Big Five personality traits, coping strategies and compulsive buying. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(2), 821.
- Li, W., et al. (2015). Characteristics of Internet addiction in U.S. university students. *PLoS ONE*, 10(2), e0117372.
- Koo, H. J., & Kwon, J.-H. (2014). Risk and protective factors of Internet addiction. *Yonsei Medical Journal*, 55(6), 1691-1711.
- Perez de Albeniz Garrote, G., et al. (2021). Smartphone abuse amongst adolescents. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 746626.
- Melodia, F., Canale, N., & Griffiths, M. D. (2020). The role of avoidance coping and escape motives in problematic online gaming. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 20, 1095-1124.

Brand, M., Young, K., & Laier, C. (2014). Prefrontal control and Internet addiction. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8, 375.

Ho, H., Shin, W., & Lwin, M. O. (2017). Social networking site use and materialistic values among youth. *Communication Research*, 46(8), 1119-1144.

Roberts, J. A., & Pirog, S. F. (2012). Materialism and impulsiveness as predictors of technological addictions. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 1(2), 56-62.

Kasser, T. (2015). Materialistic values and goals. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 67, 489-514.

Lapierre, M. A., et al. (2017). The effect of advertising on children and adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 140(Suppl 2), S152-S156.

Fineberg, N. A., et al. (2018). Manifesto for a European research network into Problematic Usage of the Internet. *European Neuropsychopharmacology*, 28(11), 1232-1246.

Fineberg, N. A., et al. (2022). Advances in problematic usage of the internet research. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 118, 152346.