

## Compulsive Buying Behaviour, Anxiety and Emotional Adjustment Among Late Adolescents During the COVID - 19 Pandemic: A Correlation and Gender Study

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### ABSTRACT

Compulsive buying or shopping addiction is a mental and behavioural health condition characterized by persistent, excessive, impulsive and uncontrollable desire to shop and spend in spite of severe psychological, social, occupational and financial consequences. Their entire pattern of living surrounds this behaviour and caters to this need. It has an effect on mood, anger, stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, adjustment issues, eating and sleeping patterns. Persons suffering from the disorder tend to understand and evaluate their feelings poorly and have low tolerance for unpleasant psychological states such as negative moods. Engaging in such behaviour for long can lead to feelings of regret, remorse, shame, guilt and even depression in some. Purchases are made in order to improve mood, cope with stress, gain social approval, recognition and improve self-image etc. In accordance, the present study has been undertaken with a perspective based on previous research and data available that onset of the disorder occurs in the late teens and gradually turns chronic, as such this particular vulnerable stratum of society needs to be understood better. Also, a review of the previous literature highlighted the gender discrepancies in studies on this behavior with most studies done on adults and women. Furthermore, the COVID- 19 pandemic period witnessed unprecedented restrictions imposed on all aspects of life including the desire to compulsively buy. This led to further complicating the 'desire to buy urge' and consequent mental health challenges. As such, the present study was undertaken during the COVID -19 pandemic to understand the correlation and gender differences between compulsive buying behavior, anxiety and emotional adjustment among late adolescents. The sample for the study was collected in the month of April, 2020 during the period of total lockdown from the District of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh and comprised an online screening of 430 teen in the age group of 16-18 years of which 100 adolescents (50 females and 50 males) were chosen for the study through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria required belonging to upper middle socio-economic class (10-25 lakh annual income) to ensure a certain financial stability and exclusion criteria was having any other stressors, co morbidities, physical and psychological concerns. Results obtained showed a significant correlation between the three variables: compulsive buying behaviour, anxiety and emotional adjustment. While compulsive buying behaviour and anxiety showed a significant positive correlation, a significant negative correlation was found between compulsive buying behaviour and emotional adjustment as

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well as anxiety and emotional adjustment. Significant gender differences were also found between female and male groups on compulsive buying behaviour and anxiety with females showing higher CBB and anxiety while a nonsignificant difference was found between the groups on emotional adjustment with males facing slightly higher emotional adjustment challenges as compared to females.

*Keywords: Adolescents, Anxiety, Emotional Adjustment, COVID -19 pandemic, Compulsive buying behaviour*

Compulsive buying behaviour also called pathological buying or shopping addiction is a commonly witnessed behaviour that is consistently increasing in contemporary societies and economies. In India, 79% of the population is said to be having this disorder. One out of every 20 Indians is said to be shopaholics. Shopping is a crucial aspect in any economy and customers with time are being enticed with various choices. New age shopping has taken different dimensions with increased and easy access towards purchasing via online platforms, mall culture and door to door delivery system. According to Mukhopadhyay and Johar, 2009 with different choices available for shopping has become a kind of reward and recreation in itself for people. Scholars have pointed out that excessive shopping may turn addictive in few individuals and result in a mental and behavioural health disorder termed compulsive buying behavior (see e.g., Christenson et.al. 1994; Mitchell, 1994 and Mc Elroy et al, 1994).

Compulsive buying behavior is comparatively a recent development which has drawn the attention of behavioural economists, consumer behaviourists and psychologists. The buyer feels an abnormal, uncontrollable desire to keep purchasing and spend money. The urge to buy is repetitive and he is overpowered by emotions to shop which he fails to have any control over. Studies have considerably proven the onset age of this disorder to be late adolescence and it takes a chronic form over time and may include various symptoms like feelings about purchasing and spending, desire, tendency and drive to spend, compulsive and dysfunctional spending and guilt post purchase. Individuals dealing with CBB have an increasing level of urge or anxiety which finds a sense of completion or satiation only when a purchase is made.

Persons suffering from CBB have consistently depicted addiction-like symptoms that were asymptomatic, chronic and without complete remission. They also are more likely to develop eating disorders, substances abuses or any other mood or anxiety disorders due to the disorder. Often misrepresented with impulsive buying there is a prominent difference between both. Impulsive buying involves an unplanned purchase on the spur of the moment while compulsive buying has serious negative repercussions like debts, addictions and disruption in daily living. It often leads to adjustment challenges with themselves and others as well.

Compulsive buying has not been categorized as a distinct disorder within the DSM-5(American Psychiatric Association, 2013), but is considered in contemporary times to be a behavioral addiction having severe psychological, social, occupational and financial consequences. The study focused on the S-O-R paradigm to explain how the pandemic triggered people's psychological alteration which led to changes in their purchase behaviours.

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**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Tao H et. al. (2022) in their paper studied consumer's psychological changes during Covid - 19 pandemic based on theories of environmental psychology, affective and consumer psychologies.

Das,D. et .al. (2022) investigated the impact of COVID-19 on Consumers changing way of life and buying behaviour based on their socio economic backgrounds. The study revealed that the virus had affected consumers more in the unorganized sectors and led to an increase in the demand for affordable substitutes for daily necessities.

Sheth J. (2020) in his study highlighted the disruption of consumer habits of buying as well as shopping during COVID -19 pandemic. The study also looked into the new habits that would develop as technology advances and demographics change.

Di Crosta A et. al. (2021) in their study highlighted the effect of the virus on individuals spending levels. Their study focused on consumer behaviour and its psychological antecedents. Consumer behaviour was found to be effected by anxiety and covid related fears, while consumer behaviour towards non necessities was predicted by depression. Personality traits,perceived economic stability and self-justifications also were found to play a crucial role in consumer behaviour during covid times.

Christenson et al. (1994) in his research on a sample of 24 compulsive buyers reported excessive shopping led to large debts in 58%, guilt in 46%, inability in making payments in 42%, criticism from others in 33%, and criminal legal problems in 8%. As per, Hollander and Allen,2006; McElroy et al., 1994; Ridgway et al., 2008a like most addiction disorders CBB has both impulsive and compulsive attributes. It involves both uncontrollable impulses where an individual engages in behaviors beyond his control i.e., debts creating problems at home and work. As an obsessive-compulsive disorder it involves obsessive thoughts and behavioral compulsions that interfere with normal functioning i.e., buying things becomes the most important activity in the person's life and other aspects of life cater to the need.

McElroy et al. (1994) in his study highlighted the impact of CBB upon adjustment. His study revealed preoccupation with the thought, emotions and behaviours related to shopping interferes with everyday functioning and results in financial problems as well. Fornell. C. (1981) related compulsive buying to the three dimensions of emotional activation, high cognitive control, and high reactivity as such the disorder has also been termed as a high level of "urge to buy". Faber and O' Guinn (1988b,1989; and1992) in their study gave importance to personality traits, family communication patterns, and demographic variables in the disorder.

Lejoyeux et al. (2007) in his study on women entering a prestigious department store in Paris found that 32.5% out of 200 women depicted compulsive buying by scoring high on the Questionnaire of Buying Behavior. Prevalence data of compulsive behavior may also be affected by heterogeneity, diversity of demographical variables like age and gender, sample differences, use of tools with different operational definitions etc.

Attempts at measuring the trait were made by Faberand O'Guinn in the year 1992. A seven-item Compulsive Buying Scale (CBS) was proposed for assessing thoughts, affects, and behavior before, during and after the purchase. However, the test contained several culture-

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related items as such new instruments were also developed to assess compulsive buying behavior. Edward (1993) developed a Compulsive Buying Scale and Heywood et al 1994 developed the Questionnaire of Addictive Buying Behavior (QAABB) while Richmonds Compulsive Buying Scale is a relatively recent scale developed to assess CB.

Summing up, compulsive buying or shopping addiction is a mental and behavioural health condition characterized by persistent, excessive, impulsive and uncontrollable desire to shop and spend in spite of severe psychological, social, occupational and financial consequences. Their entire pattern of living surrounds this behaviour and cater to the need. It has an effect on mood, anger, stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, adjustment issues, eating and sleeping patterns. Persons suffering from the disorder tend to understand and evaluate their feelings poorly and have low tolerance for unpleasant psychological states such as negative moods. Engaging in such behaviour for long can lead to feelings of regret, remorse, shame, guilt and even depression in some. Purchases are made in order to improve mood, cope with stress, gain social approval, recognition and improve self-image etc.

In accordance, the present study has been undertaken with a perspective based on previous research and data available that onset of the disorder occurs in the late teens and gradually turns chronic, as such this particular vulnerable stratum of society needs to be understood better. Also, a review of the previous literature highlighted the gender discrepancies in studies on this behavior with most studies done on adults and women. Furthermore, the COVID- 19 pandemic period witnessed unprecedented restrictions imposed on all aspects of life including the desire to compulsively buy. This led to further complicating the 'desire to buy urge' and consequent mental health challenges. As such, the present study was undertaken during the COVID -19 pandemic to understand the correlation and gender differences, between compulsive buying behavior, anxiety and emotional adjustment among late adolescents.

### METHODOLOGY

#### Objective:

To assess the correlation and gender differences between compulsive buying behaviour, anxiety and emotional adjustment among late adolescents during the COVID - 19 pandemic.

#### Hypothesis:

- H1: The results would reveal a significant correlation between compulsive buying behavior, anxiety and emotional adjustment.
- H2: Significant gender differences would be witnessed in terms of compulsive buying behavior.
- H-3: Significant gender differences would be found on anxiety levels.
- H-4: Significant gender differences would be found in emotional adjustment levels.

#### Sample:

The sample for the study was collected in the month of April, 2020 during the period of total lockdown from the District of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh and comprised an online screening of 430 teens in the age group of 16-18 years of which 100 adolescents (50 females and 50 males) were chosen for the study through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria required belonging to upper middle socio-economic class (10-25 lakh annual income) to

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ensure a certain financial stability and exclusion criteria was having any other stressors, co morbidities, physical and psychological concerns.

**Tools Used**

Compulsive buying behaviour was assessed through Edwards Compulsive buying Scale (ECBS; Edwards, E.A., 1993): The original 29 items were reduced as a result of the exploratory factor analysis and the remaining 13 items represented five dimensions: 'Tendency to spend', 'Compulsion/Drive to spend', 'Feelings about shopping and spending', 'Dysfunctional spending', and 'post-purchase guilt'. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The compulsive spending score (grand total) represents the mean average of all items.

Sample was also assessed on anxiety and emotional adjustment through Sinha's Comprehensive Anxiety Test (Sinha, A.K.P., & Sinha, L.N.K., 1955) and Adolescents Emotional Adjustment Inventory (Patil, D. V., 1989) respectively. SCAT contained 90 items with every 'yes' awarded 01 mark and every 'no' given 00. Similarly, the Adolescent Emotional Adjustment Inventory consisted of 33 items with every 'yes' being scored 02 and every 'no' being given 01.

**Procedure**

Data for the study was collected during the month of April 2020 (First lockdown period in India) with the help of compulsive buying behaviour questionnaire by Edward and a Self-made Questionnaire circulated online among 430 teens in the age group of 16-18 years for ruling out any previous and present physical, psychological issues, co morbidities and stressors, Data was in accordance collected online. Through purposive sampling, 100 adolescents (50 females and 50 males) found high on compulsive buying behaviour and having no previous physical, psychological stressors and co morbidities as per the self-made questionnaire were selected for the study and administered Sinha's Comprehensive Anxiety Test and Adolescents Emotional Adjustment Test by D.V.Patil. Data analysis involved correlation done to evaluate relation amongst the three variables and t – test analysis done to evaluate gender differences between females and males on compulsive buying behaviour, anxiety and emotional adjustment scales.

**RESULTS**

In order to understand the relation between compulsive buying behaviour, anxiety and emotional adjustment among adolescents during the COVID - 19 pandemic, a correlation analysis was done between the three variables and results of the study revealed that compulsive buying behaviour, anxiety and emotional adjustment were significantly correlated with each other.

**Table 1: Correlation between Compulsive buying behaviour, anxiety and emotional adjustment.**

		<b>CBB</b>	<b>Anxiety</b>	<b>Emotional adjustment</b>
<b>CBB</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.928**	-.296**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.003
	N	100	100	100
<b>Anxiety</b>	Pearson Correlation	.928**	1	-.316**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.002
	N	100	100	100

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		<b>CBB</b>	<b>Anxiety</b>	<b>Emotional adjustment</b>
Emotional adjustment	Pearson Correlation	-.296**	-.316**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.002	
	N	100	100	100

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The study also aimed at understanding the gender differences between females and males on the three variables.

*Table 2: Mean, SD and a t value of the two groups, females and males on Edward's compulsive buying behaviour scale.*

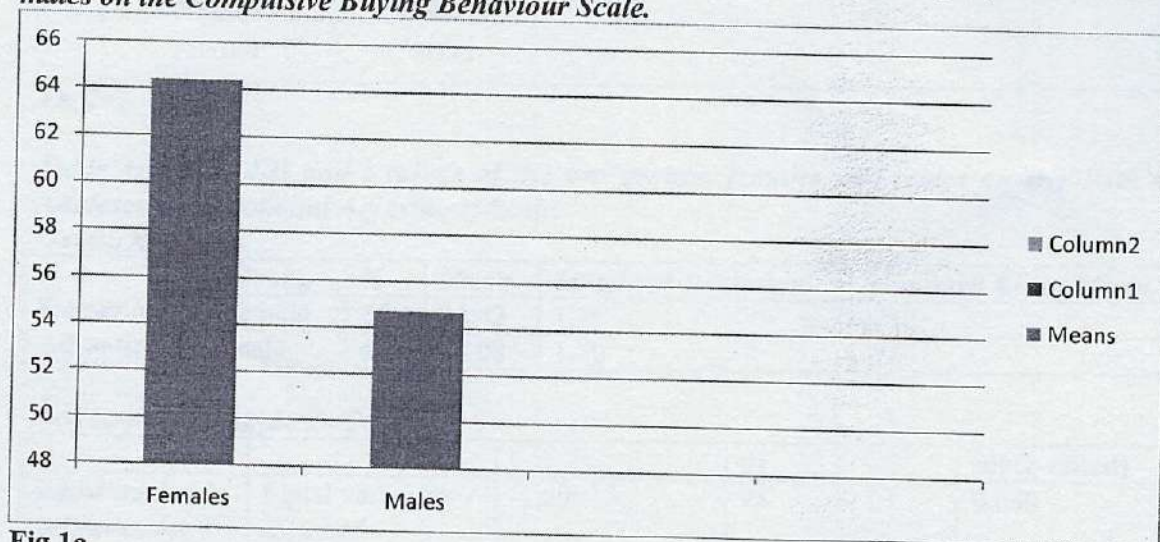
**Group Statistics**

<b>CBB</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Standard Error Mean</b>
	female	50	64.40	2.49	.353
	male	50	54.70	4.21	.595

**Independent Sample T-Test**

		<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig(2-tailed)</b>
<b>Compulsive Buying Behaviour</b>	Equal variances assumed	14.010	98	0.000
	Equal variances not assumed	14.010	79.716	0.000

*Fig 1a: Graphical representation of the mean scores of both the groups, females and males on the Compulsive Buying Behaviour Scale.*



**Fig 1a.**

*Table 3: Mean, SD and t values of the two groups, females and males on Sinha's Comprehensive Anxiety Scale.*

**Group Statistics**

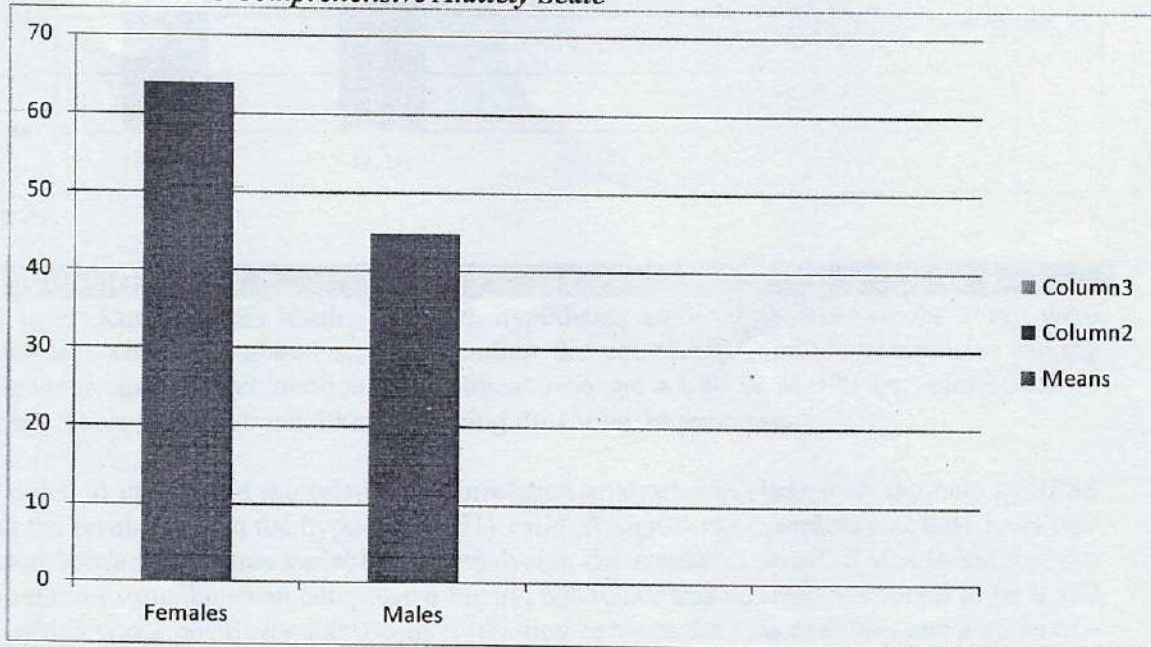
<b>Anxiety</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Standard Error Mean</b>
	female	50	63.94	5.49	.776
	male	50	44.82	4.02	.569

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**Independent T-Test**

		t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Anxiety	Equal variances assumed	19.84	98	0.000
	Equal variances not assumed	19.84	89.883	0.000

*Fig 2a: Graphical representation of the mean scores of both the groups, females and males on Sinha's Comprehensive Anxiety Scale*



**Fig 2a.**

*Table 4: Mean, SD and t values of the two groups, females and males on D,V.Patil's Adolescence Emotional Adjustment Scale.*

**Group Statistics**

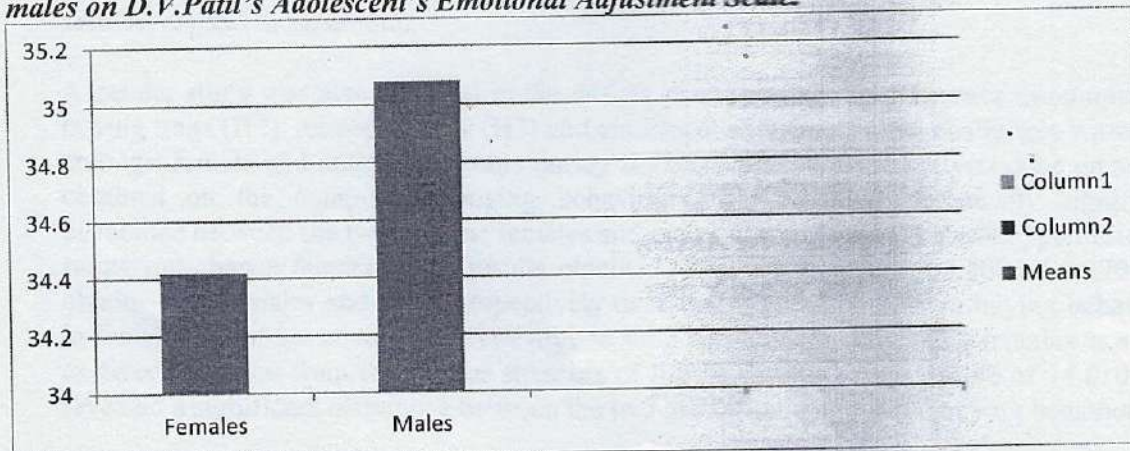
Emotional Adjustment	Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean
	female	50	34.42	1.77	.250
male	50	35.08	1.70	.240	

**Independent sample T- Test**

		t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Emotional Adjustment	Equal variances assumed	-1.899	98	0.060
	Equal variances not assumed	-1.899	97.825	0.060

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**Fig 3a: Graphical representation of the mean scores of both the groups, females and males on D.V.Patil's Adolescent's Emotional Adjustment Scale.**



**Fig 3a.**

### **DISCUSSION**

As is evident from the results obtained, hypotheses made at the start of the study were validated. The study aimed at understanding the correlation between compulsive buying behaviour, anxiety and emotional adjustment amongst a sample of 100 late adolescents of which 50 were females and 50 males during the Covid 19 pandemic.

In order to understand the relation, a correlation analysis was done with the help of SPSS and the results proved the hypothesis (H1) valid. A significant correlation at 0.01 level was found between the three variables. On analyzing the results in detail, it was found that the correlation value between compulsive buying behaviour and anxiety was found to be 0.928\*\* which was a positively significant correlation between the two variables and a value of -.296\*\* was found between compulsive buying behaviour and emotional adjustment which depicted a significantly negative correlation between the two variables. Elaborating the results, it is evident that compulsive buying behaviour correlates significantly positively with anxiety while it has a significantly negative correlation with emotional adjustment. In other words, rise of CBB ensures increase in anxiety and simultaneous decrease in emotional adjustment scores. As is evident these results indicate significance on both counts but anxiety is positively correlated to compulsive buying behaviour while emotional adjustment simultaneously has a negative correlation. Total lockdown during the pandemic ensured no means to purchase and ventilate the uncontrollable, chronic and repetitive urge to shop and spend thus leading to enhanced anxiety and emotional adjustment challenges witnessed amongst adolescents having compulsive buying behaviour. The self-made questionnaire designed for the purpose also revealed frustrations leading to anxiety in such compulsive buyers. As the compulsive desires to purchase increased emotional adjustment was seen to reduce in sample.

Similarly, the correlation values between anxiety and emotional adjustment was found to be -.0316\*\* which was again found to be negatively significantly correlated in the sample. Thus, an increased anxiety level led to decreased emotional adjustment amongst them. As was expected the increasing level of urge or anxiety to shop which would have reached a sense of satisfaction with completion when a purchase was made, the choice being unavailable to adolescents during the lockdown period found a way of expression through



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emotional adjustment issues such as increased irritability, anger, conflict etc. with themselves and those around.

A gender study was also included in the design to understand the difference in compulsive buying traits (H2), related anxiety (H3) and emotional adjustment (H4) challenges witnessed amongst female and male adolescents during the pandemic. t- Test analysis done on scores obtained on the compulsive buying behaviour scale revealed statistically significant difference between the two groups: females and males, thus rejecting the null hypothesis and ruling out chance factors in the results obtained. A mean score of 64.40 and 54.70 was obtained for females and males respectively depicting higher compulsive buying behaviour in females as compared to males. The urge to shop was explained by many females as a way to divert attention from the regular stressors of life. A resulting high t score of 14.010 also revealed a significant difference between the two groups on compulsive buying behaviour.

Similarly, a significant difference in means was also obtained between both the genders on Sinha's Comprehensive anxiety scale. The Mean scores obtained for females being 63.94 and males being 44.82 during the pandemic. The resultant t score obtained was a statistically significant score of 19.84 thus ruling out the null hypothesis and role of chance factors between the groups and their scores. Understanding the significant difference between both the scores it seemed with increased responsibilities and family members around, especially in cultures like India where females are expected to shoulder more responsibilities within the house and the means to fulfil the desire to engage in CBB and seek mental gratification through this escape route being blocked it led to much more anxiousness, irritability, restlessness, suppressed emotions ventilated in anger and fear amongst the female group as compared to the males.

Lastly, t test was also done to understand the difference between both groups on Emotional adjustment Scale as well. The Means obtained were 34.42 and 35.08 for female and male group respectively. The t scores obtained as a consequence was -1.899. As is evident, a statistically non-significant difference was obtained between the two groups on the emotional adjustment criteria thus depicting no major difference in results between females and males in terms of emotional adjustments. The null hypothesis is not ruled out in this case and chance factors could very well be in play. The results obtained indicated males to be facing slightly much more emotional adjustment challenges as compared to females. Though speculative in nature and open to further empirical researches the result could be explained by way of understanding that in Indian cultural scenario a man is not used to restrictions while a female to a certain extent is. When the lockdown happened as a result of the pandemic females still adapted and had only to deal with their compulsive buying behaviour restrictions while a man had to deal with both the restrictions as well as the behaviour thus possibly showing slightly more emotional adjustment issues as compared to females.

The study thus opened up new perspectives like male compulsive buyers being equally vulnerable to psychopathology as females. This could be explained by understanding gender roles and expectations in Indian society. While excessive buying behaviour is more acceptable and even celebrated at times in females who have to keep and run the house, it is still not associated as a trait with men who are expected to be wiser and shoulder the financial responsibilities of a family. This makes it easier for females to accept and discuss

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vulnerable to emotional adjustment issues. Also, the Pandemic and consequent lockdown ensured restriction on all including adolescents, while females still adapted fast by virtue of Cultural norms, boys found it difficult to adjust simultaneously both to the restrictions and dealing with the unfulfilled desire to buy. The study thus has heuristic value and provides a data base for further empirical studies in this direction with a cultural orientation as basis for further research as explanations for the results are still speculative and in early stages based on results and conversations with the sample.

The results obtained thus also demonstrate the requirement for urgent interventions at this critical period of onset of compulsive buying behaviour which eventually shall turn chronic. An intervention package would first require a proper diagnosis of the cause of the behaviour. It could include communication channels to first make them understand and accept they have an addictive behaviour here. A Psychoanalytic approach could look into aspects repressed in the unconscious disturbing a person to the extent he engages in such behaviour, also is the behaviour a result of unfulfilled needs during the psychosexual stages of development or is an ego defence mechanism like displacement in action here. Similarly, Behaviourist approach could focus on faulty learning patterns being a cause of this addiction.

Self-help groups, tips to avoid triggers, diary keeping and tracking of over spending could be included as components in an intervention based on this school of thought. Cognitive components like cost benefit analysis, cognitive restructuring based on an assessment that the behaviour stems from faulty thought processes can also be included in a planned intervention having components of both cognitive behavioural therapies. Humanistic perspective that would explain an addiction as a possible replacement of the need for love and belongingness and self-esteem by materialistic satisfactions could also be looked into. In accordance, Confidence building measures for enhancing self-belief and aspects of client centered therapy could be included in the intervention. Adolescents many a times also engage in such behaviour due to the immense challenges they face in terms of peer pressure and losing their individuality to it, hectic life schedules leaving no time for interactions and bonding among family members leading to replacement of these needs and seeking of purpose through such material satiation, technological over bombardment of stimulus, ease of shopping due to influx of mall culture, increased online shopping sites making purchasing an easy 'at the door' facility. In lieu of such fast paced economic developments the need of the hour is to engage adolescents dealing with an 'existential crises', and plan interventions raising awareness in them about the relevant existential questions like 'who am I' 'what is the purpose of my being', identity and role issues besides emphasis on individuality in making choices and acting responsible in accordance.

### CONCLUSION

Results obtained showed a significant correlation between the three variables: compulsive buying behaviour, anxiety and emotional adjustment. While compulsive buying behaviour and anxiety showed a significant positive correlation, a significant negative correlation was found between compulsive buying behaviour and emotional adjustment as well as anxiety and emotional adjustment. Significant gender differences were also found between female and male groups on compulsive buying behaviour and anxiety with females showing higher CBB and anxiety while a non-significant difference was found between the groups on emotional adjustment with males facing slightly higher emotional adjustment challenges as

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### *Limitations of the Study*

- Sample size being small, results cannot be generalized.
- Compulsive buying behavior tool not adapted to Indian cultural scenario.
- Socio demographic variation not covered as sample restricted to one district.
- Few mediating variables which could have had an impact on the study like family size and type, communication patterns, birth order, personality types etc. not controlled.
- No qualitative research undertaken with this study which could have helped in further understanding the results.

### *Implications of the Study*

- The study further confirms the impact of consumer behaviors on health parameters.
- It reveals the psychological and psychosocial repercussions of compulsive buying behavior.
- It highlights the necessity for future cultural studies in this area.
- As the onset of compulsive buying behavior is mostly late adolescence and turns chronic from here, the study opens avenues for intervention at this critical period.
- It highlights the gender differences among adolescents on compulsive buying behaviors.
- It opens further research avenues in gender studies on the disorder and gender sensitive therapeutic approaches, keeping gender roles, cultural expectations and challenges in focus.

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***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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