

# Understanding Compulsive Buying Disorder and New Treatment Methods for Online Shopping Addiction

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**Abstract:** With the increase of e-commerce, online shopping has become the preferred method of shopping for many individuals. However, new ways of living also means the onset of new disorders such as compulsive buying disorder (CB). A form of compulsive-obsessive disorder, online shopping at extreme levels is a compulsive act that requires its own treatment strategies, most notably Cognitive Behavioral Intervention (CBI). Other comorbid disorders include depression and anxiety in which buying material goods and services online can provide instant gratification. Low self-esteem has also been associated with CB as addicts recognize their problem but struggle to control their behavior. CBI, which is a group therapy form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, provides patients with accountability and feedback with logical explanations needed to help control their behavior. One major tragedy of CB is the exorbitant amount of money spent to keep up with their addiction which can act as a stressor in family dynamics. As online shopping addiction has increased around the world, researchers in China have created internet-based interventions through an ES system that records how long an individual spent online along with pertinent statistical information related to sites often visited. This literature review paper will take a closer look at the onset of CB and online shopping addiction as well as the reasons behind why CBI is considered a successful treatment method for CB.

**Keywords:** Compulsive buying disorder, online shopping addiction, mental health and online shopping, treatments for compulsive buying, cognitive behavioral intervention, Internet-based intervention.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Online shopping is defined as an act of buying products and goods through the Internet to determine the quantity of options, convenience, and best pricing. In recent decades, online stores have gained significant control over the market compared to brick-and-mortar stores. Today, one can find virtually anything and as a result, individuals with a tendency for compulsive-obsessive disorder have turned to online shopping as a coping mechanism. The psychology of online shopping has become an important topic for research, and is now considered a diagnosable mental health concern as online shopping addiction has been found to have much more underlying issues than psychologists first realized. This paper is a review of the current literature discussing the onset of compulsive buying disorder and new adapted treatment methods to pinpoint the specific needs of this population. It will discuss perspectives on online shopping, comorbid disorders such as depression and anxiety, and delve into how group therapy methods have been found to effectively curb addictive behavior helping patients recover from this disorder.

## II. BACKGROUND

Dr. Bruce Weinberg, a professor of marketing at Boston University is a self-proclaimed 'online-shopping pioneer.' An advocate for online shopping, Dr. Weinberg exclusively buys high-end products online. Weinberg argues for the 'superiority' of online shopping compared to brick-and-mortar stores since one can find high-end products at great price points. Sidney J. Levy, a professor at the University of Arizona, studied Dr. Weinberg and his shopping habits in order to understand the psychology of online shoppers. Levy's observation on Weinberg stated that, "Bruce Weinberg is convinced that he showed the superiority of online shopping in savings of time, money, and in providing a variety of other consumer satisfactions" (Levy, 2001). And while it is true in theory that anyone can buy high-end products online for an

affordable price compared to a brick-and-mortar store, Levy observes that Weinberg does not consider the logistics affecting those who cannot even afford a computer in the first place. Levy states, "Those who make greater use of the Internet and shop more across the board are similar to Bruce in their ready access to computers, their facility with computers, their higher social status, and relative affluence" (Levy, 2001). According to Levy, it is those living in affluence that even have the option of shopping online compared to those living in poverty and the inner-city. The numbers and percentages even show that those living in affluent neighborhoods are the ones buying, investing, and even controlling commerce through the Internet. For example, "The average affluent household owns two PCs; 46% of the affluent use their PCs for investment management (wired millionaires are 79% more likely to trade stocks online than a non-affluent counterpart), and when shopping online, they are more likely to buy across almost all product categories from books to clothing, hotel reservations to sporting goods" (Levy, 2001).

Weinberg also does not consider the competitiveness of the online market, and the consequences of it. As many are trying to buy products for reasonable sales, this drives the online market to constantly push products at the expense and exchange for business ethics, fair treatment of employees, and envelopment of consumerism. Levy states, "Currently, online companies face more competition from offline rivals, low employee morale, consumer reluctance to change buying patterns, and wary investors demanding that these businesses boost profits" (Levy, 2001).

### III. MENTAL HEALTH AND ONLINE SHOPPING

Rafael Rodriguez-Villarino and Manuel Gonzalez-Lorenzo, two professors and researchers in Spain, studied and analyzed the relationship between buying addictions and mental health disorders. In their pyramid of variables, at the top was anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), which were regarded as highly correlated with online shopping. In the middle of the pyramid were passive coping, low self esteem, and low conscientiousness, and at the bottom of the pyramid were external locus of control and being a sensation seeker. This section will focus on the variables at the top which include depression, anxiety, and OCD.

#### A. Compulsive Buying Disorder as OCD

Studies have shown that people who buy excessively and compulsively (particularly online) struggle with anxiety or OCD related symptoms. OCD and anxiety can be related as those struggling with obsessive-compulsiveness are highly anxious, and thus buy products online as an "anti-anxiety treatment." By definition, OCD is a disorder where individuals will have obsessive thoughts or compulsions triggered by thoughts of anxiety, fear, and even catastrophes. To soothe him or herself, an individual will develop compulsions to gratify an irresistible urge without thinking. In regards to online shopping, people struggling with OCD or anxiety will therefore also struggle with "compulsive buying disorder". In a case study done by Matthew Lawrence Lee, Joseph Ciorciari, and Michael Kyrios -- three researchers at the Brain and Psychology Sciences Research Center in the Swinburne School of Technology in Melbourne, Australia, showed that people with CB almost always bought out of obsession and compulsion. Interestingly, the study also showed that people with CB spent a lot of their obsession and compulsion to buy goods online. Even with the realization of one's problem, they could not stop their behavior. Lee et. al. observes, "Individuals with CB invest a lot of time in obsessions and compulsions, even though they realise their obsessions and compulsions are excessive, or unreasonable" (Villarino, 2006). Though fully aware of one's own mental state, this did not stop the act of buying compulsively, and thus CB can be regarded as OCD.

Troy W. Ertelt and Joanna M. Marino, two graduate students in the clinical psychology doctoral training program currently at the University of North Dakota, performed research on cognitive-behavior intervention for CB. In their research, they found, "A link between binge eating disorder (BED) and CB disorder in two studies" (Villarino, 2006). When an individual eats constantly, he or she may run out of food in a quick period of time, and thus will have to buy large amounts of food -- this is the same kind of mental development in compulsive buying behavior. Therefore, as Ertelt and Marino observed, this can lead to another disorder called hoarding. Other mental issues/disorders such as OCD, hoarding, as well as many others have also been connected to compulsive buying. Hoarding and compulsive buying may go hand in hand especially because compulsive buying means buying excessively. The logic would be then that when an individual is constantly buying what they desire, they will not want to throw the items away. As a result, hoarding may become an issue for the individual.

#### B. Compulsive Buying Disorder and Depression

Another mental health disorder correlated to CB is depression. Several psychosomatic and psychiatric research professors from Germany, conducted a research between depression and excessive CB on the Internet. In their research they have found, "Association between depressive symptoms and CB was supported in a large representative German sample"

(Mueller, 2011). Compulsive buying may have many causes and can appear at any given moment. However as stated in the study, CB was strongly correlated with depression. The reason being, buying can provide temporary gratification to ease feelings of depression. The German study concluded that, “With respect to self-ratings, individuals with CB reported more depressive symptoms, higher materialistic values endorsement, and more severe excessive Internet use compared with those without CB (Mueller, 2011). CB due to depression has become such a common nominal problem, that psychiatrists have begun to issue medicalization for CB. Shirley Lee and Avis Mysyk, two Anthropology professors at the University of Manitoba in Canada, studied this phenomenon. Due to the globalization and accessibility of the Internet, and the ever-increasing flux of depression, psychiatrists had to prescribe medicine in order to combat depression-fueled CB, rather than the depression itself. Lee and Mysyk have found in psychiatric practice that, “The antidepressants fluoxetine (prozac), bupropion, and nortriptyline were useful in treating compulsive buying” (Lee, 2003). Not only has medication been prescribed to treat a patient’s CB, but also other standard treatments of psychiatry such as counseling, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and self-group groups have been prescribed as well. And thus Lee and Mysyk write, “Suggested treatments range from antidepressants to cognitive behaviour modification to counselling to participation in self-help groups” (Lee, 2003). Today, CB continues to become its own mental disorder separate from depression and anxiety, an outcome of an e-commerce driven society.

### ***C. Internet Addiction and Low Self-esteem***

Seungsin Lee from Division of Global Integrated Studies and Jungkun Park from the School of Business, analyzed the relationship between Internet addiction and compulsive shopping in online/offline environments. Lee and Park state, “Both compulsive offline buying and Internet addiction had a strong positive relationship with compulsive online buying” (Lee, 2016). During their study, they suggested that Internet addiction has a negative effect on an individual during his or her daily life. Internet addiction means incredible amounts of hours spent on the Internet, in which they are exposed to calculated ads that repeatedly present themselves to people online. When this happens on multiple occasions throughout the day, it will most likely lead a person to compulsively buy. Lee and Park state, “Internet addiction does have far-reaching effects, which include varying degrees of compulsive e-buying that, in its worst form, could lead to the individual’s financial ruin and the demise of his or her family life” (Lee, 2016).

In addition, when a person buys compulsively they are already in a negative state and require buying things to satisfy and alleviate negative feelings. The outcome from such compulsive buying therefore can lead to feelings of low self-esteem because they cannot control their behavior. The cycle repeats itself when the compulsive buyer is compelled to alleviate such negative feelings (low self-esteem), and buy again. Lee and Park state that, “Low self-esteem has consistently been linked with, and found to increase, compulsive buying in literature on consumer behavior” (Lee, 2016).

## **IV. TREATMENTS FOR COMPULSIVE BUYING**

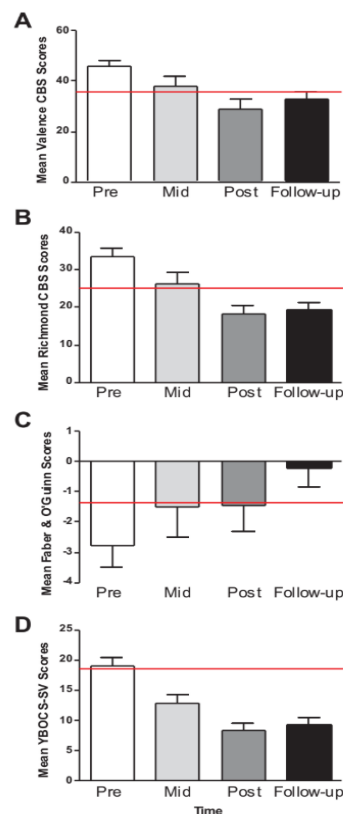
### ***A. Cognitive Behavioral Intervention***

Although cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is usually the standard treatment for many mental disorders, CB addiction may require other forms of treatment because shopping and buying goods are a part of daily life, therefore, difficult to escape. The act of buying, such as food and water are necessities of life, but can also act as triggers simply due to the fact that it requires an act of buying. This is why Ertelt and Marino recommend cognitive behavioral intervention (CBI) instead of CBT. CBT is usually performed as individual therapy, while CBI is administered through group-based CBT. The results from the group therapy sessions have shown to be effective for treating compulsive buying. After the group therapy was over, it was shown that over half of the group had no compulsive buying outbreaks, even six months after the therapy had ended. Ertelt and Marino attest this by saying, “At the end of the 10 weeks treatment, 42.9% of the original sample was considered to be in remission, and at the 6 months follow up, 58.8% of the participants were in remission” (Ertelt, 2009). However, it should be recognized that CBI is rigorous both in apprehensive learning and practical redirective behavior because each individual must first and foremost identify the reasons behind their CB. Therefore, “The CBT group seeks to identify antecedents to problematic shopping, stop the behavior once antecedents are recognized, and replace the shopping behavior with more productive alternative behaviors” (Ertelt, 2009). Group therapy is helpful because it creates a space for empathy and feedback as members help each other identify the causes and sources for CB. Another practice is to make a list of items on a shopping list in order to refrain from buying unnecessary goods. Another important practice was to close all credit card accounts. Ertelt and Marino write, “Another important aspect of this treatment approach is that participants are asked to close all credit accounts in order to limit their access to

expendable funds” (Ertelt, 2009). This is so that it helps a person to control the amount of money spent. Also, closing credit accounts would also prevent buyers from buying online, since a credit card is especially needed to buy products online.

A way in which the helpfulness of group therapy can be seen is through the story of Amanda. Unable to break out of her addiction, Amanda had been excessively buying, spending hours on the Internet a day, before she reached out for help. Therefore she joined a 12 week session in the ‘The Stopping Overshopping Group Treatment Program.’ The psychologist treating Amanda stated, “Clearly, her habit had significantly impacted the family’s physical space. But far more important was its effect on her marriage” (Benson, 2013). This shows one of the common issues with compulsive buying where all the money spent may ruin relationships or worsen them. In Amanda’s case, it caused many arguments and strife between her and her husband. Benson also notices that Amanda lacked self confidence when she stated, “I know I can look great in clothes, but my body doesn’t fit the ideal. I don’t believe I can fully love the way my body looks” (Benson, 2013). This may then lead to compulsive buying behaviors because at least when she buys pretty clothes she can cover up the features her body lacks. Benson then attempts to set a goal for Amanda which is, “Resist her morning eBay shopping and to notice her feelings rather than distract herself from them” (Benson, 2013). This small goal may help Amanda to boost her self confidence and be able to confront her feelings so she can find solutions to them. Another solution shown throughout the article is to have friends who keep you accountable to make sure you are on the right track and don’t get distracted by your addiction. In Amanda’s case she had her group who she kept accountable and they did so back to her. With her group by her side and the small goals she made and accomplished allowed her compulsive buying behaviors to slowly diminish, allowing her to rebuild her self-esteem and have a more positive outlook on life.

April Lane Benson, a Ph.D researcher in overshopping, and David Eisenhach, a psychology professor from Long Island University, attest to the benefit of group therapy for CB saying, “Though the data for group therapy with compulsive buyers are only gradually being collected, they provide the most consistently positive evidence of successful treatment” (Benson, 2013). This is due to the CBI containing what individual CBT does not: accountability. It is easy to give up when one is on his or her own for therapy, but accountability can increase moral support and perseverance, as other group members continuously encourage each other.



**Figure 1: Graph showing decrease of CB within six month period and follow up from group therapy sessions (Benson, 2013).**

### B. Internet-Based Intervention

Several researchers regarding cyberpsychology, Wenliang Su, Xiaoyi Fang, John K. Miller, and Yiyuan Wang, have done a pilot study in order to provide remote treatment for Chinese college students struggling with CB. The remote treatment was an Internet-based intervention. The intervention was an online ES system which tracks the number of hours a person spends online, provides feedback, and also gives statistical data on time spent for specific websites. The ES system asks the user various questions as well as putting out decisional balance forms to be filled. And, “By tracing intervention results, both ES groups had significant intervention effects for online hours per week, YDQ score, and online satisfaction” (Su, 2011). Much like therapy, the ES system is able to give feedback to the user and allows them to reflect on how spending too much time on the internet may be harmful. Su and Fang explain, “the ES’s design was based on MI’s counseling style, which enabled easier acceptance of information and feedback for the participants” (Su, 2011). From the results of the study, Su and Fang conclude that the online ES system is able to reduce the amount of hours a person spends per week. This is because Internet-based intervention is easily accessible and cost effective (Su, 2011). Also, Internet-based intervention is helpful in that a user can use the intervention coincidentally with browsing on the Internet.

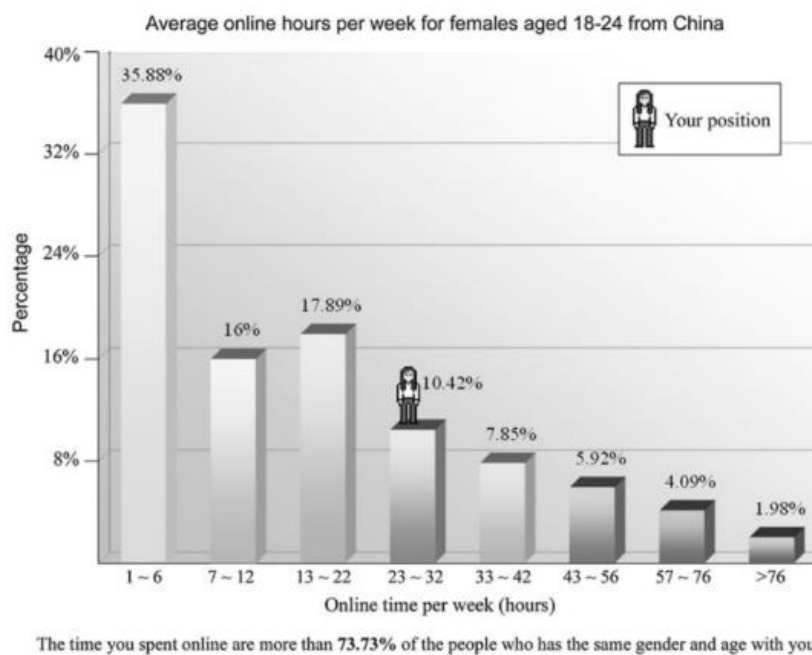


Figure 2: Example feedback from the online ES system (Villarino, 2006).

### C. Developing Self-control Mechanisms

According to Villarino and Lorenzo, developing new modes of coping and self-control is highly integral to overcoming CB. Villarino and Lorenzo suggest, “To prevent this from happening, it would be advisable for these at risk individuals to be trained in the effective use of active coping strategies and problem-solving techniques” (Villarino, 2006). One particular strategy is ‘passive coping’ which is when one attempts to avoid the problem by practicing problem solving techniques. Such techniques involve improving one’s own self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-concept (or view of oneself). As a result, “Thereby reducing both their need to escape or avoid difficult situations and their risk of falling prey to harmful addictive buying habits” (Villarino, 2006).

Another effective strategy is the development of self-control mechanisms. When self control is able to be taught and applied in one’s life it may help to get rid of the disorder as a whole. In an article by Horvath of the institute for management research, Buttner from the department of applied psychology identifies and suggests a couple of strategies which may help people to nurture self control. They state “engaging in cost-benefit analysis or distancing themselves from the desirable object.... They aggregated findings from various domains of self-control and classified strategies into those that aim to (a) reduce desire and (b) increase willpower” (When people distance themselves from an object it may not only help them to avoid the product, but also to train themselves mentally in order to avoid it as well in the future. Reducing desire and increasing willpower are two very important factors of self control as they go hand in hand to define

the word self control. Therefore strategies aimed at improving the two areas will help an individual overall to grasp the concept of self control. Strategies for reducing desire include “Notably, among the desire-reduction strategies, only temptation avoidance seems to aim towards not conducting the negative behavior at all;” (Horvath, 2015). Temptation avoidance may be accomplished by distracting yourself with equally fun things such as hobbies or watching TV in order to minimize temptation before it is too late. As for increasing willpower, it is stated that, “Establishing behavioral rules, making impulsive behavior more difficult, as well as engaging in economic cost assessments are typical, rational-based activities directed at increasing willpower when confronted with temptation.” (Horvath, 2015). This is a very effective solution since leaving your credit card and money at home will help prevent any impulsive actions, as well as build will power from not being able to buy a desired product.

## V. CONCLUSION

As society continues to rapidly increase activities online, CB is expected to rise as technological advances continue to make immense strides in society. Understanding online shopping behavior and how online platforms continue to exacerbate the problem through repetitive ads is a topic that requires further research. This is a problem not only stemming from the individual himself or herself but may be growing in response to a culture that promotes constant spending online. Nevertheless, psychologists have already adapted treatment methods, however, as they are still in their early stages of development, increased research efforts must be made. The goal should be to constantly improve the model and work towards best practices for treatments on a global scale as online shopping is rapidly growing in many developed parts of the world. Countries such as China, South Korea, and Europe should also be assessed to see how psychologists across the world can work together to understand this disorder that is rapidly growing in recent years.

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