Look on the Bright Side: Self-Expressive Consumption and Consumer Self-Worth

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It is widely held that people who spend money to compensate for negative feelings of self-worth do so in vain; thus “retail therapy” has been relegated to the dark side of consumption. But the current research finds that retail therapy has a bright side. First, events that threaten self-worth do not uniformly increase consumption, but increase a particular type of consumption: self-expressive consumption. While self-expressive consumption can increase consumer spending, it can also have the opposite effect. Moreover, when threatened consumers engage in self-expressive consumption, self-worth is immediately repaired, suggesting that retail therapy can in fact compensate for negative feelings of self-worth.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Classic research on consumption proposes that products are often purchased for their symbolic qualities (Belk 1988; Levy 1959; Solomon 1983). Indeed, consumer products can communicate information both to oneself (Bem 1972; Solomon 1983) and to others (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982). For example, an individual who notices she enjoys artwork might conclude to herself that she values creativity; an individual who drives a Lexus might be perceived by others as wealthy and having status. Based on the idea that products have such signaling value, the present session pos- ses the question of whether consumers’ product preferences and purchases are used to cope with threat. This proposition is examined with respect to threat in three different domains: one’s self-worth, one’s self-views, and one’s sense of power. Each paper puts forth evidence supporting the idea that threat leads consumers to prefer and select products that compensate for the dimension under threat. As a whole, the session sheds new light on the nature of consumption and the conditions under which threat produces compensatory consumption.

The first paper, by Dalton, proposes that a threat to consumers’ self-worth leads to compensation by choosing products that allow for self-expression. Three experiments are presented to test the effect of threats to one’s self-worth on consumption in the context of choosing whether to trade up for a higher priced item in a category. Dalton finds that a threat to one’s self-worth does indeed increase consumers’ propensity to trade up and choose the higher priced option in a choice between two options. Importantly, however, Dalton finds that this occurs only when the decision to trade up occurs in a highly self-relevant domain. In a less self-relevant domain, consumers showed a reduced propensity to trade up. In addition, further supporting the idea that consumers trade up on products in response to threat, Dalton finds that buffering participants prior to the threat reduces their tendency to trade up on self-relevant products.

Wheeler and colleagues examine how consumers’ confidence in their self-views can be threatened via apparently innocuous tasks that stir compensatory consumption in their decision-making. In four experiments, consumers’ confidence in their views of themselves is shaken either by having participants use their non-dominant (versus dominant) hand or priming doubt (versus confidence). Wheeler and colleagues find that these simple manipulations have a significant impact on consumers’ choice such that they choose products that will offset the characteristic of which there is doubt. Thus, if consumers’ self-views (e.g., excitement, intelligence) are threatened by doubt, they are more likely to choose consumer products that display these characteristics. Wheeler and colleagues further demonstrate that such threats can be prevented via direct or indirect methods that bolster the self-concept.

Rucker and Galinsky present three experiments suggesting threats to consumers’ power evoke compensatory consumption in an effort to regain their sense of power. Based on the notion that status provides one means of signaling one’s power, Rucker and Galinsky suggest and find that experiencing a psychological state of powerlessness fosters a preference for attributes related to status, leads to an emphasis in status when developing an advertisement, and leads to more positive attitudes towards products associated with status. Importantly, when the product attributes are described in terms of performance, the effect reverses. Compared to the powerless, the powerful evince a stronger preference for attributes related to performance, emphasize performance in developing an advertisement, and hold more positive attitudes towards products associated with performance.

As a whole, these three streams of research converge on the point that people often consume in a compensatory manner. Furthermore, each stream of research goes beyond this initial premise by demonstrating that threats do not simply provoke greater consumption. Dalton demonstrates consumers trade up when the product is relevant, but not when the product is irrelevant. Wheeler and colleagues demonstrate that consumers do not exhibit compensatory consumption if they first engage in an affirmation of the self. Finally, Rucker and Galinsky demonstrate that if a product confers performance, rather than status, threatened individuals are less favorable towards it. Thus, these findings push our thinking on several fronts.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Look on the Bright Side: Self-Expressive Consumption and Consumer Self-Worth”

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It is widely held that people who spend money to compensate for negative feelings of self-worth do so in vain; thus “retail therapy” has been relegated to the dark side of consumption. But in fact, little is empirically known about the relationship between consumption and self-worth. First, when the going gets tough, do the tough always go shopping, or might they sometimes become thriftier instead? And second, is retail therapy inevitably a hollow pursuit, or do conditions exist in which it can be an effective way to repair consumers’ feelings of self-worth? In addition to addressing these two questions, the current research explores the substantive issue of trading up—what drives consumers to pay premium prices for goods and/or services in some situations and not others?

According to the current framework, events that threaten self-worth do not uniformly increase consumption, but increase a particular type of consumption: self-expressive consumption. Self-expressive consumption is consumption that is consistent with (expresses) a consumer’s self-concept, his or her values and beliefs about who he or she is. Several experiments document this effect and, in doing so, highlight that retail therapy does in fact have a bright side.

First, in this framework, while self-expressive consumption can sometimes result in an increase in consumer spending (here, trading up), it can also have the opposite effect depending on consumption self-relevance. That is, material objects and consumption domains vary in the extent to which they are important to a consumer’s self-concept, a dimension referred to as self-relevance. For instance, both trading up in a highly self-relevant domain and not trading up in a domain that is low on self-relevance are forms of self-expressive consumption. The basic prediction across studies was that, in response to an event that threatened their self-worth, participants would be more likely to trade up (or trade
up more) in a consumption domain that was high on self-relevance and less likely to trade up (or trade up less) in a consumption domain that was low on self-relevance.

This hypothesis was tested in experiment 1 by examining how an academic failure impacted students’ willingness to trade up when choosing between two t-shirts that were high on self-relevance (i.e., two Duke t-shirts) or low on self-relevance (i.e., two white t-shirts). In each choice set, the t-shirts were priced at $14 and $19. Results showed that threat did not increase trading up in both choice contexts; rather, the tendency to trade up increased only for the self-relevant choice set. For the less self-relevant choice set, threat decreased the tendency to trade up. These results are consistent with the theory that threat impacted self-expressive consumption.

Experiment 2 sought to conceptually replicate these findings. Rather than manipulating threat, this study manipulated whether the threat experience was buffered or not by having participants write about a personally important value (or a value important to others; Steele and Liu 1983) before the academic failure. Second, rather than manipulating self-relevance, it was measured as an individual difference variable. Participants completed a questionnaire that assessed their chronic perception that possessions are part of their self-concept (Sprott, Czellar, Spangenberg 2007). Finally, rather than trading up being a hypothetical choice, it was a real choice. Following the academic failure, participants were led to believe the experiment was over and were told that the lab was conducting a draw for prizes. They were asked how they would allocate $100 to two different gift cards should they win the draw. The gift cards were for the stores Nordstrom (a more expensive store) and Macy’s (a less expensive store).

Results showed that compared to buffered participants, non-buffered participants engaged in higher levels of self-expressive consumption. Thus, the conceptual pattern of experiment 1’s results was upheld: when self-worth was threatened (here, because a threat was not buffered against), consumption became more self-expressive, with consumers who considered material objects important to their self-concepts trading up more (allocating more money to an expensive store), and consumers who did not consider material objects important to their self-concepts trading up less (allocating less money to an expensive store).

The results of a third experiment explored how individual and choice set differences interact to predict trading up in response to threat. The findings suggest that individuals with chronically strong links to possessions responded to threat by trading up in a variety of consumption contexts, whereas individuals with weaker links to possessions responded to threat by trade up in a more restricted range of consumption contexts. Simply put, people with strong (vs. weak) links to possessions perceive more (vs. fewer) consumption contexts to be self-relevant, and therefore trade up more (vs. less) in response to threat. These findings bolster the overall argument that threat triggers self-expressive consumption.

As alluded to earlier, this research also addressed the impact of trading up on self-worth. That is, can the decision to trade up or not assure consumers’ negative feelings of self-worth? It was predicted that trading up could repair self-worth, but only in a self-relevant domain. Experiment 1 tested and supported this hypothesis and also showed that self-worth could be repaired in less self-relevant domains by not trading up. Thus, not only can consumer decisions repair self-worth, but consumers apparently respond to threats by consuming in a way that immediately makes them feel better about themselves.

These findings support the theory that threats to self-worth trigger self-expressive consumption: consumers trade up more (or less) when consumption domains are more (or less) relevant to who they are. Moreover, engaging in self-expressive consumption in turn repairs the self-worth of threatened consumers. These findings highlight the bright side of the relationship between consumption and self-worth: consumers respond to threats adaptively—sometimes spending more and sometimes spending less—and functionally—by making consumption decisions that repair self-worth.

“Products as Compensation for Self-Confidence: Subtle Actions Affect Self-View Confidence and Product Choice”
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It has long been postulated that consumers should choose products with brand personalities that are congruent with their own self-views (e.g. Levy 1959; Birdwell 1964). For example, Birdwell (1964) showed that automobile owners’ perceptions of their cars match their self-perceptions. However, despite some promising findings such as these, extensive reviews failed to find consistent evidence that people choose products congruent with their perceived self-characteristics (Kassarjian 1971; Sirgy, 1982).

In the present research, we suggest that a key determinant of product-self congruency in choice is self-view confidence. We show that individuals’ confidence in their self-views can be shaken by seemingly inconsequential actions, such as writing about their self-characteristics with the non-dominant hand, and that this lowered confidence can increase the likelihood that they will choose products congruent with the shaken self-views.

Self-view confidence refers to the certainty that one’s self-view is truly characteristic of one’s actual characteristics (Pelham 1991; DeMarree, Petty, and Briñol 2007). Highly confident self-views can result from consistent and coherent evidence about one’s self-characteristics drawn from the environment and from one’s past experiences (Campbell 1990; Pelham 1991). In this research, we suggest that self-view confidence can also be affected by very subtle situational factors, such as performing routine actions in unusual ways (e.g., writing with one’s non-dominant hand) as well as by subtle priming tasks. Individuals generally desire to hold confident self-views, and evidence suggests that a lack of such confidence can be aversive, resulting in negative psychological outcomes such as low self-esteem (Baumgardner 1990; Campbell 1990), unhappiness and anxiety (Rosenberg 1979). As a result, people seek to bolster confidence in self-views that are threatened. They can do so through both direct and indirect means.

A direct bolstering strategy would involve taking actions that directly restore the shaken self-view. One direct strategy is selecting products that symbolize the dimension on which one has lowered self-confidence. Products are frequently chosen for their symbolic qualities (Belk 1988; Levy 1959; Solomon 1983), and usage of these products can indicate that one has certain self-characteristics both to oneself (Bem 1972; Solomon 1983) and to others (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982). An indirect strategy, by contrast, would involve restoring overall self-views without bolstering the self-characteristic directly. For example, people can cope with self-threats by affirming unrelated self-views (Steele 1988). This affirmation process can eliminate feelings of threat without directly repairing the challenged self-view.

In the present studies, we predicted that people who experience momentarily lowered confidence in a given self-view would be more likely to select products that bolster that self-view. We also predicted that this shift in product choices would be eliminated when participants first had the opportunity to bolster their self-views through either direct or indirect means. A series of four studies provided support for these predictions.
In experiment 1, participants wrote about their excitingness before choosing between exciting products (e.g., Apple computers) or competent products (e.g., IBM computers). They were randomly assigned to write about their excitingness with either their dominant hands or their non-dominant hands. Based upon prior research (Briñol and Petty 2003), we predicted that writing about a self-view with one’s non-dominant hand would lower confidence in that self-view, because doing so would be difficult and the writing would look shaky and unconfident. Participants who wrote about their excitingness with their non-dominant hands were more likely to choose exciting products than those who wrote with their dominant hands, consistent with the idea that exciting products were chosen to restore the self-views shaken by writing with the non-dominant hand.

In experiment 2, we replicated and extended these results by testing the effects in another domain (intelligence) and by testing the effect of a direct bolstering opportunity. Participants were first randomly assigned to write about their intelligence with either their dominant or non-dominant hands. They then chose among a series of products from sets containing either intelligence-related products (e.g., bookstore gift certificate) or no intelligence-related products. At the conclusion of the session, they were offered a choice between a pen (intelligence-related) and M&M’s (not intelligence-related). We predicted that participants who wrote about their intelligence with their non-dominant hand would be more likely to choose the pen, but only when they did not first have the opportunity to bolster their self-view through prior choice of intelligence-related products. This is what we found.

Experiment 3 generalized these results to another domain and tested the indirect bolstering strategy. Participants were first assigned to write about their health-consciousness with either their dominant or non-dominant hands. They then engaged in a self-affirmation task, in which they wrote about an important value, or an unrelated filler task. Last, they chose between a healthy snack (apple) and an unhealthy snack (M&M’s). Results indicated that those who wrote about their health-consciousness with their non-dominant hands were more likely to choose the apple, but only if they did not first have the opportunity to engage in self-affirmation.

In our final experiment, we use another means of shaking self-confidence, fully crossed our design to test for trait-specific confidence, and tested for confidence mediation. The experiment had a 2 (Prime: confidence vs. doubt) x 2 (Trait: excitement vs. competence) design. Participants were first primed with confidence or doubt before writing about their excitingness or competence. They then chose between a series of products with exciting or competent brand personalities. Results indicated that participants chose more exciting products when primed with doubt and writing about excitingness and chose more competent products when primed with doubt and writing about competence. Moderated mediation analyses showed that these choices were mediated by participants’ confidence, but that the effect of the reduced confidence depended on the trait that was activated.

“Lifestyles of the Powerless and Powerful: Compensatory and Non-compensatory Consumption”

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Power is an omnipresent force in consumers’ social world. Throughout the day consumers are likely to have experiences of feeling both powerful and powerless. For example, meeting with one’s boss, defending a thesis, or submitting a job application might evoke the psychological state of feeling powerless. Conversely, interviewing a potential employee, giving advice, or setting curfew for one’s child may evoke the opposite state of feeling powerful. How does power affect consumption? We propose that psychological states of low and high power have qualitatively different effects on consumers’ preferences.

Powerlessness and Compensatory Consumption. On the one hand, powerlessness, or a low power state, is associated with an aversive psychological experience that consumers are motivated to reduce. One means of reducing such a state would be to consume in a manner that gives one a sense of power. In particular, past research suggests that status is one form of power (e.g., French and Raven 1959), and that consumer products serve the function of communicating information about one’s status (e.g., Belk et al. 1982). Belk and colleagues note, “It may be that concern with demonstrating status to others comes to dominate other consumption message interests sometime after the eighth grade and that this concern then continues.” Consequently, due to a motive to compensate for their lack of power, we hypothesize that low power consumers are likely to have a preference for products and product attributes associated with status. In fact, recent work by Rucker and Galinsky (2008) suggests consumers in a state of powerlessness are willing to pay more for status-related products. We suggest this increased willingness to pay should extend to consumers’ general preferences.

Having Power and Internal Focus. On the other hand, being powerful, or a state of high power, is typically associated with having control. As control is often desirable, we hypothesize that such consumers should not have a compensatory motive activated. However, we believe there is reason to suspect that experiencing a state of power should be more likely to orient consumers towards performance and obtaining products associated with exceptional functionality and performance. Specifically, prior research has shown that when people are focused on their internal states they tend to focus on the quality of the product (Snyder and DeBono 1985). And, prior research suggests that feeling powerful leads to an increased focus on their own attitudes and desires (Briñol et al. 2007; Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh, 2001). For example, Briñol et al. (2007) found that the powerful were less likely to process information about a persuasive message because a state of power suggested their own attitude was correct and listening to others was unnecessary. Given that a focus on one’s internal desires produces a focus on quality (Snyder and DeBono 1985), and power focuses people internally, we proposed that high power should intensify a focus on the quality of the products and lead to a preference for products that emphasize quality.

We tested the different preferences resulting from states of low and high power in a series of three experiments. In experiment 1, we manipulated participants’ power using a role manipulation adapted from past research (Briñol et al. 2007). Specifically, participants were informed they would be participating in two separate experiments. In the first experiment participants were randomly assigned to either a high power role (Boss) or a low power role (Employee). After the role assignment, as part of a supposedly unrelated task, participants were asked to generate a slogan to accompany a picture of a BMW that they thought would be persuasive. Participants’ slogans were coded with respect to whether they emphasized status or performance. Participants assigned to the low power condition generated more slogans related to status than high power participants. In contrast, participants assigned to the high power condition generated more slogans related to performance than low power participants.

Experiment 2 tested our hypothesis by measuring, rather than manipulating, participants’ general sense of power and examining their preference for a product advertised as associated with status or performance. Participants were subsequently asked to report their purchasing intentions towards the product. We found that as participants’ general sense of power increased they had more favorable
purchasing intentions for the product associated with performance. Conversely, as participants’ general sense of power increased they had less favorable attitudes towards the product emphasizing status.

Experiment 3 examined the role of power in consumers’ response to ads emphasizing the status or performance aspect of a product and experimentally manipulated power. In addition, a control group was added to demonstrate that low and high power both exhibited effects relative to a control condition. Participants were assigned to control, low, or high power conditions by having them recall a past event (see Galinsky et al. 2003). Participants then read an advertisement for an executive pen and provided their attitude towards the pen. The advertisement was varied to either emphasize the status conveyed by the pen or the performance of the pen. When the pen emphasized status, low power participants held more favorable attitudes towards the pen than both high power and control participants, which did not differ from one another. In contrast, when the pen emphasized performance, high power participants held more favorable attitudes toward the pen compared to both low power and control participants.

Conclusion and Contributions. The present research provides evidence for both compensatory and non-compensatory processes in consumer behavior. Specifically, states of powerlessness foster a desire to compensate for the loss of power, which manifests itself in a proclivity to focus on, and prefer products associated with, status. In contrast, states of power invoke a preference for products associated with performance. Theoretical and practical implications of this work in understanding power in consumer behavior are discussed.

REFERENCES


