Why Retail Therapy Works: It Is Choice, Not Acquisition, That Primarily Alleviates Sadness

Beatriz Pereira, University of Michigan, USA
Scott Rick, University of Michigan, USA

Can shopping be used strategically as an emotion regulation tool? Although prior work demonstrates that sadness encourages spending, it is unclear whether and why shopping actually alleviates sadness. Our work suggests that shopping can heal, but that it is the act of choosing (e.g., between money and products), rather than the act of acquiring (e.g., simply being endowed with money or products), that primarily alleviates sadness. Two experiments that induced sadness and then manipulated whether participants made monetarily consequential choices support our conclusions.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009733/volumes/v39/NA-39

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

In this study, we examine how people’s judgment on the probability of a conjunctive event influences their subsequent inference (e.g., after successfully getting five papers accepted what is the probability of getting tenure?). Our study demonstrates that a conjunctive event that contains series of success events was judged more probable if they were supported with positive evidence, whereas its complementary event that contains a series of failure events was judged more probable if they were supported with negative evidence. We provide support for our theory in empirical setting involving hypothetical scenarios. We study the role of processing fluency as a cognitive mechanism of the strict refocusing framing effect and test the prediction in more naturalistic settings.

To test our prediction, we designed a 2×2 between-subjects experiment in which we manipulate frame (success vs. failure) and base rate information (33% vs. 67%). This prediction was tested in a study involving hypothetical scenarios. A total of 104 undergraduates (49 men and 55 women) participated in the study. Participants in the success condition read information about the chance of selling a product in the first week of employment of a new sales person who has never participated in a sales training program before joining a company. Next, they read a paragraph about Linda, who is a new employee of a company X. During the first week of her employment, she has contacted six customers where four of them had decided to buy one unit product each from Linda (coded as event A). Participants in the failure condition read the negation of event A (i.e., two of them had decided not to buy from Linda). In all four conditions, the probabilities of the events are exact, which can be calculated from binomial theorem. After reading the scenario, participants indicated their subjective probability regarding the chance that Linda had participated in a sales training program before joining the company by putting a cross (X) in a single line mark as 0% or never in one end and 100% or certain in the other end. These responses were transformed to probabilities by taking the ratio of the length of the marked line from origin with the total length of the line. We also included items for measuring message processing, and processing fluency using 7-point scale, anchored by strongly disagree [1] and strongly agree [7].

RESULTS

With regard to frame, the results show a non-significant difference between the gain (M_{GAIN} = 0.53, SD=0.17) and loss (M_{LOSS} = 0.61, (t(97)=0.165, p>0.05). With regard to base rate, the results show a significant difference between the low base rate (M_{0.33} = 0.61, SD=0.17) and high base rate (M_{0.67} = 0.53, SD=0.17, (t(97)=2.12, p<0.05). This result highlights respondents’ subjective judgments were affected by the base rate, i.e., the chance of occurrence of one event. A 2(frame: gain, loss) x 2(base rate: p=0.33, p=0.67) ANOVA revealed the frame x base rate interaction on the subjective probability judgment (F(1,99)=4.7, p=0.036). Contrast analysis shows that, albeit the four events are equally likely, participants’ subjective judgment is higher when presented with event A (i.e., where the probability of making one success is low and the information regarding Linda’s performance is described in gain) than its negation of event ~A (i.e., where the probability of making one failure is low and information regarding Linda’s performance is described in loss). In contrast, participants’ subjective judgment were higher when they read event ~B (i.e., where the probability of making one failure is low and the information regarding Linda’s performance is described as a loss) than event B (i.e., where the probability of making one success is high and the information regarding Linda’s performance is described as a gain). To examine the role of processing fluency as a potential mediator of the framing effect, a structural equation model was developed. Our results confirmed our hypotheses.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our study examines people’s subjective probability judgment on the estimates of conjunctive events that consists of an independent series of simple events. The results of our empirical study confirm our prediction and extend previous findings of Brockner (2002) and Mandel (2008). Further research is needed to generalize the findings to another consumer research setting (e.g., estimates of resolving product complaints after filing five complaints).

REFERENCES


Why Retail Therapy Works: It Is Choice, Not Acquisition, That Primarily Alleviates Sadness

Beatriz Pereira, University of Michigan, USA
Scott Rick, University of Michigan, USA

People often engage in shopping activities when feeling sad. Indeed, folk wisdom suggests that negative affect can be healed by going shopping, a phenomenon labeled as retail therapy (Underhill 1999, Gardner and Rook 1988, Atalay and Meloy 2011). Although it is increasingly clear that sadness stimulates spending (e.g., Cryder et al. 2008; Lerner, Small and Loewenstein 2004), it is less clear whether and why shopping actually helps to alleviate negative affect.

Answering the question of whether retail therapy “works” is complicated by the fact that the shopping experience consists of several components (e.g., browsing, choosing, acquiring, and consuming), some of which may be more hedonically influential than others. Previous qualitative work in marketing suggests that consumers might shop in an effort to regain a sense of control over their life (e.g., Pavia and Mason 2004), which is somewhat ironic given that the act of spending while sad is itself often viewed as a loss of self-control (cf. Faber and
Vohs 2004). Nevertheless, this work suggests that it is the act of choosing whether or how to spend, rather than the acquisition of products, that primarily alleviates sadness. The primary focus of our work is to show experimentally that choosing repairs sadness. If that is the case, we can argue that the choice component of retail therapy contributes to the alleviation of sadness, whereas mere acquisition does not.

Indeed, prior work suggests that small amounts of choice can be energizing and hedonically beneficial (e.g., Botti and Iyengar 2004; Møller, Deci, and Ryan 2006). However, none of this prior work has examined whether choice alleviates negative affect. Moreover, much of this work compares choice conditions to conditions that arguably highlight the absence of choice (e.g., by informing participants that someone else has made a choice on their behalf, or that the outcome was randomly determined). Thus, a secondary purpose of our work is to provide a more conservative test of the hedonic benefits of choice, by comparing choice conditions to conditions that do not highlight absence of choice.

To examine whether choice can help to reduce sadness, we conducted two experiments that induced sadness and then manipulated whether or not participants made monetarily consequential choices. In Experiment 1A, 41 participants learned that they would receive $1 in exchange for watching a sad video clip. The clip, from The Champ, portrayed a boy watching his mentor die, and is a common sadness induction (e.g., Gross and Levenson 1995). In the No Choice condition, participants watched the full three-minute clip uninterrupted. In the Choice condition, participants watched the first two minutes, and then the computer gave them the choice to stop watching (and return their $1 to the experimenter) or to continue watching (and keep their $1). Participants subsequently rated their current level of sadness (and other emotions) on a modified Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark and Tellegen 1988). The three items of interest were averaged to form a sadness index (“sad”, “blue”, and “depressed”, \( \alpha = 0.88 \)). Only two participants chose to stop watching the video. (Their data are excluded from the analyses.)

As predicted, reported sadness was significantly lower in the Choice condition than in the No Choice condition (3.54 vs. 4.71, \( t(37) = 2.12, p < .05, d = 0.68 \)). Participants with a chance to exert control reported lower levels of sadness than participants who did not have a choice, even though both groups performed a sadness induction of equal content and duration. No significant differences were found in the other emotions. Although the results are consistent with our hypothesis, Experiment 1A cannot rule out an artifactual explanation, namely that it was the interruption in the video (rather than the opportunity to choose) that helped to alleviate sadness. In Experiment 1B we told all participants that we were studying how people respond to emotional flip clips when there is an interruption in the clip, but gave only half of them the choice to stop watching in the intermission. Similar to Experiment 1A, the results showed that participants in the Choice condition reported lower levels of sadness. The replication suggests that the benefits of choosing observed in study 1 were not an artifact of an interruption. It also suggests that the reduction in reported sadness is not due to distraction.

To speak more directly to the effectiveness of retail therapy, Experiment 2 examined whether choosing between money and products can be similarly healing. Sadness was induced by showing all 77 participants the clip from The Champ. Next, we told participants that they would receive a small reward as a thank-you for participating. In the No Choice conditions, participants either learned that they would receive $2.50 or a shot glass emblazoned with their school’s logo. Participants were not made aware that there were two possible rewards or that their reward was randomly determined. In the Choice condition, participants chose whether they wanted to receive the cash or the glass. (Participants were only slightly, and not significantly, more likely to choose the glass than the cash.) Finally, participants rated their current feelings on the modified PANAS.

Consistent with our prediction, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of choice (\( F(1,73) = 3.98, p < .05 \)). Pooling across gift type, sadness index (\( \alpha = .88 \)) was significantly lower when participants chose their gift than when their gift was assigned (2.91 vs. 3.75; \( t(75) = 2.06, p < .05; d = .47 \)). The main effect of gift type and the interaction were non-significant. Consistent with our hypothesis, the opportunity to exert a choice in a consumption domain yielded lower reported levels of sadness, regardless of whether a product or cash was chosen.

Taken together, the results suggest that shopping can help to alleviate sadness. Specifically, it appears that choosing, rather than merely acquiring, is the primary healing component of retail therapy. Although retail therapy can surely be taken to dangerous extremes, our results suggest that moderate amounts of shopping might actually be an effective emotion regulation strategy, and not a failure of self-control.

REFERENCES


