Walking Away From Compensatory Consumption: Self-Acceptance Changes Threat Appraisal

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Individuals often respond to self-threats with compensatory consumption, a behavior with potentially harmful consequences (e.g., overeating). Here, we demonstrate that, by unconditionally accepting the self, individuals can change their threat-appraisal from harmful to benign to self-worth, and thereby reduce their reliance on compensatory consumption and be more open to self-improvement.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer behavior researchers have documented that individuals frequently try to avoid threatening information by engaging in compensatory consumption—the increased purchase of or actual consumption of goods in response to self-threats (Rucker and Galinsky forthcoming). However, compensatory consumption could potentially yield harmful consequences, such as overeating and overspending (Tice et al. 2001). Moreover, while compensatory consumption might temporally relieve emotional distress arising from self-threats, it can lead to post-consumption guilt (Arnow et al. 1992).

Here, we introduce a model of threat resolution illuminating that individuals might be able to reduce their reliance on post-threat compensatory consumption by changing their appraisal of threats from harmful to their self-worth (which would lead to defensive responses to protect their self-worth, e.g., compensatory consumption) to benign to self-worth (which would make defensive responses superfluous). We specifically focus on the role of unconditional self-acceptance (i.e., detaching one’s sense of self-worth from one’s current self-assessment; Chamberlain and Hagger 2001; Williams and Lynn 2010) in shaping threat appraisal, positing that those who practice unconditional self-acceptance (vs. those who do not) will tend to appraise otherwise threatening information as benign rather than as impinging on their self-worth. As such, we posit that these individuals will be less likely to try to protect themselves through engaging in compensatory consumption and more open to directly facing and improving on the threatened dimension.

Study 1 examined how a threat to one’s intelligence would affect consumption of products symbolic of intelligence (but do not actually boost intelligence) for individuals who varied in their degree of self-acceptance. Also, we sought to establish discriminant validity between self-acceptance and self-esteem.

All participants first completed the self-acceptance subscale from the Shortened General Attitude and Belief Scale (used to measure self-acceptance in MacInnes 2006) and then completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale. Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subject conditions (intelligence-threat vs. no-threat). Half of the participants experienced a threat to their intelligence (via “a game that assesses intelligence”/negative feedback) while the other half did not experience any threat (same game framed as stimuli development/no negative feedback). Then, all participants were asked to indicate their willingness-to-pay for three intelligence-related products (DV=summed WTP).

We found that high (+1SD) self-acceptance individuals exhibited less compensatory consumption in response to threat than low (-1SD) self-acceptance individuals (p=.002). This relation was reversed for self-esteem, such that high self-esteem individuals exhibited greater compensatory consumption in response to threat than did low self-esteem individuals (p=.06). This is consistent with the previous literature that self-acceptance and self-esteem are related, yet distinct constructs. That is, self-acceptance reflects unconditional acceptance of one’s self, and therefore tends to offer protection against self-threats whereas self-esteem tends to be conditional on one’s successes and failures and hence, may entail a greater likelihood of defensive responding to protect the self than self-acceptance (Chamberlain and Hagger 2001).

In study 2, we manipulated, rather than measured, self-acceptance and examined a different form of compensatory consumption than in study 1, namely compensatory consumption intended to shift attention from the threat (Heatherton et al. 1991) rather than consumption intended to symbolically complete the threatened aspect of the self.

Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (self-acceptance vs. control) x 2 (intelligence-threat vs. no-threat), between-subjects design. Participants in the self-acceptance condition read a list of “thoughts” that help increase self-acceptance (e.g., “I can accept myself whether I win, lose, or draw.”), chose their favorite, and explained why that particular thought was their favorite and how they might apply it to their daily lives. Those in the control condition read through a list of daily activities, chose their favorite daily activity, and explained why that particular activity was their favorite. Then, after experiencing either a threat to their intelligence (different manipulation to that of study 1: a “test of intelligence”/negative feedback) or no threat (same test framed as stimulus development/no negative feedback), participants got an opportunity to consume M&M’s (DV=# of M&M’s consumed).

We found that participants in the self-acceptance condition did increase their consumption of M&M’s in response to an intelligence threat (vs. no-threat condition, p=.23), whereas participants in the control condition consumed more M&M’s in response to a threat (p=.038), indicating that those who exercised self-acceptance did not see the need to increase their consumption as a mean to avoid the threatened self. Study 3 used a different type of self-threat (a threat to one’s power: Rucker and Galinsky 2008) and a different self-acceptance exercise to test whether consumers who practice self-acceptance would not only reduce their reliance on compensatory consumption but would also be more open to directly addressing the self-threat by seeking products that could help them improve on the threatened dimension.

Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (self-acceptance vs. control) x 2 (power-threat vs. no-threat) x 2 (threat-compensatory product vs. self-improvement product), between-subjects design. Participants in the self-acceptance condition read a short article on self-acceptance and wrote about why they believed self-acceptance to be important. Those in the control condition wrote about their last trip to buy groceries. Then, participants either experienced a threat to their sense of power (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003) or did not experience any threat. Lastly, participants in the threat-compensatory product condition indicated their WTP for a magazine symbolic of status (“Elite Traveler”) whereas those in the self-improvement product condition indicated their WTP for a self-improvement book (“Power and Influence for Dummies”).

We again found that self-acceptance reduced participants’ post-threat WTP for a threat-compensatory product to no-threat level (p<.1). Furthermore, self-acceptance increased participants’ post-threat WTP for a self-improvement product (p=.036). This finding helps converge on our account that self-acceptance leads to a relatively benign appraisal of threats and allows individuals to directly face and improve on the threatened dimension.

In sum, we provide convergent evidence for our model of threat resolution that highlights an important role for self-acceptance in
shape how individuals appraise threats, which, in turn, reduces their reliance on compensatory consumption but increases their openness to facing and addressing threatening information.

REFERENCES