Wallowing in Misery: Consumers With Low Self-Esteem Verify Negative Self-Views By Choosing Miserable Products

Anika Stuppy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands
Nicole L. Mead, University of Melbourne, Australia
Stijn M. J. van Osselaer, Cornell University, USA

When and why do consumers eat unappetizing food or purchase low-tier brands? We argue that consumers with negative self-views choose miserable products chronically and after threat to self-verify. While people with high self-esteem self-enhance or self-mollify after threat, people with low self-esteem seek self-congruent miserable products to affirm their self-views.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Miserable products are used to “wallow in misery” (Pollack 2014). Although counter-hedonic consumption exists, it has been relatively neglected by research. When and why do people choose miserable products?

We define wallowing as the perpetuation of negative self-views that can occur after threatening experiences. An example of wallowing would be engaging in miserable activities (eating disgusting food, staying at home) instead of uplifting ones (eating nice food, meeting friends) after a romantic breakup. Most existing theories would predict that threats cause self-gifting to mollify the sting of the threat (Mick and DeMoss 1991) or engage in compensatory consumption to bolster the threatened part of the self (Gao et al. 2009; Rook 1987). Why would consumption be used to cultivate negative self-views rather than to counteract them?

This research tested whether wallowing is a form of self-verification. Self-verification describes the need to be understood and to act in accordance with one’s firmly held self-views (Sedikides and Strube 1997). Self-verifying actions align self-perceptions and environment to create predictability and facilitate relationships. Research demonstrated that engrained negative self-views trigger verification rather than enhancement: People who thought poorly of themselves preferred condescending interaction partners (Swann et al. 1992) and roommates that liked them less (Swann and Pelham 2002).

This project proposes that consumers with low self-esteem use miserable products like disgusting food, or low-tier brands, to self-verify. Low self-esteem consumers perceive miserable products as self-congruent and therefore appealing. We predict that negative self-verification is chronic and persists after threats because failures and setbacks reaffirm engrained negative self-conceptions (Dogson and Wood 1998). Success experiences urge low self-esteem people to update their self-views which should temporarily attenuate the desire for miserable products. We further expect that low self-esteem consumer’s choosing of miserable products is explained by undeservingness – convictions of being unworthy of quality products (Cavanaugh 2014).

STUDY 1A
Study 1a examined whether lower self-esteem is positively associated with choosing miserable products. Participants completed a measure of trait self-esteem (Rosenberg 1989) and then chose among six food product pairs: one miserable and one non-miserable alternative (e.g., canned pulled pork in water vs. pulled pork from the meat counter). Next, we measured our mediator deservingness (Cavanaugh 2014) and trait frugality (Kasser 2005) to exclude money-saving goals as an alternative explanation. A linear regression indicated that self-esteem was negatively associated with choosing miserable products ($\beta = -.274, p = .04$). A mediation analysis revealed a significant indirect relationship between self-esteem and product preferences through deservingness (95% LLCI = .0324; 95% ULCI = .2722). Frugality did not mediate.

STUDY 1B
Study 1b tested if low self-esteem consumers actively seek out miserable products using a within-subjects design. We selected damaged and undamaged versions of eight different food products (e.g., a brown vs. a yellow banana). Participants completed the Rosenberg self-esteem scale and then rated eight unique food products (four damaged and four non-damaged) one at a time. A mixed linear regression model revealed the predicted interaction between self-esteem and quality on choice, $\beta = -.395, p < .001$. Consumers’ self-esteem was negatively associated with choosing damaged products ($\beta = .192, p = .04$) and positively associated with choosing damaged products ($\beta = -.203, p = .06$).

STUDY 2
Study 2 tested whether low self-esteem consumers’ desire for miserable products is chronic. Self-esteem was measured before or after product choice in a 2X2 between-subjects design. The product choice measure contained six alcohol product pairs, one miserable and one non-miserable (e.g., $6 plastic bottle vs. $25 glass bottle vodka). Lastly, we measured desiringness, frugality, and self-punishment motivations. We regressed self-esteem, the order dummy, and their interaction on alcohol choice. As expected, the interaction was non-significant ($p = .99$). Instead, low self-esteem consumers chose more miserable alcohol regardless of whether they completed the self-esteem scale before or after product choice ($\beta = -.290, p = .03$). Self-esteem was positively related to frugality ($p = .04$) and therefore frugality cannot explain the aforementioned effect. A parallel mediation model including self-punishment and deservingness indicated a significant indirect effect through deservingness but not self-punishment (95%LLCI = -.4893; 95%ULCI = -.1853).

STUDY 3
Study 3 tested whether positive feedback that counters negative self-views can attenuate low self-esteem consumers’ desire for miserable products. Also, we examined whether low self-esteem consumers verify negative self-views similarly on a chronic basis and after threat. We manipulated task feedback (failure vs. success vs. no feedback) and measured self-esteem in a 3X2 between-subjects design. Participants completed the self-esteem scale. Next, they solved items of the Remote Association Test after which they receive success, failure, or no feedback. Then, participants chose between two types of popcorn for a film-clip watching study: Fresh popcorn and somewhat stale popcorn. On sliders from 0 to 100, participants indicated how much they would like to eat each type. They believed to receive whichever popcorn they rated highest.

We subtracted stale- from fresh-popcorn-liking. Higher values reflected greater preference for fresh over stale popcorn. Next, we regressed this measure on experimental condition (dummy coded to compare the success to each of the other two conditions), self-esteem, and all interactions. As expected, two significant interactions between self-esteem and failure vs. success and control vs. success emerged. Simple effects for participants high and low in self-esteem (1SD above and below the mean) revealed that low self-esteem participants liked stale popcorn more after failure than after success feedback ($\beta = -.331, p = .02$), and after no feedback than after success feedback ($\beta = -.289, p = .02$). Popcorn preferences of high self-esteem participants did not differ between conditions (all $p > .08$).
CONCLUSION

In summary, four studies demonstrated “wallowing in misery” - paradoxical behavior where low self-esteem people pursue actions that cultivate negative self-views. Low self-esteem consumers’ chronic and threat-induced negative self-views led them to choose miserable food. In support of theorizing, these consumers’ sense of un-deservingness explained their choices while alternative accounts like frugality, and self-punishment were ruled out. We detailed when consumers verify (“wallow”) and when they self-enhance in the wake of threat. This work adds to emerging knowledge on consumers’ pursuit of counter-hedonic experiences (Andrade and Cohen 2007).

REFERENCES


