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Why Retail Therapy? a Preliminary Investigation of the Role of Self-Concept Discrepancy, Self-Esteem, Negative Emotions, and Proximity of Clothing to Self in the Compensatory Consumption of Apparel Products

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The purpose of our exploratory research is to investigate the personal factors that are related to the compensatory consumption of apparel products. Undergraduates from universities in four states completed a questionnaire which assessed their liminal state, self-esteem, emotional state, proximity of clothing to self, and compensatory consumption behavior. Results indicated that self-concept discrepancy was positively related to both low self-esteem and negative emotional state. Low self-esteem and proximity of clothing to self were positively related to compensatory consumption of apparel in one regression model and negative emotional state was positively related to compensatory consumption of apparel in a separate model.

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**WHY RETAIL THERAPY?
A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION OF THE ROLE OF LIMINALITY, SELF-ESTEEM, NEGATIVE EMOTIONS,
AND PROXIMITY OF CLOTHING TO SELF IN THE COMPENSATORY CONSUMPTION OF APPAREL
PRODUCTS**

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Compensatory consumption, or retail therapy, occurs “when an individual feels a need, lack, or desire which they cannot satisfy with a primary fulfillment so they use purchasing behavior as an alternative means of fulfillment” (Woodruffe-Burton 1998, 301). Compensatory consumption tends to occur when individuals have low self esteem and are experiencing negative emotional states (Kacen and Friese 1999; Woodruffe-Burton 1998). Low self esteem and negative emotional states often accompany liminal states (Noble and Walker 1997). During liminal states, individuals are likely to feel a significant gap, or a self concept discrepancy (Eastburg, Johnson, Woo, and Lucy 1988), between who they believe they currently are and who they would ideally like to be. Liminal individuals may use consumption to ease the psychological discomfort experienced with self concept discrepancies (Belk 1992; Mehta and Belk 1991). Because two of the three participants in Woodruffe-Burton’s (1998) study indicated that a trigger for their compensatory consumption was a significant life-altering event that left a “gap” in their lives, it seems likely that a relationship exists between liminality and compensatory consumption behavior. However, rather than being a direct relationship, it seems more likely that the relationship would be an indirect one through various factors (i.e., self esteem and emotional state) that are affected by liminality and, in turn, affect compensatory consumption behavior.

While individuals are engaged in compensatory consumption, they tend to purchase apparel (Kacen 1998). This is not surprising, given the fact that most compensatory consumers are females (Woodruffe 1997), and females tend to be more interested than men in apparel (Shim and Bickle 1994). Compensatory consumers’ interest in apparel suggests that they may feel a close proximity of clothing to self. Proximity of clothing to self describes the degree to which individuals believe apparel products are “a significant symbol of one’s identity, mood, or attitude” (Sontag and Lee 2004, 161). Because individuals engage in compensatory consumption of apparel to improve their self esteem and emotional state, it seems likely that compensatory consumers would possess a high degree of proximity of clothing to self.

The purpose of our exploratory study is to investigate the personal factors that are related to the compensatory consumption of apparel products. Based on previous research, the following hypotheses were developed: H₁: The degree to which an individual is experiencing a liminal state is positively related to low self esteem; H₂: The degree to which an individual is experiencing a liminal state is positively related to negative emotional state; H₃: Considering all other variables in the model, low self esteem is positively related to compensatory consumption of apparel products; H₄: Considering all other variables in the model, negative emotional state is positively related to compensatory consumption of apparel products; H₅: Considering all other variables in the model, proximity of clothing to self is positively related to compensatory

consumption of apparel products.

METHOD

Undergraduates (N = 301; 88% female; 84% Caucasian American; 20.77 = mean age) from universities in four states (Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, and North Carolina) completed a questionnaire. College students were selected as possible participants in order to obtain a sample of individuals experiencing a range of liminality (Noble and Walker 1997). Liminality (Noble and Walker 1997), self esteem (Heatherton and Polivy 1991), emotional state (Scherhorn, Reisch, and Raab 1990), proximity of clothing to self (Sontag and Lee 2004), and compensatory consumption behavior (Woodruffe 1997; Woodruffe-Burton 1998) were assessed using items presented in a seven-point Likert-type scale format. Demographic information was also assessed.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Results from a series of regression analyses using liminality as an independent variable showed that liminality was significantly and positively related to both low self esteem ($R^2 = 0.21$, $F = 73.71$, $p < 0.0001$; $\beta = 0.45$, $t = 8.59$, $p < 0.0001$) and negative emotional state ($R^2 = 0.12$, $F = 38.51$, $p < 0.0001$; $\beta = 0.35$, $t = 6.21$, $p < 0.0001$). Therefore, H₁ and H₂ were supported. A multiple linear regression model was created to test H₃ through H₅ using compensatory consumption behavior as the dependent variable and low self esteem, negative emotions, and proximity of clothing to self as independent variables along with gender as a covariate. The effect of gender on compensatory consumption behavior was significant ($\beta = 0.12$, $t = 2.27$, $p < 0.05$). Results showed that the overall model for compensatory consumption behavior was significant ($R^2 = 0.20$, $F = 18.24$, $p < 0.0001$). Compensatory consumption behavior was predicted by low self esteem ($\beta = 0.16$, $t = 2.36$, $p < 0.05$) and proximity of clothing to self ($\beta = 0.29$, $t = 5.36$, $p < 0.0001$), lending support to both H₃ and H₅. When controlling for the effects of self esteem and proximity of clothing to self in the multiple linear regression model, negative emotions did not significantly predict compensatory consumption behavior. Post hoc regression analysis using compensatory consumption behavior as the dependent variable and negative emotions as an independent variable indicated that negative emotions alone had a significant effect on compensatory consumption behavior ($R^2 = 0.10$, $F = 17.07$, $p < 0.0001$; $\beta = 0.25$, $t = 4.52$, $p < 0.0001$). Thus, H₄ was partially supported.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

A possible indirect link between liminality and compensatory consumption was identified. A positive relationship was found between the compensatory consumption of apparel products and both low self esteem and proximity of clothing to self. While negative emotional

state was independently related to compensatory consumption behavior, self esteem issues seemed to have more impact on participants' compensatory consumption behavior because negative emotional state was not a significant predictor of compensatory consumption behavior when included in a regression model with both self esteem and proximity of clothing to self as independent variables. Compensatory consumption behavior may not be especially harmful to consumers, particularly if it occurs temporarily during times of liminality. Compensatory consumption could become problematic, however, if the desire to purchase apparel products to improve one's emotional state or to increase one's self esteem does not subside and, instead, becomes a chronic consumption method (e.g., compulsive consumption). Future longitudinal research on compensatory consumption and compulsive buying is needed to address this issue.

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