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Research Report

The benefits of retail therapy: Making purchase decisions reduces residual sadness

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Abstract

People often shop when feeling sad, but whether and why shopping reduces residual (lingering) sadness remains an open question. Sadness is strongly associated with a sense that situational forces control the outcomes in one's life, and thus we theorized that the choices inherent in shopping may restore personal control over one's environment and reduce residual sadness. Three experiments provided support for our hypothesis. Making shopping choices helped to alleviate sadness whether they were hypothetical (Experiment 1) or real (Experiment 2). In addition, all experiments found support for the underlying mechanism of personal control restoration. Notably, the benefits of restored personal control over one's environment do not generalize to anger (Experiments 2 and 3), because anger is associated with a sense that other people (rather than situational forces) are likely to cause negative outcomes, and these appraisals are not ameliorated by restoring personal control over one's environment.

Keywords: Retail therapy; Shopping; Appraisal tendency theory; Sadness; Decision-making

Introduction

How do people regulate distress? Several common responses to distress have been documented, such as rumination, overeating, and alcohol consumption. Distress can also encourage unplanned purchases (e.g., Atalay & Meloy, 2011, Study 1). Shopping that is motivated by distress—"retail therapy"—is often lamented as ineffective, wasteful, and a "dark side" of consumer behavior (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000). Popular press accounts of retail therapy typically paint an equally dismal picture (Tuttle, 2010).

We propose that retail therapy has been viewed too negatively. Shopping may be an effective way to minimize sadness that lingers (residual sadness) following a sadness-inducing event. We focus on shopping's potential to reduce residual sadness in particular, as previous research has demonstrated that sadness increases comfort-seeking (Raghunathan, Pham, & Corfman, 2006) and willingness-to-pay (Cryder, Lerner, Gross, & Dahl, 2008; Lerner, Small, & Loewenstein, 2004).

Prior research has provided some suggestive evidence that shopping can convey psychological benefits (Gardner & Rook, 1988). In a diary study, Atalay and Meloy (2011, Study 3) found that most participants reported positive feelings when reflecting on their most recent purchase that was motivated by a desire to repair mood. Faber and Christenson (1996, Table 3) found that people recalled that they were less likely to experience sadness while shopping than immediately before going shopping.

However, causal conclusions remain elusive, as no prior research investigating the influence of shopping on emotion or mood has utilized experimental designs. Without random assignment to shopping or equally engaging "control" activities, it is unclear whether shopping conveys benefits beyond those produced merely by distraction or the passage of time.

In addition, research in this area has only loosely conceptualized both affect and shopping. Atalay and Meloy (2011) utilized broad measures of mood (p. 642) and positive emotion and negative emotion indices (p. 653), rather than investigating the experience of specific emotions. Faber and Christenson (1996, p. 809) asked participants to report how they generally feel "while shopping," without referencing any specific shopping

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episode. Because "shopping" can have many components, including browsing, interacting with salespeople, choosing, paying, acquiring, and consuming, retrospective reports about "shopping" cannot shed light on which component(s) are necessary for healing to occur.

This last point is not merely a descriptive shortcoming. Differences in the effectiveness of specific components could shed light on why shopping reduces residual sadness. To develop hypotheses about why some components will be particularly influential, we consider sadness from an appraisal tendency theory perspective (Han, Lerner, & Keltner, 2007). Appraisal theory suggests that the way people cognitively appraise their environment is both a cause and consequence of different emotions. Smith and Ellsworth (1985) identified six appraisals that differentiate emotions: the extent to which the current situation is pleasant, predictable, demanding of attention, demanding of effort, under human (versus situational) control, and under one's own or other people's control. Thus, similarly valenced emotions can differ on other important dimensions (e.g., anger and fear are both aversive, but anger is associated with greater certainty; Lerner & Keltner, 2001).

Sadness, more than any other emotion, is associated with a perceived deficiency in personal control over one's environment (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). People who are sad are especially likely to view outcomes as governed by situational forces and chance, rather than their own actions. To the extent that these appraisals create or maintain the experience of sadness (Han et al., 2007), aspects of shopping that restore a sense of personal control over one's environment may subsequently reduce residual sadness. Indeed, Garg and Lerner (2013, p. 112) proposed that researchers should investigate whether "feeling less helpless correspond[s] with feeling less sad."

Prior research suggests that the ability to choose tends to enhance one's sense of personal control (Inesi, Botti, Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2011; Langer, 1975). Because choices are inherent to shopping (e.g., choosing whether to buy), shopping may restore a sense of control and thus minimize residual sadness.

Of course, aside from choice, other aspects of the shopping experience could influence sadness. For example, shopping may provide distraction (cf. Kim & Rucker, 2012) or social interaction (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). In what follows, we experimentally isolate the influence of choice on the experience of sadness by utilizing simplified paradigms that necessarily strip away extraneous factors that can accompany naturalistic shopping. For example, there is no consumption or social interaction in our experiments. We control for the benefits of distraction in Experiment 1 by including a "browsing" control condition, in which participants must interact with products but cannot buy any.

We focus on choice for two reasons. First, choice is the component of shopping that is most theoretically linked to personal control. Given that sadness is characterized by a lack of personal control over one's environment, the control imbued by making shopping choices may help reduce residual sadness. Second, we focus on choice because it is arguably the most fundamental component of shopping. While shopping may or may not involve factors not present in our experiments (e.g., social interaction), shopping *always* involves choice.

We propose that making shopping choices can help to restore a sense of personal control over one's environment, but many people may have difficulty quantifying and articulating the extent to which they feel control over their environment. (In their classic demonstration, Smith and Ellsworth (1985, p. 820) utilized a group of participants pre-screened to be highly emotionally expressive, and asked them to recall their experiences of control during a specific emotional event, rather than their current, ambient feelings of control over their environment.) Thus, in what follows we shed light on our proposed process by experimentally manipulating personal control (cf. Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). We do so by manipulating whether participants can freely choose among a broad product assortment (Experiment 1), whether participants believe they can ensure that they obtain their preferred product (Experiment 2), and whether participants recall an instance of high or low control over their environment (Experiment 3).

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 tested the hypothesis that making shopping choices helps to restore personal control over one's environment, which can in turn help to alleviate residual sadness. We randomly assigned participants to choose which of several products they would hypothetically buy, or to judge which of those products would be most useful when traveling. Conceptually, our intention was to manipulate the extent to which participants could exercise personal autonomy during the task (since only a handful of the products are appropriate for travel, but any could be selected by hypothetical buyers), while holding constant distraction and (lack of) product acquisition across conditions.

Method

One hundred adults (52% female, mean age: 36) participated in an online study for a small payment. We recruited participants via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a platform validated by Paolacci, Chandler, and Ipeirotis (2010). We initially collected a baseline measure of emotions. Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which they were currently experiencing seven different emotions (*amused*, *sad*, *indifferent*, *angry*, *depressed*, *happy*, *rage*), by moving a slider along a 12 mm line anchored by the labels "not at all" and "very much." Responses were scored on a 0–100 scale based on where participants rested the slider.

Participants then viewed a three-minute clip from *The Champ* portraying the death of a boy's father, which reliably induces sadness (Rottenberg, Ray, & Gross, 2007). We then took a second measure of emotions, identical to our baseline measure.

We then randomly assigned participants to a Choosing or Browsing condition, adapting a design by Mazar and Zhong (2010). Choosers were told to "imagine buying $100 worth of products, by placing them in a shopping cart." Choosers then viewed 12 products (e.g., slippers, headphones; see Fig. 1), each priced at $25. Choosers were asked to select four products