The benefits of retail therapy

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with Beatriz Pereira and Katherine Burson
Many routes to sadness...

When the Holidays Make You Sad

Gretchen Rubin and Norman Rosenthal share five tips to lighten up the holiday blues.

Facebook Makes Us Sadder And Less Satisfied, Study Finds

THE RISE OF SADVERTISING

WHY BRANDS ARE DETERMINED TO MAKE YOU CRY
How do people respond to sadness?

a.k.a. retail therapy
Why Retail Therapy Doesn't Work

Seeking ‘Retail Therapy’ When What You Need Is Real Therapy

The best retail therapy - a day when you buy nothing
Little prior work, w/important limitations

- **Selection biases**
  - Reliance on surveys of people who chose to shop when feeling bad (e.g., Atalay & Meloy 2011)

- **Imprecise measurement**
  - Reliance on memories of the effects of shopping
    - e.g., “Did you feel better, no different, or worse after making your most recent impulse purchase?” (Gardner & Rook 1988)
Can retail therapy effectively help to alleviate sadness?
Referring to an occasional episode of retail therapy...
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*Not intensive retail therapy*
Why might shopping help to alleviate sadness?

• We view emotions from an “appraisal tendency” perspective

  – The way people cognitively appraise their environment is both a consequence and cause of emotion
Some common appraisals

– Is my environment pleasant or unpleasant?

– Is my environment predictable or unpredictable?

– Are my outcomes controlled by me, other people, or ambient environmental forces (e.g., chance)?
Sadness and control

• Sadness, more than any other emotion, causes people to view outcomes as governed by ambient, environmental forces (Smith & Ellsworth 1985)

• These appraisals maintain experience of sadness

• Aspects of shopping that restore personal control over one’s environment should reduce sadness
Choices inherent to shopping could help

• Shopping involves a number of choices
  – where to shop
  – whether to buy
  – what to buy
  – when to stop

• In other contexts, choice has appeared to enhance one’s sense of personal control
  (e.g., Corah & Boffa 1970; Inesi et al. 2011)
Certainly, other aspects of shopping may reduce sadness

- e.g., shopping can distract, provide social interaction

- Shopping *can* involve these other factors, but it *always* involves choice
  
  – Our experimental paradigms attempt to isolate the role of choice and control
Experiment 1: Does choosing help to alleviate sadness above and beyond the benefits of browsing?
Experiment 1 procedure (N = 97)

• Began with a baseline measure of current emotions

  – *Ps* rated extent to which they were currently experiencing different emotions on 0-100 scales

  – Numbers not visible to *Ps*
*A note on the measurement of emotion*

- Emotions manifest themselves in a number of ways
  - e.g., subjective experience, physio. responses, facial reactions
  - Often correlated, but can be dissociated
  - Self-report is the standard measure of subjective experience
    (e.g., Mauss & Robinson 2009)
We then induced sadness
The Champ has been used in experiments to see if depressed people are more likely to cry than non-depressed people. (MGM / The Kobal Collection)

The Saddest Movie in the World
How do you make someone cry for the sake of science? The answer lies in a young Ricky Schroder
We then randomly assigned $P$s to become “Choosers” or “Browsers”

• Both were presented with 12 products
  – Choosers: Choose four you would hypothetically be willing to buy
  – Browsers: Indicate which four would be most useful when traveling
Choosing task

- Merkury Headphones $25
- Wooden Puzzle $25
- Homedics Massager $25
- Flexible Wireless Keyboard $25
- Salt and Pepper Grinder Set $25
- Wine Decanter $25
- Apples to Apples $25
- Pet Disc Lounge $25
- Memory Foam Slippers $25
- Gel Mask $25
- Home Mini Speakers $25
- Marble Cheese Board $25

Your Shopping Cart
Browsing task

Travel Items

- Markury Headphones $25
- Wooden Puzzle $25
- Homedics Massager $25
- Flexible Wireless Keyboard $25
- Salt and Pepper Grinder Set $25
- Wine Decanter $25
- Apples to Apples $25
- Pet Disc Lounge $25
- Memory Foam Slippers $25
- Gel Mask $25
- iHome Mini Speakers $25
- Marble Cheese Board $25
Key features of Choosing and Browsing tasks

• A number of features held constant across conditions
  – Engagement in task  (61 sec vs. 58 sec, \( p = .66 \))
  – Exposure to products
  – Lack of acquisition / consumption

• But tasks presumably differ in ability to restore sense of personal control over one’s environment...
Greater autonomy reflected by greater variance among Choosers ($p < .05$)

In pretest where 42 Ps completed both tasks, 79% reported feeling greater control when Choosing.
Exp. concluded with measurement of current emotions

Using the sliders below, please indicate the extent to which you are feeling these emotions right now:

- sad
- indifferent
- angry
- happy
- depressed
- enraged
- amused
- neutral
Choosing more effectively alleviates sadness

Increase in sadness (final – baseline)

Sadness: mean of Sad and Depressed items ($r_s > .65$)
Experiment 2: Does restoring personal control through shopping also help to alleviate anger?
Sources of control outside of oneself

- Non-human external forces (e.g., hurricanes, disease)
- Other people (e.g., boss, spouse)

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- Restoring personal control over external forces may not reduce perception that other people are unduly influential.
Experiment 2 procedure \((N = 141)\)

- Began with a baseline measure of current emotions
Ps then randomly assigned to experience anger or sadness
Next, all $P$s made a shopping decision

Available Options
(must buy one; each costs 5 Lab Dollars)

Buying Budget: 5 Lab Dollars
A control manipulation embedded in the shopping task

• *Ps* told that, after their choice, computer will generate random number (cf. Berman & Small 2012)

  – If even, *P* simply gets what he or she chose

  – If odd, computer will ignore *P*’s choice, and randomly select one of the four options on their behalf

• In fact, computer always chose what *P* chose for themselves
Imagine $P$ chose the pen set
Exp. concluded with measurement of current emotions

Using the sliders below, please indicate the extent to which you are feeling these emotions right now:

- Sad
- Indifferent
- Angry
- Happy
- Depressed
- Enraged
- Amused
- Neutral
Sadness sensitive to differences in external control

Remaining sadness in Sadness conditions (final-baseline)

$p < .05$
Anger insensitive to differences in external control

$p = .93$

Remaining anger in Anger conditions (final-baseline)
Experiment 3: A more direct demonstration of the relationships between personal control restoration, sadness, and anger
Experiment 3 procedure \( (N = 301) \)

- Emotions measured as before (baseline and final)

- \( Ps \) randomly assigned to view sadness-inducing or anger-inducing video

- \( Ps \) then randomly assigned to recall instance in which they had low or high control over important situation
Prompts guided *Ps to think about external forces, rather than interpersonal power dynamics*

The High External Control prompt:

Please recall a particular incident in which you did not have any control over a situation important to you. [...] **Note that this does not involve lack of control – or lack of power – over other people, just lack of control over your environment.** Please describe this situation in which you did not have any control—what happened, how you felt, etc.
Again, sadness uniquely sensitive to differences in personal control over external forces.
Can retail therapy be effective?

- Central component of shopping (choice) helps to alleviate one negative emotion (sadness)
  - Shopping choices boost sense of personal control (Exp 1), which in turn helps to alleviate sadness (Exps 1-3)

- Benefits do not appear to extend to anger
  - Shopping that helps to restore control over others (e.g., winning an eBay auction) may help to alleviate anger
Should retail therapy be more common?

• Stigma surrounding retail therapy may discourage it
  – Sad people who would benefit from it may avoid it
  – Both consumers and retailers may benefit if retail therapy is de-stigmatized

• But repeated retail therapy may lead to debt, jeopardizing control shopping was meant to restore
THANK YOU
THANK YOU
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THANK YOU
THANK YOU
THANK YOU
THANK YOU
THANK YOU
THANK YOU
and have a nice day!