

Feeling down? Retail therapy helps beat the blues

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Retail therapy is often lamented as wasteful and irresponsible, but new research from the University of Michigan Ross School of Business indicates that it can help alleviate certain negative emotions.

No prior research has experimentally examined whether retail therapy can bring [emotional benefits](#). Research from marketing professors Scott Rick and Katherine Burson and [doctoral candidate](#) Beatriz Pereira

suggests that one component of retail therapy—making buying decisions—can help to restore a sense of control and reduce sadness.

In one study of 45 female undergraduates, 44 percent chose to buy a [snack](#) after viewing a [movie clip](#) that portrays a bullying incident. Participants rated their emotions at the beginning and end of the experiment. At the end of the study, the sadness scores of buyers were significantly lower than those of nonbuyers.

"Previous critiques of sadness and shopping pointed to how terrible it was. No one stopped to see if people actually felt better or if buying a [candy bar](#) helped to cure [negative emotions](#)," Burson said.

Then, in a second study, 100 adults who participated online viewed a movie clip that portrayed the death of a boy's [mentor](#) (previous research has shown that the clip reliably induces sadness). Then the participants were randomly assigned to either choosing or browsing conditions.

Choosers were told to imagine buying \$100 worth of products by placing them in a shopping cart. They were then presented with 12 products, each priced at \$25, and asked to select four by dragging them into a shopping cart.

Browsers were presented with the same 12 products and asked to judge which four would be the most useful when traveling, by clicking on four products and dragging them into a box labeled travel items.

Because only some products were appropriate for travel, but all may be desirable when shopping, choosers had more of an opportunity to implement their preferences and experience a sense of control. As a result, at the end of the study, the sadness scores of choosers were significantly lower than those of browsers.

"We think there are benefits to buying something new and showing it off. But when it comes to alleviating sadness, actively choosing between products is essential, even if those choices are hypothetical," Rick said. "Shopping is a natural, easy vehicle for choice. There are other situations that afford opportunities to choose and restore personal control, but they may be less tempting and harder to find than the mall."

Burson said that if you're on a budget and want to realize the benefits of retail therapy, there's a way.

"The people who simply imagine that they are buying have less sadness at the end of the experiment, suggesting that imaginary shopping may have some of the restorative benefits we see in real shopping, which might be the ultimate solution," she said.

The study also identified boundary conditions to the benefits of retail therapy. The researchers found that making buying choices did not help to reduce anger. Unlike [sadness](#), anger is a high-control emotion, and making choices does not address the main source of anger.

Pereira said the studies contribute to research on emotion and decision-making. Most work in this area has focused on how specific emotions influence decision-making and consumption. By contrast, the current paper joins a growing stream of research examining how decision-making influences the experience of specific emotions. An important limitation of the current research is the relatively mild nature of both the induced emotions and the shopping contexts utilized.

"I think it is the tip of the iceberg. We are currently dealing with small transactions and fleeting emotions. I am interested in larger purchases and chronic conditions," Rick said. "How far can the healing go?"

More information: papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm ...

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