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Trying to Project an Image of Success? It Could Make You Dwell on Your Failures

Life is full of experiences that challenge how we see ourselves and we often compensate by buying products that reinforce our ideal self-image. A new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#) shows that this type of retail therapy could backfire and lead us to think more about our failures.



“When consumers experience a psychological threat to how they would like to see themselves, buying products that signal accomplishment in the same area of their life could ironically cause them to dwell on their shortcomings. This can strip consumers of their mental resources and impair their self-control,” write authors Monika Lisjak (Erasmus University), Andrea Bonezzi (New York University), Soo Kim (Cornell University), and Derek D. Rucker (Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University).

Consider an ambitious professional who is passed up for a long-awaited promotion. She could try to make up for this by purchasing luxury products such as designer clothes that signal success. Or an MBA student who isn’t getting any good job offers might buy a Rolex to project the appearance of a successful business professional. But does this type of retail therapy actually make consumers feel better?

In one study, consumers who were asked to remember a time when their intelligence was undermined and then chose a *Scientific American* magazine (an intelligence-signaling product) reported that the magazine had prompted them to dwell on their shortcomings and were less likely to resist an offer of chocolate candy.

“Consumption can sometimes compensate for our blunders and failures, but this doesn’t always work. Consumers who use products to boost their sense of self-worth tend to dwell on their shortcomings and their ability to exert self-control is impaired. After experiencing a setback in one area of their life, consumers might be better off boosting their sense of self in a different area of their life. For example, a consumer whose intelligence is undermined might be better off signaling their self-worth socially rather than trying to assert their intelligence,” the authors conclude.

Monika Lisjak, Andrea Bonezzi, Soo Kim, and Derek D. Rucker. “Perils of Compensatory Consumption: Within-Domain Compensation Undermines Subsequent Self-Regulation.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2015. For more information, contact Monika Lisjak (lisjak@rsm.nl) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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