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Retail Therapy: Shopping to Cope With Future Challenges

Consumers often shop to cope with stressful situations but they are much more selective when it comes to shopping as a way to cope with future challenges, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“Television personality Tammy Faye Bakker once said: ‘I always say shopping is cheaper than a psychiatrist.’ Consistent with this statement, the present research shows that consumers use products to reactively cope with challenges to their self-image as well as to proactively protect themselves against potential challenges,” write authors Soo Kim and Derek D. Rucker (both Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University).

Most people can relate to emotional eating or nibbling on snacks to forget about an upsetting or stressful event. “Retail therapy” is another common coping mechanism. After a stressful experience that challenges their self-image, consumers tend to increase their overall consumption in order to distract themselves and “forget all about it.”

But do consumers shop to cope only after the fact? The authors found that consumers also shop proactively when facing potential future challenges to their self-image. However, they are very selective in choosing only products that are specific to the potentially negative situation.

For example, a student might buy a bottle of “Smart Water” before taking a math test. A consumer might splurge on some expensive jewelry prior to attending a high school reunion to guard against the perception that they have not been successful in life. Another might purchase a designer suit prior to presenting at an important meeting where their business savvy might be scrutinized.

“Prior to receiving any negative feedback, consumers select products that are specifically associated with bolstering or guarding the part of the self that might come under threat. After receiving negative feedback, consumers seem to increase their consumption more generally as consumption may serve as a means to distract them from the negative feedback,” the authors conclude.

Soo Kim and Derek D. Rucker. “Bracing for the Psychological Storm: Proactive versus Reactive Compensatory Consumption.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2012. For more information, contact Soo Kim (sooyeon-kim@kellogg.northwestern.edu) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.



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