

The Emotional Shopper: Assessing the Effectiveness of Retail Therapy

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Abstract

Shopping is an integral part of our everyday lives. Common wisdom suggests that many consumers engage in shopping and buying as a means to repair their negative feelings — a notion commonly referred to as *retail therapy*. However, does retail therapy really work? The present monograph seeks to address this question by proposing a tripartite approach, reviewing and organizing relevant research in marketing and consumer psychology based on this tripartite framework: (1) motivational (the goals and motives that consumers have for shopping); (2) behavioral (the activities in which consumers engage during the shopping process); and (3) emotional (the feelings that consumers experience while shopping). Although accumulating evidence suggests that retail therapy does work to a certain extent, simultaneously considering the three perspectives in future empirical investigation helps to further improve our understanding of the antecedents, underlying mechanisms, and consequences of retail therapy. Accordingly, a number of questions and directions for future research on the topic of retail therapy are discussed, drawing upon the proposed tripartite framework.

1

Introduction

Besides work and sleep, shopping is a daily activity on which people in many parts of the world spend the most amount of their time [Hutton, 2002]. In addition to buying and acquiring a variety of products and services that serve every day functional needs, shopping also helps to achieve more hedonic goals, in particular, self-gratification and mood repair [Isen, 1984; Tauber, 1972] — a notion popularly referred to as *retail therapy*. Indeed, anecdotes that speak to the incidence and influence of retail therapy in our lives are aplenty:

- *“I always say shopping is cheaper than a psychiatrist.”* — Tammy Faye Messner, American singer and television personality
- *“Win or lose, we go shopping after the election.”* — Imelda Marcos, previous First Lady of the Philippines
- *“I was so nervous...I just had to go shopping.”* — Usher, American singer–songwriter
- *“When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.”* — undetermined

- “*Everyone needs an occasional dose of retail therapy.*” — Susan Thurston, Tampa Bay Times staff writer
- “*Whoever said money can’t buy happiness simply didn’t know where to go shopping.*” — Bo Derek, American actress

These popular quotes seem to underscore the prevalence of shopping as a means to regulate one’s negative emotions. In fact, nearly one in three Americans shop to alleviate stress, according to a study commissioned by the Huffington Post [Gregoire, 2013] that polled over 1,000 U.S. adults online. Ebates.com [2013], an online cash-back shopping merchant, reported an even larger proportion in their recent Retail Therapy survey: they found that among 1,000 American adults surveyed, more than half (51.8%) shop and spend money to improve their mood. Comparable figures have also been reported in academic research. In a study on retail therapy, Atalay and Meloy [2011] found that among 69 college participants, 43 (62%) reported having purchased an item to treat themselves in the past one week in order to repair their mood; in comparison, 19 (28%) were motivated by celebratory events (see also Krupnick [2011] and Yarrow [2013]).

Given these convergent statistics, the many stories and anecdotes we might have heard about retail therapy, and our own personal experiences as consumers, to what extent does retail therapy really work?

In this monograph, I examine this question by reviewing the extant literature on shopping behavior and emotions. Specifically, I propose and adopt a tripartite approach to provide a more systematic and holistic treatment of this subject, assessing whether retail therapy works according to three perspectives (see Figure 1.1):

1. *Motivational* — I examine broadly the different goals and motivations that consumers have for shopping, and whether these various motivations may contribute toward more positive moods and greater well-being.
2. *Behavioral* — By viewing shopping as a sequence of constituent actions or activities, I assess whether engaging in these specific activities can bring about improved moods and well-being.

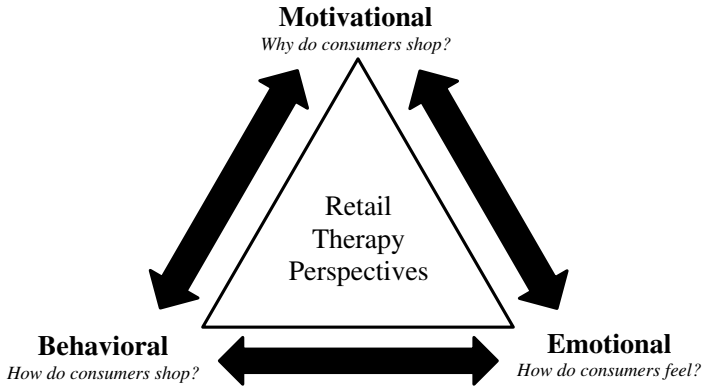


Figure 1.1: A tripartite framework for examining the effectiveness of retail therapy.

3. *Emotional* — More specifically, I consider shopping as a hedonic experience that triggers a variety of emotions. The incidence (or lack) of these specific emotions when consumers shop is examined.

As Figure 1.1 illustrates, these three perspectives, though individually distinct, are interrelated and complementary with one another. For instance, consumers' motivation to shop can influence how they go about their shopping, which can in turn affect their emotional experience. As another example, how consumers shop in a store can impact how they feel while shopping which can conversely influence their shopping goals.

The rest of this monograph is structured as follows. In Section 2, I review some conceptual foundations of the notion of retail therapy, including its definition and scope as well as the scales that researchers have developed to measure it. I next delve into the three aforementioned perspectives, assessing the effectiveness of retail therapy from each perspective by discussing and analyzing relevant work that has adopted the particular perspective in Sections 3–5. Finally, I conclude with a general discussion of the main findings as well as some questions and directions for future research in Section 6.

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