
International Journal of Marketing Semiotics & Discourse Studies

2020

Vol. 8

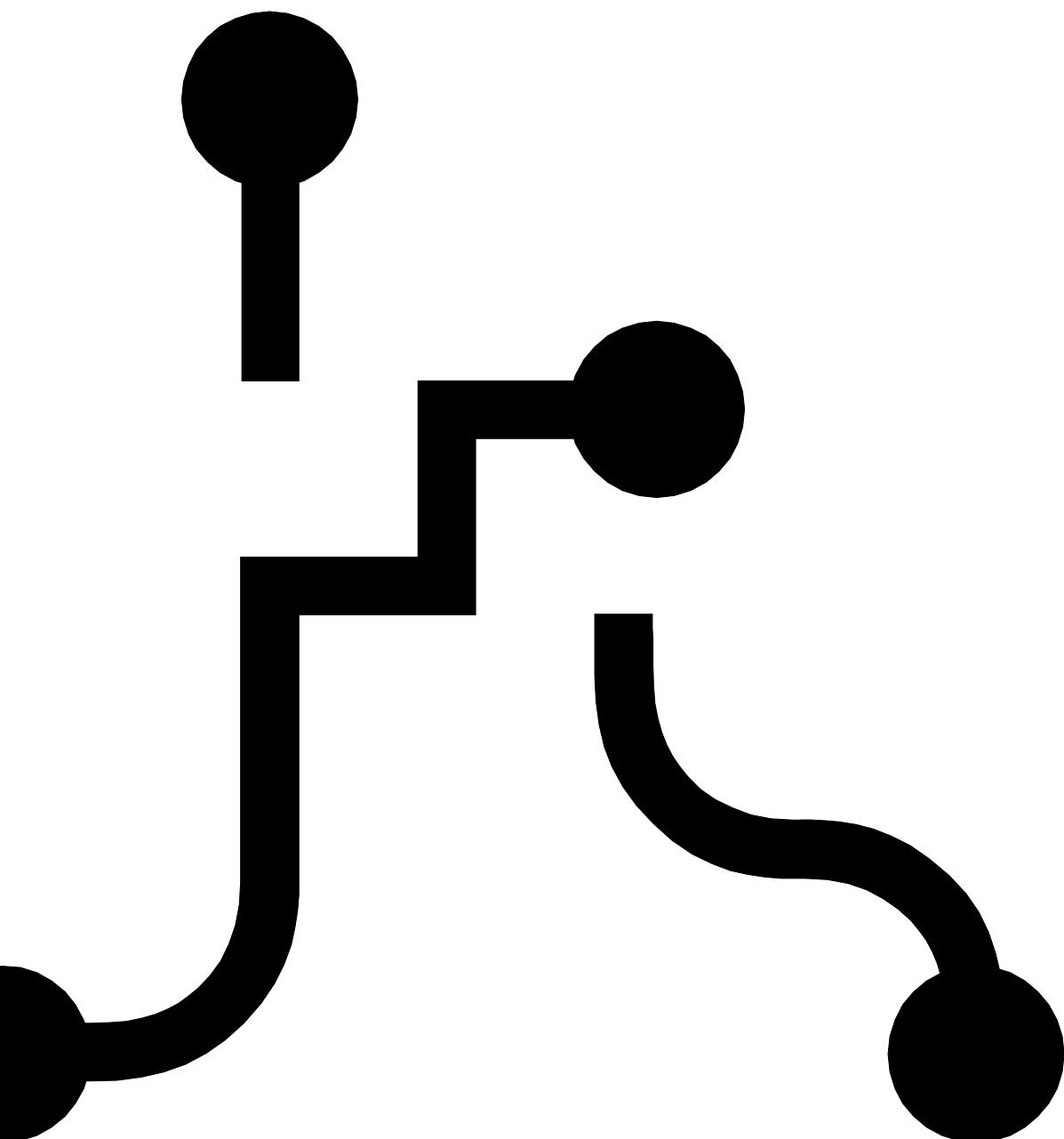
ISSN: 2195-2280

www.ijmarketingsemiotics.com

Online first

Special Issue: Trauma & Consumption

Khyati Jagani and Shilpa Shinde (2020). Compensatory consumption and reprieve from trauma-related negative emotions: An Indian context. *International Journal of Marketing Semiotics & Discourse Studies* Vol. VIII, pp.1-15.



Compensatory consumption and reprieve from trauma-related negative emotions: An Indian context

Khyati Jagani*, Department of Marketing, Flame University, Lavale, Pune, India
(khyati.jagani@flame.edu.in)

Shilpa Shinde**, Department of Human Resources and Organizational Behavior, Flame University, Lavale, Pune, India (shilpa.shinde@flame.edu.in)

Abstract

Trauma victims experience intense negative emotions during and post-trauma. These negative emotions may last for a long time and disrupt the normal functioning of an individual. Exposure to a traumatic event often leads to a threatened self-identity. The role of compensatory consumption in alleviating negative emotions and protecting from threats to self-identity has been addressed in the extant literature. The present study aims to explore the compensatory consumption behavior of trauma victims that stems from negative emotions and threats to self-identity. The study also aims to understand the emotional changes and outcomes of this consumption as experienced by traumatized subjects. In-depth interviews were used as the primary data-collection method, aimed at eliciting thick descriptions from the respondents. The findings are discussed with regard to their practical and theoretical implications, as well as potential avenues for future research.

Keywords: compensatory consumption, trauma, consumer behavior, purchase process, feelings, emotions.

***Dr. Khyati Jagani** is an Assistant Professor at Flame University, India. She has a Ph.D. from MICA, an MBA (Marketing) from IBS Hyderabad, and a BBA (Marketing) from Saurashtra University, India. Her areas of interest include advertising, branding, IMC, and digital marketing.

****Dr. Shilpa Shinde** is an Assistant Professor of Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior at the FLAME University, Pune. She has a combined experience of 11 years as an academic, trainer, consultant, and researcher. Dr. Shinde teaches HRM, Learning and Development, Leadership and Team Management, OB, Change and Development, and Psychological Assessment for Managers.

0. Introduction

The catch-phrase "when the going gets tough, the tough go shopping" (Cotton Incorporated, 2002) is reflective of a contemporary consumption lifestyle, according to which individuals indulge in shopping to alleviate negative emotions. Schor (1998) argues that consumers engage in consumption when experiencing negative emotions, for fighting the blues, enhancing their self-esteem, or escaping boredom.

Different individuals have different methods of coping with negative emotions. Psychologists have documented several responses to negative emotions. Consumer behavior researchers have also discussed that negative emotions incite consumers to go shopping to feel better (Rick et al., 2014). Consumption of goods and services provides instant gratification that, for some time, confers temporary relief and a sense of satisfaction or achievement. It results in reducing some of the emotional stress, even if only for a short duration. With regard to women, Underhill (1999) emphasized that the activity of shopping has always been a form of therapy, as women derive pleasure not only from the act of shopping but also looking. It works as an escape mechanism from everyday life (Mandel et al., 2017).

Prior studies in the consumption behavior terrain have been concerned with compensatory consumption, compulsive consumption, and addictive consumption (Bridgforth, 2004). The literature has discussed compensatory consumption as an extreme form of consumption behavior along with addictive consumption (Elliott, 1994), impulsive and compulsive buying (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018). In these consumption behaviors, commonalities have been observed, such as their repetitive nature and problematic consequences. However, each of these types of consumption has unique and distinctive characteristics. Prior research has characterized addictive consumption as pathological. Compulsive consumption presents an element of compulsion to act against one's will under some form of internal and emotional pressure. Impulsive buying occurs when a consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately (Rook, 1987). Compensatory consumption is a reactionary behavior against perceived deficits in an individual's life (Woodruffe, 1997).

Despite the adaptation of retail and service brands to different types of consumption behaviors (Kang & Johnson, 2010), there has been a lack of empirical research on compensatory consumption due to traumatic events. The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring the compensatory consumption behavior of trauma victims. Since trauma victims experience intense negative emotions post-trauma for varying periods, this study examines the impact of these emotions on traumatized subjects' consumption behavior and the emotional changes and outcomes of this consumption as experienced by them. To this end, we conducted in-depth interviews, a qualitative research method that is suitable for generating thick descriptions from respondents. The following section offers a literature review on the emotional responses to traumatic cases.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Trauma and emotional responses

Trauma is by no means an experience anyone would want to relive. However, it is hardly surprising that people who have gone through traumatic experiences relive these events' memories. Berntsen and Rubin (2007) discuss how distinctiveness and the emotional impact of

traumatic memory may keep it highly accessible and influence how the person interprets even non-traumatic experiences. These memories become a reference point for other experiences to such an extent that a person may perceive a threat in a safe situation, worry excessively, and take many precautions. Insofar as traumatic memories may become a central component of personal identity, being a trauma victim or survivor may take over one's entire existence.

Jobson and O'Kearney's (2008) research on cultural variability as to how trauma impacts memory and personal identity from independent and interdependent cultures highlights the role of trauma in altering self-concept and personal identity. Reiland and Lauterbach (2008) focus on the moderating role of religiosity in the relationship between trauma exposure and self-esteem and emphasize that various studies have shown that exposure to trauma in childhood may lead to lower self-esteem in adulthood.

Criterion A in DSM-IV (1996) states that a person has experienced trauma if, firstly, "the person experienced, witnessed or confronted an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others", and, secondly, "the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror" (Weathers & Keane, 2007, p.110).

Some trauma victims may develop PTSD or other psychological disorders as a result of exposure to trauma. Trauma victims may experience helplessness and horror (American Psychiatric Association, 1996) as well as a gamut of other intense negative emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, shame, and sadness (Amstadter & Vernon, 2008). Amstadter and Vernon (2008), in their study on peri- and post-traumatic emotional responses, found that irrespective of the type of traumatic event and notwithstanding whether the victims developed any kind of disorder or not, they reported feeling intense negative emotions during and post-trauma. They found that the emotional response of fear, although it may be present post-trauma, was more of an immediate peritraumatic response. In contrast, emotional reactions of anger, guilt, shame, and sadness became elevated post-trauma, while being dependent on the cognitive appraisals of the traumatic event's meaning. So, as victims reminisce about traumatic events over time, they experience other emotions intensely, precisely due to being unconsciously compared to fear due to prior life-threatening experience(s).

1.2 Compensatory consumption

Compensatory consumption differs from regular consumption that occurs when a person intends to satisfy a specific want or need-state. Compensatory consumption was defined by Woodruffe (1997) as a means of handling lack in an individual's life. According to Woodruffe-Burton (1998), it occurs "when an individual feels a need which they cannot satisfy with a primary fulfillment, so they use purchasing behavior as an alternative means of fulfillment." Gornmo (1988) defines compensatory consumption as "a response to a general lack of psychological need-satisfaction by a consumer for whom adequate need-satisfaction attainment is somehow unavailable." To satisfy these social-psychological needs, individuals can engage in many different activities. For example, a woman may purchase certain products if she lacks some form of self-esteem. Men may try to buy manhood symbols, such as cars, to compensate for feelings related to a lack of manhood characteristics (Rucker & Galinsky, 2013). Therefore, a trigger for compensatory consumption can consist of varied factors, such as low self-esteem (Yurchinsin et al., 2006), self-view confidence (Gao et al., 2009), sense of self-worth (Dalton, 2009), sense of power (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008).

Prior literature on compensatory consumption has also focused on self-image (Flight & Coker, 2016); extended and expanded self (Abdalla & Zambaldi, 2016); social status (Fontes & Fan, 2006); and consumption by BOP consumers (Jaiswal & Gupta, 2015). Compensatory consumption happens when one's consumption is unrelated to a specific need, although somehow compensating for a weakness related to self-identity. Individuals may buy products or consume things that compensate for their weak characteristics (Lee & Shrum, 2013) and reduce feelings of low self-esteem or lack of achievement (McCraken, 1998).

Compensatory consumption behavior is also approached as a consumer behavior that aims to avoid or deal with negative emotions. Consumers engage in compensatory consumption when they experience negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Kacen, 1998; Woodruffe, 1997). Consuming food seems to be the most common way of compensatory consumption that alleviates negative emotions, a behavior primarily noticed among women (Grunert, 1993). Woodruffe-Burton and Elliott (2005) found that for women, consumption relates to the construction of life narratives. It also helps them feel like they control their lives and escape uncertainty (Woodruffe, 1997). Research has also found that young people who face unexpected changes experience negative emotions that display compensatory consumption behavior (Yurchinsin et al., 2006).

Coleman, Williams, and Morales (2019) discuss the psychological processes that drive symbolic self-completion through compensatory consumption. According to them, identity-conflicting negative emotions may create a self-discrepancy by generating identity threat because the person is experiencing emotions that are inconsistent with their identity. They specifically demonstrate that these negative emotions conflict with an identity prototype that triggers compensatory consumption by reducing working memory capacity. In conditions of reduced working memory capacity due to identity threats, individuals process identity relevant products more easily. They would then consume these products to verify their identity symbolically.

Since trauma experience may lead to self-identity issues and many intense negative emotions during and after the traumatic event, they are likely to influence a consumer to increase their spending on conspicuous goods for compensatory consumption purposes. Therefore, we contend that that post-traumatic identity crisis and negative emotions may lead to compensatory consumption.

The present study aims to explore the compensatory consumption behavior of trauma victims. Since trauma victims experience intense negative emotions post-trauma for varying periods, we also focus on the impact of these emotions on their consumption behavior and the emotional changes and outcomes of this consumption as experienced by them. The research questions have as follows:

RQ1: How does the consumption process shape up in light of post-trauma negative emotions?

RQ2: What feelings and emotions are experienced post-consumption?

2. Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was adopted in the empirical prong of this study (Bahl & Milne, 2006). The data collection process featured 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Indian respondents (40%M,60%F) between the ages of 20 and 50 who had experienced trauma. Although the respondents originated from different parts of India, they all had immigrated to Maharashtra, a state in central India, for various reasons. The authors conducted the interviews in Pune, a city located in the state of Maharashtra. The respondents belonged to three life-style groups: home-makers, full-time working professionals, and individuals pursuing higher university education.

All respondents had experienced or witnessed some form of life-threatening event resulting in personal trauma. As a result of their traumatic experience, their consumption behavior had been affected. The researchers informed them about the purpose of the study before the interview. The researchers also informed the respondents that they would not be questioned about their traumatic experience per se, but about the changes in their consumption behavior post-trauma. The interviewers used a semi-structured discussion guide during the data collection process. The interview guide consisted of questions regarding the consumption process with negative emotions and without negative emotions. The respondents were also asked about their feelings before, during, and after purchasing products and services.

The respondents were informed that participation in this study was voluntary and that the interviews' data would remain confidential and anonymous. The volunteers who approached the researchers were informed about the DSM-IV criteria for trauma, and any queries were clarified. Only those participants who confirmed that they considered themselves to fit the criteria were included in the study. They were informed about the study's purpose, and informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the interviews.

The main types of trauma experienced by the respondents consisted of a near-death experience due to medical reasons such as cancer, life-threatening trauma such as physical abuse and domestic violence, losing a child, threatened identity due to divorce, and career downfall. Other traumatic experiences included sexual assault, attempted murder and witnessing the murder of a spouse in the same event, life-threatening experience due to severe natural calamities such as earthquake, and witnessing people being burned alive and their own life threatened at the time of religious riots.

The interviews allowed the researchers to capture consumers' feelings, emotions, and moods in their own words, along with a thick description of the phenomenon under investigation (McCracken, 1988). This method facilitates the elicitation of rich explanations of observations and offers flexibility in understanding complex consumer behavior (Carson et al., 2001). The in-depth personal interviews lasted for approximately one hour each. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. To protect the respondents' identities, the authors did not mention their names at any stage of the study.

The data analysis method followed a thematic generation procedure by using the NVivo12 qualitative research software. The first stage included the data transcription, the second stage generated preliminary codes, the third stage identified patterns and themes, the fourth stage reviewed the generated themes, and final codes were assigned in the fifth stage.

3. Main findings

3.1 The purchase process

The purpose of the first research question is to comprehend the consumption process resulting from the experience of trauma. Mixed responses were elicited concerning the place of purchase. Most respondents mentioned that they prefer to conduct their shopping at a mall, and walk around the mall. However, a few respondents chose to shop from e-commerce sites, as they allowed for easier access by using multiple retail applications on their phones. They also did not have to leave the comfort and safety of their home to go shopping. Both products and services were purchased.

The respondents primarily engaged in purchase after having experienced negative emotions such as anger, guilt, shame, regret, fear and thoughts such as a memory of trauma, loss of identity, and self, anxiety about their future, hurt self-respect, and a feeling of helplessness. Many a time they felt that these memories, feelings and emotions were triggered during stressful times. Although different consumers chose between online and offline outlets, their buying process was the same.

The respondents who preferred to conduct online shopping upon experiencing negative emotions selected the e-commerce application or sites they wanted to purchase from. Then, they chose the products they wanted to buy, placed the order, and moved on to another e-commerce application or website. Respondents who preferred to shop at a mall performed likewise. When they experienced negative emotions and decided to go to a mall, they walked through the entire mall and selected the store. Within the store, they look at the merchandise and selected the product. Then, they paid for it, exited the store, before repeating the entire process by selecting another store and continuing with their shopping. This process indicates that the shopping experience was the primary need consumers intended to satisfy, rather than the purchase of specific products and services.

The interviews revealed that consumers follow a five-stage buying process when experiencing negative emotions resulting from trauma, as analyzed in the following sections.

3.2 Emotional demand

Respondents who experienced any form of trauma mentioned that shopping was one of the methods that helped them feel better during a time they felt bogged down by negative feelings and emotions. Such shopping occasions were either planned or unplanned. However, the actual purchases were performed in a largely unconscious manner. A female respondent mentioned that "shopping was not even a plan when I went for shopping. I was feeling lost and tired of worrying about the future. So I went to the nearby mall, and without thinking much, I went inside and mindlessly purchased everything the sales executive showed and said it would look good on me." For many respondents, going to a mall and purchasing goods was their way to occupy themselves with some activity. A male respondent stated that "I don't want to just sit in one place and be in my head, I want to distract myself because if I don't, then, it will start thinking of the riots and all the people I saw being burned alive. So a better option is to keep busy at the shopping mall." Going to a mall was also an escape from reality for respondents experiencing abuse and violence at home. A female respondent mentioned: "after work, I am too scared to go home because I know for some or other reason my husband will get angry and I'll be the

recipient of it. So I would rather go to a mall and do some shopping. It would make me feel a little better for a short time."

While respondents went to shopping malls to alleviate their negative feelings and emotions, a set of respondents also mentioned that they did not feel like going out, especially in a crowded mall. Instead, they opted for opening the online shopping apps installed on their phones. A female respondent mentioned, "I do online shopping for almost everything. Sometimes I don't even know why I bought it or when I will use it, but I purchase it." Respondents perceived shopping as an emotional escape from negative feelings. A female respondent mentioned that "I feel like my rescue from everything is shopping, and when I am stressed my shopping increases because it's a way-out and I forget about my problems for a few hours when I am surfing all the e-commerce apps."

3.3 Brand selection

Respondents indicated that they would walk through the entire mall when they are in a negative emotional state. Then they would select a store to shop in the mall. This behavior is different from their normal behavior, as, on an average day, they would only go to the stores of their favorite brands. A male respondent in this context stated, "when I am upset, I just go to any mall, any store, look around and buy if something catches my eyes." Some consumers also walked through the entire mall and paid a visit to all stores. A female respondent mentioned "on a normal day, I would go to only those brand stores that I liked, but when I am upset, I'll go to all the stores, even the brands that I have never liked or considered previously." When feeling anxious, respondents visited multiple brand stores and purchased various products to make themselves feel better. A female respondent mentioned, "when I am feeling helpless and don't know what to do, I go to a mall to purchase anything and everything that meets my eyes. After buying it feels like I have achieved something."

3.4 Product selection

Some respondents mentioned that they would select all the products they tried when they went inside a store. A male respondent said, "when I am stressed, if I select five t-shirts, I'll buy all of them, even without thinking." Another respondent stated, "I would not even try the clothes that I selected as I didn't have the patience to wait in line, so I would just go and pay the bill." According to the respondents, the negative emotions impacted their choice of product style in any category. A female respondent mentioned, "I think my perception changes during a bad phase. I have even tried types of colors and designs that I would not have otherwise." A male respondent also mentioned in the same context, "I started buying stuff which I have never normally purchased like products that I would have never purchased as I never use them. But still, I'll buy it just because I saw it." Furthermore, a respondent mentioned that on a routine shopping trip, he would not seek a sales assistant's help. However, when he was in a negative mood, he would purchase every product that the sales executive would recommend. Another respondent mentioned, "when I was getting treated for cancer, I felt lonely a lot, so going to a mall and talking to random sales executives would help in not worrying about my chance of survival. I would ask questions and buy all the suggested products. It kind of gave me hope."

3.5 Purchase decision

The respondents would check all the brands available in the store, even if they were not the specific brands they normally purchased. A respondent mentioned, "I looked at all the brands because when I am anxious, my brand preference also changes. So I look at all the brands, and if I like something, then I'll purchase it." Another respondent in the same context mentioned, "When I enter a store, I walk around the whole store and see all the brands within the store. If I like it, I go to the trial room, try and purchase." Respondents stressed that when they select a store product, they do not check the price or consider offers and discounts. They would have checked the offers and discounts if they had not been in a negative emotional situation. A female respondent mentioned, "I was not in a correct state of mind to care about the price or discounts, I just paid whatever bill they gave me."

3.6 Post-purchase

While most consumers purchased products from one store and left the mall, many consumers repeated the entire purchase process by going from one store to another and buying merchandise from other stores. A female respondent mentioned, "because of everything going on, I felt inadequate, so I would go to the mall, visit every store in all three floors of the mall, and purchase everything that I liked without thinking about budget or money, etc. I even went to stores, which I would not even consider going inside, let alone shopping any other day. Once I pay the bill for some reason, I expected to feel guilty about spending so much money. However, all I felt was some kind of relief and felt good about my life a little." In a similar context, another respondent mentioned, "after I have purchased something from one store, I'll walk around the store and move on to another store and purchase from there if I like something. However, later I would feel like I did something worthwhile today instead of feeling like a complete lost cause."

Apart from purchasing merchandise from different stores, consumers also visited and consumed services such as spas, salons, and movie theaters. A respondent mentioned, "my expenses would become more than double because I am desperately trying not to be at home, and so I go out to eat, shop, watch movies, etc. And for that entire time, I would forget all the things bothering me and be busy with all the activities."

3.7 Feelings post-consumption

The purpose of this research question is to understand the emotions experienced by respondents post-retail therapy.

As discussed previously, in light of the first research question, respondents' traumatic experiences resulted in negative emotions, such as sadness, anxiety, guilt, rage, anger, loneliness, insecurity, fear, helplessness, shame, regret, and negative thoughts such as lack of confidence, as well as an imperiled self-identity. A female respondent whose self-identity was threatened mentioned that "due to the traumatic event, I had nothing to do and no one to talk to. I felt like a loser and lost all confidence in myself. The feeling that I cannot do anything right ever again constantly crept upon me." As another consumer who experienced low confidence and guilt mentioned, "I felt like I didn't try hard enough, and therefore the issue happened with me. I should have fought instead of giving up." Concerning the feeling of insecurity and fear, a female

respondent mentioned, "I am constantly worried that my son will find someone to replace me, now that I am not a part of his life, through no fault of my own."

Post-consumption, consumers reported that they experienced positive feelings and emotions. However, the positive feelings experienced post-consumption were mostly temporary. The respondents described their emotions in terms of happiness, escape from reality, excitement, confidence, validation, pride, and approval.

3.8 Happiness

Respondents said they experienced happiness upon finalizing a product purchase and paying the bill to acquire it. A respondent mentioned that "when I decided to buy the handbag, I was really happy with my choice." Consumers viewed the purchase of a product as a chance to a fresh start, an opportunity for a better future. It further acted as a source of hope that brought happiness to the consumer. In this context, a respondent said, "when I paid for the products that I had purchased, I felt really happy and like I can do something right."

3.9 Escape from reality

To a considerable extent, the purchase of goods and services was an escape from a bleak reality. It provided an escape and relief to the respondents for a short time. A male respondent mentioned, "I was feeling good about it. It was not an amazing feeling, but you are satisfied. It helps me forget the reality of everything that I have seen." For others, it was a way to forget the trauma. A respondent mentioned, "When I purchase, I forget about my problems, and for a moment, it becomes invisible. Acquiring something also gives me self-confidence and increases my morale." Another respondent noted, "offline shopping, roaming in a mall and seeing other people make me feel better and for some time I forget about my problems." Another respondent mentioned, "whenever I feel anxious, I go to the mall. If I don't like anything, I don't purchase, but seeing everything and going out takes me away from my dark life."

3.10 Excitement

Post-consumption respondents mentioned that they felt excited once they made the product purchase. A female respondent said, "I get excited when I buy a new product, to try it out, to add it to my wardrobe and mainly to show it to the world. The feeling that I could conquer the world once more and everything is possible in my future." In online shopping, respondents mentioned that they feel excited when they place an order, and while they are waiting for the order to be delivered. A respondent said, "When I feel helpless, I essentially do a lot of online surfing and buy stuff online. And when I place that order, I get excited about the order delivery. Excited for a better tomorrow."

3.11 Confidence

Respondents also mentioned that they felt confident when they purchased a particular product, and especially while using it, their friends and peers complimented them. A respondent said, "if I

buy an expensive product when I feel guilty and regret certain events, it makes me feel confident again." Consumers also mentioned that when they had good feelings about the products and services that they purchased, it further increased their confidence. A respondent noted, "I feel good when people say that I look good in the new garments I am wearing. I don't feel lost; rather, I feel positive about the future." A female respondent said, "after experiencing abuse and violence every day for years, I lost all my confidence and belief in myself. However, when I consumed services that pampered me, I felt a little better about myself and who I was."

3.12 Self-worth and approval

Consumers enhanced their self-worth when they made notable changes to or combined their purchases, which were recognized and complimented by their friends and family members. A respondent mentioned, "I buy any expensive thing that I could so that I can feel a little worthy." Yet another respondent said, "I like to do crafts and creative things, so I add something new to any product I purchase. The compliments from other people always increase my self-esteem."

Respondents mentioned that when they are experiencing negative emotions, their self-confidence is also low. Any form of compliment provided by family members, friends, and even strangers such as sales executives at the mall store is a sign of approval to them. A respondent mentioned, "I talk a lot with the sales executives, and I ask them about new arrivals and discounts in the future, etc. so that I don't sit around and think about what happened and why it happened. I even ask about their opinion on how it looks on me upon trial."

3.13 Pride

Respondents felt a sense of pride when they purchased a unique product or a product they would otherwise not buy due to a higher price. When they have negative emotions, they do not worry about the cost and purchase it. Post-purchase, they feel proud of having made that purchase choice. A male respondent mentioned, "I bought the iPhone 11 pro one day because I was just tired of everything happening in my life. And I was incredibly proud of myself for taking that step and buying it as I wanted to buy it for a long time, but I had second thoughts about spending so much money."

3.14 Guilt and regret

Although respondents mentioned that they felt happy and excited about the purchased products, they also felt guilt post-purchase straight after exiting a store or after leaving the mall. A male respondent mentioned, "when I was in the mall, I purchased a lot of products, even if I had no immediate need for them. Because I thought I was already going through a lot of problems and therefore I deserved it. But I felt guilty that I went overboard with shopping and purchased a lot of products and spent too much money for no reason after a few days." Another respondent mentioned that she felt guilty about selecting the type of products she had purchased, as they were not her usual choice of colors, and it wasn't until later that she realized she would not wear those colors. She stated, "when I came back home, I regretted my shopping both in terms of the amount of money spent on it and the choice of style and colors made."

4. Discussion of findings

As per the findings, on a regular day, respondents would indulge in online shopping when they did not experience negative emotions. However, when they were in a negative mood, they would primarily go to a mall, walk around the mall, talk to different sales executives, observe people around them, visit a few stores, and purchase products. A male respondent mentioned, "offline retail shopping, especially for clothes, provides the touch and feel factor. It gives a sense of activity. Also, online shopping at the time of emotional stress is not the best idea, because even if you select and pay for a product, you don't receive the product, you only get it after a few days." Nonetheless, some respondents mentioned indulging only in online shopping. A female respondent said, "I do not go to the mall as there are too many people there. And seeing all of them makes me feel insecure, fearful, and anxious."

Respondents bought things that they did not need or something they rarely used after purchase. This finding is in line with previous studies where participants displayed a declining interest in the products after buying them (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989). For respondents, the purchase of any product was their way to compensate for the negative emotions that they were experiencing. Although some respondents experienced guilt and regret post-purchase, most of them felt pride and excitement while presenting their purchases to their friends and family. In their research, Mick and DeMoss (1990) found that when consumers felt depressed, self-gifting helped them relieve their stress. Our findings align with the literature as regards respondents' experiencing positive feelings after purchasing products either online or offline. Indicatively, as mentioned by a female respondent, "I felt pleased when I ordered a bag online. I felt like I deserved to have something nice after everything that I had been through."

Lerner et al. (2004) discussed the carryover effects of emotions from a prior situation, which is irrelevant to a shopping behavior with financial consequences. The findings of the present study concur with this literature. The respondents stated that shopping was a way-out for them when they were experiencing negative emotions. A female respondent mentioned, "whenever I am facing problems in my life, I go to a mall during day time and do a lot of online shopping at night time. Looking at products in stores and online helps me forget about the situation that I am facing. But it also means that I spend a lot of money on buying stuff that I may not need." Consumers compensate for their negative emotions with the products they purchase, which provides them with a positive feeling, even if it is only short-lived.

Respondents mentioned that their total shopping increased as regards the volume of purchased products and their average monthly expenditure during a stressful period. However, they also mentioned that once the stress period is over, although the shopping intensity is reduced, it does not revert to average expenditure levels. A male respondent, in this context, mentioned, "when I was going through a bad phase of my life, my shopping increased as I started to do bodybuilding and also shopped a lot of clothes to look better."

Compulsive buyers did not see their buying behavior as compulsive. Instead, they rationalized it in several ways. Some said they deserved to treat themselves; some thought they could use their purchases as gifts to others, and some thought their purchases were useful. However, we can classify them as compulsive as they show a pattern of being excessive, time-consuming, and satisfaction stemming from the act of buying rather than an emotional attachment to objects, as supported by O'Guinn and Faber (1989).

Consumers justify their compensatory consumption by inventing alternative utilities for the products they purchased. A female respondent who purchased eight units of the same product category in a single purchase act said, "I was roaming around the mall, and I saw this

amazing dress. Once I started looking at more dresses, I liked even other similar dresses, and I ended up selecting eight dresses from that store. But I just thought I could use them for gifting purposes to my sister and my mother, so I purchased all of them." The present study also found that respondents visited the mall and went shopping either with friends or family members. For respondents, conversation with the accompanying partner was an essential part of the entire shopping trip, in line with the literature suggesting that impulsive buying is affected by the presence of shopping companions (Xiao & Nicholson, 2013).

5. Conclusions and areas for future research

Negative emotions such as loneliness and anxiety appear to be receding post-consumption of goods and services, while respondents experience happiness, pride, excitement, and confidence. These insights can help brands understand consumers' emotional states who engage in a shopping spree due to compensatory consumption, thus providing better and more customized service.

Prior research (Coleman et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2009; Yurchinsin et al., 2006) also suggests that the underlying motivation of people exhibiting compensatory consumption consists of psychological benefits related to self, rather than the possession of things. Low levels of self-esteem and self-identity have been found consistently in people exhibiting compensatory consumption behaviors. Future research can explore whether people with high self-esteem are also likely to form compulsive buying habits. Another area for future research concerns the study of whether compensatory consumption by consumers experiencing trauma is accompanied by the adoption of a long-term compulsive buying habit.

References

Abdalla, C.C. & Zambaldi, F. (2016). Ostentation and funk: An integrative model of extended and expanded self theories under the lenses of compensatory consumption. *International Business Review*, 25, 633-645.

American Psychiatric Association (1996). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*. Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Amstadter, A. B., & Vernon, L. L. (2008). Emotional reactions during and after trauma: A comparison of trauma types. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 16(4), 391-408.

Bahl, S. & Milne, G.R. (2006). Mixed methods in interpretative research: An application to study of the self-concept. In R.W.Belk (Ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing* (pp. 198-218). Massachusetts: Edward Elgar.

Berntsen, D., & Rubin, D. C. (2007). When a trauma becomes a key to identity: Enhanced integration of trauma memories predicts post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 21(4), 417-431.

Bridgforth, G. (2004). When shopping is a sickness. *Essence*, 154-158.

Carson, D., Gilmore, A., Perry, C., & Gronhaug, K. (2001). *Qualitative Marketing Research*. Sage: London.

Coleman, N. V., Williams, P., & Morales, A. C. (2019). Identity threats, compensatory consumption, and working memory capacity: How feeling threatened leads to heightened evaluations of identity-relevant products. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 46(1), 99-118.

Cotton Incorporated (2002). Retail therapy: When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping—Retrieved January 30, from <http://www.cottoninc.com/lsmarticles/?articleID=121>.

Dalton, A. (2009). Look on the bright side: Self-expressive consumption and consumer self-worth. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 36, 131-132.

Elliott, R. (1994). Addictive consumption: Function and fragmentation in postmodernity. *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 17(2), 159-179.

Flight, R. L., & Coker, K. K. (2016). Brand constellations: Reflections of the emotional self. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 25(2), 134-147.

Fontes, A. & Fan, J.X. (2006). The effects of ethnic identity on household budget allocation to status conveying goods. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 27(2), 643-663.

Gao, L., Wheelers, S.C., & Shiv, B. (2009). The "shaken self": product choices as a means of restoring self-view confidence. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36, 29-38.

Gornmo, S. (1988). *Compensatory consumption behavior: elements of a critical sociology of consumption*. In P. Otnes (Ed.), *The Sociology of Consumption*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International.

Grunert, S.C. (1993). On gender differences in eating behavior as compensator consumption. Proceedings of the second conference on gender and consumer behavior. 74-86.

Jaiswal, A. K., & Gupta, S. (2015). The influence of marketing on consumption behavior at the bottom of the pyramid. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 32(2), 113-124.

Jobson, L., & O'Kearney, R. (2008). Cultural differences in personal identity in post-traumatic stress disorder. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 47(1), 95-109.

Kacen, J.J. (1998). Retail therapy: Consumers' shopping cures for negative moods. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 25, 75-87.

Kang, M. & Johnson, K.K.P. (2010). Let's shop! Exploring the experiences of therapy shoppers. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing: Bridging Fashion and Marketing*, 1(2), 71-79.

Koles, B., Wells, V., & Tadajewski, M. (2018). Compensatory consumption and consumer compromises: A state-of-the-art review. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 34(1-2), 96-133.

Lee, J., & Shrum, L. J. (2013). Self-threats and consumption. In R.W.Belk & A.A.Ruvio (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Identity and Consumption* (pp. 216-224). London: Routledge.

Lerner, J. S., Small, D. A., & Loewenstein, G. (2004). Heartstrings and purse strings: Carryover effects of emotions on economic decisions. *Psychological science*, 15(5), 337-341.

Mandel, N., Rucker, D. D., Levav, J., & Galinsky, A. D. (2017). The compensatory consumer behavior model: How self-discrepancies drive consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 27(1), 133-146.

McCracken, G.D. (1988). *The long interview*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Mick, D.G. & DeMoss, M. (1990). Self-gifts: Phenomenological Insights from four contexts. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17(3), 322-332.

O'Guinn, T.C. & Faber, R.J. (1989). Compulsive buying: A phenomenological exploration. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16, 147-157.

Reiland, S., & Lauterbach, D. (2008). Effects of trauma and religiosity on self-esteem. *Psychological Reports*, 102(3), 779-790.

Rick, S.I., Pereira, B., & Burson, K.A. (2014). The benefits of retail therapy: Making purchase decisions reduces residual sadness. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 24(3), 257-267.

Rook, D. W. (1987). The buying impulse. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14(2), 189-199.

Rucker, D.D. & Galinsky, A.D. (2008). Desire to acquire: Powerlessness and compensatory consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(2), 257-267.

Schor, J.B. (1998). *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Underhill, P. (1999). *Why We Buy: The Science Of Shopping*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Weathers, F. W., & Keane, T. M. (2007). The Criterion A problem revisited: Controversies and challenges in defining and measuring psychological trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 20(2), 107-121.

Woodruffe-Burton, H. (1998). Private desires, public display: Consumption, postmodernism, and fashion's 'new man.' *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 26(8), 301-310.

Woodruffe-Burton, H., & Elliott, R. (2005). Compensatory consumption and narrative identity theory. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 32, 461-465.

Woodruffe, H.R. (1997). Compensatory consumption: Why women go shopping when they're fed up and other stories. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 15(1), 325-334.

Xiao, S. H., & Nicholson, M. (2013). A multidisciplinary cognitive-behavioral framework of impulse buying: A systematic review of the literature. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 15(3), 333-356.

Yurchinsin, J., Yan, R.N., Watchravesringkan, K., & Chen, C. (2006). Why retail therapy? A preliminary investigation of the role of liminality, self-esteem, negative emotions, and proximity of clothing to self in the compensatory consumption of apparel products. Presented at Asia Pacific Association for Consumer Research, Sydney.