

Alleviating anxiety through shopping: Roles of a sense of control and an approach/avoidance motivation

Jong Geun Lee and Sang-Eun Byun, Auburn University, USA.

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Problem and Purpose Statements

Retail therapy is a strategic and conscious attempt to repair negative mood through shopping and purchasing (Atalay & Meloy, 2011). According to one report, 50% of American consumers have participated in retail therapy (*TNS Global*, 2013). Despite its prevalence, there are very few empirical studies on this topic (e.g., Kang & Johnson, 2011; Rick, Pereira, & Burson, 2014). Accordingly, there is no strong conceptual model to explain the underlying psychological and behavioral processes of therapeutic shopping behavior (Rick et al., 2014). Furthermore, few studies have examined individual differences in shopping approaches and outcomes in this context. Therefore, this study attempts to fill the aforementioned gaps in the literature by proposing a conceptual model of therapeutic shopping behavior. Specific goals of this study are to propose theoretical links among anxiety, a therapeutic shopping motive, shopping values, and a sense of control and to predict a moderating role of an approach/avoidance motivation in the therapeutic shopping process.

Literature Review and Propositions

Anxiety and shopping motive. Anxiety is defined as “a cognitive-affective process in which an individual has a sense of unpredictability and uncontrollability over potentially negative or harmful events and emotions” (Brown et al., 2004, p.75). Individuals who are experiencing anxiety are likely to interpret their feelings as lack of personal control over situations (Ragunathan & Pham, 1999). Anxious consumers are likely to have an implicit goal to recover a sense of control by being away from stresses or problems. Because consumers may adopt shopping as a coping strategy to compensate themselves, to cheer themselves up, and to escape from stress in their daily lives (Atalay & Meloy, 2011), it is proposed that consumers with anxiety will exhibit a stronger therapeutic shopping motive.

Proposition 1: Anxiety will be positively related to a therapeutic shopping motive.

Therapeutic shopping motive and outcome shopping values. Motivational theory suggests that motivation and value perception are directly related because motivation not only impels people forward in goal-directed behavior, but also influences the way they perceive and judge their experiences (Updegraff et al., 2004). Kang and Johnson (2011) found that consumers experience two different therapeutic shopping values: positive mood reinforcement, and negative mood reduction. For example, shopping can be therapeutic by reinforcing a positive mood, such as through feeling a sense of achievement, being in a pleasant environment, and enjoying new products and visual stimuli. Shopping can also provide therapeutic values by helping shoppers escape from stressful environments or feel a sense of relief from any problems or negative feelings. Based on motivation theory, it is assumed that shoppers with a therapeutic motive will try to achieve their goals by engaging in shopping. Therefore, it is proposed:

Proposition 2: A therapeutic shopping motive will be positively related to experience of therapeutic shopping values – (a) positive mood reinforcement and (b) negative mood reduction.

Shopping and a sense of control. A lack of personal control increases susceptibility to anxiety-related distress (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998). Anxious consumers tend to approach to controllable situations or environments and try to escape from other uncontrollable aspects the negative events (Menon & Dube, 2007). People tend to obtain desirable outcomes when they can maintain perceived control over their environment (Wortman, Brehm, & Berkowitz, 1975). Previous studies have found that shopping increases a sense of control through involvement in choice behavior, which in turn reduces negative feelings (Rick et al., 2014). Therefore, it is proposed that both therapeutic shopping value outcomes will contribute to increasing shoppers' sense of control, thereby reducing the level of anxiety.

Proposition 3: Experience of therapeutic shopping values – (a) positive mood reinforcement, and (b) negative mood reduction – will be positively related to a sense of control.

Proposition 4: A sense of control will reduce anxiety.

Moderating role of an approach/avoidance motivation. Carver and White (1994) proposed two motivational systems based on people's differing emotional reactions and behavioral predisposition toward positive/reward versus negative/punishment stimuli. Individuals with the behavioral activation system (BAS) are sensitive to rewards and positive stimuli, and are prone to respond to positive decision making (Carver & White, 1994). By contrast, individuals with the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) are sensitive to signals of punishment, negative stimuli, or painful outcomes. People with greater BAS shift their attention towards positive stimuli, are likely to experience more positive events, and perceive a greater value for the pursuit and attainment of positive experiences (Derryberry & Reed, 1998). People with greater BIS shift attention away from negative and unfamiliar stimuli (Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000). We propose that an approach/avoidance motivation plays a moderating role in the effect of a therapeutic shopping motive on experienced shopping values, such that shoppers with different motivational systems will pursue their therapeutic shopping goals differently.

Proposition 5: For shoppers with greater BAS, a therapeutic shopping motive will be fulfilled through experience of positive mood reinforcement. By contrast, for shoppers with greater BIS, a therapeutic shopping motive will be fulfilled through the experience of negative mood reduction.

In a similar vein, it is assumed that individuals with a different motivational system will approach shopping differently and will choose a different route to perceive a sense of control during a shopping trip. Therefore, this study proposes that the effect of experienced shopping values on a sense of control will be moderated by an approach/avoidance motivational system.

Proposition 6: For shoppers with greater BAS, a sense of control will be enhanced through the experience of positive mood reinforcement. By contrast, for shoppers with greater BIS, a sense of control will be enhanced through the experience of negative mood reduction.

Conclusions

The proposed conceptual model of therapeutic shopping behavior contributes to the literature by elaborating the psychological and behavioral processes of shopping and incorporating individual differences in motivational systems. A proposed model can be empirically tested in a field setting to validate the theoretical linkages and provide practical implications for retailers and marketers to develop more fine-tuned strategies to help different types of shoppers achieve their therapeutic shopping goals. *[References are available upon request.]*