

Why shopping helps people feel more in control

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For The Straits Times

Shopping is a national pastime for many Singaporeans and offers the ultimate stress-relief from modern life. Whether it involves heading to the lively boutiques in Haji Lane or the megamalls in Orchard Road, retail therapy is a common way for Singaporeans to distract themselves and boost their mood. But can happiness be bought by indulging in the latest luxurious designer outfit and accessories? Or does combating melancholy lie in shopping for more practical items such as homeware or groceries?

New research at the National University of Singapore Business School has found that consumers are more likely to make practical purchases than to splurge on luxury items when they feel less in control. My co-researchers Charlene Chen from Nanyang Business School and Andy Yap from Insead and I found that consumers are more likely to buy products that are functional, such as stationery and dish detergent. Such products are typically associated with problem solving, which might enhance people's sense of control.

While other studies have shown that retail therapy can be an effective way to help us overcome our blues, they have not examined how buying certain products can achieve this by enhancing our feeling of competence in navigating life's obstacles. We investigated whether consumers experiencing a loss of control would be more likely to buy certain types of products in order to feel they have more influence over their circumstances.

In our first study, some shoppers at a supermarket were asked to recall a time when they experienced a momentary loss of control, say, when a technical failure occurred during an important presentation. Other shoppers were asked instead to recall a situation when they felt a strong sense of control, for instance, when they were able to answer all the questions in a difficult exam.

The shoppers who recalled an episode that involved a loss of control ended up buying more functional products at the supermarket, such as cooking ingredients and household cleaners, compared with the shoppers who recalled an episode involving a high degree of control.

In a follow-up study, participants were asked to indicate their preference for a pair of sneakers that could be purchased for functionality (long-wearing traction, durability) or for style (a sleek modern aesthetic, a beautiful design in contrasting shades). In another study, participants evaluated sugar-cane juice that could be consumed for its nutritional benefits (rehydration, fighting infection) or enjoyed as a tasty treat.

In both studies, consumers were far more likely to favour function over form when they felt a loss of control. But why might consumers be motivated to buy functional products rather than luxury items when they feel overwhelmed by their environment?

To find the answer, a further study asked participants to imagine they were planning to get a professional massage at a local spa either for functional reasons such as reducing body fatigue, or for a pleasurable experience by treating themselves to an enjoyable time at the spa. After they indicated their level of eagerness to schedule their massage appointment, we measured their tendency to engage in problem solving.

We found that consumers experiencing a lack of control were eager to schedule the massage for functional purposes. Importantly, they were motivated by the opportunity to address a problem. Hence, making the functional purchase gave them a sense of competence and a feeling of psychological control over their situation, even though the purchase might not have been directly relevant to the difficult situation they were experiencing.

It's perhaps no coincidence then that many consumers go on a shopping spree when they are starting a new job, getting married or having a baby. Besides allowing them to get what they need to prepare for the challenges ahead, shopping for practical items during such life-changing moments can help people restore a sense of control.

Many consumers have been urged to resist their desire to shop, or told that it is a superficial way to make themselves feel better or repair their mood. However, shopping for practical items perhaps should not be overlooked as a way for people to feel more in control of their situation.

For retailers, this research points to an interesting opportunity to think about the problems that their products can solve, and how these problem-solving functionalities can be effectively conveyed to entice consumers.

On furniture company Ikea's Retail Therapy website, which is part of its Where Life Happens campaign, it takes a problem-solving approach to promoting its functional wares. The company has selected products that can address relationship problems and featured them on the site. There are more than 100 products that have been given quirky names – a daybed called My Partner Snores, a poster of the world titled Find A Way Back To Each Other, a sleeper sofa dubbed Kids Every Other Week and champagne flutes coined When Children Leave Home.

Whether the names will drive up sales remains to be seen, but as lives become increasingly busy and stressful, steering people towards functional products that solve everyday problems and help them regain psychological control of their situations might not be such a frivolous idea.

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