COMPENSATORY CONSUMPTION

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A core theme surrounding consumption is that people do not consume products and services based solely on their functionality and for utilitarian purposes (Belk et al., 1982). One’s home, car, clothes, and music often hold additional psychological value to the consumer. As elegantly detailed throughout this book, such consumption opportunities serve as a reflecting pool for the self and one’s identity (Chapter 8 and Chapter 9, this volume). In addition, consumption is also a gauge on which individuals signal their identity to others as well as indicate their connections to groups and other individuals in society (Chapter 27, this volume).

In the present chapter we focus on a particular use of consumption: the reliance on consumption as a tool to ward off psychological threats. Specifically, we discuss the idea that consumption can be motivated in an effort to assuage a broad range of psychological threats from one’s intellectual ability to a sense of mastery over one’s environment. The aim of the chapter is to familiarize the reader with the concept of compensatory consumption, provide a sample of the type of threats that are compensated, discuss representative moderators of consumers’ engagement in compensatory consumption, and speak to the psychological value of consumption in response to threats.

Compensatory consumption

We use the term compensatory consumption to define the desire for, acquisition, or use of products to respond to a psychological need or deficit. By compensatory, we mean that consumption is undertaken, implicitly or explicitly, to offset a threat to one’s identity or preferred psychological state. By consumption, we refer to both the physical consumption of goods (e.g., wearing clothing, eating a meal) as well as consumers’ product preferences (e.g., wanting a particular brand, preferring one snack to another).

The theoretical roots of compensatory consumption are partially based in the work of Winklordan and Gollwitzer (1981, 1982) on symbolic self-completion. In their writings, Winklordan and Gollwitzer suggest that at times individuals’ identities come under fire. For instance, when academics have a paper rejected, it can lead them to question their intellectual scholarship, or athletes who finish last in a race may question their own athleticism. One response to such a threat would be to address or cope with the threat in a direct fashion. For example, the academic might rewrite the paper for another journal, or the athlete might train harder for the next race.
However, according to Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981), people can engage in behaviors that allow them to symbolically signal mastery, competence, or completeness of the threatened dimension. That is, individuals can seek out what they termed, "symbols of completeness." Indeed, Harmon-Jones et al. (2009) found that professors who were not ranked highly in research – assessed via publications, citations, and their department ranking – were more likely to refer to professional titles such as professor or PhD in their email signatures.

Consumption of products and services provides one venue by which individuals can symbolically demonstrate mastery of a threatened dimension – that is, the acquisition or display of certain consumer products can serve as symbols of completeness. For example, the rejected scholar might buy a frame to publicly display his PhD even though this does not address his rejected paper. Similarly, the athlete might overhaul her athletic wardrobe even though this does little to affect her loss on the field. Indeed, in an early demonstration of consumption as a compensatory tool, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) found that MBA students who lacked certain indicators of business success (e.g. a high GPA, multiple job offers), were more inclined to display other indicators of business success (e.g. expensive suits and watches). In such circumstances, although consumption did not change the reality of the MBA's performance, it may mitigate or eliminate the threatened aspect of the self.

Evidence for compensatory consumption

In this section we review evidence for compensatory consumption. Importantly, we provide evidence across a broad array of threat as a testimony to the broad and flexible use of consumption as a compensatory device (see also Chapter 22, this volume, for a more detailed identity perspective). Specifically, we review work that suggests consumption can be used as a means to respond to threats to one's masculinity, intelligence, power, personal freedom, and system beliefs. It is also worth noting that this set of findings is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but to offer an ample foundation for the claim that consumers use consumption in a compensatory manner.

Threats to one's masculinity

Willer et al. (2010) examined men's preference for masculine products when their identity as a man was threatened. Male and female participants were given feedback that they had masculine or feminine identities. Subsequently, participants were asked to choose their favorite vehicle from a selection of four cars, one with a strong association with masculinity (i.e. an SUV) and three that did not have a strong association (i.e. minivan, coupe, and sedan). When asked to choose their favorite vehicle, Willer et al. (2010) found that males who had been told they had a feminine identity were much more inclined to choose the SUV. For such males, only the SUV had the ability to restore their shaken sense of masculinity. No differences were found among females whose femininity was threatened, presumably because none of the vehicles were associated with femininity and thus the choice did not serve as an opportunity to compensate through consumption.

Threats to one's intelligence

Threats need not be triggered by blatant shortcomings in performance or clear feedback, as in the case of Willer and colleagues (2011). For example, Gao et al. (2009) have shown it is possible to threaten college students' intelligence in an incidental fashion to produce compensatory consumption. In their work, participants wrote about their intelligence using their dominant or non-dominant
people can engage in behavior that signifies their control over things because they do not have the symbols of completeness. For example, the rejected threats to one's personal freedom

Recent work by Levav and Zhu (2009) has suggested that being placed in confining spaces can produce a threat to individuals' personal freedom. Furthermore, Levav and Zhu posit that, in an effort to restore their personal freedom, people can use choice as a means for doing so (see Kim and Drolet 2003). Specifically, Levav and Zhu suggested that threatened individuals could re-establish their freedom by making more varied and unique consumption decisions. To test this hypothesis, in one experiment participants were given the opportunity to choose three candy bars from a set of six different options. Importantly, the room was constructed such that the candy bars were featured at the end of an aisle. In the low threat to personal freedom condition participants walked down an aisle that was 7 feet wide. In the high threat to personal freedom condition participants walked down an aisle that was only 3.5 feet wide, and thus impinged upon participants' personal space. Levav and Zhu found that participants selected a greater variety of candy bars when their physical space was threatened (i.e. the narrow aisle) compared to when it was not (i.e. the wide aisle). They suggested that this occurred because variety seeking in consumption was one means by which individuals could psychologically restore their sense of freedom that had been threatened.

System threats

In addition to a psychological need for control, people also seek to bolster and defend the social systems to which they belong in an effort to see the world as good, legitimate, and desirable (Kay and Jost 2003). Building off of this idea and tying it to the consumption literature, Cutright et al. (2011) examined how people use consumption to deal with threats to the social system of the USA. They found that when consumers heard negative comments about the USA, they
consumed in a manner that would support the country. For example, threatened consumers were more likely to favor US brands (e.g. Nike, Chevy) over foreign brands (e.g. Adidas, Toyota).

When does compensatory consumption occur

Although there is considerable evidence for the argument that compensatory consumption is a real response to threat, this does not mean all threats affect consumption. Here we discuss initial work that suggests when consumption is more or less likely to be used as a compensatory device.

Importance of the threatened domain

Perhaps the most logical observation is that compensatory consumption is more prone to occur when the dimension under threat is important versus unimportant to the individual (see Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). For example, although there is a basic need for governance over one’s environment (Rotter 1966), this need may be stronger in some individuals than others. Consistent with this proposition, Rucker et al. (2011) found that individuals threatened with a loss of power were willing to pay a greater amount for status-signaling objects, particularly when they were accustomed to having power.

Similarly, Braun and Wicklund (1989) presented evidence for this proposition with respect to tennis players. Braun and Wicklund reasoned that novice tennis players with a strong commitment to tennis should be more prone to experience threat when they made mistakes during games. Consistent with the authors’ hypothesis, participants who were both novices in tennis and reported that playing tennis was important to them were most inclined to exhibit a strong preference for a specific brand of apparel.

Ability and motivation to rebuke the threat directly

Compensatory consumption is a surrogate means of addressing threats. In some cases individuals could address a threat directly and completely resolve it. However, whether consumers address a threat head on or indirectly through consumption may hinge on their perceived ability and motivation to effectively dispel a threat. For example, if an MBA’s business success is threatened by a poor grade on a finance exam they could choose to either study harder for the next exam or to adorn themselves with finely crafted suits and ties to signal their success. However, the route people choose may depend strongly on their perception that studying harder would actually produce a desired outcome on the exam.

Cutright et al. (2011; experiment 4) provide a recent illustration of the role of ability in how people respond to threat. In this experiment the authors first measured individuals’ confidence in the USA as a system. Subsequently, participants were exposed to an article purportedly written by a British journalist that threatened their beliefs about the USA. Participants were then given the opportunity to evaluate both the writer and to make a choice between national and international brands. Two interesting results emerged. Among participants who had low, as opposed to high, confidence in the system there was a stronger preference for national over international brands, consistent with the idea that they used consumption as a means to compensate for the threat. In contrast, among participants who had high, as opposed to low, confidence in the system, there was a stronger derogation of the British journalist. Thus, having confidence in the system appeared to give participants the psychological gusto to address the threat in a more direct manner, whereas those with low confidence relied on the more indirect and less confrontational method of consuming products made in the USA.
The conspicuous nature of compensatory consumption

In writing on symbolic self-completion, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) put forth the idea that others govern symbolic completion of the self. Specifically, they use the term "social reality" to relate the point that defining aspects of the self are only given meaning when they are accepted and acknowledged by others. As a consequence, one can infer that compensatory consumption might be more likely to occur when that consumption can be observed and witnessed by others in one's social environment. Indeed, work suggests, at least for some types of threats (see Lee and Shrum 2012) the conspicuousness of consumption is important.

For example, work examining the influence of a low-power state on status speaking also offers evidence favoring conspicuous consumption in response to threat. Specifically, research has found that individuals in a low state of power not only desire status-related objects, but they desire objects that are more likely to be seen and recognized by others as such (i.e. objects with physically larger brand logos) (Rucker and Galinsky 2009). Furthermore, Charles et al. (2009) find that minority groups spend a disproportionate amount of their income on conspicuously displayed goods (e.g. cars, jewelry) as a means to elevate their own status within society. Similarly, Dubois et al. (in press) manipulated how visible consumption was and found that loss of power led participants to consume more only when the consumption was visible to others.

The restorative power of consumption

Why do consumers engage in consumption in response to threats? Perhaps the simplest answer to this question is that compensatory consumption can alleviate the threat experienced by consumers. Indeed, several independent findings suggest that compensatory consumption assuages the threatened aspect of the self.

For example, in one experiment by Gao and colleagues (Gao et al. 2009), participants' intelligence was threatened. Subsequently, participants engaged in a sequential choice task. In the first choice task half of the participants first chose from a set of objects associated with intelligence (e.g. bookstore gift certificates) or a set of objects unrelated to intelligence. In the second choice task, all participants chose between a product either related to intelligence (i.e. a fountain pen) or unrelated to intelligence (i.e. candy). When threatened participants had first chosen from a set of objects associated with intelligence they did not differ in their second choice between the fountain pen and candy. However, if they had selected an object from a set of objects unrelated to intelligence objects, then threatened participants displayed a preference for the pen in the subsequent choice task. The authors suggest that in the former case the choice of a product symbolizing intelligence alleviated the threat and eliminated the need to compensate.

Elsewhere, Rucker and colleagues (Rucker et al. 2011) report an experiment where the acquisition of a status object restored participants' self-reported feelings of power. Participants were induced into a low- or high-power state and then given a pen that had been advertised in terms of either status or performance. Before receiving the pen individuals in the low-power condition reported feeling less powerful than high-power participants. However, after the pen had been physically received, low-power participants felt more powerful, but only when given the pen associated with status and not when the pen was associated with performance. Thus, physically acquiring an object was enough to eliminate the experienced threat.

Finally, although much of the research to date has examined compensatory consumption in the threatened domain, it should be noted that this is not the only means by which consumption can ward off threat. Mandel and Smeesters (2008) found that consumption can also distrac
individuals from threat by serving as an escape from self-awareness. In their study, when individuals’ mortality was threatened (i.e. they were reminded that they would someday die) they are more cookies. The eating of more cookies does not serve to eliminate concerns with death; rather, the action provides a means to escape thinking about the loss of the self. This finding, of course, raises an important direction for future research with respect to when consumers seek out products that specifically address the threat at hand and when they engage in greater consumption to distract oneself from the threat.

**Future directions**

Our final section proposes several promising questions to be tackled by future research efforts in understanding the nature of compensatory consumption.

**Mapping compensatory efforts**

One important goal for research in the domain of compensatory consumption is to map out the various psychological needs consumers have and the type of products and attributes that are sought in response to these needs. At first blush this might seem like a relatively easy task if one assumes that consumers seek out products that are clear manifestations of the dimension under threat. For example, if one assumes that when athletic ability is threatened people seek to demonstrate their athleticism the implications are straightforward. However, recent work reveals that constructs that do not have such immediate explicit connections can share a more common motive.

Consider the following two examples. First, work has found that a basic human motive for control underlies threats related to both lacking choice and lacking power (see Inesi et al. 2011). As a consequence, what initially appeared to be two separate and distinct literatures, one on the intrapersonal domain of choice and the other on the interpersonal domain of power, were found to share a common thread that allows substitution between them: a lack of choice can increase the desire for products that offer power, whereas a lack of power can lead to a preference for greater choice in selecting one’s products. Second, research by Levav and Zhu (2009), noted earlier, has shown that when consumers feel physically confined (e.g. when surrounded by narrow aisles in a grocery store) they are more likely to seek variety in their purchases because variety provides a sense of freedom. However, prior to that work, a clear and direct link between threats to personal freedom and variety seeking was not apparent.

Clearly, understanding the dynamic interplay between various threats and the type of consumption that alleviates those threats warrants further consideration.

**Threat-specific versus general consumption**

As reviewed here, the bulk of the work in the literature suggests that consumption tends to increase in a threat-specific fashion. That is, whatever the specific nature of the threat (e.g., intelligence, power), people consume in a manner that signals one standing of that dimension. However, the work reported by Mandel and Smeesters (2008) suggests that consumption can sometimes increase regardless of whether it specifically relates to the threatened dimension or not by serving as a means of distraction.

An important challenge for the literature on compensatory consumption is to understand when people consume in a threat-specific fashion as opposed to increasing their consumption more generally. In response to this issue, Kim and Rucker (2011) proposed that general versus threat-specific consumption might sometimes be observed as a function of whether consumers
state preferences or engage in actual behavior. Specifically, they proposed that when asked for their preferences consumers would tend to prefer products that specifically resolved the threatened aspect of their identity. However, when given the opportunity to engage in actual consumption of products, they hypothesized consumers might spend more time consuming to allow them to distract themselves from the threat.

To test this idea, participants were first given feedback that they had performed poorly on a task related to intelligence. Subsequently, participants took part in an evaluation task related to music. Half the participants were told the music was associated with increasing intelligence (threat-related), whereas the other half were told the music was associated with calmness (threat-unrelated). Participants were either: 1 asked to state how long they would prefer to listen to music; or 2 given the opportunity to actually listen to music. Relative to a no-threat condition, when simply asked for their preferences, threatened participants wanted to listen to the music longer only when it was framed in terms of intelligence. However, when given the opportunity to actually listen to the music, threatened participants listened to the music longer than unthreatened participants, regardless of its association to the threat.

This finding represents one initial moderator of threat-specific versus general consumption, and future research should be guided to examining other potential moderators.

**Successfulness of threat reduction**

Although research has suggested that consumption can attenuate needs induced via states of threats (see Gao et al. 2009; Rucker et al. 2011), less work has examined the various boundary conditions that affect the degree or duration of threat reduction. For example, although a single occasion of consumption might be effective in alleviating a temporary induced effect, in the presence of recurring threats (e.g. bullying at school, social rejection) it may require continual consumption. As a consequence, what may initially begin as efforts to alleviate threats through consumption may give way to habitual overspending and overconsumption that can produce crippling credit card debt or obesity.

In addition, even when consumption appears to remedy threat, it may only lead to a temporary alleviation of the threat rather than a complete resolution. If consumption merely alleviates the symptoms of the threats, this could have unintended consequences of allowing the threat to come back more strongly. The plausibility of such an occurrence has roots in research in the area of stereotype suppression that has found that individuals who successfully suppress stereotypes during one task demonstrate enhanced accessibility of those stereotypes in a subsequent task (Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000; Macrae et al. 1995). These remain important questions to explore to more fully understand the efficacy of compensatory consumption.

**Conclusion**

The work reviewed in the present chapter is a testament to the powerful role consumption can play in responding to psychological threats. Central to the theme of this book, consumption offers a means to respond to threats that attempt to carve away important components of one's identity. We also reviewed boundary conditions for when compensatory consumption does and does not occur, with the importance of the domain under threat, people's ability to address the threat, and the conspicuousness of the consumption serving as important moderators. When compensatory consumption does transpire, it can indeed serve to reduce the experience of threat. The present chapter hopefully serves as both a primer on the topic of compensatory consumption and a cradle for new ideas and directions in this burgeoning area of research.
References


