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Retail Therapy: What Makes You Feel Relieved and Happy?

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Keywords: Retail therapy, self-gift motivation, unplanned buying tendency, price consciousness

**Introduction and Purpose:** Retail therapy has been defined as an activity that lifts one's spirit and gives an immediate positive emotional response through shopping (Lonsdale, 1994). Today the term retail therapy has been used frequently and the concept of retail therapy has received notable attention from both marketers and scholars. Shopping has always been a form of therapy for consumers because they experience a significant amount of pleasure from the act of browsing or buying. Researchers have identified some factors to explain retail therapy motivations, such as loneliness, boredom, mood alleviation, and others. (Atalay & Meloy, 2011; Kang & Johnson, 2011). However, little research has been done to understand or draw linkages between personal characteristics (as antecedents) and retail therapy. Therefore, understanding *what* factors influence retail therapy and *how* the factors motivate retail therapy is critical. Consequently, this study aims to 1) examine the antecedents of retail therapy and 2) explore the impact of personal characteristics on retail therapy. Three personal characteristics (i.e., self-gift motivation, unplanned buying tendency, and price consciousness), were selected as antecedents of retail therapy because these factors are not related to consumers' emotion or mood, which have been widely studied as antecedents of retail therapy.

**Literature Review and Hypotheses:**

H1: *Self-gift motivation* is positively related to *retail therapy*. Self-gift motivation is presented when consumers wish to "relieve stress" and to "provide an incentive (Atalay & Meloy, 2011)." That is, self-gift motivation includes a therapeutic desire to cheer oneself up. Therefore, self-gift motivation is expected to have a positive relationship with retail therapy.

H2: *Unplanned buying tendency* is positively related to *retail therapy*. Unplanned buying is closely related to the senses of boredom, distress, and anxiety. Thus, consumers who have a high unplanned buying tendency chronically purchase goods or are consumed in the process of buying itself to remove negative feelings (Saleh, 2012). Given this, unplanned buying tendency is expected to have a positive relationship with retail therapy.

H3: *Price consciousness* is negatively related to *retail therapy*. Price consciousness refers to the degree to which consumers seek to pay lower prices (Lichtenstein et al., 1993). Since retail therapy is involved in purchasing itself, consumers with high price consciousness may be not willing to engage in retail therapy or make an impulse purchase. Accordingly, price consciousness will negatively impact retail therapy.

**Method:** A Qualtrics survey was conducted in which participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (i.e., MTurk), as this method is gaining popularity in social science research (Huang & Wang, 2016). The targeted respondents were U.S. consumers aged 18 years and older. The measurement items for self-gift motivation, unplanned buying tendency, price consciousness,

and retail therapy were developed based on previous studies and measured using a 7-point Likert scale. A total of 200 data sets were collected and analyzed for the study.

**Findings:** After verifying the reliability ( $\alpha > .70$ ) of the four constructs utilizing exploratory factor analysis (EFA), this study tested H1 through H3 using multiple regression analysis. All hypotheses, except H3 (i.e., Price consciousness is negatively related to retail therapy), were accepted. The results showed that self-gift motivation and unplanned buying tendency significantly influence retail therapy ( $R^2 = .580$ ,  $F = 85.096$ ,  $\beta_{(\text{self-gift motivation})} = .732^{***}$ ,  $p_{(\text{self-gift motivation})} = .000$ ,  $\beta_{(\text{unplanned buying tendency})} = .401^{***}$ ,  $p_{(\text{unplanned buying tendency})} = .000$ ), but price consciousness ( $\beta = -.172$ ,  $p = .053$ ) was not found to have a negative relationship with retail therapy in this study.

**Discussions and Implication:** This study found that retail therapy can be positively motivated by self-gift motivation and unplanned buying tendency. That is, the higher self-gift motivation and the higher unplanned buying tendency a consumer has, the higher the chance that they will engage in retail therapy. In addition, this study found that the impact of self-gift tendency on retail therapy was stronger than the impact of unplanned buying tendency. Surprisingly, price consciousness showed no impact on retail therapy. This might explain why when consumers engage in retail therapy, they often purchase items which they might not ordinarily purchase, such as high-priced items or fashionable and trendy apparel items (Atalay & Meloy, 2011). Thus, the price of products does not seem to have much impact on retail therapy. Based on these findings, this study suggests the following practical implications: 1) In order to estimate retail therapy, retailers and marketers should promote consumers' self-gift motivation and understand unplanned buying tendency. 2) To improve the motivation for retail therapy, the appeal of self-esteem and self-attachment in their advertising and promotions should be emphasized and utilized in order to increase self-gift motivation. 3) To increase retail therapy, consumers' unplanned buying tendency should be stimulated by utilizing loss-leader or buy-one-get-one-free sales in the store. This study contributes to literature by confirming antecedents of retail therapy and examining the impact of antecedents on retail therapy.

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