

Look on the Bright Side: Self-Expressive Consumption and Consumer Self-Worth

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Department of  
Business Administration in the Graduate School  
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ABSTRACT

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## Abstract

This research investigates the interplay between self-worth and consumption, and explores the substantive phenomenon of trading up. Laboratory experiments were conducted in which participants were led to fail (or not) on an intelligence test, which threatened their feelings of self-worth (or not). Following the failure, participants made consumer choices. Of key interest was whether threatened self-worth would result in more “trading up” – that is, selecting more expensive products or retail stores. Results revealed that compared to consumers whose self-worth was not threatened, threatened consumers demonstrated more *self-expressive consumption*: trading up when a product portrayed “me” (high on self-relevance), or not trading up when a product portrayed “not me” (low on self-relevance). Self-relevance was operationalized in terms of choice sets (i.e., the choice between two Duke t-shirts vs. two white t-shirts) and individual differences in the tendency to consider material objects part of the self (this was measured via a questionnaire).

This research also examined two hypotheses regarding how consumption could, in turn, affect feelings of self-worth. The first hypothesis stated that negative feelings of self-worth can be immediately repaired via consumer decisions (here, the decision to trade up or not). Indeed, results revealed that among consumers whose feelings of self-worth were threatened, self-expressive consumption repaired negative feelings of self-worth. The second hypothesis stated that positive attachments between possessions and

consumers' feelings of self-worth enable consumers to rely on possessions to protect self-worth. To test this, participants wrote about a possession that was important for who they are and how they feel about themselves (participants in a control condition wrote about a possession important to other people for this reason). Results showed that writing about a self-relevant possession before failing a test buffered the impact on feelings of self-worth. This finding was particularly robust for possessions important to consumers' social relationships.

These findings highlight the bright side of the relationship between consumption and self-worth: consumers respond to threats adaptively – sometimes spending more and sometimes spending less – and functionally – by making consumption decisions that repair self-worth and by relying on possessions to protect self-worth.

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# 1. Introduction

## *1.1 General Motivation and Overview*

Few will admit to doing it, and fewer will condone it, but “retail therapy” – spending money with the purpose of improving how one feels – is many mainstream consumers’ therapy of choice. Although potentially cheaper than a psychiatrist, retail therapy is by no means receiving a glowing endorsement. Psychologists caution that self-esteem is not for sale (Kasser 2002) and have relegated retail therapy to the “dark side” of consumption – a category of consumer behaviors such as over-spending and impulsive buying that are symptomatic of negative affect, poor self-control, or poor judgment, and can result in feelings of remorse or grave financial consequences for consumers (Belk 1985; Dawson and Bamossy 1991; Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Gardner and Rook 1988; Kasser and Sheldon 2000; O’Guinn and Faber 1989; Rook 1987; Richins and Dawson 1992; Sirgy 1998). Average consumers are taking heed, turning to self-help books and support groups to wean them from their shopping habits (Ash 2006). But is this backlash premature? Although research suggests that consumers who feel badly about themselves are indeed more consumption-oriented, little else is known about the issue.

The current research asks three key questions about the relationship between consumption and self-worth. First, when the going gets tough, do the tough *always* go shopping? Might they sometimes pull tight their purse strings and become thriftier instead? Second, is retail therapy an effective way to boost how we feel about ourselves?

It has been argued that psychological needs are seldom met by extrinsic rewards (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser 2004; Deci and Ryan 1991; Maslow 1954; Rogers 1964), but consumers themselves report that shopping can improve their self-worth (Mick and DeMoss 1990). If shopping can boost self-worth, then when does this occur? Finally, does consumption offer anything more than a short-term fix? Most women - 65% in fact – believe that brand new clothes provide more pleasure compared to items owned for a long time (Lifestyle Monitor 2008). But what about a favorite suit or watch? Possessions that are important for who we are and how we feel about ourselves may have an enduring positive impact on feelings of self-worth. Items like a favorite suit, jewelry, or a car may protect how we feel about ourselves against the threats of daily life, and perhaps by relying on these items, we become less likely to splurge on new ones.

The framework developed here posits that consumers who are feeling badly about themselves are more likely to consume in a manner consistent with their beliefs about who they are, which does not necessarily mean increased consumer spending. The current framework also predicts a positive relationship between consumption and self-worth, with certain consumption decisions repairing self-worth in the short-term and certain possessions protecting self-worth in the long-term. Thus, rather than focusing on the dark-side of consumption, this work attempts to illuminate its bright side.

## ***1.2 Threats to Self-Worth and Self-Expressive Consumption***

The bulk of research on consumption and self-worth has investigated how negative feelings of self-worth impact consumption. This prior work has demonstrated

that events that negatively impact consumers' feelings of self-worth affect product preferences (Mandel and Smeesters 2007), product evaluations (Beggan 1992; Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, and Carvallo 2005; but see Barone, Shimp, and Spratt 1997), purchase request compliance (Howard, Gengler, and Jain 1995), self-brand connections (Escalas and Bettman 2003; 2005) and purchase decisions (Mick and DeMoss 1990). People who generally feel negatively about themselves tend to be more materialistic (Chang and Arkin 2002; Mick 1996; Richins and Dawson 1992) and research conducted with children shows that this relationship is causal. That is, among children whose feelings of self-worth improve, materialistic tendencies subside (Chaplin and John 2007). Taken together, negative feelings of self-worth appear to produce a consumption-orientation. But the perspective offered here posits that these feelings do not increase consumption *per se*. Rather, these feelings impact a specific type of consumption, termed *self-expressive consumption*. Self-expressive consumption is defined as consumption that is consistent with consumers' self-concepts, their specific beliefs about who they are. While self-expressive consumption can increase consumer spending, it can also have the opposite effect. From this perspective, the observed increase in consumption following events that threaten self-worth is only half the story.

The notion that threats to self-worth trigger self-expressive consumption integrates literatures suggesting that (1) consumption can be self-expressive and (2) threats to self-worth motivate positive portrayals of the self.

### **1.2.1 Self-Expressive Consumption**

Self-expression can be an important driver of consumer behavior. Believing that material objects can reflect both “me-ness” and “not me-ness” (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995), consumers create, convey, and define their self-concepts through their material worlds (Belk 1984; 1985; 1988; Fournier 1998; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Landon 1974; McCracken 1989; Richins 1994; Solomon 1983). For instance, consumers often desire congruency between aspects of their self-concepts and retail shopping environments (Sirgy, Grewal, and Mangleburg 2000) or brands (Aaker 1999; Aaker and Schmitt 2001; Dolich 1969). While they prefer and adopt products associated with in-groups, consumers often avoid products associated with out-groups (Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2003; 2005). These preferences and behaviors arise at least in part because where consumers shop, what brands they buy, and how they allocate money can express who they are and who they are not.

In the current studies, self-expression was explored in the context of trading up. Trading up is a term coined to describe consumers’ willingness to pay premium prices for particular goods or services (Silverstein and Fiske 2003; 2005). Selecting a more expensive option in a choice set or seeking out brands or stores that are relatively more expensive are examples of trading up. In the experiments presented here, participants were presented with two options (which were either two products or two retail stores, depending on the experiment) and trading up was operationalized as a preference for the more expensive option.

Self-expressive consumption can entail trading up when a product is highly relevant to the self-concept, and thus portrays “me,” but it can also entail *not* trading up when a product is less relevant or irrelevant to the self-concept, and thus portrays “not me”. Highly self-relevant products might include prestige products (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986; Shavitt 1990) or symbolic products, such as clothes or shoes (Berger and Heath 2007; Lee and Shavitt 2006), but of course self-relevance can vary by consumer and by consumption domain. For instance, a health conscious consumer may perceive the choice of a grocery store to be self-relevant and trade up to shop at a natural foods store. A less health conscious consumer may not share this perception and not trade up. A university student may perceive the choice of a school logo t-shirt to be self-relevant and trade up on this purchase, but may not perceive the choice between white t-shirts to be self-relevant and not trade up. Moreover, some consumers are more likely than others to consider material objects self-relevant in general (Belk 1984; Richins 1992; Richins and Dawson 1990; 1992; Sprott, Czellar, Spangenberg 2007). The key point is that the self-relevance of a product to a consumer can be expressed via trading up.

Despite research demonstrating that consumer behavior can be self-expressive, little is known about what drives it. Surely not every t-shirt in the closet was purchased because it expressed a consumer’s self-concept. One account posits that situational cues can drive self-expressive consumption because the aspects of the self that are salient can vary across situations (Aaker 1999; Reed 2004). Building on this prior research, the current research tests the notion that self-expressive consumption can also be driven by events that negatively impact self-worth. In the context of trading up, events that threaten

consumers' self-worth should increase the likelihood or extent of trading up on highly self-relevant products, and decrease the likelihood or extent of trading up on less self-relevant products. For instance, a young corporate executive might buy expensive cocktails in a bar, but after eating a hot dog from a street vendor for dinner. Both trading up on cocktails and not trading up on dinner can express who she is and what she values. At the end of a long and ego-damaging day at work, the current perspective posits that trading up should be more likely for self-relevant items (like cocktails) and less likely for less self-relevant items (like dinner). The rationale underlying this hypothesis is described next.

### **1.2.2 Threats to Self-Worth and Self-Expression**

Many common daily experiences can threaten self-worth, including comparisons to others (Festinger 1954; also see Argo, White, and Dahl 2006; Smeesters and Mandel 2006), social rejection and exclusion (Leary 2006), failure to meet performance standards (Vohs and Heatherton 2001), and even self-concept inconsistent behavior (Steele and Liu 1983; Tesser and Cornell 1991). When self-worth is threatened, numerous psychological processes and behaviors can be utilized in an attempt to maintain a positive self-evaluation (Banaji and Prentice 1994; Baumeister 1982; Baumgardner, Kaufman, and Levy 1989; Tesser, Martin, and Cornell 1996). Individuals might compare themselves to other people who are relatively worse off (Tesser, 1988; Tesser and Paulhus, 1983), or become more self-serving in their standards of performance (Beauregard and Dunning 1998), estimates of their abilities, or definitions of success (Dunning, Leuenberger, and



Sherman 1995). A recurring theme is that people who feel badly about themselves want to say something positive about who they are; interestingly, however, another way that people can maintain a favorable view of themselves is by behaving consistently with who they are (Steele and Spencer 1992).

Although self-worth and self-consistency have been depicted as independent motivational influences on consumption (Sirgy 1982), Claude Steele and colleagues posit that self-consistency is one way to maintain self-integrity, or self-worth (Steele 1988; Steele et al. 1993; but see Swann, Pelham, and Krull 1989). Given that consistency between self-concept and behavior affects self-worth, then it stands to reason that threats to self-worth could cause individuals to behave more consistently with their self-concepts. In consumer contexts, this would translate into more self-expressive consumption.

This framework is different (though by no means mutually exclusive) from prevalent theoretical perspectives suggesting that consumers acquire material symbols of the self to compensate for specific deficiencies (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982), or affirm their cultural value (Kasser and Sheldon 2000; Mandel and Heine 1999). According to the current framework, the consumer response to threats to self-worth is not about acquiring or spending more; it is about being true to the real you. Thus, threat should not increase consumer spending in general; rather, consumers should spend in a manner that reflects the extent to which products are relevant to their self-concepts. As an example, consider two students engaging in a little retail therapy after learning they have failed an important exam at school. The style conscious student who wears jeans to

convey who he is would buy a more expensive pair than usual. His friend, however, who does not consider his jeans to be a statement of who he is would buy a less expensive pair than usual. The argument is that threatened self-worth attunes these consumers to the “me-ness” or “not me-ness” of products and their spending is consistent with these perceptions.

To summarize, thus far I have described how feelings of self-worth can impact consumption. But how does consumption in turn affect feelings of self-worth? Two additional hypotheses were tested in this regard. The first hypothesis states that negative feelings of self-worth can be immediately repaired via consumption (here, the decision to trade up or not). The second hypothesis states that positive attachments between possessions and consumers’ feelings of self-worth enable consumers to rely on possessions to protect self-worth.

### ***1.3 Repairing and Protecting Self-Worth via Consumption***

Consumption is affected by negative feelings of self-worth, but it is not clear whether consumers get what they pay for when they spend money to feel better about themselves. The question of effectiveness is particularly important in the consumption context because it has been argued elsewhere that when consumers spend money to repair self-worth, they do so in vain. Prominent theorists from humanistic and social psychological traditions have suggested that consumers try to use material objects to satisfy emotional and psychological needs that are seldom met by extrinsic rewards (Arndt, Solomon, and Kasser 2004; Deci and Ryan 1991; 1995; Maslow 1954; Rogers

1964). According to this perspective, it is an illusion that material things can make us feel better about ourselves. But many consumers would disagree. In a survey (Mick and DeMoss 1990; also see Mick, DeMoss and Faber 1992), 25 percent of respondents reported that they premeditate special indulgences, which the authors called “self-gifts,” to elevate, protect, or medicate self-esteem. Likewise, Rindfleisch and Burroughs (2004) question the empirical and conceptual evidence linking materialism to ill-being. These discrepant perspectives regarding the impact of consumption on self-worth might reflect that moderators of the relationship have been overlooked. For instance, in terms of consumer spending repairing self-worth, perhaps this effect is limited to highly self-relevant merchandise. To address this possibility, the current research tests whether the decision to trade up or not can repair consumers’ negative feelings of self-worth, examining separately material objects that are high and low on self-relevance.

It may not suffice to demonstrate that certain consumer decisions can provide a short-term benefit to consumers’ feelings of self-worth. As noted by Solomon (1983), consumer behavior should not be equated with buyer behavior; it is important to consider what consumers do with the products they buy. I propose that when material possessions are positively associated with consumers’ self-concepts, consumers can rely on these possessions to protect their feelings of self-worth. While a pair of jeans might protect the self-worth of a style oriented consumer, a pair of sneakers might protect the self-worth of an athlete, and to the corporate executive, a watch or suit might serve this function. By protecting self-worth, self-relevant possessions should have an enduring positive impact on consumers.

Why might possessions protect self-worth? Although the precise nature of the relationship people have to possessions has been described in several different ways, including the ideas that possessions are props (McCracken, 1989), relationship partners (Fournier, 1998), and identity-enablers (Kleine et al., 1993), the common thread is that possessions can be central components of the self and thereby can affect how we feel about ourselves. This idea can be traced back to William James (1890, p. 291), who noted, “It is clear that between what a man calls me and what he simply calls mine the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves.” Belk (1988, p. 141) reasoned that this relationship is reciprocal, writing that, “We may impose our identities on possessions and possessions may impose their identities on us.” According to the current framework, the attributes possessions symbolize, such as attractiveness, athleticism, or competence, can bolster consumers’ self-concepts and the possessions become important resources that consumers can rely upon to facilitate coping.

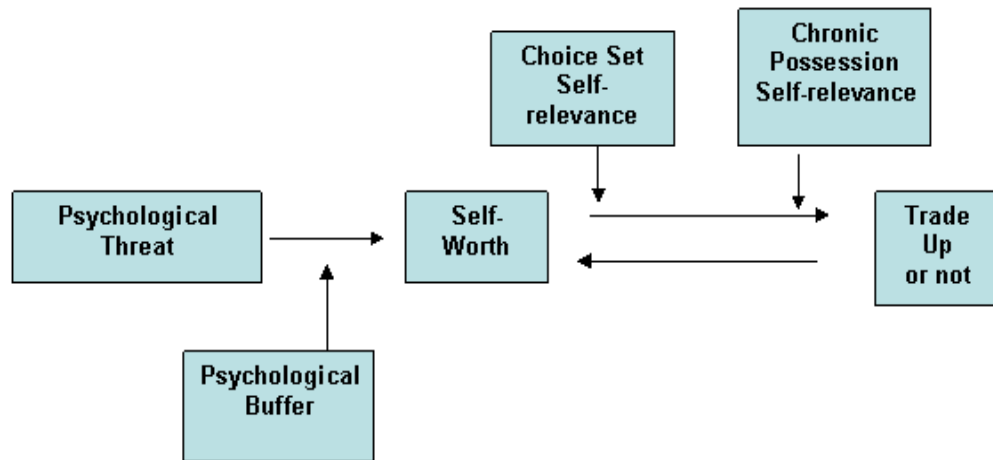
In line with this possibility, research in very different streams can be interpreted as showing that some core aspects of the self can function as resources and thereby enable individuals to cope more effectively in their daily lives. For instance, the impact of psychologically traumatic events can be buffered by an individual’s in-groups (Correll and Park 2005), self-esteem (Baumeister 1998; Dutton and Brown 1997), values (Fein and Spencer 1997; Steele and Liu 1983), and self-complexity (Linville 1985; 1987), all of which are core aspects of self. Because some possessions share the feature of being core to the self, they might also come to function as resources that can be relied upon to

protect self-worth. If so, then the increase in self-expressive consumption that would otherwise follow potentially threatening events should be reduced or eliminated.

To summarize, the current framework posits that consumption (here, the decision to trade up or not) can repair negative feelings of self-worth. Moreover, in the long-term, possessions are predicted to protect feelings of self-worth. I propose that the decision to trade up or not can repair self-worth because of it can be self-expressive, and self-expression has been linked to maintaining self-worth (Steele and Liu 1983; Tesser and Cornell 1991). Possessions can protect self-worth when consumers build positive associations between possessions and their self-concepts. Thus, both special possessions and more mundane consumption decisions (e.g., decisions about what clothes item to purchase and at what store to shop) can portray positive and valued aspects of the self and can therefore positively impact feelings of self-worth.

#### ***1.4 Conceptual Model***

Several psychological factors are proposed to contribute to the relationship between feelings of self-worth and trading up, including: experience of threat, product self-relevance, and protection against threat. Protection against threat is examined in two ways, values and possessions. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**

### 1.4.1 Experience of Threat

If the decision to trade up or not is affected by negative feelings of self-worth, then this decision should be affected, all else equal, when individuals experience an event that threatens self-worth. Therefore, experiment 1 compares trading up between groups of participants who do or do not experience a threat to self-worth. But several caveats are required here. First, from the perspective of self-expressive consumption, the perceived self-relevance of a consumer's options should moderate trading up. This factor is addressed in the next two sections. Second, a psychological buffer can protect consumers from the threat experience itself, thus reducing its impact on trading up. This factor is addressed in the section on protection from threat.

### **1.4.2 Self-relevance and Repairing Self-Worth**

If threats to self-worth increase consumption in general, then consumers should trade up following threat regardless of the relevance of products to consumers' self-concepts. If, however, threats to self-worth increase self-expressive consumption, then trading up should depend on the self-relevance of material objects. Self-relevance is operationalized in two ways. First, self-relevance is manipulated via choice sets: some consumers decide to trade up or not in a domain that is relevant to who they are and some consumers make this decision in a less self-relevant domain. In response to threat, consumers should trade up more (or be more likely to trade up) when the choice set is high on self-relevance, and trade up less (or be less likely to trade up) when the choice set is low on self-relevance. This hypothesis was tested in experiments 1 and 3. Second, self-relevance is measured as an individual difference variable: some consumers are more apt to see their possessions as part of who they are, while others are less likely to do so. In response to threat, individuals who tend to link material objects to their self-concepts should trade up more (or be more likely to trade up), and individuals who tend not to link material objects to their self-concepts should trade up less (or be less likely to trade up). This hypothesis was tested in experiments 2a, 2b, 3, and 4.

According to the current framework, trading up should repair feelings of self-worth when a choice set is high on self-relevance, but trading up should not repair feelings of self-worth when a choice set is low on self-relevance. This hypothesis was tested in experiment 1.

### **1.4.3 Protection against Threat: Values and Possessions**

A third boundary condition is tested that is not directly related to the decision to trade up, but rather to the impact of a potential threat on feelings of self-worth. That is, the threat can be buffered. This research examined two sorts of buffers against threats, values and possessions. Because prior work has illustrated that writing about a personally important value buffers against threat (Fein and Spencer 1997; Steele and Liu 1983; Steele, Spencer, and Lynch 1993; Tesser and Cornell 1991), the methods established in that work were adopted here (in experiments 2a and 2b) and subsequently modified to explore the protective power of self-relevant possessions (in experiments 3 and 4). The general prediction is as follows: Among individuals who affirm self-worth before experiencing a threat (either through a value affirmation or possession affirmation task), self-worth should be protected and self-expressive consumption should be reduced relative to their unprotected counterparts. Experiment 4 also explores how a consumer's self-worth is protected by reflecting on possessions that are important to self-worth for different reasons.

### **1.4.4 Summary**

The conceptual model proposes that events that negatively impact feelings of self-worth will affect trading up. However, an event's impact on self-worth can be buffered, reducing its affect on trading up. This research tests whether self-relevant possessions can buffer against threat. Assuming a threat is not buffered against, consumers should engage in more self-expressive consumption; thus, the affect of threat on trading up should



depend on the perceived self-relevance of a consumer's options. Self-relevance is examined in terms of choice set and chronic possession self-relevance. Trading up for a self-relevant product should repair self-worth, but trading up for a less self-relevant product should not. Finding support for this framework will suggest that consumers respond to threats adaptively – sometimes spending more and sometimes spending less – and that consumption following threat can serve important functions – repairing self-worth in the short-term and protecting self-worth in the long-term.

## 2. Experiment 1

### 2.1 Introduction

Experiment 1 addressed the impact of threats to self-worth on the decision to trade up and the impact of trading up or not on feelings of self-worth. Participants' self-worth was threatened (or not) before making a hypothetical choice in a shopping scenario. An academic threat was used in all experiments because of its relevant and familiarity to our participant population (all of whom are university students).<sup>1</sup> Following the threat manipulation, participants were given a single hypothetical choice between two t-shirts that were either high on self-relevance (i.e., two Duke t-shirts) or low on self-relevance (i.e., two white t-shirts). A separate pretest showed that the Duke t-shirts were perceived as more self-relevant than the white t-shirts.<sup>2</sup> In each choice set, the t-shirts were priced at roughly \$14 and \$19. After deciding to trade up or not, participants' rated the self-relevance of the choice choice (a manipulation check) and their current feelings of self-worth.

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<sup>1</sup> A pilot for this experiment found that this manipulation did not significantly impact positive affect,  $F(1, 22) < 1$ , or negative affect,  $F(1, 22) = 1.14$ ,  $p < .30$ , measured using the PANAS (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen, 1988). These findings were driven by null effects for items such as *angry*, *jittery*, and *scared*. However, the single PANAS item *ashamed*, which captures negative feelings of self-worth, was impacted by the academic failure manipulation,  $F(1, 22) = 4.05$ ,  $p = .05$ .

<sup>2</sup> For this between-subjects pretest, students imagine purchasing a Duke (vs. a white) t-shirt among several different Duke (vs. white) t-shirt styles. Participants responded to the question *Do you agree that these t-shirts say something about who you are as an individual?* on a nine-point scale, anchored with *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*. The results showed that the Duke t-shirts were rated higher in self-relevance than the white t-shirts, ( $M_{\text{Duke}} = 6.8$  vs.  $M_{\text{white}} = 5.7$ ;  $F(1, 96) = 6.17$ ,  $p < .02$ ).

## **2.2 Methods**

### **2.2.1 Participants and Design**

One hundred forty-eight Duke undergraduate students received \$10 each to participate. The experiment incorporated two manipulated between-subjects variables in a 2 (threat: threat vs. no threat) X 2 (choice set self-relevance: high vs. low) design. In addition, two hanging control conditions were included in which threat was manipulated but choice self-relevance was not, i.e., no choice set was presented.

### **2.2.2 Materials and Procedure**

The threat manipulation involved completion of a 12-item paper-and-pencil Remote Associates Task (RAT, Mednick 1962). This task presents sets of three words, and participants generate a fourth word for each set that relates to the words in the set in a meaningful way. Established norms for performance on RAT items (Bowden and Beeman 2007) were consulted to craft an easy and a difficult version of the RAT, which were administered to the control and experimental groups, respectively. One item from the easy version presented the words *cottage*, *swiss*, and *cake* (the answer is *cheese*); one item from the difficult version presented the words *over*, *plant*, and *horse* (the answer is *power*).

The procedures for administering the RAT were adapted from Vohs and Heatherton (2001, experiment 1). All participants were told that the RAT measured Integrative Orientation, described as “how a person sees connections among different types of information.” Participants who completed the easy RAT (no threat condition)

were then told to take their time completing the items. All participants correctly completed at least 10 of the 12 easy items, and the median was 12. Participants who completed the difficult RAT (threat condition) were told that “Integrative Orientation is a stable intellectual ability that has been shown to predict college performance as well as general intelligence.” Four min. were allotted to work on the items, after which the experimenter returned. No participant correctly completed more than 4 of the 12 difficult items and the median was 0. While the experimenter scored the RAT, the participant reviewed the answer sheet, which had bogus norms printed on it indicating that most students get most of the items correct. Also, the experimenter placed a folder on the counter in the participant’s view while she was scoring. The folder contained RATs that were ostensibly completed by other participants. Scores ranging from 8 to 10 were printed in the experimenter’s red pen in the upper right hand corner of each of these RATs.

Following the easy or difficult RAT, a hypothetical choice was made between either two Duke t-shirts (a choice set high on self-relevance) or two white t-shirts (a choice set low on self-relevance). For this choice, participants were instructed to imagine that they are purchasing a t-shirt with a Duke logo on it (a white t-shirt), and when they get to the Duke store (go shopping) they narrow their choice down to two Duke t-shirts (white t-shirts), both of which are well liked. One t-shirt is more expensive (\$18.95), but liked a bit more, while the other is a better deal (\$13.95), but liked a bit less. The results of a pretest conducted on a separate sample of 48 students (between subjects) drawn from the same population showed that in the absence of any manipulation, the proportion of

participants who chose to trade up on this choice was not significantly different when the options were Duke t-shirts versus white t-shirts ( $M_{\text{Duke}} = .60$  vs.  $M_{\text{white}} = .65$ ;  $F(1, 46) < 1$ ).

Perceived self-relevance of the t-shirts was then assessed by having participants indicate on a nine-point scale the extent to which they agree that the t-shirts say something about who they are as an individual (anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*). Next, participants responded to the question *How do you feel about yourself right now?* (adapted from Leary et al. 2007) on a 13-point scale anchored with *extremely bad* and *extremely good* (only the scale's endpoints were labeled). Finally, participants completed a funneled debriefing questionnaire (Bargh and Chartrand 2000), which included several open-ended questions designed to probe for awareness about the true purpose of the experiment. Participants who indicated that that they believed the purpose of the RAT was to make them feel bad and pick the expensive t-shirt ( $N = 17$ ) were excluded from the analyses.<sup>3</sup>

## **2.3 Results**

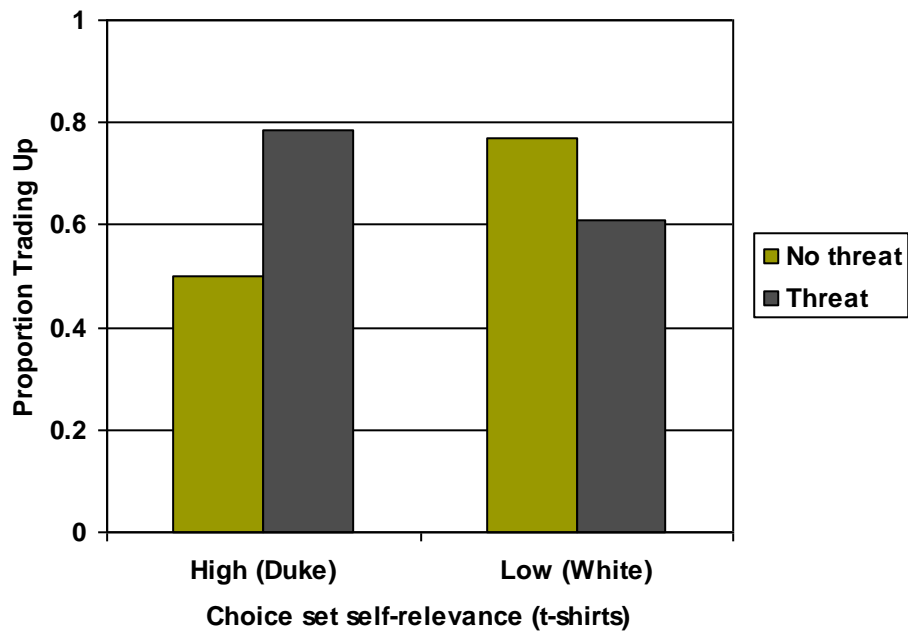
### **2.3.1 T-shirt Choice**

The manipulated variable(s) were contrast coded for statistical analyses. The analyses supported the hypothesis that threat triggers self-expressive consumption: a

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<sup>3</sup> Awareness of the purpose of the experimental manipulations and measures may have been due to an experimenter's heavy-handed approach to administering the manipulations. Following past research (e.g., Aarts, Gollwitzer, and Hassin, 2004; Chartrand and Bargh, 1996; Lakin and Chartrand, 2003), aware participants were excluded from the analyses (for a discussion of this issue, see Bargh and Chartrand, 2000). However, including these participants did not change the pattern of change.

binary logistic regression yielded a significant interaction between threat (threat vs. no threat) and choice set self-relevance (high vs. low),  $\chi^2(1) = 4.58, p < .05$ . Simple effects confirmed that relative to the no threat condition, threat increased the proportion of participants trading up when the choice set was high on self-relevance,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.98, p < .05$ , but when the choice set was low on self-relevance, threat decreased the proportion of participants trading up,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.86, p < .05$ . The main effect of threat condition was marginally significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.79, p < .10$ , as was the main effect of choice set self-relevance,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.10, p < .10$ . The data are depicted in figure 2.



**Figure 2: Proportion Trading Up as a Function of Choice Set Self-Relevance and Threat Condition in Experiment 1**

### **2.3.2 T-shirt Self-relevance**

As a manipulation check, perceptions of t-shirt self-relevance were measured and regressed on threat condition (threat vs. no threat) and choice set self-relevance (high vs. low). Results showed that the choice set high on self-relevance (Duke t-shirts) was rated as more important for saying something about the self than the choice set low on self-relevance (white t-shirts),  $t(89) = -2.38, p < .05$ . Interestingly, this main effect was qualified by an interaction,  $t(89) = 2.06, p < .05$ , indicating that threat increased the perceived self-relevance of the Duke t-shirts and decreased the perceived self-relevance of the white t-shirts.

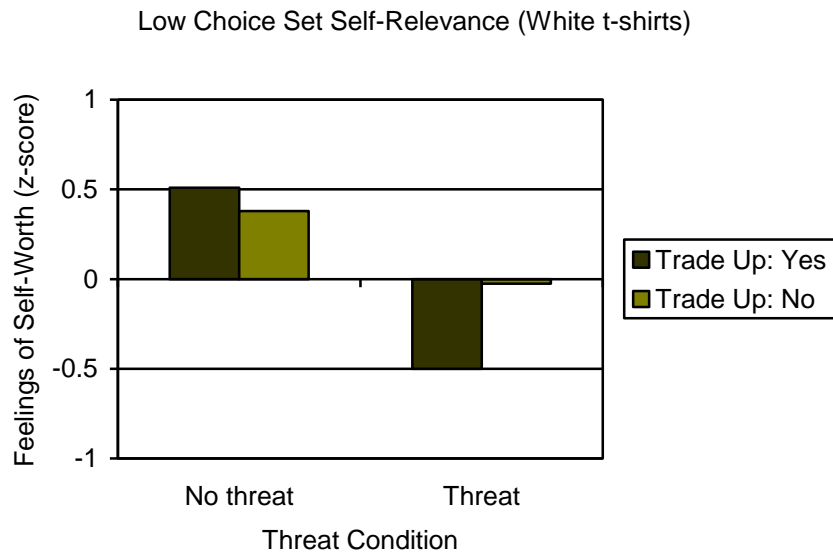
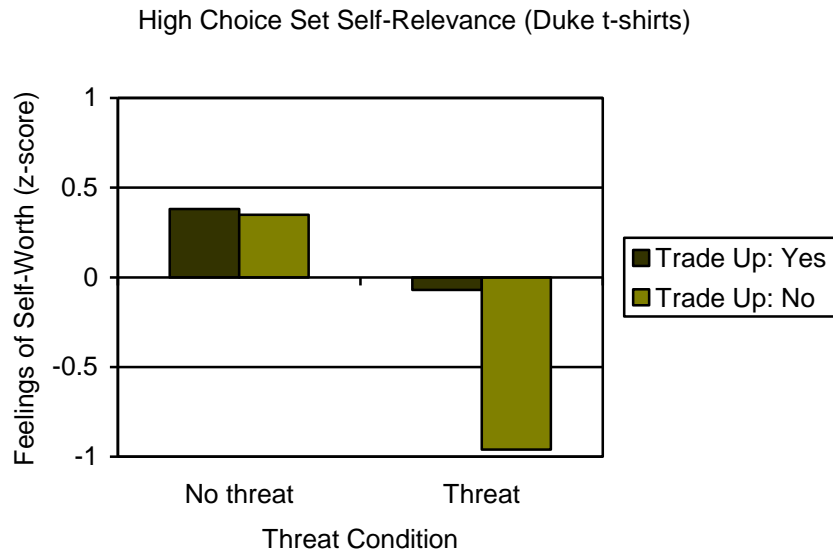
### **2.3.3 Feelings of Self-Worth**

An ANOVA was conducted with threat condition (threat vs. no threat), choice set self-relevance (high vs. low), and choice (trade up: yes vs. trade up: no) as predictors, and feelings of self-worth as the dependent variable. The data are depicted in figure 3. Note that ratings of participants' feelings of self-worth were standardized for expositional ease. Results suggested that participants felt worse about themselves if they had who worked on the difficult RAT compared to the easy RAT,  $F(1, 84) = 9.64, p < .01$ . This main effect was qualified by a three-way interaction,  $F(1, 84) = 6.10, p < .01$ , which was decomposed to test the hypotheses that trading up can repair self-worth when choice sets are high on self-relevance but not when choice sets are low on self-relevance. In support of this prediction, the negative feelings of self-worth provoked by the difficult RAT were attenuated among participants who traded up when the choice set was high on self-

relevance,  $F(1, 84) = 5.46$ ,  $p < .05$ . When the choice set was low on self-relevance, the pattern of means clearly indicated that trading up did not repair self-worth; in fact, results indicated that when the choice set was low on self-relevance, self-worth was (marginally) repaired by not trading up,  $F(1, 84) = 3.15$ ,  $p < .10$ .

Although these findings are consistent with the notion that self-worth is repaired by self-expressive consumption, an alternative possibility is that self-worth experiences an additional blow by non-self expressive consumption. So, for instance, participants feel negatively about themselves after failing the intelligence test and then feel even worse after trading up on the white t-shirt or being thrifty on the Duke t-shirt. To address this alternative possibility, no choice control conditions were included in which participants' self-worth was measured after experienced threat ( $M = -.84$ ) or no threat ( $M = .52$ ). The key question was whether feelings of self-worth were better among threatened participants in the no choice control condition ( $M = -.84$ ) compared to threatened participants who did not trade up on a self-relevant product ( $M = -1.01$ ) or threatened participants who traded up on a less self-relevant product ( $M = -.50$ ). Results indicated that self-worth did not vary significantly between these groups ( $F < 1$ ), which is consistent with the hypothesis that self-expressive consumption repairs self-worth.





**Figure 3: Feelings of Self-Worth as a Function of Choice Set Self-Relevance, Threat Condition, and Trading up in Experiment 1**

## **2.4 Discussion**

This experiment finds that individuals who experience events that make them feel negatively about themselves respond by consuming in a way that immediately makes them feel better about themselves. These responses include trading up in domains that are relevant to consumers' self-concepts and *not* trading up in domains that are less self-relevant. Three aspects of these findings are noteworthy. First, when individuals feel badly about themselves, consumption does not generally increase; it becomes more self-expressive. Second, the idea of acquiring a self-relevant product is not sufficient to repair self-worth. If that were the case, then whether participants traded up or not on a self-relevant product would produce similar results. It seems instead that when it comes to self-relevant products, to repair their self-worth, consumers should trade up. Finally, trading up on a self-relevant product was not the only route to repair. Indeed, there was some evidence that trading down on a less self-relevant product also repaired self-worth. Taken together, these findings suggest that threat triggers self-expressive consumption and self-expressive consumption, in turn, repairs negative feelings of self-worth.

One interpretation of these findings is that individuals compensate for a specific threat to self-worth (here, academic incompetence) by trading up on products that match the nature of the threat (here, Duke t-shirts). According to this perspective, trading up following threat would occur only for products related to academics. On the other hand, a different interpretation of experiment 1's findings is that individuals compensate for any threat to self-worth by trading up on any product that is self-relevant; Duke t-shirts could be substituted with any other self-relevant product and the same effects would occur.

While specific compensatory consumption has been the focus of prior research (Braun and Wicklund 1989; Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1985), cross-domain compensatory consumption would be a highly favorable feature of the self system because it would afford flexibility in how one maintains feelings of self-worth (Steele et al. 1993; Tesser et al. 1996). Therefore, the next experiment moves to a consumption domain that has no relation to the nature of the threat.

## 3. Experiment 2a

### 3.1 Introduction

Experiment 2a sought to conceptually replicate experiment 1's main finding that threatened feelings of self-worth impact trading up as a function of the self-relevance of a consumption context. Rather than manipulating self-relevance, self-relevance was measured, and rather than manipulating threat, threat was buffered or not. Self-relevance was measured via a questionnaire that assessed participants' chronic tendency to perceive possessions as part of who they are (this questionnaire was a modified version of the Brand-Extended Self-Construal scale (BESC), Sprott et al. 2007). The psychological buffer involved writing about a value important to the self (vs. others) (Steele and Liu 1983; Steele et al. 1993).

Another purpose of experiment 2a was to measure a real consumer choice. As the measure of trading up, participants decided how they would allocate \$100 to two different gift cards should they be the winner of a draw being conducted in the research lab. The gift cards were for the stores Nordstrom and Macy's, which were selected based on pretesting.<sup>1</sup> Because shopping at Nordstrom is more expensive and therefore indicative of trading up, participants who were feeling threatened (i.e., those who were

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<sup>1</sup> For one pretest, 100 Duke students rated the desirability of the Macy's and Nordstrom gift cards (along with several other gift cards) on seven-point scales anchored with *not at all desirable* and *very desirable*. The results showed that the Macy's and Nordstrom gift cards were considered equally desirable ( $M_{\text{Macy's}} = 4.8$  vs.  $M_{\text{Nordstrom}} = 5.0$ ,  $F(1, 98) < 1$ ). A separate pretest asked 71 different students to rate how expensive they perceived shopping at these stores to be on a single nine-point scale, where -4 indicated *Macy's is more expensive than Nordstrom*, 0 indicated they were *equally expensive*, and +4 indicated *Nordstrom is more expensive than Macy's*. The results suggested that participants perceived shopping at Nordstrom to be more expensive ( $M = 1.76$ ,  $t(70) = 8.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

not buffered by the value affirmation task) were predicted to allocate more money to the Nordstrom gift card if they were high on chronic possession self-relevance and less money to the Nordstrom gift card if they were low on chronic possession self-relevance.

## **3.2 Methods**

### **3.2.1 Participants and Design**

Thirty-eight Duke undergraduate students received \$10 each to participate. . The experiment incorporated two between-subjects variables in a 2 (buffer condition: buffer vs. no buffer) X chronic possession self-relevance design, with buffer condition manipulated and chronic possession self-relevance measured.

### **3.2.2 Materials and Procedure**

Participants completed the measure of chronic possession self-relevance either at the beginning or end of the experiment. Scores on this scale did not vary systematically as a function of position or as a function of threat condition ( $F_s < 1$ ), so the position of the scale was excluded as a factor in the analyses. Sample items from this scale include *I have a special bond with my favorite possessions* and *There are links between my special possessions and how I view myself*. The full scale is presented in the appendix.

Participants responded to the items on seven-point scales anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Following the modified BESC scale, several other scales were completed in Experiments 2a, 2b, and 3. These included the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (Paulhus, 1984), Materialism (Richins and

Participants were randomly assigned to be either buffered or not buffered by completing one of two versions of a value affirmation task. All participants were presented with six categories of values obtained from the Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values scale (Allport, Vernon, and Lindzey 1960) and were instructed to rank the values according to personal importance. The categories (all of which were described to the participants) included religion, social life and relationships, business and economics, fine arts, theory, and politics. Participants in the buffer condition were then instructed to write a few paragraphs about why their first ranked value is important to them, and participants in the no buffer (control) condition were instructed to write a few paragraphs about why their sixth ranked value might be important to someone else. Participants completed this task alone in the testing room and were given 5 min. to work on it.

Following the value affirmation task, all participants were led to fail on the difficult RAT and then reported how they were feeling about themselves at the moment on the same 13-point scale that was used in experiment 1. As participants prepared to leave, they were told that the lab was conducting a prize draw that week, which was March Break, and all participants were automatically entered. The prizes were worth \$100 and their chances of being selected as a winner were quite good given that participation is relatively low during March Break. The experimenter then indicated that the \$100 prize would be allocated to gift cards for two major retailers at a local mall,

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Dawson, 1992), and two different measures of trait Self-Esteem, the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker, Luhtanen, and Bouvrette, 2003) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965). None of these other measures reliably accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in these experiments, so they will not be discussed further.

Nordstrom and Macy's, and participants could choose how they wanted the \$100 distributed across these two cards, should they be a winner. All participants reported that they were familiar with both stores.

The last item participants completed was a funneled debriefing (similar to that used in experiment 1). Participants were excluded from the analyses if they indicated on the funneled debriefing that the purpose of the difficult RAT was to make them feel bad and allocate more money to the Nordstrom's gift card ( $N = 5$ ).<sup>3</sup>

### **3.3 Results**

#### **3.3.1 Feelings of Self-Worth**

To determine whether the value affirmation task did in fact buffer (or not) against the threat, an ANOVA was conducted that examined participants' feelings as a function of buffer condition. Results showed that buffered participants indeed had higher feelings of self-worth following the threat than participants who were not buffered ( $M_{\text{buffer}} = 6.1$  vs.  $M_{\text{no buffer}} = 4.4$ ,  $F(1, 31) = 4.0$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As would be expected, neither chronic possession self-relevance nor its interaction with threat condition had significant effects on feelings of self-worth,  $ts < 1$ .

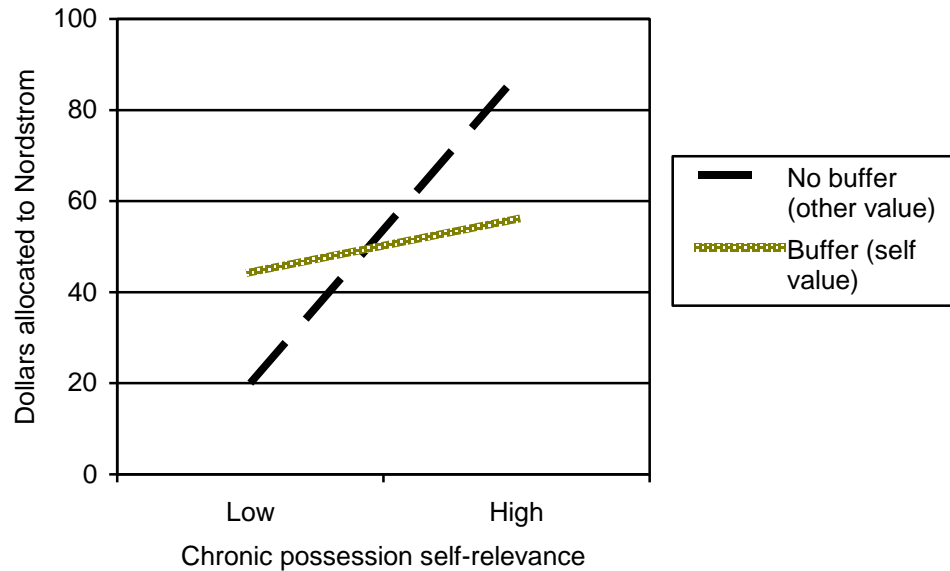
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<sup>3</sup> All participants who reported awareness were run by the same experimenter who seemed to trigger awareness in Experiment 1. As in that experiment, including these participants in the analysis does not significantly change the pattern of results.

### 3.3.2 Allocation of Money

The variable buffer condition was dummy coded for the analyses. First, trading up (i.e., dollars allocated to the Nordstrom gift card) was regressed on buffer condition (buffer vs. no buffer) and chronic possession self-relevance. As illustrated in figure 4, chronic possession self-relevance interacted with buffer condition to predict trading up,  $t(28) = -2.33, p < .05$ . To explore this interaction, the slope of chronic possession self-relevance was examined separately in the buffer and no buffer conditions. Results showed that the slope of chronic possession self-relevance on trading up was positive and significant in the no buffer condition,  $t(28) = 2.36, p < .05$ , but non-significant in the buffer condition,  $t < 1$ . These findings suggest that individual differences in chronic possession self-relevance had the most pronounced impact on trading up among participants who were not buffered against the threat, thereby supporting the hypothesis that threats to self-worth cause consumers to allocate money in a manner consistent with their self-concepts. Finally, to test for differences between the buffered and no buffered conditions, spotlight analyses were conducted at 2 standard deviations above and 2 standard deviations below the mean of chronic possession self-relevance. These analyses revealed that consumers who were high on chronic possession self-relevance traded up more when not buffered than when buffered,  $t(28) = 2.07, p < .05$ , and consumers who were low on chronic possession self-relevance traded up less when not buffered than when buffered,  $t(28) = -2.32, p < .05$ .





**Figure 4: Dollars Allocated to Nordstrom Gift Card as a Function of Chronic Possession Self-Relevance and Buffer Condition in Experiment 2a**

### ***3.4 Discussion***

This experiment finds that individuals do not always respond to potentially threatening events by engaging in self-expressive consumption. When a psychological buffer is in place, feelings of self-worth are protected from the potential threat and consumers are less inclined to engage in self-expressive consumption. The manipulations and measures differed from experiment 1's, yet the conceptual pattern of results parallels experiment 1's findings: when consumers feel threatened, the perception that material goods are (or are not) self-relevant leads to more (or less) trading up. These results were obtained using a different measure of trading up than in experiment 1 – trading up on a retail store.

## **4. Experiment 2b**

### ***4.1 Introduction***

From the perspective that threats to self-worth trigger more self-expressive consumption, the key determinant of trading up is the perception of self-relevance. Thus, the chronic perception that material objects are self-relevant should lead people whose feelings of self-worth are threatened to trade up across a wider range of consumption contexts. To explore this hypothesis, experiment 2b examined how chronic possession self-relevance and choice set self-relevance (i.e., school logo t-shirts vs. white t-shirts) impact the decision to trade up or not. All participants encountered a threat to their self-worth, but for half of the participants a psychological buffer (the value affirmation task) was in place. Among participants who were not buffered, high chronic possession self-relevance should result in trading up across choice sets, but low chronic possession self-relevance should not.

### ***4.2 Methods***

#### **4.2.1 Participants and Design**

Ninety-three University of North Carolina (UNC) undergraduate students received course credit to participate. The experiment incorporated three between-subjects variables in a 2 (buffer condition: buffer vs. no buffer) X 2 (choice set self-relevance:

high vs. low) X chronic possession self-relevance design. Buffer condition and choice set relevance were manipulated and chronic possession self-relevance was measured.

#### **4.2.2 Materials and Procedure**

Participants completed the chronic possession self-relevance scale either at the beginning or end of the experiment. Scores on this scale did not vary systematically as a function of position or as a function of threat condition ( $F_s < 1$ ), so this factor was excluded from analyses. As in experiment 2a, participants were randomly assigned to one of two value affirmation tasks, in which they wrote about a value important to the self or someone else. All participants were then led to fail on the difficult RAT. A hypothetical shopping scenario then presented a choice between either two UNC t-shirts or two white t-shirts and participants decided whether they would trade up or not (this scenario were used in experiment 1, but pertained to “Duke” instead of “UNC”). Finally, participants responded to a funneled debriefing questionnaire.

### **4.3 Results**

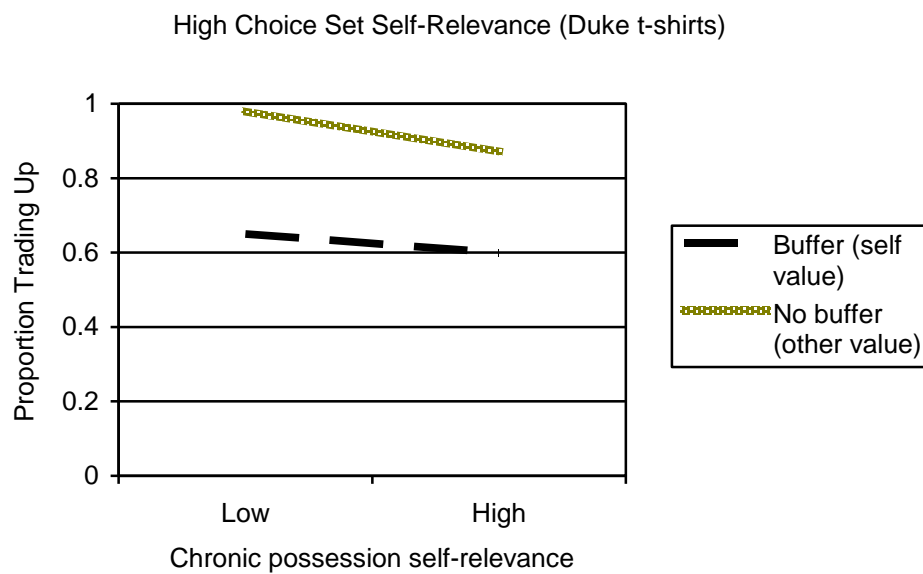
#### **4.3.1 T-shirt Choice**

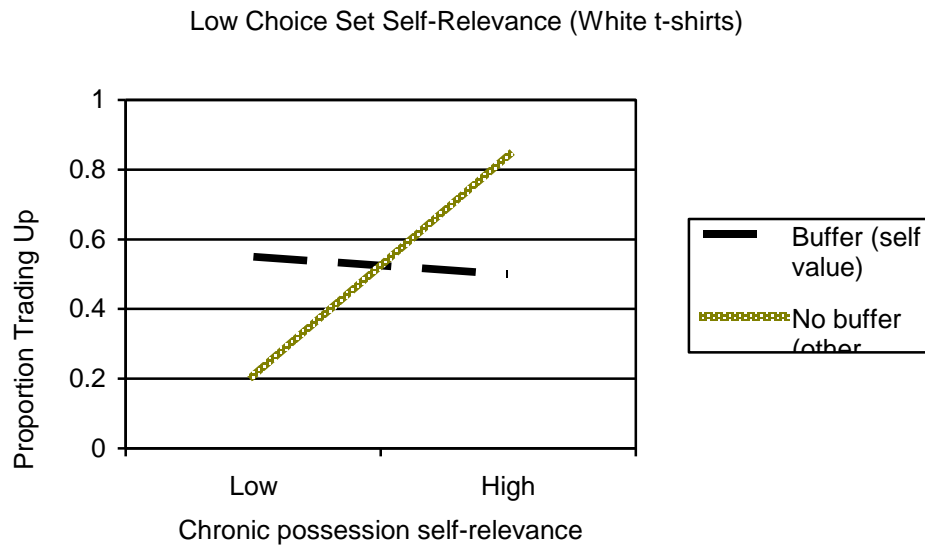
The variables buffer condition and choice set self-relevance were dummy coded for the analyses. A binary logistic regression replicated the significant two-way interaction between buffer condition (buffer vs. no buffer) and chronic possession self-relevance obtained in experiment 2a,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.03, p < .05$ , but this effect was qualified by a significant three-way interaction between buffer condition, chronic possession self-relevance, and choice set relevance

(high vs. low),  $\chi^2(1) = 3.85, p < .05$ . Figure 5 presents the data by low and high choice set self-relevance. In the low choice set self-relevance condition (i.e., the white t-shirt condition), the slope of chronic possession self-relevance on trading up was positive and significant in the no buffer condition,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.66, p < .05$ , but non-significant in the buffer condition  $\chi^2 < 1$ . These slopes were significantly different from each other,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.03, p < .05$ . These findings closely parallel those obtained in the previous study – chronic possession self-relevance had the most pronounced impact on trading up among individuals whose feelings of self-worth were not buffered against threat, which supports the hypothesis that the experience of threat triggers self-expressive consumption. To address whether trading up could both increase and decrease among non-buffered individuals, spotlight analyses were conducted at 2 standard deviations above and 2 standard deviations below the mean of chronic possession self-relevance. Results suggested that, relative to consumers who were buffered, those who were not buffered were more likely to trade up if they were high on chronic possession self-relevance,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.85, p < .05$ , and less likely to trade up if they were low on chronic possession self-relevance,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.76, p < .10$ . Thus, the pattern of results replicated experiments 1 and 2a: while threat can increase consumer spending, it can also have the opposite effect.

In the high choice set self-relevance condition (i.e., the school logo t-shirt condition), the slope of chronic possession self-relevance on trading up was again non-significant in the buffer condition, but it was also non-significant in the no buffer condition,  $\chi^2s < 1$  – not because trading up was unaffected, but because of a ceiling effect: all participants in the high choice set self-relevance condition tended to trade up when the threat was not buffered. This increase in trading up was significant at 2 standard

deviations above the mean on chronic possession self-relevance,  $\chi^2 (1) = 3.85, p < .05$ , replicating the results obtained for the low choice set self-relevance condition. Moreover, this increase in trading up was marginally significant at 2 standard deviations below the mean on chronic possession self-relevance,  $\chi^2 (1) = 2.65, p = .10$ , reversing the results obtained for the low choice set self-relevance condition. Thus, given this highly self-relevant choice set, the effect of individual differences on the response to threat was wiped out, as individuals who often would be less likely to trade up actually became somewhat more likely to trade up.





**Figure 5: Proportion Trading Up as a Function of Buffer Condition, Chronic Possession Self-Relevance, and Choice Set Self-Relevance in Experiment 2b**

#### ***4.4 Discussion***

These findings are consistent with the perspective that self-expressive consumption is triggered by threat: when threat was buffered, the individual and choice set differences that influence how one would respond to a threat did not come into play. When threat was not buffered, individuals who tend to consider material objects self-relevant traded up across choice sets, while individuals who tend not to consider material objects self-relevant traded up only in a particularly self-relevant choice set (i.e., the choice of a school logo t-shirt), and otherwise traded down. This latter finding is noteworthy because it suggests that people for whom material objects are “not me” do not always become thriftier when they are feeling badly about themselves. Taken together, these findings underscore the key point that when self-worth is

threatened (here, not buffered), consumers are more (or less) likely to trade up when products are perceived to be more (or less) relevant to who they are.

Thus far, this research has shown that threats to self-worth lead to more self-expressive consumption. While experiment 1 showed that self-expressive consumption can repair feelings of self-worth, what has not yet been addressed is how the possessions consumers acquire can affect their self-worth in the long-term. Can consumers rely on possessions to protect self-worth from events that would otherwise be threatening? This issue is addressed in the next two experiments.

## 5. Experiment 3

### 5.1 Introduction

Experiment 3 transitions to a new view regarding the self-protective function that possessions might serve. The basic notion is that when people establish meaningful connections to the material objects they possess, these possessions can function as resources that can buffer against threats to self-worth and thereby impact the tendency to trade up on other consumption decisions. The methods employed to manipulate the psychological buffer in the previous experiments (i.e., the value affirmation task) were adapted to explore the buffering capabilities of possessions. Participants described a possession that was important to them (or, in the control condition, one that could be important to someone else) for who they are and how they feel about themselves. Following a potentially threatening event, they were given the opportunity to trade up or not (using the gift card procedure from experiment 2a).

If the possession affirmation procedure can buffer self-worth in the same way as the value affirmation procedure, then the results should parallel experiments 2a and 2b: participants in the buffer condition should be protected from the threat and self-expressive consumption should be minimal, but participants in the no buffer condition should be unprotected from the threat and engage in more self-expressive consumption. A point of departure from those experiments, however, is that experiment 3's data are examined in a more nuanced manner by including feelings of self-worth as an additional predictor of trading up. If self-expressive consumption is triggered by negative feelings



of self-worth, then it follows that consumption should become more self-expressive as feelings of self-worth become more negative. So, in addition to examining whether possessions can operate as buffers against threat, experiment 3 examines the prediction that self-expressive consumption should be most extreme among individuals who were not buffered against the threat and whose feelings of self-worth were particularly negative following the threat.

## ***5.2 Methods***

### **5.2.1 Participants and Design**

Thirty-two undergraduate students received \$10 each to participate. The experiment incorporated three between-subjects variables in a 2 (buffer condition: buffer vs. no buffer) X current feelings of self-worth X chronic possession self-relevance design, with buffer condition manipulated and current feelings of self-worth and chronic possession self-relevance measured.

### **5.2.2 Materials and Procedure**

Participants completed the chronic possession self-relevance scale either at the beginning or end of the experiment (as in the previous experiments, neither order nor the manipulation influenced scores). Participants were then randomly assigned to either the buffer or no buffer condition. Participants in the buffer condition were instructed to write down three possessions they have purchased that are important to them because they say something about who they are and make them feel good about themselves. Then they

were asked to select their most important possession from the list and write about why it is so important for these reasons (c.f. Richins 1994). In the no buffer condition, participants were instructed to list three possessions that might be important to others for these reasons, but to take care not to include in their list possessions that were personally meaningful. Then they were instructed to select from their list the possession least important to them and write about why someone else might find it important to who they are and how they feel about themselves.

Following the possession affirmation task, all participants were led to fail on the difficult RAT, and then completed the 13-point scale of feelings of self-worth. Next, participants were told about a \$100 gift card prize draw and indicated how they would want the money allocated to the Nordstrom and Macy's cards, should they be a winner (instructions were identical to experiment 2a). The last item participants completed was a funneled debriefing, which revealed that none of the participants were aware of the purpose of the experiment.

### ***5.3 Results***

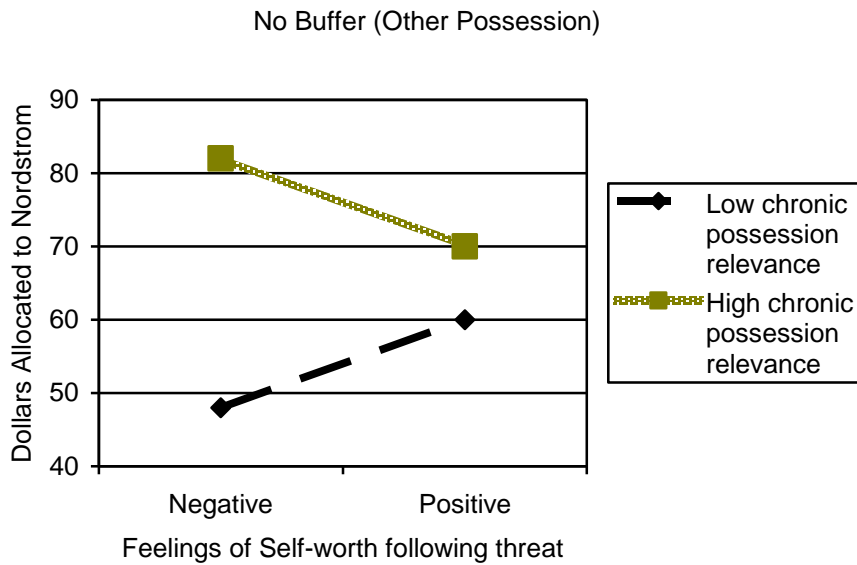
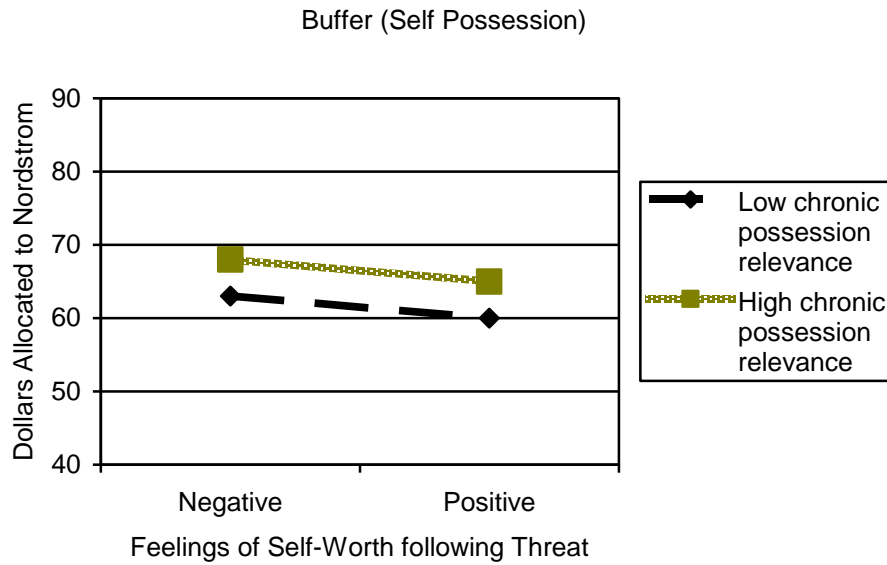
#### **5.3.1 Allocation of Money**

The variable buffer condition was dummy coded for the analyses. A regression analysis was conducted with buffer condition (buffer vs. no buffer), feelings of self-worth, and chronic possession self-relevance as predictors, and amount of money allocated to the Nordstrom gift card as the measure of trading up. The results revealed a three-way interaction among possession affirmation condition, current feelings of self-

worth, and chronic possession self-relevance,  $t(24) = 2.44, p < .05$ ,<sup>1</sup> which is illustrated in figure 6. Note that the continuous variable chronic possession self-relevance is median split for illustrative purposes. The simple interaction of feelings of self-worth and chronic possession self-relevance was non-significant among buffered participants  $t < 1$ . This finding makes sense in light of an additional result, which suggests that the possession affirmation procedure indeed protected against threat,  $t(24) = 2.0, p < .05$ . Because possessions can protect against threats to self-worth, then the impact of a potentially threatening event is offset and self-expressive consumption is minimal. On the other hand, among participants who were not buffered, the interaction between feelings of self-worth and chronic possession self-relevance was significant,  $t(24) = 2.59, p < .01$ . As depicted in the figure, those *low* on chronic possession self-relevance traded up *less* as a function of feeling more negatively about themselves, while those *high* on chronic possession self-relevance traded up *more* as a function of feeling more negatively about themselves. This pattern of results supports the hypothesis that self-expressive consumption is most pronounced among individuals whose self-worth is the most threatened.

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<sup>1</sup> This same three-way interaction was found in experiment 2a. Although the results were only marginally significant, the analysis yielded the identical pattern of data.



**Figure 6: Dollars Allocated to Nordstrom Gift Card as a Function of Buffer Condition, Feelings of Self-Worth, and Chronic Possession Self-Relevance in Experiment 3**

## ***5.4 Discussion***

Supporting the theory that threats to self-worth trigger self-expressive consumption, experiment 3 found that high (vs. low) chronic possession self-relevance led to the most (least) trading up when participants were not buffered from the threat and felt particularly badly about themselves following the threat. The results of experiment 3 also provide initial evidence that possessions can function as coping resources. Simply writing about a possession that is important to self-worth protected participants from the experience of an otherwise threatening event. This finding suggests that what consumers do with their possessions can have downstream consequences for buyer behavior. Consumers who develop positive attachments between possessions and self-worth can rely these possessions to protect their self-worth, thereby making them less likely to retail therapy when they face threats in their daily lives.

It is also worth highlighting that this methodology provides a conservative test of the protective value of possessions. Presumably, consumers have ensembles of possessions that they use to protect their feelings of self-worth, with several possessions working together at any given time. Moreover, different types of possessions and different types of relationships to possessions likely affect the extent to which a possession can protect self-worth. For instance, a t-shirt displaying an owner's school logo might symbolize either self-discipline or a social clique, both of which might be important qualities to the owner's self-worth. But are both types of self-possession associations equally effective when it comes to buffering against threats to his self-worth? To determine whether different types of self-possession connections do vary in

their capacity to protect against threats to self-worth, Experiment 4 manipulated this factor.

## 6. Experiment 4

### 6.1 Introduction

The protective benefits of a possession might depend on how consumers construe the relationship between the possession, their self-concept, and their feelings of self-worth. For instance, a consumer might consider a piece of art important because it makes him feel sophisticated among his friends and it reminds him of his wife, who was with him when he bought it. Alternatively, he could consider its acquisition a personal accomplishment because its aesthetic qualities blend well with the home décor and it covers a hole in the wall. The nature of these self-possession relationships vary in terms of whether they are social or personal in nature, and their efficacy as psychological buffers against threat will be compared in this experiment.

There is a long-standing debate about whether the self-concept (and our feelings about it, feelings of self-worth) is necessarily social in origin. Clearly, self-worth is affected by social experiences, including the roles we play, social comparisons, and other people's judgments, but are *social-worth* and *self-worth* dissociable? Many investigators have tackled this issue by treating the self-concept as multifaceted, encompassing actual, ideal, and social components (Hughes and Guerrero 1971; Sirgy 1980), while others have taken the stance that self-worth is simply a reflection of social-worth. One variant of this perspective suggests that feelings of self-worth are a gauge of perceived interpersonal value, and fluctuations are due to perceived changes in social approval and acceptance (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Leary 2007; Leary and Baumeister 2000). It follows from

this perspective that possessions protect feelings of self-worth to the extent possessions are perceived to be valued aspects of our social selves. Thus, highlighting the social importance of possessions might be the most effective buffer against threats to self-worth. This hypothesis is tested in the current experiment.

In the current experiment, participants described a possession in terms either of its personal importance or its social importance to the self-concept and feelings of self-worth, or in terms of its importance to someone else's self-concept and self-worth (control condition). Self-worth protection was assessed by examining trading up on a white t-shirt following a subsequent threat. The results are expected to be similar to experiment 2b's findings in that participants in the no buffer condition who are high (vs. low) on chronic possession self-relevance should be more (less) likely to trade up. The key question in the current research is whether the two buffer conditions would produce different effects on self-expressive consumption. If one type of buffer is superior to the other, this will be revealed by greater attenuation of self-expressive consumption.

## ***6.2 Methods***

### **6.2.1 Participants and Design**

Sixty-six undergraduate students received \$10 each to participate. The experiment incorporated two between-subjects variables in a 3 (social buffer vs. personal buffer vs. no buffer) X chronic possession self-relevance design, with buffer condition manipulated and chronic possession self-relevance measured.



## **6.2.2 Materials and Procedure**

Participants completed the chronic possession self-relevance scale either at the beginning or end of the experiment (as in the previous experiments, neither order nor the manipulation affected participants' scores). Participants were randomly assigned to the social buffer, personal buffer, or no buffer conditions. The procedure and instructions were the same as in experiment 3, except that participants read an example that described different types of self-possession connections. In the buffer conditions, participants were instructed to write down three possessions they have purchased that are important to them because they say something about who they are and they make them feel good about themselves either for social or personal reasons (depending upon condition). Then they selected their most important product from the list and wrote about why it is important for those reasons. Instructions for the control condition were identical to experiment 3. All participants subsequently made a hypothetical choice between two white t-shirts (the same scenario used in experiments 1 and 2b). Finally, participants completed a funneled debriefing, which suggested that none of the participants were aware of the purpose of the experiment.

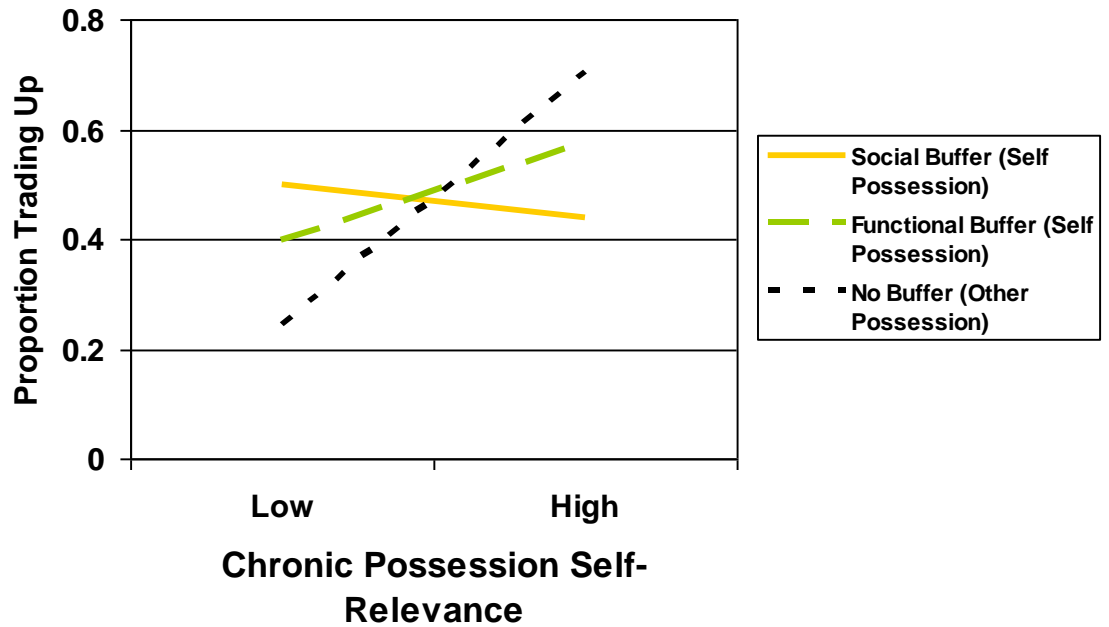
## **6.3 Results**

### **6.3.1 T-shirt Choice**

Each of the three levels of the buffer condition variable (social buffer vs. personal buffer vs. no buffer) was dummy coded and set to zero to examine the slopes of chronic possession self-relevance. The results of a logistic regression showed that only in the no buffer condition was

this slope significant,  $\chi^2 (1) = 5.22, p < .05$ . Among those who wrote about their own possession, whether personally or socially important, self-expressive consumption was attenuated,  $\chi^2s < 1$ .

The next question was whether the personal and social buffers differed in their efficacy relative to the no buffer condition. To address this, the slope of chronic possession self-relevance on trading up was compared for the social buffer and no buffer conditions. The pattern of results, depicted in figure 7, showed that self-expressive consumption was more likely in the no buffer condition compared to the social buffer condition,  $\chi^2 (1) = 8.18, p < .01$ , which is consistent with the theory that the social buffer protected self-worth. The slope of chronic possession self-relevance on trading up for the personal buffer condition fell between the other two, but was only marginally different from the no buffer condition,  $\chi^2 (1) = 2.95, p < .10$ , and the social buffer condition,  $\chi^2 (1) = 3.24, p < .10$ . This pattern of results suggests that possessions protect self-worth most effectively when their links to the self highlight consumers' social relationships.



**Figure 7: Proportion Trading Up as a Function of Chronic Possession Self-Relevance and Buffer Condition in Experiment 4**

### **6.4 Discussion**

When consumers consider possessions important to self-worth for social reasons (e.g., “it reminds me of my mother”, “it makes me more attractive”, or “it keeps me connected to my friends”), they can rely on these possessions to buffer against threat. When possessions are important to self-worth for personal reasons (e.g., “it keeps me healthy”, “I learn a lot from it”, or “it helps me to perform better in school”), consumers are less able to rely on these possessions as buffers. So, although consumers might have numerous possessions that represent core aspects of the self, the self-possession connections that are important because of their links to social relationships may be the best resources for coping with events that threaten self-worth.

## 7. General Discussion

Prior research has highlighted the dark side of consumption (Arndt et al. 2004; Belk 1985; O’Guinn and Faber 1989; Richins and Dawson 1992). I examine what drives consumers to pay premium prices for goods (i.e., trade up) in some categories and under some circumstances but not others. The framework developed here posits that among consumers who experience events that threaten their self-worth, consumption decisions become more consistent with their self-concepts, their specific beliefs about who they are. While this self-expressive consumption can increase consumer spending, it can also have the opposite effect. For instance, consumers can express that a product is “me” (high on self-relevance) by trading up or “not me” (low on self-relevance) by not trading up. Consumers who experience a threat to self-worth would therefore be more likely to trade up (or trade up more) in consumption domains that are high on self-relevance and less likely to trade up (or trade up less) in consumption domains that are low on self-relevance. Relevance to the self-concept was operationalized both by the choice set (e.g., choice between Duke t-shirts or plain white t-shirts) and by the degree to which individuals chronically view possessions as integral aspects of the self. Both choice set self-relevance and chronic possession self-relevance moderated trading up, thus supporting the notion that threats to self-worth impact self-expressive consumption.

This research also examined two hypotheses regarding how consumption could, in turn, affect feelings of self-worth. The first hypothesis stated that negative feelings of self-worth can be immediately repaired via consumer decisions (here, the decision to

trade up or not). Results revealed that self-worth was repaired not only by trading up on self-relevant choices, but also by not trading up on less self-relevant choices. The second hypothesis stated that positive attachments between possessions and consumers' feelings of self-worth enable consumers to rely on possessions to protect self-worth. To test this, participants wrote about a possession that was important for who they are and how they feel about themselves (participants in a control condition wrote about a possession important to other people for this reason). Results showed that writing about a self-relevant possession before failing a test buffered the impact of failure on feelings of self-worth. This research also explored how the type of meaning attached to a possession determines its capacity to protect consumers against threat, and showed that the greatest protective power comes from possessions that are important vis-à-vis consumers' social relationships.

### ***7.1 Limitations and Future Directions***

The current research posits that threats to self-worth lead to more self-expressive consumption, defined as consumption that is consistent with the self-concept. It is important to note that while the self-concept is complex and multifaceted, the current research has focused on situations where consumption can enable individuals to portray themselves in a positively valued light. It is perhaps less likely that a consumer whose self-worth is threatened would make consumption decisions that would depict the self negatively. For instance, a consumer might have a negative body image but aspire to be thin and beautiful. When self-worth is threatened, it is perhaps more likely that this

consumer trade up on products that portray this ideal self rather than the actual self, even with self-relevance held constant. Moreover, this consumer might actively avoid consumption decisions that would risk the actual self portrayal. For instance, shopping for clothing might be threatening to a consumer with a negative body image, while shopping for electronics or home décor items might not, and perhaps it is only in situations where feelings of self-worth have experienced a boost where consumers who actively seek out products that potentially highlight negative aspects of their self-concepts. Self-affirmed consumers might also be more inclined to purchase products that represent negative or threatened aspects of the self. Self-affirmation enables individuals to process negative self-relevant information in an unbiased way (Sherman and Cohen 2002), which would suggest that because they temporarily have the resources to cope with the negative self-portrayal. The bottom line is that there might be important boundary conditions for future research to explore with respect to the impact of threat on self-expressive consumption.

This work has implications for literatures on trading up and coping, as well as implications for consumer welfare and marketing practitioners. These implications will be addressed in the sections that follow.

## ***7.2 Trading Up***

Several lines of research in marketing address the drivers of trading up. For instance, whether or not consumers trade up might be a function of price-quality trade-offs (Diehl, Kornish, and Lynch 2003; Kardes, Cronley, Kellaris, and Posavac 2004;

Lichtenstein and Burton 1989; Lim, Olshavsky, and Kim 1988; Lynch and Ariely 2000), stimulus organization (Park, Jun, and Macinnis 2000; Simonson, Nowlis, and Lemon 1993), and/or reference group effects (Amaldoss and Jain 2005; 2007). The current research contributes to this literature a framework to understand what drives consumers to trade up in some categories and under some circumstances but not others. The current conceptualization suggests that trading up is a form of self-enhancement whereby people make a statement about who they are via their decision to trade up or not and, in so doing, they come to feel more favorably about themselves.

### ***7.3 Implications for Coping Literature in Marketing***

This research highlights self-focus as an important continuum on which affective states lie. Nowadays, the dominant approach to the study of emotions in consumer contexts has been to examine the effects of emotions as a function of appraisal dimensions, including certainty and control (Smith and Elseworth 1985; Lazarus 1991, Lerner and Keltner 2000). Although the construct ego-involvement is part of Lazarus's widely adopted framework, it is not a central construct in consumer behavior research on emotion (e.g., Pham 1998; Raghunathan, Pham and Corfman 2006). Recently, self-focus has been examined in terms of the relevance of an emotion for self vs. family (Agrawal, Menon, and Aaker 2007); however, it is unlikely, for instance, that self-relevant anxiety related to having cancer and self-relevant anxiety about failing a test are similar experiences. It is hoped that one contribution of the current research is to highlight the importance of the ego-involvement construct to the study of consumer behavior because

it highlights the prominent idea that many forms of consumption derive from the need to self-enhance.

#### ***7.4 Implications for Consumer Welfare***

The aim of this research has been to shed light on the depth, nature, and purpose of material consumption by examining its relation to feelings of self-worth. In doing so, the bright side of trading up as a coping mechanism has been accentuated. This perspective might be met with skepticism in light of research linking a constellation of dark side consumer behaviors to materialism and to negative feelings of self-worth (Belk 1985; Richins and Dawson 1992; Sirgy 1998). It is therefore important to point out how the perspectives can be reconciled. First, I would point out that the situations in which trading up can repair self-worth are limited. Consumers sometimes make the “wrong” choice – they trade up on products or services that are less relevant to their self-concepts. Though this did not represent the majority of participants, it is clearly important for future research to understand the reasons why consumers vary in their attunement to the most functional response. Second, it is important to revisit experiment 1’s finding that repairing self-worth is not merely about acquiring self-relevant products. It is instead about making statements about who we are and what we value via our decisions to trade up or not. Consequently, deciding not to trade up can have its costs as well, depending on the context.

Rather than advising consumers to avoid the use of consumption as a self-enhancement tool, the current research would instead advise consumers to understand the



domains in which one's self-worth is invested and therefore the sorts of consumption decisions that are capable of elevating and protecting one's self-worth. But there are certainly some consumers who are prone to spend beyond their means and perhaps would benefit from strategies that would prevent them from turning to consumption to cope with threat. Based on the current findings, the counterintuitive prescription would be for consumers who are feeling negatively about themselves to go shopping for more mundane products – groceries, socks, anything that is not relevant to how they define themselves. Here, their negative feelings of self-worth will drive them to be thrifter, and finding good deals will actually help them feel better.

Another extrapolation, based on the findings of the possession affirmation procedure, is that reflecting on self-relevant possessions perhaps can be implemented by consumers as a strategy to avoid coping with negative feelings of self-worth via “retail therapy.” That is, consumers can remind themselves of the important objects they already possess that make them feel good about whom they are, and then their tendency to trade up on other consumption decisions to assuage negative feelings of self-worth can be thwarted.

### ***7.5 Implications for Marketing Practitioners***

The current research also has implications for practitioners seeking to control or manage these effects. Although it is widely accepted that people seek emotional benefits from consumption, the current perspective offers new insights into this phenomenon by documenting one type of emotional experience that can trigger trading up, in what

product categories this will occur, and among what consumers. How could practitioners profit from this new knowledge? An obvious tactic would be to threaten consumers' self-worth either at the point of decision or point of purchase. However, this may lead to negative repercussions from consumers or policy makers. A related approach would be to anticipate situations in which consumers tend to experience threats to self-worth. Threats to self-worth could be evoked by certain types of television programs or advertisements (e.g., Smeesters and Mandel 2006). Nevertheless, predicting when consumers would experience threat could be difficult.

Less difficult is predicting how consumers will respond to threats to self-worth and what one should do as a marketer given a threat has occurred. There are clear implications of the current research regarding whether and how you should advertise or sell in particular vehicles as a function of threat. The answer will depend on whether one is marketing at the high-end or low-end of a category. The overall implication for higher-end marketers is to make salient the link between the product category and consumers' self-concepts. This strategy will drive consumers to trade up for your product when threatened. The overall implication of this research for lower-end marketers is to minimize the link between product category and consumers' self-concepts. This strategy will drive consumers to trade down for your product when threatened. Both sets of consumers should be left feeling good about themselves and presumably about their choice.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

Advertising inundates us with messages to “shop ‘til we drop.” Especially when we’re feeling badly about ourselves, a little “retail therapy” is depicted as our ultimate salvation. Although it is unlikely that consumption is an emotional cure-all, it is equally unlikely that our relationship with consumption is entirely superficial. The current research set out to address this potential bright side to the interplay between feelings of self-worth and consumption. First, it was shown that events that threaten self-worth do not always increase consumer spending. Rather, these events lead to self-expressive consumption: consumers trade up more (or less) to express the relevance (or irrelevance) of merchandise to their self-concepts. Moreover, self-expressive consumption in turn repairs negative feelings of self-worth. This research also shows that, in the long term, possessions come to function as coping resources that protect consumers from threats to self-worth. This effect is particularly robust for possessions important to consumers’ social selves. In sum, these findings highlight the bright side of the relationship between consumption and self-worth: consumers respond to threats adaptively – sometimes spending more and sometimes spending less – and functionally – by making consumption decisions that repair self-worth.

## Appendix

Please respond to the items below using a scale from 1-7, where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

**Table 1: Chronic Possession Self-Relevance Scale**

1. I have a special bond with my favorite possessions.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I consider my favorite possessions to be a part of myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I often feel a personal connection between my special possessions and me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Part of me is defined by the special possessions in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I feel as if I have a close personal connection with the possessions I most prefer.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I can identify with important possessions in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. There are links between my special possessions and how I view myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. My favorite possessions are an important indication of who I am.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

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