

## FEELING LOW? FORGO THE COMFORT FOOD AND TURN UP THE VOLUME!

**BY PROFESSORS RISHTEE BATRA AND TANUKA GHOSHAL**

*Managing one's self-worth after experiencing a psychological threat need not always lead to counterproductive behaviours such as excessive shopping and binge eating. Research by Professors Rishtee Batra and Tanuka Ghoshal shows that high intensity sensory consumption or HISC, which involves heightening the senses via enhanced levels of key sensory properties such as bright colours or loud music, can be a better and less harmful method of managing threats to one's self-worth.*

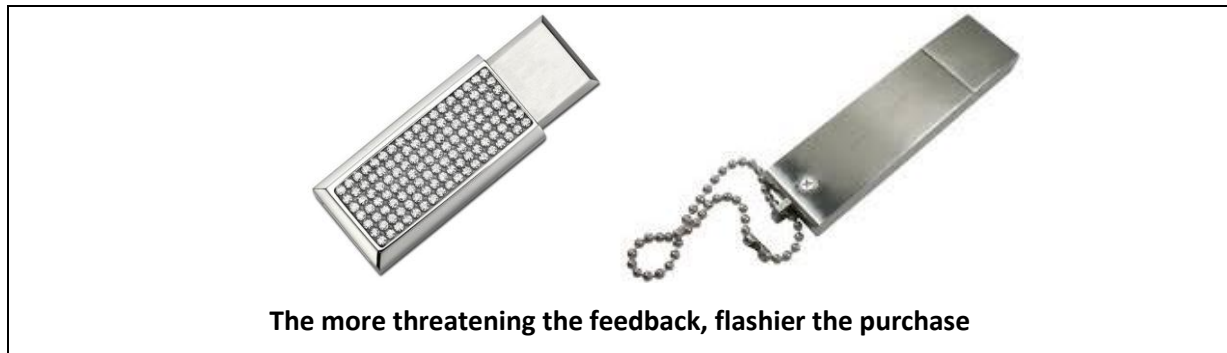
Researchers have long studied the relationship between self-threat and compensatory consumption. For example, when people sense that their socio-economic status is threatened, they feel the need to demonstrate their earning ability and often react by buying larger-than-life, conspicuously branded goods (Veblen 1899; Han, Nunes and Dreze 2010). In other instances, when people face threats such as the end of relationships or problems at work, they shop and consume to distract themselves. Often, people find solace in a tub of ice cream or big bag of potato chips.

Self-worth is a favourable opinion of oneself and is contingent on one of several aspects of our identity like our relationship with family and friends, spirituality, intelligence, competence etc. (Crocker and Park 2003). An athlete's self-worth might largely rest on his perceived physical fitness. A scientist's might be contingent on his perceived intelligence. A socialite may draw his self-worth from the people he knows. ***Individuals' sense of self-worth can be shaken when they experience a psychological threat to an important aspect of their identity and it is called self-threat.*** When an athlete faces diminished physical fitness, when the scientist's research is criticised, and when the socialite faces social exclusion, each experiences self-threat. When humans face self-threat, they often engage in unhealthy consumption behaviours to compensate for hurt feelings such as excessive shopping or binge eating. These behaviours temporarily distract individuals, provide relief and restore their sense of self-worth.

### **Healthy Alternatives for Countering Self-threat**

Researchers have already looked at the purchase of status-signaling, conspicuous goods (e.g. Louis Vuitton tote bag), as a mechanism to counter damaged self-worth. We propose that while threatened people do consume branded goods, they also seek more intense sensory engagement from their environment in general known as high intensity sensory consumption, (HISC). We define HISC as a consumption experience that involves a heightened stimulation of the senses via enhanced levels of key sensory properties, such as brightness of colours, volume of music, and intensity of texture. The

research has looked at the consumption of status-enhancing goods (e.g. branded goods) as an outcome of self-threat (Sivanthan and Petit 2010; Dubois, Rucker and Galinsky 2010). We, however, find that in addition to seeking status-enhancing goods; individuals also consume goods that are very high in sensory stimulation, even if they are completely devoid of status-signalling properties such as a luxury brand. We find that after facing threats, people prefer “flashier” or “louder” products and that after consuming such products, they actually feel better about themselves. Our series of experiments show that exposure to such high intensity sensory properties elevates people’s arousal levels, which in turn seems to suppress negative thoughts related to the threat, and therefore improves people’s self-worth.



In our initial study, we found that students, when exposed to negative feedback about their competence, had a much higher likelihood of purchasing “flashier” products than those who did not face a similar psychological threat. Those who were threatened not only reported liking conspicuous, “gaudier” products, such as the Swarovski-encrusted flash drive shown below, but they also reported that they were much more likely to buy such a product. In contrast, people whose identity was not threatened reported a preference for much more subtle designs. The threatened people seemed to gravitate toward more visually conspicuous, “loud” product designs.

In subsequent experiments, we found that people subjected to self-threat had an innate preference for intense sensory stimulation at a very basic level. In one of our studies, after experimentally manipulating the threat, we found that our subjects had a much higher preference for brighter shades over lighter shades of the same colour. In another study, we found that people with psychological threat chose to listen to music at a much higher volume.

## HOW IT WAS DONE?

Our Sensory Consumption Study relied on several laboratory experiments at the ISB Behavioral Lab. In a study, 92 student subjects were told that they would be participating in a series of unrelated studies and kept oblivious about being part of a larger research programme connected to each other.

Firstly, the subjects completed what they thought was a study examining gender differences in problem solving. They were asked to finish a relatively difficult problem-solving task. Subsequently the researchers manipulated the subjects' self-threat by giving feedback on the test results. Half the subjects were told they were in the bottom 5 percent of all survey-takers (high self-threat condition) and the other half were told that they were in the top 5 percent (low self-threat). This has been a proven effective manipulation for self-threat among college students because general competence is a relatively important aspect of their identity (Crocker et al 2003).

Subjects then headed to what they perceived as an unrelated study about musical preferences. They were provided identical laptops and asked to listen to a jingle and rate how much they liked it and suggest a suitable advertisement. They did not know that study actually measured the volume of music (auditory intensity) at which they listened after receiving feedback from previous test.

It was clearly established that people who were subjected to high self-threat listened to the same music clip at a significantly higher volume than those who did not experience self-threat. Similarly, in other studies, we found that subjects exposed to high levels of self-threat preferred brighter colors and indicated a higher desire to touch stimuli compared to those who did not experience self-threat.

In follow-up studies, we found that when people felt dejected after receiving threatening feedback, they opted to consume products and experiences with high intensity sensory properties. HISC helped them arrive at a more aroused or alert frame of mind. Past research shows that when people are in high arousal states (imagine you watching a nail-biting soccer or cricket match); their ability to think deeply about things is diminished. In such high-arousal states, people have a tendency to "gloss over" facts or use mental shortcuts. We find that the high arousal properties of sensory experiences such as bright colours and loud music temporarily impair people's ability to elaborate upon their negative experience. Thus, arousing properties of loud music and bright colours distract people from the self-worth threat, and as a result, they feel better about themselves in the same way as purchasing a \$3,000 Louis Vuitton bag or gobbling up a 3,000 calories ice cream bucket.

Our research implies that when consumers feel low, they can restore their self-worth by engaging in non-detrimental activities involving HISC, such as visiting an art museum, wearing brightly coloured clothes (visual stimuli), or listening to loud music (auditory stimuli), rather than indulging in high calorie "comfort" foods or shopping. So the next time you're feeling low about missing the promotion or a party, don't reach out for chips or a MK bag. Instead, sit back, pump up the volume and let your worries fade away.

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## About the Authors

**Rishtee Batra** (Assistant Professor of Marketing, ISB) teaches Consumer Behaviour. Her core areas of research include understanding how sensory perception impacts consumption choices and how the experience of aversive psychological states impacts one's desire to consume conspicuously. She also helps companies use principles of Consumer Behaviour to improve the quality of decisions made regarding health, fitness, and wellness choices.

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***This research was supported by the EY-ISB Initiative for Emerging Market Studies grant for 2015-2016.***