

# How exposure to negative feedback in influences goal-directed consumer behaviors

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Threats to self-esteem and negative feedback are pervasive in today's society. Social media researchers, for example, have shown a link between frequent usage of social media websites and upward social comparison and negative affect.

How does this influence consumer [behavior](#)? A new paper published in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* examines how single and repeated exposure to [negative feedback](#) in one domain influences goal-directed consumer behaviors.

In "The Motivating And Demotivating Effects Of Negative Feedback On Cross-Domain Goal Pursuit Behaviors," authors Alison Jing Xu, Shirley Y. Y. Cheng, and Tiffany Barnett White hypothesize that receiving negative feedback induces a general motive to boost one's self-view, which motivates people to pursue proving goals (i.e., those that allow them to demonstrate their competence), even in areas that are unrelated to the feedback. The authors propose that negative feedback also demotivates the pursuit of [enjoyment](#) goals (i.e., those that focus on the pursuit of pleasure and therefore have no self-restorative characteristics).

These motivational consequences not only influence consumers' goal pursuit behaviors when a single goal (either a proving goal ["Playing this game can prove my intellectual abilities"] or an enjoyment goal ["I would have a lot of fun playing this game"] is activated, but also affect consumers' choice between a proving goal and an enjoyment goal.

Although receiving negative feedback may give rise to negative affect, the motivational consequences of negative feedback on goal pursuit behaviors were not driven by [negative affect](#), per se. Instead, the motivation to boost one's self-view mediates the motivational influence of negative feedback on goal pursuit behaviors in other unrelated domains.

The authors conducted four experiments to support their hypothesis: manipulating negative feedback by providing performance feedback on a creativity test or an emotional intelligence test, and demonstrating its influence on consumers' motivation to pursue either a proving or an enjoyment goal, as well as on consumers' choice between a proving goal and an enjoyment goal.

"We showed that receiving negative feedback in an unrelated domain motivated consumers to spend more effort searching for product information if their search behavior was driven by the goal to identify the best option and prove their ability to make wise decisions (i.e., a proving goal)," the authors write. However, when consumers' search behavior was driven by the goal of having fun (i.e., an enjoyment goal), receiving negative feedback reduced search efforts.

Study participants who received negative performance feedback on a creativity task in one study responded by searching for information about options in an ostensibly unrelated study when this search behavior was framed as a proving [goal](#). Similarly, receiving negative feedback on an emotional intelligence quiz increased participants' later likelihood of choosing to play a game that could demonstrate and improve their intellectual abilities (Clash of Clans) versus one they would enjoy more and have more fun playing (Fruit Ninja).

The findings also suggest that while consumers may be eager to self-improve when they receive initial negative feedback, repeated negative

feedback exposure may undermine their confidence in their ability to self-repair, resulting in their being less motivated to pursue proving goals. This finding has important implications not only for the dynamic effects of self-repair motives on consumer behavior, but also for how to give negative feedback. "Specifically, it suggests that although people generally strive to self-improve after negative feedback, too much negative feedback can lead them to seek enjoyment rather than self-improvement, even in areas that have nothing to do with what they failed on previously," the authors write.

The findings may offer a path through which firms can have a positive impact on consumers' well-being. The findings suggest that, independent of potential effects of mood, receiving feedback that causes consumers to experience a threat to their self-concept (e.g., unflattering social comparison on a social media website) can influence not only their preferences for a given brand, but also the depth of their engagement with that brand. For example, the [consumers](#) in the first experiment were not only interested in trying the items in the assortment following negative (versus positive) [feedback](#), they also literally searched more options for a longer period of time.

The drop of [self-esteem](#) as a result of upward social comparison may facilitate the marketing of goods, services, and activities that are associated with proving (but not enjoyment) goals (e.g., via Facebook ads) in the short run but not in the long run.

**More information:** Alison Xu et al, THE MOTIVATING AND DEMOTIVATING EFFECTS OF NEGATIVE FEEDBACK ON CROSS-DOMAIN GOAL PURSUIT BEHAVIORS, *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1086/709275](https://doi.org/10.1086/709275)

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