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EXISTENTIAL EMPTINESS AND COMPENSATORY CONSUMPTION THROUGH IDENTITY INSECURITY AND SELF-ESTEEM

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Abstract: *This study examines the psychological mechanisms underlying compensatory consumption in conditions of existential emptiness. The aim of the research is to analyse whether a deficit of perceived meaning in life acts as a structural antecedent of compensatory consumption through its impact on identity insecurity and self-esteem. The study integrates concepts from existential psychology, identity economics and consumer behaviour theory in order to construct and empirically test a sequential mediation model. Data were collected through a structured online survey conducted between October 2025 and January 2026 on a convenience (snowball) sample of 446 adult respondents in the Republic of Croatia. Validated measurement scales were adapted to operationalise existential emptiness, identity insecurity, self-esteem and compensatory consumption. Statistical analyses were performed using regression analysis and PROCESS macro (Model 6) with bootstrap estimation (5,000 samples) to test indirect effects. The results indicate that existential emptiness significantly predicts identity insecurity, which is in turn negatively associated with self-esteem, while lower self-esteem predicts higher compensatory consumption. A significant sequential indirect effect indicates that the relationship between existential emptiness and compensatory consumption is transmitted through identity insecurity and self-esteem; once the mediators are included, the direct association is no longer statistically significant, a pattern consistent with full sequential mediation. The findings suggest that compensatory consumption is not merely a situational reaction but the outcome of a broader identity-evaluative destabilisation process. The study contributes to consumer economics by introducing existential emptiness as a theoretically grounded antecedent of compensatory consumption; its implications for preference instability are advanced as a theoretical interpretation rather than as an empirically established finding.*

Keywords: Existential emptiness; Identity insecurity; Self-esteem; Compensatory consumption; Consumer behaviour

JEL Classification: D91; D11; M31

INTRODUCTION

Standard microeconomic theory is grounded in the assumption of stable, clearly defined preferences and rational utility maximisation. Within this analytical framework, consumer choice is understood as the outcome of a consistent ranking of bundles of goods, while preferences are treated as exogenous and relatively stable. Although behavioural economics has introduced bounded rationality and cognitive biases into this framework, the deeper psychological foundations of preference stability remain insufficiently explored. In particular, limited attention has been paid to structural disturbances that may disrupt the coherence of the preference system itself.

Contemporary market dynamics raise precisely such questions. Over recent decades, material living standards have significantly increased in developed economies; however, this growth has not been accompanied by a proportional rise in subjective well-being. At the same time, empirical studies report increasing levels of materialism, impulsive buying, and status-oriented consumption. Earlier work by (Dittmar, 2005) already pointed to the growing psychological significance of materialistic values, while meta-analytic evidence documents the association between materialistic orientations, diminished well-being and consumption-oriented coping strategies (Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, & Kasser, 2014). Such patterns suggest that consumption increasingly performs functions that extend beyond instrumental utility maximisation. Goods are selected not solely for their functional attributes but also for their symbolic and regulatory roles. Identity economics provides a partial explanation for this shift. (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000) demonstrate that identity can directly enter the utility function and influence economic behaviour through internalised social norms and categories of belonging. This perspective is further extended by (Bénabou & Tirole, 2011) who emphasise the reputational and signalling dimensions of economic decisions, arguing that individuals derive utility from how they are perceived by others. When goods serve as identity signals, preference formation becomes intertwined with self-perception and social validation.

However, most identity-based models treat identity as a relatively stable structure subject to situational threat rather than structural destabilisation. Research on compensatory consumption shows that individuals increase symbolic and status-oriented purchases when experiencing reduced power, social exclusion, or personal inadequacy (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008); (Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2017). Further contributions demonstrate that threats to the self systematically increase reliance on symbolic consumption as a regulatory mechanism (Lisjak, Bonezzi, Kim, & Rucker, 2015); (Sivathan & Pettit, 2010). Under such conditions, consumption functions as a mechanism that temporarily restores perceived control or self-worth. Nevertheless, these models largely focus on immediate triggers—such as identity threat or lowered self-esteem—without examining deeper antecedents that may undermine identity coherence.

The concept of existential emptiness offers a theoretical extension capable of addressing this gap. (Frankl, 1963) defines existential emptiness as a state characterised by the absence of perceived meaning and stable life orientation. Meaning functions not only as an emotional resource but also as a structural organiser of identity and long-term goals. (Baumeister, 1991) further conceptualises meaning as an integrative principle connecting purpose, coherence, and self-evaluation. When meaning weakens, fragmentation of the self occurs, accompanied by increased reliance on external sources of validation. Empirical research supports this association. (Steger, Frazier,

Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) demonstrate that lower levels of perceived meaning are linked to impulsive decision-making, while subsequent reviews highlight its role in stabilising psychological functioning and reducing existential anxiety (King & Hicks, 2021); (Schnell, 2021). From an economic perspective, such fragmentation may be interpreted as a disturbance in the internal consistency of preferences. If identity coherence contributes to the stability of evaluative criteria, its destabilisation may increase susceptibility to symbolically charged goods and regulatory choices aimed at restoring psychological balance. In this sense, existential emptiness may function as a latent shock to the preference structure, altering the evaluative processes underlying consumer decisions. These processes are further intensified in digitally mediated markets. Online environments amplify social comparison and expand opportunities for identity signalling. (Barasch, Zauberaman, & Diehl, 2018) show that even the anticipation of sharing experiences can reshape evaluation processes, while related research demonstrates that continuous exposure to curated content increases comparison tendencies and self-evaluative sensitivity (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016); (Verduyn, Gugushvili, Massar, Täht, & Kross, 2020). Under conditions of existential emptiness, such dynamics may further deepen identity instability and enhance the attractiveness of goods promising symbolic reaffirmation.

Despite its theoretical relevance, the existential dimension remains largely absent from economic analyses of consumer behaviour. Existing studies treat materialism, identity threat, or low self-esteem as separate predictors, without integrating them into a broader identity-evaluative framework grounded in deficits of meaning. Systematic examination of existential emptiness as a foundational antecedent of compensatory consumption remains underdeveloped within consumer economics. This study seeks to address this theoretical gap by conceptualising existential emptiness as a primary antecedent of compensatory consumption. A sequential mediation model is proposed in which existential emptiness destabilises identity coherence, increases identity insecurity, reduces self-esteem, and ultimately raises the likelihood of regulatory, symbolically oriented consumption. Within this framework, compensatory consumption is not interpreted as an isolated anomaly but as the final stage of a broader identity-evaluative adaptation process. The empirical analysis is based on survey data collected from a sample of 446 adult respondents, employing validated measurement instruments and mediation analysis. The contribution of the research is threefold. First, it extends economic models of consumer choice by introducing existential emptiness as a psychological antecedent whose destabilising implications for preference formation are developed at the theoretical level. Second, it empirically tests a sequential mediation mechanism linking identity destabilisation to compensatory consumption. Third, it provides theoretical insight into contemporary market patterns in which the symbolic value of goods increasingly surpasses their functional utility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existential Emptiness as Structural Destabilisation of Identity and Preference Coherence

The concept of existential emptiness originates in Viktor Frankl's logotherapeutic framework (1963), where it is defined as a chronic absence of perceived meaning, purpose, and life direction. Unlike transient emotional states, existential emptiness rep-

resents a deeper motivational deficit that disrupts the long-term organisation of goals and the integration of values. According to Frankl, the search for meaning constitutes a fundamental human motivation; its absence generates a sense of aimlessness, internal tension, and diffuse dissatisfaction. Although initially developed within existential psychology, the implications of this concept extend beyond the clinical domain to the organisation of identity and patterns of decision-making. Subsequent theoretical accounts conceptualise meaning in life as an integrative structure that connects goals, values, and self-perception into a coherent whole. (Baumeister, 1991) describes meaning as a cognitive architecture that ensures identity continuity over time. This integrative role of meaning has been reaffirmed in more recent work, which conceptualises meaning as a central organising principle of psychological functioning and long-term behavioural regulation (Schnell, 2021). Meaning enables narrative stability—the integration of past experiences, present roles, and future aspirations within a unified evaluative framework. When this integrative function weakens, identity becomes fragmented, and behavioural regulation shifts from long-term orientation toward short-term regulatory strategies.

Empirical evidence supports this association. (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) distinguish between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning, demonstrating that lower levels of meaning presence are associated with more impulsive decision-making, heightened emotional instability, and increased reliance on external validation. Subsequent research further emphasises the stabilising function of meaning, showing that it reduces existential anxiety, promotes behavioural consistency, and that its deficits are linked to increased psychological vulnerability and reduced coherence in self-regulation (King & Hicks, 2021). The absence of meaning therefore does not merely produce emotional discomfort; it undermines evaluative coherence. From an economic perspective, such destabilisation may be interpreted as a disturbance in the structure of preferences. Standard microeconomic models assume stable and transitive preference orderings. Even within behavioural economics, deviations are typically conceptualised as cognitive biases operating within an otherwise stable evaluative system. However, if identity coherence contributes to the stability of evaluative criteria, existential emptiness may generate instability at the level of preference construction itself. In other words, rather than distorting stable preferences, existential emptiness may alter the conditions under which preferences are formed. Identity economics partially anticipates this possibility. (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000) integrate identity directly into the utility function, arguing that behaviour is shaped not only by material outcomes but also by alignment with identity norms. This perspective is further elaborated by (Bénabou & Tirole, 2011) who demonstrate that individuals derive utility through reputational and self-signalling mechanisms, embedding identity validation into economic decision-making. Yet these models implicitly assume relative stability of identity categories. Existential emptiness challenges this assumption. If perceived meaning functions as a higher-order integrative structure of identity, its weakening may destabilise identity categories themselves. Individuals no longer act from a stable identity seeking confirmation but from a state of identity uncertainty. This process can be conceptualised as structural identity destabilisation.

Contemporary models of self-esteem provide additional theoretical grounding for this interpretation. (Albarracin, et al., 2024) conceptualise self-esteem as a hierar-

chically organised inferential system tracking an individual's perceived standing within the social environment. Within this framework, stable (trait) self-esteem functions as a higher-level prior guiding the interpretation of social signals, whereas situational fluctuations represent lower-level updates. Complementary empirical research highlights that instability in self-evaluative processes increases sensitivity to external cues and short-term feedback loops (Kernis, 2005). Applied to existential emptiness, diminished perceived meaning may reduce the precision of identity-related priors, rendering individuals more sensitive to short-term evaluative cues. In such states, external symbolic signals acquire enhanced regulatory significance, compensating for the weakened internal structure of valuation.

These dynamics are further intensified in digitally mediated markets. Increased exposure to social comparison and idealised lifestyle representations heightens the salience of symbolic consumption. Early evidence by (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014) demonstrates the role of social comparison in shaping self-evaluation, while related studies show that curated content environments amplify comparison processes and increase self-evaluative sensitivity (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016); (Verduyn, Gugushvili, Massar, Täht, & Kross, 2020). Under conditions of existential emptiness, such environments may further destabilise identity and reinforce reliance on market-based signalling mechanisms. It is important to distinguish existential emptiness from related constructs. Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) focuses on discrepancies between actual and ideal selves; sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000) interprets self-esteem as an indicator of social inclusion; and contingent self-esteem models emphasise domain-specific sources of self-worth (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003). Existential emptiness operates at a more foundational level it precedes specific threats and destabilises the very orientation structure that enables evaluative consistency. In this sense, existential emptiness may be conceptualised as a latent antecedent of identity insecurity. Its primary consequence is not immediate consumption but heightened sensitivity to symbolic mechanisms of market validation. The weakening of internal coherence increases dependence on external indicators of value, thereby creating conditions for regulatory patterns of behaviour. By conceptualising existential emptiness as a structural disruption of identity coherence, the present study moves beyond partial accounts that attribute consumer behaviour solely to cognitive biases or situational threats. Existential emptiness is positioned as a higher-order determinant of preference instability and increased susceptibility to symbolic consumption.

A terminological clarification is warranted regarding the relationship between existential emptiness and the low presence of meaning. In the present study, existential emptiness is conceptualised, following (Frankl, 1963) as a chronic deficit of perceived meaning and life orientation, and it is operationalised through reformulated items of the presence-of-meaning subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). The two constructs are therefore closely related but not fully equivalent: a low presence of meaning constitutes the measurable core of existential emptiness, whereas the broader existential-vacuum concept also encompasses aimlessness and diffuse dissatisfaction that are not exhausted by meaning items. Accordingly, the empirical indicator used here should be understood as a proxy for existential emptiness anchored in the meaning-presence dimension, and the interpretation of the findings is restricted to this operational definition.

Identity Insecurity, Self-Esteem, and Evaluative Stability

Identity represents a relatively stable organisation of values, goals, and self-perceptions that enables coherent interpretation of experience and consistent behavioural orientation. Classical theories of identity assume that individuals possess a hierarchically structured self-concept that regulates choice and evaluation, as originally conceptualised by (Erikson, 1968) and further developed within social identity theory by (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, contemporary research increasingly emphasises the fluidity of identity and its sensitivity to social and market stimuli, particularly under conditions of intensified symbolic exposure and comparison. Recent perspectives highlight that identity is not only socially embedded but also continuously reconstructed through interaction with mediated environments and evaluative feedback systems (de Vries & Kühne, 2015). Identity insecurity refers to the subjective experience of lacking a stable definition of the self, reflected in diminished clarity regarding personal values, goals, and social roles. (Campbell, et al., 1996) introduced the concept of self-concept clarity, demonstrating that lower levels of clarity are associated with greater emotional reactivity and increased dependence on external evaluations. When identity lacks structural coherence, individuals become more sensitive to situational cues and social comparison, resulting in greater variability in self-evaluation.

Subsequent empirical work confirms that reduced self-concept clarity is associated with heightened responsiveness to external validation and has systematic implications for consumer behaviour (Mittal, 2015). Within this framework, self-esteem functions as the evaluative dimension of identity. (Rosenberg, 1965) conceptualised self-esteem as a global assessment of self-worth, whereas (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), in sociometer theory, highlighted its role in monitoring perceived social inclusion. Self-esteem therefore reflects not only internal evaluation but also expectations of social acceptance. When identity coherence weakens, the precision of these expectations declines, and self-esteem becomes more unstable. Recent models further elaborate this dynamic. (Albarracin, et al., 2024) conceptualise self-esteem as a hierarchically organised inferential system functioning as a set of “empirical priors” regarding one’s adaptive value within the social environment. Stable (trait) self-esteem represents a higher-order layer that shapes the interpretation of social feedback, whereas situational fluctuations (state self-esteem) reflect short-term updates of the system. Complementary longitudinal research demonstrates that self-esteem is not only a stable trait but also a dynamic system sensitive to environmental feedback and life conditions (Orth & Robins, The development of self-esteem, 2014), (Orth & Robins, Is high self-esteem beneficial? Revisiting a classic question, 2022). When identity is destabilised, the precision of these priors decreases, rendering the evaluative system more sensitive to immediate stimuli and short-term fluctuations.

From an economic perspective, such instability may be interpreted as reduced evaluative consistency. If identity and self-esteem participate in organising valuation criteria, their destabilisation may increase oscillations in the assessment of goods. Individuals no longer evaluate goods solely according to functional attributes but also according to their potential role in regulating perceived self-worth. Empirical findings support this interpretation. Research indicates that individuals with lower and unstable self-esteem display greater susceptibility to social comparison, heightened reactivity to status signals, and increased dependence on external indicators of success,

as demonstrated by (Orth & Robins, The development of self-esteem, 2014). Related evidence further shows that self-esteem instability amplifies reactivity to evaluative events and external feedback (Kernis, 2005). Identity insecurity amplifies this dynamic by reducing long-term self-regulatory capacity. Under such conditions, the evaluation of goods may function as an instrument for temporary stabilisation of perceived self-worth. It is important to distinguish low self-esteem from unstable self-esteem. Whereas low self-esteem reflects a chronically negative self-evaluation, unstable self-esteem is characterised by high variability contingent on situational stimuli. It is instability rather than absolute level alone that increases susceptibility to regulatory behavioural patterns. When the evaluative system lacks stability, market symbols may acquire the function of short-term stabilisers. It should be emphasised, however, that the empirical analysis in this study measures the global level of self-esteem using selected items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and does not measure the temporal stability of self-esteem. References to self-esteem instability therefore operate strictly at the theoretical level of the argument, whereas the hypotheses and the empirical model concern the level of global self-esteem; empirical statements in the remainder of the paper are accordingly formulated in terms of lower versus higher self-esteem. This mechanism gains further significance in digitally intensive environments. Continuous exposure to comparison and performative identity presentation heightens the salience of evaluative signals. Studies show that social media environments intensify upward comparison processes and increase dependence on external validation for self-evaluation (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020); (Verduyn, Gugushvili, Massar, Täht, & Kross, 2020). Under conditions of identity insecurity, such environments may further fragment self-concept, increasing the dependence of self-esteem on external validation. Evaluative stability may therefore be conceptualised as a function of identity coherence and stable self-esteem. When these elements are weakened, the likelihood increases that individuals will resort to symbolic resources to temporarily regulate perceived self-worth. In other words, identity insecurity and reduced self-esteem stability create conditions under which market choices can assume a regulatory function. This interpretation moves beyond partial accounts that attribute consumption exclusively to situational threats or self-discrepancies. It suggests that compensatory consumption may arise from a deeper destabilisation of the evaluative system itself. Understanding this process requires closer examination of how symbolic goods enable temporary identity reaffirmation and self-esteem regulation

A further clarification concerns the relationship between identity insecurity and self-concept clarity. Identity insecurity is operationalised in this study through adapted items of the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell, et al., 1996) which implies that the measure captures primarily the reversed dimension of self-concept clarity rather than an entirely new construct. The term identity insecurity is therefore used as a theoretical label that connects low self-concept clarity with the broader identity-evaluative framework of the model, and no claim is made that the measure possesses discriminant validity relative to self-concept clarity. Establishing identity insecurity as a construct that is empirically distinct from inverse self-concept clarity would require dedicated construct-validation studies, which is acknowledged as a limitation of the present research.

Compensatory Consumption as a Regulatory Market Mechanism

Compensatory consumption refers to market choices that extend beyond functional use value and assume a regulatory role in restoring or stabilising disrupted self-perception. Unlike utilitarian consumption, which is oriented toward the maximisation of instrumental utility, compensatory consumption arises from the psychological need to reaffirm identity or mitigate evaluative instability. The central premise of this approach is that goods and brands possess a symbolic dimension that enables the signalling of social status, competence, belonging, or personal worth. (Belk, 1988) introduced the concept of the extended self, arguing that material objects become integrated into an individual's identity structure. This perspective is further supported by identity-based consumption frameworks, which suggest that consumers actively use brands and products to construct and signal their identities (Escalas & Bettman, 2005); (Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012). When identity becomes destabilised, symbolic goods may function as external resources for its temporary reorganisation. Experimental research demonstrates that perceived reductions in power or social inclusion increase preferences for status-signalling and prestigious products. (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008) provide early evidence of this mechanism, showing how powerlessness enhances the desire for status-oriented goods, while the broader conceptualisation developed by (Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2017) frames such behaviour as a response to self-discrepancies. Further research extends this perspective by demonstrating that threats to the self systematically increase reliance on symbolic consumption as a regulatory mechanism. For instance, (Lisjak, Bonezzi, Kim, & Rucker, 2015) show that psychological threat provokes the acquisition of products that symbolise accomplishment in the threatened domain, while (Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010) demonstrate that self-threat increases the preference for high-status goods that serve an affirmational function. In such contexts, consumption operates as a mechanism that temporarily reduces evaluative dissonance and restores a sense of coherence.

Contemporary literature, however, indicates that compensatory consumption is not always directed toward positive self-enhancement. A comprehensive review by (Consiglio & van Osselaer, 2022) systematises the processes through which consumption influences self-esteem, including self-discrepancy reduction, self-enhancement, self-affirmation, and self-verification. The latter mechanism is particularly relevant under conditions of identity insecurity. Individuals with chronically low self-esteem may sometimes prefer choices that confirm existing negative self-perceptions, as such confirmation increases predictability and reduces anxiety associated with uncertainty. Empirical evidence supports this dynamic. Research by (Stuppy, Mead, & van Osselaer, 2020) shows that individuals with lower self-esteem may prefer inferior products when those products are congruent with their self-concept. Such choices do not maximise objective quality but rather subjective identity coherence. Earlier experimental findings similarly indicate that consumers select products in order to restore or confirm threatened self-views, highlighting the stabilising rather than the enhancing function of such behaviour (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009).

Compensatory consumption, therefore, does not necessarily result in positive evaluative change; its primary function may be stabilisation rather than improvement of self-perception. In the presence of identity insecurity, the regulatory function of consumption becomes more pronounced. When the evaluative system is unstable, sym-

bolic goods acquire the role of short-term stabilisers. Their value derives from their capacity to temporarily restore feelings of control, status, or belonging. Yet because these mechanisms do not address the underlying destabilisation of identity, their effects are often transient, potentially encouraging repeated regulatory choices. This cyclical dynamic is consistent with evidence that within-domain compensatory consumption can undermine subsequent self-regulation, thereby encouraging repeated regulatory choices (Lisjak, Bonezzi, Kim, & Rucker, 2015). This dynamic is particularly visible in markets characterised by high levels of symbolic competition. Digital environments increase the transparency of comparison and the intensity of signalling, making symbolic consumption a readily available regulatory tool. Empirical studies indicate that online environments amplify social comparison and increase the salience of identity-relevant signals (Verduyn, Gugushvili, Massar, Täht, & Kross, 2020). In such contexts, identity insecurity may rapidly translate into market behaviour. It is important to emphasise that compensatory consumption is not an anomaly but part of a broader system of identity regulation. It emerges when internal evaluative resources are insufficient to maintain a stable self-perception. In this sense, compensatory consumption can be interpreted as the final stage of an identity-evaluative process initiated by existential destabilisation. By integrating existential emptiness, identity insecurity and self-esteem and the regulatory function of consumption, a coherent theoretical chain is established that enables precise modelling of sequential relationships among constructs. Such an approach moves beyond isolated analyses of self-discrepancy or status signalling and positions compensatory consumption within a broader motivational architecture.

Theoretical Integration of Constructs and Hypothesis Development

The preceding sections establish three analytically distinct yet conceptually interdependent domains: existential emptiness as a higher-order structural deficit, identity insecurity and self-esteem as components of evaluative architecture, and compensatory consumption as a regulatory market response. Integrating these domains requires positioning them within a coherent motivational sequence rather than treating them as isolated predictors of consumer behaviour. Existential emptiness represents a disruption at the level of meaning integration. When perceived meaning weakens, the narrative continuity that binds values, goals, and self-perceptions into a stable identity framework becomes attenuated. Identity categories lose structural precision, and individuals experience increased ambiguity regarding who they are and what evaluative standards guide their choices. In such conditions, identity insecurity emerges not as an episodic reaction but as a structural consequence of diminished meaning coherence. The weakening of integrative orientation thus precedes and predicts instability at the level of self-definition. Accordingly, existential emptiness is expected to be positively associated with identity insecurity. Identity insecurity, in turn, affects the evaluative dimension of the self. When individuals lack clarity regarding their identity structure, the inferential system that generates global self-evaluations becomes less stable. As discussed in hierarchical models of self-esteem, stable trait-level self-worth functions as a higher-order prior shaping the interpretation of social signals. Identity destabilisation reduces the precision of these priors, rendering self-esteem more vulnerable to situational fluctuations and downward evaluative shifts. Consequently, higher levels of identity insecurity are expected to be associated with lower levels of self-esteem.

The regulatory implications of diminished self-esteem follow from its function as an indicator of perceived adaptive value. When global self-worth declines, individuals may seek externally visible resources capable of temporarily recalibrating evaluative balance. Symbolic goods provide such resources by enabling status signalling, competence projection, or affiliation cues. In the absence of stable internal evaluative anchors, market choices may assume a compensatory function. Lower self-esteem is therefore expected to increase the likelihood of compensatory consumption. Taken together, these relationships suggest a sequential motivational chain. Existential emptiness destabilises identity coherence; identity insecurity undermines evaluative stability; and reduced self-esteem increases reliance on symbolic market mechanisms for temporary self-regulation. Compensatory consumption thus emerges as the behavioural endpoint of a broader identity-evaluative process. Importantly, this framework implies not only isolated pairwise relationships but also an indirect pathway linking existential emptiness to compensatory consumption through identity insecurity and self-esteem. If existential deficits weaken identity structure and thereby reduce evaluative stability, part of their influence on market behaviour should operate through this sequential mechanism. At the same time, given the multifaceted nature of consumption motives, a residual direct association between existential emptiness and compensatory consumption cannot be ruled out.

Based on this integrated theoretical model, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- H1. Existential emptiness is positively associated with identity insecurity.
- H2. Identity insecurity is negatively associated with self-esteem.
- H3. Self-esteem is negatively associated with compensatory consumption.
- H4. Existential emptiness exerts an indirect effect on compensatory consumption through identity insecurity and self-esteem in a sequential mediation process.

This hypothesis structure allows empirical testing of both direct structural relationships and the broader regulatory chain linking existential destabilisation to market behaviour.

METHODOLOGY

To systematically address the research problem and empirically test the conceptual model linking existential emptiness and compensatory consumption, the study was designed as an integration of theoretical analysis and quantitative empirical investigation. The theoretical foundation was established through an extensive review of relevant domestic and international literature in the fields of existential psychology, identity economics, self-esteem theory, and symbolic consumption. A structured search was conducted in major international databases (Web of Science, Scopus, and ScienceDirect) to identify theoretical and empirical contributions enabling the construction of an integrated model connecting meaning destabilisation, identity insecurity, self-esteem, and compensatory consumption. The synthesis of existing approaches resulted in a sequential mediation framework in which existential emptiness is conceptualised as a fundamental psychological antecedent of shifts in the individual evaluative system. The empirical component was conducted using a quantitative cross-sectional design based on a structured online survey questionnaire. Data were collected between October 2025 and January 2026 from a sample of 446 adult respondents in the Republic

of Croatia. A non-probability convenience sampling procedure with a snowball component was applied: the questionnaire was distributed primarily through social media (posts and shares by respondents within their own networks), which chain-referral pattern constitutes a snowball sampling element, during the period from October 2025 to January 2026. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no incentives were offered. The inclusion criteria required respondents to be at least 18 years of age and to complete the questionnaire in full; incomplete responses were excluded from the analysis. The final sample comprises 229 women (51.3%) and 217 men (48.7%). All age groups are represented in comparable proportions: 18–25 years (19.7%), 26–35 years (20.9%), 36–45 years (18.4%), 46–55 years (19.1%) and 56 years or older (22.0%). In terms of educational attainment, 24.4% of respondents completed secondary education, 25.3% hold an undergraduate degree, 22.4% a graduate degree and 27.8% a postgraduate degree, while monthly income is likewise balanced across the four categories (below EUR 800: 24.0%; EUR 800–1,200: 26.7%; EUR 1,200–1,800: 24.9%; above EUR 1,800: 24.4%). Because a convenience sample was used, the sample is not statistically representative of the adult population, which is explicitly addressed among the limitations of the study. The sample size ensures adequate statistical power for testing indirect effects in mediation models of moderate complexity and provides stability in parameter estimation, particularly when applying bootstrap procedures. Measurement instruments were constructed on the basis of validated scales from the international literature. Existential emptiness was operationalised through an adaptation of the “presence of meaning” subscale from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) with items reformulated to reflect deficits in perceived meaning in line with Frankl’s concept of the existential vacuum. Identity insecurity was measured using adapted items from the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell, et al., 1996), assessing the stability and coherence of self-perception. Self-esteem was assessed using selected items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), widely recognised as the standard measure of global self-worth. The compensatory consumption scale was developed on the basis of theoretical and experimental research demonstrating that reduced feelings of personal adequacy and power increase preferences for symbolically laden goods (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008); (Mandel, Rucker, Levay, & Galinsky, 2017). Items were formulated to capture the regulatory function of consumption in terms of reaffirming personal value and restoring a sense of control. All constructs were measured using five-point Likert-type scales. Existential emptiness, identity insecurity and self-esteem were each measured with five items, and compensatory consumption with six items; the self-esteem measure includes one reverse-worded item, which was recoded prior to the analysis. The complete wording of all measurement items, in the original Croatian and in English translation, is reported in Appendix A. Prior to the main data collection, the instrument was pilot-tested on a smaller convenience sample to assess clarity and content alignment with the theoretical constructs. Minor linguistic adjustments were subsequently implemented. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha coefficients. Factorial structure was examined to confirm convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs. To address potential common method variance, Harman’s single-factor test was performed. Convergent validity was supported by satisfactory factor loadings, while discriminant validity was confirmed as inter-construct correlations remained below critical thresh-

olds. The first factor accounted for less than 50% of the total variance, indicating that common method bias is unlikely to pose a serious concern. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 27, with the PROCESS macro - Model 6 (Hayes, 2018), employed to test the sequential mediation model. The model assumes that existential emptiness influences compensatory consumption indirectly through identity insecurity and self-esteem. Indirect effects were estimated using bootstrap resampling with 5,000 iterations and percentile bootstrap confidence intervals, ensuring robust parameter estimation without relying on the assumption of normality in the sampling distribution of mediation effects.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

The empirical analysis was designed to test the integrated sequential model according to which existential emptiness functions as a structural antecedent of compensatory consumption, mediated by identity insecurity and self-esteem. The analytical strategy was structured to enable a stepwise examination of the proposed identity-evaluative chain and to distinguish between direct and indirect effects among the constructs. The results are presented in four interrelated stages. The first stage reports descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients, thereby confirming the distributional adequacy of the data and the internal consistency of the latent constructs. The second stage examines bivariate relationships among variables in order to establish the underlying structure of associations and assess the theoretical coherence of the model. The third stage involves testing the direct regression relationships specified in hypotheses H1–H3. The final stage applies sequential mediation analysis to examine the transmission mechanism through which existential emptiness influences compensatory consumption via identity insecurity and self-esteem. The analysis was conducted on a sample of 446 adult respondents. Statistical procedures were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27. Sequential mediation was tested using the PROCESS macro (Model 6; Hayes, 2018), which allows estimation of multiple consecutive mediators within a single analytical framework. Indirect effects were estimated using bootstrap resampling with 5,000 iterations and percentile bootstrap 95% confidence intervals, ensuring robust parameter estimation without reliance on the normality assumption of the sampling distribution of mediation effects. Control variables (age, gender, education, and income) were tested; however, their inclusion did not materially alter the magnitude or significance of the estimated relationships and were therefore excluded from the final model for parsimony.

Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency of the Measurement Scales

Descriptive statistics and internal consistency estimates of the constructs are reported in *Table 1*. Existential emptiness exhibits a mean value of $M = 2.97$ ($SD = 0.64$), while identity insecurity reaches $M = 3.04$ ($SD = 0.67$). Self-esteem shows a comparable average level ($M = 3.06$; $SD = 0.59$), whereas compensatory consumption records $M = 3.05$ ($SD = 0.57$). Distributional indicators suggest adequate variability across all constructs, with no evidence of range restriction. Skewness values range between -0.20 and 0.07 , and kurtosis values between -0.25 and 0.27 . All indices fall within conventional empirical thresholds considered acceptable for parametric model-

ling ($|\text{Skew}| < 1$; $|\text{Kurtosis}| < 1$), indicating the absence of substantial deviations from normality. Internal consistency of the measurement scales, assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, demonstrates high reliability across all constructs. Alpha values range from 0.90 (self-esteem) to 0.93 (existential emptiness and identity insecurity), substantially exceeding recommended thresholds for research instruments. These results confirm item homogeneity within each scale and justify aggregation of variables into composite indices used in subsequent regression and mediation analyses.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Constructs

Constructs	M	SD	Skew	Kurt	Cronbach α
Existential Emptiness	2.97	0.64	0.07	-0.10	0.93
Identity Insecurity	3.04	0.67	-0.09	-0.25	0.93
Self-Esteem	3.06	0.59	-0.11	0.25	0.90
Compensatory Consumption	3.05	0.57	-0.20	0.27	0.92

Source: Authors' calculation

Correlation Analysis

Bivariate relationships among the constructs were assessed using Pearson correlation coefficients (*Table 2*). The resulting pattern of associations demonstrates a high degree of theoretical consistency with the proposed identity-evaluative model. Existential emptiness is strongly and positively correlated with identity insecurity ($r = 0.70$; $p < 0.001$), empirically supporting the assumption that deficits in perceived meaning are accompanied by destabilisation of self-definition. The magnitude of this association suggests that the existential dimension constitutes a central, rather than peripheral, factor in the organisation of identity coherence. At the same time, existential emptiness shows a significant negative correlation with self-esteem ($r = -0.50$; $p < 0.001$), while identity insecurity is likewise negatively associated with self-esteem ($r = -0.63$; $p < 0.001$). This correlation pattern indicates an evaluative dynamic in which identity destabilisation is accompanied by diminished global self-worth, providing empirical support for the proposed transition from identity instability to evaluative instability. With respect to compensatory consumption, existential emptiness exhibits a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.34$; $p < 0.001$), and identity insecurity is positively associated with compensatory consumption ($r = 0.45$; $p < 0.001$). Self-esteem is negatively correlated with compensatory consumption ($r = -0.61$; $p < 0.001$), suggesting that reduced evaluative stability is associated with increased inclination toward symbolically oriented market choices. Overall, the correlation matrix reveals a consistent sequential structure of relationships: existential emptiness is associated with identity insecurity, identity insecurity with self-esteem, and self-esteem with compensatory consumption. Although correlational analysis does not allow testing of causal or transmission mechanisms, the findings provide empirical justification for subsequent regression and mediation modelling.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix of the Constructs

Constructs	1	2	3	4
Existential Emptiness	1			
Identity Insecurity	0.70**	1		
Self-Esteem	-0.50**	-0.63**	1	
Compensatory Consumption	0.34**	0.45**	-0.61**	1

Source: Authors' calculation

Note: ** $p < 0.001$

Hypothesis Testing through Regression Analysis

The direct relationships specified in the theoretical model were estimated using linear regression analysis. The constructs were operationalised as composite indices calculated as arithmetic means of their respective items. Diagnostic tests confirmed that the assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity were satisfied. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below 2 across all models, indicating stability of the regression parameter estimates.

H1. Existential Emptiness → Identity Insecurity

The regression model demonstrates high statistical significance ($F(1, 444) = 431.81$; $p < 0.001$) with a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.49$ (Tables 3 and 4). Existential emptiness strongly and positively predicts identity insecurity ($\beta = 0.70$; $p < 0.001$), explaining 49% of the variance in the dependent variable. The magnitude of the standardised coefficient indicates a substantial statistical association; given the cross-sectional design, it is interpreted as a predictive relationship rather than as evidence of an underlying causal mechanism.

Hypothesis H1 is supported.

Table 3. Model summary

Model Summary	Value
R	0.70
R^2	0.49
Adjusted R^2	0.49
$F(1, 444)$	431.81
p	< 0.001

Source: Authors' calculation

Table 4. Regression Estimates for Model H1

Independent Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
Existential Emptiness	0.74	0.04	0.70	20.78	< 0.001

Source: Authors' calculation

H2. Identity Insecurity → Self-Esteem

The regression model is statistically significant ($F(1, 444) = 297.57$; $p < 0.001$) with $R^2 = 0.40$ (Tables 5 and 6). Identity insecurity significantly and negatively predicts self-esteem ($\beta = -0.63$; $p < 0.001$), explaining 40% of the variance in self-esteem. The magnitude of the coefficient indicates a pronounced evaluative correlate of identity destabilisation: increased uncertainty in self-definition is associated with lower global self-worth.

Hypothesis H2 is supported.

Table 5. Model summary

Model Summary	Value
R	0.63
R ²	0.40
Adjusted R ²	0.40
F (1, 444)	297.57
p	< 0.001

Source: Authors' calculation

Table 6. Regression Estimates for Model H2

Independent Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
Identity Insecurity	-0.55	0.03	-0.63	-17.25	< 0.001

Source: Authors' calculation

H3. Self-Esteem → Compensatory Consumption

The third regression model is also statistically significant ($F(1, 444) = 260.08$; $p < 0.001$), with $R^2 = 0.37$ (Tables 7 and 8). Self-esteem significantly and negatively predicts compensatory consumption ($\beta = -0.61$; $p < 0.001$), explaining 37% of the variance in compensatory consumption. The findings indicate that lower self-esteem is associated with an increased propensity toward symbolically oriented market choices.

Hypothesis H3 is supported.

Table 7. Model summary

Model Summary	Value
R	0.61
R ²	0.37
Adjusted R ²	0.37
F (1, 444)	260.08
p	< 0.001

Source: Authors' calculation

Table 8. Regression Estimates for Model H3

Independent Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
Self-Esteem	-0.59	0.04	-0.61	-16.13	< 0.001

Source: Authors' calculation

Sequential Mediation Analysis

Sequential mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro - Model 6 (Hayes, 2018) to examine whether the effect of existential emptiness on compensatory consumption is transmitted through identity insecurity and self-esteem in the hypothesised order. The specified model estimates the sequential pathway $X \rightarrow M_1 \rightarrow M_2 \rightarrow Y$, where existential emptiness (X) predicts identity insecurity (M_1), which is subsequently associated with self-esteem (M_2), ultimately predicting compensatory consumption (Y). The analytical framework allows simultaneous estimation of the total effect (c), the direct effect (c'), and the specific indirect effects associated with each mediating path, including the sequential indirect effect through both mediators. Indirect effects were estimated using bootstrap resampling with 5,000 iterations and percentile bootstrap 95% confidence intervals, ensuring robust inference without reliance on the assumption of normality of the sampling distribution of mediation effects.

Table 9. Total and Direct Effects of Existential Emptiness on Compensatory Consumption

Effects	B	SE	t	p
Total effect (without mediators)	0.30	0.04	7.51	< 0.001
Direct effect (with mediators)	-0.02	0.05	-0.31	0.759

Source: Authors' calculation

The results reported in *Table 9* indicate that existential emptiness has a significant total association with compensatory consumption ($B = 0.30$; $SE = 0.04$; $p < 0.001$). After including identity insecurity and self-esteem in the model, the direct association is no longer statistically significant ($B = -0.02$; $SE = 0.05$; $p = 0.759$). The reduction of the coefficient from 0.30 to a value that does not differ significantly from zero suggests that the relationship between existential emptiness and compensatory consumption is transmitted almost entirely through the identity-evaluative mechanisms specified in the model. The sum of the specific indirect effects (0.31) corresponds to the difference between the total and the direct effect, confirming the internal consistency of the estimated decomposition.

Table 10. Indirect Effects of Existential Emptiness on Compensatory Consumption

Path	Indirect Effect	Boot SE	95 % CI (LLCI - ULCI)
EE $\rightarrow$ II $\rightarrow$ CC	0.070	0.037	-0.003 - 0.142
EE $\rightarrow$ SE $\rightarrow$ CC	0.055	0.024	0.009 - 0.105
EE $\rightarrow$ II $\rightarrow$ SE $\rightarrow$ CC (sequential path)	0.189	0.026	0.142 - 0.244

Source: Authors' calculation

The bootstrap analysis of the indirect pathways (*Table 10*) shows a clearly structured pattern of transmission. The dominant and statistically significant channel is the sequential indirect path ($EE \rightarrow II \rightarrow SE \rightarrow CC$; $B = 0.189$; 95% CI [0.142, 0.244]), which is consistent with the hypothesised relational chain: existential emptiness predicts higher identity insecurity; identity insecurity is associated with lower self-esteem; and lower self-esteem, in turn, predicts higher compensatory consumption. The indirect path through self-esteem alone ($EE \rightarrow SE \rightarrow CC$; $B = 0.055$; 95% CI [0.009, 0.105]) is also statistically significant, although smaller in magnitude. By contrast, the specific indirect path through identity insecurity alone ($EE \rightarrow II \rightarrow CC$; $B = 0.070$; 95% CI [-0.003, 0.142]) does not reach statistical significance, as its confidence interval includes zero. This pattern indicates that identity insecurity is related to compensatory consumption primarily through its evaluative implications for self-esteem, and that the evaluative dimension attains its full regulatory relevance precisely when preceded by identity destabilisation. Given that the direct association is no longer significant once the mediators are included, the findings are consistent with full sequential mediation: the relationship between existential emptiness and compensatory consumption is transmitted through the identity-evaluative system specified in the model.

The results provide empirical support for *Hypothesis H4*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical analysis indicates that the relationship between existential emptiness and compensatory consumption is neither linear nor reducible to a simple direct association between psychological deficit and market choice. Rather, it unfolds through a clearly structured identity-evaluative chain. Existential emptiness does not operate as a transient emotional state, but as a disruption of the integrative function of identity. Meaning in life, as conceptualized within the existential tradition, organizes goals, values, and expectations into a relatively stable narrative whole. When this organization weakens, the consequence is not merely a subjective feeling of emptiness, but a fragmentation of the criteria through which individuals evaluate themselves and their decisions. The strong association between existential emptiness and identity insecurity is consistent with this dynamic: destabilization begins at the level of self-definition. Identity becomes less coherent, less clearly structured, and more susceptible to external signals, thereby undermining its organizing role in structuring preferences.

Such fragmentation has direct implications for evaluative stability. The negative relationship between identity insecurity and self-esteem suggests that reduced clarity of self is accompanied by a decline in global self-evaluation. The sequence is theoretically and empirically consistent: self-esteem does not deteriorate independently, but as a consequence of identity destabilization. When individuals lack a stable reference framework for interpreting experiences and social feedback, their assessment of personal adequacy becomes more sensitive to situational cues. Self-esteem thus loses its function as a relatively stable evaluative anchor and becomes more reactive and dependent on external validation. In this condition, market symbols gain increased relevance because they provide clearly coded signals of status, competence, and belonging that can temporarily substitute weakened internal standards of evaluation. The negative association between self-esteem and compensatory consumption aligns with regula-

tory models of consumer behaviour, yet within this framework it acquires a deeper structural interpretation. Compensatory consumption does not stem from an isolated desire for status nor from momentary emotional discomfort, but from an attempt to stabilize a system that has previously been destabilized. When internal evaluative criteria are weakened, symbolic goods can serve as external organizers of identity coherence. Market choice then assumes the function of short-term reorganization of self-perception: a product or brand offers not only functional utility, but also a temporary sense of clearer position, control, or worth. Consumption acquires a regulatory dimension because it intervenes where continuity of the self has been disrupted.

The sequential mediation analysis further indicates that existential emptiness does not translate directly into compensatory consumption, but operates through identity-evaluative mechanisms. Its association with compensatory consumption is transmitted through identity insecurity and subsequently through self-esteem, a pattern consistent with a gradual transformation of existential deficit into market behaviour. Distinguishing levels of analysis is crucial: the existential dimension operates at the level of life orientation and narrative coherence; identity insecurity at the level of self-definition; and self-esteem at the level of evaluation. Only when these levels are cumulatively affected does the likelihood of compensatory consumption increase. Compensatory purchasing thus emerges as the final stage of a process in which internal destabilization is translated into external choice.

In the present data, no significant direct association between existential emptiness and compensatory consumption remains once the mediators are included, which indicates that the identity–evaluative chain accounts for the bulk of the observed relationship. This does not preclude additional channels—such as shifts in temporal perspective, heightened sensitivity to short-term rewards, or reduced tolerance for uncertainty—but such mechanisms are not detectable as a residual direct association in the present model. The predominance of indirect associations is consistent with the interpretation that compensatory consumption is not merely a hedonistic reaction, but an expression of a deeper disruption in the coherence of the self; given the cross-sectional design, this interpretation remains theoretical rather than causally established. These findings have broader implications for understanding preference stability in economic models. If identity functions as an organizing framework within which goals and evaluative criteria are defined, its destabilization may alter the very basis of valuation. In this sense, compensatory consumption does not necessarily represent irrational deviation, but rather an adaptive attempt to restore evaluative stability. Increased sensitivity to symbolic attributes does not arise from informational error, but from altered conditions under which preferences are formed. In contemporary markets, particularly those shaped by digital communication and intensified social comparison, these processes may be further amplified. Continuous exposure to normative standards and symbolic markers of success can heighten the responsiveness of identity-destabilized individuals to market signals. When the internal reference framework weakens, external symbols gain importance, and compensatory consumption becomes a more accessible strategy of adjustment. The market thus functions not only as a mechanism of exchange, but also as a space in which individuals attempt to re-establish continuity and value. The sequential dynamic identified in this study allows for a more precise positioning of compensatory consumption within a broader motivational architecture: existential

emptiness destabilizes identity; destabilized identity undermines evaluative stability; and diminished evaluative stability increases reliance on symbolic resources. Market choice in this chain is not the origin of the process, but its outcome.

The findings also carry practical implications for marketing practice and consumer welfare. For marketing practice, the results suggest that consumers' responsiveness to symbolic and status-related appeals is systematically related to the state of their identity-evaluative system. Segmentation and communication strategies that rely on identity signalling are therefore likely to be most effective—and most ethically sensitive—among consumers experiencing diminished meaning, identity uncertainty and lowered self-esteem. Brands positioned around competence, belonging or self-expression should recognise that part of the demand for such positioning is regulatory in nature, and that communication which deliberately amplifies identity insecurity in order to stimulate demand raises serious ethical concerns. From a consumer-welfare and policy perspective, the results indicate that compensatory consumption may function as a short-term regulatory strategy with limited long-term benefits, which supports interventions aimed at strengthening consumers' internal evaluative resources: programmes of financial and media literacy, transparency requirements for idealised or algorithmically curated content, and initiatives that foster sources of meaning outside the market sphere. For consumers themselves, awareness that symbolically driven purchases may constitute responses to identity destabilisation rather than to product attributes can support more reflective decision-making.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that compensatory consumption cannot be adequately explained without accounting for the deeper existential dimension of identity. A deficit in experienced meaning does not remain at the level of a subjective feeling of emptiness; rather, it affects the structure of self-definition and the evaluative system, thereby altering the way individuals assess themselves and their choices. Market behaviour, particularly when symbolically oriented, emerges in this context as a response to the destabilization of internal coherence. The sequential dynamics identified in the analysis indicate that compensatory consumption is not an immediate response to existential emptiness, but the outcome of a gradual transformation of the identity-evaluative structure. When meaning weakens, identity loses clarity; when identity becomes insecure, self-esteem loses stability; and when evaluative stability declines, market symbols acquire an enhanced regulatory function. Compensatory consumption is thus repositioned from the category of isolated market anomalies to the domain of adaptive strategies for coping with internal destabilization. This perspective opens space for a reconsideration of preference stability in economic modelling. If identity constitutes the organizational framework within which evaluative criteria are formed, its destabilization may produce changes in the very structure of choice. In this sense, the market does not function solely as a neutral arena of exchange, but also as a space of symbolic regulation in which individuals attempt to restore a sense of coherence. The study has several limitations. First, it is based on a cross-sectional design and self-reported measures, which limits the strength of causal inference; the estimated relationships should therefore be interpreted as predictive associations rather than causal effects. Second, the data were collected through non-probability convenience

sampling in a single country, which restricts the generalisability of the findings to the broader adult population and to other cultural and economic contexts; replication on probability-based and cross-national samples is therefore needed. Third, the operationalisation of the constructs relies on adapted and, in the case of compensatory consumption, newly developed scales: existential emptiness is measured through reformulated presence-of-meaning items, identity insecurity through adapted self-concept clarity items, and self-esteem through selected Rosenberg items capturing the level rather than the stability of self-esteem. Stronger evidence of construct validity, including the discriminant validity of identity insecurity relative to self-concept clarity and direct measurement of self-esteem stability, remains an important task for future research. Longitudinal and experimental designs could provide a more precise understanding of the temporal dynamics through which existential emptiness translates into compensatory consumption. Future research could also incorporate additional mediators such as materialistic values, temporal orientation, or emotion regulation to further elaborate the mechanisms linking meaning destabilization to market behaviour. In contemporary digitally mediated markets, where symbolic signals are continuously present and amplified, understanding these processes becomes particularly relevant. In such environments, compensatory consumption may not merely reflect a desire for status or hedonic gratification, but also an attempt to restore diminished identity stability. To understand this process is to better understand the broader relationship between existential security and market dynamics.

Appendix A. Measurement Instrument

All constructs were measured using the following statements, rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The original items were administered in Croatian; an English translation is provided alongside each item for readers unfamiliar with the source language. Existential emptiness (EE) items were formulated with reference to the presence-of-meaning subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006); identity insecurity (II) items were formulated with reference to the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell, et al., 1996); self-esteem (SE) items were adapted from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), with item SE4 reverse-worded and reverse-coded prior to analysis; the compensatory consumption (CC) scale was developed for the purposes of this research on the basis of theoretical and experimental work on compensatory consumer behaviour (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008); (Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2017).

A) Existential Emptiness (EE)

Item	Original statement (Croatian)	English translation
EE1	Često imam osjećaj da moj život nema jasan smisao.	I often feel that my life has no clear meaning.
EE2	Ponekad ne vidim svrhu u onome što radim.	Sometimes I do not see the purpose in what I do.
EE3	Nedostaje mi jasna životna usmjerenost.	I lack a clear sense of direction in life.
EE4	Osjećam da moj život nema dublje značenje.	I feel that my life lacks deeper meaning.
EE5	Teško mi je definirati što daje smisao mom životu.	It is difficult for me to define what gives my life meaning.

B) Identity Insecurity (II)

Item	Original statement (Croatian)	English translation
II1	Ponekad imam osjećaj da ne znam tko sam zapravo.	I sometimes feel that I do not really know who I am.
II2	Moje vrijednosti često nisu jasno definirane.	My values are often not clearly defined.
II3	Moja slika o sebi često je nejasna.	My self-image is often unclear.
II4	Osjećam nesigurnost u vezi vlastitog identiteta.	I feel insecure about my own identity.
II5	Moja uvjerenja o sebi često se mijenjaju.	My beliefs about myself often change.

C) Self-Esteem (SE)

Item	Original statement (Croatian)	English translation
SE1	Općenito sam zadovoljan/na sobom.	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
SE2	Smatram da imam brojne pozitivne osobine.	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
SE3	Osjećam da vrijedim jednako kao i drugi ljudi.	I feel that I am worth just as much as other people.
SE4 (R)	Ponekad mislim da nisam dovoljno vrijedan/na. (obrnuto kodirano)	At times I think I am not worthwhile enough. (reverse-coded)
SE5	Imam pozitivan stav prema sebi.	I have a positive attitude toward myself.

D) Compensatory Consumption (CC)

Item	Original statement (Croatian)	English translation
CC1	Kada se osjećam nesigurno, sklon/a sam kupnji proizvoda koji naglašavaju moj status.	When I feel insecure, I am inclined to buy products that emphasise my status.
CC2	Kupnja određenih proizvoda pomaže mi da se osjećam vrijednije.	Buying certain products helps me feel more valuable.
CC3	Ponekad kupujem stvari kako bih nadoknadio/la osjećaj nezadovoljstva sobom.	I sometimes buy things to compensate for feelings of dissatisfaction with myself.
CC4	Važno mi je da proizvodi koje posjedujem odražavaju moju osobnu vrijednost.	It is important to me that the products I own reflect my personal worth.
CC5	Kupnja mi može pomoći da povratim osjećaj kontrole.	Buying can help me regain a sense of control.
CC6	U trenucima nesigurnosti češće razmišljam o kupnji.	In moments of insecurity, I think about buying more often.

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