

## Post-Disaster Recovery and Rebuilding: A Consumer Perspective

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In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the costliest natural disasters in United States history, research and outreach activities related to social and economic development have reached heightened importance. The extant social and behavioral research on natural disasters has primarily focused on coping by individuals in terms of psychological reactions as predictors of mental health problems. An emphasis has also been placed on “vulnerable” populations and the resultant disruptive behaviors even though in actuality this segment is quite small. From a public policy perspective, it is imperative to understand how the broader “disaster-impacted” general population copes with disruptions to their daily lives. One critical dimension of coping involves their “consumption adjustments” where consumption behaviors (search, purchase and even disposition) may be modified.

While previous research has demonstrated that an individual’s coping self-efficacy acts as a significant mediator between the stresses and losses associated with a disaster, it is still unclear whether, how, and to what extent coping self-efficacy impacts individual coping among day-to-day consumption behaviors (i.e., consumption adjustments). The current study determined whether psychological coping strategies (CS) mediate the relationship between coping self-efficacy (CSE) and consumer-based coping strategies, namely, consumption adjustment (CA).

The sample consisted of 213 Louisiana Gulf Coast residents directly affected by the hurricanes. The respondents were predominantly female (69%), Caucasian (65%), and younger (65% between 19 and 24 years although 23% of the sample was above 45 years). Exploratory factor analysis was used to verify the dimensionality and reliability of the items.

The construct of consumption adjustment represents the degree of change in a broad range of consumption-related activities and attitudes. Results identified most common adjustments—conservative buying which is reflected in both store choice and product choice. Overall, disaster-affected consumers were more careful in decision making and reducing wasteful spending. Coping strategies (CS) focus on consumers’ active (behavioral) and emotional responses to emotionally arousing, stress inducing interactions with the environment. Six dimensions emerged from an exploratory factor analysis: Active Coping, Rational Thinking, Positive Thinking, Emotional Support, Instrumental Support, and Emotional Venting. A test for mediation with regression analysis found CS partially mediating the effect of CSE on CA for three of the coping strategies. As a result, two generalized relationships emerged: (1) the higher a consumers’ confidence in their ability to cope with the stressful situation, the less they utilize psychological coping strategies and the less they adjust their consumption behavior; and (2) the more consumers utilize psychological coping strategies (i.e., instrumental support, emotional venting and positive thinking), the more likely they are to also adjust their consumption behavior in response to the stressful event.

This research provides a number of practical implications. For instance, restoring or increasing consumer confidence in the ability to cope plays an instrumental role in the actual adjustments that are made. While strategies to assist consumers in making smarter buying decisions are crucial, consumer education to assist in adapting their actual buying behavior (purchase planning, information search, etc.) is needed as well. Private-sector strategies should be ready to respond to the dual nature of the consumption adjustments through increases in both consumer support and education.

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