

Beyond Consumerism: Retail Therapy as Psychological Healing in Beth Harbison's *Shoe Addicts Anonymous*

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ما وراء الاستهلاكية: العلاج بالتسوق بوصفه آلية للدفاع النفسي وممارسة علاجية في

رواية مدمنات الأحذية المجهولات لبيث هاربسون

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Abstract

Retail therapy is the therapeutic act of shopping in which consumption functions as a psychological defense mechanism by which women regain confidence, restore emotional balance, and reconnect with their feminine selfhood. Arguing that shopping is an intentional and significant therapeutic strategy for many women, this study examines Beth Harbison's *Shoe Addicts Anonymous* (2007) as an example of Chick Lit novel that significantly fosters women's related issues. The study seeks to answer the following questions: What is retail therapy? How does the selected novel represent retail therapy? Being qualitative in its nature, the study is critical, descriptive, and analytical. The critical orientation of the study combines feminist criticism and psychoanalytic theory, drawing primarily on Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanisms alongside postfeminist views on femininity and consumer culture. The study concludes that shopping, as represented in the selected novel, is more than a temporary emotional escape. It becomes a constructive psychological practice through which women overcome emotional difficulties, strengthen social relationships, and reclaim a positive sense of femininity. Therefore, retail therapy emerges as a meaningful literary and psychological discourse that redefines shopping as a source of healing, empowerment, and self-expression rather than merely an act of consumption. **Keywords:** Beth Harbison, Chick Lit, Consumer Culture, Defense Mechanism, Femininity, Retail Therapy, *Shoe Addicts Anonymous*, Shopping.

المخلص

يُعدّ العلاج بالتسوق ممارسةً علاجيةً يُوظف فيها الاستهلاك بوصفه آليةً دفاعيةً نفسيةً تستعين بها النساء لاستعادة الثقة بالنفس، واستعادة التوازن العاطفي، وإعادة التواصل مع هويتهنّ الأنثوية. وانطلاقاً من فكرة أن التسوق يُمثّل استراتيجيةً علاجيةً مقصودةً وذات أهمية بالنسبة إلى العديد من النساء، تتناول هذه الدراسة رواية مدمنات الأحذية المجهولات (٢٠٠٧) للكاتبة بيث هاربسون بوصفها نموذجاً من روايات تشيك ليت التي تُبرز قضايا المرأة وتجاربها بصورة واضحة. وتسعى الدراسة إلى الإجابة عن التساؤلين الآتيين: ما العلاج بالتسوق؟ وكيف تُجسّد الرواية المختارة مفهوم العلاج بالتسوق؟ وبحكم طبيعتها النوعية، تعتمد الدراسة منهجاً نقدياً وصفيّاً تحليليّاً، ويرتكز إطارها النظري على الجمع بين النقد النسوي ونظرية التحليل النفسي، مع الاعتماد بصورة رئيسة على نظرية آنا فرويد في آليات الدفاع النفسي، إلى جانب الرؤى ما بعد النسوية المتعلقة بالأنوثة وثقافة

الاستهلاك. وتتوصل الدراسة إلى أن التسوق، كما تُصوّر الرواية المختارة، يتجاوز كونه وسيلة مؤقتة للهروب من الضغوط والانفعالات، ليغدو ممارسةً نفسيةً بناءةً تُمكن النساء من تجاوز الصعوبات العاطفية، وتعزيز علاقاتهن الاجتماعية، واستعادة شعورٍ إيجابي بالأنوثة. ومن ثم، يبرز العلاج بالتسوق بوصفه خطاباً أدبياً ونفسياً ذا دلالة، يُعيد تعريف التسوق باعتباره وسيلةً للتعافي والتمكين والتعبير عن الذات، وليس مجرد فعلٍ استهلاكي. الكلمات المفتاحية: بيت هاريسون، تشيك ليت، ثقافة الاستهلاك، آليات الدفاع النفسي، الأنوثة، العلاج بالتسوق، مدمنات الأحذية المجهولات، التسوق

Introduction

Within the scope of consumer culture, shopping is traditionally perceived as an act of mere material satisfaction. At present, however, shopping has become a means by which individuals, particularly women, express their emotional needs and personal and social desires. This is confirmed by Baudrillard (1998) who states: "Consumption is not the passive absorption and appropriation of goods. It is an active mode of relation not only to objects but to the collective and to the world." (p. 25). According to the Baudrillardian context, therefore, women's conception is an act of socialization, in that it connects individuals to societal culture. Precisely, shopping can be understood as an act of women's socialization because it often functions as more than the purchasing of goods; it creates opportunities for social interaction, identity formation, and participation in cultural life. In relation, retail therapy, a psychological coping mechanism usually followed by women, is an attempt to improve emotional status, including sadness, stress, and any other negative feelings that would detach them from social interaction and attach them instead to psychological disempowerment. As such, Daniel Miller (1998) confirms: "Shopping is not best understood as an individualistic or materialistic practice, but as a means by which people create and maintain social relationships." (p. 18) He further emphasizes that purchasing goods is frequently connected to feelings of affection, care, and emotional attachment. In modern times, consumer culture is perceived as an arena of female participation where she can pick and choose from a wide range of multiple items. (McRobbie, 1994) These items, according to retail therapy, are not merely passive possessions but rather agents that shape their mood and thus promise freedom of self-expression and liberation from the constraints of the patriarchal construction of female subjectivity. This "return to pleasure" reclaims the body and the 'feminine' principle in consumption (Shildrich, 1997). Accordingly, practicing retail therapy has been referred to as a compensatory consumption because it occurs when an individual feels a need, lack, or desire that cannot be satisfied. So, he seeks alternative means of fulfillment. In *Retail Therapy: The Hidden Connection Between Shopping and Well-Being* (2024), F. G. Cardin illustrates the connection between shopping and emotional state; he delves into the psychological background of retail therapy, examining how it can boost mood, reduce stress, and enhance self-esteem and confidence. Cardin states: "when individuals engage in shopping, their brains release dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward" (Cardin, 2024, p. 7). This finds its echo in Amanda Ford (2002), who shares stories about her most memorable findings during shopping, such as the perfect pink sweater. In her *Retail Therapy: Life Lessons Learned While Shopping*, Ford shows how shopping examines deeper truths about people's lives and what is really going on when money is spent. Reflecting on passions' discovery and personal care, she says: "Something deep inside you yearns for pink ... you cannot explain why" (n.d) Retail therapy is among the most significant issues represented in Chick Lit novels, a fictional genre focusses on the personal and professional lives of modern women, blending humor, romance, and self-discovery. It typically addresses romantic relationships, female friendships, and workplace struggles in humorous and lighthearted ways. Chick-lit novels tell intellectual, fast-paced stories about young, predominantly white women's messy journeys through personal and professional experiences, as they gain self-knowledge and self-acceptance, and thus are empowered to take control of their intimate relationships and professional lives (Smith, 2008). The manner of telling the story in Chick-lit is confiding, with a personal tone and frequent first-person narration, as if a best friend were telling another about his life. In addition, chick-lit has monumentally changed the representation of single women in literature by portraying not figures of pity, illness or derision, but a cast of funny, usually capable women not looking to settle (Harzewski, 2006) Idiomatically, "Chick" is an American slang term for a young woman, and "lit" is a shortened form of the word "literature". In *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011), quoting *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2007), the term is defined as: "literature by, for, or about women; esp. a type of fiction, typically focusing on the social lives and relationships of women, and often aimed at readers with similar experiences" (p. 17) As a fictional term, it did not become an established one for a style of novel until the second half of the 1990s, along with the phenomenal success of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (first published in 1996), and continued success with Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* (first published in

2003). Thus, chick lit refers to the tendency in postfeminist culture to evoke choice and the development of individual agency as the defining tenets of feminine identity. This is best realized through engagement with consumer culture, in which women are encouraged to achieve self-fulfillment by purchasing, adorning themselves with, or surrounding themselves with the goods this culture offers.

Shopping as a Defense Mechanism and Healing Emotional Wounds

Beth Harbison's *Shoe Addicts Anonymous* represents shopping as a journey of healing and self-discovery, in which the female characters attempt to fill emotional voids and psychological wounds through fashion and consumer practices. The novel explores retail therapy as a psychological defense mechanism and emotional healing process, showing how shopping becomes a coping strategy through which women work through pain, anxiety, failed relationships, low self-esteem, and childhood emotional deprivation. Huddleston & Minahan (2011) argue that shopping is more complex than making a purchase, since it reflects emotional needs, identity formation, creativity, and the search for self-worth. They state: "Shopping is certainly not just about buying something, as the women have so clearly said. Shopping is much more than opening the wallet and flashing the plastic" (p. 4). This perspective is deeply significant in *Shoe Addicts Anonymous*, in which shopping, as a motif, is tied to emotional memory and character development rather than a material desire. Alongside shopping and shoes, another motif in the novel symbolizes far more than fashion; it represents confidence, escape, comfort, emotional protection, and transformation. Published in 2007, *Shoe Addicts Anonymous* centers on four women from different backgrounds. Harbison's novel, as such, follows a collective female experience, emphasizing shared emotional pain, female solidarity, and mutual healing. Each character carries emotional wounds connected to her past relationships, insecurities, and feelings of inadequacy. Shopping, in this sense, becomes an emotional compensation for unresolved struggles. Beth Harbison is an American novelist known for her emotionally driven women's fiction and chick-lit narratives that blend humor with romance. Harbison often uses the pen name Beth Harbison to write some of her women's fiction books. *Shoe Addicts Anonymous* was the first book of her career to reach the New York Times bestseller list. Before becoming a novelist, she worked in the beauty and fashion industry, an experience that strongly influenced her portrayal of feminine consumer culture and women's emotions related to fashion. Her novels often focus on female friendship, humor, romance, and personal transformation within modern society. Among her notable works are *Secrets of a Shoe Addict* (2005), *Hop in a Jar* (2007), *When in Doubt, Add Butter* (2012), and *One Less Problem Without You* (2013). While many of her novels include themes of romance and humor, *Shoe Addicts Anonymous* differs significantly because it places emotional healing and psychological recovery at the center of the narrative rather than a romance or comic misunderstanding alone. The novel does not merely focus on women's obsession with fashion, but rather explores the emotional reasons hidden behind that attachment. Harbison's writings draw on multiple perspectives, allowing readers to access the inner emotional worlds of several female characters rather than a single protagonist. This narrative structure shows emotional complexity through multiple narrators and interconnected stories. In other words, Harbison creates a collective feminine voice that highlights how different women experienced similar emotional struggles despite the differences in personality, age, or social background. She also uses conversational, accessible language to reduce the distance between the reader and the characters. *Shoe Addicts Anonymous*'s main characters are Lorna Rafferty, Jocelyn Bowen, Helene Zaharis, Sandra Vanderslice, and Senator Jim Zaharis. The latter is a well-known politician and the husband of Helen Zaharis. He always keeps Helene under his control and hardly allows her any kind of freedom. As a means of controlling her, Jim also terminates the credit card transaction. On the other hand, Lorna Rafferty is presented as being in heavy debt. However, she is unable to give up shopping on eBay as she is extensively addicted to it. Sandra battles through agoraphobia, and in order to pay off the shoe bills, she makes the decision to work as a phone sex operator. Jocelyn Bowen works as a nanny for a terrible family. Every Tuesday night, all four women meet to buy shoes together. This way, they end up becoming best friends and share their personal problems. They think of seeking triumph over blackmail, dating problems, bankruptcy, and past secrets. The title, *Shoe Addicts Anonymous*, carries a symbolic significance. It reflects the collective consciousness of women from diverse social backgrounds who are emotionally unified by their attachment to shoes. The title, therefore, reflects suffering and solidarity, in that shopping for shoes becomes the language through which the four women communicate their silent and invisible pain. Lorna Rafferty is one of the clearest examples that depict shopping as a defense mechanism. Lorna's emotional world is connected to shoes, not as fashionable objects but as emotional companions that provide comfort and relief. The opening lines immediately establish this emotional attachment: "Lorna had these peep-toe ankle-strap Delman platform sandals to comfort her. She could walk right into the fires of hell if she had to, in shoes to die for" (p. 1). This quotation

reveals that shoes function as emotional armor for Lorona. The expression, 'walk right into the fires of hell', symbolizes the difficult and painful realities that she experienced in her life, so shoes provided her with the confidence and strength by which she endures these hardships. Lorna's attachment to shoes is deeply connected to the memory of her mother and childhood: One of the only things she could remember about her mother was her shoes. Black-and-white spectators. Little pink sandals with kitten heels. And Lorna's favorites: long, slim satin shoes, with heels like narrow art deco commas, and tiny bows at the toe that were frayed slightly at the end from the years since her wedding. (p.1) The detailed description of little pink sandals, slim satin shoes, and heels like narrow art transforms shoes into emotional symbols attached to maternal memory, love, comfort, and absence. Even as an adult, Lorona returns to those memories emotionally. Reflecting on nostalgic memories, she sees shoes as symbolic substitutes for the emotional connection she lacked in her relationship with her mother. Thus, shopping for shoes is not simply consumer behavior but an unconscious attachment to childhood and motherhood memories. The pleasure Laura experiences while shopping strongly reflects the principle of retail therapy. When she tries Delman shoes, she describes the feelings as "ah, magic" (Harbison, 2007, p.2). This short sentence emphasizes emotional satisfaction. Shopping becomes an experience that relieves stress and pain. This idea supports Cardin's argument that "when individuals engage in shopping, their brains release dopamine and neurotransmitters associated with pleasure and reward" (Cardin, 2024, p. 7). According to Cardin, the perfect item contributes to a sense of accomplishment and emotional fulfillment for Lorona; the Delman shoes become more than a fashionable object, they create emotional pleasure and comfort that she struggled to find elsewhere in her life. Lorna's shoes also reflect the emotional motivations behind retail therapy. Kim and Chang (2023) argue that retail therapy is driven by emotional needs, where individuals use shopping to express, manage, and communicate their emotions. It works as a coping mechanism for dealing with stress and negative emotions. This idea becomes visible throughout Lorona's life. Her failed romantic relationships repeatedly leave wounds that she unconsciously attempts to heal through shopping. Harbison explained that one boyfriend dumped her a few weeks later after betraying her with her best friend at her own birthday. Instead of emotionally confronting heartbreak directly, Lorna redirects her emotion energy toward fashion and shoes; even her romantic experience becomes associated with footwear: "But come fall, she met a new man- one who loved salsa dancing. The footwear was magnificent. Stilettos, strappiest, the man was a dream, one come true" (p. 7). The focus on shoes rather than emotional intimacy reveals how consumption becomes psychologically intertwined with emotional relationships. Shoes become emotionally safer and more reliable than human relationships. Lorna romanticizes shoes, viewing them as timeless and a good investment, reflecting what Anna Freud (1936) described as rationalization. According to Anna Freud, rationalization occurs when the ego creates a logical explanation for actions that are emotionally motivated. Lorna emotionally needs shoes for comfort and reassurance, yet she justifies the purchase economically by calling them an investment. The ego, therefore, disguises emotional dependency beneath socially acceptable reasoning. This rationalization repeatedly appears throughout the novel. After purchasing the shoes, Lorna continues buying unnecessary items. Despite the comfort shopping provides, Harbison reveals the negative side of retail therapy. Lorna suffers financially and emotionally from compulsive consumption. When she realizes she must return the Delman shoes, the emotional pain becomes overwhelming. "When she left the store, she felt like she was going to cry" (p. 32). This reaction shows how shopping carries emotional significance far beyond material value. Returning the shoes feels painful for Lorna because they symbolize comfort and emotional control. Lorona herself openly rationalized her shopping behavior by stating: They made her happy. She wasn't going to apologize for that. Some people drank, some people used drugs, some people were sex addicts, some people even did truly heinous things to other people in order to make themselves feel better. Compared with all that, a new pair of Ferragamos here, some Uggs there...it just didn't seem that bad. (p. 32). Lorna justifies compulsive shopping by comparing it to more destructive addictions, minimizing the seriousness of her emotional dependency on consumption. Through rationalization, she protects herself from guilt and emotional confrontation. Harbison also portrays the shopping environment itself as emotionally therapeutic. The mall atmosphere emotionally affects Lorna. "The mall was cool and festive, carrying the sounds of people talking and muzak" (p. 31). Usually, the environment gave Lorona a lift. This reflects Melindra and Aprianinisi's (2016) argument that retail therapy involves not only the purchase of goods but also the overall shopping experience, which can provide emotional satisfaction and comfort. Spaces themselves, the sounds, smells, lights, and the movement of the mall create temporary emotional relief. Shopping environments become emotionally comforting spaces that distract women from loneliness and stress. The other character that Harbison mentioned is Helene Zaharias, who stands for one of the most complex representations of retail therapy in *Shoe Addicts Anonymous*. Unlike Lorna, whose

attachment to shoes emerged from romantic disappointment and childhood memory, Helene's relationship with shopping developed from emotional oppression, loss of personal freedom, political performance, and childhood deprivation. Helen appears outwardly privileged as the wife of Senator Jim Zaharis, surrounded by wealth, luxury, and social status, yet internally she suffers from emotional emptiness and a toxic relationship with her husband. Her shopping addiction, therefore, becomes a defense mechanism through which she attempts to regain emotional comfort, personal control, and happiness within life, the life that is dominated by performance. From the beginning of Helene's narrative, Harbison reveals the oppressive structure surrounding her marriage. Helen no longer possesses autonomy over her own life or even her own body. This may become visible when Harbison writes: But Helene was firm on this. She didn't want a child. It would absolutely be unfair, primarily to the child, since the only reason Jim wanted a baby was so that he would have the perfect little family to trot around during campaigns. Camelot 2008. (p.10) This quotation shows feelings of fear and anxiety within Helene's marriage. Helene's husband desires a child out of emotional love engendered by familial intimacy: "The only reason Jim wanted a baby was so that he would have the perfect little family" (p.13). Desiring a perfect little family reflects how Helen herself becomes part of political performance. Her femininity and domestic role are reduced to political symbolism, serving Jim's public image. In this sense, Helen's life reflects emotional loneliness and loss of individuality. She is forced to play the role of a senator's perfect wife while suppressing her own emotional desires and dreams. This emotional dispute directly contributes to her dependence on shopping as a form of emotional compensation. Harbison portrays Helene as emotionally trapped within social performance and public expectations. She constantly participates in a political conversation and charity performance: "She has always hated this kind of conversation, but she had no choice but to do her best" (p.12). The phrase "no choice" is important because it highlights Helene's lack of control over her environment. According to Rick, Pereira, and Burson (2014), choices inherent in shopping may restore personal control over one's environment and reduce residual sadness. They focus on choice because it is linked to personal control, whereas sadness is characterized by a lack of such control over one's environment. Helene's daily life is structured around obligation, performance, and control imposed by others. Shopping, therefore, becomes one of the few spaces where she can exercise independent choice and autonomy. Within stores and shopping environments, she temporarily escapes political performance and regains authority over her own desires and choices. This emotional pressure becomes especially visible after stressful social interaction. Harbison immediately transitions from Helene's emotional expression to the shoe department of Armond, Helene leaned back against the stiff faux-leather chair in the shoe department of Ormond's her reward for her two-hour audience with Nancy Cabot-and turned the thought of her husband's anger over in her mind, like a piece of jewelry she was considering buying. (p.13) The word "reward" reveals the function of shopping for shoes and how it becomes compensational for emotional labor and social exhaustion. Here, retail therapy functions exactly as Cardin explains in *Retail Therapy* (2024), the hidden connection between shopping and wellbeing. Cardin argues that shopping can boost mood, reduce stress, and increase feelings of confidence and emotional relief. Shopping offers Helene a temporary emotional resolution after enduring psychological pressure and emotional suppression. She remains mentally haunted by her husband's control because he repetitively calls her during shopping, a matter that deprived her of the possibility of fully escaping emotional oppression. However, such stress motivates her desire to shop and enhances her ability to use it as a healing tool and emotional refuge. This is manifested in her frequent visits to Arnold's shoe department three times a week. Lee (2015) explains that retail therapy is frequently motivated by emotional demands and internal needs that influence purchasing behavior to improve mood and reduce stress. Healing through shopping, therefore, does not emerge from superficial materialism but from emotional survival in a cold familial environment. Harbison directly identifies the temporary psychological effect of shopping: "the pleasure she got there was fleeting, but the initial thrill of acquisition never failed her" (p. 16). This quotation captures the paradox of retail therapy: the emotional satisfaction is temporary, yet the anticipation and movement of acquisition consistently provide psychological relief. Shopping seems to become emotionally addictive because it temporarily interrupts feelings of emptiness and suffocation. The phrase "never failed her" is significant because shoes become emotionally reliable in ways that people and relationships have not been. Shopping offers immediate comfort without judgment or emotional risk. At the same time, Helene fully understands that her purchases carry an emotional meaning beyond material value. "She wasn't just buying stuff; she was buying herself some good memories" (p. 16). This statement reveals one of the deepest psychological dimensions of retail therapy within the novel: shopping becomes an attempt to create emotional experiences worth remembering inside a life emotionally empty of warmth. Gulam Hazmin (2022) describes retail therapy as a form of catharsis that allows individuals to seek comfort, nostalgia, and

emotional security through consumption, a matter that can erase negative feelings. Helen's purchases, therefore, become an emotional preservation that allows her to momentarily escape emotional numbness and seek fragments of happiness within a restrictive life. Xu and Jackson (2019) argue that retail therapy functions as a mechanism for stress reduction and emotional well-being, helping individuals cope constructively with negative emotions. Helene's shopping precisely reflects this psychological process. However, her shopping behavior is linked to childhood deprivation and childhood insecurity. Helene confesses: "There were a lot of times when I literally had to walk to school barefoot" (p. 175). This revelation transforms the symbolism of shoes entirely. Shoes no longer represent luxury alone; they become symbols of emotional compensation for childhood deprivation and humiliation. Her obsession with shoes emerged from a painful past marked by poverty and insecurity. The emotional significance of shoes, therefore, extends far beyond fashion. Shoes become symbols of safety, dignity, and transformation from earlier suffering. The psychological process can also be understood through Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanisms. Anna Freud (1936) explains that a defense mechanism is an adaptive strategy through which the ego attempts to resolve emotional conflict and psychological tensions. Helen's shopping functions as a sublimation because she redirects her frustration, repression, and dissatisfaction into socially acceptable consumer behavior. Instead of openly confronting her emotional pain or destructive material reality, she channels these emotions into shopping rituals and luxury consumption. The third character is Sandra, whose life presents the psychological dimension of retail therapy. Her relationship with shopping emerged from emotional insecurity, body image trauma, and social isolation. Through Sandra's character, Beth Harbison deconstructs the stereotypical perspective that women shop merely for pleasure or vanity; the novel presents shopping as a coping mechanism and a form of emotional survival. Sandra's attachment to shoes is deeply connected to her lifelong struggle against self-esteem, her comparison with her sister Tiffany, and her inability to feel comfortable within her own body, and her psychological illness, which is agoraphobia. Sandra uses shoes as emotional protection against feelings of loneliness and rejection. From Sandra's narrative, Harbison begins to establish the tension between imagination and reality. Sandra introduces herself through fantasy and fashion: "I'm wearing my red leather stilettos...." Sandra Vanderslice padded across the floor of her Adams Morgan apartment in bare feet" (p. 24). The contrast between the glamorous red stiletto shoes and Sandra's actual barefoot symbolizes the division between the woman she imagines herself to be and the woman she believes herself to be in reality. Harbison's narrative style depends heavily on irony, allowing readers to enter Sandra's inner emotional world. The shoes symbolize competence, femininity, and desirability, while the barefoot reveal vulnerability and emotional emptiness. Sandra's emotional struggle is shaped by her conservative upbringing and emotionally restrictive environment. This strict environment contributes to Sandra's repression and emotional insecurity. Her professional identity as a phone operator becomes psychologically significant because it allows her to escape reality through performance and fantasy. Harbison reveals how Sandra constructs an alternative feminine identity through imagination. Sandra's body image trauma becomes so visible through her comparison with her sister Tiffany. "Growing up with her sister had been like being trapped in the before and after diet" (p. 27). This powerfully reflects the destructive impact of beauty standards on female identity. Tiffany represents a conventional feminine identity, while Sandra sees herself as having an undesirable body image: A long time ago, Sandra had realized that life just wasn't always fair. And if she wanted to lose some weight, or do anything at all, she was going to have to play by life's stupid, cheating, biased, and badly refereed rules. (p. 27) This awareness demonstrates how deeply consumer culture and beauty expectations affect women psychologically. As a result of these emotional wounds, Sandra turns to shopping as a defense mechanism and emotional coping strategy. Harbison clearly shows this emotional process: "She could have cried instead, though, she'd do what she usually did to not make herself feel better. In these situations, she'd shop" (Harbison, 2007, p. 26). Shopping replaces emotional breakdown rather than directly confronting pain. Sandra redirected her emotions towards consumption. Harbison reinforces Sandra's behavior when she writes, "Thanks to the wonders of internet shopping and grocery delivery, she didn't have to leave home in three months" (p.30). Sandra's agoraphobia intensifies her emotional dependence on shopping. Online shopping allows her to maintain contact with the outside world while avoiding direct social interaction. The purchases themselves become emotionally comforting objects. Her shopping behavior reflects what Bowins (2004) describes as the role of psychological defense mechanisms in restoring emotional balance and reducing negative emotional states. Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanism is especially useful in understanding Sandra's behavior. Sandra unconsciously uses displacement by redirecting feelings of rejection and insecurity towards shopping and shoe consumption. Rather than confronting her emotional wounds directly, she channels them, redirects them into buying shoes. Shopping becomes a substitute

emotional outlet. Sandra's emotional dependence on shoes is deeply connected to her body image. Unlike clothing, shoes do not force her to confront her weight: "I think I got into shoes partly so I could bridge the height gap between us. That and the fact that your shoe size doesn't change even if you gain weight" (p.156). This quotation reveals why shoes become safe objects for Sandra. Shoes remain stable regardless of physical changes, offering her a sense of emotional security that clothing cannot provide. Sandra later explains this more directly:

No matter how heavy I got, no matter what size jeans I wore or what section of the department store I had to go to find them, in shoes I was size seven and a half, and that was that. (p.180) Shoes become symbols of identity and emotional safety. While her body constantly exposes her to shame and comparison, shoes allow her to participate in femininity without judgment. Amanda Ford (2003) argues that shopping can boost self-esteem temporarily but cannot completely heal deep self-doubt. Sandra perfectly embodies this contradiction. Shoes comfort her emotionally, and they cannot fully alleviate her insecurity and loneliness. Harbison also demonstrates how shopping becomes connected to imagination. Sandra states: If I was ordering shoes from a catalog, asking for a seven and a half didn't say a thing about me. I could have been Jennifer Aniston for all they knew. Which, come to think of it, is sort of what it's like being a phone-sex operator. (p.180) Since this fantasy allows Sandra to temporarily escape the social judgment attached to her body, her shoes become emotionally liberating, freeing her from visibility and comparison. So, shopping therefore becomes therapeutic because it allows Sandra to imagine alternative versions of herself. Among the four female protagonists, Jocelyn 'Joss' represents a different relationship with shopping and consumer culture. Unlike Lorana, Helen, and Sandra, whose emotional attachment to shoes predates joining the support group, Joss initially shows little interest in fashion or designer shoes. At the beginning of the novel, shopping does not serve as an emotional pleasure or a form of feminine self-expression for her. Instead, it becomes an excuse for escape and a means of temporary emotional relief from the exhausting environment in which she lives and works. Through Joss character, Beth Harbison presents retail therapy not simply as a compulsive consumption but as a social process that allows women to discover themselves, build confidence, and create new possibilities for life. Joss worked as a nanny for the Oliver family, where she experienced exploitation and an inability to set personal boundaries. The narrative repeatedly emphasizes her passive personality and fear of confrontation, even as she recognizes the unfairness of her situation. She cannot defend herself emotionally. Joss wanted to point out that she was just their nanny and that, technically, since it was eight thirty at night, she was off-duty, but she wasn't a person who enjoyed confrontation. "I tried to stop them, but the minute I went to my room they shot out of theirs like bullets. (p.78) According to Anna Freud (1936), these moments reveal Joss's avoidance and submission. Defense mechanisms are adaptive strategies used by the ego to reduce emotional conflict and psychological pressure. One of the mechanisms evident in Joss's behavior is denial, in which the individual avoids directly confronting painful realities or emotionally difficult situations. Joss continuously denies the seriousness of her exploitation by minimizing her suffering and passively accepting mistreatment instead of resisting it. Rather than confronting the unhealthy environment of the Olivers' household, she searches for a solution elsewhere. This escape appears when she discovers the advertisements of Shoe Addicts Anonymous. For Joss, the group has nothing to do with shoe addicts themselves. Instead, it represents emotional relief, social interaction, and temporary freedom from the pressure in her life. Through this, searching for shoes becomes beneficial because it allows her to spend time away from the Olivers' house. Thus, shopping serves as an avoidance mechanism that redirects her psyche toward healthier emotional and social experiences. This reflects the argument in Kim and Chang (2023), who explained that retail therapy is emotionally driven and functions as a coping mechanism, which individuals use to relieve stress and negative emotions. Here, Joss does not shop for pleasure or beauty; she shops because the process itself provides emotional movement, distraction, and temporary relief. At first, Joss feels unfamiliar with designer culture and expensive shoes, which highlights her social and economic distance from the consumer culture presented by the other women. "Thanks," Joss said. "I was just browsing, but I was hoping to find some shoes. Like, designer shoes? Size seven and a half?" "Designer?" The girl looked as blank as Joss felt" (p. 112). This moment reflects Joss' outsider position within consumer culture. Unlike the other women, she has never really had access to luxury fashion or glamorous femininity. However, her involvement within the group changes her understanding of shopping and femininity. She eventually admits: "Actually, it's not as bad as some of the Super Markt shoes I've worn. I can see why you guys like these. I just never had the opportunity to wear good shoes before" (p. 181). This confession marks the beginning of Joss's transformation. Shopping and shoes themselves are no longer merely objects; they become symbols of self-worth and social belonging. According to Melindra and Aprianinisih (2016), retail therapy involves not only purchasing goods but also the entire shopping experience, including browsing, interacting with others, social bonding, and

self-expression. This idea strongly applies to Joss because her healing stems from her interactions with the group itself, rather than from material consumption alone. Furthermore, the support group gives Joss confidence and offers new possibilities for her future.

Conclusion

Through these experiences, Harbison shows that shopping serves as both a defense mechanism and a form of retail therapy. The novel is consistent with the theory of Anna Freud that reflects on various defense mechanisms to manage emotional conflicts. Shopping provides the characters with a socially acceptable outlet through which they can diffuse their anxieties, their sadness, and their negative feelings. More importantly, the novel emphasizes that shopping is not only about acquiring products, but also about emotional comfort, social bonding, and the restoration of personal control. This idea is reflected in a significant moment when women are confronted with difficulties. This moment features the novel's central argument that shopping has an emotional language through which women can communicate their feelings and support one another, and that shopping becomes a gateway to their healing. *Shoe Addicts Anonymous* represents shopping not as superficial materialism but as a meaningful emotional practice through which women navigate personal struggles.

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