Mood and Comparative Judgment

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Previous research indicates that mood can influence absolute product evaluation, but little is known about how mood influences comparisons among products. We examined consumers’ choice among options they encountered sequentially. We showed that when they started evaluating the options upon receipt of information on the first option, mood influenced the choice of this first option. However, when they did not start evaluating the options until they had received information on all the options, mood influenced the choice of the last option. We also demonstrated how the timing of the first constructed evaluation changed as a function of choice set characteristics.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12693/volumes/v34/NA-34

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that consumers’ affective experience, regardless of whether it is a genuine integral affective response to a target, or a feeling arising incidentally from a transient mood state, can influence their evaluations of products (e.g., Adaval 2001; Pham 1998; Schwarz and Clore 1996). While we know mood can influence consumers’ absolute judgments of products, we are less clear about how it would influence consumers’ comparative judgments and choices among products. Consider a consumer who is choosing among a number of options. Suppose s/he happens to be experiencing a mood state when s/he receives information on each of these options one by one, would mood influence his/her evaluations of each of the options to a similar extent, and hence have no net effect on choice? Alternatively, would mood influence evaluations of only one of the options, and lead to changes of his/her choice? If so, which particular option would be influenced? Our research provides answers to this series of questions.

We suggest that mood can have a differential effect on comparative judgment because consumers are likely to incorporate their mood into the first evaluation being constructed during the comparison process. Moreover, once incorporated, mood will cease to influence evaluations of the latter options because its informational value for these options will be discounted. Note, however, consumers may form the first evaluation at different points in time during the comparison process. When the timing of the first evaluation varies, the influence of mood on comparison may vary accordingly. Suppose consumers evaluate the very first option from a set (e.g., the item shown on the first page of a catalog) right away when they encounter it, before they see the other options. Their mood is likely to be incorporated into the evaluation of this first option rather than into those of the subsequent ones. Alternatively, suppose consumers deliberately wait until they encounter the last option before beginning their evaluation and take a perspective focusing on the last encountered option. In this case, the evaluation into which mood is incorporated may “shift” to the last option. As such, we expect mood to influence the evaluation of the last option, rather than those of the preceding ones.

We further show that the timing of constructing the first evaluation may vary systematically as a function of choice set characteristics. For example, it may depend on whether the alternatives are differentiated by descriptive features or by their global appearance. When consumers choose among options that have similar descriptive features but differ in external appearance, they are likely to form an evaluation of the first option very quickly once they come across it, without waiting to see the comparison options. Consequently, their mood is likely to influence their evaluations of the first encountered option, and hence their choices of this option. In contrast, when consumers choose among options that are differentiated by descriptive features, they tend to wait until they have encountered all the options and to know about their features before making any comparison. Consequently, their mood is likely to influence their evaluations of the last encountered option, and hence their choices of this option.

Three experiments were conducted to test the above predictions regarding (a) how the influence of mood on comparison may vary as a function of the timing of the first evaluation and choice set characteristics and (b) the underlying mechanism through which the influence occurs.

Experiment 1. We examined the influence of mood on choices among options that only differed in global, aesthetic aspects. We induced participants’ mood by asking them to write a piece of happy or unhappy personal experience. Then they moved on to the second (ostensibly unrelated) task where they saw pictures of three mango-flavored desserts sequentially. After that, they indicated their choices and absolute evaluations of the options. As predicted, the choice share of the first option was higher when participants were happy than when they were unhappy. Absolute evaluation data confirmed that happy participants liked the first option more than the unhappy participants did.

Experiment 2. In experiment 2, the timing of the first evaluation was delayed to the last option due to changes in choice set characteristics. The procedure was essentially the same as experiment 1. However, participants chose among three desserts that differed in flavor (which is presumably an important descriptive feature for desserts). Consistent with our prediction, choice share of the last option was higher when participants were happy than when they were unhappy. Happy participants also liked the last option more than their unhappy counterparts.

Experiment 3. In experiments 1 and 2, we assumed the timing of the first evaluation would change as a function of choice set characteristics. While the literature provides theoretical supports for the assumptions, we validated these assumptions empirically in experiment 3 by manipulating the timing of the first evaluation through experimental instructions. This experiment had a 2 (induced mood: positive vs. negative) by 2 (flavor: same-flavor vs. different-flavor) by 3 (instruction on the timing of the first evaluation: no-instruction vs. immediate-judgment vs. deferred-judgment) factorial design. Participants either received no instruction or an instruction as to when to start making their evaluations before they saw pictures of two desserts. After seeing the two options one by one, they indicated their relative preferences. As predicted, happy participants in the immediate-judgment group of conditions (i.e., the “no-instruction, same-flavor” condition and the two “immediate-judgment” conditions) had a stronger preference for the first option, whereas their unhappy counterparts had a weaker preference for the first option. A reversed pattern was observed in the deferred-judgment group of conditions (i.e., the “no-instruction, different-flavor” condition and the two “deferred-judgment” conditions).

In combination, findings from experiments 1-3 support the notion that mood is likely to be incorporated into the first evaluation consumers make during a comparison process, and this evaluation could be the evaluation of the initial option or the final option of a choice set.

REFERENCES
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