Be Better Or Be Merry: How Mood Affects Self-Control

Ayelet Fishbach, University of Chicago, USA
Aparna A. Labroo, University of Chicago, USA

We explore whether the effect of mood on self-control success depends on a person’s accessible goal. Positive mood signals to adopt an accessible goal, whereas negative mood signals to reject an accessible goal; therefore, happy (vs. neutral or unhappy) people perform better on self-control tasks when they are primed with a self-improvement goal because self-control tasks are compatible with self-improvement. Conversely, happy people abstain from self-control tasks when they are primed with a mood management goal because self-control tasks are incompatible with this goal. This pattern receives consistent support across several self-control tasks (e.g., donating to charity, seeking negative feedback).

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esized, those shown uniqueness arrays were significantly more likely to choose the unique chocolate (a milk Hershey’s kiss wrapped in a different color) than those shown homogeneity arrays.

In the third study, we extended our examination to variety seeking. We presented participants with either “variety” arrays (e.g., OVOXVOXO) or “homogeneity” arrays (see above). As compensation, participants were offered a choice of three chocolates. As hypothesized, those shown variety arrays were significantly more likely to exhibit variety seeking in their choices (i.e., choose three different types of chocolates) than those shown homogeneity arrays.

Taken together, these studies show that individuals spontaneously extract meaning from ambiguous stimuli and their behavior unintentionally follows in kind. These studies reflect two key themes in the study of human perception and behavior: that individuals extract concepts beyond those inherent in the stimuli they encounter and that individuals’ behavior is driven by factors of which they are unaware. That these studies used impoverished stimuli for which individuals had no prior associations illustrates the pervasiveness of these tendencies and suggests that the applicability of these broad principles to consumer behavior processes may be greater than suggested by prior research and theorizing.

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Aparna A. Labroo, University of Chicago
Ayelet Fishbach, University of Chicago

Are happy (vs. unhappy) consumers more or less likely to read an emotionally disturbing charity appeal and donate money toward the advocated cause? Are happy (vs. unhappy) consumers more or less likely to attend to an ad appeal that warns them about the adverse effects of caffeine consumption and advises them to change their wayward ways? Such issues that involve motivating consumers to incur short term pains for long term gains are often at the helm of public policy planning, and whereas the literature suggests that consumer moods will affect self control and adherence to goals, the evidence on what the effect will be and what the underlying process may be is mixed. On the one hand, the literature on mood indicates that happy individuals are more likely than neutral or unhappy individuals to seek positive and avoid negative stimuli, which suggests that they would be less likely to engage in unpleasant tasks involving self control. On the other hand, the literature also reports that happy (vs. unhappy) individuals seek out negative information when it is self relevant, which suggests that at least on some occasions they may be more likely to engage in self control.

The current investigation addresses this controversy from a perspective of recent research on goal priming. Since the pursuit of many long-term consumer goals requires overcoming conflicting short-term motives (e.g., Loewenstein, 1996; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999), contextual primes for an overriding goal are often not sufficient to promote goal-congruent actions. Under these conditions, happy (vs. neutral) individuals are better able to pursue primed long-term goals because positive mood is a signal to approach any accessible goal, whereas unhappy (vs. neutral) individuals are more likely to deter from pursuing primed long-term goals since negative mood is a signal to avoid an accessible goal. Importantly however, happy (vs. unhappy) individuals are expected to demonstrate increased self-control only when the higher order long-term goal is primed. Since positive mood serves as a booster, facilitating adherence to any primed goal, happy individuals are further expected to adhere to a contextually primed short-term goals such as maintaining their positive mood, whereas unhappy individuals would deter from such goal. As a result, happy individuals work harder on a task that serves an accessible long-term goal of self-improvement, but abstain from this task when primed with an incompatible mood-management goal. On the other hand, unhappy individuals deter from a task that serves an accessible long-term goal of self-improvement, which they are more likely to pursue when primed with an incompatible mood-management goal.

Four studies tested whether happy (vs. neutral and unhappy) individuals adhere to accessible goals regardless of their content (self-improvement or mood maintenance). These studies manipulated participants’ mood (happy, neutral, and unhappy) and accessible goal (self-improvement vs. mood maintenance) and measured for performance on self-control tasks. Study 1 indicated that happy (vs. unhappy) individuals with an accessible self-improvement goal donated more to a charity campaign that involved exposure to negatively valenced emotionally draining materials; however, they withheld their donations (compared to unhappy individuals) when their accessible goal referred to mood-management. Study 2 expanded these findings to performance on a difficult and challenging creativity test depicted to be a valid indicator of future professional success. It finds that individuals in a happy mood with a salient self-improvement goal performed better on the test compared with unhappy individuals, but happy mood led to lower test performance among participants whose accessible goal referred to mood-management. Study 3 indicates that a positive mood further facilitates physical endurance, as measured by persistence on squeezing a handgrip described to participants as an indicator of future healthiness, but only when the task was compatible with a primed self-improvement goal. When the task was incompatible with a primed goal of mood-management, happy individuals did not express greater physical endurance than others. Finally, Study 4 examines the effect of mood on recalling negative information and it finds that happy individuals spent more time than others recalling the health consequences of caffeine consumption and that they ended up recalling more information—but only to the extent that they were primed with self-improvement rather than mood-management goal.

By addressing the effect of moods on adhering to accessible goals, this research integrates two lines of research of the relationships between mood and self-regulation: research on mood as the ultimate goal of self-regulation (e.g., Diener, 2000; Gilbert et al., 1998; Kahneman, 2000) and research on mood as a resource for self-regulation (e.g., Aspinwall, 1998; Leith & Baumeister, 1996; Raghunathan & Trope, 2002). We propose that when people experience mild positive mood, they are more likely to adhere to contextual goal primes. Under these conditions, when the mood-management goal is accessible, positive mood discourages choice of actions that undermine this goal. However, when the accessible goal refers to self-improvement, positive mood improves performance and hence it serves as a resource for self-regulation. Task performance thus depends upon whichever goal is more salient because of contextual primes. Happy individuals are better able to regulate either of these accessible goals.

“Individual Susceptibility to Priming Effects”

Stacy L. Wood, University of South Carolina
Catherine Poynor, University of South Carolina
Tanya Chartrand, Duke University

New research in priming suggests that our old beliefs about the inefficacy of subliminal advertising may need to be qualified (Bargh 2004). Researchers have demonstrated, in diverse paradigms, how people may respond to concepts that they have been exposed to below conscious awareness. Although priming effects are robust across reported studies, within-study variance suggests that some individuals are more impacted by the primes to which they are exposed. The purpose of this research is to test this concept and identify the characteristics that would contribute to individual differences in susceptibility to priming (STP). While priming
researchers may benefit from an STP scale as a useful covariate, consumer behaviorists are likely to be interested in the concept of STP due to its implications for advertising efficacy. If advertisers use priming to make salient those goals, ideas, or evaluative criteria that are most advantageous to the company, which consumers are most likely to be vulnerable to this nonconscious influence?

Hypothesis. We posit that people who are confident, socially poised, creative, and thoughtful are those who are most susceptible to priming. Stated broadly, one may interpret this as counterintuitive because of an expectation that those consumers who would be least at risk from subliminal advertising (or any form of manipulative advertising) are those who are characterized by vulnerable due to lower than average capabilities in cognition or communication. Yet, the mechanisms by which priming work suggest the opposite. Priming works through a spreading activation process in which a prime (e.g., a concept like "luxury") automatically activates related nodes without the conscious control of the individual. Thus, primes require 1) physical (but not necessarily aware) exposure and 2) associative processing. This suggests two paths to priming susceptibility. First, individuals who are confident and socially poised may be more likely to exhibit an "approach" attitude to the environment and thus may naturally attend most to their immediate environment—this promotes physical exposure to a prime. Second, individuals with high need for cognition and creative or association-based thought (e.g., imaginative or interdependent thinkers) may favor thought processes that facilitate the spreading activation of primes.

Study Protocol. To test this hypothesis, we measured a population (n=112) on eight different trait scales that tapped into attentional or associative factors (Self Esteem, Need for Cognition, Self Monitoring [Attention to Emotion and Ability to Modulate], Action-Orient, Imaginativeness, Interdependence, and Closeminedness) prior to their attendance at a research session. At the later session, participants engaged in several unrelated tasks, one of which was a priming study. Procedures similar to those used by Chartrand and Bargh (1996) were used to prime memory goals. Participants were randomly assigned to either the memory-prime or no-prime exposure condition. After the prime exposure, participants were directed to an ostensibly unrelated task in which a computer program self-guided participants through a product evaluation task. Participants received information about a new type of sports drink and were asked to read this information carefully. The screen then displayed 11 statements about the drink. After the 11 statements had been displayed, participants were given a questionnaire that asked them to recall as many statements as possible about the sports drink. Thus, priming effects would be demonstrated by primed participants recalling more words than unprimed participants.

Results and Discussion. Two coders, both blind to the study hypothesis, counted the number of discrete thought units correctly listed in participants' free recall. Participants in the memory prime condition recalled significantly more words (M=9.91) than those who received no prime (M=8.54; F(1,108)=1.16, p=.025). We then considered each individual difference scale separately to assess its impact on priming efficacy. A median split for each scale created two groups who scored either higher than or lower than the median. Five of the eight traits had a material influence on the priming effect as indicated by significant Prime x High/Low [scale median split] interactions. These traits included two attention-oriented tendencies (Self-Esteem and Attention to Emotion) and three associative tendencies (Action-orientation, Imagination, and Closeminedness).

A post-hoc formative scale to measure STP was constructed by selecting representative items from each of the scales. We selected the two items that had the highest item-to-total correlation within each respective scale. This 16 item scale showed remarkable reliability (Cronbach’s alpha=.672) despite its amalgamation from several distinct constructs. We then divided the participants into two groups based on a median split of the STP scale (median=77). As expected, the Prime x High/Low STP interaction is significant (F(1,104)=6.14, p=.008, one-tailed). Those who scored high on the STP scale showed a significantly stronger priming effect; primed participants recalled more words (M=10.89) than unprimed participants (M=9.03; p=.002). For those low in STP, the prime did not have an effect on the number of words recalled (Mprime=9.08; Mno prime=9.03; p>.95).

Overall, we demonstrate that people are differently susceptible to priming influences. This finding, and the development of a short-form STP scale, offer interesting implications for psychology, consumer behavior, public policy, and advertising and would generate an interactive and insightful discussion within the ACR forum.

SELECTED REFERENCES