The Influence of Affect on the Perceived Similarity of Preferences Between the Self and Others

Hakkyun Kim, University of Minnesota

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Predicting the preferences and attitudes of other people is an important aspect of marketing and consumer behavior. The importance of predicting about others highlights the need for a better understanding of the factors that impact how people predict attitudes and preferences about other people. Despite an increasing interest in how people predict the preferences of others, there has been little effort to investigate how people are affected by the context in which a certain mood is induced. Thus, this paper aims to demonstrate how a person’s affective state can influence his or her predictions of others' preferences and aims to investigate the mechanism by which affect influences his or her predictions of other people’s behaviors and attitudes.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Predicting the preferences and attitudes of other people is an important aspect of marketing and consumer behavior. The importance of predicting about others highlights the need for a better understanding of the factors that impact how people predict attitudes and preferences about other people. Despite an increasing interest in how people predict the preferences of others, there has been little effort to investigate how people are affected by the context in which a certain mood is induced. Thus, this paper aims to demonstrate how a person’s affective state can influence his or her predictions of others’ preferences and aims to investigate the mechanism by which affect influences his or her predictions of other people’s behaviors and attitudes.

Two research streams may shed light upon this question. According to research on the interplay of affect and cognition, people in whom a positive mood is induced tend to be better at integrating information, finding relationships among stimuli and generating creative solutions (e.g., Isen and Daubman 1984; Lee and Sternthal 1999). In particular, there is substantial evidence that is in accordance with the view that positive mood affects the extent of relational elaboration and promotes flexibility in categorization. This notion is enforced by the observation that people in a positive mood came up with more similarities between product pairs than did those in a neutral mood.

Another stream of research relevant to our theorizing is that people often allow their own behaviors and attitudes to exert undue influence over their predictions of other people’s behaviors and attitudes. In this vein, the self appears to play a pervasive role in people’s judgments of others, in that people often assume that others will behave in the same or similar ways as themselves. Thus, they tend to project onto others their own beliefs, attitudes, and predispositions.

Given that the preferences of the self influence how we predict the preferences of other people, this research speculates that mood might have an effect. This speculation is true because positive affect has been shown to prompt relational elaboration and perceptions of similarity more often than negative affect. In other words, happy people can detect similarities better or can perceive broader category membership better than sad people. Therefore, rethinking the process of predicting the preferences of other people (which starts from examining their own preferences and the nature of elaboration for those in a positive mood), we expect that people in whom positive affect is induced will exhibit a greater degree of assumed similarity in preference than will people in whom negative affect is induced.

In addition, a positive mood that enhances relational elaboration will make it possible for people to see the similarities between the self and others. Based on this perception, people will consider that the preferences of others will be similar to their own. Specifically, it is reasonable to theorize that moods affect the overall perceptions of similarity between the self and others. This assumed similarity, then, influences the specific perceptions of similarity in preferences. Therefore, people who are in a positive mood (and thus employ relational elaboration) will most likely be better at finding similarities between the self and others than will people in a negative mood. This constructed perception of similarities (i.e., decreased psychological distance) will have an impact on the similarity between preferences of the self and others (e.g., “This person is quite a bit like me. I like this product. Therefore, this person will also like this.”).

Two experiments were conducted to test the above hypotheses. Experiment 1 aimed to demonstrate whether different types of mood (positive vs. negative) produce variations in the extent to which people assume the similarity of preferences between the self and others. A 2 (affect: positive vs. negative) X 2 (product type: function-based vs. emotion-based) between-subjects design was employed. The results from experiment 1 provided support for our hypothesis. More specifically, people in whom positive affect was induced showed smaller differences between preferences of the self and preferences of others than did people in whom negative affect was induced. Product type did not affect the prediction of the preferences. However, since Experiment 1 did not investigate the process by which positive affect facilitates social projection when people predict the preferences of other people, Experiment 2 was conducted to address this question.

In Experiment 2, a 2 (affect: positive vs. negative) X 2 (question order: psychological distance first vs. similarity of preferences first) analysis of variance was employed, and a mediation analysis was run to shed light on whether the effect of Affect (positive vs. negative) on the similarity of preferences between the self and others would continue to be significant when psychological distance is introduced as a mediator. The results replicated the findings in experiment 1, and more importantly, showed that psychological distance mediates the relationship between affect and the similarity of preferences between the self and others.

By integrating the research on mood and social projection, this research represents the first attempt to understand how a person’s affective state can influence his or her prediction of others’ preferences. By showing that a positive mood enhances the assumed similarity of preferences when predicting the preferences of other people, and that psychological distance mediates the relationship between affect and the assumed similarity of preferences, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on mood and judgment.

This research can provide several managerial implications for sales strategies, persuasion, and advertising. Because firms have the opportunity to make use of mood to their advantage by employing tactics in advertisements and interpersonal sales designed to enhance consumers’ mood states, the findings of this research suggest that the use of positive affect in sales or advertising can be an effective strategy when targeting people who are making purchases for other individuals.

REFERENCES


