When Do Moods Influence Consumer Preferences?: Moderators of Mood Congruency

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Although consumers’ judgments are often tainted in a direction consistent with their temporary mood states, past research is equivocal regarding when such mood congruency effects emerge. We examined whether mood congruency is moderated by focused attention to moods and perceived appropriateness of using moods. Perceived appropriateness was manipulated in two ways: reminding participants that it is appropriate to use moods (vs. cognitions) when making judgments (study 1) and having participants judge “feel” vs. “think” products (study 2). As predicted, when participants were focused on their moods and believed that using moods to inform judgments was appropriate, they demonstrated mood congruency.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12430/volumes/v33/NA-33

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I Want It Even Though I Do Not Like It: Preference for Familiar but Less Liked Music
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Many radio stations play the same songs over and over again, with little willingness to add new songs to the playlist, despite voiced criticism. Station managers argue that they are simply giving the listeners what they want to hear. We investigate this radio paradigm to understand what is driving this discrepancy between voiced preference and actual choice.

Presenting 24 songs from 12 artists (one familiar and one unfamiliar), and 22 famous actors to participants, we show that people do indeed choose to listen to songs, and see actors in movies, based on two factors: their preference (or “liking”) and their familiarity with the song or actor. Interestingly, we find that the effect of familiarity on choice remains significant when we control for the effects of preference on choice. That is, participants sometimes chose a song they liked less than the other option, just because the chosen song was familiar.

In a second study we control for liking across songs based on pretests and show that participants choose playlists of songs that they are familiar with despite lower preferences for these songs. Our last study tested whether the results could be explained by anticipated regret and/or social perceptions (or “coolness,” which may drive people to indicate they do not like familiar songs even though they do actually like them). Using personal computers where participants actually listened to their choices on individual headphones, participants made choices first and then indicated familiarity and liking, as well as how much they may regret their choice and how “cool” they thought each song was. Though regret did affect choice, indicating the presence of some uncertainty about the options, we find that familiarity significantly predicts choice when controlling for the effects of liking, regret, and coolness.

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The mood congruency effect refers to the tendency for those in positive moods to make more favorable judgments than those in negative moods. Although mood congruency has been documented in the domain of consumer judgment, past research is equivocal regarding the conditions under which such mood congruency effects emerge. While some authors have documented mood congruency effects in consumer judgments (Curren and Harich 1994; Isen, Shalker, Clark, and Karp 1978), other researchers have not (Adaval 2001). In addition, several moderators of the mood congruency effect have been proposed, such as relevance of the product (Curren and Haric, 1994), consumer motivation (Pham 1998), ability to attribute the source of one’s moods accurately (Gorn, Goldberg, and Basu 1993; Pham 1998), and desirability of the brand (Barone and Miniard 2002).

One such moderator is the ability to focus on one’s mood states. Although some research suggests that those who focus on their moods are better able to avoid or correct for mood congruency (e.g., McFarland, White, and Newth 2003), other research suggests that those who focus on their moods are more likely to demonstrate mood congruency (e.g., Forgas and Ciarrochi 2001). We suspect that the different judgment tasks used in these two studies may be responsible for the discrepant results. The evaluation task used by Forgas and Ciarrochi (2001) involved evaluations of actual and potential possessions, whereas the evaluation task used by McFarland and colleagues involved making evaluations of another person. It seems plausible that people may consider it more appropriate to allow their moods to influence consumer judgments than interpersonal evaluations.

We attempt to resolve this discrepancy and suggest that the influence of mood-focus on the mood congruency effect will be moderated by perceived appropriateness of using moods to guide judgments. For example, Gasper & Clore (2000) found that the future predictions of participants high in mood attention were more affected by their current mood than those of participants low in mood attention. Importantly, the mood congruency bias revealed among persons high in mood attention was eliminated only when they were actively encouraged to view their moods as irrelevant to the judgment task. Thus, our key prediction is that mood congruency in consumer judgment will be most pronounced when individuals both acknowledge their moods and consider it appropriate to allow their moods to influence consumer judgments than interpersonal evaluations.

In study 1, we utilized a 2(Mood: positive vs. negative) X 2(Focus: focused vs. not focused) X 2(Appropriateness: moods appropriate vs. cognitions appropriate) between subjects design. We manipulated mood by having participants recall either a negative or positive event (e.g., McFarland et al., 2002). Participants were either focused on their moods (i.e., they rated their moods before making consumer judgments) or distracted from their moods (i.e., they completed a distraction task before making judgments). Perceived appropriateness was manipulated by having participants read either that using moods to inform consumer judgments is a good strategy or that using cognitions to inform consumer judgments is a good strategy. The consumer judgment task involved rating two products that pretested as being equally perceived as “think” and “feel” products: a camera and a backpack. Participants viewed photographs of both products and rated them in on 9-point Likert scales ranging from dislike very much to like very much, unfavorable to favorable, negative to positive, and bad to good. A product evaluation index was created by averaging across these measures (α=86). The interaction between mood, focus, and perceived appropriateness was statistically significant $F(1, 186)=6.77, p <.02$. In particular, participants demonstrated mood congruency only when they were focused on their moods and perceived moods to be appropriate ($M_{positive}=6.07$ and $M_{negative}=5.19$, $t(186)=2.54, p <.02$).

1Manipulation checks in study 1 and 2 were successful.
Study 2 utilized product type to manipulate perceived appropriateness. In study 2 mood and focus were manipulated as in study 1. To manipulate perceived appropriateness, we selected products that differed in terms of whether people believed that moods or cognitions were most useful for evaluating them. In a pretest we asked participants a) whether it was more appropriate to use “emotions” or “thoughts” to evaluate each product and b) whether their own evaluation of the product was more based on “feelings” or more “logical/objective” information. We identified two “think” products (a pen and Newsweek magazine) and two “feel” products (a chocolate bar and People magazine). The pen and chocolate bar, as well as the two magazines were matched on stated price in order to control for the effects of differential price perceptions. Participants were presented with photos of each product (with think and feel products counterbalanced) and then asked to complete the same evaluations as in study 1. The 3-way interaction between mood, focus, and product type (as a repeated measure) was significant, F(1, 90)=10.13, p<.005. Once again, mood congruency only emerged when participants were focused on their mood states and when using moods to inform judgments was appropriate (i.e., when evaluating feel products; Mpositive=6.49 and Mnegative=5.68, t(90)=2.09, p<.05). Significant mood congruency effects were not exhibited in any other conditions.

The preceding studies reveal an important nuance regarding the influence of moods on consumer judgment. When it is considered appropriate to allow moods to influence judgments, those focused on their moods are more likely than those not focused on their moods to rely on their feelings when making judgments. We also provide evidence that, for certain products, it may be perceived as appropriate to use moods to inform judgments, whereas for other products it may be deemed inappropriate to use moods to inform judgments. In addition, advertisers may want to encourage consumers to perceive it to be appropriate to use positive moods when evaluating their own products, or to perceive it to be appropriate to use negative moods when evaluating a competitor’s product.

How Affect Influences Choice: An Investigation of the Comparison Processes

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Extended Abstract

Research has shown that consumers’ affective experience can influence their evaluations of products (e.g., Adaval 2001; Pham 1998). While we know that affect can influence consumers’ absolute judgments of products, we are less clear about how it can influence consumers’ comparisons and choices among products. Consider a consumer who is choosing among a number of options, and assume that s/he receives information on each of these options one by one. Would affect influence evaluations of all these options in a similar way and to a similar extent, and hence have no net effect on choice? Alternatively, would affect influence evaluations of only one of the options, and lead to changes of his/her choice? If this is the case, which particular one will be influenced? Our research suggests that this would depend on the point of time (during the comparative judgment process) at which consumers start evaluating the options in the choice set.

In one case, consumers may begin their evaluations on receiving information on the first option. In this instance, affect is likely to influence evaluations of this first option, but not the ones that are encountered subsequently. This is due to two reasons. First, consumers are likely to form an initial impression of a product spontaneously based on their affect when they encounter the product (Pham, Cohen, Pracejus, and Hughes 2001; Yeung and Wyer 2004). Consequently, affect can influence their impressions of this option. Second, according to previous findings on affect attribution (see Pham 2004 for a review), once individuals have attributed their affect to one source (the first option), they are less likely to attribute this affect to other sources (the second and the third options). Based on these arguments, we propose that consumers’ affect is likely to have a positive impact on their liking of the first option that they encounter, and hence a positive impact on the choice share of this option.

In a second case, consumers may not start evaluating the options until after they have received information on all the options in a choice set. In this instance, their affect will be attributed to the last option instead of the preceding ones. As such, it will have a positive impact on their liking and choices of the last option.

We further suggest that the point of time at which consumers start evaluating the options would change as a function of choice set characteristics. In choosing among options that do not have any differentiating features but only differ in global aesthetic aspects, consumers tend to form a spontaneous impression of each option upon receiving information on the options, and hence the first option being evaluated would be the first option that they encounter (Yeung and Wyer 2004). However, in choosing among options that have certain differentiating feature(s), consumers may feel a need to delay their judgments until they have seen information on all the options, and hence the first option being evaluated would be the last option that they encounter (Houston, Sherman, and Baker 1989; Mantel and Kardes 1999). In either case, we predict that affect will have a positive impact on their liking of the first option being evaluated, and hence a positive impact on the choice share of this option. More specifically, consumers in a happy mood would be more likely to choose this option than those in an unhappy mood. Three experiments were conducted to test these predictions.

Experiment 1. We examined the influence of affect on choices between two options which did not have any differentiating features but 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 two mango-flavored desserts sequentially. After that, participants indicated their choices between the options and also their absolute judgments of the options. Consistent with our predictions, the choice share of the first option was higher when participants were in a positive mood than when they were in a negative mood (68.97% vs. 38.46%; p<.05). The data on absolute judgments of the two options confirmed that participants had a higher evaluation of the first option when they were happy than when they were unhappy (p<.05); whereas the two groups did not differ in their evaluations of the second option (p>.05).

However, one might argue that, as dessert tends to elicit positive affective reactions, participants’ negative extraneous affect might not be perceived as a genuine affective response to the dessert and hence should not have an effect on choices of desserts. Instead, the low

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