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## **How Affect Influences Choice: an Investigation of the Comparison Processes**

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How Affect Influences Choice: An Investigation of the Comparison Processes Catherine Yeung, National University of Singapore Cheng Qiu, National University of Singapore ABSTRACT This research investigates the influence of affect on comparative judgments. Consider a case in which consumers encounter a multiple number of options sequentially and make a choice among these options. Three experiments show that when consumers start evaluating the options upon receiving information on the first option, affect has a positive impact on the choice of this first option rather than on the subsequent ones. However, when consumers do not start evaluating the options until they have received information on all the options, affect has a positive influence on the choice of the last option.

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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;  $M_{\text{positive}}=6.49$  and  $M_{\text{negative}}=5.68, t(90)=2.09, p<.05$ ). 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.

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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 ( $p>.50$ ).

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

choice share of the first option under the negative mood condition could be due to the high choice share of the second option, which, in turn, was driven by a recency effect. This alternative explanation is addressed in experiment 2.

*Experiment 2.* We investigated a three-option choice context in order to disentangle between the mood effect explanation and the recency effect explanation. If the change of choice share was due to an effect of mood, this change would be reflected in the choice share of the first option. However, if the change of choice share was due to a recency effect, it would be reflected in the choice share of the third (i.e., last) option. The results lend support to the mood effect explanation. That is, participants in a positive mood were more likely to choose the first option than those in a negative mood. Choices of the last option did not differ across the two mood conditions. Moreover, the absolute judgments data show that the two groups differed in their evaluations of the first option, but not in their evaluations of the ones that they encountered subsequently.

*Experiment 3.* In experiments 1 and 2, the first option that participants encountered was presumably the starting point of comparative judgments. To further investigate the mechanism through which affect influences choice, we manipulated the time at which participants started to evaluate the options in experiment 3. The procedure of experiment 3 was essentially the same as experiment 2. However, we delayed the starting point of comparative judgments by asking participants to choose among desserts that differ in flavor (which is presumably a differentiating feature for desserts). We predict that affect would influence choices of this last option in much the same way as it influenced choices of the first option in experiments 1 and 2. We found a marginally significant relationship between mood and choice ( $p=.067$ ). Consistent with our predictions, participants in a positive mood evaluated the last option significantly higher than those in a negative mood and were more likely to choose the last option (46.3% vs. 26.9%;  $p<.05$ ).

In combination, experiments 1-3 suggest that, the point at which consumers' affect is incorporated into a comparison process depends on the starting point of the process. In any case, affect is incorporated into the first evaluation people make, regardless of whether this evaluation is made with reference to the first option or the last option from a choice set.

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