Despite voiced frustration by listeners, radio stations repetitively play the same songs. Investigating this phenomenon, we find that people prefer to listen to songs with which they are familiar, above and beyond whether they like the song. This finding translates to radio station choice where we find that people choose stations playing familiar songs over songs that they expect to like. This finding holds for movies as well: people choose movies with familiar actors over movies with actors they like, perhaps explaining the Tom Cruise Continued Success Paradigm. The studies demonstrate that mere exposure affects choice independent of preference.

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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.

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

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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 Harich, 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 their judgments.

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 (Mpositive=6.07 and Mnegative=5.19, t(186)=2.54, p < .02).

1Manipulation checks in study 1 and 2 were successful.