Positive Versus Negative Affect Asymmetry and Comfort Food Consumption

Jordan LeBel, John Molson School of Business, Concordia University
Ji Lu, Faculty of Management, McGill University
Laurette Dube, Faculty of Management, McGill University

LeBel, J., Lu, J., and Dubé, L. Positive versus Negative Affect Asymmetry and Comfort Food Consumption. In this paper we demonstrate that factors tied to affect asymmetry predict the emotional triggers of comfort food consumption. A web-based survey was conducted to assess the emotional antecedents and consequences of comfort food consumption across genders, age and cultural groups, and food categories. Positive affect was a powerful trigger for men, older and French-speaking participants. Women, younger and English-speaking participants reported more intense negative emotions prior to consuming their favorite comfort food. Foods high in sugar and fat were more efficient in alleviating negative affects whereas other types of food increased positive emotions.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12324/volumes/v33/NA-33

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(e.g., to invest in the best educational video for your baby) versus non-baby-related domains (e.g., recycling to save the planet Earth). Third study will examine whether specific advertising appeals that solicit such written emotional expression of maternal guilt will change the initial effect; whether the entity of solicitation matters; and whether these effects carry over to non-baby related domains.

Considering that mothers constitute a major proportion of consumers that make purchases especially in baby-related domains, these studies will provide the marketers with managerial implications to utilize the guilt appeals specifically targeting them.

References


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Jordan LeBel, Concordia University
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In the present study, we examine the effect on comfort food consumption of variables previously linked to the asymmetry between positive and negative affect. Specifically, we consider consumers’ gender, age, and cultural background as well as features of food product categories (e.g., sugar and fat contents) as moderators of emotional antecedents and consequences of comfort food consumption.

Men and women vary considerably in terms of how they experience, express and regulate emotions. Women tend to rely more on negative emotions in decision-making and behaviours; men tend to distract themselves from negative emotional experiences. We propose that men’s comfort-seeking consumption is more likely to be triggered by and then lead to enhanced positive affects, whereas women’s comfort-seeking consumption is expected to be driven by negative affects. With age, one learns to better regulate one’s emotions, developing both the ability and the tendency to constrain emotional experiences with a focus on heightening positive affect. In addition, research has also shown that as age increases so does the relative dominance of positive affect in decision-making. Thus, it is expected that for older adults positive emotions should be a more prevalent antecedent of comfort-seeking consumption than negative emotions.

Culture may also be related to affect asymmetry. For instance, the French cultural stereotype includes a longstanding association to hedonism as a general philosophy of life guiding individual decisions and behaviors. In contrast, the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of life includes stronger dispositions and associations to functionality and restraint. Therefore, we expect that comfort food consumption in...
French-cultured individuals will be motivated by the maintenance/enhancement of positive emotions, and for English participants, comfort food consumption is more likely to be related to the alleviation of negative emotions. Finally, the type of food eaten to provide emotional comfort is another factor likely to be tied to affect asymmetry. For instance, sweet and high-fat foods (SHF), like ice cream, cookies or chocolate, have been linked to the experience of negative affect. Thus, we expect that the consumption of SHF foods is more likely to be triggered by negative affects than is the case for non-sweet high-fat foods (NSHF) or for foods of low energy density (LED) regardless of their dominant nutrient.

A survey was administered via the World Wide Web and was promoted in electronic and mass media in the city of Montreal, a multicultural Canadian city with a predominance of French- and English-cultured citizens. In total, 277 participants (196 women; 81 men) completed the survey. The age distribution was as follow: 117 young adults (age 18-24), 136 adults (25-54) and 21 older adults (55 and more). The language primarily spoken at home was taken as a proxy for cultural background: 121 participants primarily spoke French, 129 primarily spoke English at home, and the remaining 27 primarily spoke another language. Participants did not receive any incentive for this study. Participants first provided background information (age, height, weight, etc.), identified their favorite comfort food and were then asked to think back to instances when they ate their favorite comfort food, taking time to form a vivid and complete recollection. Next, using 7-point scales (“not at all” to “very intensely”) participants indicated the degree to which they typically felt a set of positive (happy, joyful, calm and relaxed, \( \alpha = .81 \)) and negative affects (depressed, anxious, sad, nostalgic, upset, and lonely, \( \alpha = .88 \)) prior to eating their favorite comfort food. Finally, to explore the effects of the proposed factors on the emotional consequences of comfort food consumption, we also asked participants to indicate the degree to which they typically experience the same positive and negative affects after eating their favorite comfort food. The difference between the pre- and post-consumption reports was used to assess change in affect. Guilt was added to the post-consumption list since it is distinct from general negative affects and was shown to arise from comfort food consumption.

Favorite comfort foods cited by participants were assigned to one of three categories: 1) sweet high fat (SHF) foods, which totalled 101 mentions (36.5%) and included primarily chocolate, ice cream and baked goods; 2) non-sweet high-fat (NSHF) foods with 69 mentions (24.9 %) including meats and meat products, pizza and salted snacks; 3) lower energy density foods (LED) with 93 mentions (33.6%) including soups, pasta dishes, fruits and vegetables. Fourteen favorite comfort foods could not be coded into these categories or were incomprehensible (e.g., foreign language vernacular or abbreviation).

Consistent with expectations, results indicate that men’s comfort food consumption was preceded by more intense positive emotions than women (Men=4.18, Women=3.69, p<.001). On the other hand, women’s consumption tended to be triggered by more intense negative affect (Women= 3.03, Men= 2.9) but this difference did not reach significance. Consumption of comfort foods alleviated women’s negative emotions but also produced more intense feelings of guilt than men (Men= 2.00, Women= 2.69, p<.05). Positive affect was a particularly powerful trigger of comfort food consumption for older participants (younger= 3.65, older=4.36, p<.05) and for French-cultured participants (French=4.06, English=3.66, p<.05). Younger participants and English-culture participants reported more intense negative emotions prior to consuming comfort foods. Foods high in sugar and fat content were more efficient in alleviating negative affects whereas low- to medium energy density foods were more efficient in increasing positive emotions.

Selected References:

**Anger in Ultimatum Bargaining: Emotional Outcomes Lead to Irrational Decisions**
Francine Espinoza, University of Maryland
Alexander Fedorikhin, Indiana University
Joydeep Srivastava, University of Maryland

Consumers evaluate most retail prices in terms of utility/value of the good, but they may also infer fairness from these offers. When buying a car, for instance, consumers may judge the price as fair or unfair, and accept the offer (purchase) or not (do not purchase). This mechanism is similar to ultimatum bargaining, where perceptions of fairness influence offer evaluation. It is argued that emotions such as anger are a consequence of the fairness appraisal and it is possible to influence bargaining behavior by altering the perceived source of the emotion, holding fairness perceptions constant.

In ultimatum bargaining, a proposer controls an amount of money (say $10) and must offer some fraction (say $3) to the responder. Both players know the amount being divided and the rules of the game. If the responder accepts the offer, s/he receives $3, and the proposer receives $7. If the responder rejects the offer, both people receive nothing (Camerer and Thaler 1995).