



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

Sadness and Consumption: the Attenuating Role of Choice

Nitika Garg, University of Mississippi, USA

Jennifer Lerner, Harvard University, USA

Sadness from one situation tends to carry-over to new situations. Its effect typically occurs without awareness, leading individuals to pay more for new goods and to eat more unhealthy food. Findings from two experiments (with real food and real money) reveal that enhancing individual control (choice of gift vs. receiving it) attenuates sadness' effect on consumption.

[to cite]:

Nitika Garg and Jennifer Lerner (2011) , "Sadness and Consumption: the Attenuating Role of Choice", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 38, eds. Darren W. Dahl, Gita V. Johar, and Stijn M.J. van Osselaer, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/16177/volumes/v38/NA-38>

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

Sadness and Consumption: The Attenuating Role of Choice

Nitika Garg, University of Mississippi, USA

Jennifer Lerner, Harvard University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on incidental emotion has discovered the pervasive tendency of emotions to carry over from one situation to another, coloring behavior in unrelated tasks (for reviews, see Forgas, 1995; Isen, 1993; Keltner and Lerner, 2009). For some time now, researchers have been paying closer attention to the influence of emotion on consumption and have hinted at a possible relationship between the two. One of the most curious carry-over examples involves sadness and consumption. First, its effects depart from what one would predict based on emotional valence. The standard prediction of a valence-based model would be that any negative emotion, including sadness, should trigger generalized negative valuation of, say, a new product. The idea is that a negative state leads one to perceive the world in negative ways. While disgust, another negative emotion, fits that predicted pattern, sadness does not. Sadness triggers positive valuation of new products, as measured by willingness to pay (Lerner et al., 2004). A second curious aspect of sadness and consumption is that the carry-over effect drives consumption behavior across diverse domains. In the domain of eating, for example, sadness (relative to happiness) leads to increased consumption of tasty, fattening food products, such as buttered popcorn and M&M candies (Garg et al., 2007). In the domain of monetary transactions, sadness (relative to a neutral state) leads to increased amount spent to purchase items (Lerner et al., 2004). Importantly, these undesirable consumption effects of sadness typically occur without awareness by those in the sad state; they also typically occur even when the sadness-eliciting events have no rationally-justifiable relation to the consumption choices at hand (Cryder et al., 2008). Thus, the increased consumption represents more than typical, conscious attempts at "consumer therapy." Rather, it represents unbidden and undesirable behavior.

Understanding how to attenuate the undesirable effects of sadness on consumption is an important issue. Individuals do not want to pay more or over-consume when they are sad; yet they do so. In the present research, we seek to examine whether increasing decision makers' sense of individual control and decreasing their sense of helplessness would moderate the carry-over effects. Although a few studies have now documented carry-over effects of sadness on consumption (i.e., spending and eating), we do not know of any study that has discovered ways to significantly attenuate its effect on consumption. More generally, we examine both the robustness of the effect of sadness on consumption and its moderating and mediating factors.

As discussed earlier, sadness has been associated with conscious or unconscious attempts at mood repair (e.g., Raghunathan and Pham, 1999; Schwarz and Clore, 1983). Given the underlying themes of loss and helplessness associated with sadness (Frijda, Kuipers, and ter Schure, 1989; Keltner and Lerner, 2009; Lazarus, 1991) as well as the pattern of compensatory consumption, could sadness' effect on consumption be attenuated by providing individuals greater individual control and diminished helplessness?

An opportunity to choose a hedonic (i.e., rewarding) gift, rather than merely being given one, may attenuate the otherwise robust carry-over effect. A long line of research on perceived control and choice suggests that individuals prefer choice (vs. no-choice) because of its link to self-determination and sense of control (Averill, 1973; Langer, 1975). Thus, because choice might give individuals some semblance of control and therefore alleviate the helplessness that is typically concomitant with sadness, we expect that choice will

attenuate sadness' effect. We test this idea across two studies with different dependent variables of interest. Study 1 focuses on the more established relationship between sadness and food consumption (e.g., Garg et al., 2007; Tice et al., 2001), and Study 2 examines the lesser-known effect of sadness on monetary transactions, such as willingness to pay for a new product (e.g., Lerner et al., 2004).

Study 1 established three key points: (1) that sadness elevates self-reports of helplessness in response to the emotion-inducing situation; (2) that this increased helplessness mediates the sadness-consumption effect; and (3) that inducing a sense of control (via the provision of choice) attenuates sadness' effect. Study 2 also established three key points: (1) that sadness' effect replicates not only in food consumption but also in purchasing consumption; (2) that different kinds of sadness inductions (writing versus video watching) both produce sadness' carry-over effect; and (3) that the timing of receiving the good (pre- or post- emotion induction) is not responsible for the effect of choice (control) on attenuation of sadness' effect.

Overall, the studies provide critical insight into the underlying mechanism relating sadness and consumption, and extend prior work by discovering a key moderator and a key mediator. Specifically, giving sad individuals a choice about what they can receive, rather than simply giving them a good, determined whether sadness' effect was attenuated. Our data suggest that this occurs because having a choice confers a sense of individual control, which counteracts the sense of helplessness associated with sadness. Now that we better understand the sadness-consumption relationship, such undesirable effects as spending or eating too much when one is sad can hopefully be reduced with strategic interventions. As part of the larger discussion about emotions and their effects on decision making, our research suggests that the underlying 'appraisal theme' of an emotion might be the key to understanding and managing its effects.

REFERENCES

- Averill, J.R. (1973). Personal control over aversive stimuli and its relationship to stress. *Psychological Bulletin*, 80, 286-303.
- Baron, R. M., and Kenny D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 1173-1182.
- Becker, G.M., DeGroot, M.H., and Marschak, J. (1964). Measuring utility by a single-response sequential method. *Behavioral Science*, 9, 226-232.
- Cryder, C.E., Lerner, J.S., Gross, J.J., and Dahl, R.E. (2008). Misery is not miserly: Sad and self-focused individuals spend more. *Psychological Science*, 19, 525-530.
- Forgas, J.P. (1995). Mood and judgment: The affect infusion model (AIM). *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 39-66.
- Frijda, N. H., Kuipers, P., and ter Schure, E. (1989). Relations among emotion, appraisal, and emotional action readiness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 212-228.
- Garg, N., Inman, J.J., and Mittal, V. (2005). Incidental and task-related affect: A re-inquiry and extension of the influence of affect on choice. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32, 154-159.
- Garg, N., Wansink, B., and Inman, J.J. (2007). The influence of incidental affect on consumers' food intake. *Journal of Marketing*, 71, 194-206.

- Higgins, E.T., Idson, L.C., Freitas, A.L., Spiegel, S., and Molden, D.C. (2003). Transfer of value from fit. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 1140-1153.
- Isen, A. M. (1993). Positive affect and decision making: Handbook of emotions. New York, NY: Guilford Press, pp. 261-277.
- _____ (2001). An influence of positive affect on decision making in complex situations: Theoretical issues with practical implications. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 11, 75-85.
- Johnson, E. J., and Tversky, A. (1983). Affect, generalization and the perception of risk. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45, 20-31.
- Keltner, D. and Lerner, J. S. (2009). Emotion. The Handbook of Social Psychology (5th edition), New York: McGraw Hill.
- Keltner, D., Locke, K.D., and Audrain, P.C. (1993). The influence of attributions on the relevance of negative feelings to personal satisfaction. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 21-29.
- Keppel, G., and Zedeck, S. (1989). *Data analysis for research designs: Analysis of variance and multiple regression/correlation approaches*. New York, NY: W. H. Freeman and Co, Publishers.
- Langer, E.J. (1975). The illusion of control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 32, 311-328.
- Lazarus, R.S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Leith, K. P., and Baumeister, R. (1996). Why do bad moods increase self-defeating behavior? Emotion, risk taking and self-regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71, 1250- 1267.
- Lerner, J.S., Goldberg, J. H., and Tetlock, P.E. (1998). Sober second thought: The effects of accountability, anger, and authoritarianism on attributions of responsibility. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 24, 563-574.
- Lerner, J.S., and Keltner, D. (2000). Beyond valence: Toward a model of emotion-specific influences on judgment and choice. *Cognition and Emotion*, 14, 473-493.
- _____ (2001). Fear, anger and risk. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 146-159.
- Lerner, J.S., Small, D.A., and Loewenstein, G. (2004). Heart strings and purse strings: Carry-over effects of emotions on economic transactions. *Psychological Science*, 15, 337-341.
- Raghunathan, R., and Pham, M.T. (1999). All negative moods are not equal: Motivational influences of anxiety and sadness on decision making. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 79, 56-77.
- Schwarz, N., and Clore, G.L. (1983). Mood, misattribution, and judgments of well-being: Informative and directive functions of affective states. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45, 513-523.
- Smith, C.A., and Ellsworth, P.C. (1985). Patterns of cognitive appraisal in emotion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48, 813-838.
- Tice, D.M., Bratslavsky, E., and Baumeister, R.F. (2001). Emotional distress regulation takes precedence over impulse control: If you feel bad, do it! *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 53-67.
- Tiedens, L.Z., and Linton, S. (2001). Judgment under emotional uncertainty: The effects of specific emotions on information processing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 973-988.
- Wansink, B., Cheney, M.M., and Chan, N. (2003). Exploring comfort food preferences across gender and age. *Physiology and Behavior*, 79, 739-747.