Negative Scope Sensitivity: the Collapse of Feeling-Based Valuation For Multiple Desirable Objects

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We propose that consumers’ feeling-based valuations can exhibit negative scope sensitivity, according to which a set of multiple different products can be valued less than the valuation of a single product from that set. This negative scope sensitivity is driven by consumers’ inability to vividly imagine multiple different objects simultaneously.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1012407/volumes/v40/NA-40

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Dual-process theories have identified two distinct consumers’ valuation processes, distinguishing between a feeling-based valuation process and a calculation-based valuation process (Epstein 1994; Hsee and Rottenstreich 2004; Metcalfe and Mischel 1999). A calculation-based valuation process relies on a rational and rule-based assessment of the target products, and displays normal scope sensitivity such that more products are valued more. A feeling-based valuation process, on the other hand, is crucially dependent on consumers’ integral affective response towards the products and can be surprisingly insensitive to the scope of appetitive objects. For example, consumers display the same willingness-to-pay for five versus 10 Madonna CDs and donate the same amount to save one versus four panda(s) (Hsee and Rottenstreich 2004), a phenomenon termed scope insensitivity.

Extending the scope of this stream of research, we argue that increasing numbers of different desirable objects can ironically reduce consumers’ feeling-based valuation for these objects. We derive our conceptualization from research on the role of mental imagery in feelings. Specifically, prior research suggests that consumers’ affective responses towards the objects is crucially determined by the concreteness and vividness of mental imagery related to these objects (Metcalfe and Mischel 1999; Pham 2007), which form the basis of consumers’ feeling-based valuation. However, mental imagery requires processing resources, which are limited in nature and thereby restrain consumers’ ability to form concrete and vivid mental images of multiple different objects simultaneously (MacInnis and Price 1987; Shiv and Huber 2000). Therefore, we propose that the degree of concreteness and vividness of the mental images that consumers can generate deteriorates as the number of different objects increases. This leads to our hypothesis that consumers’ feeling-based valuation of multiple different desirable objects can be lower than the feeling-based valuation of a single object from that set, a phenomenon we term negative scope sensitivity.

We examined our negative scope sensitivity hypothesis in five studies. In Study-1, we used an implicit measure (adapted from Custers and Aarts 2005) to assess whether consumers are more motivated and thus work harder to acquire a single desirable reward (vs. two equally desirable rewards). After completing several unrelated questionnaires, participants learned that the experiment was almost over and would be followed by one more task (a mouse-click task). They were further told that subsequent to this last task they would receive a lottery ticket entitling them to win a reward. Half of the participants were told that the reward was a movie ticket (single-reward condition), whereas the other half learnt that the reward was a movie ticket plus a music CD (two-reward condition). The movie ticket and the music CD were pretested to be equally desirable. Participants then completed the mouse-click task, wherein they had to click on the computer screens according to a specified pattern. Our dependent variable was the speed with which participants completed this mouse-click task. Consistent with our hypothesis, participants in the single-reward condition were more motivated and worked significantly faster on the mouse-click task than participants in the two-reward condition, even though the total monetary value of the two rewards is twice as high as the value of the single reward.

In Study-2, we examine whether negative scope sensitivity is indeed restricted to feeling-based valuations and does not occur when consumers engage in a calculation-based valuation process. Specifically, we employed a priming task (Hsee and Rottenstreich 2004) to manipulate consumers’ reliance on feelings versus calculation. Subsequently, participants were asked to imagine that a local museum was holding an art exhibition, which featured, among others, one painting (vs. two paintings) from the celebrated artist Salvador Dali. In the single-painting condition, one of the two paintings (pretested to be equally attractive) was randomly chosen and displayed, whereas in the two-painting condition, both paintings were displayed. Our results show that participants who were primed to rely on feelings (vs. calculation) reported higher intention and greater willingness-to-pay for attending the exhibition that featured only one painting (vs. two paintings). However, we observed an opposite effect for participants who were primed to rely on calculation.

Further, prior research suggests that consumers are more likely to use mental imagery to “see how it feels” when they have a hedonic consumption goal rather than a utilitarian consumption goal (Pham 1998). This logic formed the basis of Study-3. Employing the art exhibition scenario in the previous study, we manipulated the consumption goal by asking participants to imagine they wanted to enjoy themselves after a week of hard work (hedonic goal) or they wanted to enrich their knowledge of art history (utilitarian goal). We show that participants with a hedonic (vs. utilitarian) consumption goal reported higher intention and greater willingness-to-pay for attending the exhibition that featured only one painting (vs. two paintings).

In the next two studies, we provide direct support for the role of mental imagery in negative scope sensitivity. Specifically, we argue that consumers who have a greater reliance on mental imagery are more likely to exhibit negative scope sensitivity. In Study-4, we examine the individual differences related to the reliance on mental imagery. Participants first evaluated a vacation package highlighting either one or two appealing vacation experience(s). In the single-vacation-experience condition, the vacation package featured either a picture of snorkeling in the tropical seascapes or a picture of a beautiful ancient temple; whereas in the two-vacation-experience condition, both pictures were featured in the vacation package. Next, participants responded to a Style-of-Processing Scale (Childers, Houston, and Heckler 1985), which distinguishes between individuals with a disposition to construct mental images when processing information (visualizers) and individuals with a disposition to process information semantically without forming images (verbalizers). We show that participants reported higher willingness-to-pay for the vacation package featuring only one vacation experience (vs. two vacation experiences). More importantly, this effect was only observed for visualizers but not for verbalizers.

In Study-5 we directly manipulate the reliance on mental imagery and show that participants who were encouraged to rely on mental imagery reported higher willingness-to-pay for the vacation package featuring only one vacation experience (vs. two vacation experiences). However, this effect disappeared when participants were discouraged from using mental imagery.

In summary, our findings demonstrate that consumers’ feeling-based valuation can exhibit negative scope sensitivity, according to
which the valuation of a set of multiple different desirable objects can ironically be lower than the valuation of a single object from that set. We discuss the theoretical and practical importance of our findings.

REFERENCES