Feeling Mixed? When, Why and to What End Do We Feel Mixed Emotions?

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Feeling Mixed? When, Why and To What End Do We Feel Mixed Emotions?

Chair: Patti Williams, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Paper #1: Finding Meaning in Mixed Affective Experiences
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Thomas Kramer, University of South Carolina, USA
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Paper #2: Putting the Consumer in the Picture: Visual Perspectives and Mixed Emotions in Advertising
Iris Hung, National University of Singapore, Singapore
Anirban Mukhopadhyay, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, China

Paper #3: Mixed Emotional Experience is Associated With and Precedes Improvements in Well-Being
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SESSION OVERVIEW

Over the past decade, scholars in marketing and psychology have investigated whether individuals can experience mixed emotions, the psychological processes associated with such experiences and the individual differences and situational factors that make them more or less likely. The majority of this work has focused on understanding when individuals are likely to experience discomfort in response to mixed emotions (e.g., Williams and Aaker 2002), with findings suggesting young, Caucasian Americans and those with a concrete construal mindset (Hong and Lee 2010) likely to experience discomfort and thus to find mixed emotions aversive.

Building upon, and yet in contrast to, this previous work, the papers in this session suggest that mixed emotions are frequent experiences, even among those for whom past research has suggested they might be aversive. Mixed emotions may, in fact, even be deliberately sought. The papers in this session suggest that mixed emotions may be integral to goal pursuit and personal achievement, can be an essential component in meaning making, particularly in the face of adversity, may be perceived as reflecting reality, and can be processed fluently depending upon an individual’s orientation toward them.

The first paper in this session (Mukherjee, Kramer & Lau-Gesk) suggests that consumers may not always want to avoid mixed affective experiences, particularly in the domain of goal pursuit and personal achievement, because a combination of positive and negative experiences is associated with the creation of meaning. In particular, the addition of some negative affect to goal pursuit can enhance feelings of accomplishment through hardship. This research suggests that while mixed-ness can be aversive when individuals are focused on the process of goal achievement, a focus on the outcome links mixed-ness to meaning-making and to more enjoyment of the experience itself.

The second paper (Hung and Mukhopadhyay) examines the impact of visual perspectives on the fluency with which consumers process advertising evoking mixtures of hedonic and self-conscious emotions, and hence on attitudes to products featured in the appeals. Results show that consumers who adopt a third-person, observer perspective process self-conscious emotional ads more fluently and evaluate them more favorably, while consumers adopting a first-person, actor perspective process ads that highlight hedonic emotions more fluently and evaluate them more favorably.

The third paper (Hershfield and Adler) suggests that concurrent experiences of conflicting emotions in times of adversity can ultimately lead to greater well-being over time. Individuals who sought therapeutic treatment for a wide variety of life events were asked to write about their experiences. These narratives were coded and results show that blends of happiness and sadness in response to therapy were associated well-being over time. As in the first paper, this research suggests that the blends may not have been pleasant at the time of their experience, but are shown to have a prospective influence, such that the impact of mixed emotions on well-being unfolds over time.

This session is likely to be of interest to ACR members studying emotions generally as well as those studying mixed emotions and those who are investigating well-being and how consumers find meaning in consumption experiences. The session furthers the conference’s mission of appreciating diversity in a variety of ways. First, the papers investigate mixed emotions in a variety of settings, from the more traditional advertising context, to video game playing and to coping with life-stressors and therapeutic interventions. The papers in the session also examine a variety of different types of mixed emotions, from happiness and sadness to mixtures of hedonic and self-conscious emotions. Previous work on mixed emotions has focused upon when mixed emotions can be construed as more or less negative and aversive. This session, in contrast to that previous literature, focuses upon when mixed emotions might actually be processed fluently, actively pursued and associated with meaning-making and enhanced well-being, which is a substantial contribution to the current literature on mixed emotions.

Finding Meaning in Mixed Affective Experiences

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Past research has shown that mixed affective experiences generally are aversive unless consumers find a way to cope with their associated discomfort (Williams and Aaker 2002). Yet consumers often knowingly seek out experiences that elicit both positive and negative affect. For example, skydivers find enjoyment from feeling intense happiness and fear during their jump (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993).

Thus, many mixed affective experiences are those that consumers actually wish for rather than wish to avoid. Responding favorably to this type of mixed affective experience seems not a function of coping with unpleasantness, but rather enjoying its pleasantness. Departing from past research which examines mixed affective experiences that consumers want to avoid, we investigate those that consumers actually desire. Specifically, we address two interrelated questions. First, can mixed affective experiences be more enjoyable than pure positive ones? And second, what makes such mixed affective experiences enjoyable to consumers?

We propose that in the context of mixed affective experiences that involve goal pursuit and personal achievements, mixed affective experiences can be more enjoyable than pure positive ones because consumers derive more meaning from the experience. This is based on past research which has discussed the importance of goal pursuit in deriving meaning where meaning is defined as having a sense of purpose and attainment of goals that are important to an individual (King et al. 2006). Thus, mixed affective experiences that involve goal pursuit not only are associated with mixed affect but are also likely to be linked with meaningfulness. In turn, consistent with re-
search showing that meaningfulness is often associated with greater levels of enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), we suggest that consumers may seek out and enjoy mixed experiences from which they derive meaning. Further, we argue that mixed affective experiences can be enjoyed more than pure positive ones. This is because when engaged in goal pursuit, consumers may infer that deterrents, such as negative affect, are necessary evils to experience on the way to success, as popularized by the expressions of “no pain, no gain,” or “the road to accomplishment is through hardship.” For example, Kramer et al. (2011) found that consumer responses to medications with severe, as compared to mild, side effects were more favorable. Further, a bad-tasting cough syrup was judged to be more effective at fighting colds than a good-tasting one. Likewise, Loewenstein (1999) found that the pain endured during mountain climbing reveals one’s strength under harsh conditions to others.

To test our proposition, we directly examined mixed affective experiences that involve goals and personal accomplishments, such as mastering a videogame or a challenging mountain bike ride. We conducted a field study in a videogame arcade where 41 patrons played a videogame of their choice. After playing the game, participants reported their affective intensity and overall evaluations. As expected, results showed that participants evaluated the experience as significantly more enjoyable when it was mixed versus pure positive (6.09 vs. 5.5; F(1, 39) = 4.64, p < .05). In our second study, we examined the mediating role of meaningfulness. We also included felt discomfort measures to rule it out as an alternate mediator to demonstrate the novelty of desirable mixed affective experiences. Further, since we suggest that consumers obtain meaning from mixed affective experiences when such experiences are associated with goals and personal achievement, we theorized that this effect should emerge when consumers focused on the end goal (of accomplishment). Thus, in the next study, we manipulated the focus of participants’ thoughts to either emphasize the end goal of achievement (outcome-focus) or emphasize the process or steps that lead to the goal (process-focus) (Escalas and Luce 2003).

One hundred and fifteen undergraduate students participated in a study on mountain-biking. A 2 (affective experience: mixed vs. pure positive) X 2 (focus: outcome vs. process) ANOVA on participants’ enjoyment yielded the expected affective experience X focus interaction (F(1, 111) = 4.62, p < .05). Enjoyment of the mixed affective experience was significantly greater than the pure positive one (6.53 vs. 6.00; F(1, 111) = 5.49, p < .05). However, type of affective experience did not impact the level of enjoyment for participants in the process focus condition (6.15 vs. 6.26; F(1, 111) = .31, p > .10). To examine whether meaningfulness mediated the interaction between affective experience and focus on enjoyment ratings, a mediated moderation analysis was conducted (Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt 2005). Results showed that the effect of type of affective experience on enjoyment is mediated by meaningfulness. However, and as expected, the observed effects only emerged for consumers who were focused on the outcome or end goal of the experience, as compared to the process. Further, findings showed that felt discomfort did not mediate the joint influence of type of affective experience and focus on enjoyment.

Together, the findings from our two studies show that mixed affective experiences are not only enjoyable but they can even provide more enjoyment than pure positive affective experiences. This adds to research across different domains of mixed experiences such as mixed affect (Williams and Aaker 2002) and cognitive dissonance (Elliott and Devine 1994).

**Putting the Consumer in the Picture:**

**Visual Perspectives and Mixed Emotions in Advertising**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Advertising appeals that describe a consumption experience often elicit mixed emotions. Typically, such advertisements portray cognitively complex stimuli or phenomena (Larsen, McGraw, and Cacioppo 2001). For example, Williams and Aaker (2002) studied responses to an ad for a brand of photographic film, where a person was ostensibly commenting on a photograph of themselves as a baby posed with their now deceased grandmother. The commentary here was in the first person. (“My Nana, Emma, passed away this past year... I loved sharing time with her. I miss her...”). What factors influence the effectiveness of such mixed-emotional advertising? In this research, we investigate how the use of different visual perspectives, e.g., first versus third person, might influence consumers’ responses to such mixed appeals. In so doing, we aim to identify one important factor that facilitates the processing of appeals that elicit mixtures of emotions, and therefore influences attitudes towards the advertised products.

Consumers viewing advertising such as the above may visualize the advertised situation and transport themselves into it in one of two ways. They may view the situation in the first person as if they are living it, as in William’s and Aaker’s stimuli, or they may observe the situation as if they are watching a movie of themselves. In either case, they may use the elicited emotions as bases for evaluating the product (Sujan, Bettman and Baumgartner 1993; Escalas 2007). Hung and Mukhopadhyay (2012) demonstrated that the visual perspectives people take to view a given situation influence the intensity of the emotions people experience, such that people who take an actor’s (i.e., first person) perspective feel stronger hedonic emotions whereas those who take an observer’s perspective experience stronger self-conscious emotions. Based on this, we argue that when depicting mixed emotions, ads that use an actor’s (observer’s) perspective facilitate the processing of the hedonic (self-conscious) emotions involved. The ease with which the emotion is processed should consequently increase evaluations of the advertisement as well as the advertised product.

Product consumption often involves simultaneous experiences of different specific emotions (Larsen et al. 2001; Williams and Aaker 2002). For example, an ad portraying the consumption of a late-night snack because one has to study for an exam thereby foregoing a concert by one’s favorite band might elicit both the hedonic emotion of sadness (for missing out on the concert) and the self-conscious emotion of pride (for studying hard). Hedonic emotions such as excitement and sadness are relatively spontaneous and can be elicited without much cognitive deliberation whereas self-conscious emotions such as pride and guilt are characterized as being accompanied by thoughts about how others might evaluate me/the desirability of my behavior (Leary 2007). Given the difference in the nature of these emotions, recent findings show that visual perspectives, which dispose people to focus on different aspects of information (Jones and Nisbett 1972), might influence people’s experience of these emotions (Hung and Mukhopadhyay 2012). Actors, who pay more attention to situational circumstances, might respond more fluently to aspects of events that elicit hedonic emotions. Observers, who pay more attention to the ‘me’ in the situation (i.e., as if one is seeing a movie of oneself), might respond more fluently to aspects of events that elicit self-conscious emotions.

Building on these findings, we examine the role of visual perspectives in responses to advertising appeals which feature product consumption experiences that typically elicit mixed emotions. We
propose that actors’ (observers’) perspectives should facilitate the processing of an appeal that highlights a hedonic (self-conscious) emotion in a product consumption experience that typically elicits a mixture of hedonic and self-conscious emotions. Consequently, the ease with which actors (observers) process the appeal should increase evaluations of the appeal itself as well as the advertised products.

Three experiments support these propositions. Participants took either an actor’s or an observer’s perspective to process an appeal that described a product consumption experience eliciting a mixture of hedonic and self-conscious emotion (experiments 1 and 3). Regardless of the valence of the emotion highlighted, actors evaluated the ad and the advertised product more favorably when the ad highlighted a hedonic emotion than observers did. In contrast, observers evaluated the ad and the advertised product more favorably when the ad highlighted a self-conscious emotion than actors did. Experiments 2 to 3 further examined whether similar effects of visual perspectives occur when the use of visual perspectives were subtly manipulated by the appeal. Participants processed an ad describing a mixed-emotional experience that elicits a positive (negative) hedonic emotion of excitement (sadness) and a negative (positive) self-conscious emotion of guilt (pride). The mixed-emotional experience involved either studying in the library while one’s favorite band was in concert (simultaneous sadness and pride), or attending the concert despite an exam the next day (simultaneous excitement and guilt). The visual for the ad featured a photograph of a library scene or a concert scene, as viewed on a mobile phone. The text in the ad however highlighted only one of the four emotions involved: positive hedonic (excitement), negative hedonic (sadness), positive self-conscious (pride), or negative self-conscious (guilt). Visual perspectives were manipulated integrally, using tag-markers on the photograph itself. Participants reported their attitudes towards the ad, and the advertised products. Across three studies, results consistently showed that the ad and the advertised product were evaluated more favorably when participants took an actor’s (observer’s) perspective to view a mixed-emotional situation that highlighted a hedonic (self-conscious) emotion. This effect was mediated by the ease of processing the appeal, and was observed when the visual perspective was induced incidentally as well as integrally by the advertisement, and whether the advertisement was viewed subsequently or simultaneously.

Overall, this research contributes to the understanding of the conditions under which mixed emotional appeals are likely to be fluently processed, thereby increasing consumers’ evaluations of advertised products. This research also sheds new light on the role of visual perspectives in the impact of appeals that depict integral and mixed emotions, by examining the relative impact of mixed emotions that might typically be elicited in product consumption experiences portrayed in emotional appeals. Theoretical and practical implications will be discussed in the session.

**Mixed Emotional Experience is Associated With and Precedes Improvements in Well-Being**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

The respective benefits and drawbacks of positive and negative emotional experience on well-being have been well documented (e.g., Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Yet, considerably less attention has been given to the ways in which the experience of mixed emotions – that is, the concurrent experience of positive and negative emotions – can affect well-being. A notable exception is the co-activation model of health proposed by Larsen and colleagues (2003), which holds that experiencing positive emotions concurrently with negative emotions may detoxify them, transforming a negative emotional experience into fodder for meaning-making and subsequently enhanced well-being. Although recent work has tested the postulates of Larsen’s model on physical health (Hershfield, Scheibe, Sims, & Carstensen, Under review), very little research to date has directly examined the connection between mixed emotional experience and enhanced well-being. In the present study, we investigated whether mixed emotional experience – specifically the concurrent experience of happiness and sadness – prospectively benefits improvement in well-being. The context for this investigation was a naturalistic longitudinal study of psychotherapy in an outpatient clinic. Psychotherapy is fundamentally concerned with emotional experience (Greenberg & Safran, 1987) and provided an opportunity to assess the unfolding relationships between mixed emotional experience and well-being. The present study aims to demonstrate that concurrent happiness and sadness may temporally precede improvements in well-being.

When facing negative events in the course of one’s life, people may choose to either suppress negative emotions (Gross & John, 2003) or express them (e.g., Pennebaker, 1997). There are benefits and drawbacks to both approaches, but failing to confront negative events can ultimately lead to increased stress levels (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988). Larsen and colleagues (2003) propose that a third strategy, one of “taking the good with the bad”, might actually benefit individuals during difficult times by allowing them to confront adversity and ultimately find meaning in life’s stressors (a eudaimonic outcome), as well as to feel better in their wake (a hedonic outcome). In their co-activation model, allowing for the experience of positive emotion alongside negative emotion prompts individuals to face negative life events and gain insight into them. Larsen and colleagues’ model thus suggests that during difficult situations, a mix of positive and negative emotions may be optimal for well-being. For instance, when experiencing the loss of a loved one, allowing positive memories to be experienced alongside sadness could potentially lead to a healthier bereavement process (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). As Davis and colleagues (Davis, Zautra, & Smith, 2004) note, one key to resilience across the adult life span, may be the “ability to maintain affective complexity in the face of life’s inevitable difficulties” (p. 1155).

Although prior work offers preliminary evidence for the positive role that the blending of positive and negative emotion can play in well-being, none has systematically examined the prospective benefits that mixed emotions may have on well-being over time in a fine-grained way. Thus, in the present study, we sought to examine whether mixed emotional experiences are prospectively linked to enhanced well-being.

Forty-seven adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 36$ years) who sought treatment at a major outpatient clinic for a wide variety of problems, ranging from significant psychopathology to more typical life events such as divorce or the transition to parenthood, were enrolled in the present study prior to beginning treatment. In order to tap a broad conception of well-being encompassing both hedonic and eudaimonic elements (Ryan & Deci, 2001), the Systemic Therapy Inventory of Change was selected as the primary outcome measure (STIC; Pinslo & Chambers, 2009). To assess the emotional content of participants’ experiences in psychotherapy, we collected private narratives about participants’ perspectives on treatment. The present study asked participants to reflect in writing on their thoughts and feelings associated with being in therapy, including the way they saw the treatment fitting into their overall life or sense of self. As such, the narratives discussed both participants’ life events as well as their experiences in treatment.
A team of two trained raters (undergraduate research assistants, trained by the first author, who were blind to the hypotheses of the study and unfamiliar with the coactivation model) coded the narratives for their emotional content. Previous theoretical and empirical work on mixed emotional experience has taken a broad approach to operationalizing the construct, including generic categories of “positive” and “negative” emotional experience. In contrast, in the present study we sought to empirically identify the specific blend of positive and negative emotions that are associated with improvements in well-being. Given that happiness and sadness were the only specific emotions to show a significant relationship with well-being over time, the six other specific emotions were dropped from subsequent analysis and a composite variable, representing instances when happiness and sadness co-occurred, was created.

The primary analytical strategy applied growth curve modeling to the data. This technique is well-suited to accommodate missing data and unbalanced spacing of assessment points, both of which are inevitable in data collected from a naturalistic sample. The results indicate that participants who experienced a concurrent mixture of happiness and sadness during the course of treatment enjoyed subsequent improvements in their well-being. This finding remained significant when controlling for the impact of the passage of time as well as that of dispositional personality traits associated with affect. In addition, the results suggest that the significant association between the experience of concurrent happiness and sadness is uniquely related to well-being at the following assessment point, but not concurrently, when controlling for the independent impacts of happiness and sadness themselves. In other words, mixed emotional experience was seen to have a prospective influence on well-being, but its concurrent association with well-being was explained by the independent effects of happiness and sadness. This suggests that mixed emotional experience may have a distinct prospective potency; its association with well-being unfolds over time. Thus, while the concurrent experience of happiness and sadness in the face of adversity might not provide immediate benefit, it may signal enhancements in well-being in the near future.