One More Unit to Increase Desire: the Minimal Sharpness Effect

Yunhui Huang, Nanjing University, China
Han Gong, Nanjing University, China

Numbers with minimal sharpness are unique and tend to induce senses of arousal. The heightened arousal could be misattributed to consumers’ desire toward the focal product, and thus increase their wanting but not liking. Results show that people prefer products associated with a minimal sharp number than a round number.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Despite extant work on marketing communication involving numerical information, one category of numbers with minimal sharpness (i.e., numbers that are just above a round number and ending with one) has attained very little investigation. In the present article, we propose and demonstrate that using a minimal sharp number to describe a product characteristic, regardless of whether the number represents quantity, ingredient, or meaningless brand name, enhances consumers’ desire and preference toward the target product, which we term as **minimal sharpness effect**.

We contend that numbers with minimal sharpness are unique and tend to induce a sense of arousal, because they represent a salient boundary between round-number categories (Isaac & Schindler, 2014). The heightened arousal could be misattributed to consumers’ desire toward the focal product, and thus increase their wanting (Gorn, Pham & Sin, 2001; Schwarz, 2011). Moreover, given the affect-laden nature of this effect, whether the product valuation is feelings-based or reason-based would moderate the effect (Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004). Similarly, the minimal sharpness effect would also be influenced by product type as well as consumers’ dispositional tendency to relying on feelings.

Study 1 provided initial support for our main hypothesis. We presented participants with an advertisement of a limited edition watch. Depending on the condition, the watch was described as limited to 999/1000/1001 pieces. Participants indicated how much they would be willing to pay for the watch (WTP) as a measure of their desire (i.e., wanting; Litt, Khan, & Shiv, 2009). A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of number on WTP ($F(2, 143) = 4.884$, $p = .009$). Participants in the 1001 condition were willing to give a higher price than those in the 999 condition and those in the 1000 condition ($t(143) = 2.683$, $p = .008$). No significant difference was found between the latter two conditions ($t<1$).

Study 2 investigated the generalizability of the proposed effect in a charitable donating context. We asked to participants to donate to 501/1000/1001 African children in need. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of number on donation intention ($F(2, 144) = 4.079$, $p = .019$). Specifically, participants were willing to donate more to 1001 victims than to 1000 victims ($t(144) = 2.703$, $p = .008$). They were also willing to donate more to 501 victims than to 1000 victims ($t(144) = 2.151$, $p = .033$). However, participants did not show difference between the 1001 and the 501 conditions ($t<1$).

In Study 3 we tested the moderating effect of consumers’ initial interest toward the focal product. They were presented with an advertisement of a fragrance named IVES MILLER 999/100/101. Participants indicated their willingness to pay for the fragrance and reported their levels of arousal on two items. They also reported their interest in fragrances. In fragrances, we found that participants with high interest would like to pay more for the target fragrance in the 101 condition (vs. 999/100 conditions) ($\beta = .222$, $t(141) = 1.778$, $p = .078$), whereas those with lower interest were not influenced by the number ($\beta = -1.22$, $t(141) = -.935$, $p = .351$). Further, a bootstrapping analysis (Hayes 2012; Model 7) indicated that the interaction between minimal sharpness and interest on WTP was mediated by the levels of arousal (95% CI: .0646 to 2.1569).

Study 4 aimed to explore the underlying mechanism of the proposed effect. Feeling-as-information theory suggests the observed effect should diminish when consumers are directed to attribute their feelings to other external sources (Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004). We recruited only male participants in this study and randomly assigned them to a 2(number: 100 vs. 101)2(sexual cues: without vs. with) between-subjects design. The results yielded a significant interaction ($F(1, 161) = 4.91$, $p = .028$), suggesting that when no external cues are available, the increased level of arousal induced by minimal sharpness is misattributed to the desire for the focal product.

In Study 5, we examined whether the effect would be influenced by mode of valuation. Participants first completed a task to prime feelings-based versus calculation-based processing, developed by Hsee and Rottenstreich (2004). Afterwards, participants were presented with the advertisement used in Study 1, and indicated how much they would be willing to pay for this watch. A 2 2 between-subjects ANOVA yielded a significant interaction between number and processing mode ($F(1, 195) = 4.788$, $p = .03$), confirming that the minimal sharpness effect occur only when valuation mode is feelings-based.

Study 6 explored whether the minimal sharpness effect could extend to consumers’ choice. Identical to Study 4, participants were presented with a new brand of chips Mr. Potato 100/101 and asked to choose between the Lay’s and the new brand. We also measured participants’ reliance on feelings to make choices (adapted from Hsee et al., 2015). Logistic regression revealed that participants were more likely to choose the new brand when its brand name contained 101 (vs. 100), only for those feeling-based consumers ($z = 2.64$, $p = .008$), but not for those reason-based consumers ($z = -0.79$, $p = .431$).

Study 7 aimed to examine the role of product type in moderating the effect. We posit that the minimal sharpness effect should also diminish when the product has greater functional values than incentive values, such as healthy food. We found that when choosing chips, consumers were more likely to choose the focal chips when its brand name contained 101 (vs. 100) for those who tended to rely on feelings, but not for those reason-based decision makers. By contrast, when choosing raisins, the number in brand name did not show an effect.

In sum, we observed that the minimal sharpness effect—numbers that just exceed a round number tend to elicit greater arousal and thus leading consumers to desire more toward products associated with those numbers. Further this effect was diminished (1) when an external source of arousal was provided (2) when the choice was not affect-laden, and (3) when the decision maker tended to rely on reasoning instead of feeling.

**REFERENCES**


