Keep Calm and Smell the Roses: the Differential Impact of Low and High Arousal Emotions on Consumption Outcomes

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We propose and find evidence in four studies that low (vs. high) arousal emotions has a positive impact on several consumption outcomes. We find that this occurs because low arousal emotions reduce mind-wandering, increasing consumers’ focus on the consumption experience itself, allowing for stronger connections with the product to develop.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumption experiences can elicit different emotions (Cohen & Areni, 1991). For example, a consumer can feel energized while consuming a cold, fizzy drink, or calm while consuming a warm cup of tea. While there has been research that explores the impact of the consumption emotions’ level of arousal, most of this research has focused on high arousal emotions. For example, high arousal emotions have been found to have a positive effect on information sharing and talking (Berger, 2011), as well as on desire and readiness for action (Rucker & Petty, 2004). And while consumption can also elicit low arousal emotions (Richins, 1997), they have received less examination. In our research we address this gap in the literature by focusing on low arousal emotions (e.g., contentment, peacefulness, relaxation) and identifying their impact on several favorable consumption outcomes. Specifically, we propose and find evidence in four studies that experiencing low (vs. high) arousal emotions during consumption has a positive impact on product liking, willingness to pay, self-brand connection, and desire to continue the consumption experience, as well as slows down hedonic adaptation (or the rate at which utility derived from the consumption erodes). We find that this occurs because low arousal emotions, during a consumption experience, reduce the extent to which the mind wanders to other thoughts and stimuli, increasing the consumer’s focus on the consumption experience itself, allowing the consumer to develop stronger connections with the product.

We follow past classifications of emotions (Barrett & Russell, 1999; Mogilner, Aaker, & Kamvar, 2012; Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006) in using level of arousal as a key dimension for categorizing emotions. Low arousal emotions include emotions such as peaceful, calm, and relaxed, whereas high arousal emotions include emotions such as excited, elated, and energized. We propose that high arousal (vs. low arousal) accelerates the speed of people’s thoughts. Past research has found that thought speed creates an urge for action that has been compared to that of fight-or-flight (Pronin, 2013). When people experience this type of response, their attention narrows (Skosnik, Chatterton, Swisher, & Park, 2000). Low arousal emotions, on the other hand, are likely to slow down the speed of people’s thoughts, broadening their focus of attention.

Based on these findings, we hypothesize that low arousal positive emotions (e.g., contentment, serenity, calmness) will slow down the speed of both actions and thoughts. The reduced action orientation and increased tendency to talk and do less (which comes with quietude and contentment), slows down the mind from jumping to other thoughts and stimuli, instead allowing it to focus on the current experience and increasing the extent to which the consumer absorbs it in, experiences it more fully, and thinks about it. This increased focus on the experience can have several benefits. Past research has shown that merely giving more attention to a target can imbue it with more value and weight (MacKenzie, 1986). Furthermore, Sheldon & Lyubomirsky’s (2012) hedonic adaptation prevention model posits the more people keep thinking about the target, the more they continue to derive positive feeling from it, sustaining their initial happiness boost. Thus, we propose low arousal emotions, by allowing people to focus on the consumption experience, will result in consumers feeling a stronger sense of connection with the consumed product, which will in turn have other positive consequences, such as higher willingness to pay. Additionally, this type of focus on the consumer experience will slow down hedonic adaptation (i.e., the rate at which consumption happiness erodes).

In four experimental studies, we find evidence that low (vs. high) arousal consumption emotions will have a positive impact on product liking (studies 1 and 2), willingness to pay (study 2), desire to continue the consumption experience (study 3), and self-brand connection (studies 2 and 4). We also find that low arousal consumption emotions slow down hedonic adaptation (i.e., the rate at which the happiness derived from the consumption erodes) in a longitudinal study with actual purchases (study 4). Furthermore, we find evidence that the level of emotional arousal impacts the extent to which people’s mind wanders off from the consumption experiences (as indicated by participants in study 1) and the extent to which they remember details of the consumption experience (specifically, accurately remembering the name of a slow or fast tempo song in study 2). Our studies span different types of products consumed (pen, song, tea, actual purchases), different types of manipulation of level of arousal (incidental, stimulus-generated, primed with product positioning and communications), and different methodologies (consumption in lab, longitudinal study), adding robustness to our findings.

REFERENCES


