The Paradoxical Impact of Positive Mood on Goal Favorability: Consumers in Positive Mood Favor Maintenance Goals Yet Believe Attainment Goals to Be Better For Fostering Positive Mood

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Although extant mood theories and consumers’ lay beliefs suggest that, when in positive mood, consumers may favor attainment goals (i.e., achieve better outcomes) more than maintenance ones (i.e., achieve the same), we show that the opposite can occur. Field and lab studies demonstrate its nonconscious nature, boundary conditions, and implications.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This research examines the interplay of consumers' positive mood and the type of goals they pursue. We propose and demonstrate that although consumers believe that attainment goals are better for fostering a positive mood, they actually favor maintenance goals more than attainment goals when they are in a positive mood.

Attainment and maintenance goals are two common types of goals (Yang, Stamatogiannakis, and Chattopadhyay 2015). For attainment goals, the current state of consumers is different from their desired state (e.g., save, at least, $10 more this month). For maintenance goals, the current state already matches the desired state; consumers pursuing this type of goal seek to maintain a current state that is the same as or exceeds the desired state (e.g., keep saving, at least, the same amount this month).

Because attainment goals have better outcomes than the corresponding maintenance goals (e.g., save $10 more vs. the same), the outcomes of the former would be considered more affectively positive (cf. Plemmons and Weiss 2013). As such, consumers who seek to foster and elevate their positive mood may favor attainment goals over maintenance ones (Wegener et al. 1995). This reasoning is consistent with consumers' lay beliefs shown in a pilot study: When given a choice between the two goal types, participants strongly preferred attainment over maintenance goals in order to maintain a positive mood. That is, according to extant mood maintenance theories as well as consumers' lay beliefs shown in the pilot study, consumers may be more favorable towards attainment (vs. maintenance) goals when they are in a positive mood.

However, in this research, we argue and show that the opposite pattern can occur. We build on the prior research finding that positive affect can be generated by pursuing other goals involving activities that are congruent with a target goal (cf. Kruglanski 2006). For example, when team members’ private goals involve activities that are perceived as congruent with the target goal they pursue for their team, they tend to experience more positive affect (Kristol-Brown and Stevens 2001). In our research context, positive mood maintenance can be considered a target goal consumers hold (Wegener et al. 1995); attainment vs. maintenance goals (e.g., save $10 more vs. the same) are the other goals that consumers pursue while they are after positive mood maintenance. Because consumers tend to construe maintenance (but not attainment) goals as involving activities related to fostering and keeping one’s current state (Yang et al. 2015), maintenance (vs. attainment) goals are more congruent with the target goal of maintaining positive mood. Thus, to the extent that this congruence can generate positive affect (Kruglanski 2006), consumers in a positive (but not negative or neutral) mood would favor maintenance goals more than attainment goals.

Further, because both congruence effects (Kruglanski 2006) and mood maintenance (Handley et al., 2004) tend to operate nonconsciously, our propose interaction effect is also likely nonconscious in nature. Thus, the effect would persist when conscious cognitive resources are constrained, but be attenuated among individuals more aware of factors influencing their mood. Four field and lab studies involving different goal pursuit domains and different operationalizations of positive mood, support these propositions.

Study 1 examined real-life, bodyweight-management goal-setting behavior of over 1,300 consumers on a goal-management website for one year. Random-effect logistic regression models showed that, consistent with our proposition, consumers in a chronically more (vs. less) positive affective state were more likely to set a weight-maintenance than weight-reduction goal.

Study 2 had a 2 (positive vs. negative mood prime) × 2 (maintenance vs. attainment goals) between-participant design, and utilized goal domains that participants self-identified as important (e.g., work, health). A significant interaction effect revealed that, under positive mood, participants favored maintenance goals more than attainment goals. However, under negative mood, no difference was found.

Study 3 had a 3 (neutral mood vs. positive mood vs. positive mood and cognitive load) × 2 (health goal: attainment vs. maintenance) between-participant design. A significant interaction effect revealed that maintenance goals were favored more than attainment goals in both positive mood conditions (showing qualitatively identical results). However, in the neutral mood condition, no difference was found. Thus, consistent with our proposed nonconscious process, the effect persisted when conscious cognitive resources were constrained.

Study 4 had a 2 (positive vs. neutral mood prime) × 2 (health goal: maintenance vs. attainment) between-participant design and measured participants’ chronic awareness of factors influencing their mood. The mood × goal type interaction effect was replicated. More importantly, the results showed a significant 3-way interaction: The less participants were aware of factors influencing their mood, the more they favored maintenance (vs. attainment) goals under positive mood, suggesting that the effect is nonconscious.

Overall, our research contributes to understanding the interplay between mood and goal pursuit. Although extant mood maintenance theories and consumers’ lay beliefs predict that attainment goals would be better for fostering a positive mood, we propose and show in the field and lab that consumers in a positive (as opposed to negative or neutral) mood tend to favor maintenance (vs. attainment) goals more. Our findings thus add to the current understanding of the mood-goal relationship, complementing the existing theories on mood maintenance (Handley et al. 2004; Wegener et al. 1995). Our results also complement the prior research finding that goal achievement generates positive affect (Plemmons and Weiss 2013) by showing that different affective states can have unique effects on perceived favorability of different types of goals. Further, we also add to the literature by showing that this effect, resulting from the congruence between maintenance goals and the goal of positive mood maintenance, is largely nonconscious. The effect persists when consumers’ conscious cognitive resources are constrained, and is attenuated among consumers who are more aware of factors influencing their mood.

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