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Winter 2013 Research Curation

Emotions and Consumer Behavior

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The impact of emotions on judgments, evaluations, and decisions has long been important to psychology and consumer behavior. The field's focus has progressed from demonstrations that emotions, like cognitions, do have an impact on consumption, to more nuanced understandings of what drives the experience of discrete emotional states, how those discrete emotions uniquely affect decision making and the motivations that consumers might have to regulate their emotional states over time. The articles selected for this special collection offer further insight into these important topics. They examine how distinct perspectives shape the processes of appraisal that lead to emotional experience and how different consumers might define happiness distinctly. They examine emotions that vary by valence (positive, negative, and mixed) as well as emotions that are more hedonic versus those that rely on higher order self-conscious processes to arise. These studies also suggest new ways to distinguish among emotions and to assess their usefulness to consumers, by considering the emotion's temporal frame. And they remind us that although arousal has received relatively little attention recently, compared to investigations focused on valence or appraisals, there are still many novel insights to be discovered by better understanding how consumers manage their experience of emotional arousal to achieve their own affective goals.

Hung and Mukhopadhyay examine the influence of actor versus observer perspectives on the emotional experience. Building on the importance of cognitive appraisals in generating emotions, the authors take a step back and examine antecedent psychological processes that might differentially direct attention to certain types of situational information, influencing appraisals and the intensity with which certain emotions are felt. They find that actors tend to focus more on the situation at hand and experience more intense hedonic emotions, such as excitement or sadness when they recall or anticipate emotional experiences. On the other hand, because observer perspectives lead to greater attention to the self in the situation, observers experience more intense self-conscious emotions, such as pride, embarrassment, or guilt. While a significant amount of recent research has built understanding about how appraisals shape emotional experiences, this study opens up interesting questions about the processes that generate the appraisals that consumers might make. While Hung and Mukhopadhyay are focused on the broad distinctions between hedonic versus self-conscious emotions, the next three articles in the collection focus upon three discrete emotions that influence consumer behavior.

Previous research has linked the experience of loneliness with materialism, suggesting that when consumers attach too great an importance to possessions, they may reduce the importance of their social relationships, leading to isolation and feelings of loneliness. This may, unfortunately, lead to a downward spiral of even more attachment to material objects and even more loneliness. With interesting longitudinal data, Pieters examines the interrelationships between loneliness and three subtypes of materialism: acquisition centrality (where possessions enable hedonic pleasure seeking), possession-defined success (where possessions are a status symbol), and acquisition as the pursuit of happiness (where possessions are a material means to improving happiness). This study finds a reciprocal relationship between the latter two subtypes of materialism and loneliness, but importantly, the effect of loneliness on these subtypes was greater over time than was the effect of these subtypes on loneliness. Thus, materialism may arise as a way to cope with loneliness, which suggests that to decrease materialism, one may want to first focus on building social relationships and reducing loneliness rather than focusing first upon reduced consumption. Or perhaps one might focus on using possessions as a source of fun rather than as a source

of status or happiness, as valuing possessions as enablers of fun was associated with a decrease in loneliness over time.

Zhou et al. examine the impact of nostalgia, a bittersweet, sentimental longing for a personally experienced and valued past, on prosocial behaviors. They argue that because nostalgia is a social emotion often focusing on important close relationships and thus boosting social bonds and enhancing social connectedness, feeling nostalgia will heighten empathy toward others who are experiencing distress. In five studies they find that feeling nostalgic enhances charitable intentions and actions, because it heightens the experience of empathy. This article, along with the next, highlights the importance of temporal perspectives in understanding the experience of emotions and their consequences for consumer behavior. Nostalgia is an emotion that arises when one focuses on the past. It requires a person to look backward from the present, to be focused on what has happened rather than on what is or what might happen.

In contrast, Mogilner, Aaker, and Kamvar examine differences in emotion that are driven by a focus on the present versus a focus on the future. Although consumers may all want to be happy and to make purchases that enhance their overall happiness, this study finds that the meaning of happiness is malleable and that its meaning may vary across consumers, driven by the individual's temporal focus. Individuals with a present focus experience happiness as calm and peaceful, emphasizing being happy in the moment. On the other hand, individuals with a future focus experience happiness as exciting and arousing, something to look forward to. The meaning of happiness that is most relevant to one's temporal focus influences choices such that those with a present focus will prefer products that offer calm, while those with a future focus will prefer products that offer excitement. The study also reminds us that arousal, not just valence, can play an important role in the desirability of emotions, as calm happiness in the moment is associated with lower arousal, while future-oriented excited happiness is much more energetic.

The last article continues the examination of arousal as Di Muro and Murray argue that consumers are motivated to regulate not only the valence of their emotions but also the arousal associated with their emotional states. They find that consumers in a positive mood will make consumption choices that are congruent with both the valence and the arousal of their current emotions, but that this process differs when consumers are experiencing negative emotions. Excited consumers will choose exciting products and calm consumers will choose relaxing products. Given general preferences for positive hedonic experiences, it is not surprising that consumers in a negative mood prefer alternatives that offer positive emotions. But Di Muro and Murray find that consumers in a negative mood prefer positive alternatives that are incongruent with their current negative state of arousal. Consumers experiencing high arousal negative emotions will seek out alternatives that are positive and low arousal, while those experiencing low arousal negative moods will prefer choices that offer high arousal positive affect. This research reminds us that consumers are motivated seekers of emotional states and that feeling good is not just a function of valence but is also driven by the energy that our emotions might require to sustain and perhaps provide to help us engage in future behavior.

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Lenses of the Heart: How Actors' and Observers' Perspectives Influence Emotional Experiences

Iris W. Hung and Anirban Mukhopadhyay

This research examines how the visual perspectives that people take to appraise an event, that is, whether they view themselves as actors in the situation or observers of it, influence the intensities of the emotions they experience. We predict that in a situation that elicits emotions, greater attention to the self (if using an observer's perspective) leads to greater intensity of self-conscious emotions such as pride, guilt, and embarrassment, whereas greater attention to the situation (if using an actor's perspective) leads to greater intensity of hedonic emotions such as joy, sorrow, and excitement. In this way, visual perspectives can act as situational antecedents that shape the use of emotion appraisals. Three experiments support these

propositions and demonstrate the mediating role of appraisals, across a variety of emotion-eliciting contexts, that were visualized as well as recalled.

Journal of Consumer Research, 38 (April 2012), 1103–15

Bidirectional Dynamics of Materialism and Loneliness: Not Just a Vicious Cycle

Rik Pieters

This research is the first to test the hypothesis that consumers face a “material trap” in which materialism fosters social isolation which in turn reinforces materialism. It provides evidence that materialism and loneliness are engaged in bidirectional relationships over time. Importantly, it finds that loneliness contributes more to materialism than the other way around. Moreover, it finds that materialism’s contribution to loneliness is not uniformly vicious but critically differs between specific subtypes of materialism. That is, valuing possessions as a happiness medicine or as a success measure increased loneliness, and these subtypes also increased most due to loneliness. Yet seeking possessions for material mirth decreased loneliness and was unaffected by it. These findings are based on longitudinal data from over 2,500 consumers across 6 years and a new latent growth model. They reveal how materialism and loneliness form a self-perpetuating vicious and virtuous cycle depending on the materialism subtype.

Journal of Consumer Research, 40 (December 2013), 615–31

Nostalgia: The Gift That Keeps on Giving

Xinyue Zhou, Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, Kan Shi, and Cong Feng

Nostalgia, a sentimental longing for a personally experienced and valued past, is a social emotion. It refers to significant others in the context of momentous life events and fosters a sense of social connectedness. On this basis, the authors hypothesized that (1) nostalgia promotes charitable intentions and behavior, and (2) this effect is mediated by empathy with the charity’s beneficiaries. Five studies assessed the effect of nostalgia on empathy, intentions to volunteer and donate, as well as tangible charitable behavior. Results were consistent with the hypotheses. Study 1 found that nostalgia increases charitable intentions. Study 2 showed that this salutary effect of nostalgia on charitable intentions is mediated by empathy (but not by personal distress). Studies 3 and 4 corroborated these findings for different charities and in diverse samples. Finally, study 5 demonstrated that nostalgia increases tangible charitable behavior. By virtue of its capacity to increase empathy, nostalgia facilitates prosocial reactions.

Journal of Consumer Research, 39 (June 2012), 39–50

How Happiness Affects Choice

Cassie Mogilner, Jennifer Aaker, and Sepandar D. Kamvar

Consumers want to be happy, and marketers are increasingly trying to appeal to consumers’ pursuit of happiness. However, the results of six studies reveal that what happiness means varies, and consumers’ choices reflect those differences. In some cases, happiness is defined as feeling excited, and in other cases, happiness is defined as feeling calm. The type of happiness pursued is determined by one’s temporal focus, such that individuals tend to choose more exciting options when focused on the future, and more

calming options when focused on the present moment. These results suggest that the definition of happiness, and consumers' resulting choices, are dynamic and malleable.

Journal of Consumer Research, 39 (August 2012), 429–43

An Arousal Regulation Explanation of Mood Effects on Consumer Choice

Fabrizio Di Muro and Kyle B. Murray

This article examines how consumers' preferences are affected by the interplay between their level of arousal and the valence of their current affective state. Building on prior research examining the regulation of mood valence, the authors propose that consumers are also motivated to manage their level of arousal. It is predicted that this motivation systematically affects consumers' product preferences such that consumers in a pleasant mood will tend to choose products that are congruent with their current level of arousal, while those in an unpleasant mood will tend to choose products that are incongruent with their current level of arousal. The results of three consequential choice studies—that use scent and music to vary consumers' moods—provide strong support for the hypotheses. The article concludes with a discussion of the theoretical implications of the results.

Journal of Consumer Research, 39 (October 2012), 574–84