Coping with sequential conflicting emotional experiences

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ABSTRACT

What influences retrospective evaluations of sequentially arising conflicting emotions? The present research brings to light two competing views, one where the positive emotion enables successful coping with the negative emotion and the other where the most salient aspect of the experience guides evaluations. Results from study 1 support the coping view. Specifically, relatively close (vs. distant) temporal proximity between movie clips arousing positive emotions and those eliciting negative emotions produced more favorable evaluations of the overall viewing experience. Study 2 examines the underlying process of coping through relatively close (vs. distant) temporal proximity between positive and negative emotions. Findings from this study support the notion that reappraisal drives the beneficial effect of relatively close (vs. distant) temporal proximity, which in turn leads to more favorable evaluations of conflicting emotional experiences.

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1. Introduction

Emotional experiences comprised of sequentially arising positive and negative emotions are a part of consumer life. A visit to Disneyland, deemed the "happiest place on earth," more often produces a roller coaster of emotions instead of pure happiness (Sutton, 1992), for example, from the exuberance felt when meeting a favorite Disney character on Main Street to the frustration felt while waiting in long lines. Conflicting emotions also arise for the 'happiest milestones' in life such as when planning weddings (Nelson & Otnes, 2005) and likewise for the types of decisions about engaging in vice behaviors such as drug and alcohol consumption (Fitzsimons, Nunes, & Williams, 2007) or gambling (Cowley, 2008). Positive and negative emotions present themselves for mundane experiences as well, for instance, while watching or listening to commercials (Edell & Burke, 1987; Ursavas & Hesapci-Sanaktekin, 2013). Indeed, consumption experiences are filled with ups and downs.

How do consumers evaluate such conflicting emotional experiences? What are the factors driving their evaluations? These are particularly important questions for marketers who are increasingly seeking to manage and structure consumption experiences for long-term customer relationship management (e.g. Grewal, Levy, & Kumar, 2009). From horror movies to extreme sports such as sky diving (Andrade & Cohen, 2007; Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993), engineering conflicting emotions is at the crux of successful customer experience design (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Yet, despite their ubiquity, conflicting emotional experiences have received far less attention from researchers than single-valence experiences, with existing work mostly identifying how and when conflicting emotions may be triggered (Brooks, Highhouse, Russell, & Mohr, 2003; Ursavas & Hesapci-Sanaktekin, 2013). Earlier work also demonstrated that conflicting as opposed to single-valenced emotional experiences activate both positive and negative emotion systems in memory (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997; Davidson, 1993; Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001), positively correlate with higher activity levels in two different locations of the brain (Larsen, Norris, & Cacioppo, 2003), and can produce higher levels of felt discomfort that subsequently influences judgment (Williams & Aaker, 2002; Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002; Priester & Petty, 1996). Although there has been debate over whether positive and negative emotions can truly be aroused simultaneously (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009), there has been unequivocal agreement that the underpinnings of conflicting emotional experiences can be sequential in nature (Russell & Carroll, 1999).

The present research brings to light two different views about consumer evaluations of sequentially arising positive and negative emotions. Drawing on research suggesting that positive emotions help renew the coping resources drained from negative emotions (Linville & Fischer, 1991), a coping view indicates that relatively close (vs. distant) temporal proximity between conflicting emotions should lead to more favorable evaluations (Labroo & Ramanathan, 2007), regardless of sequential ordering of the emotions (i.e. positive-negative or negative-positive; Linville & Fischer, 1991). However, other research on sequential positioning promotes that the most memorable aspect of the experience guides evaluation of sequences (Biswas, Grewal, & Roggeveen, 2010; Biswas, Labrecque, Lehmann, & Markos, 2014).

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Since memory fades over time, it is often the case that the most recent event would be the most salient. In this way, sequential ordering would matter as would temporal proximity.

We construct contrasting hypotheses to test these two views in Study 1 where participants watch and evaluate conflicting emotion inducing movie clips sequentially. Our findings align with the coping over the memory based sequential positioning view. Study 2 examines the possibility that the underlying process leading to successful coping in relatively close (vs. distant) temporal proximity of conflicting emotions is reappraisal (Richards & Gross, 2000) or "reinterpreting the situation in a manner that alters its meaning" (Manera, Samson, Pehrs, Lee, & Gross, 2014, p. 833). Specifically, this study finds that relatively close (vs. distant) temporal proximity impacts evaluations of a conflicting emotional experience in a jellybean sampling context, for those participants chronically high in reappraisal tendencies. An alternate suppression coping strategy is ruled out as well (Gross & John, 2003).

We contribute to existing research by highlighting and empirically examining two distinct theoretical views about evaluations of sequential conflicting emotional experiences, based on coping and sequential positioning literatures. Our findings align with the coping view. Moreover, we add to previous literature that has described temporal proximity as a key factor in coping with sequential conflicting emotions (e.g. Labroo & Ramanathan, 2007; Linville & Fischer, 1991). In particular, we shed light on reappraisal as a plausible strategy underlying the favorable effect of relatively close (vs. distant) temporal proximity on consumer evaluations and establish individual reappraisal tendencies as a novel moderator. For marketing managers, our findings imply the importance of exercising greater control over enabling conditions that allow consumers to reappraise sequentially arising conflicting emotions that commonly occur in a wide variety of consumer situations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Coping with conflicting emotions

One stream of research indicates that when consumers experience conflicting emotions, feelings of discomfort arise (Priester & Petty, 1996), which they often attempt to resolve either by avoiding the uncomfortable experience completely or by finding ways to minimize the discomfort once it arises (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007). Researchers have identified moderators of the relationships among conflicting emotional experiences, felt discomfort, and subsequent judgments, with the bulk of this work investigating the role of individual difference variables (propensity to accept duality: Williams & Aaker, 2002; duality expertise: Kramer, Lau-Gesk, & Chiu, 2009; construal level: Hong & Lee, 2010). Moreover, evidence suggests that evaluations of conflicting emotional experiences are relatively more favorable for consumers who have the necessary skills to cope with or overcome the discomfort otherwise associated with the experience (Kramer et al., 2009; Williams & Aaker, 2002). For example, those more prone to accepting duality due to their own experiences with conflict accumulated over a lifetime appear better equipped to cope with and thereby respond more favorably to conflicting emotions than those with far fewer experiences with facing conflict. The elderly (vs. young), East Asians (vs. westerners), and biculturals (vs. monoculturals) represent such individuals likely associated with higher duality acceptance and lower feelings of discomfort with conflicting emotions (Kramer et al., 2009; Williams & Aaker, 2002). Thus, consumer responses to conflicting emotions appear to depend on availability of a coping mechanism.

Importantly, considerably less work examining the relationship between conflicting emotions and coping has focused on sequentially arising positive and negative emotions (e.g. Williams & Aaker, 2002). Further, the existing literature on sequential conflicting emotions has concentrated on certain characteristics of the experiential pattern created by the emotional sequencing rather than on individual differences as

moderating variables. Specifically, this line of work suggests that relatively close (vs. distant) temporal proximity of positive and negative events facilitates mental integration (segregation) of positive and negative affect into an overall evaluation (Thaler & Johnson, 1990). For example, Cowley (2008) found that winning gamblers integrate big losses that occur in close proximity to big wins into an overall favorable evaluation of a gambling session. Integration of positive and negative affect leads to a cancellation effect that minimizes the pain and decline of happiness associated with a negative event (Thaler & Johnson, 1990).

Interestingly, these findings are consistent with research indicating that positive emotion can build resources (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finke, 2008) that function as reserves (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005) and can be drawn upon to cope with negative emotion. Labroo and Ramanathan (2007) argued and showed that, in addition to ads arousing an improving sequence of conflicting emotions, those that induce a downward trend of positive to negative emotion can yield favorable responses. Importantly, results for this declining pattern of emotions attenuated as time delay between the conflicting emotions increased, thereby substantiating the notion that temporal proximity influences the coping effectiveness of positive emotion helping to counteract the depletion caused from negative emotion. Linville and Fischer (1991) made similar claims, proposing that positive events can create additional coping resources that can buffer against the loss of resources drained by a negative event when they are temporally contiguous irrespective of the sequential ordering of the positive and negative events. Support for their theorizing was unveiled through the intertemporal choices people made. For conflicting outcome imaginary scenarios (e.g., earning a bad grade in one class but a good grade in another), participants generally chose experiencing both events on the same day rather than on different days regardless of whether the positive or negative event occurred first. Conversely, when positive and negative events are not contiguous, it creates a break in the sequence as earlier emotions dissipate, which presumably reduces the coping effectiveness of positive emotion to buffer resources drained by negative emotion (Labroo & Ramanathan, 2007; Linville & Fischer, 1991). Further, Lau-Gesk (2005) found that perception of emotional source similarity moderates this temporal proximity effect. Specifically, results from a jellybean tasting revealed that the lower (vs. higher) the perceived similarity among jellybeans, the more favorable evaluations of the overall experience for jellybeans producing positive and negative emotional responses when sampled closer (vs. distant) in temporal proximity. In these instances, whether the samples were tasted in a sequence reflecting improvement or decline did not influence outcomes (Linville & Fischer, 1991).

In sum, there is growing evidence for the influential role of temporal proximity for conflicting emotional experiences due to the nourishment generated from positive emotions to help counteract the depletion of coping resources from negative emotions. Nevertheless, the specific coping processes that may result in more favorable evaluations of conflicting emotional experiences have not yet been pinpointed. Before addressing this gap in the literature, we turn next to another stream of work that offers a different view on evaluations of sequential conflicting emotions, one that offers a purely memory based account to understand preferences for conflicting emotional sequences.

2.2. Remembering conflicting emotions: recency

A related stream of research has investigated serial positioning effects for non-experiential and experiential stimuli (Biswas et al., 2010; Biswas et al., 2014; Zauberman, Diehl, & Ariely, 2006). Earlier work in this area mostly focused on sequences of repeated single valence inputs, in particular, those considered non-experiential stimuli (Büyükkurt, 1986). As a result, issues regarding coping have received little if any attention here. Rather since the interest lies in the relative influential weight of certain serial positioning, the sequential stimuli used have