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# The emotion of interest and its relevance to consumer psychology and behaviour

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## ABSTRACT

Consumers are known to show a paradoxical tendency to favour both familiar and novel marketing stimuli such as products and advertisements. However, an explanation for this paradox has yet to be proposed. This provides immense challenges for marketing practices that conventionally strive to build familiarity (e.g. building awareness, recognition, recall, and customer relationships). Using the emotion differentiation framework, this theoretical paper shows that this paradox is a result of two distinct emotions – liking and interest. Specifically, consumers like familiarity but are interested in novelty. This paper offers six empirical propositions to: (1) differentiate interest from liking; (2) show that liking motivates consumers to favour familiarity whereas interest motivates consumers to prefer novelty; (3) demonstrate that interest accounts for previously explained boundary conditions of the familiarity–liking effect; and (4) provide insights to explain previous conflicting findings in the field of innovation, advertising, and consumer psychology research.

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## 1. Introduction

A paradox exists in our understanding of consumer psychology and behaviour. There is a strong positive relationship between familiarity and liking that resides at the core of consumer psychology (e.g., Monahan et al., 2000; Monin, 2003; Zajonc, 1968, 2001). Yet, consumers demonstrate a preference for novelty over familiarity (e.g., Bornstein et al., 1990; Gillebaart et al., 2012; Rubera and Kirca, 2012; Talke et al., 2009). This is known as the omnivore paradox, whereby consumers are both neophiliacs and neophobics who simultaneously desire to approach and avoid novelty (for a review, see van Trijp and van Kleef, 2008). The current paper offers an explanation to this fundamental paradox by alluding to the differentiation of two similar yet distinct emotions – liking and interest. Specifically, it is proposed that consumers like familiarity but are also interested in novelty. This culminates in six empirical propositions to resolve the omnivore paradox and advance our understanding of consumer psychology and behaviour.

Achieving familiarity is a fundamental goal of marketing. Familiarity has been shown to increase brand recall (e.g., Kent and Allen, 1994), consumer engagement (e.g., Paswan and Ganesh, 2003), perceived product quality (e.g., Hoyer and Brown, 1990), brand preference (e.g., Rindfleisch and Inman, 1998), purchase intention (e.g.,

Arora and Stoner, 1996), and repeat purchases (e.g., Macdonald and Sharp, 2000). Brand familiarity prompts purchase intention by increasing consumers' resistance towards competitive advertising (e.g., Kent and Allen, 1994) and reducing the likelihood of reference price seeking (e.g., Biswas, 1992). Thus, advertising is used to increase the reach, awareness, and familiarity of the advertised message (e.g., Kent and Allen, 1994; Pechmann and Stewart, 1988; Campbell and Keller, 2003). Endorsement marketing allows businesses to build associations between a brand or product with a likable and familiar endorser (Cornwell and Coote, 2005; Nicholls et al., 1999). Further, branding strategies are used to build top-of-mind awareness (e.g., Fang et al., 2007; Ferraro et al., 2009). As such, marketers often strive to achieve greater familiarity for their brands.

However, prior research has shown that consumers prefer novelty over familiarity in certain motivational contexts. For instance, consumers tend to favour novelty over familiarity when they are primed to focus on growth and advancement instead of security (Gillebaart et al., 2012; Topolinski and Sparenberg, 2012). Consumers are also known to actively engage in variety-seeking and brand switching behaviours for the sake of novelty even when such experiences are less attractive (e.g., Ratner et al., 1999; van Trijp et al., 1996). Novelty has also been found to be a key determinant in the success of innovative products (e.g., Talke et al., 2009; Kleinschmidt and Cooper, 1991; Calantone et al., 2006).

However, whether consumers prefer familiarity or novelty is an important question that has remained unanswered. In fact, recent research in psychology has failed to concur on a resolution to this

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question (e.g., Norton et al., 2011, 2013; Norton et al., 2007; Reis et al., 2011; Ullrich et al., 2013). Prior research has focussed on the individual's affective motivation to prefer familiarity and found that familiarity breeds liking (e.g., Ferraro et al., 2009; Fang et al., 2007; Zajonc, 2001). However, very little research has examined the opposing affective motivation that drive the individual's preference for novelty. Therefore, it is suggested that the missing piece to the omnivore paradox is the understanding of individuals' affective motivations to approach novelty.

Interest is an emotion that piques an individual's curiosity, motivating them to approach novel, complex, but not necessarily pleasant stimuli (Silvia, 2005b, 2006, 2008; Turner and Silvia, 2006). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to shed light on the relevance of interest to the understanding of consumer psychology and behaviour. Specifically, it is proposed that the conflicting tendency to approach both the familiar and novel is accounted for by two distinct positive affective states: *liking* (contentment and joy) which motivates consumers to favour familiarity; and *interest* which motivates consumers to favour novelty. This is in line with a growing stream of research on the differentiation of positive emotions (e.g., Gable and Harmon-Jones, 2008; Harmon-Jones et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2014; Tong, 2015). Most importantly, this paper explores how the emotion differentiation framework provides insights to better understand and manage consumers' tendency to favour both familiar and novel marketing stimuli.

This paper is divided into four parts. First, it will demonstrate that the differentiation of positive affects (i.e., liking and interest) may provide a more thorough and adequate approach to examine the effects of emotion on decision making and information processing. Second, recent research in both psychology (Smith et al., 2014) and marketing (So et al., 2015) has encouraged the adoption of appraisal theory to advance the study of emotion on consumer psychology. To do so, this paper will utilise an appraisal theory perspective to differentiate the emotional and motivational quality of interest from liking. Specifically, it is argued that familiarity leads to liking, whereas novelty results in interest. Third, it will highlight how interest and its related appraisal may explain the boundary conditions of the familiarity-liking association, something that has yet to be explained by the existing literature. Lastly, this paper will discuss the practical and theoretical implication of the differentiation between the familiarity-liking and interest-novelty association in consumer psychology and marketing.

## 2. Differentiation of positive emotions

Liking and interest are both positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001; Silvia, 2006; Turner and Silvia, 2006). However, it is proposed that familiarity motivates consumers to favour familiarity while novelty motivates them. This challenges the conventional notion in the psychology and marketing literature that all positive emotions have nearly identical effects on one's psychology and behaviour (for a review, see Cavanaugh et al., 2007). A notable example of this conventional notion is the affect infusion model, which suggests that the positive and negative valence of affective experiences may determine how individuals process information (Forgas, 1995). Similarly, the broaden-and-build theory proposes that all positive emotions serve the function of broadening attention and cognition to build one's physical, social, intellectual, and psychological resource (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). This overgeneralisation is further supported by research that report high correlations amongst the experience of different positive emotions (e.g., Barrett et al., 2001).

However, recent research on emotion differentiation shows that such an overgeneralisation is misleading. For instance, early research suggested that all positive affects facilitate peripheral and heuristic processing (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). However, recent findings show that some positive emotions such as awe and love

led to more systematic processing (Griskevicius et al., 2010a, 2010b). Another example is the effect of positive emotions on the attentional scope, whereby the broaden-and-build theory suggests that positive emotions broaden attention (for a review, see Fredrickson and Branigan, 2005). Other studies also show that approach-motivated emotions that are positive in affective valence (e.g., desire and enthusiasm) narrow attentional scope (Gable and Harmon-Jones, 2008; Sung and Yih, 2015). Thus, the emotion differentiation framework appears to be a more robust explanation on how individual emotions can affect consumer psychology and behaviour.

In fact, the emotion differentiation framework is consistent with various established theories of emotions. Plutchik (1980) proposed that positive emotions have different evolutionary functions that facilitate survival, reproduction, affiliation, and exploration. Ellsworth and Smith (1988) demonstrated that positive emotions are evoked by distinct cognitive appraisals and Frijda (1986) showed that emotions are associated with different action tendencies. Thus, positive emotions appear to involve different antecedents and consequences. In line with this, Tong (2015) reported that appraisal structures are different for seemingly similar positive emotions such as amusement, contentment, and joy. For instance, contentment is predicted by a self-relevant and low-effort situation and interest is uniquely evoked by high personal control (Smith et al., 2014; Tong, 2015). Although the evolutionary function and appraisal of emotions are frequently discussed in marketing and consumer psychology literature, the differentiation of positive emotions have been neglected by most studies. Therefore, the current paper draws on the emotion differentiation framework to explain consumers' paradoxical tendency to favour both familiarity and novelty.

Taken together, the valence of an emotional state does not necessarily serve as an adequate and comprehensive account of its functions and effects on the individual's decision-making processes. Instead, differentiating emotion by their appraisal structure, motivational function, and evolutionary benefit may provide a more complete examination. This leads to the proposition:

**P1.** *The emotion differentiation framework provides a more holistic account of the antecedents and consequences of consumers' emotions.*

In this paper, the framework of emotion differentiation is extended to liking and interest. It is also suggested that such a differentiation may account for an individual's seemingly contradictory tendency to favour both familiarity and novelty. In the next section, liking and interest are differentiated by examining their appraisal structures, motivational functions, subjective experiences, and physiological manifestations.

## 3. Differentiating interest from liking

In applying the emotion differentiation framework into consumer psychology and behaviour, it is proposed that familiarity evokes liking and novelty evokes interest. Liking has been broadly defined as an emotional state with a positive valence and is closely related to the emotion of contentment and joy (Fang et al., 2007; Ferraro et al., 2009; Zajonc, 2001). However, marketing research has largely neglected interest as an emotion (Sung et al., 2016). In this section, interest is defined and its distinction to liking highlighted. Specifically, it is showed that interest has different appraisal structures, motivation functions, subjective experiences, expressions, and physiological consequences.

## 4. What is interest?

Interest is an evolutionarily adaptive emotion that motivates people to develop a broad set of new knowledge, skills, and experiences (Izard, 2007; Silvia, 2006, 2008; Silvia and Kashdan, 2009).

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