

Consumer happiness derived from inherent preferences versus learned preferences

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We distinguish between two types of preferences. One is inherent (e.g., preference for warm over cold temperature); it is formed early in evolution and largely stable. The other is learned (e.g., preference for large over small diamonds); it is acquired more recently, and variable across time and contexts. We propose that compared with inherent preferences, learned preferences 1) rely more on social comparison, resulting in a relative (rather than absolute) effect on happiness, and 2) are more prone to hedonic adaptation, resulting in a transient (rather than durable) effect on happiness. In addition, we propose that preferences about resource-related attributes (e.g., size of home) are inherent in low-value regions, and learned in high-value regions. We discuss implications of this analysis for improving consumer subjective well-being.

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Consumers derive happiness from consuming their preferred products or services, which are composites of their preferred attribute values. What is the relationship between consumption of preferred attribute values and happiness? Suppose X is a consumed attribute (e.g., home size), x_1 and x_2 ($x_2 > x_1$) are two values on the attribute (e.g., 1000 square feet and 2000 square feet), and, *ceteris paribus*, people prefer the higher value (i.e., x_2) to the lower value (i.e., x_1). Suppose also that person A has x_1 and person B has x_2 . Is person B happier than person A? And if person A switches from x_1 to x_2 , will she feel happier, and, if so, how long will the increased happiness last? More generally, do preferred attribute values always correspond to better subjective experience? Is happiness absolute (i.e.,

independent of other people's, or one's previous, attribute values) or relative (i.e., dependent on other people's, or one's previous, attribute values)? Existing literature yields mixed results on these issues [1,2,3,4,5^{*},6,7,8,9,10].

The main tenet of this review is that whether a more preferred attribute value (in choice) corresponds to greater happiness (in experience) depends, at least in part, on whether the preference is inherent or learned.

Inherent preference versus learned preference

Preferences are not created equal. Preferences about some attributes are formed early in evolution, and are hard-wired [11]. Examples include the preference for a warm ambient temperature (e.g., 70 °F) over a cold ambient temperature (e.g., 40 °F) [12^{**}], for high calorie food (e.g., French fries) over low calorie food (e.g., kale salad), for a good night's sleep over sleep deprivation [13], and for being socially accepted over being socially excluded [14]. We call this type of preference 'inherent preference.'

Preferences about other attributes are acquired more recently in evolution in specific social, cultural environments and are malleable across time and contexts. Examples include the preference for genuine diamonds over synthetic diamonds, for a \$ 3000 Gucci bag over a \$300 Coach bag, for French wine over Californian wine, and for Crocs' hole-filled shoes over normal looking shoes. We call this type of preference 'learned preference.' In earlier publications [12^{**},15^{*}], we referred to attributes related to inherent preference as 'inherently evaluable' attribute or 'type A' attribute, and attributes related to learned preference as 'inherently inevaluable' attributes or 'type B' attributes. We adopt the terms 'inherent preference' and 'learned preference' here because these new terms are more intuitive and better explain the origin of the preferences. Simonson has also used the term 'inherent preferences' to refer to stable preferences [16], but his notion of inherent preference focuses on individual differences, which can be attributed to individual genes [17] (e.g., some individuals are predisposed to prefer soft pillows and others are predisposed to prefer hard pillows), whereas our notion of inherent preference concerns evolutionarily-formed human preferences.

Whether a preference is inherent or learned is a continuum, depending on when the preference is formed in human evolution — a million years ago, a millennium ago, or a year ago. It is for ease of exposition that we treat

inherent and learned preferences as if they were discrete in this article.

We propose that happiness derived from inherent preferences 1) relies less on social comparison and 2) is less prone to hedonic adaptation, than happiness derived from learned preferences, resulting in two happiness-related effects — 1) absolute versus relative effect and 2) durable versus transient effect.

Social comparison: absolute versus relative effect

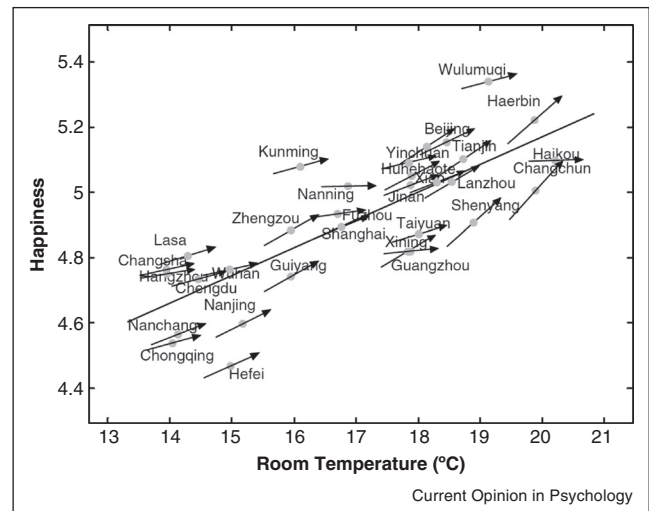
Inherent preferences are formed early in evolution and gradually become ‘hard-wired’ in mind and body, whereas learned preferences are acquired more recently in specific social, cultural contexts. Therefore, happiness derived from inherent-preference attributes doesn’t need social comparison; one would feel better under 70 °F temperature than under 30 °F temperature, regardless of what temperature others are under or what temperature she was under in the past. In contrast, happiness derived from learned-preference attributes require social comparison; one would feel better wearing a 2-karat diamond than wearing a 1-karat diamond, only if she knows others wear 1-karat or she wore 1-karat in the past [12^{••},18[•],19[•],20[•]].

Proposition 1.

Happiness about inherent-preference attributes needs no social comparison and is absolute; happiness about learned-preference attributes needs social comparison and is relative.

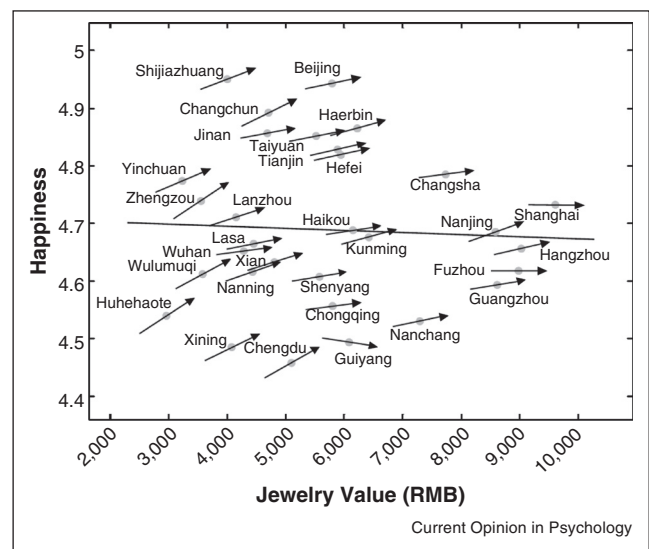
Evidence for Proposition 1 comes from a field study conducted during a winter through telephone interviews among residents in 31 representative cities in China [12^{••}]. The researchers investigated the relationship between attribute value and happiness on a typical inherent-preference attribute — room temperature, and a typical learned-preference attribute — jewelry value. They asked each resident four questions: 1) their present room temperature, 2) their happiness with their present room temperature, 3) the value of their jewelry and 4) their happiness with their jewelry. The researchers analyzed the effects of temperature value and jewelry value on happiness both within cities and across cities, assuming that social comparison is more likely among people within the same city than between different cities. They found that, for room temperature, within each city people with higher room temperature were happier (within-city effect), and between cities people with higher room temperature were also happier (between-cities effect) (see Figure 1). However, for jewelry value, there was only a within-city effect (see Figure 2). These results suggest that happiness derived from room temperature, an inherent-preference attribute, does not rely on social comparison and is absolute, whereas happiness derived from jewelry value, a learned-preference attribute, relies on social comparison and is relative.

Figure 1



The impact of room temperature on happiness within cities and across cities (from [12]). The slope of each small line indicates the effect of temperature within a particular city, and the slope of the long (trend) line indicates the effect of temperature across all the cities. As the graph shows, temperature has a positive effect within most cities (within-city effects), and also a positive effect across cities (between-city effect).

Figure 2



The impact of jewelry value on happiness within cities and across cities (from [12]). The slope of each small line indicates the effect of jewelry value within a particular city, and the slope of the long (trend) line indicates the effect of jewelry value across all the cities. As the graph shows, jewelry value has a positive effect within most cities (within-city effects), but does not have a positive effect across cities (between-city effect).

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