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Research Article

Warmth and conformity: The effects of ambient temperature on product preferences and financial decisions☆

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Abstract

Comfortable ambient temperatures can influence consumer preferences for conformity. The results of three laboratory experiments suggest that warm (vs. cool) temperatures dispose consumers toward using others' opinions as the basis for product preferences, stock price forecasts, and betting. Warm temperatures increased the participants' perceptions of social closeness to other decision-makers, thus leading them to consider the opinions of those decision-makers to have greater validity. This enhanced validity, in turn, rendered them more likely to conform to the crowd. This effect was confirmed in an analysis of betting behavior at the racetrack over a three-year period. Bets were more likely to converge on the "favorite" (i.e., the majority-endorsed option) when the temperature at the track was warm.
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Introduction

The behavior and opinions of others are among the most pervasive determinants of human decision-making. Conformity and dissension, at opposite ends, have been subjects of investigation in psychology since Asch (1946) and are also a concern in economics (Herding; Bikhchandani & Sharma, 2001 for a review). Conformity draws on the proposition that value is conferred by the mainstream position: if the majority has chosen a particular option, then it must be good. In contrast, dissension or non-conformity draws on the opposing proposition that value is a positive function of the minority position: if an option has been adopted by only a few, then it must be good. Both conformity and non-conformity are frequently used tactics in marketing (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2006). For example, Whiskas, a popular cat food brand, relies on the former in its advertising campaign—"Eight out of ten cats prefer it"—whereas Italia Classics, a clothing brand, emphasizes the latter: "For those who prefer to be scene and not herd."

What factors render consumers more or less likely to conform? Previous studies have identified several moderators. For example, Griskevicius et al. (2009) found conformity to increase with the need for self-protection. Fear-eliciting cues (e.g., a crime drama) can activate this need, and thus induce a disposition to follow the crowd. Other personal factors or personality traits, such as the need for uniqueness, reduce the tendency to conform (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Conformity may also be a function of product category. For example, consumers are less likely to display conformity in behaviors that signal their social identity (e.g., hairstyles), whereas they are more likely to follow others in purchasing products that do not have signaling values (e.g., stereos or toothpaste; Berger & Heath, 2007). The influences of these aforementioned factors are often conscious and deliberate.

In this paper, we propose another moderator of conformity, namely, the ambient temperature that consumers experience

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when making a decision. We restrict our consideration to temperatures within a comfortable range, that is, between 61 °F and 77 °F (Anderson, Anderson, Dorr, DeNeve, & Flanagan, 2000; Baker & Cameron, 1996; Baron & Bell, 1976; IJzerman & Semin, 2009), which are more relevant to business settings than more extreme temperatures. We focus on the domains of financial decisions and preferences for non-social products. We predict that within this fairly narrow temperature range, consumers will display greater conformity when it is warm than when it is cool.

From physical warmth to social warmth

The notion that atmospherics play a crucial role in shopping behavior is widely accepted (Bitner, 1992; Eroglu & Machleit, 2008). As suggested by conceptualizations of sensory marketing, background factors that stimulate any of the five senses can have an important influence on consumer decisions (Krishna, 2012). Previous research has identified the effects of ambient scents (Bosmans, 2006; Krishna, Lwin, & Morrin, 2010; Spangenberg, Crowley, & Henderson, 1996), background music (Hui, Dubé, & Chebat, 1997; Morin, Dubé, & Chebat, 2007), and flooring (Meyers-Levy, Zhu, & Jiang, 2010). However, although ambient temperature is an inherent characteristic of the retail and service settings, relatively few studies have investigated its effects in marketing. The majority of research on ambient temperature in service marketing focuses on identifying the range of temperatures at which shoppers are likely to feel comfortable and which are therefore conducive to a pleasant shopping experience (Baker & Cameron, 1996; D'Astous, 2000). With few exceptions (e.g., Cheema & Patrick, 2012; Hong & Sun, 2012), the actual impact of temperature within the comfortable range on consumer behavior has not been examined.

In a different research paradigm, recent studies in psychology have shed light on the potential effects of ambient temperature. Drawing on emerging evidence of the interplay between body and mind, these studies suggest that bodily experience can influence dissimilar, but metaphorically associated, psychological judgments (Barsalou, 2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). According to this view, people experience bodily sensations through direct interaction with the physical world and learn to label them accordingly (e.g., "heavy"). More abstract psychological concepts (e.g., "importance"), whose referents cannot be seen or touched, are later given meaning by metaphorically mapping them onto a physical experience. Well-established metaphors can thus be tied to the source domain of physical experience, thereby unconsciously influencing the target domain of psychological judgment upon activation (Ackerman, Nocera, & Bargh, 2010).

More relevant to the current research is the association between physical warmth and social warmth that some researchers have documented (IJzerman & Semin, 2009; 2010; Steinmetz & Mussweiler, 2011). For example, Williams and Bargh (2008) found that people judge strangers to be friendlier when holding a warm cup. IJzerman and Semin (2009) found that a high ambient temperature leads individuals to perceive themselves as socially closer to another person, whereas a low ambient temperature leads to perceptions of greater social distance.

Our prediction: from physical warmth to conformity

These findings on temperature's effects on judgment are intriguing, yet they do not necessarily have implications for the effects of ambient temperature on conformity in the studies we report. Our prediction is based on two considerations. First, prior studies focus on people's judgment of a *particular* individual. This effect appears to hold regardless of whether the target individual is a total stranger, someone the participant knows well, or the experimenter (IJzerman & Semin, 2009; Williams & Bargh, 2008). The implication is that temperature's effects may influence the way in which individuals perceive their social world *in general*. That is, warm temperatures (relative to cool temperatures) appear to blur the perceived boundaries between an individual and all salient others, creating a sense of social similarity, closeness (IJzerman & Semin, 2010), and "oneness" (Heider, 1958). To this extent, we predict that the incidental experience of temperature, that is, physical warmth, can increase consumers' perceptions of their closeness to other decision-makers in general, regardless of the nature of those decision-makers.

Second, conformity can occur for two reasons: normative and informative. Past research on the association between physical temperature and social temperature has primarily focused on affiliation-based judgments, such as friendliness, loneliness, helping, or a liking for romantic movies (Hong & Sun, 2012; Williams & Bargh, 2008; Zhong & Leonardelli, 2008). The implication of these studies may be that physical warmth leads individuals to adopt others' opinions for *normative* reasons, as such a conformity to closer others facilitates social affiliation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and helps to avoid social disapproval (Wyer, 1966).

However, in the contexts that we examined—financial decision-making and purchases of non-social products—the influences are more likely to be *informational* (monetary payoffs or accuracy). In these contexts, people follow others' opinions when they believe that the information held by others is valid. Any empirical evidence that warm (vs. cool) temperatures lead to this kind of conformity would be interesting.

Previous research has identified a number of determinants of perceived validity. For example, a piece of information is perceived as high (vs. low) in validity when it is delivered by a high (vs. low) credibility source (Kaufman, Stasson, & Hart, 1999). The mere repetition of exposures to a piece of information can also enhance its perceived validity (Hawkins, Hoch, & Meyers-Levy, 2001). Furthermore, people with a disposition to think concretely (vs. abstractly) are more likely to believe that the statements they read are valid (Wright et al., 2012). These statements include marketing claims (e.g., "Burt's Bee is made from all natural ingredients and is more effective than other leading brands.").

In the case we are investigating, we predict that temperature is another factor that influences the perceived validity of others' opinions. This is because people would be more likely to rely on close others' opinions as a reference standard (Mussweiler, 2003), to believe that these opinions are valid (Naylor, Lamberton, & Norton, 2011) and persuasive (Wood, Kallgren, & Preisler, 1985), and to adopt these opinions as a valuable source of information

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