

## Research Report

Sadness and consumption<sup>☆</sup>Nitika Garg<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jennifer S. Lerner<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Australian School of Business, The University of New South Wales, UNSW Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia<sup>b</sup> John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

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## Abstract

Sadness influences consumption, leading individuals to pay more to acquire new goods and to eat more unhealthy food than they would otherwise. These undesirable consumption effects of sadness can occur without awareness, thus representing more than just conscious attempts at “retail therapy.” In an experiment with real food consumption, the present paper examines the hypothesis that sadness’ impact on consumption could be attenuated if the choice context counteracted appraisals of helplessness and enhanced a sense of individual control. Results revealed that: (1) sadness elevates self-reports of helplessness in response to the emotion-inducing situation, (2) helplessness mediates the sadness–consumption effect, and (3) inducing a sense of control (via choice) attenuates sadness’ effect.

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## Introduction

Research on incidental emotion has discovered the pervasive tendency of emotions to carry over from one situation to another, coloring behavior in unrelated tasks (for reviews, see [Forgas, 1995](#); [Isen, 1993](#); [Keltner & Lerner, 2010](#); [Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003](#); [Schwarz, 2000](#)). Incidental emotions (i.e., normatively irrelevant, prior emotions) have been found to reliably influence numerous aspects of judgment and decision making, such as risk seeking ([Johnson & Tversky, 1983](#); [Lerner & Keltner, 2001](#)), information processing ([Isen, 2001](#); [Tiedens & Linton, 2001](#)), choice ([Garg, Inman, & Mittal, 2005](#)), and financial transactions ([Lerner, Small, & Loewenstein, 2004](#)).

One of the most interesting carryover examples involves sadness and consumption. It is interesting for at least two reasons. First, its effects depart from what one would predict based on emotional valence. The standard prediction of a valence-based

model would be that any negative emotion, including sadness, should trigger generalized negative valuation of, say, a new product. That is, a negative state should lead one to perceive the world in negative ways. While disgust, another negative emotion, fits that predicted pattern, sadness in fact does not. Sadness actually triggers *positive valuation* of new products, as measured by willingness to pay ([Lerner et al., 2004](#)).

A second novel aspect of sadness and consumption is that the carryover effect drives consumption behavior across diverse domains. In the domain of eating, for example, sadness (relative to happiness) leads to increased consumption of tasty, fattening food products, such as buttered popcorn and M&M candies ([Garg, Wansink, & Inman, 2007](#)). In the domain of consumer transactions, sadness (relative to a neutral state) increases the amount people spend to purchase items ([Lerner et al., 2004](#)), a phenomenon that has been labeled the *misery is not miserly effect* ([Cryder, Lerner, Gross, & Dahl, 2008](#)).

Importantly, sadness in these cases is *incidental* to the choice at hand. Decision makers were randomly assigned to a sadness induction (e.g., reflecting on past sad events) or a neutral-mood induction. According to the subjects themselves, the incidental sadness should have had no role in shaping their present choices, yet it did play a role. Moreover, unlike making

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a conscious choice to engage in “retail therapy,” the sad feelings in all these studies carried over to the choice without decision makers realizing it. In fact, when decision makers were asked about the possibility of carryover, they explicitly denied it (for example, see Cryder et al., 2008). Thus, the carryover represents an unconscious, undesirable effect on spending and eating.

Sadness’ effect on consumption can be understood by examining its core relational theme of loss and helplessness (Lazarus, 1991). Notably, sadness is associated not with simple loss (e.g., loss of a replaceable possession) but rather with a sense of *irrevocable* loss (e.g., loss of a loved one). It is the combination of loss and helplessness associated with sadness that leads to compensatory tendencies rather than simply an experience of a low-control, negative emotion (e.g., fear). Thus, there are two important links that we seek to examine to understand the sadness–consumption relationship: first, the link that ties sadness to loss and helplessness, and second, the link that ties this sadness-related sense of loss and helplessness to increased consumption. Our research contributes to the literature in this domain by examining sadness’ links to appraisals of loss and helplessness and by testing whether these appraisals in turn drive the sadness–consumption relationship. Finally, we also study whether inducing a sense of control (via choice) successfully attenuates sadness’ effect.

## Hypotheses development

Decision makers do not want to pay more or over-consume when they are sad, yet they do so. Moreover, sadness and over-consumption may create negative, recursive cycles of behavior. Episodes of over-consumption can themselves lead to negative moods, which then perpetuate these self-defeating behaviors (Leith & Baumeister, 1996).

As noted, sadness has been associated with the core theme of loss and helplessness (Keltner, Locke, & Audrain, 1993; Lazarus, 1991), and the relationship between sadness–consumption can essentially be understood by examining two questions. First, how is sadness linked to appraisals of loss and helplessness? Second, how do these appraisals of loss and helplessness lead to increased consumption? To answer the first question, we rely on existing literature that has reliably established the link between sadness and appraisals of loss and helplessness. Emotion research (Keltner et al., 1993; Lazarus, 1991) suggests that each emotion has a core relational theme that defines it and that sadness has the core theme of loss and helplessness. Accordingly, a heightened sense of situational, rather than individual, control (the extent to which a person believes that a human agent is in control of the situation) characterizes sadness (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Scherer, 1997; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Weiner, 1985). Thus, sadness is distinct from other low-control negative emotions, such as fear and anxiety, which are characterized by distinct relational themes of “immediate, concrete, and overwhelming physical danger” and “facing uncertain, existential threat” (Lazarus, 1991), respectively.

As a result, sadness may evoke implicit goals of changing one’s circumstances (Lerner et al., 2004) and acquiring rewarding

outcomes (Raghunathan & Pham, 1999) to compensate for the corresponding sense of loss and helplessness. This connection helps us to answer the question of how sadness-related loss and helplessness lead to increased consumption. Specifically, prior research has found sadness to be associated with conscious or unconscious attempts at mood repair (e.g., Raghunathan & Pham, 1999; Schwarz & Clore, 1983; Wegener & Petty, 1994). For example, sad individuals are more likely to choose high-risk/high-reward options as compared to anxious individuals, who implicitly seek uncertainty reduction and are more likely to choose low-risk/low-reward options (Raghunathan & Pham, 1999). More recently, research has revealed a wide range of what might be considered compensatory consumption effects. For example, sad individuals prefer to consume certain “comfort foods” or drinks, such as ice cream or pizza, as opposed to healthier alternatives (Wansink, Cheney, & Chan, 2003). And sad individuals are less likely to restrain their consumption of a hedonic, rewarding food than are happy individuals (Garg et al., 2007), unless they believe that eating will not change their mood (Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001).

Taken together, the foregoing results shed light on the relationship between sadness and consumption. Again, it seems to be the combination of loss and helplessness associated with sadness that seems to give rise to compensatory tendencies rather than a simple lack of control. However, while prior research implies that consumption alleviates feelings of sadness; to our knowledge, no one has collected post-consumption emotion measures to illustrate whether consumption actually alleviates sadness. Thus, it could be that this research merely documents the effect of sadness on consumption-related behaviors rather than the attenuation of sadness’ effect via consumption. Indeed, recent research seems to support the notion that *compensatory consumption does not always attenuate sadness’ effects*. Sadness’ effect on consumption was found to be resilient even in the face of multiple opportunities to engage in compensatory consumption (Garg & Lerner, 2009). Specifically, the authors hypothesized that the misery-is-not-miserly effect (Cryder et al., 2008) could be attenuated by providing adequate consumption opportunities in other domains (such as hedonic food consumption and positive event recall) prior to eliciting participants’ willingness to pay (WTP) for a new product. However, they found that compensatory consumption opportunities failed to attenuate sadness’ effect on WTP and concluded that lack of adequate compensation alone does not seem to drive sadness’ effect.

These results in particular, raise a question about the mechanics underlying the relationship between sadness and potentially mood-altering consumption. That is, even though the underlying themes of loss and helplessness are associated with sadness (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989; Keltner & Lerner, 2010; Lazarus, 1991) as well as the pattern of compensatory consumption, increasing the compensation to counter the appraisal of loss does not seem to be enough to attenuate sadness’ effect. The question then is whether sadness’ effect on consumption can be attenuated by providing individuals with greater individual control and diminished helplessness?

We thus, hypothesize that increasing decision makers’ sense of individual control and decreasing their sense of helplessness

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