

Research Report

Two birds, one stone? Positive mood makes products seem less useful for multiple-goal pursuit ☆

Anastasiya Pocheptsova ^{a,*}, Francine Espinoza Petersen ^b, Jordan Etkin ^c

^a *R. H. Smith School of Business, University of Maryland, 3313 Van Munching Hall, College Park, MD 20742, USA*

^b *European School of Management and Technology, Schlossplatz 1, Berlin 10178, Germany*

^c *Fuqua School of Business, Duke University, 100 Fuqua Drive, Durham, NC 27708, USA*

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Abstract

Negotiating the pursuit of multiple goals often requires making difficult trade-offs between goals. In these situations, consumers can benefit from using products that help them pursue several goals at the same time. But do consumers always prefer these multipurpose products? We propose that consumers' incidental mood state alters perceptions of products in a multiple-goal context. Four studies demonstrate that being in a positive mood amplifies perceptions of differences between multiple conflicting goals. As a consequence, consumers are less likely to evaluate multipurpose products as being able to serve multiple distinct goals simultaneously. We conclude by discussing implications of these findings for marketers of multipurpose products.

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Introduction

The marketplace offers many multipurpose products that can help consumers pursue multiple goals at the same time. A smartphone, for instance, can be used for work and to connect with the family. An exercise video is a way to stay healthy and save money. Frozen yogurt helps keep off the pounds and satisfies a sweet tooth. But do consumers always prefer these multipurpose means to goal pursuit? We propose that consumers' moods affect evaluation of multipurpose products.

When consumers pursue a single goal, being in a positive mood has clear benefits. People are more likely to pursue goals associated with positive affect (Custers & Aarts, 2005). Being in a positive mood increases the likelihood of goal adoption and goal-congruent actions (Fishbach & Labroo, 2007), especially for long-term goals (Labroo & Patrick, 2009). While pursuing goals in a positive mood, people are more likely to seek feedback to improve their goal pursuit (Gervy, Igou, & Trope, 2005).

Does positive mood have similar beneficial effects when consumers are motivated by multiple goals instead of a single goal? For example, one can simultaneously strive to do well at work, lose weight, and spend time with family. Negotiating the pursuit of multiple distinct goals can be difficult, as consumers have to decide which goals to pursue and which to temporarily forsake (Chun, Kruglanski, Sleeth-Keppler, & Friedman, 2011; Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Kruglanski et al., 2002). Thus, a key feature of multiple-goal pursuit is the need to make trade-offs between goals, which is an aversive process

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: apochept@rhsmith.umd.edu (A. Pocheptsova), petersen@esmt.org (F.E. Petersen), jordan.etkin@duke.edu (J. Etkin).

(Emmons, King, & Sheldon, 1993). One can avoid having to make such trade-offs by using multipurpose means: products or services that aid pursuit of several goals at the same time (Köpetz et al., 2011; Kruglanski et al., 2012). However, as we argue next, consumers in a positive mood may be less likely to use such multipurpose means.

Prior research demonstrates that the presence of decision conflict and the need to make trade-offs between multiple options generally increase consumers' focus on unique, or different, features of those options (Brenner, Rottenstreich, & Sood, 1999; Dhar & Sherman, 1996; Gati & Tversky, 1984; Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995; Medin, Goldstone, & Gentner, 1993; Tversky & Simonson, 1993). If inter-goal conflict similarly leads consumers to consider trade-offs between their multiple goals, consumers should be more likely to focus on differences between goals when choosing which of the multiple goals to pursue.

We propose that a positive mood should enhance the focus on inter-goal trade-offs and increase attention on differences between goals. A positive mood bestows value on thoughts and actions that happen to be accessible at the moment (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007, 2009; Huntsinger, Isbell, & Clore, 2012; Huntsinger, 2012). By doing so, positive mood increases the focus on the most salient information at the time of judgment. Several studies provide converging evidence for this enhancing effect of positive mood. Mather and Sutherland (2011) demonstrate that emotional arousal biases attention toward more visually conspicuous stimuli at the moment. Huntsinger et al. (2012) show that when participants in a positive mood are focused on their internal state (vs. outside environment), they demonstrate a more local (vs. global) focus in their judgments. Murray, Sujan, Hirt, and Sujan (1990) further find that when differences (vs. similarities) were the salient focus of the items-evaluation task, participants in a positive mood found more differences (vs. similarities) between items than those in a neutral mood.

Building on this research, we expect that being in a positive mood will enhance the salient focus on trade-offs between multiple conflicting goals, and lead consumers to see these goals as more dissimilar from each other. However, when goals do not conflict (e.g., when goals are overlapping because they serve the same higher purpose) and there is no need to make inter-goal trade-offs, we do not expect this effect to emerge.

The fact that a positive mood makes conflicting goals seem more different from each has negative consequences for evaluation of multipurpose products. Two lines of research provide support for this proposition. First, Köpetz et al. (2011) show that more similar (vs. distinct) goals are more likely to share common means to goal attainment. For example, for the goals of being healthy and getting in shape, participants identified more common means than for more distinct goals, such as the goals of being healthy and doing well at work. Therefore, we expect that consumers in a positive mood, who see their goals as more different from each other, will be less likely to identify multipurpose means for their conflicting goals.

Second, several papers argue that multipurpose means are less effective for goal pursuit (compared to means that serve only one goal), because an addition of other goals to a single means decreases the strength of association between each goal

and the means (Kruglanski et al., 2012; Zhang, Fishbach, & Kruglanski, 2007). For example, Simonson, Nowlis, and Simonson (1993) show that preference for a product decreased when participants learned that other consumers were using it for another purpose. Zhang et al. (2007) found that when participants were told (vs. not) that aerobic exercise was instrumental to the goal of maintaining healthy bones, in addition to helping avoid heart disease, they judged exercise as less instrumental in preventing heart disease. Critically, Zhang et al. (2007; Study 3) demonstrate that perceived goal distinctiveness moderates the dilution effect: when participants were asked to deliberate on whether the goals were different from (vs. similar to) each other, they perceived multipurpose means to be less (vs. more) effective for goal pursuit. Based on this research, we propose that by increasing the focus on inter-goal trade-offs and differences between conflicting goals, a positive mood will also decrease perceptions of the instrumentality of multipurpose products.

Returning back to our opening example, we predict that when consumers are in a positive mood, they will be less likely to identify and evaluate a smartphone as useful both for the goal of being successful at work and for the goal of spending time with family. This negative effect on evaluation of multipurpose means occurs because consumers in a positive (vs. neutral) mood see goals of being successful at work and spending time with family as more distinct from each other. In what follows, we demonstrate that (a) pursuit of multiple conflicting goals increases the focus on differences between the goals (Study 1), (b) being in a positive mood enhances this focus (Studies 1–3), and (c) increased perception of inter-goal differences lowers evaluation of usefulness of products for the pursuit of multiple conflicting goals (Studies 1–4).

Study 1

Study 1 tests whether a focus on inter-goal differences is salient during pursuit of multiple conflicting goals, and provides initial evidence that incidental positive mood enhances this focus and thereby decreases evaluation of multipurpose means.

Method

Participants and design

Members of a national online panel ($N = 116$) participated in this study in exchange for a small payment. Participants were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (mood: positive, negative) \times 3 (focus: similarities, differences, no focus control) between-subjects design and were asked to complete two ostensibly unrelated tasks.

Procedure

In the first task, we manipulated incidental mood using a word-priming task adapted from Pyone and Isen (2011). In the positive-mood condition, we presented participants with 10 words that evoked positive emotions (e.g., laughter, fun). In the negative-mood condition, we presented participants with 10 words that evoked negative emotions (e.g., loss, war). The

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