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Short communication

Contextual influences on liking and preference

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Abstract

The paper addresses the topic of how much an individual likes a stimulus and also how much that individual prefers it to other stimuli. Research is reviewed showing that the context in which the stimulus is presented affects both liking and preference judgments. Having subjects think of the context stimuli and the test stimuli as being in different categories reduces the impact of the context stimuli on the ratings of the test stimuli and might be used to avoid such context effects in determining liking of and preferences for stimuli.

Keywords: Hedonics; Context effects; Preference; Liking

Introduction

If people ask us how much we like a particular food with which we are familiar, we have no difficulty telling them. While there are certainly ways to influence how much someone likes a particular food such as conditioned taste aversions and flavor–flavor conditioning (see Zellner, 1991), we believe those judgments to be fairly stable. We believe that how much we like a food today should be similar, if not identical, to how much we like it tomorrow. We certainly do not expect that what we think is good today will be bad tomorrow (or vice versa).

However, our ratings of the "goodness" of stimuli vary considerably. In fact, what is rated as "good" in one context can be rated as "bad" in another. Although we perceive ourselves as giving absolute judgments of the hedonic quality of an object such as a food, we are in fact greatly influenced by the goodness of stimuli we experience before those we are rating. It appears that a stimulus' goodness is dependent upon the context in which it is presented. This fact can influence how much we enjoy things in everyday life (see Parducci, 1995 for a discussion of context effects on happiness). It is also of practical concern when companies are trying to find out how much, or even whether, consumers will like their new product. The answer may depend upon the context in which the product is presented.

The fact that context alters hedonic (i.e., goodness) judgments was pointed out as long ago as 1898 (Fechner, 1898). In his book Vorschule der Aesthetik, II, Gustav Fechner describes hedonic contrast as follows: "That which gives pleasure gives more pleasure the more it enters into contrast with sources of displeasure or of lesser pleasure; and a corresponding proposition holds for that which gives displeasure." (as translated by Beebe-Center, 1965, pg. 222). So Fechner believed that good things can make other things worse and bad things can make them better. Fechner also pointed out that in order for context stimuli to influence what we will call the "test" stimuli, "the two factors had to bear a certain resemblance to each other" (Beebe-Center, 1965, pg. 223). So, in other words, the context and test stimuli had to be from the same category of stimuli

Categorization

I and my collaborators have been investigating hedonic contrast in order to determine if what Fechner said is true. What Fechner said about the effect of categorization on contrast made us wonder if some people's ratings of apples are influenced by oranges because they think of them as being "fruit" whereas for other people oranges do not influence the ratings of apples because they are viewed as

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different things. If there were both kinds of people then we should find that those who put the "good" and "less good" stimuli in a single category will like the "less good" version less than will those who put the "good" and "less good" stimuli in different categories. Hedonic contrast should only occur among people who put all versions in the same category.

We tested this using coffee which has "good" and "less good" versions. In our first study (Zellner, Kern, & Parker, 2002), we looked at people's liking for ordinary canned coffee (the "less good" version of coffee). In order to be in the study subjects also had to consume the "good" version, gourmet coffee as bought in two coffee shops where we collected data. We asked subjects to give hedonic ratings for the ordinary canned coffee and the gourmet coffee they most commonly consumed. As we expected, people consistently judged the gourmet coffee as very hedonically positive and the ordinary coffee as considerably less good.

We also asked them to tell us whether they thought of the two versions as being the same or different beverages. The people who said "same" think of them as being in the same category (i.e., coffee) and those who said "different" think of them as being in two different categories (presumably ordinary and gourmet coffee). If Fechner was right, then only people who thought of the two kinds of coffees as the same beverage would show hedonic contrast. That would result in the "same" group rating the less good ordinary canned coffee as less hedonically positive than the "different" group.

That is indeed what we found. Those subjects who thought of both types of coffee as the same beverage rated the ordinary canned coffee as being hedonically negative (i.e., they disliked it). On the other hand, the subjects who thought of the two types of coffees as different beverages liked the ordinary coffee, although less than the gourmet coffee. Some of these subjects reported that they still drank ordinary canned coffee at home while those who thought of the two coffees as the same beverage had a hard time drinking ordinary canned coffee anymore. Drinking gourmet coffee made ordinary coffee unacceptable only for the subjects who thought the two coffees were members of the same category.

We (Zellner et al., 2002) replicated this finding that failure to sub-categorize can make less good versions of an item bad if a better version is introduced. This time we surveyed beer drinkers who had consumed both "regular" beer (e.g., Budweiser) and "specialty" beer (e.g., imports or microbrews). We again saw the same effect. The less good "regular" beer suffered in comparison with the better imports and microbrews only among people who thought of the two kinds of beers as being the same beverage. Those individuals now disliked the "regular" beer, whereas those who put the two kinds of beers in different categories still liked the "regular" beer, although less than the "specialty" beer.

These studies confirmed what Fechner had pointed out: lumping good and less good versions of similar items into the same category results in disliking the less good versions, but separating them into two categories allows us to like both versions to some degree. The next question we investigated was whether instructing subjects to put good and less good versions of stimuli into one category or two can produce or prevent hedonic contrast.

Our next studies (Zellner, Rohm, Bassetti, & Parker, 2003) involved experimentally manipulating categorization of context and test stimuli to determine (1) if hedonic contrast would occur when subjects were told that the "good" context stimuli were in the same category as the "less good" test stimuli, and (2) if formation of that hedonic contrast would be prevented by informing subjects that the two sets of stimuli were members of different categories.

In the first experiment, four groups of subjects were asked to rate how much they liked the taste of two test beverages (Mistic brand juice blends diluted with enough water to make them close to hedonically neutral). Two no-context control groups rated only those two test beverages. One control group was told that they were rating two fruit juices. The other control group was told that they were rating two commercial drinks. The two context groups drank and rated the hedonic value of eight context full-strength Mistic beverages prior to rating the two test beverages. One context group was told that they were rating fruit juices and the other was told that they were rating a set of eight fruit juices followed by two commercial drinks.

Subjects in both control groups who only rated the two diluted test beverages rated them as slightly hedonically positive. However, subjects reported disliking the dilute juices if they were told that both the good full-strength and less good dilute test juices were "juices." This effect was attenuated if they were told that the full-strength context juices were "juices" and the dilute test juices were "commercial drinks."

We found similar results using pictures of birds as stimuli. When hedonically positive tropical birds preceded less attractive North American birds subjects reported that they found the North American birds unattractive. However, subjects told to categorize the two sets of birds into "Tropical birds" and "North American birds" found the North American test birds somewhat attractive.

Thus, hedonic contrast is reduced when subjects are told to put the context stimuli in one category and the test stimuli in another. However, in these studies, the hedonic contrast was not *eliminated* by telling people to categorize. For example, in the fruit juice study both groups rating the context juices before the test juices showed hedonic contrast. However, the degree of contrast in the group told to categorize was significantly less than those who were not told to categorize. Why did being told to categorize not completely eliminate the hedonic contrast?

People may have a tendency to categorize objects in certain ways so that telling them to think about things in another way is not completely successful. For example, the people in our bird study probably naturally made one category of "birds" and the information about Tropical and North American birds did not totally override their tendency to see all birds as birds. However, if they had been