

# The Influence of Experience and Sequence of Conflicting Emotions on Ad Attitudes

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Two experiments suggest that when participants evaluate an ad, they prefer improving ad emotions, because attitudes are based on an assessment of whether the emotions deviate positively or negatively from previous levels of emotions. In contrast, when emotions are experienced, positive emotions facilitate coping with later negativity, and an ad with declining (vs. improving) emotions results in more favorable attitudes. This beneficial effect of experienced positive emotions in reducing the impact of subsequent negative emotions is reversed when the positive emotions are allowed to dissipate over a time delay between the experiences of the two emotions.

An ad for one-a-day multivitamins employs a narrator presenting unpleasant information on bone loss followed by positive information about healthiness from the supplement. In contrast, an ad for aspirin evokes positive feelings about a wedding and then induces negative emotions about death and how the bride's father could attend the wedding only because aspirin saved his life during a recent heart attack. Such advertisements portraying conflicting emotions in sequence—negative then positive or positive then negative—are not uncommon, and research on mixed emotions is of growing interest (Larsen, McGraw, and Cacioppo 2001; Priester and Petty 1996). For example, we now know that the use of emotions (vs. not) in ad appeals is beneficial because it garners attention but also that conflicting (vs. pure) ad emotions make consumers unhappy and reduce persuasion (Williams and Aaker 2002). In such studies, emotions are induced in a mixed manner (each ad statement has positive and negative aspects); however, if the emotions are sorted by valence (the ad contains all positive and then all negative aspects, or the reverse), it is not clear

whether the sequence of emotions will affect persuasion differently.

Although a normative assumption suggests that as long as the total emotional content across ads is the same the sequence of emotions will not matter, some research in non-advertising contexts shows that improving (vs. declining) sequences will be preferred. For instance, Loewenstein and Prelec (1993) report that consumers prefer a fancy dinner to follow an ordinary one over the converse. Reportedly, recent emotions affect judgment to a greater extent than earlier ones (Fredrickson and Kahneman 1993; Lau-Gesk 2005), and positive (negative) departures from the current affect level are judged as favorable (unfavorable). Also, the evaluation of affective outcomes is marked by contrast effects, and preceding events affect the perception of subsequent ones. Positive (negative) events appear more positive (negative) when preceded by negative (positive) ones than not (Olsen and Pracejus 2004). Furthermore, negative emotions signal change, and positive emotions signal safety (Schwarz and Clore 1983); thus, improving (vs. declining) emotions are more positive because they signal that the prior (negative) problem state has been resolved. However, other studies suggest that declining (vs. improving) emotions will be preferred. For example, Raghunathan and Trope (2002) report that positive (vs. not positive) feelings enhance persuasion from negative self-relevant ad messages, and Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) report that participants instructed (vs. not instructed) to find positive meaning in their lives develop psychological resistance against adverse events. Positive emotions trigger positive thoughts that help people overcome the emotional costs of negative information and cope with stressful experiences (Aspinwall 1998; Fredrickson 1998). Positive emotions also distract attention away from threatening information (Bower 1981) by suggesting

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*Dawn Iacobucci served as editor and Gita V. Johar served as associate editor for this article.*

*Electronically published December 12, 2006*

that the situation is benign (Schwarz and Clore 1983); thus, declining (vs. improving) emotions will be preferred for this reason as well.

It may be possible to resolve these alternative views by considering the extent to which the emotions are experienced. From the existing studies, it appears that cognitive appraisal of affective outcomes (series of dinners, jelly beans) is associated with liking for improving sequences but felt emotions are associated with liking for declining sequences. Further, research has shown that ad attitudes depend on whether people evaluate (vs. experience) ad emotions (Burke and Edell 1989; Pham 1998); therefore, if emotion sequences are employed in advertising, they might differentially affect ad attitudes. In particular, under baseline ad evaluation conditions, improving (vs. declining) ad emotions may be preferred, as evaluation is marked by cognitive biases, such as contrast effects, judgments about how the current affect deviates from previous levels, and whether an existing negative state has been resolved or not. However, when ad emotions are experienced, positive emotions might cue positive thoughts that facilitate coping with and/or distracting the reader from later negativity. Indeed, Friestad and Wright (1994) report that consumers employ coping processes to deal with ad emotions, and it is possible that positive ad emotions will facilitate coping with subsequent negative ad emotions, if ad emotions are experienced and require coping processes. In such a case, declining (vs. improving) emotions will enhance ad attitudes.

Experiment 1 investigates whether people who evaluate affective outcomes prefer ads with improving (vs. declining) emotions but those who experience emotions prefer an ad that employs declining (vs. improving) emotions in sequence and whether this is because experienced positive ad emotions facilitate coping with (vs. distracting from) negative ad emotions. As a further test of the underlying process—that experienced positive emotions facilitate coping with subsequent negative emotions—experiment 2 introduces a delay between the experiences of the two emotions to allow the positive emotions to dissipate and no longer assuage the later negative emotions.

## EXPERIMENT 1

Experiment 1 employed a 2 (sequence: improving vs. declining)  $\times$  2 (emotion experience: evaluate vs. experience) between-subjects design. Participants were exposed to one of two mock-up ads—with improving versus declining emotions—for a fictitious film (adapted from Williams and Aaker 2002). Half of the participants were instructed to experience the emotions depicted in the ad, while the others evaluated the ad without any instruction. A control condition was also run in which participants evaluated an ad that did not comprise any emotions.

### Method

*Pretests.* Three pretests were run as manipulation checks. In the first pretest ( $n = 35$ ), participants evaluated

a passage comprising either positive or negative emotions. Results confirmed that the former was more positive than the latter. In the second pretest ( $n = 24$ ), participants evaluated the ad with improving or declining emotions for how involving, self-relevant, and natural it was to read. Results indicated no differences between the two ads on these variables. The third (computerized) pretest ( $n = 56$ ) tested whether experienced positive emotions distract participants from subsequent negative emotions. Participants read an ad with improving (vs. declining) emotions while experiencing emotions or not and then categorized as quickly as possible four positive and four negative (randomly presented) emotion words taken from the ad (by pressing  $z =$  positive,  $/ =$  negative; response times of the four positive [negative] words were averaged for each participant). A 2 (experience)  $\times$  2 (sequence)  $\times$  2 (valence of words) ANOVA showed only a main effect of experience; participants in the experience condition registered faster responses to positive and to negative words, suggesting that experienced positive emotions do not block negative emotions (see table 1 for pretest results).

*Procedure.* Sixty-four undergraduate students at the University of Chicago, each paid \$3.00, were assigned at random to one of four ad-processing conditions or to the control condition. After reading the ad, participants indicated ad attitudes (1 = bad, negative, dislike, unfavorable; 7 = good, positive, like, favorable) and rated how strongly they felt each of the following emotions: down-hearted, happy, loving, sad, uncomfortable, affectionate, friendly, depressed, conflicted, regretful, joyful, lonely, delighted, distressed, sentimental, confused, warm-hearted, sorrowful, emotional, touched, discouraged, moved (1 = not at all; 7 = very).

## Results

We expected experienced declining (vs. improving) emotions to lead to greater net positivity and also higher ad attitudes. The 2 (sequence)  $\times$  2 (experience) ANOVA conducted on an ad-attitude index (average of the four ad-attitude measures;  $\alpha = .91$ ) revealed only a sequence  $\times$  experience interaction ( $F(1, 42) = 4.90, p < .03$ ). As expected, participants who experienced emotions preferred an ad with declining versus improving emotions ( $M = 4.25$  vs. 2.81;  $t(42) = 2.57, p < .01$ ). However, under the evaluation condition, ad attitudes did not differ based on the sequence of emotions ( $M = 2.72$  vs. 3.07;  $t(42) < 1$ ). Further, relative to the control condition where 18 participants evaluated an ad with no emotions, the use of conflicting ad emotions significantly reduced ad attitudes ( $M_{\text{control}}$  vs.  $M_{\text{eval-imp.}} = 4.75$  vs. 3.07,  $t(26) = 3.27, p < .01$ ;  $M_{\text{eval-dec.}} = 2.72$ ,  $t(28) = 3.79, p < .01$ ;  $M_{\text{exp-imp.}} = 2.72$ ,  $t(30) = 4.22, p < .01$ ), except when participants experienced declining emotions ( $t < 1$ ).<sup>1</sup> This suggests that experienced positive ad

<sup>1</sup>Abbreviations are as follows: eval. = evaluate, imp. = improving, dec. = declining, exp. = experience.

**TABLE 1**  
RESULTS OF PRETESTS 1–3

Pretest description	Results	Significance tests
Pretest 1 ( <i>n</i> = 35): Rating positive versus negative emotional content of the ad (1 = extremely negative, bad, unfavorable; 7 = extremely positive, good, favorable)	$M_{\text{pos. vs. neg.}} = 5.41$ versus 2.77	$F(1, 33) = 58.29, p < .01$
Pretest 2 ( <i>n</i> = 24): Rating involvement, relevance, and “naturalness” of improving versus declining ad emotions (1 = not at all; 7 = very)	Involvement: $M_{\text{dec. vs. imp.}} = 3.91$ versus 4.08 Self-relevance: $M_{\text{dec. vs. imp.}} = 3.50$ versus 3.92 Naturalness: $M_{\text{dec. vs. imp.}} = 3.58$ versus 4.16	$F(1, 22) = .09, p = .77$ $F(1, 22) = .31, p = .58$ $F(1, 22) = .65, p = .43$
Pretest 3 ( <i>n</i> = 56): Average response time of four positive and four negative ad words	$M_{\text{exp. vs. eval.}} = 660$ versus 708 milliseconds	$F(1, 52) = 4.61, p < .05$

NOTE.—pos. = positive; neg. = negative; dec. = declining; imp. = improving; exp. = experience; eval. = evaluate.

emotions reduce the impact of subsequent negative emotions to no-emotion control ad levels. See figure 1 for results.

A factor analysis conducted on the scales measuring emotions that participants reported feeling revealed three main groups of emotions: positive (happy, friendly, joyful, delighted; 10.07% of the variance), negative (down-hearted, sad, uncomfortable, depressed, conflicted, regretful, lonely, distressed, confused, sorrowful, discouraged; 36.83% of the variance), and sentimental (loving, affectionate, sentimental, warm-hearted, emotional, touched, moved; 15.68% of the variance). A positivity index was constructed by averaging the positive and sentimental emotions and subtracting the negative emotions for each participant. A 2 × 2 ANOVA on this index revealed a sequence × experience interaction ( $F(1, 41) = 4.55, p < .05$ ). As expected, when emotions were experienced, those with declining (vs. improving) emotions reported feeling more positive ( $M = -.35$  vs.  $-1.58$ ;  $t(41) = 1.70, p < .05$ ), but in the evaluate condition, positivity did not differ based on the sequence of emotions ( $M = -1.30$  vs.  $-.33$ ;  $t(41) = 1.32, p > .15$ ).

**Discussion**

As hypothesized, experiment 1 indicates that when emotions are experienced, declining (vs. improving) ad emotions lead to more positive feelings and to more positive ad attitudes. Importantly, pretest 3 showed that experienced declining versus improving emotions led to similar processing of negative ad emotions and that positive ad emotions did not distract attention away from the later negativity. Viewed in combination with the finding that the use of conflicting (vs. no) emotions in ads significantly reduced ad attitudes except when participants experienced declining emotions suggests that experienced positive emotions help people deal with later negative emotions and bring their attitudes up to control no-emotion attitude levels. Note that the declining (vs. improving) emotions ad was not more self-relevant, in-

volving, or more natural to read (pretest 2); thus, the observed effects are unlikely to have emerged for those reasons.

Unexpectedly, with evaluation, improving (vs. declining) emotion ads did not enhance attitudes or felt positivity, even though there was some directional support. It is possible that these null effects resulted from processing ambiguity, as those participants were not given any ad processing instructions, and some of them may have experienced the emotions. Thus, in experiment 2, participants were given clear instructions to either evaluate or experience emotions. Also, to further investigate the underlying process, a delay manipulation was (vs. was not) included between the two emotions. With no delay, and with explicit evaluation in-

**FIGURE 1**  
EXPERIMENT 1: AD ATTITUDES AS A FUNCTION OF SEQUENCE AND EXPERIENCE OF EMOTION

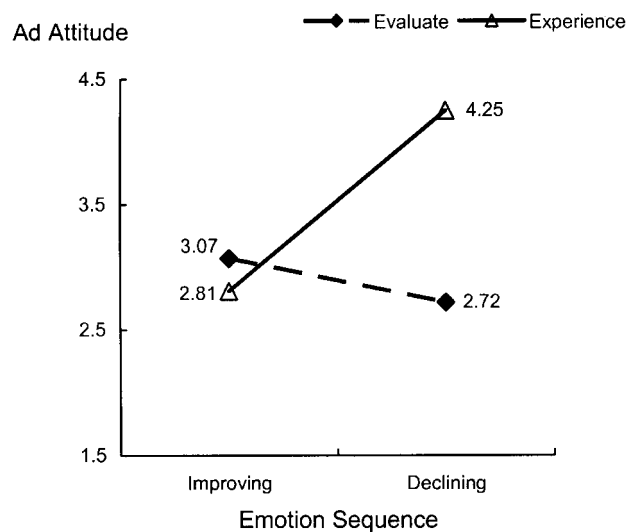
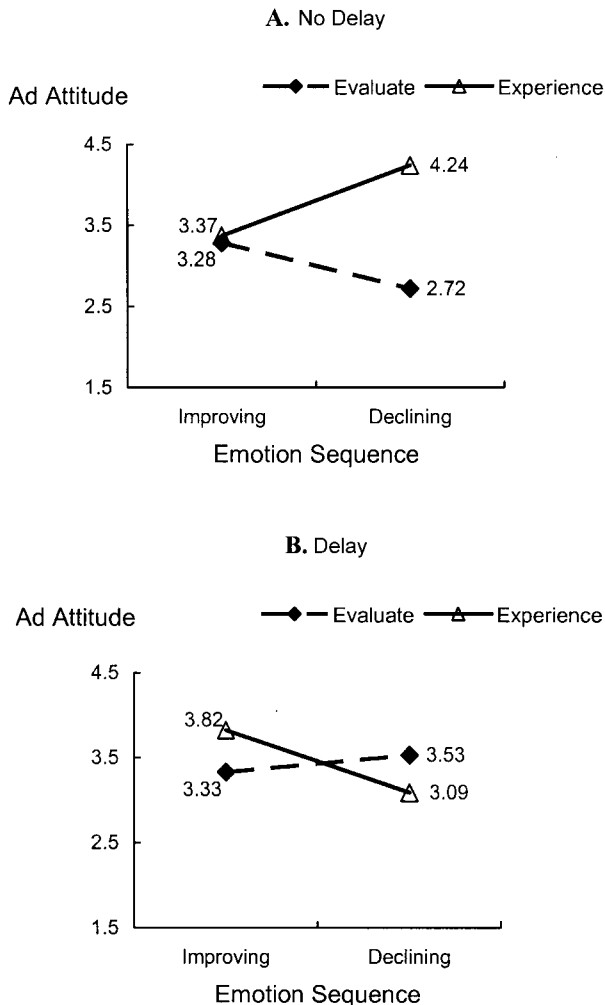


FIGURE 2

## EXPERIMENT 2: ATTITUDE AS A FUNCTION OF SEQUENCE AND EXPERIENCE OF EMOTION AND DELAY



structions, we expect that improving (vs. declining) emotion ads will be preferred. Evaluation is accompanied by assessments of deviations in affect, and negative-positive deviations are preferred to positive-negative ones. Also, positive (negative) events appear more positive (negative) when preceded by negative (positive) ones. With experiential processing, we expect that declining (vs. improving) emotion ads will be preferred, thus replicating experiment 1. This is because experienced positivity helps in coping with later negativity.

We further expect that a delay will break the sequence that served as a basis for affective evaluations and also allow emotions experienced early on to dissipate. Thus, with delay, and with evaluation, ad attitudes will no longer differ based on sequence, as the sequence that served as the basis for adaptation (contrast) is broken. Also, with delay, emotions

experienced first will dissipate, and later emotions will assimilate with attitudes. This reversed preference for experienced improving (vs. declining) emotions with delay may also emerge because experienced positive emotions undo earlier negative emotions over time (Fredrickson 1998).

## EXPERIMENT 2

## Overview and Procedure

Experiment 2 employed a 2 (sequence: improving or declining)  $\times$  2 (emotion: evaluate vs. experience)  $\times$  2 (delay: no vs. yes) between-subjects design. One hundred seven undergraduate students at the University of Chicago participated in this study, each for a compensation of \$5.00. The ad used in experiment 1 was modified, and two ads were developed from it. One ad comprised only positive emotions and the other only negative emotions, and participants either saw the positive and then the negative ad or saw the ads in reverse order. The ads were described as part of an overall brand campaign, and participants were instructed (before seeing each ad) either to evaluate the campaign to assess its effectiveness or to experience the depicted emotions. Half of the participants were exposed to the two ads sequentially with no delay, whereas the others completed a 10-minute filler task after seeing the first ad but before seeing the second ad. Once participants had been exposed to the two ads, they were asked for their attitudes toward the brand campaign (1 = bad, unfavorable, unattractive, dislike; 7 = good, favorable, attractive, like) and for manipulation check measures such as self reports of involvement (1 = not at all; 7 = very), relevance of the brand campaign (1 = not at all; 7 = very), and whether they assessed the campaign in a rational versus emotional manner (1 = used my thoughts, used my head, was rational; 7 = used my feelings, used my heart, was empathetic).

## Results and Discussion

As expected, a 2  $\times$  2  $\times$  2 ANOVA on involvement, with delay, emotion instruction, and sequence as independent variables revealed no significant effects ( $F$ 's  $< 1$ ) nor did the ANOVA on relevance of the ad ( $F$ 's  $< 1$ ). Also, the ANOVA on whether emotions were experienced or evaluated revealed only the expected main effect of the emotion instruction ( $M = 3.76$  vs. 4.55;  $F(1, 99) = 8.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that the instructions manipulated the style of processing as desired but not the involvement or relevance of the campaign.

The four attitude measures ( $\alpha = .78$ ) were averaged into an index. A 2  $\times$  2  $\times$  2 ANOVA on the index with delay, experience, and sequence as independent factors revealed a main effect of experience ( $M_{\text{eval.}}$  vs.  $M_{\text{exp.}} = 3.23$  vs. 3.69;  $F(1, 99) = 5.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ), a delay  $\times$  experience interaction ( $F(1, 99) = 4.37$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and the expected delay  $\times$  experience  $\times$  sequence interaction ( $F(1, 99) = 9.96$ ,  $p < .01$ ). No other effects were significant. See figure 2 for the means.

Without delay, as expected, a significant experience  $\times$  sequence interaction emerged ( $F(1, 99) = 6.60, p < .01$ ); participants who were instructed to evaluate the campaign indicated higher ad attitudes toward improving (vs. declining) emotions ads ( $M_{\text{imp. vs. dec.}} = 3.28$  vs.  $2.72; t(99) = 1.67, p = .05$ ). The reverse was true when participants were instructed to experience emotions ( $M = 3.37$  vs.  $4.24; t(99) = 2.25, p < .01$ ). Furthermore, with delay, a marginal experience  $\times$  sequence interaction emerged ( $F(1, 99) = 3.52, p < .10$ ). As expected, sequence effects disappeared in the evaluate condition when the earlier emotions could not serve as an adaptation level (or basis for contrast effects) for the later emotions ( $M = 3.33$  vs.  $3.53; t(99) < 1$ ). In the experience conditions, improving (vs. declining) emotions were now preferred ( $M = 3.82$  vs.  $3.09; t(99) = 2.09, p < .05$ ), suggesting decay (or undoing) of early emotions and greater impact of later emotions. It appears that the evaluation of affective ad sequences is accompanied by adaptation to or contrast with current affect levels and that improving (vs. declining) ad emotions enhance attitudes. If the sequence is broken, then adaptation (contrast) no longer occurs, and the difference in attitudes is attenuated. However, when emotions are experienced, declining emotions lead to higher ad attitudes possibly because positive emotions help in coping with negative emotions. A delay between the experiences of the two emotions allows the initial emotions to dissipate, and recently experienced emotions affect ad attitudes more strongly.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Experiencing ad emotions increases consumer coping (Friestad and Wright 1994). People cope with felt negativity by denial ("It's not so bad") or by finding positivity ("It's bad, but I'm glad for something good"). Also, research shows that people who evoke positive emotions in the face of negativity in life report higher satisfaction (Fredrickson and Levenson 1998). Adding to this, our data suggest that in advertising, experiencing (vs. evaluating) specific sequences of conflicting emotions affects whether people can (or will) draw on the positive to cope with the negative. Two experiments provide converging evidence to suggest that when participants evaluate ads, current emotions serve as a baseline from which to evaluate later emotions. In contrast, when participants experience emotions, positive emotions enhance positive feelings and facilitate coping with later negativity. Importantly, experienced declining (vs. improving) emotions lead to similar processing of negative ad information (pretest 3), suggesting that experienced positive emotions do not detract attention from negative ad material. Further, the use of conflicting (vs. no) emotions in ads reduces attitudes except when participants experience declining emotions, which additionally suggests that experienced positivity facilitates coping with negativity. The effects are not due to differences in involvement with the two ads, and a delay between the two emotions mitigates the effects of sequence  $\times$  experience on attitudes.

This research extends the effects reported recently by Lau-

Gesk (2005) to an ad context. Lau-Gesk (2005) manipulated the style of cognitive appraisal, wherein her participants either noted similarities or differences in affective experiences while consuming three jelly beans and reported that when participants focused on similarities (but not differences), improving sequences were preferred to declining ones. Compatibly, in our studies, conflicting emotions appeared within a single ad or overall ad campaign relating to the same target (the grandfather), which is akin to focusing on similarities rather than differences of affective experiences. When our participants were asked to evaluate the ads, improving sequence ads were preferred to declining ones, compatible with Lau-Gesk's (2005) similarity data. However, going beyond Lau-Gesk (2005), we also manipulated the experience of emotions and showed that experienced positive emotions facilitate coping with negative emotions. It is reasonable to expect that positive emotions, if experienced, will facilitate coping with negative emotions within a single ad. In other domains, the beneficial effects of positive emotions on coping with adversity have been noted (Aspinwall 1998) and occur when the two emotions belong to different domains (e.g., a positive mood helps in coping with a negative persuasion message; Raghunathan and Trope 2002) or to the same domain, such as a single film (e.g., smiling spontaneously during a sad film; Fredrickson and Levenson 1998). Our data thus indicate the conditions (i.e., extent of evaluation vs. experience) under which, and possibly suggest populations for whom, improving (vs. declining) emotions will be successful and apply those findings to ad context effects.

Some limitations of these data and areas of future research may be noted. First, we employed strong positive and negative emotions of only one type, relating to the passing away of a grandparent. Future research might investigate other types of emotional sequences in order to generalize these data. For example, it would be useful from a public policy perspective to see if early positive ad emotions enhance persuasion from strong fear appeals. Strong fear appeals are otherwise reported as ineffective in changing attitudes as they increase denial and defensiveness (Sternthal and Craig 1974), but experienced positive emotion might provide a resource to deal with subsequent negative emotion. Also, different types of negative emotions lead to different consequences (Raghunathan and Pham 1999), and so it will be interesting to see which positive emotions facilitate coping with which negative emotions. Second, we employed emotions that were associated with high levels of arousal, where the literature suggests that discrepancies between what people felt about the emotional content of the ad (e.g., "the ad was amusing") and how they actually felt while watching it (e.g., "I was amused") are more likely to emerge. Future investigations might manipulate levels of arousal or the strength of the emotions. It is possible that weak emotions are mostly appraised; if so, improving sequences of such emotions will be preferred. However, the work by Fredrickson suggests that even mild emotions like contentment can facilitate coping (Fredrickson 1998), and so our results

may hold for weakly experienced emotions as well. Also, in the future, researchers may wish to distinguish between liking for the affective sequence and the ad itself that employs such a sequence. Our data suggests that ad attitudes assimilate with felt affect, and researchers may wish to examine the extent to which the former mediates the latter. In addition, we employed explicit instructions to evaluate (vs. experience) ad emotions, and in the future, researchers may wish to investigate whether the results hold even with implicit primes, collect additional process measures, or investigate situations that might automatically activate coping, such as expectations of future negative emotions.

Future investigations might wish to consider the impact of emotionality and sequence on behavioral measures of choice and postchoice satisfaction. Recall that experiment 1 indicated that other than in the experience-declining emotions condition, conflicting emotions reduced ad attitudes versus a no emotions control condition. At first, this might suggest that conflicting emotions should mostly not be used in ads; however, it is possible that conflicting emotions in advertising might still lead to greater behavioral intent relative to no emotional content. For instance, our ad was presented to participants as a single presentation without other ads surrounding it to control for cross advertising effects (Lee and Labroo 2004); however, if included within a series of ads, it is possible that conflicting emotions ads heighten behavioral intent by cutting through the ad clutter more effectively than nonemotional ads. Indeed, with the abundance of conflicting emotions in real world advertising, one hopes that this is the case.

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