The Impact of Perceived Self-Skill Levels on Product Choice: An Exploratory Study of the Moderating Influence of Mood

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In view of previous research on consumers' single-peaked product preference and "matching" process, this paper examines the effect of price as a necessary condition for consumers' ideal-point formation process in making choices in a product array that has monotonically increasing values on the benefit dimension. Building on the "mood-as-information" perspective and incorporating the emerging stream of mood study, this paper also studies the moderating impact of mood on the effects of perceived self-skill levels on consumers' purchase intentions. Using experiments, this research generates and replicates consumers' single-peaked product preferences in a consumer behavioral lab. Results show that subjects always go for the best product option in the absence of price information (i.e., preference is monotonically increasing, rather than single-peaked), and subjects exhibit different product preference patterns when they are in different moods. This paper extends previous research by explicitly including and testing the effect of price as a cost dimension, and incorporating the emerging trend of mood study, and therefore, this paper gains a deeper understanding of consumers' single-peaked preference function.

Keywords: single-peaked product preference, ideal point, mood-as-information, perceived self-skill levels

INTRODUCTION

Previous research suggests that consumers evaluate products based on the available comparative information about themselves and products and infer their best product choice by forming the ideal point that best match the consumer and the product (Prelec, Wernerfelt, and Zettelmeyer, 1997). For example, Cook et al (2004) propose a cost-benefit trade-off model, which states that the formation of a consumer's ideal point is a combination of single-peaked preference and monotonic attributes. Carpenter and Nakamoto (1998) also talk about how consumers' preference for a pioneering brand is influenced by its association with the ambiguity of the ideal attribute combination. Moreover, how strong the effect of the ideal point is on consumers' choices also depends on the availability of the ideal point (Chernev, 2003).

Among all the articles that try to identify the variables that shift the position of the ideal point, Burson (2007) proposes that task difficulty leads to inconsistent choices through the matching process, and the reason is that consumers rely on their relative self-assessments to choose products and therefore they unintentionally pick the products that do not match their actual skills.

Although Burson's (2007) work proposes one possible variable, namely, consumers' perceived skill level of themselves, that would shift the ideal point of consumers' product preference, she did not explicitly define the boundaries of her findings. For example, under what circumstances are her findings valid? What are the contextual factors that would influence or change the relationship between her results? Therefore,

the objective of this article is to identify possible moderating variables that would influence the position of the ideal point of consumers' product preference and suggest necessary conditions for this "matching" process to happen. Specifically, this paper proposes that price is a non-neglectable condition for the single-peaked product preference function, and the effects of consumers' perceived self-skill level on product choice depend on the mood conditions they are in.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ideal-Point Formation and Single-Peaked Preferences

Numerous studies have shown that consumers exhibit single-peaked preferences for alternative products that vary in the number, amount, or duration of benefits (Cooke et al., 2004). The reason that consumers tend to have the highest preference (i.e. single-peaked preference, or ideal-point for a product array) for a certain product in a range of alternatives is that the series of products are composed of inherent and underlying benefits and cost dimensions (Coombs and Avrunin 1977). People have to compare and make a trade-off between the costs and monotonic benefits of the products. For example, previous studies have shown that consumers prefer moderately fast music (Holbrook and Anand 1990), moderately sweet drinks (Best 1976), and moderately magnifying power binoculars that they believe are in line with their relative preference (Prelec, Wernerfelt, Zettelmeyer, 1997).

Therefore, it may not be always true that the benefit levels of the product and consumers' preference are monotonically related, in other words, increases in the stimulus intensity do not necessarily produce uniformly increasing (decreasing) judgments, because there is also a cost dimension involved in the evaluation and decision-making process. The formation of single-peaked preference (i.e. ideal-point) is a function of both the monotonic relationship and cost-benefit trade-offs (Cooke et al., 2004).

Burson (2007) has identified a contextual variable that shifts the single-peaked (i.e. ideal-point) preference of consumer product choices, namely, consumers' perceived self-skill level (which may also be influenced by the difficulty level of tasks they are taking). Specifically, she proposed that people rely heavily on their self-assessment in product choice and try to match their self-skill level with the required skill level by the product. However, in Burson's (2007) study, she referred to the single-peaked (i.e. ideal-point formation) product choice process as consumers' "matching" strategy and manipulated the benefit dimension of the product array with varying skill levels of each stimulus without explicitly specifying the cost dimension of the "matching" process.

Price as the Cost Dimension of Single-Peaked Preference

Zeithaml (1988) defines price as "what is given up or sacrificed to obtain a product," which is also consistent with the conceptualizations by other researchers as the "give," rather than "get" component of a product (Ahtola's, 1984). In addition, previous research has shown that monetary price is not the only source of sacrifice consumers need to make to obtain products, other sources of costs are also salient to consumers, such as time cost, search cost, travel cost, and psychic costs, etc (Leuthold 1981; Zeithaml and Berry 1987).

The price-perceived quality relationship influences buyers' perceptions of value in their purchase intentions or choices (Monroe and Krishnan, 1985; Monroe and Rao, 1987; Zeithaml, 1988). Jocoby and Olson (1977) distinguish objective external price and consumers' subjective internal representations that are derived from the perception of price. Price could be both an indicator of the amount of sacrifice needed to obtain a product and a measurement of the level of quality of the product. On the one hand, a higher price represents a perceived higher quality level, which in turn leads to a higher purchase intention. On the other hand, a higher price also means a greater amount of sacrifices required to purchase the product, which may result in lower purchase likelihood, and consumers make purchase decisions based on the trade-off between quality and perceived sacrifices involved (Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal, 1991).

The Effect of Mood on Purchase Intention

In the history of mood effect research, two main theories have been widely used to explain how mood affects consumers' evaluation and decision-making processes: inferential models (e.g., the mood-as-

information model) and memory-based theories (e.g., the affect-priming model). According to the affect-as-information model, people tend to use mood as answer to the "How do I feel about it" heuristic when they are evaluating products (Schwarz, 1990), and they sometimes mistake their mood for feelings about the stimulus. The affect-priming model indicates that mood serves as a retrieval cue for the recall of mood-congruent material from memory (Isen, Shalker, Clark, and Karp, 1978; Bower, 1981), in the sense that mood selectively activates and retrieves similar or relevant nodes. If one affective node is activated, then other connected events will be also activated (Fedorikhin and Cole, 2004).

An emerging stream of mood research suggests that positive mood plays an adaptive role in human functioning (Isen and Labroo, 2003; Raghunathan and Trope, 2002), that it broadens people's attention and allows them to focus on the big picture and future opportunities. Based on the "affect-as-information model", Labroo and Patrick (2007) propose that positive mood increases consumers' abstract construal or high-level thinking, because positive mood normally signals the current environment is benign, which will in turn distances people psychologically from the current situation and focus on a broader perspective (Liberman Sagristano, and Trope 2002; Bar-Anan, Liberman, and Trope 2006). In contrast, a negative mood normally indicates an immediate danger or concern, which leads consumers to pay more attention to low-level construal or to be more detail-oriented (Schwarz and Clore, 1983). Specifically, a positive mood increases people's openness to new information and enhances their efforts to achieve future well-being (Isen and Labroo, 2003), and people in a positive mood are more likely to disengage from current tasks but work harder to accomplish other tasks (Bless et al. 1990), because they consider long-term reward or future activity is more important than current tasks. Different from the effect of a positive mood, a negative mood normally signals an immediate concern and leads people to a more proximal focus on the current situation (Labroo and Patrick, 2007).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Proposed Hypotheses: The Effect of Price on Purchase Intention

Previous research suggests that consumers generally tend to have a range of prices that are considered to be acceptable for a given purchase, because relatively low prices may signal suspect product quality (Cooper 1969), and very high prices of products that are above the upper threshold of the price are believed to be too expensive to accept (Ofir, 2004).

Therefore, as price increases within the range of lower threshold and upper bound of acceptable price limit, consumers develop enhanced purchase intention. In contrast, when the price continues to increase beyond the acceptable price set, the purchase likelihood of the product would decline. Thus, the relationship between price and consumers' purchase intention should be curvilinear (Monroe and Lee, 1999).

Price is also considered as the "cost" or "sacrifice" dimension of a considered purchase, as just discussed, price plays a crucial role in consumers' purchase decision-making process price is the prerequisite for the single-peaked pattern of consumers' purchase intention and product choice (Coombs and Avrunin 1977). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: *For products that have monotonically increasing values on the benefit dimension, price serves as the cost dimension of the products, and is the necessary condition for a "matching" process to happen, in terms of product selection and purchase intention.*

The Effects of Task Condition/Perceived Self-Skill Levels on Product Choice

Burson (2007) proposed that task difficulty leads to inconsistent choices through the matching process, as previous research has shown that most people are systematically inaccurate judges of their standing, assessing their ability as too low when a task feels difficult and too high when a task feels easy (Kruger 1999), which in turn makes consumers choose higher-end products when product usage seems easy and thus they perceive their ability to be relatively high, and that consumers choose lower-end products when usage seems difficult and thus they perceive their comparative ability to be low. In other words, task difficulty affects consumers' perceived self-skill levels and have an impact on their product choice when

they try to match their skill level to a product's required skill level. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: *Task condition has a main effect on people's perceived self skill levels, such that difficult task makes people feel themselves have lower skill levels, whereas people's better performance in an easy task makes them think they have higher skill levels.*

H2b: *Consumers select the product in a product array that best match their self skill-levels, such that people who perceive their skill-level are lower tend to pick the products that have lower skill-level requirement, whereas people who think they have higher skill levels tend to choose more advanced products.*

The Effect of Mood on Purchase Intention

Building on the "mood-as-information" perspective, a positive mood is believed to make people focus on the higher-level construal or big picture of the situation. Therefore, when it comes to the product choice or "matching" purchase-decision-making strategy, people in a positive mood will pay more attention to the future benefit of obtaining a product and make a wiser decision. Specifically, when the product is consistent with the future goals of the consumers, they tend to have a higher purchase likelihood, whereas, for products that do not help consumers to achieve their future well-being, they are less likely to purchase the product. It will be a different story in the case of people in a negative mood, they will pay more attention to the current tasks, such that they focus more on the details of the product and neglect the future well-being. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: *There is an interaction between consumers' mood conditions and their product purchase intentions, such that for people in a positive mood, they are more likely to purchase the product when their perceived self-skill levels are high (i.e., when they take an easy task), whereas they are less likely to purchase the product when they believe their self-skills are poor (i.e., when they take a hard task). For people in a negative mood, they tend to have a lower purchase intention for the product no matter what kind of task they are given. In other words, people's self-assessment of their skill levels does not influence their purchase decisions, and people in a negative mood are less likely to purchase the product in general.*

METHODS

Study 1

Hypothesis 1 suggests that for any "matching" process to happen, there are always some "costs" involved in the product choice, such that consumers have to make a trade-off between the benefits they will get from buying the products and the costs associated with them. The benefits can be in the form of superiority (higher skill level) of the product, better taste, or any form that the consumer prefers, whereas the cost of the product is normally the price of the product that consumers need to pay.

Therefore, the objectives of study 1 were: firstly, study 1 was trying to replicate the findings in Burson's (2007) first study, that consumers' perceived relative skill influences their product choice because they always try to match their skill levels and the required skill levels to use the product, and manipulations of perceived comparative skill changes product choices. Secondly, study 1 was conducted to examine the effect of price availability as the necessary condition of the "matching" process, in other words, the single-peaked purchase intention cannot be produced in the absence of price information.

Procedure and Stimuli

The experiment was a mixed design study, with a two (price information: price was provided vs. price information was not provided) by two (mood: positive or negative) by three (test condition: easy test, hard test or no test) between-subject factors, and a set of six golf balls as within-subject stimuli. Although study 1 tried to replicate the design and setting of the ones used in Burson's (2007) study as closely as possible, the following changes/differences need to be noticed. First, about the manipulation of task difficulty, instead

of asking participants to put a golf ball, tests of knowledge on golf balls and rules of playing golf were used. Secondly, subjects were asked to indicate their purchase intention for each of the golf balls, rather than just select one from the six products that they would purchase. Thirdly, price and mood were added as independent between-subject factors in the study.

Two hundred and fifty-eight undergraduate students who took an introductory-level marketing class were recruited from a southern public university and randomly assigned to one of the 12 conditions. Firstly, the mood was manipulated by asking students to recall either a happy or a sad recent personal experience (Labroo and Patrick, 2009). Next, people were randomly assigned to one of the three test conditions (easy, hard, or no test), and each subject took an eight-item quiz on knowledge about golf balls and rules. In the hard test condition, each of the eight items described a scenario concerning a specific rule of golf, and the subject would need to choose whether the statement was true or false. In the easy test condition, the quiz asked very basic questions about golf balls and the rules of playing golf, and the participants had to choose which of the two options was correct, with one of the options being wrong. Then all the participants saw six levels of golf balls on the screen with pictures of the balls and their corresponding prices ranging from $9.99 to $34.99 (people in the no-price condition did not see any price information), as well as recommended skill level required by the product, which was indicated by the handicap index numbers of the golf balls. Participants then made judgments on the purchase likelihood of each golf ball on a 9-point Likert scale with 1 being "very unlikely to purchase" to 9 being "very likely to purchase". Similarly, participants were also asked to judge the price attractiveness, perceived skill level required by the product, and quality of the product after each golf ball was displayed. At the end of the survey, mood measures, and some other personal trait measurements, such as self-reward, self-punishment, and self-monitoring were also recorded.

Results

Repeated measures were used to analyze the patterns of participants' purchase likelihood among the six levels of golf balls at the group level. As expected, the three-way interaction between golf balls, test condition, and price information was statistically significant ($F(2, 246) = 6.798$, $p < .01$). As indicated in Figure 1, Graphs A and B present the patterns of purchase intentions among the six golf balls across all the participants. Figure 1A shows that when price information was not provided, there was a monotonic relationship between the stimulus levels (increasingly superior golf balls) and people's purchase likelihood. In other words, if the price is not an issue (i.e. there are no costs associated with product choice), people always go for the best product, no matter what test they had taken before. In contrast, when price information was presented, purchase intention among the six levels of products began to show single-peaked patterns. For those who took the easy test, after taking into consideration of the price influence, people showed the highest purchase intention for the golf ball that ranked second from the bottom, whereas in the hard test condition, people tended to choose the second-best golf ball in the product array (ranked fifth from the bottom). This provided support to hypothesis 1 that price information is a crucial prerequisite for the "matching" process to happen.

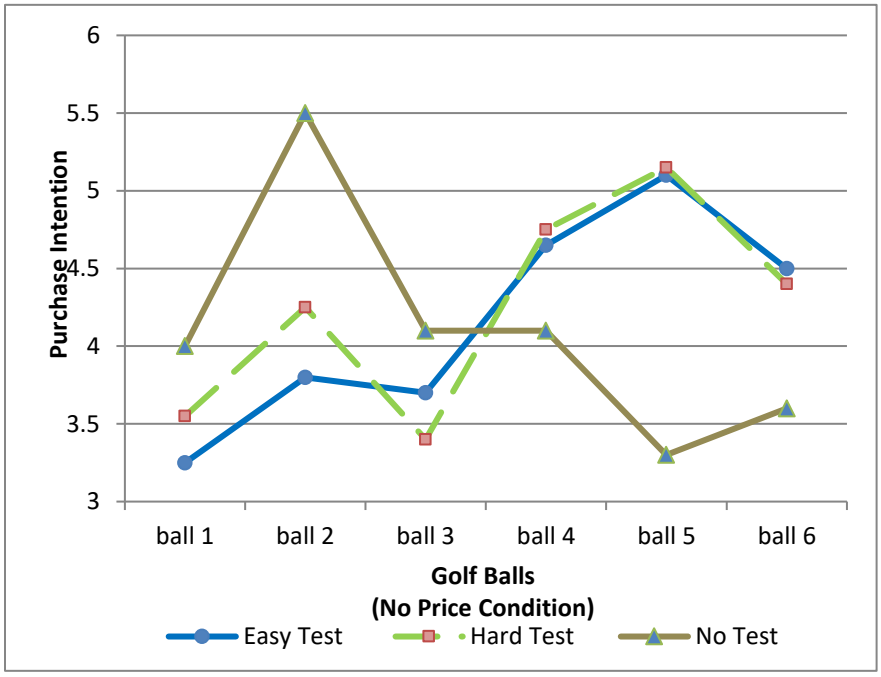
There was also a marginally significant interaction between the set of golf balls and mood condition ($F(1, 246) = 12.276$, $p = 0.088$), which indicates that people who were in a positive mood tended to have a higher purchase intention than those who were in a bad mood. However, personal trait variables of self-reward, self-punishment, and self-monitoring did not show any significant influence on people's purchase intention.

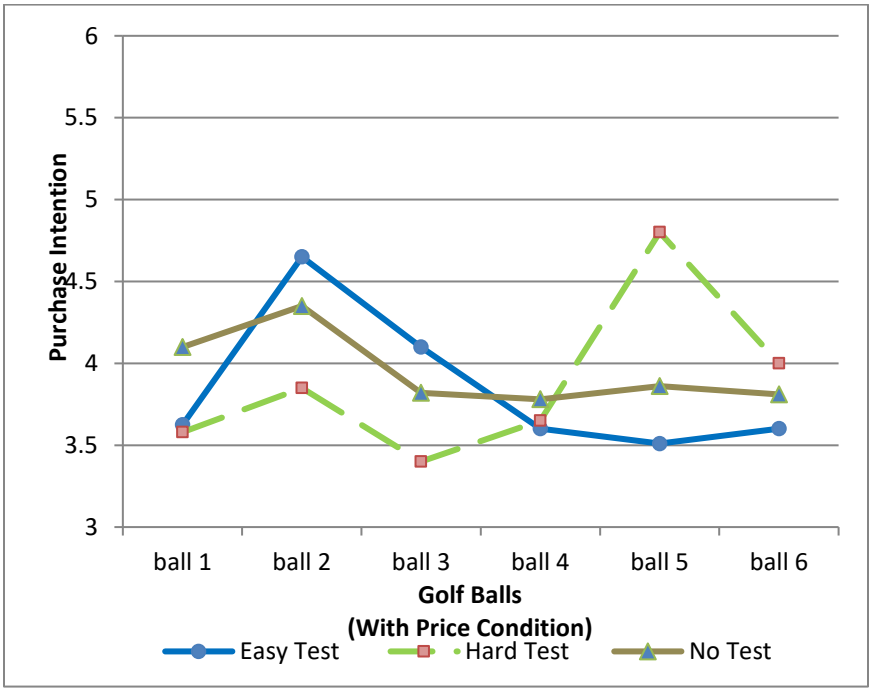
Discussion

Firstly, study 1 found support for hypothesis 1 that price information is the necessary condition for the "matching" product choice process to happen. As shown in figure 1, without price information, participants tend to choose the best product in the array, whereas when price information is provided, they began to show different preference patterns among the six products. Secondly, study 1 did not quite replicate Burson's (2007) findings with one noteworthy result that people in the easy test condition tend to pick the worse product (product ranked second from the bottom) compared to people in the hard test condition (fifth

in the product array). One possible explanation may lie in the differences in the settings and designs of the two studies. Specifically, concerns were raised about the manipulation of test conditions and brand effects of golf balls. Due to the format and questions of the quiz, it might be possible that the hard test was not hard enough to generate a significantly different actual test performance than what the easy test did, and the six golf balls in the product array had different brands, which may indicate a brand effect confound. Therefore, study 2 was conducted to remedy these problems and test hypotheses 2 and 3 at the same time.

FIGURE 1
PURCHASE INTENTION OF SIX GOLF BALLS ACROSS ALL PARTICIPANTS IN STUDY 1





Study 2

To replicate the results in study one and further investigate the effect of mood, a second study was conducted. The design and procedure of Experiment 2 were identical to that used in study 1 except for the following changes. First, the mood was manipulated by showing the participants either a happy or a sad movie clip (Bear Necessities for the happy mood and Sophie's Choice for the sad mood), both of which have been pretested and widely used in previous research and shown stable effect (e.g. Martin, et al. 1993). Secondly, to remedy the concerns raised in study one, a set of six levels of golf balls were selected with the same brand (Nike) to rule out the potential confounding effect of brand influence. Thirdly, some changes were made to the questions in the previous hard test conditions: the true/false format of the hard test was converted into multiple choices with four options, which was more consistent with the format of the easy test. And the expanded four options also ensured that the hard test condition was difficult enough to generate significant differences in terms of test performance. Thirdly, price information was provided in all the conditions, and finally, other personal factors such as experience, personal goals in playing golf, and confidence were also included.

Procedure

Study two was also a mixed design with two (test condition: easy or hard test) by two (mood: positive vs. negative) between-subject factors, and a set of six Nike golf balls with varying prices (ranging from $9.99 to $34.99) and required skill levels by the product (also indicated by handicap index). Forty-one undergraduate students were recruited for study two and were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

Results

A correlation analysis between price attractiveness evaluation and price information (prices for each product shown on the screen) was firstly conducted for each individual to detect outliers and rule out people who may read the scales wrong. Six subjects were excluded from the dataset who showed low correlation in their responses ($|r| < 0.15$), which resulted in a sample size of thirty-five participants in total.

Manipulation Check

Actual test performances for both of the test groups were recorded, and the average test score for people who took the easy test was 80%, whereas the average test score for the hard test condition was 17%. The manipulation check for the test condition (which asked people to rate the difficulty level of the test on a 1~9 scale) also showed that the manipulation worked well ($F(1, 33) = 103.047$, $p < 0.01$), that people who took the hard test believed the test was a lot of harder than those who were in the easy test condition. Mood was also measured by four items at the end of the survey, and the reliability of these four items was relatively high (Cronbach's Alpha=0.894). An ANOVA test on the summated scale of mood also showed that people who saw the happy movie clip had a more positive mood than those who watched the sad movie, and this difference was significant ($F(1, 33) = 5.557$, $p < 0.03$).

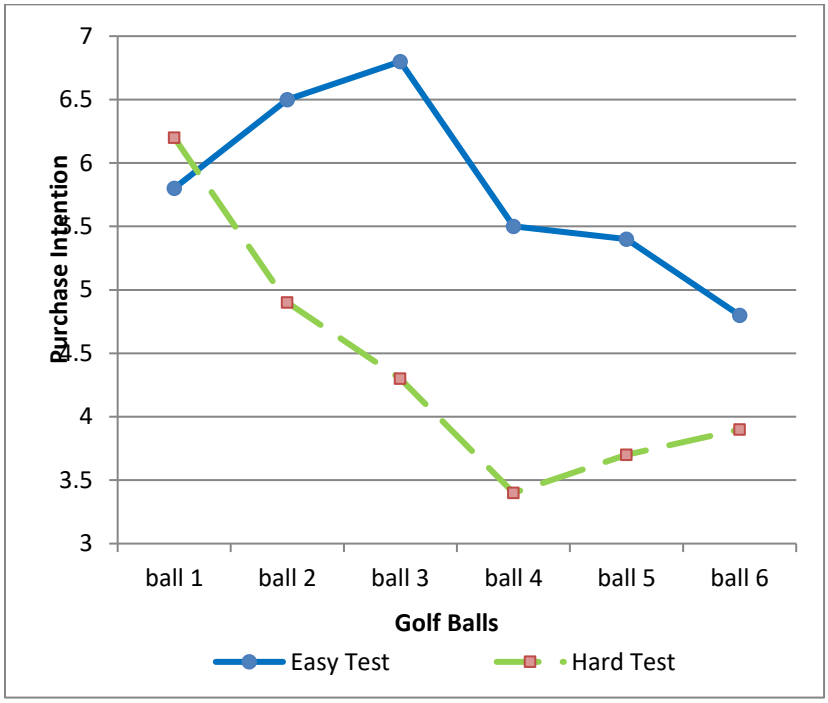
As predicted, there was a significant within-subject interaction between the set of golf balls and the test condition ($F(1, 31) = 4.617$, $p < 0.05$). As shown in figure 2, people who took the easy test had the highest purchase intention for the third golf ball in the product array, whereas people who were in the hard test condition tended to be more likely to purchase the first golf ball, which had the lowest quality and price in the set of golf balls.

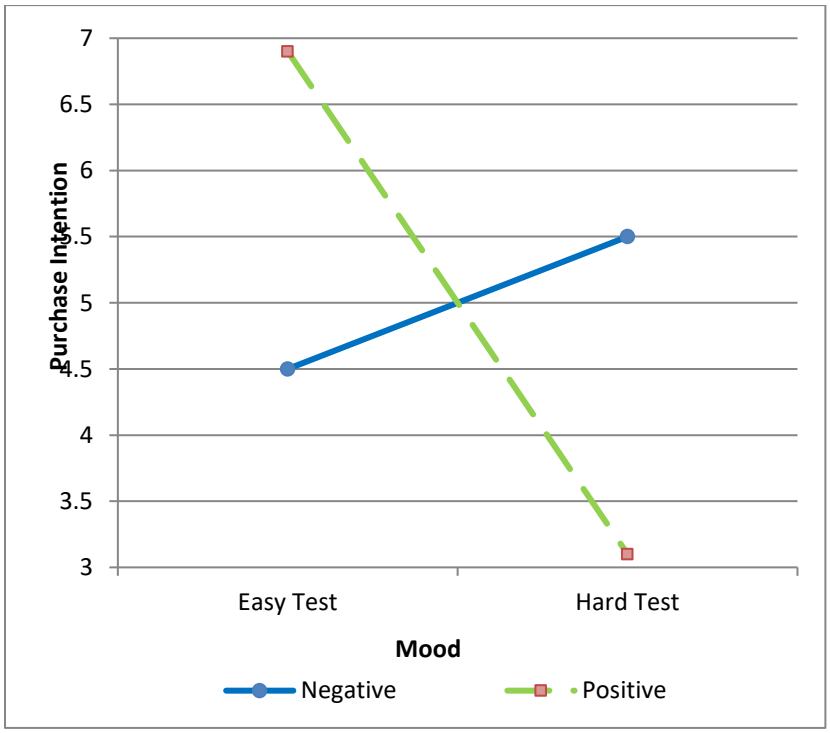
There was also a significant between-subject interaction between mood and test condition ($F(1, 31) = 4.308$, $p < 0.05$), that people in a positive mood, they tended to have a higher purchase likelihood for a product that match their skill levels and a very low purchase intention for golf balls that did not match their perceived skill level. In contrast, for people who had a negative mood, their purchase intention for all six golf balls did not differ very much. In other words, whether the required skill level of the product matches their self-perceived skill level or not, did not influence their product choice.

Finally, after including personal variables as covariates, such as people's personal experience in playing golf, confidence, and goals, personal experience showed a significant impact on their purchase intentions

(F (1, 28) =4.123, p< 0.1), that people who are more experienced in golf have higher purchase intentions than those who are less experienced. Goals and confidence did not influence their product choice.

FIGURE 2
PURCHASE INTENTION OF SIX GOLF BALLS ACROSS ALL PARTICIPANTS IN STUDY 2





Discussion

First, study 2 found support for hypothesis 3. People who were in a positive mood, they tend to show a much higher purchase intention for the product that they believe matches their self-skill levels than the product that was not in line with their skills. However, the differences in skill levels of the products did not affect people's preferences and purchase likelihood of these products when they were in a negative mood. Secondly, results in study 2 also replicated Burson's findings in her study (i.e. find support to both H2a and H2b), that easy tests tended to make people feel themselves better golfers and choose the product with higher skill levels, and hard task change people's perceptions of their skill levels to be lower and purchase the lower-skill-level golf ball accordingly. Finally, it also makes sense that people who are more experienced in playing golf are more likely to purchase golf balls.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper extends previous research in three ways. First, this paper gains a deeper understanding of consumers' single-peaked product preference (ideal-point formation or "matching" strategy) process by explicitly including and testing the effect of price as a cost dimension in product choice. Secondly, incorporating the emerging trend of mood study, this paper explains how mood affects consumers' decision-making process and works differently when people are in a positive versus negative mood. Thirdly, Burson (2007) suggested in her study that one direction for future study is to examine the moderating impact of actual skill level in people's matching process, and this paper fulfills that goal and shows that consumers' experience in using the product does influence their purchase intentions.

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