

Mixed emotions, meaning-making, and consumer well-being outcomes

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## **ABSTRACT**

Emotions can influence consumer decision-making and behavior in many ways, but complex emotional states like mixed emotions have not received the same attention as emotions such as happiness and sadness. Additionally, consumer meaning-making processes and their contributions to well-being may be an important area for marketers to understand as consumption with ultimate aims like personal growth and development remain common.

The current research explores how mixed emotions and meaning-making may influence both attitudes about a product and consumer well-being. In two studies, the role of mixed emotions and the presence of meaning were not found to influence product attitudes or consumer well-being following an advertisement. Limitations of these studies and potential future directions for research are discussed.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Emotions likely play a role in nearly all consumption activities (Alderson 1957; Holbrook 1986). Following Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) lead, consumer research has sought to understand the experiential side of consumption, including the emotions, experiences, and symbolism involved in the acquisition, use, and disposal of products and services. This experiential perspective emphasizes that consumer needs and desires commonly stretch beyond functional utility to include goals such as self-concept development and hedonic regulation. The symbolic and, at times, idiosyncratic benefits that products and services can provide become key components of the value proposition from this viewpoint, and consumers use offerings to construct identities and understand and develop their social relationships and broader world around them (Belk 1988; Richins 1994b).

Mixed emotions -- the coactivation of positivity and negativity -- occur during consumption experiences and can affect attitudes and purchasing behavior (Williams and Aaker 2002). Although experiencing mixed emotions can be uncomfortable, there is substantial variability in how discomfoting a mixed state feels (Fong 2006; Hong and Lee 2010). Furthermore, internal and situational variables can moderate the extent to which a mixed state leads to discomfort and negative attitude change. Recent research has even identified numerous instances in which mixed emotions lead to positive psychological and physical health outcomes, suggesting that consumers' relationship to mixed emotions is complex. Past efforts at understanding when mixed emotions lead to discomfort and when they do not has focused on dispositional traits as moderators, or on the consumer's current construal level (e.g., Hong and Lee 2010). Those studies lay the groundwork for exploring when mixed emotions can be

beneficial to both consumers and marketing managers, and the current dissertation seeks to build on that foundation.

This dissertation examines how mixed emotions affect consumption and consumer well-being as the feeling of meaning in life varies. That is, consumers can sense that their lives are more or less meaningful at a given moment, and this sense of meaning provides information about the environment and consumers' relationship to it. Consumer research has long recognized that meaning-making can be a primary goal of consumption (e.g., Belk 1988; McCracken 1986), and consumer decision-making can be altered by changes in a sense of meaningfulness (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Mandel and Heine 1999). By drawing on a meaning as information model, I argue that the feeling of meaning influences decision-making by impacting consumer mindsets -- a broad set of attentional priorities -- which, in turn, affects how consumers process and respond to mixed emotions. Specifically, when the feeling of meaning is salient and not threatened, consumers will use mixed emotions as information that allows them to make more adaptive decisions by creating new meanings and expanding the self-concept. I test this explanation by examining consumer attitudes toward novel brands that vary in incongruity from moderate to extreme *and by asking consumers to generate creative uses for a product.*

The remainder of this dissertation proceeds as follows. First, emotion is defined and contrasted with conceptually similar constructs such as affect and mood in order to clarify the boundaries of the current research domain. Next, the theoretical foundations of a mixed emotions state are outlined and previous work on mixed emotions that informs the current research is presented. Third, relevant approaches to meaning and meaning-making in the consumer research and psychology literatures are reviewed, and consequences of meaning-making on consumption are discussed. Fourth, the relationship between mixed emotions and meaning is explored and



hypotheses concerning their effects on consumption and well-being are developed. Last, experiments are outlined that will test the hypotheses and the expected results of these studies are discussed with emphases on implications for managers and consumer well-being.

## EMOTION

Attempts to integrate experiential value into traditional information-processing models of consumption created a gravity pulling dynamic, affectively-charged constructs such as emotions and moods closer to the center of research on consumer decision-making processes. These constructs, however, posed clear problems for early information-processing perspectives that relied on a rational consumer assumption (e.g., Howard and Sheth 1969; Bettman 1970). In such conceptualizations, relatively enduring constructs such as attitudes were featured because fleeting, unstable, and uncontrollable constructs such as emotions were difficult to incorporate (Gardner 1985; MacInnis and Jaworski 1985). Over time, though, consumer research has increasingly viewed emotions as powerful influences on consumer experiences and decision-making.

Affect, a broad umbrella category encompassing moods, emotions, and attitudes, describes constructs that are fundamentally experienced as some level of activation and valence. Distinguishing emotions from similar affective constructs such as moods has been difficult. Clore, Ortony, and Foss (1987) and Richins (1997) contend that an emotion is a “valenced affective reaction to perceptions” of a situation. However, this definition may not clearly discriminate emotions from moods or quick, affective responses variously described as intuitions (Haidt 2001) or simply affect (Baumeister et al. 2007)<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, this definition may obscure

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<sup>1</sup> Baumeister and colleagues (2011) define *affect* as both a category containing all constructs primarily experienced as specific instances of valence and arousal and as a specific type of construct within that broader category that motivates extremely quick responses to stimuli (e.g., the physiological pattern preceding the removal of a hand from a hot stove would qualify as an instance of their second definition of affect).

evidence that emotions can arise from nonperceptual sources such as memory (Mather and Sutherland 2011). To more readily distinguish emotions from similar constructs, the following definition is offered: Emotions are a category of relatively fleeting and intense instances of affect that reflect changes in arousal and valence often driven by a specifiable internal or external stimulus, and that influences information processing and behavior. In contrast, moods are more diffuse and involve low levels of arousal and a lower likelihood of being stimulus-specific compared to emotions. Early work on emotions placed them firmly within the realm of awareness and, thus, less susceptible to misattribution effects than a mood state, though recent evidence has not supported this argument (Cohen, Pham, and Andrade 2008; Gardner 1985; Clark and Isen 1982). Furthermore, early consumer researchers were hesitant to explore emotions since they were thought to potentially distract from messaging and, thus, difficult to utilize in persuasive appeals (Kroeber-Riel 1984a; Kroeber-Riel 1984b). Models of information-processing that included emotions often conceptualized them as the outputs of more deliberate cognitions such as attribute-level satisfactions (e.g., MacInnis and Jaworski 1985; Oliver 1993) rather than as antecedents to consumption decision-making. And although emotions were measured as distinct constructs, they were often collapsed into single measures of positive and negative affect when used as predictors, preventing them from being studied as distinct constructs with reliably different antecedents and consequences (Oliver 1993; Westbrook 1987; Westbrook and Oliver 1991).

The development of experiential consumer research programs provided an outlet for explorations of distinct emotions and their motivational roles in consumption (Belk 1984). Viewing consumption as both a physical and symbolic endeavor, the experiential perspective that they could play a key role in connecting objects, people, and ideas to the consumer self-

concept (Belk 1988). Support for this perspective on emotions initially came from research showing that consumers often describe consumption activities in emotional terms and report that emotions felt during consumption experiences are unexpected, intense, and closely tied to consumers' sense of self-growth (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk 1987). Additionally, the development of dual-processing models of attitude change provided a new avenue through which emotions could be integrated into rational processing models (Dholakia 2001; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983; Strack and Deutsch 2006). As a result, emotions have risen in prominence as both the overall scope of consumer research and the ability of information-processing models to account for affective variables have developed.

Advances in the measurement of emotions were also instrumental for integrating distinct emotional states into consumer behavior models. Early work on the role of emotions in consumer behavior borrowed measures from psychology, with Izard's (1977) Differential Emotions Scale (DES-II) and Plutchik's (1980; Plutchik and Kellerman 1974) Emotion Profile Index (EPI) commonly deployed. Both measures draw on evolutionary arguments that a basic and limited set of emotions are fundamental to experience, and that additional emotions develop from mixtures or blends of this initial set. Limitations of these measures, including low coverage of positive affective space; a lack of discrimination between emotions, arousing cognitive states, and evaluations; and the lack of a clear conceptual link tying them to consumption led to the development of the Consumption Emotions Set (CES: Richins 1997). The CES consists of 47 emotions that are meant to serve as a point of departure for researchers seeking to measure emotional states commonly experienced in consumption contexts. Notably, the CES does not argue for a fundamental subset of emotions from which others can be produced through blending or mixing. Instead, it contends that certain emotions are more likely in consumption settings than

others, and that researchers should use “theory or common sense” to determine the appropriate emotions to measure in a given study. Thus, the CES anticipates that future research may uncover links between emotion states not listed in the CES and consumption.

## **MIXED EMOTIONS**

A mixed emotions state -- defined as the coactivation of positivity and negativity experienced simultaneously as a discrete emotional state -- explicitly challenges key assumptions held by models of affective experience contemporary to the CES (e.g., Russell 1980; Watson and Tellegen 1985). These models describe affective space as bounded by fundamental arousal and valence axes (Russell and Barrett 1999). Happiness, for instance, is a discrete emotional state emerging from moderate arousal, positivity, and an absence of negativity. In contrast, sadness arises from the experience of moderate arousal, negativity, and the absence of positivity. Two questions become important in a discussion of the conceptual foundations for mixed emotions. First, do positivity and negativity overlap such that the midpoint of the valence dimension represents moderate positive activation and moderate negative activation, or does the midpoint of the valence dimension represent the absence of both positivity and negativity? Second, and relatedly, will changes in positivity necessitate similar but inverse changes in negativity? That is, are positivity and negativity necessarily inversely correlated?

According to Russell and Carroll (1999), pleasant emotions reflect some level of arousal, positivity, and the absence of negativity, while unpleasant emotions are produced by some level of arousal, negativity, and the absence of positivity. This conceptualization of the valence dimension assumes that when positivity is activated negativity is not, and vice versa. In contrast, the current paper draws on evidence derived from tests of the Evaluative Space Model (ESM:

Cacioppo and Berntson 1994) that indicate positivity and negativity can be coactivated and produce complex emotional states like mixed emotions (Grossman et al. 2016).

The ESM contends that valence is not a fundamental dimension of affect, but instead can be more accurately described as partially independent positive and negative substrates that are often tightly coupled but behave more independently when responding to complex affective experiences (Cacioppo, Berntson, and Petty 1997). A key hypothesis derived from the ESM is that the independence of positivity and negativity allows for four modes of activation: Reciprocal activation describes an inverse relationship between positivity and negativity, such that increases in positivity are matched by decreases in negativity or vice versa. Independent activation involves the activation of positivity or negativity without changes in the other. Coinhibition is the simultaneous decrease in both positivity and negativity, and the fourth mode of activation, coactivation, describes the simultaneous increase of both positivity and negativity. Notably, the ESM suggests that reciprocal activation is most common since it provides the best guide to behavior, and behavior is necessarily constrained to an approach-avoidance dimension.

Coactivation of positivity and negativity provides the foundation for the experience of mixed emotions, an emotional state distinct from univalent states such as happiness and sadness (Norris, Gollan, Berntson, Cacioppo 2010). Indeed, consumers may vacillate quickly between states of happiness and sadness, but they report feeling mixed emotions as a distinguishable state (Larsen and McGraw 2011). Additional studies supporting the ESM's conceptualization of mixed emotions have shown that reports of mixed emotions are not the result of demand characteristics (Larsen and McGraw 2011); are more likely in response to complex affective stimuli such as music with conflicting cues (e.g., Larsen and Stastny 2011) and meaningful life transitions (e.g., Ersner-Hershfield et al. 2008); and are more fleeting than happiness and sadness

individually (Cann and Larsen, unpublished data). Furthermore, mixed emotions are often associated with aversive arousal or felt discomfort that motivates consumers to leave a mixed state (e.g., Williams and Aaker 2002), yet they are also positively associated with an array of adaptive behaviors (e.g., Rees et al. 2013; Rothman and Melwani 2017) and long-term well-being and physical health outcomes (e.g., Adler and Hershfield 2012; Hershfield et al. 2013).

Importantly, mixed emotions are commonly reported in consumption contexts (e.g., Ramanathan and Williams 2007) and in response to advertisements (Hong and Lee 2010; Williams and Aaker 2002). For instance, consumers with a high tolerance for duality responded favorably to mixed emotional appeals for a camera or a moving company, and consumers in an abstract construal mindset felt less discomfort and, as a result, reported more positive attitudes and greater likelihood to purchase an offering in response to mixed emotional appeals compared to consumers in a concrete mindset (Hong and Lee 2010). Additionally, mixed emotions are reported when consumers consumption experiences involve conflicting goals such as purchasing an offering at an unexpectedly low price while also avoiding unplanned purchases (e.g., Mukhopadhyay and Johar 2007); consuming unhealthy but delicious food (e.g., Ramanathan and Williams 2011); or balancing the conflicting demands of wedding planning (e.g., Otnes, Lowery, and Shrum 1997).

Overall, theoretical and empirical evidence supports the notion that consumers experience mixed emotions, and that mixed emotions can have variable effects on consumption decision-making processes and choice behavior. Yet, the circumstances in which mixed emotions will lead to discomfort and the contexts in which a mixed state will lead to adaptive decision-making remain largely unexplored. Next, I discuss meaning and meaning-making from

both experiential and information-processing perspectives and discuss how the experience of meaning can affect consumer processing of mixed emotions.

## **MEANING AND MEANING-MAKING**

Meaning has roots in both the relationship between the consumer and entities within their environment and in the relationship between the consumer and their broader life course.

Semiotics is the study of signs, which can be unpacked as an attempt to understand how the interactions between an entity and its context affect how a consumer perceives and responds to the entity (Mick 1986). A sign, then, is “something that stands for something (its object), to somebody (its interpreter), in some respect (its context)” (Mick 1986, p. 198). Meaning, in this sense, is what emerges from the interpreter’s understanding of an entity in a given context. For instance, a young man walking down the street dressed in army fatigues may be interpreted as a member of ROTC on October 30, but on Halloween that same man may be viewed as a costumed reveler. Similarly, a product may be interpreted according to its utilitarian meaning or its contextualized relationship to a consumer’s past. Chevrolet, for instance, has emphasized how its brand links multiple generations of a family together to highlight how a vehicle can have meaning beyond its mobilization capability.

Fournier (1991) argues that meaning varies along dimensions of tangibility, the extent to which the meaning derived from an object is based on its objective versus subjective value, emotionality, and commonality -- the extent to which meaning is derived from its relationship with the individual versus the broader culture. Consumption driven by meaning-making involves acquisition, use, and disposal with the goal of influencing the meaning of the self, the meaning of the cultural world, or the relationship between the self and the cultural world. That is, consumption provides a means through which meaning can be transferred from the world to the

self, or through which the individual can highlight aspects of the self they want to be salient to the outside world. McCracken's (1986) model of meaning transfer identifies categories and principles (i.e., foundational assumptions) that help define the commonality dimension of meaning for consumers in a culture. Cultural meanings are relatively clear to those inside a given culture but relatively opaque to those outside of that culture, pointing to the culturally-driven nature of meanings that can provide a sense of belonging or isolation.

Second, consumers have a broad sense that their life and the world have some meaning in relation to each other. This diffuse sense of meaning is operationalized as meaning-in-life, with perceptions of purpose, significance, and coherence as primary dimensions (Steger 2012). Purpose and significance are motivational constructs that describe the extent to which one's life is driven by personally and culturally valued goals respectively. Coherence is the extent to which the relationships and connections in the world have a sense of fitting together in an organized fashion that does not manifest as a threat to the self-concept. To clarify, relationships in the environment may be objectively coherent, but if they simultaneously imply a barrier to highly self-relevant goals, they may not be perceived as coherent. Thus, meanings that emerge through contextualized interpretations of entities may contribute to a sense of meaning-in-life to the extent that they are perceived to interact coherently across entities in a given situation.

The Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM: (Heine, Proulx, Vohs 2006) contends that consumers are innate meaning-makers, and seek to re-establish a sense of meaning when they perceive it has been reduced. The MMM agrees with McCracken's notion of meaning as substantiated through cultural categories and principles while proposing that, additionally, consumers maintain a more general sense of how meaningful the world feels at any given time. That is, consumers seek to live in a meaningful world, and the perception of meaningfulness is



driven by the relative coherence of meanings in a given situation (Heintzelman and King 2014). Supporting this proposition, recent evidence suggests that minor changes in perceived coherence of stimuli significantly affect perceived sense of meaning. Heintzelman and colleagues (2013) showed consumers pictures of trees during different seasons (i.e., spring, fall, winter, summer). Some consumers viewed the pictures in a natural order while others viewed the pictures in a random order. Those who viewed the pictures in natural order reported greater meaning in life compared to those in the random condition. Additionally, when consumers were shown word triads that were conceptually connected by a fourth word, they reported greater perceived meaning in life than when the same set of words was presented in a random order.

The cultural categories and principles outlined by McCracken (1986), then, can be understood as efficient, adaptive mechanisms through which a society can maintain a sense of coherence in the world. Importantly, when the world is perceived as relatively less coherent, consumers may seek to re-establish a sense of meaning by acquiring culturally valuable goods such as a luxury car (e.g., Mandel and Heine 1999) or by acquiring brands viewed positively by a salient ingroup (Escalas and Bettman 2005). More broadly, advertising, fashion, and branding constitute routes through which cultural and social meanings are transferred into market offerings. Marketers, from this perspective, seek to imbue offerings with specific meanings that are desired or possessed and important to a target market segment (McCracken 1986). The meaning of an offering, however, can be relatively dynamic, and is affected by the nature of its marketing mix as well as the nature of the consumer and the social and cultural contexts in which the offering or marketing efforts are perceived. Thus, coherence appears to operate as a key perceptual cue for meaning in the world, and explains why cultural categories play such an important role in the development of a society.

Global meaning-in-life judgments and object-specific meanings, then, are linked through consumption. When a global sense of meaning is threatened, consumers may respond by consuming entities that re-affirm connections between the self and positively-viewed aspects of culture. That is, to recover a broad sense of meaning-in-life, consumers rely on contextualized meanings to guide consumption. For instance, threatening meaning by raising the salience of mortality leads to a preference for culturally-valued luxury goods (Mandel and Heine 1999). More recently, evidence has emerged that consumers consume social media in order to buffer against meaning threats (Toma and Hancock 2013). Tian and Belk (2015) argue that the types of meanings consumers seek during consumption depends on how they understand meaning-in-life more generally. To wit, some consumers may view the world as random and thus rarely view consumption as a meaning-driven endeavor. Many others, however, believe that world around them is either partially or entirely determined by an outside governing force, and they believe that by acquiring entities with specific meanings, they may court preferred outcomes that allow them to feel as though they have a purpose and are making significant contributions to the world (Tian and Belk 2015).

Emotions play a key role in meaning and meaning-making (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). William James (1890) called emotions the “guideposts” of meaning, and emotionality is one of the three fundamental dimensions of object-specific meaning (Belk 1980; Fournier 1991). Indeed, appraisal theories describe emotions as instances of valence and arousal borne of distinct sets of meanings such as self-relevance and novelty that are applied to specific stimuli in order to understand their implications and motivate behavior (Scherer et al. 2001). Consumers also use emotions to understand the symbolic meanings that drive identity enactment, and emotional information is a key source of information for consumer decision-making, particularly when

psychological distance is low (Chang and Pham 2012; Laverie, Kleine, and Kleine 2002; Schwarz and Clore 2003). Additionally, and contra long-held claims that the process is devoid of affective influence, fear plays a prominent role in responding to the loss of meaning experienced when thoughts of death are salient (Lambert et al. 2014).

## **MIXED EMOTIONS AND MEANING-MAKING**

Mixed emotions have been conceptually and empirically tied to meaning-making. The Dynamic Model of Affect (DMA: Reich et al. 2003) posits that when arousal is high, a consumer's affect system facilitates immediate behavioral action. In order to guide behavior in an approach- or avoidance-oriented manner, positivity and negativity will have a stronger negative correlation during high arousal situations, and the experience of mixed emotions will be less likely. Notably, though, the DMA also argues that a dispositional tendency to experience mixed emotions can dampen the negative consequences of stressful situations, suggesting that the ability to experience positivity and negativity simultaneously confers adaptive benefits during high arousal events (Davis et al. 2004). To the extent that consumers use relatively more emotional (versus cognitive) processing to respond to meaning threats, then, mixed emotions may support meaning recovery following a stressor (Park 2010).

Socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) provides a complementary argument regarding mixed emotions and meaning (Carstensen, Fung, and Charles 2003). SST describes two broad motives that operate throughout life and change in importance as consumers age: A knowledge acquisition motive and a motive to achieve emotionally meaningful goals. Younger consumers often value the knowledge acquisition motive more than the emotional meaning motive, however when a time horizon becomes prominent (as it may later in life), there is a shift from knowledge-acquisition toward emotional meaning-making (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles 1999).

Importantly though, the emotional meaning motive implies that consumers will be more engaged with their emotions, leading to a preference for emotional complexity and a greater likelihood of experiencing mixed emotions (Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, and Nesselroade 2000). That is, a stronger desire for meaning leads to a greater acceptance of emotional complexity and less aversion to a mixed emotional state (Carstensen, Turan, Scheibe, Ram, Ersner-Hershfield, Samanez-Larkin, Brooks, and Nesselroade 2011).

The coactivation model of coping posits that the co-occurrence of positivity and negativity can facilitate adaptation to unpleasant experiences by allowing a consumer to hold negative information in working memory for a longer duration compared to instances when only negativity is activated. This can increase cognitive engagement with the source of negativity and facilitate meaning-making, personal growth, and resolution of the source of negativity (Larsen, Hemenover, Norris, and Cacioppo 2003). Thus, the coactivation model predicts that mixed emotions are a driver of meaning-making following a negative life event or perceived threat to the self. A key proposition of the coactivation model is that adaptive responding to negativity can be facilitated by an optimal proportion of positivity to negativity, and the optimal proportion will vary based on the intensity of the negativity experienced. Notably, the coactivation model suggests that experience of a mixed state alone may not be enough to facilitate adaptive meaning-making (Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, and Fahey 1998; Larsen et al. 2003). Consumers must also have a goal to create meaning and achieve self-growth. To the extent that consumption can be motivated by meaning-making, then, the model argues that mixed emotions can facilitate goals activated by that motive.

Empirical evidence also converges on situations high in perceived meaning as consumption scenarios in which mixed emotions are likely to confer benefits. Adler and

Hershfield (2012) present evidence that mixed emotions facilitate the process of gaining insight into a complex, personally significant life event. The authors sampled adults who sought help in an outpatient clinic for issues ranging in severity from psychopathology to divorce and parenthood. Journal entries documenting experiences, thoughts, and feelings in therapy were coded for reports of happiness, sadness, and the co-occurrence of happiness and sadness. At the end of therapy, participants completed a survey indicating their psychological well-being using the Systematic Therapy Inventory of Change (STIC), which taps elements of meaning-making such as self-misunderstanding, self-acceptance, life functioning, and resilience (Pinsof et al. 2009). A hierarchical linear model controlling for the independent influences of happiness and sadness showed that changes in mixed emotions temporally preceded and predicted improvements in well-being (Adler and Hershfield 2012).

Mixed emotions are also more likely to be experienced when consumers attempt to synthesize and understand the meaningfulness of a situation. Ersner-Hershfield, Mikels, Sullivan, and Carstensen (2008) asked consumers to mentally simulate the experience of being in a place of personal significance. After describing the emotions they experienced during this exercise, consumers were asked what they would feel if they were at the same place two months in the future and, finally, half of the consumers were asked to describe how they would feel if they were visiting that same place for the final time. A control group mentally simulated being in the same location in four months' time. Mixed emotions were present at low levels at each point of measurement, however the group that imagined visiting a meaningful location for the final time reported far more mixed emotions than the control group. The authors note that the experimental group reported a decrease in happiness and an increase in sadness during the final mental simulation, however both mean happiness and sadness ratings were above the scale midpoint.

Furthermore, within-subject measures of mixed emotions using the MIN score technique (e.g., Larsen, Hershfield, Stastny, and Hester 2017; Schimmack 2001) found that individual participants reported more mixed emotions during the experimental condition compared to the control condition.

In a second study, the authors explored the ecological validity of their findings. On college graduation day, students were asked to fill out an emotion survey with a prompt that emphasized or did not emphasize that the students were experiencing a meaningful ending as they moved from college to a new phase of life. Students reported mixed emotions in both conditions, but those that were reminded they were experiencing a meaningful ending reported significantly more mixed emotions than the control group (Ersner-Hershfield et al. 2008).

Mixed emotions are also more likely to be experienced when consumers are seeking meaningful entertainment options compared to options that provide primarily hedonic benefits. Although consumers often value entertainment that elicits pleasant emotions, they also choose to consume entertainment that elicits unpleasant emotions like sadness and meaning-related feelings such as contemplativeness, compassion, and inspiration. Oliver and Raney (2011) measured hedonic and eudaimonic motivations, with the latter reflecting entertainment choices involving a search for meaning and understanding of the connection between the self and the broader world. Both hedonic and eudaimonic motivations were positively related to the presence of meaning in life, but only eudaimonic motivation was positively related to the search for meaning in life and reflectiveness (Oliver and Raney 2011). The authors also asked consumers to complete measures of eudaimonic and hedonic motives for viewing entertainment then report the extent to which they experienced a variety of emotions the first time they viewed a favorite film. Spotlight analyses (Aiken and West 1991) indicated that positive affect predicted meaningful

emotions only when negative affect was also present. Additionally, an index of the co-occurrence of positivity and negativity was positively associated with the experience of meaningful emotions. Bartsch, Kalch, and Oliver (2014) found that adding moving music to a film clip led to an increase in meaningful emotions, and the experience of meaningful emotions was partially driven by mixed emotions. Thus, there appears to be a complex relationship between mixed emotions and consumers' meaning-making projects. Mixed emotions play a beneficial role for consumers actively seeking to improve psychological health (e.g., Adler and Hirshfield 2012) and are often experienced during meaningful entertainment activities (e.g., Bartsch et al. 2014; Oliver and Raney 2011). Yet, consumers often report discomfort when exposed to mixed emotional stimuli and struggle to accurately remember mixed states compared to univalent states such as happiness or sadness (e.g., Aaker, Drolet, and Griffin 2008).

Conceptualizing consumers' experience of meaning as two partially independent processes may offer clarity as to the role of mixed emotions in meaning-making. Steger and colleagues (2006) draw on Frankl's (1963) seminal *Man's Search for Meaning* to argue that meaning can be understood as monitoring and searching processes. That is, *presence of meaning* (PM) describes a perception that one's life makes sense and is coherent, while *search for meaning* (SM) concerns the consumer's active -- through both more automatic and more deliberate processing -- investigation of their world to uncover new meaning or reaffirm familiar relationships. This perspective comports with the meaning-making approach to consumption developed in the consumer research literature (e.g., McCracken 1986; Mick 1986). Viewing consumption as a process of meaning-making through the acquisition, use, and disposal of market offerings imbued with symbolism derived from culture has provided a fertile ground for knowledge development (Arnould and Thompson 2005). It also suggests meaning-making, as a

dynamic, ongoing, and goal-oriented set of processes, iteratively re-shapes itself as symbols are perceived and interpreted. Presence of meaning, then, can be seen as a cognitive factor that influences meaning-making goals in real time by signaling whether relationships within and between the self-concept and environment are relatively coherent. As such, presence of meaning functions as something like a gauge of progress toward the life themes identified by Mick and Buhl (1992) that consumers use, along with life projects, to interpret and interact with symbolic advertising.

Meanwhile, consumers' continual search for meaning varies independently of the presence of meaning. Indeed, some consumers will report less searching for meaning when presence of meaning is high while others will continue searching for meaning even when they already feel its presence. This dual process framework explains why consumers may appear to be in a constant state of meaning construction: Even when the presence of meaning is high, consumers may continue to search for meaning in the relationships between aspects of their self-concept, in relationships among objects in the external world, and in relationships between the self and the external world (Belk 1988; Heine et al. 2006). Arnould and Price's (1993) exploration of extraordinary consumption experiences during a river rafting trip point to a continual search for meaning that varies in goal content. During the trip, rafters found new relationships between the self and the environment while negotiating challenges to the known capabilities of the self. Following the trip, with the knowledge that they had survived and possessed a new level of mastery over their environment, searching for meaning involved the reflective incorporation of new meanings into the self-concept and a quest to understand how these new meanings affected relationships between the self and the outside world in the future. Although search for meaning can reflect different goal orientations, it remains fairly stable



dispositionally over time (Steger et al. 2006). Increasingly, search for meaning through consumption has developed along a digital dimension. Social aspects of the Internet provide links to presence of meaning through self-affirmation (e.g., Toma and Hancock 2013) and social interactions (e.g., Larsen 2008; Wilson, Gosling, and Graham 2012). Furthermore, the digitization of the self has resulted in meaning-making through more extensive and elaborative co-creation processes (Belk 2013). For instance, consumers may seek to inoculate against potential threats to meaning by posting comments that elicit affirmations from others, and they develop group-based attitudes and preferences by creating and joining like-minded communities around brands or interests that would otherwise be inaccessible (boyd 2010; Drenton 2012; Muniz and O'Guinn 2011).

### **MIXED EMOTIONS, PRESENCE, AND SEARCH FOR MEANING**

Emotions can be motivational, so to understand their role in consumer meaning-making it is necessary to explore how presence of meaning -- a gauge of meaningfulness often measured by perceived coherence -- and search for meaning, which involves continued active perceptual scanning for coherence in the world and the consumer's relationship to it, interact with mixed emotions to differentially affect well-being. Extensive empirical research converges on the following conclusions about PM, SM, and well-being. First, PM is positively related to well-being variables such as purpose in life, autonomy, relatedness, personal growth, self-acceptance, curiosity, warmth, positive emotionality, agreeableness, conscientiousness, competence, self-discipline, social support, and life satisfaction. Additionally, it is negatively related to viewing the past through a negative lens, neuroticism, impulsiveness, self-consciousness, depression, negative emotionality, and anxiety (Park, Park and Peterson 2010; Shin and Steger 2016; Steger et al. 2008; Steger et al. 2009; Steger et al. 2011). Conversely, SM is positively related to

rumination, viewing the past through a negative lens, fatalistic thoughts, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness, investigative and artistic interests, anxiety, and depression. It is negatively related to relatedness, self-acceptance, positive affect, and life satisfaction. Generally, then, PM is associated with positive consumer well-being outcomes and SM is associated with negative well-being outcomes. Yet, these relationships are more complex than a cursory examination suggests. For instance, both presence and search for meaning are positively associated with healthy eating behaviors and physical activity in adolescents, and the interaction of PM and SM explains additional variance in male healthy eating behavior and female tendency to engage in physical activities (Brassai, Piko, and Steger 2015).

PM and SM are often moderately negatively correlated with each other (Park, Park and Peterson 2010; Steger et al. 2008), however, intriguingly, when PM is high, both PM and SM are often positively related to well-being outcomes. For instance, consumers enrolled in a smoking cessation program generally reported a negative association between SM and perceived health and anxiety. However, when PM was high, consumers that were high in SM reported better perceived health than those low in SM, and they reported an indistinguishable amount of anxiety compared to those low in SM (Steger et al. 2009). Similarly, when PM is moderate or low, SM is negatively related to judgments of life satisfaction (Park, Park, and Peterson 2010). Yet, when PM is high, the relationship between SM and life satisfaction is positive. Steger, Oishi, and Kesebir (2011) build on this work and contend that SM moderates the relationship between PM and life satisfaction. In three studies, PM and SM were regressed on life satisfaction, and in each case the relationship between PM and life satisfaction was significantly stronger when SM was high. Additional evidence comes from college students that reported how supportive their environment was for their personal search for meaning. Those that felt supported felt greater PM

when SM was high than when SM was low (Shin and Steger 2016). That is, when students felt safe to pursue a search for meaning in their life, that search was associated with greater presence of meaning. Yet when support was low, search for meaning was more likely to have negative effects. Cohen and Cairns (2012) find evidence that when PM is high, consumers report similar levels of happiness regardless of whether SM is low and high. Furthermore, self-actualization appears to have a similar role to PM: when self-actualization is high, happiness ratings are similar at high and low levels of SM. Finally, DeZutter et al. (2016) clustered chronic pain patients into groups distinguished by relative PM and SM. Across three time points, the high presence/high search group and the high presence/low search group reported similar levels of pain intensity and life satisfaction, and both groups reported greater health outcomes than groups with low PM. Additionally, the high presence/high search group reported fewer depressive symptoms than the low presence groups but more depressive symptoms than the high presence/low search group.

Generally, consumer research has focused on meaning-making as an ongoing, disequilibrating activity: Interacting with environmental symbols is viewed as a necessity for navigating a complex world, and consumption behaviors merely adopt a set of processes that allow consumers to establish relationships between market offerings and the self-concept (Belk 1988). Thus, consumer research often explores how consumers define the self through consumption but do not link those processes to a global sense of meaning in life. For instance, Escalas and Bettman (2005) have produced a series of studies showing how consumers strengthen self-brand connections to positively-viewed and aspirational brands following a meaning threat. Additionally, preferences for luxury goods increase following a threat to meaning, but religiosity can buffer this threat such that highly religious consumers feel less

motivation to conspicuously consumer luxury goods compared to those less religious (Stillman et al. 2012). Consumption habits as a function of financial wealth also influence meaning and well-being, with more savings acting as a buffer against mortality salience and financial insecurity leading to lower reports of meaning in life (Abeyta et al. 2017; Zaleskiewicz et al. 2013).

Consumption rituals can also act as pathways to meaning and the development of the self-concept in that consumption can be motivated by a lack of self-concept completion or clarity. Belk (2009) discusses how collecting can become a passion and a purpose, such as searching for specific goods becomes a meaningful self-development project. McCarthy (1984) and Belk (1987) argue that the self-concept is often extended to possessions as a form of self-validation. That is, the objects consumers possess provide stable representations of aspects of the self-concept that might otherwise drift into uncertainty. Indeed, the possessions that become most important as consumers age are those that provide a sense of meaning and coherence to life. Specifically, possessions that highlight social connections, established relationships, and past events that shaped one's life become greater in importance as age increases (Rochberg-Halton 1984). Belk (1992) describes how behaviors centered around objects that give clarity to the self-concept involve a greater level of care than objects less representative of the self.

Belk (1988; 2013) contends that consumption processes serve meaning-making functions by providing opportunities for having, being, and doing. For instance, owning a car can provide self-clarity as an adolescent transitions to a life of independence, and co-creation of products and advertisements can provide purpose to life by engendering a sense of having contributed to the creation of a market offering (Bloch 1982; Hoyer et al. 2010). Belk (1992) draws on Fromm (1976) to argue that experiential consumption confers meaning to the consumer. When experiences and time are viewed as possessions, tying experiential consumption to self-

development highlights how experiences define the self and give it coherence and purpose in life. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) describe a consumption scenario in which the proprietor of an elephant museum and gift shop reports that having, being, and doing all affect the meaningfulness of his life. Owning the gift shop provides him with meaning in life because it is a unique venture that only he (and his unique elephant replica collection) could have made successful, and working in the shop daily provides him with social interactions and the opportunity to distinguish the elephant replicas that are meaningful (i.e., his museum collection) from those that are not (i.e., elephant-centric items in the gift shop). The ritualistic nature of shop ownership also contributes to a sense of meaning that allows the elderly owner to speak freely about his impending death in a manner that would be unlikely were his life low in meaning (Belk et al. 1989; Heine, Proulx, and Vohs 2006). Overall, the presence and search for meaning appear to have independent and interactive effects on well-being, and consumption provides a space in which presence of meaning can be detected and search for meaning can occur.

Although mixed emotions can occur in many consumption contexts (e.g., choices between hedonic and utilitarian products (Ramanathan and Williams 2010)), they are commonly reported when consumers are in situations in which presence of meaning is likely to be high. For instance, consumers reported greater mixed emotions following a comedic film set in a Nazi prison camp than before the film (Larsen et al. 2001). Students also reported more mixed emotions on the final day of college compared to a typical day, and consumers felt more mixed emotions when they imagined visiting a meaningful place for the final time than if they imagined they would have a chance to go back (Hershfield et al. 2008). Additionally, college seniors reported greater mixed emotions following a video that highlighted the meaningfulness of their college experience than they reported before the video, and post-video mixed emotions were

positively associated with eudaimonic well-being outcomes including the experience of meaning (Berrios et al. 2017). Finally, and intriguingly, consumers instructed to reflect on important life goals and potential conflicts between those goals experienced mixed emotions, and that mixed state predicted a greater likelihood to engage in meaningful activities (Berrios et al. 2017). The experience of mixed emotions was positively associated with search for meaning, which then mediated the positive relationship between mixed emotions and meaning-making motives for engaging in activities.

Mixed emotions and consumers' search for meaning can both lead to negative outcomes, however they may interact to produce positive outcomes under certain conditions. Specifically, when presence of meaning is high, mixed emotions may motivate an adaptive search for novel meaning in the environment, leading to preferences for market offerings that emphasize new meanings rather than reinforcing existing meanings. To the extent that this search uncovers new meanings that are incorporated into the self-concept, consumers may experience positive health and well-being outcomes. Indeed, Larsen and colleagues (2003) suggest that the coactivation of positivity and negativity can lead to positive well-being outcomes when consumers are also motivated to find new meanings in their environment. However, when meaning is perceived as low, mixed emotions may increase the salience of that lack of meaning by highlighting a lack of coherence in relationships between aspects of the self, aspects of the external environment, or aspects of the self and the environment. As a result, consumers may be motivated to consume offerings that reinforce key aspects of their identity rather than those that provide novel meanings. Consumers will seek coherence, and thus mixed emotions will be accompanied by discomfort that will negatively affect consumer well-being.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES**

Clearly, mixed emotions can affect consumer choice and well-being, however the circumstances in which mixed emotions are perceived as beneficial remain open to inquiry. The current dissertation draws on work in the consumer research and psychology literatures that suggests consumers are near-constant meaning-makers and are sensitive to the relative coherence of the environment around them and their relation to it. Additionally, it draws on a feelings-as-information approach to contend that mixed emotions convey different information depending on the relative level of meaning a person feels at any given time. That is, mixed emotions are often uncomfortable because it is relatively rare for consumers to engage in active, deliberate meaning-making when presence of meaning is already high. Yet, previous research indicates that consumers may continue to search for meaning even when they already feel its presence, moments when meaning-making is likely to be a primary goal are consistently those in which mixed emotions are more likely to be reported (e.g., Ersner-Hershfield et al. 2008). Although past work has made a strong case that meaningful moments in life such as transitions or moments when multiple valued goals conflict are prime candidates for strong mixed emotional experiences, the current dissertation seeks to make the more nuanced argument that these moments represent, collectively, those in which consumers are likely to deliberate on the meaningfulness of their life. That is, these moments are not merely meaningful, but the “feeling of meaning” (Heintzelman and King 2014) is more likely to affect cognitive processing. To wit, it is not the meaningfulness of a situation but the extent to which the presence of that meaningfulness is felt and influences cognition and decision-making that will be the larger determinant of whether mixed emotions are relatively more or less discomfiting to consumers. More specifically, this dissertation makes predictions about the differing roles of mixed emotions when presence of meaning is high, compared to low or stable and moderate. That is, when

presence of meaning is high, mixed emotions facilitate the construction of new meanings and incorporation of novel meanings into the self-concept. Thus, when presence of meaning is high, mixed emotional appeals are likely to lead to positive attitude change about a target offering.

***H1a:** When PM is high, mixed emotions will mediate the positive association between PM and product attitudes.*

Furthermore, attempts to construct new meanings will enhance well-being by encouraging personal growth and the development of conceptual coherence. When presence of meaning is less salient or threatened, however, mixed emotions become a signal of incoherence and are thus uncomfortable and avoided by consumers. In such cases, mixed emotions, relative to a neutral state, are likely lead to discomfort and negative attitude change about a target offering as well as negatively affecting well-being and leading consumers to seek to reinstate structure in the world and their relationship to it.

***H1b:** When PM is low, consumers viewing mixed emotional appeals will report that felt discomfort mediates the negative association between PM and product attitudes.*

Prior research also suggests that while mixed emotions are relatively rare, consumers are quite responsive to their presence. When mixed emotions are felt in response to receiving an exam score, for instance, students downregulated the mixed experience and did not remember it as accurately as they remembered univalent emotions. And when students felt mixed emotions following a bittersweet video about the school from which they were preparing to graduate, the



mixed state facilitated a search for meaning that contributed to enhanced well-being outcomes (Berrios et al. 2017). Thus, when presence of meaning is high, mixed emotions are likely to be facilitate the construction of new meaning and perceptions of personal growth, both of which are components of eudaimonic consumer well-being.

*H2a: When PM is high, the interaction of mixed emotions and search for meaning will be positively associated with meaning-making and personal growth.*

Yet when presence of meaning is less salient, mixed emotions are likely to contribute to a feeling of discomfort and a search for coherence in the environment.

*H2b: When PM is low, the interaction of mixed emotions and search for meaning will be negatively associated with meaning-making and personal growth.*

*H2c: When PM is low, discomfort is likely to partially mediate the relationship between the interaction of mixed emotions and search for meaning and well-being outcomes.*

## **METHODS**

### **Procedure**

Participants were drawn from a pool of mTurk workers limited to the United States and compensated for participation monetarily. Participants were then randomly assigned to the mixed emotions or emotionally positive messaging condition and to a high or low presence of meaning condition. Participants in the meaning enhancement condition will complete a counterfactual

scenario that has been shown to increase the feeling of meaningfulness in life (Kray et al. 2010). They were then told that they would review a print advertisement on the computer. They reported the emotions they experienced after reviewing the advertisement and their attitude about and likelihood of purchasing the product advertised. After reviewing the product, participants completed Ryff's (1989) psychological functioning scales that measure aspects of eudaimonic well-being such as meaning-making and personal growth.

## **Results**

I calculated a MIN score, which reflects the lowest value between reported positivity and negativity. If a participant reports either no positivity or no negativity, the MIN score equals zero. Twenty-eight participants (66%) reported the presence of both some level of positivity and some level of negativity, resulting in a MIN score of one or more, which is an index of mixed emotions. However, the difference in likelihood of experiencing mixed emotions between participants that watched the mixed emotional ad ( $M = 1.70$ ) and those that viewed the positive ad ( $M = 1.36$ ) was not significant ( $t(46) = -0.80, p = 0.43$ ).

Next, a 2 (Emotional appeal) x 2 (Presence of Meaning) ANOVA was run on attitude about the product with a planned contrast on the presence of meaning variable. There was not a significant relationship between presence of meaning and attitude about the product ( $F(1, 44) = 0.46, p = 0.50$ ) or between emotional appeal and attitude about the product ( $F(1, 44) = 0.33, p = 0.57$ ).

To test Hypothesis 2A, psychological well-being scores were calculated for each participant using responses to Ryff's (1989) six-dimensional scale. Participants were split into high and low presence of meaning samples then well-being was regressed on Search For Meaning and reported mixed emotions for the sample that received the high presence of meaning

manipulation ( $N = 21$ ). Neither Search for Meaning or mixed emotions significantly affected psychological well-being ( $F(3, 20) = 0.67, p = 0.58, R^2 = 0.11$ ).

To test hypothesis 2b, The low Presence of Meaning group was analyzed to determine whether the interaction of Search for Meaning and mixed emotions negatively affected well-being. The results of the regression analysis showed there was no effect present, ( $F(3, 23) = 1.16, p = 0.35, R^2 = 0.13$ ).

According to hypothesis 2C, felt discomfort mediates the relationship between the interaction of Search for Meaning and mixed emotions, however since no relationship was found in the current study, this hypothesis could not be examined.

## **Discussion**

Complex emotional states such as mixed emotions may interact with variables such as meaning-making to influence consumer attitudes about a product and about their own well-being. The current study sought to manipulate the presence of meaning by asking consumers to construct a counterfactual scenario about an important friend, and it sought to manipulate mixed emotions by varying the appeal in an advertisement. The mixed emotional appeal, however, did not lead to a significant difference in the experience of mixed emotions and this research leaves many questions for future work to address.

Primary among these questions is how to more intensely stimulate the experience of mixed emotions through advertising. Consumer attention is a limited resource and, in many environments, processing a mixed emotional state may require more attentional resources than a consumer is willing to give. Although the current work sought to examine whether a meaningful environment provides a more fertile ground for processing complex emotions, the lack of a relationship between Presence of Meaning and mixed emotions in high Presence of Meaning

environments suggests that new stimuli or methods may be necessary to further explore this relationship. Although this research sought to provide a stringent test of mixed emotions' influence on consumption, the product, a mirror, may not have been evocative enough to examine the role of mixed emotions.

An additional limitation of the current work concerns the measurement of consumer well-being. Well-being models such as Ryff's six-dimensional approach are grounded in long-term outcomes, whereas consumers may utilize heuristics such as financial state or social comparisons to assess momentary well-being and make decisions. One intriguing notion is that consumers may use the experience of complex emotional states such as mixed emotions as an index of well-being, such that the discomfort that can be experienced alongside mixed emotions influences perceptions of well-being and stimulates behaviors aimed at improving or restoring a sense of well-being.

For marketing managers, this study raises questions about the structure of consumer environments but, unfortunately, is not able to provide answers to those questions. Understanding the intersection of emotion, meaning-making, and information-processing has important implications for managers as they encourage consumers to make purchase decisions that result in long-term well-being and positive brand and product associations. If a consumer attributes positive well-being outcomes to a product, particularly long-term well-being outcomes, they may build powerful and lasting positive associations with the brand and product. And while this research focused on how the environment in which mixed emotions are experienced could lead to engagement with a mixed state, there may also be consumption scenarios in which resource scarcity may lead to a desire to disengage from complex emotions. In such instances, managers may wish to offer products and services that produce environments more conducive to

complex emotional processing. Overall, managers that understand that a value exchange may produce differing emotional and well-being outcomes in the short- versus long-term may want to produce a clear map of their customers' emotional journey to determine whether resolving emotions experienced during an appeal or purchase decision affects future decision-making and cognitive associations.

Finally, managers concerned with experiential consumption may be particularly interested in mixed emotions since experiences can involve the resolution of complex emotional states. For instance, theme parks may utilize appeals focused on the mixture of fear and joy felt at the moment a roller coaster begins to drop down a hill. Presenting mixed emotional experiences in a manner that suggests a positive outcome may drive consumption of those experiences. Similarly, the current study suggested that when consumers felt safety through elevated presence of meaning, they would be more willing to engage with a mixed emotional experience.

Mixed emotions are fleeting, but potentially powerful motivators of information processing and behavior. In the same way that humor or disgust can result from the relief of tension between the socially taboo and socially acceptable interpretations of an event, resolving the experience of mixed emotions may produce positive associations to salient brands or products. However, complex emotional states can also produce discomfort, so understanding not only how to elicit mixed emotions but also the environment in which they will positively affect attitudes and lead to changes in buying behavior is crucial for managers that seek to evoke emotions through advertisements or manage the outcomes of complex emotional states created by their products or services. And, of course, managers and researchers that wish to improve

consumer well-being must understand how complex emotions and consumer responses to them affect short- and long-term well-being outcomes.

## CHAPTER 2

### INTRODUCTION

Consumer researchers have long struggled to measure and understand the influence of emotions. The nature and extent of the consumer's attempts to understand and regulate their own emotions, however, has only organized into a field of inquiry over the past twenty years. As consumption experiences generate emotions, consumers consciously and nonconsciously make decisions about whether to seek to increase or decrease the experience of their emotions and what strategies to deploy toward those ends (Shafir et al. 2016). Notably, consumption experiences often create complex emotional environments that elicit both pleasant and unpleasant emotions (Arnould and Price 1993; Mukhopadhyay and Johar 2007; Williams and Aaker 2002). Both individual differences (Berrios, Totterdell, and Kellet 2017, Williams and Aaker 2002) and situational variables (e.g., Hong and Lee 2010) affect how consumers respond to the simultaneous experience of pleasant and unpleasant emotions, often described as a mixed emotional state or mixed emotions. One key variable that may affect how consumers process mixed emotions is the presence of felt meaning in a situation. Mixed emotions can be uncomfortable to experience, however the presence of meaning in a situation may allow consumers to adaptively engage with and use a mixed emotional state to guide decision-making and behavior (Heintzelman and King 2014). Yet, a mechanistic explanation of how perceiving meaning in a situation leads to differential processing of mixed emotions remains unclear. In this essay, I draw on recent models of emotion regulation choice to argue that felt meaning influences how consumers choose to regulate a mixed emotional state. I propose that when meaningfulness is high, consumers choose to engage with mixed emotions despite the cognitive costs involved in engaging (compared to disengagement strategies) because when meaning is high, consumers are

more likely to be in a reflective mindset rather than one that demands action. In such a state, mixed emotions can be appraised for their informational value rather than their behavioral guidance, increasing the likelihood that they will be regulated using engagement-based emotion regulation strategies. The role of emotion regulation choice in mixed emotional processing, and the downstream consequences it has on decision-making, will be tested. Implications for future research and managerial decisions are discussed.

### **PRESENCE OF MEANING AND COGNITIVE PROCESSING**

Meaning and meaning-making can be strong drivers of consumption (Belk 1988; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; McCracken 1986). According to Belk (1988), meaning is created by establishing connections between the self and the environment. That is, consumers embark on life projects aimed at establishing, growing, and navigating the symbolic relationships between the self and the world, different aspects of a broad self-concept, and different aspects of the dynamic environment (Heine, Proulx, and Vohs 2006; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Meaning is dynamic and often drawn from culture since cultural categories and principles inform the purpose, significance, and coherence of the symbolic entities encountered in life (Heintzelman and King 2014; McCracken 1986). Notably, a cultural foundation for meaning explains how similar entities can vary considerably in terms of what they communicate and elicit between cultures. However, it also establishes an adaptive role for culture as a phenomenon through which to organize the world. The meanings culture imbues in symbolic entities through cultural systems such as fashion or advertising provide an efficient means through which to understand an otherwise impenetrably complex world (McCracken 1986).

Meaning-based and experiential approaches initially organized as alternatives to and extensions of information-processing models of consumer behavior (Hirschman and Holbrook



1982). Over time, as affect and emotion have been increasingly recognized as sources of information that influence decision-making and behavior, the interplay of affective and cognitive aspects of consumption has received increased attention (e.g., Pham 2007). Meaning has followed a similar path and can now be examined from both phenomenological and information-processing perspectives. An important link between meaning and cognition derives from the recognition that meaning likely represents three partially independent attributes of symbols: The extent to which they imply purpose or goal relevance, the extent to which they imply a connection between the self and the world (i.e., significance), and the extent to which they imply coherence, or the sense of “reliable connections” among symbolic entities perceived in the world (Baumeister 1991; Steger 2012).

Consumers are constantly engaged in meaning-making as they perceive symbols and seek to understand the relationships among those symbols and between the symbolic world and the self (Belk 1988). Yet, the goals driving meaning-making vary considerably based on the state of the self-concept. The Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM: Heine, Proulx, and Vohs 2006) argues that consumers seek to maintain a subjective level of meaningfulness that acts as a gauge of the coherence of the relationships they perceive in the world and between the world and the self. That is, dynamic changes in one’s sense of meaning motivate restoration of meaning through affirmation of the self or acquisition of cultural symbols (Mandel and Heine 1999; Sherman and Cohen 2006). For instance, after participants received false feedback that they had failed a trivia quiz, they were more likely to express positive attitudes about and seek affiliation with a school athletic team. Thus, a threat to the self led to meaning restoration through the adoption of a positively viewed cultural symbol (Cialdini et al. 1976). Furthermore, uncertainty-

identity theory suggests that self-uncertainty motivates group affiliation because groups re-establish meaning by providing clear and reliable structure to the world (Hogg 2007).

Meaning-making processes can become salient even when a consumer's sense of meaning has not been threatened. Consumers report relatively high meaning in life most of the time, and engaging in activities such as reflecting on treasured possessions or developing habits can influence reported sense of meaning in life (Heintzelman and King 2014). Additionally, boredom has been conceptualized as "anxiety about the absence of meaning" (Barbalet 1999, p. 641), suggesting that a lack of meaning may not automatically instigate immediate meaning recovery processes but may, at times, lead to emotions that encourage the discovery of novel sources of meaning. Overall, the meaning-making concept appears to encompass numerous partially independent subgoals that can be differentially activated based on perceptions of the self and the environment. Exploring novel connections between symbols in the environment, then, constitutes a different aspect of meaning-making than restoration of meaning following a threat.

Recent research suggests that perceived coherence may provide a link between the phenomenological perspective of meaning and information-processing. According to the meaning-as-information hypothesis, a consumer's subjective feeling of meaning varies in response to perceived coherence in the self-concept and environment (Heintzelman and King 2014). That is, the experience of meaning gauges coherence and motivates responses to it. In a recent study, consumers reported a greater sense of meaning in life when viewing pictures of trees in a pattern that matched the order of the seasons (i.e., winter followed by spring, followed by summer, etc.). This outcome was replicated using word triads. Consumers that viewed word triads that were conceptually related reported greater meaning in life than those that viewed

unrelated triads (Heintzelman et al. 2013). A sense of meaning, on a moment-to-moment level, may be a “cognitive component” of a broader construct of meaning, one that is an outcome of perceptual and attentional processes that seek to recognize and understand relationships and connections in the environment and in the self. From this perspective, a sense of meaning increases the likelihood of adopting an associative mindset, indicating that it affects cognitive processing (Heintzelman and King 2014). To date, no research has addressed how a sense of meaning affects emotion regulation, which can rely heavily on cognitive processing as a means to recognize emotions, select adaptive regulation strategies, and implement those strategies. Next, emotion regulation is discussed in detail and emotion regulation strategy choice is proposed as a mechanism linking sense of meaning and differences in how consumers process and respond to mixed emotions, which, in turn, affects downstream decision-making.

## **EMOTION REGULATION**

Emotion regulation is the processes and activities involved in identifying emotion states, selecting strategies to regulate those states, and implementing and maintaining those strategies (Gross 2015). Emotions and emotion-based messaging are increasingly recognized as key factors in understanding how consumers process marketing appeals (e.g., Cohen, Pham, and Andrade 2008), the types of offerings consumers prefer (e.g., Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999), identity-enactment behaviors (e.g., Coleman and Williams 2013), and loyalty (e.g., Magids, Zorfas, and Leemon 2015). In some situations, emotions can improve the rationality of consumer decision-making, however emotions can also bias consumption decisions in unhealthy or maladaptive ways (Pham 2007). Understanding how consumers recognize and respond to emotions felt during consumption experiences should provide important information concerning how marketing communications and purchasing decisions are processed.

Over the past twenty years, emotion regulation research has drawn on the process model of emotion regulation (Gross 1998; 2015) to organize and investigate how and why consumers regulate their emotions. The process model contends that the generation and experience of an emotional state proceeds through multiple stages, and that emotion regulation attempts can take place at each stage (Ochsner and Gross 2005). The process model is grounded in limited resource information-processing frameworks that fundamentally assume constraints on the amount of cognitive resources available for conscious processing at any given moment (Barrett, Ochsner, and Gross 2007). Humans act as cognitive misers in that they attempt to conserve resources unless some array of expected outcomes suggests that committing additional resources will be adaptively beneficial. According to the process model, emotional episodes develop over time and move through a series of relatively consistent stages: situation recognition, attentional resource deployment, appraisal of salient and emotionally-relevant aspects of the situation, and response generation sequence. This sequence occurs and re-occurs quickly to reflect changes in a consumer's internal and external environments. For instance, a consumer in a grocery store may recognize that they are in a consumption scenario and begin deploying attentional resources toward stimuli that top-down and bottom-up processes identify as priorities (Mather and Sutherland 2011). Some of these stimuli (e.g., ice cream) may generate emotions, and consumers will utilize both automatic and deliberate emotion regulation strategies as they attempt to influence their emotional life (Gross 2015).

At each stage of the emotion generation process, consumers can attempt to implement classes of regulation strategies. First, consumers select or modify a situation in order to influence the likelihood of preferred emotions. Situation selection, specifically, involves choosing environments that are believed to be likely to lead to preferred emotions or unlikely to lead to

disliked emotions. For instance, one consumer may visit a grocery store with self-checkout technology because they experience social anxiety when interacting with cashiers (Jacobson, Martell, Dimidjian 2001; Orel and Kara 2014). Situation modification describes a class of strategies in which “external, physical environments” are altered in order to change the likelihood of experiencing specific emotions (Gross 2015; p. 8). Consumers may attempt to modify a situation by removing objects that provoke unwanted emotions (e.g., disposing of a former relationship partner’s photographs) or by adding items such as alcohol to a situation in an attempt to control or dampen emotional responding (Williams and Hasking 2010).

The attentional deployment family of regulation strategies describe conscious or nonconscious attempts to affect the target and coordination of a consumer’s attentional resources. A consumer attending a horror film may, for example, avert their eyes from the screen during intensely fear-inducing scenes (Armstrong and Olatunji 2012). Students that become bored in class may think about more emotionally positive activities or divide attention between note-taking and a more emotionally pleasing task on a smartphone. Attentional deployment is often explored in the context of tradeoffs between short- and long-term goals. Consumers that can successfully down-regulate the pleasant emotions associated with likely impulsive purchases are more likely to be able to delay gratification and prioritize longer-term, less emotionally charged goals (Mischel, Ebbesen, and Zeiss 1972). Distraction, a commonly studied attentional deployment strategy, effectively down-regulates emotions by refocusing attention on neutral thoughts (Bennett et al. 2007).

After attention has been allocated to a stimulus, consumers generate appraisals about the stimulus that influence the quality of their emotional response. Common appraisal dimensions include self-relevance, novelty, and valence (Moors, Ellsworth, Scherer, and Frijda 2013).

Although many appraisals are largely automatic, emotion regulation strategies that involve changing or generating new appraisals can be effectively utilized during this phase. For instance, a consumer that views a skateboarder colliding with the side of a car may initially feel horror or disgust, however they may reappraise the event as humorous once it is clear that nobody was injured in the crash (Samson et al. 2016). Past research has shown that this cognitive change family of strategies can effectively regulate unpleasant emotions by changing the meaning of a situation, however these strategies may often require greater use of cognitive resources than attentional deployment strategies such as distraction (Sheppes and Meiran 2007). Response modulation strategies focus on controlling the cognitive and behavioral consequences of emotions. Drawing on embodied cognition theories (e.g., Markman and Brendl 2005), these strategies can involve limiting or increasing the extent to which emotions are socially displayed. Notably, response modulation strategies such as expressive suppression target the consequences of emotions more than the processes that generate them (e.g., Gross and Levenson 1997).

A key prediction of the process model is that the cognitive costs and benefits of emotion regulation strategies differ based on the type and timing of the strategy deployed. For instance, regulating an emotion via reappraisal can be more cognitively costly than distraction, however reappraisal is often more beneficial for long-term emotional adaptation because it preserves emotional information and allows for more adaptive responding in the future (Gross and John 2003). That is, emotion regulation involves trade-offs between cognitive resource deployment and long-term benefits; consumers can attempt to avoid emotional information in the near-term, but in doing so they risk limiting their ability to learn from that information and respond to or alter it at a later point in time.

Marketing research on emotion regulation has largely focused on how consuming market offerings can act as emotional regulatory strategies. That is, the key questions in marketing has often been how products and services that are appraised positively can relieve unpleasant emotions (Zillmann 1988). For instance, consumers that associate chocolate with pleasant emotions are more likely to consume chocolate when they are in a bad mood because they believe it will relieve their unpleasant state (Andrade 2005). Kemp and colleagues (2012) have also documented how anticipating pleasant emotions from consumption can affect behavioral intentions toward an offering by increasing regret mitigation cognitions and increasing hedonic rationalizations. These studies examine how cognitions are influenced by emotions, but does not explore how consumers regulate anticipated emotions or regret, and thus cannot speak to the potential costs or benefits of emotion regulation strategies employed. Additionally, consumers use brands as affiliative placeholders to relieve unpleasant emotions. After watching a horror movie, consumers reported more positive attitudes about a salient brand when they did not have a social other with whom to affiliate (Hoegg and Dunn 2013). To regulate a state of intense fear, then, consumers may seek to increase positive attachment to positively-viewed brands.

Consumers also use emotions to facilitate consumption that leads to preferred goals. For instance, consumers preferred products that were associated with high arousal when they felt angry, but preferred products that were associated with low arousal when they felt sad (Rucker and Petty 2004). Intriguingly, Salerno and colleagues (2014) found that goal salience affects how consumers seek to regulate unpleasant emotions like sadness. When a hedonic eating goal was salient, less hedonic consumption took place when consumers were sad (vs neutral), presumably because the presence of sadness increased sensitivity to the consequences of consumption.

However, when a hedonic goal was less salient, sad consumers ate more in an attempt to relieve the unpleasant emotional state.

Marketing research also suggests that emotion regulation may play an outsized role in consumption decision-making when consumers feel urgency to make a decision, such as when they make impulse purchases (Verplanken and Sato 2011). A recent self-regulation model of impulse buying suggests that impulse purchases may constitute self-regulation. Thus, consumers may make impulse purchases to relieve emotional experiences that they do not have the motive or ability to regulate cognitively. One intriguing aspect of pairing this approach with the emotion regulation choice model outlined below is that it suggests consumers may at times make impulse purchases to relieve intensely pleasant emotions as well as unpleasant emotions (Sheppes et al. 2011). Overall, emotion regulation in marketing has, quite appropriately, focused on how emotions regulate buyer behavior. The current dissertation seeks to explore the processes in between emotion generation and purchasing behavior. Accumulating evidence that consumers have the ability to cognitively dampen, enhance, or change the nature of an emotional experience before it affects behavior suggests that understanding the conditions under which consumers choose to regulate consumption emotions, and the manner in which they enact emotion regulation, may have important consequences for marketplace behavior.

## **EMOTION REGULATION CHOICE**

Past research on emotion regulation in the consumer behavior literature (e.g., Kemp et al. 2014) has focused on how emotional stimuli can influence consumer choice in the marketplace. Prior to making a choice between offerings, though consumers make choices about how to regulate the emotions they experience. That is, the selection of an emotion regulation goal; the selection of an appropriate strategy to deploy to reach that goal; and the relative success



implementing that strategy in the face of situational and intrapersonal constraints all influence the overall success of an emotion regulation attempt. Thus, understanding how consumers identify emotion regulation goals, select strategies to achieve those goals, and implement those strategies become key to explaining how emotions influence consumption.

Although many attempts have been made to establish adaptive and maladaptive classes for emotion regulation strategies, recent conceptual models of adaptive emotion regulation focus on flexibility and context sensitivity as mechanisms that determine a consumer's ability to respond adaptively to emotional information (Aldao, Sheppes, and Gross 2015). An important facet of this approach is that it recognizes emotion regulation as goal-driven. That is, consumers determine an appropriate emotion regulation goal given their perception of their situation and select a regulation strategy they believe is likely to achieve that goal. Often, consumers have a hedonic regulation goal such as feeling more pleasant and/or less unpleasant (Tamir 2009). For instance, a consumer experiencing anxiety on a first date may devote more attentional resources to a meal that makes them feel good, or a consumer in a horror film may evaluate a nearby brand more positively because it alleviates the fear felt during the film (Hoegg and Dunn 2013). In these cases, consumers have a goal to feel more pleasant, and often to feel more of a specific pleasant emotion such as happiness or pride. After setting this emotion regulation goal, consumers must select a strategy they believe will be effective at achieving the goal.

The consumer on a date may think about how delicious the meal is, or how glad they are to try a certain food or dish they would not have tried if not for this date. Finally, the consumer must implement that strategy. The consumer focusing on the taste of their food may attempt to devote more attentional resources to their food at the expense of other stimuli that provoke anxiety (e.g., their date across the table).

Emotion regulation motives theories (e.g., Tamir 2016) aim to explain emotion regulation goals through a motivational lens. Thus, a consumer that is motivated to feel good may upregulate happiness or joy because those emotion states are useful goals to have when one wishes to feel pleasant. However, a motive to improve performance at a task, for example, can lead consumers to upregulate an emotion state that is believed to facilitate task success even if that emotion is not experienced as pleasant. For instance, when consumers believed that experiencing anger would facilitate success in a video game, they chose to engage in activities that were expected to make them feel angry (Tamir, Mitchell, and Gross 2008). Yet, this motivational model does not explain how consumers select among the multitude of emotion regulation strategies that may help them reach a preferred emotion regulation goal.

The emotion regulation choice model (ERCM: Sheppes et al. 2014) explains how consumers evaluate strategy effectiveness and select among potentially useful emotion regulation strategies. The ERCM draws on limited cognitive processing models to contend that the inherent restrictions on processing lead to competition between emotion generation and regulation to influence cognition and behavior (Sheppes 2014). An important implication of this *competition assumption* is the recognition that as an emotion develops, it gains increasing dominance over the cognitive system, making it more likely to draw attentional resources and more difficult to regulate (Gross 2015). Consumers can be more or less sensitive to the costs and benefits of different emotion regulation strategies. The *sensitivity assumption* suggests that consumers are variably sensitive to contextual variables such as the intensity of the emotion state being regulated, the resources available to the cognitive system, and the consumer's current motives when adaptively selecting an emotion regulation strategy. Third, the ERCM contends that adaptive regulation can require *conscious intervention*, such that consumers often use deliberate

processing to override habitual or associatively-driven responses to emotions. For instance, feeling amusement during a serious business meeting requires conscious intervention to control likely outputs of the behavioral system such as laughter and smiling. Fourth, the model specifies that conscious interventions are directed toward *choosing between strategies that disengage from or engage with emotional information*. Although consumers can deploy disengagement and engagement strategies throughout the development of an emotional state, disengagement strategies are generally more effective when used at an early stage (e.g., attentional deployment) and engagement strategies are generally more effective at a later stage when the consumer has the opportunity to elaborate on emotional information and produce alternative interpretations of the emotion-eliciting stimulus that can change the intensity or quality of an emotion (Gross 2015b). That is, the fundamental choice consumers make regarding how to regulate their emotions is whether to engage with and elaborate on the emotional information they experience or disengage from that information through processes such as attention allocation or reappraising the extent to which the emotion is perceived to reflect reality (Sheppes et al. 2014).

Based on these assumptions, the ERCM argues that emotional, cognitive, and motivational factors will influence the choices consumers make about how to regulate their emotions. Emotion factors include attributes of an emotional state that can affect the likelihood of cognitive processes effectively modifying the emotion. For instance, Sheppes and colleagues (2014) showed that emotion intensity influences the likelihood of choosing to deploy distraction -- a disengagement strategy that involves switching attention from emotional information to neutral information -- or reappraisal, an engagement strategy that involves changing the meaning of emotional information. When consumers viewed intensely unpleasant pictures they were more likely to distract, yet when they viewed low intensity unpleasant pictures, they were more likely

to select reappraisal. Notably, this effect held even when consumers were offered monetary compensation (both relatively large and small amounts of money) to select the strategy the model predicted would be less effective. That is, consumers preferred to distract from high intensity emotions even when offered a relatively large incentive to reappraise (Sheppes et al. 2014).

Cognitive factors that affect emotion regulation strategy choice reflect the common assumption that consumers are cognitive misers that prefer to conserve cognitive resources rather than expend them. Sheppes and colleagues (2014) argue that generating a reappraisal strategy is more cognitively complex than generating a distraction strategy because reappraisal involves interacting with emotion information and creating new meaning instead of generating unrelated neutral thoughts as in distraction. To examine the role that cognitive resource deployment plays in emotion regulation choice, then, the researchers provided some consumers with options for how to reappraise and distract from emotional information and asked other consumers to generate their own reappraisal and distraction options. When consumers generated their own strategies, they selected reappraisal -- which provides more long-term adaptive benefits than distraction -- 54% of the time. Yet when consumers were given strategic options and did not need to self-generate them, they selected reappraisal significantly more often (Sheppes et al. 2014).

Finally, motivational moderators can influence emotion regulation strategy choice. When consumers are motivated by longer-term goals, their strategy choices change compared to when motivated by short-term goals. Specifically, consumers prefer to engage with emotional information when they believe they will face similar emotions again in the future. In contrast, they prefer to disengage from similar emotional information if they do not believe they will face similar emotional information again (Sheppes et al. 2014).

The ERCM contends that emotion regulation is fundamentally concerned with the choice between engaging with or disengaging from emotional information adaptively. However, another possibility is that emotion regulation choice is, at its core, a question of cognitive resource availability. That is, consumers will select the available strategy that requires the least amount of cognitive resources to be effective in a given situation. In contrast, the ERCM contends that the fundamental mechanism guiding strategy choice is not resource availability but the likely benefits of engaging with versus disengaging from incoming emotional information. Sheppes and colleagues (2014) tested the cognitive resource account against the engagement dimension account by offering participants more or less cognitively taxing disengagement strategy options when regulating a high intensity emotional state. The results support the engagement dimension approach: Consumers preferred a more cognitively taxing disengagement strategy (difficult math problems) over a less taxing strategy (simple math problems) when regulating intense emotions.

Overall, the ERCM framework suggests that when a consumption experience is emotionally-charged, consumers are sensitive to the consequences of deploying different emotion regulation strategies and actively choose strategies based on contextual factors that indicate the likely effectiveness of engaging with or disengaging from emotional information.

## **REGULATING MIXED EMOTIONS**

Mixed emotions -- the coactivation of positivity and negativity experienced as a distinct emotional state -- are commonly experienced during consumption (Williams and Aaker 2002). Mixed emotions have been associated with goal conflict (e.g., Mukhopadhyay and Johar 2006; Ramanathan and Williams 2007), meaningful life transitions (e.g., Larsen, McGraw, and Cacioppo 2001), and complex consumption experiences (Otnes et al. 1997). Although mixed emotions can lead to positive attitude change (e.g., Hong and Lee 2010; Williams and Aaker

2002), a mixed state is often positively associated with felt discomfort (Cacioppo, Gardner and Berntson 1997).

Although mixed emotions can be uncomfortable, recent research suggests they are also associated with a number of adaptive benefits. For example, mixed emotions are positively associated with physical and psychological health outcomes over time (e.g., Adler and Hershfield 2012; Hershfield et al. 2013). Additionally, when consumers seek entertainment that provides eudaimonic well-being outcomes such as a sense of meaning in life, they tend to select options that lead to mixed emotions, and mixed emotions mediate the well-being outcomes (Oliver and Raney 2011).

Mixed emotions, then, are uncomfortable and downregulated in some situations but provide adaptive benefits and may even be actively sought out in others. Yet no research has directly addressed the mechanisms that allow consumers to adaptively regulate mixed emotions across situations. Both conceptual accounts of mixed emotions and empirical evidence suggest that mixed emotions are often associated with felt discomfort. The Evaluative Space Model (ESM: Cacioppo and Berntson 1994) argues that affective experience can be described as a two-dimensional space with valence and arousal axes. Thus, affective experiences -- including emotions -- are fundamentally distinct based on the valence and arousal that define them. Furthermore, the valence dimension of affective experience, which runs from intensely negative to intensely positive, can break down into positive and negative substrates during complex affective experiences. In such moments, consumers may feel both pleasant and unpleasant simultaneously, and this experience describes a mixed emotions state. However, the ESM suggests that the coactivation of positivity and negativity is uncomfortable because affect and emotions are often motivational constructs that imply behavioral responses along an approach

versus avoidance dimension. A mixed emotions state, however, provides poor behavioral guidance. As a result, a consumer experiencing mixed emotions will often prefer to leave a mixed state for a univalent state that is a more useful behavioral guide. This explains why a mixed state generates discomfort that motivates consumers to move toward a more behaviorally useful emotional state (Norris et al. 2010).

Marketing research drawing on the ESM has found support for its treatment of mixed emotions and discomfort. Consumers presented with an advertisement that elicited mixed emotions reported greater discomfort than those presented with a happy or a sad appeal (Williams and Aaker 2002). Furthermore, felt discomfort mediated the effect of the mixed emotions advertisement on attitude toward the ad. Similar results were found by Hong and Lee (2010) when they presented consumers with either mixed emotional ads or ads that evoked happiness. The mixed emotional ads elicited discomfort that negatively affected attitude about the advertisement and purchase intent while the happy ads did not.

Additional indirect evidence supports the notion that consumers are more likely to use disengagement regulation strategies when experiencing mixed emotions than engagement strategies. One consequence of deploying disengagement regulation strategies is reduced memory for emotional information (Sheppes 2014). When students received midterm exam grades in a MBA class, they were asked to report emotional experiences and discomfort. Although many students reported experiencing mixed emotions when their exam was initially returned, memory for mixed emotions was less accurate than memory for happiness or sadness two weeks after the exam was returned. Specifically, students recalled experiencing fewer mixed emotions when their exam was returned two weeks later. Additionally, they also recalled experiencing more happiness and sadness than they reported when they received their exam

score (Aaker, Drolet, and Griffin 2008). Thus, students appear to have sought to disengage from mixed emotional information. Cann and Larsen (2011) also explored how consumers regulated mixed emotions using a music clip paradigm. Consumers listened to short music clips validated to elicit happiness, sadness, or mixed emotions (Hunter, Schellenberg, and Schimmack 2008) and used a computer mouse to report online emotional experiences during the music. Consumers pressed the one mouse button to report happiness, the other button to report sadness, and both buttons simultaneously to report mixed emotions. Mixed emotional experiences were significantly shorter in average duration than happy or sad experiences. Once again, this suggests that consumers were more motivated to disengage from a mixed emotional state than from pleasant or unpleasant univalent states, even when experiencing mixed emotions for a relatively short period of time.

Notably, all consumers do not experience discomfort when they feel mixed emotions. Individual differences such as a tendency toward dialectical thinking and cognitive moderators such as adopting an abstract construal level when evaluating mixed emotional ads can reduce felt discomfort such that consumers report attitudes about the mixed emotional ad equivalent to those reported about a happy ad (Hong and Lee 2010). Thus, while it appears that consumers are often uncomfortable and seek to disengage from mixed emotions, contextual variables can reduce the discomfort felt during a mixed emotional experience. In such instances, mixed emotions elicit attitude change similar to that of happiness, indicating that when consumers do choose to engage with mixed emotions, they can draw something positive from the experience. The research above informs the first hypothesis of this essay:



*H1: Consumers that select an engagement strategy when regulating mixed emotions will report less discomfort and more positive attitudes about an advertisement compared to those that select a disengagement strategy.*

Drawing on theories that frame adaptive emotion regulation in terms of context and consequence sensitivity and flexible regulation strategy deployment, as well as the ERCM's argument that the decision to engage with emotional information is dependent on emotional, cognitive, and motivational factors, this dissertation will take the first steps toward describing how consumers regulate mixed emotions in a manner that avoids discomfort and confers the benefits that can be gained from experiencing a mixed state.

To do so, I will explore the relationship between perceived meaning-in-life and mixed emotions. Previous research indicates that mixed emotions are more likely to be reported when a sense of meaning is relatively high. For instance, when consumers thought about an important place in their life as if they were visiting it for the last time, they experienced more mixed emotions than if they imagined visiting it without the caveat (Ersner-Hershfield et al. 2008). Similarly, graduating college seniors reported more mixed emotions after watching a video that highlighted their transition out of college than those that did not (Berrios et al. 2017). Consumers also report more mixed emotions when consuming meaningful entertainment and when viewing a movie with moving music (Bartsch et al. 2014; Oliver and Raney 2011). The first essay of this dissertation seeks direct evidence for the relationship between meaningful contexts and mixed emotions. The current essay explores emotion regulation choice as a mechanism that links salient contextual variables with the processing and outcomes of mixed emotional experiences.

*H2: When presence of meaning is high, consumers will be more likely to select an engagement emotion regulation strategy in response to a mixed emotional appeal compared to when presence of meaning is low.*

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Participants were 60 mTurk workers living in the United States who received monetary compensation for completing the study. Seventy percent of participants were male (27.7% female) and ages ranged from 23 to 62 years old with an average age of 35.

### **Procedure**

Participants were told that they were completing a study measuring emotional responses to an advertisement. Next, they were asked to read a short explanation of two emotion regulation strategies: reappraisal and distraction. The order in which the two strategies were presented was randomized. After declaring that they understood each strategy, participants completed the Presence of Meaning manipulation by either writing about how their life would be different if they had never met one of their close friends (high PM condition) or writing about their morning routine (low PM condition).

Next, the emotion regulation strategy section of the study was described: *Next, you will see a + symbol for 5 seconds, then you will see an advertisement and be asked to select one of the previously presented strategies to use when you see the advertisement a second time. Please use the strategy you select when the advertisement re-appears.* Participants acknowledged understanding the instructions and were presented with either an advertisement for a mirror with a mixed emotional (n=25) or positive (n=22) appeal and selected an emotion regulation strategy to use before viewing the ad a second time. Following the second viewing of the ad, participants

reported positivity, negativity, attitude about the product, purchase likelihood, and the extent to which they believed the product could contribute to meaning-making and personal growth. They reported demographic variables and entered a 4-digit code to receive compensation.

## RESULTS

I calculated a MIN score (Schimmack 2001) as an index of mixed emotions. Since mixed emotions are the co-occurrence of positivity and negativity, the MIN value is used to measure both if and at what intensity mixed emotions are experienced. When a participant reported experiencing both positivity and negativity, the MIN score reflects the lower value of the two. When participants report either no positivity, no negativity, or neither positivity or negativity, the MIN score is zero. Sixty-two participants reported experiencing a combination of positivity and negativity after viewing the ad ( $M = 3.3$ ).

According to Hypothesis 1, consumers that select an engagement strategy in response to a mixed emotional appeal should report more positive attitudes about the product advertised compared to those that select a disengagement strategy. A one-way ANOVA did find a significant interaction between engagement strategy selection and appeal on product attitude ( $F(1, 85) = 0.09, p = 0.76$ ). However the analysis revealed a main effect of emotion regulation strategy selection on product attitudes ( $F(1, 85) = 7.92, p = 0.006$ ), such that consumers that chose to disengage from the emotions experienced following the ad reported more positive attitudes than those that chose an engagement-driven strategy.

Hypothesis 2 contends that Presence of Meaning affects likelihood of selecting an engagement compared to a disengagement-based emotion regulation strategy in response to a mixed emotional appeal. However, since the study's mixed emotions manipulation was not more

likely to produce mixed emotions compared to a positive appeal, this hypothesis could not be tested.

Despite the manipulation failure, intriguing questions can be asked based on trends in the data. For instance, counter to Hypothesis 2, participants that selected an engagement emotion regulation strategy ( $M = 3.21$ ) while viewing the ad reported more mixed emotions compared to participants that selected a distraction strategy ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $t(26) = 1.89$ ,  $p = .042$ ). In line with previous research, this may suggest that mixed emotions can be useful for decision-making when consumers attempt to process rather than avoid them.

## **DISCUSSION**

Although a pre-test indicated that the mixed emotions manipulation was more likely to produce mixed emotions than the positive ad, the likelihood of experiencing mixed emotions following the ads was not significantly different in this study. Furthermore, 62 of 89 participants reported some level of mixed emotions across conditions. Thirty-four participants reported mixed emotions after viewing the positive ad and 28 reported mixed emotions following the mixed emotional ad. A chi-squared test indicated there was not a significant difference in likelihood of experiencing mixed emotions based on ad, however it is notable that such a large percentage of the sample reported mixed emotions given that their experience is often fleeting. Future research can employ in-the-moment measures of mixed emotions during advertisements, such as facial response analyses or an Evaluative Response Grid.

Additional research is needed to further explore the interaction of meaning-making and emotion regulation strategy selection. For instance, when the presence of meaning is high, people may seek to distract from new information because they prefer to keep their attention focused on

information that is already salient since they believe processing it can create new meaning or an expansion of the self-concept.

The limitations of this study leave numerous questions about the role of mixed emotions in meaningful consumption environments still to be answered. The failure of the emotion manipulation conditions to elicit distinct emotional states narrowed the scope of the current research. However, the addition of more stimuli sets could provide an opportunity to test the hypotheses in the future. Simply put, new stimuli may need to be more evocative. Additionally, advances in technology may allow for tests with behavioral rather than attitudinal dependent variables. For instance, asking consumers to click through for more information about a product may be a next step toward understanding the relationship between mixed emotional appeals and consumer behavior.

Another key limitation of the current study is that it did not extend directly into the realm of consumer buying behavior. Although participants reported their attitude about the product, they did not report whether they viewed the product as more valuable monetarily, nor whether any change in value affected the likelihood of purchase. However, it is important to note that consumption describes more than buying behavior, and that research describing how consumers allocate attentional resources can be quite valuable. For instance, in a social media application in which advertisements are incidental to consumption and must compete in an environment with scarce attentional resources, a complex emotional state such as mixed emotions in drawing on attentional resources to regulate emotions may be influential. Notably, social media applications may be consumption environments in which the presence of meaning is high since they can provide information about friends, family, peers, and the broader social culture that affect the self-concept.

Both the relationship between mixed emotions and emotion regulation strategy selection and between presence of meaning and strategy selection remain unexplored territory.

Understanding these relationships remains an important task for marketers in an age when intensely emotional consumption is simpler than ever. Consumers that engage with and process mixed emotions may arrive at different purchase decisions than those that disengage from them.

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