



Affect and automatic mood maintenance[☆]

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Abstract

The hedonic contingency model (HCM; Wegener & Petty, 1994) states that individuals have learned to seek out positive activities while in a happy mood in order to maintain or elevate that mood. We argue that this tendency may become overlearned and, thus, automated. More specifically, the experience of a happy mood was predicted to automatically activate the mood-maintenance tendency proposed by the HCM. Participants induced into happy, sad, or neutral moods ranked their preferences for future activities that were nonconsciously associated with either a positive or negative valence. Supporting the notion of automatic mood maintenance, happy participants appeared to evaluate the affective qualities of the future activities and base their preferences on this evaluation without realizing that they were doing so. Theoretical implications of this finding are discussed.

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Introduction

Evidence has accumulated indicating that mood-maintenance tendencies are commonly observed for individuals experiencing a positive mood. For example, Isen and Simmonds (1978) have demonstrated that, relative to neutral-mood (control) individuals, happy individuals help someone more if the helping task involves reading uplifting information, but help less if the helping task involves reading mood-depreciating information. Mood-maintenance tendencies have also been observed in gambling situations. Specifically, Isen and Patrick (1983) found that, relative to controls, happy participants made more risky bets in a benign hypothetical gambling situation but made less risky bets

when making actual gambles. Isen and Patrick explained the latter finding by suggesting that happy participants had more to lose than control participants in that losing a real bet would decrease their mood from an already positive level.

Wegener and Petty's hedonic contingency model (HCM, 1994, 2001; Wegener, Petty, & Smith, 1995) provides an explanatory framework for the examples described above. Based on the assumption that "behaviors that result in more positive or less negative feelings are rewarded, and behaviors that result in less positive or more negative feelings are punished" (p. 1035), Wegener and Petty (1994) argued that different reward contingencies should operate for individuals experiencing sad and happy moods. That is, during a sad mood, almost any activity in which individuals could engage would likely result in a more positive mood. Therefore, rewards are likely without careful consideration of the hedonic consequences of one's actions. Accordingly, individuals learn that, while they are sad, the experience of reward is not contingent upon careful attention to their affective environment. Conversely, during a happy mood, engaging in only a narrow range of activities will maintain or elevate an individual's mood; engaging in most activities or attending to most information would likely cause an

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individual in a happy mood to subsequently experience a less positive mood. Therefore, to experience rewards, happy individuals must carefully select activities in which to engage or information to process that will allow them to maintain or elevate their positive mood. Over time, individuals should learn that reaping rewards and avoiding punishment while experiencing a happy mood is contingent upon careful attention to their affective environment. Therefore, when happy, relative to when sad or in a neutral mood, individuals should learn to monitor the affective ramifications of their behaviors, preferring activities that are likely to prolong or enhance their positive affective state.

Wegener and Petty (1994) discuss initial experiments supporting the HCM in which participants who underwent a positive-, neutral-, or negative-mood induction were given information about eight videotapes. This information included other students' ostensible ratings of how happy the tapes had made them feel as well as two other dimensions (e.g., how exciting or interesting they found the tapes to be). For each of these dimensions, four of the tapes were rated high and four were rated low. The ratings for the dimensions were counterbalanced across tapes so that every combination of low and high ratings was represented. The participants then ranked the videotapes in order from those they most wanted to view to those they least wanted to view. These rankings were summed for the four tapes rated highly on the happiness dimension and this score was compared for individuals in happy, neutral, and sad moods. The results indicated that participants in a happy mood based their preferences for tapes on the happiness dimension. That is, happy participants ranked the happy tapes more highly than did both neutral and sad participants, who did not differ in their rankings for the happy tapes. Thus, consistent with the HCM, individuals experiencing a happy mood based their decisions about engaging in future activities on the affective qualities of those activities to a greater extent than did sad or neutral-mood individuals.

Wegener et al. (1995) also obtained results supporting the HCM using a persuasion paradigm. Happy and sad participants were provided with either a positive or negative expectation about how an essay would make them feel and an essay—containing either strong or weak arguments—framed in an uplifting or depressing manner that was congruent with the given expectation. These results showed that sad individuals formed more favorable attitudes about the persuasive communications containing strong arguments than weak arguments, irrespective of the communication's affective framing. However, happy individuals formed more favorable attitudes about strong arguments only for those communications framed in an uplifting, rather than a depressing, manner. Knowing that an essay would be uplifting, happy individuals apparently chose to care-

fully process this particular essay—as indicated by the formation of more favorable attitudes about essays containing strong, as opposed to weak, arguments—but elected to cursorily process the depressing essay.

The pervasiveness of positive-mood maintenance

To date, most tests of the HCM have explicitly informed individuals in advance that watching a video will make them happy or that they will find an upcoming message depressing or uplifting. However, recent evidence suggests that positive mood-maintenance can occur without overt affective expectations. Specifically, Handley and Lassiter (2002, Study 2) have replicated the results for Wegener et al.'s (1995, Study 2) happy participants under conditions in which no expectation was provided about how uplifting or depressing an upcoming essay would be. This replication suggests that happy individuals need not be forewarned about the hedonic qualities of future activities in order to determine their level of information processing but, rather, can come to recognize these qualities online and alter the extent to which they process information according to the hedonic consequences of that activity.

The above finding revealed that positive-mood maintenance could be observed under more subtle situations than originally demonstrated. As discussed earlier, Wegener and Petty (1994) argue that individuals come to learn over time that, while experiencing a happy mood, attending to the hedonic consequences of behavior (i.e., both the choice to engage in as well as the actual process of engaging in mood-maintaining or elevating activities) will be rewarding, whereas ignoring these consequences will be punishing. Assuming that individuals experience happy moods frequently during their lifetimes, it is our view that this mood-maintenance tendency could become overlearned and, thus, automated (see Wegner & Bargh, 1998). That is, individuals may automatically seek out positive activities or process positive information—and avoid negative activities or negative information—while happy because they have overlearned the hedonic contingencies identified by Wegener and Petty (1994).

Rationale of the current study

The current research was conducted to answer two key questions. First, can results consistent with the HCM be obtained when individuals make preference decisions about possible future activities that are not overtly positive or negative (cf. Wegener & Petty, 1994), but are instead nonconsciously associated with a positive or negative valence? That is, might positive-mood maintenance proceed automatically, without individuals even consciously recognizing the affective qualities of stimuli in their environment? Second, are happy, relative

to sad and neutral-mood, individuals consciously aware of their learned tendency to seek out positive experiences?

To answer the first question, an experiment was designed using a video rank-order paradigm similar to that used by Wegener and Petty (1994). However, instead of informing participants about the affective qualities of the videos they might view, video titles in the present study were partially composed of neutral words previously (i.e., 15 min earlier) associated with either positive or negative words via word-pair presentations. During this procedure, titles were expected to become nonconsciously associated with a particular valence via classical conditioning (cf., DeHouwer, Thomas, & Baeyens, 2001; Olson & Fazio, 2001, 2002). Thus, participants' preferences to view video titles nonconsciously associated with positively valenced words would be decisions made without awareness of the affective qualities influencing these choices. That is, individuals would be seeking activities linked to a positive valence without realizing this link exists. The second question was answerable by directly asking participants why they had ranked the video titles as they had.

Study overview

Participants viewed word pairs that were briefly presented on a projector screen. In this presentation, neutral words were paired with either positive or negative words. Participants then watched a happy, neutral, or sad mood-manipulation video and rank ordered their preferences for video titles, each of which was partially composed of neutral words that were previously paired with either positive or negative words. Finally, participants were asked to provide a reason for ranking the videos as they did and they completed a questionnaire assessing memory for the word pairs and positivity evaluations for the constituent neutral words.

Consistent with Wegener and Petty (1994), it was predicted that participants experiencing a happy mood would indicate a stronger preference to see the video titles that had been nonconsciously associated with positive words than participants experiencing a sad or neutral mood. Importantly, consistent with the notion that the learned tendency to seek out positive activities while happy has become automated, happy participants were not expected to spontaneously mention that they had ranked the video titles to maintain or elevate mood any more so than would sad or neutral-mood participants. Rather, participants in all mood groups were expected to mention a mood-maintenance rationale for their video rankings infrequently and to an equal extent. Finally, lending support to the notion that the manipulated affective valences associated with the movie titles were not consciously experienced, participants were not expected to recall word pairs any more accurately than

they would by chance nor were they expected to evaluate the positivity of the neutral words within the valenced word pairs differently. This later prediction is derived from the affect infusion model (Forgas, 1995) according to which affect—or affective association in the present case—tends not to influence judgments when individuals have direct access to previously formed evaluations about attitude objects. Therefore, regardless of one's mood or the affective associations to the word “with,” for example, the previously formed evaluation of “with” as being obviously neutral will be retrieved and reported.

Method

Participants

In exchange for partial class credit, 191 male and female Ohio University undergraduates participated in the experiment in groups ranging from 1 to 11 individuals. Each group was randomly assigned to one of the three mood conditions (happy [$n = 67$], neutral [$n = 61$], or sad [$n = 63$]).

Procedure

The experimenter began by reading instructions indicating that memory for word pairs was being investigated. At this time, participants were told that they would view 24 word-pairs that would be presented at 1-s intervals. Participants were further told that after the presentation of these word pairs, they would watch and rate a 12–15 min-long video consisting of three segments from different movies. Participants were also informed that they would be watching a short video at the end of the experimental session and that the experimenter would determine which video they would watch based on their responses to a questionnaire they would receive after watching the movie clips. Finally, participants learned that their memory for the word pairs would be tested in a final questionnaire. After these introductory instructions were read, the experimenter presented the word pairs to the participants, played the mood-manipulation video, and handed out the first, then the second, questionnaire.

Word associations. Using Microsoft PowerPoint, a mounted projector, and a screen in front of a classroom, participants were presented 24 word-pairs in contiguous 1-s intervals. Half of the words were neutral and the other half were positive, negative, or also neutral. One-third of the neutral words were paired with positive words (e.g., the-love), one-third were paired with negative words (e.g., of-agony), and one-third were paired with other neutral words (e.g., about-and). In this way, the neutral words were associated with positive,

negative, or other neutral words.¹ Two versions of the PowerPoint presentation were created such that pairings of the neutral words with positive or negative words were counterbalanced between versions. Additionally, the order of the neutral words and the valenced words within the word pairs was counterbalanced.

Mood manipulation. After viewing the word-pair presentation, participants were shown one of the three videos, each consisting of three clips taken from separate movies (totaling approximately 12–15 min). Prior research (e.g., Halberstadt & Niedenthal, 1997; Niedenthal, Halberstadt, & Innes-Ker, 1999) has demonstrated that these videos successfully induce either a happy (e.g., “City Slickers 2,” Crystal & Weiland, 1994), sad (e.g., “Terms of Endearment,” Brooks, 1983), or neutral mood (e.g., a history-of-golf documentary).

Dependent measures

Mood index. After watching the video, participants received a questionnaire (used by Wegener & Petty (1994)) designed to assess the effectiveness of the mood manipulation. The critical questions asked participants to rate on 15-point scales (higher numbers indicating a more positive mood) how bad/good, unpleasant/pleasant, and negative/positive they felt. These three questions, which had a high degree of internal consistency ($\alpha = .98$), were averaged to form a mood index for use as a mood-manipulation check.

Video-preference measure. The page following the mood-manipulation check contained eight fictitious video titles. Participants were instructed to use all numbers between 1 and 8 to rank these titles in order from the one they most wanted to see (1) to the one they least wanted to see (8). Prior to making their rankings, participants read that they would be shown a video clip at the end of the experiment, determined by how they, as a group, ranked the video titles. To reduce the possibility of any order effects, the order of the video titles was counterbalanced.

The titles, each of which contained four words (Just so you know, The walk from home, Of things and

thoughts, Another day flew by, Some stuff that bubbles, There has often been, Walking around with shoes, Were we talking or...), were partially composed of neutral words presented to participants via the word pairs during the PowerPoint presentation at the beginning of the experiment. Half of the titles contained two unique neutral words that were previously paired with two positive words and half of the titles contained two unique neutral words that were previously paired with two negative words. Therefore, half of the titles were loosely and, it will be argued, nonconsciously, associated with positive words whereas the other half of the titles were loosely associated with negative words. It is important to note that, depending on which of the two versions of the word-pair presentation participants viewed, the same movie title was associated with either positive or negative words (i.e., the affective associations to the titles were counterbalanced).² Following Wegener and Petty (1994), the video-preference measure was formed by summing the rankings of the four “positive” video titles (i.e., those that were composed of neutral words previously associated with positive words).

Mood-maintenance awareness. After ranking the video titles, participants were asked why they ranked the titles as they did and four categories of rationale emerged: mood-maintenance concerns (e.g., “I thought the video would be funny or make me happy”), interestingness, entertainment, and other. Two coders independently categorized the responses based on these themes. The coders demonstrated high agreement on their categorizations (92.9%) and discrepancies were resolved through discussion.³

Conscious evaluation checks. After its completion, participants exchanged the first questionnaire for a second questionnaire. On this second questionnaire, participants were informed that their memory for the word pairs presented during the beginning of the experiment would be tested. To do this, participants had to match 24 words, with a blank space beside each, to 24 correct matches that appeared in a word bank. All words from the word-pair presentation were represented

¹ All words used to construct the word pairs were chosen from a larger set of words that were pre-tested and rated on 9-point scales (1 = *negative* and 9 = *positive*). Eight of the most positively rated (fun, good, smile, friendship, happy, love, joy, and laugh, $M = 8.41$), eight of the most negatively rated (evil, hate, pain, sad, death, agony, sorrow, and suffer, $M = 1.53$), and 16 of the most neutrally rated (the, from, of, and, another, by, just, so, some, that, there, been, around, with, were, or, $M = 4.98$) words were used to construct the positive-neutral and negative-neutral word pairs. The positive set of words was rated significantly more positive than the neutral set ($t[10] = 12.93$, $p < .001$) and the neutral set was rated significantly more positive than the negative set ($t[10] = 15.90$, $p < .001$). The filler neutral-neutral word pairs were constructed from an additional set of 16 neutral words ($M = 5.07$).

² The titles used for the video-preference measure were pre-tested. Originally, 15 titles were created and participants ranked these titles from the one they would most like to see (1) to the one they would least like to see (15). The eight most neutrally ranked titles ($M = 7.38$) were used in the present experiment. Of these eight titles, four of the titles would be associated with a positive valence in the main experiment whereas the other four titles would be associated with a negative valence (depending on counterbalancing). These two groups of four titles were compared using the pretest data to insure that one group of titles was not preferred more than the other group. Using a paired-samples t test, it was determined that these two groups of titles did not differ in the extent to which they were preferred, $t(14) = .38$.

³ Perhaps due to the re-arrangement of lab space, the raw data of 65 participants was lost before the mood-maintenance awareness measure was coded. However, the data of 126 participants were available for analysis.

in this questionnaire and the number of word pairs correctly identified served as the word-pair memory measure. Participants then rated, on 9-point scales (1 = *negative* and 9 = *positive*), filler words and the neutral words from the valenced word pairs. Responses were separately summed and averaged for the neutral words paired with positive and negative words. The memory measure and the word-pair evaluation measure were designed to assess the extent to which participants were consciously aware of the transfer of affect that occurred during the word-pair presentations.

Results

Mood-manipulation check

Participants' responses to the mood index were entered into a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) in which the mood manipulation served as the between-subjects variable. The omnibus test was significant, $F(2, 188) = 131.89$, $p < .001$. Subsequent paired comparisons confirmed that participants who watched the happy video ($M = 11.45$, $SD = 2.71$) reported experiencing a more positive mood than those who watched the neutral video ($M = 8.18$, $SD = 1.47$; $F[1, 188] = 7.99$, $p < .001$) who, in turn, reported experiencing a more positive mood than those who watched the negative video ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 2.52$; $F[1, 188] = 7.99$, $p < .001$).

Video-preference measure

A one-way ANOVA was also used to examine the sum of participants' rankings of the four positive video titles, and this analysis was significant, $F(2, 188) = 3.03$, $p = .05$. A focused contrast was constructed, following Rosenthal and Rosnow (1985), to determine if happy participants preferred the positive video titles ($M = 16.93$, $SD = 4.47$) compared to both sad ($M = 18.65$, $SD = 3.68$) and neutral-mood ($M = 18.08$, $SD = 4.02$) participants. This contrast (with weights of $-2, 1, 1$, for participants in a happy, sad, and neutral mood, respectively) was significant, $F(1, 188) = 5.43$, $p = .021$, and, as determined by a second contrast (with weights of $0, 1, -1$), the sad- and neutral-mood conditions did not differ from one another, $p = .44$.

Mood-maintenance awareness and conscious evaluation checks

A chi-square analysis was performed to examine the frequency with which participants in the three mood conditions reported that their video preferences were based on one of four rationales: mood-maintenance, interestingness, entertainment, and other. This analysis did not yield a significant effect ($\chi^2[6, N = 126] = 5.88$,

$p = .44$), suggesting that mood did not affect individuals' conscious rationales for their choices. Additionally, only six individuals (4.8% of participants for whom data were available) indicated that they chose the videos based on mood-maintenance considerations, so few that the expected frequencies were too small to conduct a valid chi-square test on mood for this individual category. Because it might be argued that individuals seek interesting or entertaining activities for mood-maintenance/elevation purposes (but see Wegener & Petty, 1994), a second analysis was conducted in which these rationales were combined with mood-maintenance and compared to the "other" category. This analysis did not yield a significant effect ($\chi^2[2, N = 126] = 1.00$, $p = .61$), again suggesting that mood did not affect individuals' conscious rationales for their choices.

The number of correct word-pair matches was entered into a one-way ANOVA with mood as the between-subjects factor. There was no effect of mood, $F < 1$, indicating that, on average, participants recalled the same number of word pairs regardless of their mood. Furthermore, participants identified only an average of 2.23 (or 9.3%) of the word pairs correctly. As determined by a matching distribution, the probability of correctly answering this many word pairs by chance is greater than .05 (actually the probability is close to .18). It was therefore concluded that participants were merely guessing the word-pair matches and did not actually recall which words were paired together during the PowerPoint presentation.

To test the possibility that happy participants may have had better memory for mood-congruent word pairs (cf. Isen, 1987), the average number of correctly recalled positive-neutral word pairs was examined. This analysis did not yield a significant effect of mood, $F < 1$, suggesting that happy participants did not experience better recall for mood-congruent word pairs. This same analysis was also independently conducted for negative-neutral and neutral-neutral word pairs and, again, no significant results were observed (all F s < 1). Additionally, participants did not recall word pairs from any of these subsets above chance levels.

Finally, participants' evaluations of the neutral words from the valenced word pairings were entered into a 3 (mood) $\times 2$ (positively paired words vs. negatively paired words) between-within ANOVA. No effects of this analysis attained significance (all p s $> .10$), indicating that participants did not rate the neutral words differently as a function of the valence of the word to which they were paired (grand $M = 5.04$).

Discussion

Supporting the notion that the positive video titles were nonconsciously associated with words of a positive

valence, participants were unable to accurately recall the word pairs presented during the beginning of the experimental session at levels above chance. Moreover, participants did not vary in their conscious positivity evaluations for the neutral words earlier paired with positive or negative words. Nonetheless, happy participants preferred titles composed of words previously associated with positive words more than did sad and neutral-mood participants, indicating that they were able to evaluate the affective qualities of these video titles without conscious awareness (cf. Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995). Furthermore, there is evidence that, with their video preferences, happy participants demonstrated an automatic tendency to seek experiences that would preserve their pleasant moods. Specifically, very few participants actually indicated a mood-maintenance/elevation rationale for ranking the video titles and this rationale was provided equally across mood groups. Taken together, then, the results of the reported study provide evidence that the experience of a happy mood activates an automatic mood-maintenance tendency that leads happy individuals to seek out activities that are nonconsciously associated with a positive valence, affording an opportunity for mood-maintenance. Thus, the tendency for happy people to pursue mood-maintaining activities may be even more pervasive than has been demonstrated in earlier investigations of the HCM.

The current study yielded two seemingly odd effects. First, participants' ratings of positivity for the neutral words were not affected by the valence of the words with which they were previously paired yet, for the happy participants, there was a preference for video titles composed of the neutral words that were earlier paired with positive words. Consistent with the affect infusion model (Forgas, 1995), it was predicted that participants' ratings for the neutral words would be unaffected by the classical-conditioning manipulation because participants had direct access to a previously formed evaluation about the neutral word—a situation in which affect tends not to influence judgments. However, because the video titles were ambiguous and novel and, thus, participants needed to evaluate them online, the affect associated with the constituent neutral words did influence evaluations of the video titles, at least for happy participants who are sensitive to their affective environments. The second somewhat surprising result, is that no mood-congruent recall effects were observed in the current study, although such effects have been documented in the mood and recall literatures (e.g., Isen, 1987). The lack of such effects is likely attributable to a "floor effect" resulting from significant memory degradation over the 20 min that had elapsed between the time the word pairs were presented and the time word-pair recall was measured.

Importantly, the reported study adds to recent research on implicit evaluative conditioning. Olson and Fazio (2001, 2002) have found that, after repeated pairings, a conditioned stimulus can come to acquire the same valence as an unconditioned stimulus, even when individuals are unaware of the simultaneous pairings of these stimuli. Consistent with these findings, the present study found evidence for implicit evaluative conditioning as neutral words acquired a positive or negative valence via pairings with valenced words even though participants were unable to accurately recall the word pairs themselves.

Finally, an alternative account for the results of the happy participants can be derived from Bower's (1981) associative network model of emotion. This model predicts that, via spreading activation, specific moods facilitate the perception, learning, and recall of mood-congruent stimuli. Supporting the notion of mood-congruent perceptual facilitation, Niedenthal, Halberstadt, and Setterlund (1997, Study 2) found that, relative to neutral controls, happy participants identified a string of letters as a word (as opposed to a non-word) more quickly if that word had a happy meaning (e.g., delight, joy), whereas sad participants did not. However, this facilitation pattern was reversed for happy and sad participants when judging words having a sad meaning (e.g., despair, regret). It may be the case, then, that the happy participants in our study perceived/processed the positive video titles more easily than the negative video titles and it was this facilitation, rather than an automatic mood-maintenance tendency, that led happy participants to prefer the happy titles (cf. Jacoby, Kelly, & Dywan, 1989). However, if the ease of processing mood-congruent stimuli determined participants' video preferences, it would follow that, relative to neutral-mood participants, sad participants would have also demonstrated a preference for mood-congruent (negative) video titles. This was clearly not the case as sad and neutral participants did not differ significantly in their preferences for the video titles.

Limiting conditions and future directions

The research and theorizing of Erber and Erber (2001) suggests that mood regulation is context sensitive. Although happy and sad individuals often seek out mood-congruent activities, this occurs primarily in the absence of social or processing constraints. However, when one's current mood is inappropriate within a given context (e.g., being happy at a funeral) or when a neutral mood may facilitate performance on challenging tasks, mood-incongruent activities and information may be *effortfully* sought and processed to reverse or neutralize an experienced mood. There were likely no social or processing constraints within our study and, therefore, our results are consistent with Erber and Erber (2001) in that happy

participants pursued mood-congruent activities (note however, that no such effect was observed for sad individuals). Interestingly, given Erber and Erber's (2001) account, happy and sad participants may demonstrate a preference for mood-inconsistent video titles, and report a mood-regulation rationale for this preference, if they feel their current mood could hinder a social or performance goal for an upcoming activity. It is therefore possible that the present findings might be limited to constraint-free situations. However, unless the intent to neutralize or reverse a current mood "switches off" the automatic mood-maintenance tendency, conscious mood-altering efforts may, to some extent, be betrayed by the automatic proclivity to maintain a positive mood. We encourage future research into these possibilities.

Similar to Erber and Erber (2001), the mood-as-input framework (see Martin, 2001) suggests that mood and the context in which it is experienced interact to influence motivation and evaluative judgments. That is, mood serves as one piece of information, in addition to the processing objectives within a given situation (i.e., to achieve or to enjoy one's self), used in determining goal fulfillment and task evaluations. Specifically, if an individual experiencing a positive mood evokes an achievement rule, this individual will end a task sooner inferring that the positive mood indicates task accomplishment. However, if this individual adopts an enjoyment rule, they should persevere longer at a task, inferring that the positive mood indicates task enjoyment (e.g., Martin, Ward, Achee, & Wyer, 1993). Once positive affect begins to wane, however, the individual ceases task engagement. The results of our study may suggest that the experience of a positive mood automatically evokes an implicit enjoyment rule given the context possesses no achievement demands. That is, happy individuals may, in general, automatically engage in mood-maintaining tasks and cease engagement with mood-depreciating tasks because of an automatically activated enjoyment rule.

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