

Animal instincts: Why do unhappy consumers prefer tactile sensations?

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A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* explains why sad people are more likely to want to hug a teddy bear than seek out a visual experience such as looking at art. Hint: It has to do with our mammalian instincts.

"Human affective systems evolved from mammalian affective systems, and when mammals are young and incapable of thinking, their brain systems have to make these pups able to perform the 'correct' behavior," write authors Dan King (NUS Business School, Singapore) and Chris Janiszewski (University of Florida, Gainesville). One way the brain encourages correct behavior is to use the mammal's affective state to change the [pleasure](#) response to major sensory channels.

For example, mammal pups that are in a negative state are typically injured, sick, heat deprived, or lost. The brain tries to restore physical resources to these vulnerable creatures by increasing their pleasure response to tactile stimulation. "In this way, the mammal will experience pleasure from engaging in behaviors that mitigate the negative affect state (for example, returning to its mother for warmth, protection, and nourishment)," the authors write.

Mammals that are in a positive state are primed for visual exploration, to fulfill goals of protection and territorial expansion. "Animal studies have shown that excited organisms have heightened visual systems and make more visual explorations," the authors explain.

Across five experiments the authors found that consumers felt more pleasure from tactile attributes of products when they were in negative states, and more pleasure from visual aspects when they were in positive states. For example, in one experiment, participants who were in a negative affective state were more appreciative of the tactile qualities of a hand lotion, whereas those in a positive state were more appreciative of the lotion's visual qualities.

"This research suggests that marketers may be able to segment their markets based on the affective propensities of the consumer, and prioritize tactile and visual quality for these different segments," the authors write. "A dollar invested in the 'correct' attribute will generate more pleasure, and hence, will be more likely to be rewarded in terms of higher sales."

More information: Dan King and Chris Janiszewski. "Affect-Gating." Published online June 7, 2011. *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2011. Further information: ejcr.org

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