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Welcome to Who-ville! Examining Positive Affect Before,

During, and After the Holiday Season

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Abstract

The current study examines positive emotions before, during and after the holiday season. Participants completed an online survey at three different times (before, during, and after the holidays). At each time point, individuals rated the degree to which they were experiencing positive and negative emotions. Individuals also answered a series of questions about themselves (e.g., gender) and their holiday experiences (e.g., the number of family members they were expecting to host). We expected to find that participants would experience the most positive emotions before the holidays, the least positive emotions after the holidays, and moderate amounts of positive emotions during the holidays. Four variables (costs, the number of family members participants spent time with, loss of a loved one, and importance of the holidays) were examined to better understand what might lead to decreases in positive emotions around the holiday season. Analyses revealed that participants experienced fewer positive emotions after the holiday season than during the holiday season. Spending money, spending time with many family members, and placing a high amount of importance on the holidays were all positively correlated with positive emotions at at least one time point.

**Welcome to Who-ville! Examining positive affect before,
during, and after the holiday season**

In the classic Dr. Seuss story *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1957), there is a community who loved Christmas and all of the inner-workings of the holiday season. They really enjoyed the experience of giving and receiving gifts and spending time with their family members. Overall, they placed an enormous amount of focus and importance on the holidays. All of these factors lead Cindy Lou-Who and her companions to take pleasure in the holiday season. The Grinch, on the other hand, lived up on a mountain that overlooked Who-Ville, and he hated the Whos and their merriment during the holidays. In the movie, it is shown that the Grinch has this grotesque attitude towards the Whos and the holidays because he was made fun of in school. His peers pushed him further and further away and out of their community. He experienced a loss, a loss of his friends and companions, and this leads to his miserable holiday season.

As it turns out, the Whos are not the only ones who celebrate Christmas. It has been found that 96% of Americans celebrate this holiday (Blanton, 2004). The majority of the remaining 4% celebrate Hannakah, Kwanzaa, New Years, or some other sort of holiday during this time period known as “the holiday season.” Because of the enormous amount of celebration by the American society during this time period, we wanted to look at how positivity fluctuates, and what leads to these fluctuations, before, during, and after the holiday season. Our focus has been split into two research questions. First, we want to know how positive emotions fluctuate -- that is become more or less positive -- before, during, and after the holiday season. Second, we want to know what factors will predict these positive emotions. Based on our review of the extant literature, we looked specifically at the costs incurred during the holiday season, the

number of family members that participants spent time with, whether or not participants had experienced the loss of a loved one around the holidays, and finally, how important the holidays were to the participants. Although much of the existing research on emotions during the holiday season has focused on negative emotions (e.g., depression; David, 1983), we will be focusing on positive emotions during the holiday season. This focus is consistent with a broader trend towards a more “positive psychology” that examines, for example, the sources of human happiness (e.g., Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M., 2000). Our first research question is: How do emotions fluctuate before, during, and after the holiday season? Although there is relatively little research that specifically addresses this question, one relatively recent study by Baier (1987) suggests that negative emotions decrease in the days and weeks before Christmas and increase after the holidays. Baier assessed negative emotions by recording the number of visits to a 24-hour psychiatric emergency service. He found visits to decreased before the holidays and increased afterwards, suggesting that people had more of a need to visit the center because they had increased negative emotions after the holidays. Consistent with these findings, Friedberg (1991) suggests that after the holidays we do not have as much distraction nor do we have the support of our friends and family, as they have all gone home. As a result, people’s negative emotions tend to resurface. After the holiday-related events have passed, and our family has gone home, we are left to deal with our emotions on our own, which leads to a decrease of positive affect.

Our second research question is: What factors predict positive affect before, during, and after the holidays? The first feature we looked at was the costs of the holidays. The literature as a whole suggests that the more money a person spends, the more negative emotions he or she is likely to experience. For example, David (1983) found that the additional financial burdens of

the holiday season lead to lower levels of happiness. Similarly, Kasser and Sheldon (2002) found that when people put a focus on the spending of money and receiving of gifts, they experience lower emotional well-being. In explaining these findings, Baier (1987) suggests that when people are consumed, or focused on the quality of Christmas shopping, they are more anxious and stressed, which are factors that can lead to holiday depression, or negative affect.

A second factor that we examined as a potential predictor of positive emotions during the holiday season was the number of family members that people spend time with during the holiday season. Generally the literature suggests that being with family during the holidays has a positive effect. For example, it has been found that being with family increases overall well-being (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002), whereas the lack of plans and the feeling of loneliness can lead to holiday blues (Baier, 1987). These findings are consistent with the research on emotional fluctuations during the holiday season, as it was stated earlier that being with friends and family can create a distraction from people's negative emotions, and support in dealing with those emotions. This suggests that being with family increases positivity during this time.

We were also interested in whether experiencing a loss during an earlier holiday season might influence individuals' ability to experience positive emotions during the current holiday season. Prior research suggests that levels of subjective well-being are altered with major life events such as being unemployed, being disabled, and for our purposes, experiencing the death of a spouse. People are able to recover from the loss of a spouse, but it can take up to seven years to reach the level of well-being that they were at before the death (Lucas, 2007). If following the death of a spouse, individuals are found to have lower levels of well-being, it would make sense that individuals may also experience a dampening of positive emotions during

the holiday season and that this dampening of positive emotions might extend to the loss of other loved ones.

Finally, we were interested in investigating whether placing large amounts of importance on the holidays affects a person's positivity. If people place a high amount of importance on the holiday season, does this lead to positive or negative emotions? Baier (1987) suggests that when people have "fantasies and unachievable expectations of Christmas," this tends to lead to holiday depression and more negative emotions. When people hold the holidays up on a pedestal, it makes it nearly impossible to meet these expectations. Thus, the more importance that is placed on the holiday season the more unhappy people are.

The culmination of all of this research leads us to believe that there will be fluctuations in positivity before, during, and after the holiday season, and that there are some variables (e.g., loss of a loved one) that will be predictive of positive emotions at each time point. We believe that participants will experience the most positive affect before the holiday season, the least positive affect after the holiday season, and moderate levels of positive affect during the holiday seasons. In addition, we believe that positive affect will be positively predicted by spending less money, spending time with a lot of family members, not having experienced a loss around the holidays, and by placing less importance on the holiday season. In order to test these hypotheses, participants were asked to fill out a two-part survey. In this survey, they answered questions about how often they had experienced positive and negative emotions, as well as short-answer questions reporting individual factors dealing with costs, amount of family members spending time with, loss, and the importance of the holidays.

Method

Participants

Participants were 118 male and 248 female adults, ages 22 to 92 ($M = 44.10$, $SD = 13.70$). The majority of participants were married (58.9%), though 9.0% reported being divorced, and 18.9% reported being single. 60.9% of the sample had children, with the average number of children being 1.39. Participants reported an average household income of \$88,633.96.

Materials

Participants completed an 18-item survey. The survey was made up of two parts.

The first part of the survey was designed to measure the degree to which participants were experiencing positive and negative emotions. The measure was adapted from the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE) by Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener (Diener, Wirtz, Tov, Kim-Prieto, Choi, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2009). The scale consists of 12 different feelings, each having positive (e.g., joy) or negative connotations (e.g., sad). Participants were asked to rate each feeling on a scale of one to five (one being very rarely or never, five being very often or always) based on how much they had experienced each emotion in the past few days. Scores on the six positive items were added to create a positive emotions score. Scores on the six negative items were added to create a negative emotions score. Analyses focused on positive emotions.

The second part of the survey consisted of 12 questions (see Appendix), assessing participants experiences during the holiday season. Analyses focused on the four questions assessing the amount of money participants spent during the holiday season (i.e., how much do you expect to spend on holiday-related expenses this year?), the number of family members participants were spending the holidays with (i.e., roughly how many family members do you intend to spend the holiday season with?), loss experienced during the holidays (i.e., have you

experienced the loss of a family member during the holidays?), and importance of the holidays (i.e., How important are the holidays to you?)

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete the survey at three different times. Some participants were contacted through email and given the link to the survey. Others found the link through the Psychological Research on the Net website (<http://psych.hanover.edu/research/exponnet.html>). The number of times that the participants completed the survey was a choice on the part of the participant, but all participants were asked to complete the survey at all three times. The survey remained the same throughout all three times it was open for completion.

The first time the survey was open to be completed was on December 1st. Participants were able to complete the survey until December 13th. This was considered the “before” the holidays time period. The second time the survey was open to be completed was from December 20th until January 3rd. This was considered the “during” the holidays time period as it included Christmas, Kwanzaa, New Years Eve, and New Years Day. Unfortunately, Hanukkah was not included in this time period as it began on December 8th in 2010. Anyone who only celebrated Hanukkah was omitted because of this.

The third time the survey was open for completion was from January 10th until January 24th. This was considered the “after” the holidays time period.

Results

We expected to find that positive affect would be highest before the holiday season and lowest after the holiday season, with moderate levels of positive affect reported during the holiday season. To test this hypothesis, we ran a repeated-measures ANOVA with time as the

within-subjects variable and positive affect as the dependent variable. We controlled for negative affect and age in all analyses because negative affect was strongly correlated with positive affect at all three time points, $r_s = -.45$ to $-.79$, $p_s < .001$, and age was correlated with positive affect at Time 1, $r = .21$, $p < .01$. These analyses were run using data from only the 50 participants who completed the survey at each of the three survey openings in order to measure the fluctuations of positive affect over all three times. Analyses revealed an overall effect of time, $F(2,45) = 3.29$, $p < .05$ (See Figure 1). Post-hoc tests revealed a marginally significant effect indicating that people were happier during the holidays ($M = 23.08$, $SD = 2.91$) than afterwards ($M = 22.42$, $SD = 2.57$), $F(2,44) = 1.39$, $p = .10$.

Additionally, we hypothesized that positive emotions before, during and after the holidays would be predicted by spending less money, being around many family members, not having experienced loss around past holiday seasons, and putting less importance on the holiday season. Table 1 shows the means, medians, and standards deviations for each variable. To test our hypothesis, we ran a series of bivariate correlations at each time point, including all participants who completed the survey at that time point, and controlling for income. The results of these analyses are summarized in Table 2. The costs of the holidays were found to be significantly correlated with positive affect during ($r = .19$, $p < .05$) and after ($r = .18$, $p < .05$) the holiday season, such that the more people spent, the more positive affect they experienced. The number of family members participants spent time with during the holiday season was a significant predictor of positive emotions during the holidays ($r = .18$, $p < .05$), such that the more family members they spent time with, the more positive affect they experienced. The loss of a loved one was not significantly correlated at any of the time points with positive affect. Importance of the holidays was significant before ($r = .26$, $p < .001$), during ($r = .20$, $p < .05$) and

after ($r = .22, p < .01$) the holiday season, such that the more importance individuals placed on the holiday season, the more positive affect they experienced.

Discussion

Implications

We hypothesized that participants would have the most positive affect before the holiday season, the least positive affect after the holiday season, and moderate levels of positive affect during the holiday season. This hypothesis was partly supported, in that we did find an overall effect of time, and positive affect was lower after the holiday season than it was during, but only marginally so. More simply, people were less happy after the holidays than they were during. The previous research states that during the holidays you are more distracted from the negative thoughts and emotions, and that after the holidays those distractions are gone, so your negative emotions resurface (Friedberg, 1991). The difference that we found could be explained by this phenomenon, as our participants may have been preoccupied with the holiday celebrations during the holiday season, and then afterwards they became more aware of their negative emotions. While Friedberg (1991) and Baier (1987) focus on decreased positive affect after the holiday season, which is what we found in our results, Cattell (1955) tends to focus on this decrease during the holiday season. Based on Cattell's research of the holiday syndrome, it could be stated that during the holidays, people regress to a previous state of discontent because of the constant reminders of past memories of holidays past. In looking at our results, we only found marginally significant results in the difference between during and after the holidays. It is possible that Cattell's theory of the holiday syndrome played a part in our participants' holiday experiences. We wonder if maybe these results are only marginally significant because some of our participants had more trouble with negative emotions during the holidays, as Cattell

addresses, and others had more of this dilemma after the holidays, as Friedberg and Baier suggest. These conflicting ideas would cause our results to be less clear-cut as we had predicted. Putting these results into practical uses, Baier (1987) suggests that spending time with your family after the holiday season is over could provide emotional support past the Christmas holiday itself. In addition, planning ahead as far as traveling expenses and cooking, for example, can help make the transition to the holiday season smoother, and hopefully make post-holiday emotions a little more positive.

From our second hypothesis, which was based on four factors, we only discovered the number of family members participants were spending their holiday season with to be supported by our results. We found that the more family members participants were spending time with, the higher their positive affect was likely to be. This could be due to the fact that being around family members helped the participants to better deal with their negative emotions, as suggested by Friedberg (1991).

Two of the other three factors were found to have the opposite results than we expected, in that, the more money individuals report they spent, the more positive they were, and the more importance that was placed on the holiday season, the more positive affect was shown. In looking at the costs of the holidays, it is important to keep in mind that we controlled for income, so the income level of the participants did not play a role in positivity when correlated with costs. Since spending more money was correlated with positivity, we had to wonder what our participants were spending money on. It is possible that they were spending it on experiences, which could have made them happy. Perhaps they were spending money on food and ingredients for different meals. Because we did not ask, we cannot be sure, but we did find that people who spent money were happier. As far as importance of the holidays, we believe that we

found that people who rated the holidays as important to also be happier, because we did not assess the degree to which people thought it was important. The options for answering this question were one-important, two-neutral, and three-unimportant. If participants celebrated the holidays, and they cared if they were successful, then they likely marked important. Thus, our conclusion would be better stated as participants who cared about the success of the holidays were also found to be happier.

Our final factor, loss of a family member, was neither supported nor negated, as the results we found were not significant. We cannot make a cause and effect inference as to these fluctuations, but our research has shown that when people do spend more money, spend time with more family members, and take time to make the holidays more important on an individual level, they also tend to be happier. However, the direction of this effect cannot be known simply from this study. For example, it is not clear whether spending more money makes participants happy, or if being happy makes the participants spend more money. However, this information does provide us with some practical keys to understanding how positivity can be affected around the holidays.

Limitations

One major limitation to our study is that our survey questions were fairly broad. In asking our participants if they had experienced a loss, we did not ask them to specify who it was whom they had lost. The study by Lucas (2007) showed that recovery from a loss of a spouse can take up to seven years. So in addition to asking who had passed away, we would want to ask when they had passed away to get more specific results. We might also ask what participants were spending their money on. Was it experiences, gifts, food, etc.? By asking this, we would be able to look at differences in positivity based on what participants are spending their money on.

Additionally, we would ask participants for a more specific degree of importance for the holidays. Instead of having the options be important, neutral, and unimportant, we might also add “extremely important (I will lose sleep while I am planning for them)” and “do not care (I wish there was not a holiday season).” This would allow us to do more comparisons and correlations with positivity.

Furthermore, we would hope to look for trends in a more diverse population as most of our participants celebrated Christmas. We believe we might find differences between populations that celebrate in different ways. For instance, in an article by Thomas (1998) the argument is made for the difference in celebrations of Christmas as a religious holiday, versus the celebration of Christmas as an American holiday. The happiness levels found in the individuals who celebrate the holiday as a religious one are found to be more positive than the individuals who chose to celebrate it as the holiday American society has formed it. If these differences can be found within one holiday, we believe they could be found between different populations.

Conclusion

The inconsistency of our data with previous research goes to show that there is much more research to be done in the area of positive affect before, during, and after the holiday season. It is possible that individual differences play a much bigger role than we are giving them credit for. For example, people celebrate the holidays for different reasons and they celebrate it in different ways. Some people spend enormous amounts of money, while others spend very little. Some people celebrate with their extended families, while others celebrate with only one friend or loved one. However, as our data shows, we did not find one or all of these things to be a consistent predictor of positive affect at all three time points, other than importance. There are some other factors at work in predicting emotions during this time, and one of the largest and

most important factors continues to be individual differences. Like the Grinch, when it is assumed that one factor is more important than other factors, as he thought the most important factor of the holiday season for the Whos were the material items, it can deter our focus. The Grinch tried to take these material items away. In reality, the Whos had a much different experience of the holidays compared to the Grinch. All they needed to do was be reminded of how important the holidays were to them, and spend time with their families in order to be happy.

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Appendix A

Survey

1. Please create a 4 character alpha-numeric code (Example: FROG or C1D6). Please make sure this code is easy for you to remember, but is not easy to link directly to your name. If this is your 2nd or 3rd time filling out this survey, please enter the same code you entered on previous surveys. Additionally, if you have already filled out this survey before, you may skip questions 1-11 if you wish.
2. Please think about what you have been doing and experiencing during the past couple days. Then report how much you experienced each of the following feelings, using the scale below. For each item, select a number from 1 to 5.

1=Very Rarely or Never

2=Rarely

3=Sometimes

4=Often

5=Very Often or Always

Contented

Afraid

Pleasant

Good

Happy

Positive

Joyful

Sad

Bad

Negative

Unpleasant

Angry

Please finish these thoughts, as they pertain to you, in as much detail as possible...

1. The holiday season is supposed to be a time of...
2. The best part of the holiday season for me personally is...
3. The worst part of the holiday season for me personally is...

Demographics

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. How many children do you have?
4. What are the ages of your oldest and youngest children?

5. What is your marital status? (Single, In a relationship, married, widowed, divorced)
6. What is your average household income per year (in dollars)?
7. How much do you expect to spend on holiday-related expenses this year (e.g., gifts, food, travel, etc.)?
8. What holidays will you celebrate this holiday season (Select all that apply)? (Christmas, New Years, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, None, Others)
9. Roughly how many family member do you intend to spend the holiday season with?
10. What is your estimated time commitment to the following “holiday season activities?” (Cooking dinners (in hours), Shopping for presents (in hours), Hosting other people (in days))
11. Will you be traveling this holiday season?
12. In you answered YES to #11, how far will you be traveling (in miles)? If you answered NO, go to next questions.
13. Have you experienced the loss of a family member during the holidays? (Does not have to have been in the recent past.)
14. Do you have any family members who usually come home for the holidays, but will not be able to make it this year?
15. How important are the holidays to you? (Important, Neutral, Unimportant)

Tables and Figures

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics for Variables Assessing Participants' Holiday-Related Experiences

Difference Variable	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Costs	\$1,420.81	\$1,000	\$1,305.99
Number of Family Members	16.08	12	14.61
Loss	0.31	2	0.46
Importance	1.46	1	0.82

Table 2.

Correlations Representing Associations Between Participants' Holiday-Related Experiences and Positive Emotions Before, During, and After the Holiday Season

Difference Variable	Before (N = 217)	During (N = 156)	After (N = 158)
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Costs	.10	.19*	.18*
Number of Family Members	.13	.18*	.10
Loss	.07	.06	.07
Importance	.26***	.20*	.22**

Note. Analyses controlled for participants' age and ratings of negative affect at each time point.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

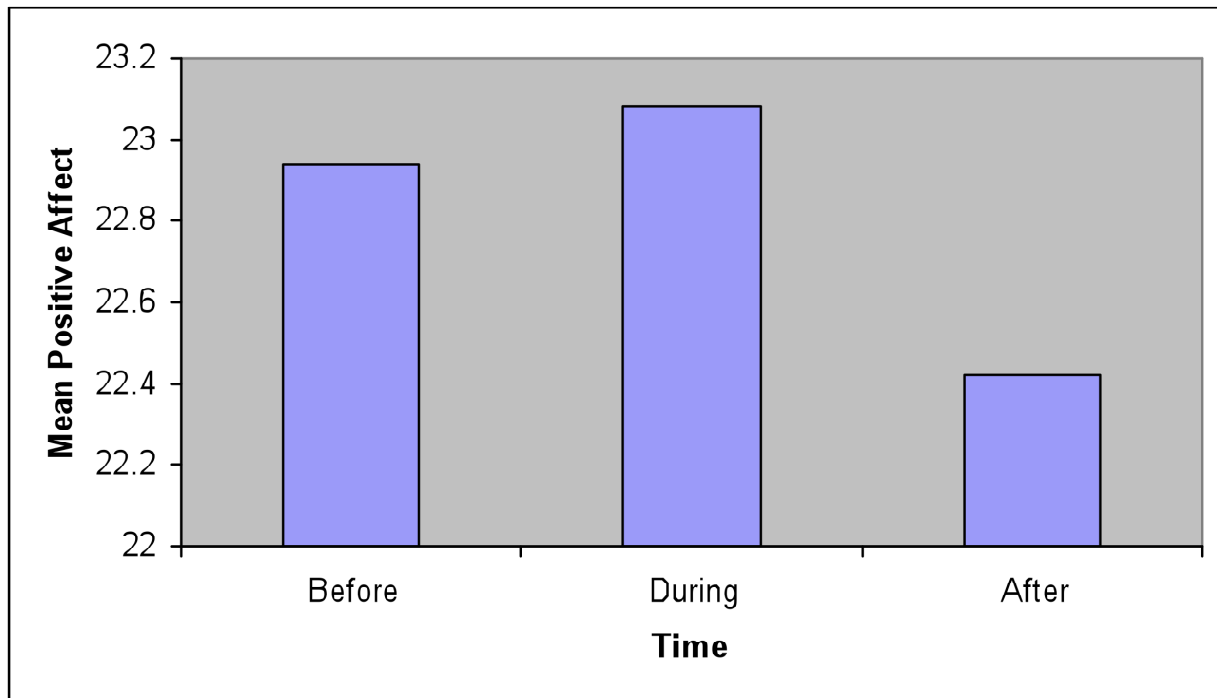


Figure 1. Average reported scores for positive affect reported before during and after the holiday season as reported by the 50 participants who completed the survey at all three time points.