Preference Invites Categorization

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It is no secret that you know more (that is, have expertise) about things you are interested in. If you hate baseball, you are not going to spend your spare time reading up homerun statistics and debating who the best pitcher is. On the other hand, if you inadvertently tell a wine connoisseur, that you enjoy a particular wine “just because it tastes good”, it will not be long before you are being lectured on different grape varietals and schooled in the different soil compositions of neighboring vineyards. However, it is less clear how we categorize and sort all of those facts related to things that interest us. Previous research has indicated that positive feelings towards an item or topic result in broader, more general categorizations of it. In addition, research has focused on expertise as being the main factor in categorization. Psychologists Rachel Smallman and Neal J. Roese from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign wanted to examine the role of preference, not expertise, in categorization.

A group of students were divided into three groups: positive, negative or neutral preference. During the experiment, a neutral symbol was paired with either a positive (a pleasant scene), negative (an unpleasant scene) or neutral image. Next, the participants sorted a deck of 20 cards (each card depicting a neutral symbol they were shown earlier) into meaningful categories.

According to results published in the December issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, preference by itself *can* influence categorization. The participants in the positive group sorted the symbols into finer, more specific categories compared to participants in the negative group. The authors suggest that when we like something, we will spend more time thinking about it, poring over its finer details and this will result in more specific categorization.

These findings are particularly relevant for consumer psychology because consumers often seek out new kinds of products related to positive earlier experiences. In this way, categorization based on preference can result in specific brands being thought of as distinct. These results also have implications for goal-oriented behavior. The authors note that “this research has shown that goal-relevant objects are automatically evaluated more positively than are goal-irrelevant objects.” The authors conclude that a more positive evaluation results in stronger intentions and more motivation to complete goals.