

## Does the Grateful Emotion Satisfice?

### Abstract

We try to arrive at a rational decision in all the choices of our life. In this process, we may exhaust all the options or restrict the alternatives and arrive at a 'satisficing' decision. Our emotion plays a crucial role in this process of evaluating and choosing the suitable alternative, though they may not be rational. Experimental studies on gratitude show that it has its own bias in decision making. The influence of gratitude on the evaluation of the alternatives is explored in this study by studying the post-graduate students' decision-making process ( $n = 157$ ) at a private university in India. We found that gratitude does not influence 'maximizing tendency.' The results have been discussed, followed by the directions of future research.

(Keyword: Gratitude, Bounded rationality, Maximizing, Satisficing, Decision making, and Positive emotion)

### Introduction

Today, there are many options we have in our daily lives, whether it is about choosing a restaurant or choosing the food inside a restaurant. This makes the decision-making challenging to process the information and arrive at a 'satisficing' (one that is good enough) decision. While dealing with this 'paradox of choice,' some people took more effort to choose the best option (maximizers). They want to consider a vast number of available choices to arrive at a decision. At the same time, some people chose a "fairly good" option (satisficers). They tend to consider some criteria to decide (Schwartz et al. 2002). This relentless search for more alternatives may cause decision-making difficulty as the choice complexity increases (Fasolo, Carmeci, & Misuraca, 2009; Greifeneder, Scheibehenne, & Kleber, 2010). They may also look for a high standard in everything and may be reluctant to settle for the next best. As a result, this process may negatively influence their well-being. Maximizers are not to be happy, in comparison to the satisficers. Because the tendency to find and make the best decision can be maladaptive, as they become exhausted from the constant search for the best option (Schwartz et al., 2002). So, maximizers are less satisfied than the satisficers with their decisions. Maximizers are more likely to engage in social comparison, affected by upward social comparison, and less satisfied in bargaining games (Misuraca, Faraci, Gangemi, Carmeci, & Miceli, 2015). Some of the gratitude's consequences can act as an anecdote to this tendency of 'maximizing.'

The available research shows that gratitude significantly predicts well-being relationship (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010; Jans-Beken, Jacobs, Janssens, Peeters, Reijnders, Lechner, & Lataster, 2020), and prosociality (Ma, Tunney, & Ferguson, 2017; Tsang, 2020). However, the studies on the influence of gratitude in decision-making are

limited. The available studies suggest that grateful emotion influence the beneficiary to take a biased decision (Kates, & DeSteno, 2020); Zhang, Chen, & Ni, 2020). People with grateful feelings may not increase the search alternatives. The tendency to search for more alternatives in taking a decision happens because of the discontent with the available options. As they look for more buy-in, they are not satisfied with an option and tend to go for more alternatives in the given situation. Grateful emotion has a broader life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the world's positive (Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010). People with gratitude are content with what they have because they count their blessings, and they are more likely to judge their lives as satisfactory (Emmons, Froh, & Rose, 2019; Alkozei, Smith, & Killgore, 2018). As a result, the tendency to search for more alternatives will be reduced. They tend to be content with the available options and less inclined to go for more alternatives in the given situation.

This study intends to find out whether the trait gratitude predicts the maximizing tendency through the survey method. Recent studies differentiated maximizing as a strategy and goal (Schwartz, 2016). Maximizing as a strategy involves searching for more alternatives in each decision of life. Maximizing as a goal involves setting a high standard for the self in life. Studies show that maximizing as a strategy was maladaptive and negatively related to well-being but not maximizing as a goal (Misuraca, Faraci, Gangemi, Carmeci, & Miceli, 2015). Hence, we have taken maximizing as a strategy, as well as a goal for this study.

### **Hypotheses Development**

One of the reasons for striving more is due to anxiety and the feeling of insecurity. People experiencing gratitude should be less prone to such strivings because they view their lives overall as more secure, safe, and ultimately fulfilling (Jiang, Sun, Liu, & Pan, 2016; Polak & McCullough, 2006). Considering the pro-social generosity nature of gratitude, people with gratitude tend to invest in social relations, be supportive, have communalistic values, and feel less insecure (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Gratitude will build a sense of satisfaction with life, which will make individuals less inclined to pursue striving for more (Chaplin, John, Rindfleisch, & Froh, 2019; Lambert, Fincham, Stillman and Dean, 2009).

Gratitude has the potential to reduce this excessive economic impatience. In an experimental study, the participants' different emotional inducements (Gratitude, Happy and Neutral) were asked to make choices between receiving smaller cash amounts immediately Vs. more significant cash amounts in the future (after a week or months). It was found that only gratitude conditions exhibited more extraordinary patience in comparison to participants of the other two conditions (DeSteno, Dickens, and Lerner, 2014). Grateful people may not focus on striving for more, searching for better alternatives or possessions of wealth; Rather, they would be expected to contemplate the positive experiences or outcomes (McCullough, Emmons and Tsang, 2002). Pleasant events come to mind more easily for grateful individuals than for less grateful. Because trait gratitude was positively associated with a positive memory bias (Alkozei, Smith, Waugaman, Kotzin, Bajaj, & Killgore, 2019; Watkins, & Bell, 2017). Not only do grateful individuals tend to recall more positive memories when

instructed to do so, but they also tend to have more positive memories come to mind even when they are attempting to remember life's adverse events. (Pillay, Park, Kim, & Lee, 2020; Watkins, Grimm and Kolts, 2004).

The most significant difference between the maximizers and satisficers is how they evaluate the choice (Misuraca, Faraci, Gangemi, Carmeci, & Miceli, 2015). We speculate that gratitude influences people to positively evaluate the cognitive ability not to go beyond the available options and make the best decision. In some of the experiments, under the grateful condition, involving sharing of resources, or cooperation vs. non-co-operation, the participants developed a positive appraisal of the situation and the helpers (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). As a result, when confronted with making choices, under the influence of grateful emotion, people prefer to cooperate with the helpers immediately, sometimes even with strangers (Balconi, Fronda, & Vanutelli, 2019; DeSteno, Bartlett, Baumann, Williams, & Dickens, 2010). The positive appraisal of the situation or helpers' act makes them biased towards the helpers and prevents them from looking for more opportunities or search for more alternatives. This enables them to be satisfied with life. The experience of gratitude may foster eudaimonic well-being such as autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Dispositional gratitude (high and low gratitude) of cancer patients reduced distress and increased well-being, mainly referring to hedonic, i.e., relaxation and contentment (Ruini & Vescovelli, 2013). Grateful adolescents were socially integrated and higher in absorption, satisfied with life, and less envious and depressed than their less grateful counterparts (Emmons, Froh, & Rose, 2019). They will not waste their time in going for numerous alternatives in every decision of the life. To state formally:

H1: The 'overall tendency to maximize' significantly differs between the low gratitude and high gratitude group members.

H1a: The 'tendency to search for more alternatives' maximization component differs significantly between the low gratitude and high gratitude group members.

H1b: The 'difficulty in making decision' component of maximization significantly differs between the low gratitude and high gratitude group members.

H1c: The 'the tendency to have high-status regard' component of maximization significantly differs between the low gratitude and high gratitude group members.

Implicit to these hypotheses is the assumption that those with high gratitude will have lesser tendency: to maximize, search for alternatives, of difficulty in decision making and high status regarding.

## **Methodology**

### **Data and Sample**

We have contacted 180 students MBA students from universities in the Eastern part of India through online mode and offline mode. We have received 171 responses. After removing for missing variables, we have taken 157 responses for analysis.

### Measures

All the variables were measured on a scale of 1 (I strongly disagree) to 5 (I strongly agree) through self-reporting.

*Gratitude.* The gratitude was measured using the Gratitude Adjective Checklist (GAC, McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). The GAC comprises three affect adjectives (grateful, appreciative, and thankful) and has been used to assess both state and trait gratitude. The scale has three items (“I usually feel grateful”). It was a modified version (“How grateful do you feel toward the other participant?”) of Bartlett and DeSteno, (2006). It measures both benefit-triggered gratitude and generalized gratitude.

*Maximizing.* Maximizing was measured by the inventory of Schwartz et al. (2002) 10 items scales. It has three sub-components: the tendency to search for alternatives (When I watch TV, I channel surf, often scanning through the available options even while attempting to watch one program), decision-making difficulties (When shopping, I have a hard time finding clothing that I love) and the high-status regard (“No matter what I do, I have the highest standards for myself”).

### Analysis

The responses were divided into two groups based on their gratitude score: high gratitude group (n=60) and low gratitude group (n=98). The Kruskal Wallis test was carried out to compare the statistical differences of ‘tendency to maximization’ and their subcomponents between two independent samples (high and low gratitude groups). As the sample sizes of the two groups were not in the exact sizes and non-normal distributions in nature, the Kruskal Wallis test was performed. The descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and alphas for the different measures) are presented in Table 1.

(Table 1 here)

The mean difference of ‘the tendency to maximize’ between the two groups was present in table 2. The mean of the low and high gratitude group is 3.41, and 3.53 respectively.

(Table 2 here)

The results of the hypothesis testing are presented in Table 3. The findings show no statistically significant difference in the tendency to maximize ( $p = 0.24$ ) and their sub-components ( $p=0.07, 0.33, 0.87$ ) between the high and low gratitude groups. This indicates that

groups based on gratitude score are not differing between themselves on ‘the tendency to maximize.’

(Table 3 here)

Hence, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that the ‘tendency to maximize’ remains the same across the low and high gratitude groups. This indicates that gratitude does not influence ‘the tendency to maximize.’

## Discussion

This study intended to explore the influence of gratitude whether the maximizing tendency differs across the low and high gratitude groups through the survey method. The survey was carried out among the post-graduate students at a private university in India. The ‘tendency to maximize’ (and their sub-components - ‘tendency to search for more alternatives, difficulty in making the decision,’ and the tendency to have high-status regard’) do not significantly differ between the low gratitude and high gratitude groups members. Though the hypothesis was not supported, the study threw up interesting conclusions: The one was about the hypothesis, and the other was about the elicitation of gratitude.

First, maximization tendency or decision-making process happens at the cognitive level. Gratitude may be too weak to influence the cognitive aspect. The influence of gratitude may be in social relations and personal well-being only. The available studies of gratitude and cognition are related to cooperating or helping aspect of the cognition (Balconi, Fronda, & Vanutelli, 2019; Fox, Kaplan, Damasio, & Damasio, 2015; Vayness, Duong, & DeSteno, 2020) or moral aspect (Drażkowski, Kaczmarek, & Kashdan, 2017; Syropoulos, Watkins, Shariff, Hodges, & Markowitz, 2020). So, drawing from the moral affect theory of gratitude (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001), we can conclude that as a moral emotion, gratitude may be associated with moral cognition only or those decision making that involves moral dilemmas (DeSteno et al., 2010). Studies have also found that gratitude’s biased, partial influence in decision making (Zhang, Chen, & Ni, 2020). It may have little or no influence over the information processing or information search, mainly if it is not related to moral issues.

Second, research has also shown that trait gratitude per se weakly predicts than the state gratitude (Ma, Tunney, & Ferguson, 2017). Hence this could be a reason for the lack of significant difference between the groups. Though we have used the "state" gratitude scale, it measures trait aspect only. State gratitude is a momentary feeling of grateful emotions. State gratitude is linked to immediate happenings and responses from specific situations and activities, and it emerges whenever the individual feels grateful for those specific events. For example, the experimental studies have used the gratitude interventions (gratitude journal writing, gratitude expression) to elicit gratitude, followed by using this state gratitude scale. In the absence of such interventions, and measurement of state gratitude measures trait only.



Third, generalized gratitude is different from specific gratitude. State or trait gratitude measures the general tendency to feel grateful (Overall, I feel grateful, or I feel grateful most of the time). When we study the impact of gratitude, it must be related to the target instead of general. For example, studies of sports and organizational literature have used the domain-specific ('I feel grateful to my coach,' 'I feel grateful to my organization') gratitude (Chen, & Chang, 2017; Ford, Wang, Jin, & Eisenberger, 2018; Ruser, Yukhymenko-Lescroart, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Moore, 2020; Ward, 2017). When gratitude is felt for a specific reason, the predictability may be higher than when it is felt for a general reason. Failing to measure gratitude with specific maximization tendency or status may be why not getting the results as hypothesized.

Fourth, to narrow down the above point further, gratitude has many facets (Morgan, Gulliford, & Kristjánsson, 2017). It can be understood from the definitions: "a life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world" (Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010), "generalized tendency to recognize beneficence ...other people's benevolence" (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), "a moral emotion that is other-praising..." (Haidt, 2003), "an attribution-dependent state" (Weiner, 1985), "Awareness of a gain for which someone else is responsible" (Luccarelli, 2019), "as an adaptive evolutionary mechanism ..relevant to healthy psychological and interpersonal outcomes" (Chopik, Newton, Ryan, Kashdan, & Jarden, 2019), "is the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself" (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). These definitions differ from the generalized tendency to specific, from moral to social, and psychological. Depends on how defines and measure, this will have a different influence on the outcomes. For example, students' perceptions of gratitude (appreciation for others and sense of abundance) had a different association with social cognition (Bosacki, Sitnik, Dutcher, & Talwar, 2018).

## Conclusion

As a positive emotion, whether the emotion of gratitude will act as an anecdote to the 'maximizing' tendency was the study's objective. The role of emotion in decision making has been widely studied (Bubić, & Erceg, 2018; Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, & Kassam, 2015; George, & Dane, 2016). Though gratitude's influence on decision making has been examined in the context of pro-social and risk preference, its role on maximizing vs. satisficing has not been explored. We found no support for our hypothesis. Gratitude does not influence the maximizing tendency of the individual. The limitations of the study throw light on the future direction of research.

## Limitations and Direction for Future Research

First, the lack of specific gratitude measures (I am grateful that I have a decent living, or I am grateful that I have good status) may be the major limitation of studying the relationship between gratitude and maximizing tendency. Future studies can pursue this further by constructing and validating a questionnaire that measures the grateful feeling towards what we have.

Second, lack of gratitude elicitation, followed by gratitude measurement as a method, is another limitation. The future (experimental) studies can customize the 'count your blessings' kind of gratitude intervention relating to maximization (by asking the participants to count what material possession they have or feel grateful for their status in society). This will give rise to a grateful feeling related to the 'maximization tendency' only.

Third, the existing gratitude research has not differentiated generalized gratitude's influence, specific gratitude on their outcomes. Exploring the different facets of gratitude can be another exciting research. Eliciting gratitude towards own skill and monitoring the self-esteem, accomplishments are some of the examples.

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