Cross-Cultural Differences in Delight

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Delight is the augmented pleasure that accompanies a positive outcome, such as a gift or a sales promotion, due to its unexpectedness. To be delighted, consumers must be surprised. Surprise makes an enjoyable event even more pleasurable. Past research shows that East Asians are less likely than Westerners to experience surprise. If that is the case, East Asians may react differently to unexpected positive outcomes. We investigate whether East Asians are less delighted than Westerners by an unexpected promotional gift since East Asians are more likely than Westerners to think “holistically” and exhibit the hindsight bias (or the tendency to “have known it all along”). Relative to Westerners, East Asians report less pleasure and less surprise with unanticipated promotional gifts. However, when an unexpected gift is attributed to luck, East Asians experience even more delight than Westerners. For East Asians, luck is a means for external control that turns an unexpected outcome into a delightful one.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper examines cross cultural differences in delight. Delight is a combination of affect (pleasure or happiness) and surprise (contrast with expectations). In consumer and business marketing, pleasant surprises occur when customers experience new products, new features of familiar products, service upgrades, sales promotions, or free gifts. Past research shows that surprising positive events are more pleasurable than expected positive events, and surprising negative events are more painful. Surprise amplifies emotional experiences by causing arousal and activation that heightens valence. However, are such magical effects universal? Are Chinese customers and American consumers delighted by the same events? If so, does delight have the same effects on behavior? Cross cultural researchers have found numerous differences in the expression of emotions between Westerners and East Asians. The frequency and intensity of positive emotions is stronger in Western cultures than in Asian cultures (Scollon, Diener, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2004; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Asians also tend to report lower levels of well-being.

Why? First, groups differ in cultural norms. It is more desirable to express and experience positive feelings in Western cultures (Kitayama, Markus and Kurokawa 2000). Asian cultures are more accepting of negative feelings (Diener and Suh 1999). Second, groups differ in their need for positive self regard. A review by Heine, Lehman, Markus and Kitayama (1999) suggests that Japanese are more critical of themselves than Westerners. Greater self criticism could lead to lower levels of well being. Third, groups differ in their outlook on the future. Chang, Asakawa, and Sanna (2001) compared optimism and pessimism by asking Japanese and European Americans to predict the probability of life events. European Americans showed no differences in their predictions of their own futures and those of others. However, Japanese participants believed they were less likely than others to experience positive events; they exhibited a pessimistic bias.

On the other hand, probably the most well-known difference between Westerners and East Asians involves reasoning styles. Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001) argued that East Asians are holistic and make little use of categories, while Westerners focus their attention on objects and the categories to which they belong. East Asians rely heavily on dialectical reasoning, while Westerners are more likely to use analytical reasoning based on formal rules and logic. The holistic reasoning style of Asian cultures is guided by the assumption that everything in the universe is connected (Choi, Dalal, & Kim-Prieto, 1999). Holistic reasoning styles are also associated with a greater acceptance of contradiction. Confronted with apparent contradictions, a dialectical person will try to reconcile the opposing propositions, seek a middle way, or transcend the points of disagreement. The analytical thinking style tends to confront the contradiction head on and reject the less plausible proposition (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Perhaps because they create more holistic and complex causal theories, East Asians are less likely that Westerners to experience surprise and more likely to experience hindsight (Choi and Nisbett, 2000).

If surprising positive events are more pleasurable than expected positive events and East Asians are less likely to experience surprise, they may report less pleasure than Westerners when confronted with a positive unexpected event. We argue that these cross-cultural differences are due, in part, to differences in the extent of exhibited hindsight bias, which, in turn, affects experienced surprise. Finally, we expect that positive feelings about an unexpected gift may transfer to related stimulus such as a store, brand or product.

We designed three studies to test the effect of cultural orientation on affective reactions to an unanticipated gift and attitudes towards a related product/services:

In Experiment 1, we found support for the hypothesis that Westerners derive greater pleasure than East Asians from an unannounced gift ($2 gift certificate at a University Café) relative to no gift. Moreover, Westerners are happier than East Asians with an unannounced gift (University car sticker valued at $2) relative to an equivalent announced gift. Culture was a moderator of expectations on reported pleasure. Westerners were more delighted than East Asians by unexpected positive events. Experiment 2 investigated cross-cultural differences in surprise and hindsight as potential causes of affective differences. We found that Westerners reported less hindsight and more surprise than East Asians with an unexpected gift. Surprise mediated immediate pleasure. Surprise and hindsight were negatively correlated. Presumably, East Asians believed that they could better anticipate unexpected events, and, as a consequence, felt less surprised about it. In Experiment 2, the gift was a University car sticker that was allegedly provided by the University Bookstore as a token of appreciation for completing a customer satisfaction survey. Reported pleasure associated with the car sticker transferred to attitudes about the bookstore. Momentary pleasure was correlated with attitudes. Not only did Westerners feel happier than East Asians about the unexpected gift, Westerners had more positive attitudes towards the bookstore when the gift was unexpected. Experiment 3 builds on research showing that East Asians and Westerners differ in their concept of luck, and East Asians are more likely than Westerners to believe that luck helps one deal with uncertainty. Experiment 3 demonstrates that East Asians derive greater pleasure than Westerners from an unexpected gift associated with good luck, and that their positive affect transfers to the overall experience of the experiment. In other words, the addition of a luck element allows East Asians to experience the emotional amplification resulting from the unexpectedness of the gift.

Our findings have implications for the design of international marketing strategies. Marketers often use pleasant surprises to influence consumers’ brand evaluations and, thus, purchase decisions. In fact, the marketing literature emphasizes the role of consumer delight as a source of competitive advantage (Oliver, Rust and Varki 1997). However, the use of “delighting” marketing activities across countries has to accommodate these identified differences in consumer reactions to “unexpectedness”.

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References


