Delight-As-Magic: Refining the Conceptual Domain of Customer Delight

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores consumers’ experience of delight and investigates the role of surprise in this process. These questions are examined through an interpretation of five consumers’ own accounts of delight in the context of travel experiences, informed by literature from the fields of psychology, aesthetics, and consumer research. The exercise contributes to our understanding of customer delight by identifying two distinct modes of delight: delight-as-pleasant-surprise and delight-as-magic. Delight-as-magic refers to the efferent emotional arousal individuals derive from consumption experiences they imbue with a subjective, symbolic meaning associated with themes of interpersonal warmth, aesthetic experiences, or leisure experiences.

“What is man before beauty cajoles from him a delight in things for their own sake, or the serenity of form tempers the savagery of life?”—Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller

Customer delight has gained considerable popularity among marketing practitioners in the last decade and has more recently attracted the attention of marketing researchers. Deming (1986) introduced the concept of customer delight as the true source of competitive advantage in an era where customer satisfaction has become a competitive necessity. Consultants and managers rapidly espoused this philosophy, and customer delight has been substituted for customer satisfaction as a strategic objective in several firms, including Eastman Kodak, AT&T, and Sun Microsystems (Chandler 1989; Hines 1995; Trader 1995).

In support of this trend, research findings have indicated that customer delight may contribute to enhanced customer satisfaction, word-of-mouth communication, repurchase intentions, and more positive evaluations of brand extensions (Kumar 1996; Oliver, Rust and Varkey 1997; Westbrook and Oliver 1991).

Little agreement exists, however, regarding the meaning of ‘delight’. Indeed, firms that adopt a customer delight strategy interpret this concept differently to signify exceeding customer expectations, providing superior quality through the service encounter, or creating a “wow” factor by providing customers with unexpected attention and service features (Chandler 1989; Cohen 1997; Hines 1995).

Similarly, efforts by psychology and consumer researchers to define the concept of delight have yielded various conceptualizations. One conceptualization construes customer delight as extreme satisfaction, suggesting that delight occurs when customer expectations are highly exceeded (Estalami 2000; Ngobo 1999). More popular conceptualizations of delight involve various combinations of positive affect, arousal, and surprise (Oliver et al. 1997; Plutchik 1980; Russell 1980; Westbrook and Oliver 1991). Adopting a prototypical approach of emotion, a third group of researchers have depicted delight as a type of joy or happiness (Richins 1997; Shaver et al. 1987). Finally, studies eliciting consumers’ own descriptions of delight have associated this emotion to feelings of excitement, effervescence, warmth, well-being, joy, exuberance, thrill, exhilaration, elation, surprise, joy, relaxation, and comfort (Davitz 1969; Kumar 1996; Menon and Dubé 1999).

Discrepancies among various conceptualizations of the construct and empirical findings suggest that certain issues remain unresolved. In particular, the role of surprise in the experience of delight needs to be clarified. While Oliver et al. (1997) posited surprise as a necessary antecedent of delight, some empirical investigations have suggested that consumers sometimes experience delight in the absence of surprise (Kumar 1996; Oliver et al. 1997). The purpose of the present study is to explore the role of surprise in consumers’ experience of delight. Specifically, the experiential dimensions of delight, the underlying meanings of those experiences, and the conditions under which delight emerges are examined through an interpretation of consumers’ own accounts of delight in the context of travel experiences. The interpretation is embedded in an experiential view of consumer research (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) and it is informed by literature in the areas of psychology, aesthetics theory, and consumer behavior.

METHOD

Study Design and Data Collection
Phenomenological interviewing (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989) was well suited to the study’s discovery-oriented goal (Wells 1993) of understanding the meanings of delight for consumers. Five informants participated in a series of two interviews—averaging a total of two hours of interview per participant—in addition to a subsequent member check. Interviews, which were conducted either in the informant’s home or in a University office, were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The investigation was situated in the context of travel experiences. This context was chosen because it potentially includes consumption experiences covering a broad spectrum of consumer involvement and affective content, that is, various levels of emotional arousal (Price, Arnould, and Tierney 1995). Consequently, a broad definition of the term “travel” was adopted, as informants may have engaged in while traveling for any purpose (business, leisure, adventure, etc.) they may have engaged in while traveling.
more directive, in that informants were asked about a particular type of experience, both interviews were formulated to allow informants to freely describe their experience in detail.

Finally, informants were contacted a third time to conduct member checks, a procedure that assesses the credibility of the author’s interpretation against the informants’ view of their experiences. Informants corrected certain minor chronological errors, but they generally found that the interpretation was interesting and reflected their own experience.

Data Analysis

The process of defining the conceptual domain of customer delight rested on the general procedures of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The objective of this interpretation was to identify the experiential dimensions of delight, to understand the underlying meanings of those experiences, and to gain insight into the conditions under which delight emerges. An idiographic analysis of the text transcribed from the interviews was first conducted, where the experiences of informants were considered individually. This involved a reconstruction of each informant’s travel history, as well as an impressionistic reading of transcripts to identify themes emerging from informants’ travel experiences. The number of delight episodes identified by each participant ranged from none at all to eight cases, for a total of twenty episodes of delight. A procedure of open coding broke these episodes down into various categories of information (e.g., physical responses to delight, related emotions, context, etc.). These experiences were then aggregated in a cross-case analysis using axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Axial coding involved connecting the basic categories into more general conceptual classes composed of sub-categories. Selective coding then mapped relationships between the larger conceptual classes. Thus the interpretation process increasingly moved towards a more abstract level of analysis. It is important to note that this process was not linear, however, and it often entailed moving back and forth between the various coding operations as the interpretation developed. In fact, the analysis progressed through a hermeneutical process (Arnold and Fisher 1994), with successive iteration between individual experiences, emerging global themes, and the literature that informed the interpretation, with the goal of removing contradictions from the developing interpretation.

DELIGHT-AS-MAGIC: EMERGING THEMES

An analysis of the interviews revealed episodes of delight as pleasant surprise, converging with Oliver et al.’s (1997) definition of delight. However, and more importantly, a second type of delight also emerged which did not involve pleasant surprise. These episodes constitute the focus of the present analysis. In lieu of positive affect and surprise, these episodes of delight appeared to be endowed with a magical quality that eludes rationalization. In the words of one informant, these episodes consist of:

[…] little special moments that you kind of remember. You get a flash, sort of. You’re not really sure why or how… why it’s there, but… you’re just delighted and that’s it, I guess.-Susan

Similarly, these delight episodes were also associated with situations that informants viewed as “just right” or “perfect”:

[…] and I remember telling my husband “Ah… This is just perfect”. It was like time was standing still, also, because it was so peaceful and quiet, and we were just standing there and… I was, like, totally delighted and out of it [laughs].-Claire

The object of delight in these instances appears to possess a quintessential nature, a “rare and mysterious capacity to be just exactly what they ought to be… unequivocally right” (Cornfield and Edwards 1983, in Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, p. 16). Indeed, Cornfield and Edwards’ characterization of the pleasure quintessential objects ignite in us is reminiscent of the childlike experience of delight depicted by some informants, and suggests that this pleasure arises from the meaning bestowed upon the object: “The pleasure such things offer us is wonderful and illogical; it is very like the pure joy a child feels when he unexpectedly comes into possession of something magically desirable” (p.16).

The delight that emanates from these magical moments will be referred to as ‘delight-as-magic’. Understanding the nature of delight-as-magic requires that we dissect the sources of meaning that imbue some experiences with a quintessential quality and hence renders them delightful. The interviews suggest three sources of meaning leading to episodes of delight-as-magic—interpersonal warmth, leisure experience, and aesthetic experience—which are described next.

Interpersonal Warmth

Participants recalled several delight episodes that occurred in the context of close, comfortable interpersonal interactions. Andersen and Guerrero’s (1998) construct of ‘interpersonal warmth’ captures the essence of this context. Interpersonal warmth refers to the “pleasant, contented, intimate feeling that occurs during positive interactions with friends, family, colleagues, and romantic partners” (Andersen and Guerrero 1998, p.304). For instance, Christina’s experience of delight during her trip to San Francisco was in part associated with her interactions with close high school friends (“they’re all, like, on the same wave length as me”). Similarly, harmonious interactions between family members were constitutive of her experience of delight while sitting outside a restaurant in Quebec City:

Sometimes my family fights when we’re on holidays but I think that that time maybe we weren’t, for once [laughs]. […] just sitting there and totally being relaxed, having no responsibilities, and being with my family and not arguing.

These findings converge with previous observations that, compared to less intimate relationships, close relationships contain significantly more positive emotions such a delight ( Bersheid, Snyder, and Omato 1989).

Interpersonal warmth was also a source of delight when informants were reunited with friends or family members after being separated from some time.

I guess, like, walking into my house and, like, having the house smell, and seeing my cats, and seeing my mom and dad […] I love them so much, and being away from them for months, even for short periods…-Laura

This experience evokes Saint Thomas Aquinas’ characterization of delight as a situation where “we are not without the good we love, but are at rest in its possession” (Drost 1995, p.47). Hence, while desire represents the movement towards an object that is loved, delight lies in the repose we find in the presence or possession of that object, so that delight “is to the emotions what coming to rest is to physical things” (Drost 1995, p.51).

At other times, interpersonal warmth engendered delight when informants met new people with whom they felt spontaneous bonding (Andersen and Guerrero 1998). In Susan’s words, this
occurs upon “meeting people with whom you… it’s just easy, you know… just easy communication; you almost feel as if you’ve known them forever, and you barely know them.”

While interpersonal warmth stimulates the experience of delight, its absence may inhibit the emotion. This is illustrated when comparing Christina’s delight situations characterized by interpersonal warmth—interacting with her friends in San Francisco and with her family in Quebec City—with the emotions she felt during what she described as the best trip of her life to Helsinki. Christina spent the last evening of that trip with schoolmates and professors at a local bar located on top of a building. Although she reports feelings of happiness, delight eluded this evening, a situation in part attributable to the absence of interpersonal warmth:

People that I was with, I wouldn’t say that I’m a hundred percent comfortable with, not that I wasn’t comfortable with them but, just not like they were my friends or my family, people I’ve known for ever and ever. They became friends, but we didn’t… it’s not like they are the people that know everything about me. […] Sometimes there were things that normally I would say, that I wouldn’t say. You’re a bit more reserved when you’re with people that you don’t… you know. You’re on a different level, kind of.—Christina

Delight in the context of interpersonal warmth is associated with both cognitive and emotional goals. Indeed, informants described these interactions as founded on mutual understanding, shared interests, easy communication, comfort and love. The concept of validation subsumes these goals, as it encompasses “experiences of understanding, acceptance and warmth” (Praeger 1995, p.47).

Leisure experience

Some delight episodes were consistent with three elements Unger and Kernan (1983) identified as characteristics of the concept of leisure: intrinsic motivation, perceived freedom, and involvement.

For the ancient Greeks, leisure (schohle) referred to “a contemplative activity pursued for its own sake or to its own end.” (Unger and Kernan 1983, p. 382.). In this view, leisure is intrinsically motivated—an activity that is undertaken as an end in itself. Several delight episodes occurred when informants were engaged in seemingly mundane activities undertaken for no other purpose than the immediate pleasure they procured. For instance, some of Christina’s delight episodes took place as she was simply walking through the streets of Quebec City, Helsinki, or San Francisco, enjoying her surroundings, the music and activity around her, or the company of her friends. In these examples, delight stemmed from the pleasure of engaging in the activity itself and entailed a special type of involvement characterized by a spontaneous letting-be and a deep absorption in the process (Arnould and Price 1993; Unger and Kernan 1983). This observation offers insight into the case of Elisabeth, who did not report any delight episode while traveling.

Delight in the context of leisure experiences often contained a dimension of escape from external pressure or responsibility. Christina’s feelings of delight while walking in the streets of Helsinki were partly due to the fact that she was away from the stress of competition. Likewise, her delightful stroll in the streets of Quebec City took place while she was released from her responsibility as supervisor of a group of students. Sarah experiences a similar feeling every time she goes home for a brief vacation from school and from the responsibilities of living on her own:

It’s just the home, like, comfort. I’m really happy to be home and not have to worry about… your own house, cooking, things like that. It’s just like a relief, just to have that home, I guess.

This concurs with previous observations that leisure constitutes an “interlude from the ordinary” or even a “fantastic escape from reality” (Unger and Kernan 1983). Although the interviews were situated in a travel context conducive to leisure, the three characteristics of intrinsic motivation, perceived freedom, and escape from the ordinary transcend the travel context and apply to other service settings.

Aesthetic Experience

Delight was also associated with the contemplation of beauty in one’s surroundings. For Susan, beauty in nature corresponds to a very specific type of coastal landscape, which she spontaneously referred to upon recalling a number of delight episodes:

I think that probably all the moments I spend on cliffs, you know, with the wind blowing, along the ocean. I think delight is there, along the ocean. […] It’s a really nice feeling to be out there… that feeling of, you know, openness around you. […] It’s so beautiful! It’s just amazingly beautiful.

The idea that delight may emanate from the contemplation of a beautiful object—and specifically of nature as an object—was
acknowledged in Kant’s aesthetic theory (Budd 1998b). Kant proposed that a person will delight in an object he or she finds beautiful, due to the existence of a certain harmony between that person’s imagination—the perception process which transforms sensory input into a perceptual representation of the object—and his or her understanding—the perceptual process of assigning the object to a specific type or category of objects. For Kant, delight thus occurs when the object perceived corresponds to the object conceived, that is the object the imagination would have produced if its only aim was to please itself. Accordingly, one could posit that a person will see an object as quintessential when that person’s perception of the object is isomorphic to an idealized mental imagery or schema he or she holds.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu asserted that a one’s tastes are grounded in one’s habitus, that is, the socially constructed system of schema a person gains through his or her upbringing, education, and experience through life (Holt 1998). The influence of Susan’s habitus can be seen in the delight she felt while visiting friends in Kenya, and relishing in a certain ‘art de vivre’:

[...] the house, the garden, the life you’re having there... I think that was delightful as well, you know... the nice meals, she had nice things, nice cutlery, nice china, things from all over the world, you know.

Delight in aesthetic experiences thus occurs when, in the contemplation of an object, a person’s perception of that object is harmonious with an idealized mental representation of that object developed through that person’s socialization process and life experiences.

In some instances, informants recounted memories of stunning landscapes that left a strong impression on them, but did not elicit delight. Consider, for instance, Sarah’s account of her best memory from her trip to Africa:

They took us out to the Grey Cliff Valley and we were just sitting on the edge of it and it was amazing, like, the view was amazing. It was, like, out of a movie or something. [...] I was really, like, marveled. I don’t know... I don’t know what the word is, like... in awe that I was actually there, like, I was standing right there on a huge cliff overlooking Africa [laughs]. You could see, like, volcanoes in the distance and you could see all the villages down there, and... and feeling sick because it was so high [laughs].

Sarah’s dominant emotions in this situation were awe and amazement. Kant’s distinction between the beautiful and the sublime (Budd 1998a) enlightens this observation. Whereas the sentiment of beauty immerses the mind in restful and pleasurable contemplation as there is a sense of harmony between nature and our faculties, the sentiment of the sublime stimulates agitation in the mind as fear looms in an overwhelming recognition of the infinite greatness of the world. Supporting Kant’s propositions, the informants’ experiences suggest that delight is associated with the sentiment of beauty, while awe dominates the experience of the sublime.

Finally, several accounts of delight in the beautiful were described in the context of a first time experience, such as Claire’s first view from the top of a mountain in Austria, and Susan’s first glimpse of a luxurious tent during her safari in Africa. Although it might appear that surprise triggers delight in such instances, it is unlikely the most significant factor giving rise to the emotion. According to Kant, the pleasure one derives from seeing an object for the first time and finding that object beautiful has two sources: the awareness that one is experiencing the object for the first time and the inherent pleasure in contemplating the object itself. (Budd 1998b). This allows for the possibility of seeking and finding delight again in the object beyond that initial contact. In support of this proposition, informants expressed the desire to experience other similar situations and intentions to return to a specific destination that created delight. For example:

I’ve been to Austria and, to me, that’s the most beautiful country I’ve ever been to. Switzerland is something quite similar, so I want to go there. [...] I prefer hills than big, big mountains, and Austria reminded me of here. Actually, we’re planning to go back to Austria. [...] we want to go to that same place where we went hiking.-Claire

Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) note that aesthetic products “may be consumed in anticipation of the pleasure they provide” (p.96), and the interviews suggest that consumers may seek reenactment of this pleasure over time. In this context, the hypothesized link between surprise and delight (Oliver et al. 1997) appears tenuous at best. When delight emerged from aesthetic contemplation, it was associated less with surprise than with the materialization of an anticipated and desired experience.

Synchronicity of themes

Three themes underlie the experience of delight-as-magic: interpersonal warmth, aesthetic experience, and leisure experience. While one theme often dominates a specific delight episode, they do not necessarily constitute distinct and mutually exclusive experiences. In fact, these themes often work synergistically to accelerate the experience of delight. For instance, Sarah’s delight in coming home stems from the pleasure of seeing her parents after a long separation (interpersonal warmth) and from the escape it represents from her daily responsibilities (leisure experience). This synergy contributes to the magical quality of delight episodes by instilling a sense of synchronicity (Rook 1987) where informants felt that “they were in the right place at the right time, the beneficiaries of a unique and fortuitous convergence of events” (p.194): “You know, the timing, if you feel like going somewhere else, or if the timing is not... But, you know, if you just feel ‘This is where I want to be now’, you know.”–Susan. These moments are spontaneous and attributed to chance, a gift that informants feel lucky and privileged to receive (Belk 1996).

CONCLUSION

The present study refined our understanding of the conceptual domain of customer delight through an interpretation of consumers’ travel experiences. This interpretation suggests that, in addition to delight arising from pleasant surprise, there is also delight that could be labeled delight-as-magic. Delight-as-magic refers to the efferent emotional arousal individuals derive from consumption experiences they imbue with a subjective, symbolic meaning. Specifically, interpersonal warmth, aesthetic experiences, and leisure experiences were identified as fertile ground from which delight can be cultivated. Contrary to delight-as-pleasant-surprise, delight-as-magic does not necessitate the presence of surprise and novelty and may be repeated over time as individuals continue to engage in activities that entail a strong hedonic motivation. This idea expands the Rust and Oliver’s (2000) concept of “reenacted delight”, which posits that the experience of delight may be transformed into a pleasant memory where delighting features are recognized as truly unique and therefore will not expected in future
service encounters. However, the concept of delight-as-magic rests on a slightly different proposition where the memory of delight creates a desire for repeated reenactment, as delighting experiences are actively sought again. This process is due to the presence of delighting features that resonate in a particular way with the customer and sustain a certain aura of meaning that prevents them from becoming perceived as commonplace. Future research should investigate the evolution of delight-as-magic over time. What contributes to maintaining, enhancing, or reducing the occurrence of delight in an object over time? Under which circumstances does the delighting consumption experience lose its aura of pleasure and become trivial?

The concept of delight-as-magic is also appealing for the potential explanation it offers in reconciling Oliver et al.’s (1997) findings regarding the nature of customer delight in different contexts. Indeed, in their survey of symphony concert goers—decidedly an aesthetic consumption experience—delight was associated with positive affect but not with surprise. According to the conceptualization of delight-as-magic, these findings may be attributable to the fact that it was the very pleasure of rejoicing in the anticipated aesthetic experience that created delight.

The delight episodes reported in the present study resulted from explicit prompts from the researcher who asked informants to identify, if they could, such occurrences in their travel experience. This approach was judged necessary since no informant used the word ‘delight’ during the first interview. Two questions arise from this procedure. First, could the concept of delight be of little importance in consumers’ experiences? This appears unlikely since delight episodes were easily recalled by informants and were described as particularly meaningful to them. Furthermore, the prototype perspective on emotion offers one possible explanation for the absence of the word ‘delight’ in the first interviews. According to this approach, individuals consider certain emotions as general categories that supersede more narrowly defined emotions that, in a sense, represent facets of prototype emotions (Fehr and Russell 1984). Several episodes of delight were described in the first interview as being characterized by feelings of joy and happiness, two emotions that are hierarchically superior to delight (Richins 1997; Shaver et al. 1987). The second question pertains to the possible bias introduced by directly asking informants to identify delight episodes. While this approach may stimulate acquiescence or impose a concept on the informant’s experiences, accounts from the second interviews suggest that this was not the case. Indeed, informants clearly distinguished what they considered to be delight episodes from other experiences. At the end of the second interview, each informant was probed explicitly about their emotions during events discussed in the first interview that were not identified in the second interview as delightful. None of them agreed that delight could have been present in those events, even when asked directly. Nevertheless, the notion that delight may not be a forthcoming concept in consumers’ description of their consumption experiences is an intriguing finding that deserves attention in future research.

Finally, the narrow scope of this study needs to be recognized as a limitation. Further insight into the concept of customer delight would be gained from examining the proposed model in other consumption environments. For instance, it would be useful to contrast the experience of delight in contexts that appear to be conducive to delight-as-magic, such as aesthetic products and services, versus contexts that are more mundane and endowed with lower affective content (Price et al. 1995). The small size of the sample also impedes more in-depth analysis of interesting issues that arose. For example, differences were observed in the experience of delight based on informants’ age, with younger informants reporting more delight episodes in the context of leisure and older informants more frequently taking delight in aesthetic experiences. Likewise, the finding that one informant did not report any delight episode during the numerous trips she has taken over the last fifty years is intriguing and indicative that personal characteristics may intervene in the experience of delight. A larger-scale investigation would permit more attention to such differences.

In summary, this study suggests that customer delight may usefully be construed as a multi-modal construct where delight-as-magic is experientially distinct from delight-as-pleasant-surprise. As such, customer delight is a more complex and perhaps more powerful construct than what extant conceptualizations in the marketing and psychology literature propose. For marketers, this study suggests that there may be more paths to delighting customers than offering pleasant surprises. Fostering interpersonal warmth, creating aesthetically pleasurable experiences, and orchestrating events conducive to leisure experiences may stimulate recurring encounters of delight-as-magic. Future research is needed to build on this exploratory study to determine how the outcomes of these types of delight differ.

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