Stumbled Upon: Impact of Framing As Expected Versus Unexpected on Product Evaluations

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Framing a product feature as unexpected (serendipitous discovery) versus expected (intentional development) has targeted positive impact on desire-related product evaluations (e.g., willingness-to-pay), but not on non-desire-related product evaluations (e.g., perceived effectiveness). We argue that this is because unexpected framing enhances reward salience and show moderation by reward sensitivity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers often discover unexpected uses of a product, that is, they stumble upon benefits of a product that are neither marketed by the company nor expected by the common users. In fact, searching for the ‘unexpected uses of …’ online could generate numerous such interesting cases. Such experience creates interesting and unique consumption experience for consumers, which, in turn, creates increased buzz or conversations about the product (Berman, 2005; Derbaix and Vahamme, 2003). Since discovering unexpected product benefit is not uncommon and is often accompanied by strong response from consumers, it is important to understand how such experience of unexpectedness impacts consumers. Therefore, in this research, we ask the following question: could the simple knowledge that a certain product feature was unexpectedly discovered as opposed to intentionally developed impact consumers who lack the actual experience of unexpectedness positively? In departure from previous research, we investigate the role of vicarious unexpectedness, rather than real unexpectedness on consumers’ product evaluations.

Based on prior research, we make two diverging predictions on the role of unexpected framing on product evaluations. First, unexpected framing can serve as some type of conceptual incongruity, leading to enhanced general attitude toward the product. Much of work on unexpectedness in marketing has focused on documenting the positive impact of ‘unexpected’ element in an advertisement for attitude formation (Heckler & Childrens, 1992; Houston et al., 1987; Lee, 2000; Lee & Mason, 1999). According to this stream of research, unexpectedness or a mismatch amongst various elements in an advertisement leads to increased elaboration which results in general enhanced attitude. On the other hand, a stream of research (Bromberg-Martin et al., 2010; Di Chiara, 2002; Horvitz, 2000) in neuroscience which has shown that unexpectedness enhances reward salience would predict a rather targeted positive impact of unexpected framing only on desire-related product evaluations.

Although both are possible, we think that unexpected framing is unlikely to create incongruity causing cognitive elaboration because, in our context, any form of incongruity that exists between two features exists equally for both the products with or without unexpected framing. Therefore, we predict vicarious unexpectedness to serve as a reward-salience enhancer rather than general attitude enhancer, resulting in a targeted positive impact only on desire-related product evaluations (e.g., willingness-to-pay) but not on non-desire-related measures (e.g., perceived effectiveness). Furthermore, we expect this positive impact of unexpected framing on desire-related product evaluations to be moderated by reward sensitivity, such that the positive impact of unexpected framing is observable when reward sensitivity is high, but not when reward sensitivity is low. Across four studies, we document the targeted impact of unexpected framing on desire-related product evaluations and show that this relationship is observed when reward sensitivity is high, chronically (study1) or situationally (study2-4).

In the first study, we test our basic research hypothesis related to the targeted positive impact of unexpected framing on desire-related product evaluations and test the moderation by individual reward sensitivity. If unexpected framing enhances reward salience of the product as we argue, we should observe the positive impact of unexpected framing on desire toward the product to be driven by those who are high on chronic reward sensitivity (measured by behavioral activation scale (BAS)) but not for those who are low.

Participants were randomly assigned to the product conditions (expected versus unexpected) and saw a print advertisement of a dietary supplement. Participants in the expected condition were informed that the dietary supplement was a powerful antioxidant for skin and eye, developed and found to be effective in supporting healthy skin and healthy eye function, whereas participants in the unexpected condition were informed that the dietary supplement was a powerful antioxidant for skin, developed and found effective in supporting healthy skin, and the product unexpectedly found to be effective in supporting eye health as well. They were then assigned to a product evaluation condition (desire-related versus non-desire-related). In the desire-related condition, participants indicated their WTP for the antioxidant dietary supplement whereas in the non-desire-related condition, participants indicated how much they believe the product description and perceived effectiveness of the product. Afterwards, participants completed the BAS scales. As expected, participants who viewed a product with unexpected framing were willing to pay significantly more for the product than participants who viewed a product without unexpected framing and this effect was driven by those who have high reward sensitivity (see Table1). Furthermore, as hypothesized, there was no such positive impact of unexpected framing on non-desire-related measures.

In next three studies, we provide a further support for our argument by manipulating reward sensitivity situationally. Furthermore, across next three studies, we use different stimuli to operationalize vicarious unexpectedness (dietary supplement, sunscreen, body lotion). In the second study, we manipulate reward sensitivity by having participants imagine consumption situation to be hedonic (vacation) or utilitarian (business trip) and show that there is a positive impact of unexpected framing on desire toward the product only when one is under affective mindset (see Table3). Finally, in the fourth study, we heighten general motivational state by having participants sample appetitive cues (food pictures) versus neutral cues (nature pictures) prior to the product evaluations (Li, 2008; Wadhwa, Shiv, Nowlis, 2008). As expected, we found that participants who have high reward sensitivity due to heightened motivational state indicated greater desire toward the product with unexpected framing compared to product without unexpected framing, but no such difference was found for those whose motivational state was not heightened (see Table4).

In sum, findings from this research show that framing a certain feature of a product as unexpected can lead to positive evaluation of a product when one’s reward sensitivity is high and the dimension of evaluation is desire-related.

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Bromberg-Martin, E. S., M. Matsumoto, and O. Hikosaka, “Dopamine in Motivational Control: Rewarding, Aversive, and Alerting,” *Neuron*, 68 (5), 815-34.


