Surprise Her But Not Him: Gender Differences in the Valuation and Choice of Positive Surprises

Aleksandra Kovacheva, University of Pittsburgh, USA
Hristina Nikolova, Boston College, USA
Cait Lamberton, University of Pittsburgh, USA

This paper shows that women are more likely to prefer surprises than men and find the same product more attractive when it is received as a surprise than purchased. Results suggest this may be because in a shopping context, women find risk enjoyable, offsetting their natural tendency toward risk aversion.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We contribute to the literature on positive uncertainty and surprise (e.g., Wilson et al. 2005) by studying consumers’ preference for and evaluation of surprises. Specifically, we examine whether men and women choose differently between a surprise and a known product. The literature provides diverging predictions. The research on risk taking suggests that women are significantly more risk averse than men (Eckel and Grossman 2008). Since surprise products involve uncertainty and risk, this research stream would predict that women would be less likely to choose the surprise. On the other hand, men are more agentic and like to be in control of their choices (Kurt et al. 2011) while women are more open to experiences, especially in a shopping context (Arnold and Reynolds 2003; Babin et al.1994). Drawing on these findings, we expect that women would prefer surprise more than men and a known option (H1). We predict that the positive attitude towards surprises would spill over into the evaluation of the product itself so that women would find the same product more attractive when it is received as a surprise than a purchase (H2). Finally, we hypothesize that desire for control would mediate the effect (H3). We test these predictions in four studies across 3 categories. Pre-tests ensured that all manipulations were successful; details are available from the authors. All scales have acceptable reliability and were measured on a scale from 1=not at all to 7=extremely.

In Study 1 participants were asked to choose between a surprise healthy snack and a known healthy granola bar and informed that three students in each session will receive their choice. A logistic regression indicated that women were more likely to choose a surprise snack (71%) than men (47%; β=0.52, Wald’s $\chi^2 = 5.86$, $p = .02$). Overall, participants liked granola bars (grand $M = 4.86 > 4$), the scale midpoint, $t(101) = 5.99$, $p < .001$) but there were no differences in how much women ($M = 5.09$) and men ($M = 4.68$) liked granola bars ($F(1,100) = 1.96$, $p = .16$). Hence, using consequential choice, we find support that women prefer surprises more than men do and show that this effect does not seem to be driven by a diverging liking of the product category.

In Study 2, participants imagined receiving a pair of headphones as part of a surprise box (surprise condition) or as a purchase from a store (purchase condition) and rated the product’s attractiveness. There was a significant condition x gender interaction ($F(1,75) = 4.07$, $p = .047$) such that women found the product more attractive in the surprise ($M = 5.87$) than the purchase condition ($M = 5.01$, $p = .02$) while there was no difference for men. Waiting to receive the product was more enjoyable in the surprise ($M = 4.18$) than the purchase condition ($M = 3.30$; $F(1,75) = 8.21$, $p = .005$) but this effect was not moderated by gender ($p > .1$). Hence, women did not seem to engage in more mental imagery while waiting for their surprise than men. In conclusion, this study provides support for H2 and shows that for women, surprise can shape the subjective attractiveness of a product.

In Study 3, participants imagined ordering a “Juicy Surprise Box” consisting of six samples of juice drinks and were instructed that 1) all flavors will be a surprise (no choice condition), 2) they need to select one of the flavors (one-choice condition), or 3) they need to select three of the flavors (there-choice condition) while the remaining flavors will be a surprise. Next, they saw the contents of the surprise box and rated its attractiveness. There was a gender x choice condition interaction ($F(2, 334) = 3.09$, $p = .05$) such that in the no-choice condition women evaluated the box more favorably ($M = 5.53$) than men ($M = 4.95$, $p = .02$) while the gender difference was attenuated in the two choice conditions ($p > .15$). Further, men’s evaluation of the surprise box was higher in the one-choice condition ($M = 5.44$) than in the no-choice condition ($M = 4.95$, $p = .02$). Thus, this study replicates our main finding that women like surprises more than men and, in support of H3, suggests that allowing consumers to have some say in their surprise offering can increase men’s positive evaluation.

Study 4 tested H3 directly. In a hypothetical scenario, participants familiar with Kashi bars chose between a surprise box of healthy snacks and a known box of healthy Kashi granola bars. Next, participants rated the degree to which their choice was driven by a desire for control (e.g., “I chose this option because it allowed me to have more control over my reward”) and anticipated enjoyment (e.g., “I chose this option because I expect that it will bring me a lot of joy”). We found that women were more likely to choose the surprise option (64%) compared to men (46%; $β = .40$, Wald’s $χ^2 = 4.21$, $p = .04$) and that liking of Kashi granola bars was negatively associated with choice of the surprise option ($β = -.61$, Wald’s $χ^2 = 6.52$, $p < .001$). The brand was liked equally by men ($M = 4.73$) and women ($M = 4.49$, $F < 1$). Notably, desire to have control was more important for men ($M = 4.23$) than for women ($M = 3.45$, $F(1, 138) = 5.02$, $p = .03$) while there was no difference in anticipated enjoyment between men ($M = 4.50$) and women ($M = 4.60$, $F < 1$). Mediation analysis confirmed that perceived control (but not anticipated enjoyment) mediated the effect of gender on choice. Thus, we find evidence that the more participants desired to have control over the product, the less likely they were to select the surprise option.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper to demonstrate a marketing context in which women are risk seeking. Further, we contribute to the literature on positive uncertainty by examining consumers’ preferences for surprise products. We show that women are more likely to prefer surprises than men and this has important spillover effects to the perception of products. We find evidence that this effect is driven by men’s and women’s differing desire for control.

REFERENCES


