The Thought Counts: Effect of Surprise on the Consumption Experience of Gifts
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Although people might respond positively toward surprise gifts initially, it is unclear whether the effect will sustain over time. Four experiments demonstrate that surprise (vs. announcing gifts in advance) prolongs real-time consumption enjoyment of gifts over time and that this effect is driven by expectations that surprise gifts are special.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Although surprise-and-delight marketing campaigns have received tremendous media attention and positive customer feedback in recent years, such strategies are under-utilized (LoyaltyOne 2015). Marketing research on surprise gifts has also been scarce. Based on findings that sensory consumption experience often assimilates to pre-consumption expectations (Plassmann et al. 2008; Wilson et al. 1989), we propose that surprise prolongs recipients’ enjoyment of gifts over time by triggering a cognitive belief that surprise gifts are special and thoughtful (Belk 1996).

In all experiments, we either surprised participants with a gift right before they received it or informed them in advance, a procedure adapted from Valenzuela, Mellers, and Strebel (2010). The novelty of our paradigm was that all participants rated the gift multiple times, allowing us to demonstrate that surprise prolonged consumption enjoyment over time. Experiment 1 tested how surprise interacted with time to influence consumption enjoyment of a gift by employing a 2(surprise)×(time/trials) mixed design with surprise being the between-subjects variable and time/trials as the within-subject variable. A 2(surprise)×(time-trials) mixed repeated-measures ANOVA on enjoyment ratings yielded a significant two-way interaction (F(2.35,117.72) = 2.94, p < .05). Consistent with the principle of hedonic adaptation, enjoyment declined over time in both conditions (average βsurprise = -.42, βannounced = -.63; one-sample t-test against 0: tsurprise(23) = -4.88, tannounced(27) = -7.76, both p’s < .001). However, it declined at a slower rate in the surprise condition than the announced condition (independent-samples t-test: t(50) = 1.73, p = .09).

We employed the same procedure in subsequent experiments. In Experiment 2, we extended the finding to a marketing context by telling participants the gift giver was a company and tested whether beliefs of specialness mediated our effect. We used a 2(gift: announced vs. surprise) × 6(trial) mixed design with gift as the between-subjects variable and trial as the within-subject variable. The gift in this experiment was a computer desktop wallpaper. A 2(gift) × 6(trials) repeated-measures ANOVA yielded a significant two-way interaction (F(2.35, 731.76) = 3.31, p < .05). Enjoyment declined at a slower rate in the surprise condition than the announced condition (average βsurprise = -.22, βannounced = -.32; one-sample t-test against 0: tsurprise(160) = -7.85, tannounced(152) = -9.43, both p’s < .001; independent-samples t-test: t(312) = 2.24, p = .026). Additionally, beliefs about the specialness of the gift and tendency to savor the gift sequentially mediated our effect (indirect effect: = .29, CI = [.11, .54]).

Experiment 3 ruled out attention and mood-amplification as alternative explanations by testing the effect of surprise on negative experiences. If surprise caused people to pay more attention (Wilson et al. 1989) and increased the intensity of affective reaction (Mellers 2000), then enjoyment should be lower for an unpleasant gift in the surprise (vs. announced) condition. If the notion about surprise gifts was driving our effect, then surprise should prolong enjoyment regardless of valence of the gift. We employed a 2 (gift: announced vs. surprise) × 2(valence: pleasant vs. unpleasant) × 6(trial) mixed design with gift and valence as the between-subjects variables and trial as the within-subject variable. Participants received an image of a painting as a gift. They received either the pleasant, original version, or the unpleasant, decolorized version. A 2(surprise)×2(valence)×6(time/trials) mixed repeated-measures ANOVA yielded a significant two-way interaction between time/trials and surprise condition (F(2.43,520.86) = 2.91, p < .05). Participants reported greater enjoyment of the surprise gift over time regardless of valence (pleasant and unpleasant gifts: average βsurprise = -.22, βannounced = -.33; one-sample t-test against 0: tsurprise(116) = -6.59, tanounced(100) = -9.30, both p’s < .001; independent-samples t-test: t(216) = 2.12, p = .035).

In Experiment 4, we further tested our proposed mechanism by manipulating directly the association between surprise gifts and specialness. Participants in the special condition affirmed the notion that surprise gifts are special and thoughtful. Participants in the not-special condition came up with arguments to counter this common belief. We also examined downstream consequences by asking participants to predict their usage of the gift and enjoyment in the future.

The experiment employed a 2(beliefs about surprise gifts: special vs. not special) × 2 (gift: announced vs. surprise) × 6(trial) mixed design with beliefs and gift as the between-subjects variable and trial as the within-subject variable. The gift items were the wallpapers from Experiment 2. A 2(gift) × 6(trials) repeated-measures ANOVA revealed significant two-way interaction in the special condition (F(1.84,224.58) = 3.35, p < .05) but not in the not-special condition (p = .65). Within the special condition, enjoyment levels across trials declined at a slower rate in the surprise condition than the announced condition (average βsurprise = -.20, βannounced = -.35; one-sample t-test against 0: tsurprise(58) = -4.01, tanounced(57) = -6.30, both p’s < .001; independent-samples t-test: t(115) = 2.08, p = .04). We submitted likelihood of using the wallpaper and predicted enjoyment from viewing the wallpaper to two-way ANOVAs. There were significant two-way interactions between beliefs and gift on likelihood of usage (F(1, 237) = 5.63, p < .05) and predicted enjoyment (F(1, 237) = 3.89, p = .05). Specifically, in the special condition, participants reported being more likely to use the surprise gift than the announced gift (Msurprise = 5.19 vs. Manounced = 2.86; F(1, 237) = 13.80, p < .001) and predicted greater enjoyment from the surprise gift (Msurprise = 6.48 vs. Manounced = 4.31; F(1, 237) = 15.65, p < .001). Predicted usage and enjoyment did not differ by gift in the not-special condition (both p’s > .21).

Our research demonstrates that surprise prolongs consumption enjoyment of gifts over time and provides insights into the psychological process driving the effect. Consistent results across various product categories, real-time measures, and downstream variables attest to the robustness of our findings. Data ruled out attention and mood-amplification as alternative explanations. This work complements the literature of gifting and surprise by identifying expectations of surprise gifts as special and showing that surprise can enhance consumption enjoyment even for negative stimuli. It also has important managerial implications for enhancing and managing customer experiences.

REFERENCES

