

# A surprise for you and me?

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## VALORIZATION ADDENDUM



In this addendum, I elaborate on the value of this dissertation to society and economy. It is based on the requirements stated in appendix 4, article 23 of the Regulation Governing Doctoral Degrees which say that knowledge valorization refers to the “process of creating value from knowledge, by making knowledge suitable and/or available for social (and/or economic) use” (p. 50). The three chapters of this dissertation have already outlined actionable advice for marketing managers and public policy makers. This advice should help increase individual well-being and tackle one of the most pressing problems of our time, obesity, while helping companies to increase profits. In the long run, our findings may contribute to an increase companies’ profits and help the state save costs, particularly costs incurred in healthcare.

## 10.1 CHAPTER 2: THE SURPRISING NATURE OF PACKAGING LABELS: BEHAVIORAL AND NEUROPHYSIOLOGICAL INSIGHTS INTO HOW SURPRISE LABELS ENCOURAGE CHOICE

Chapter 2 of this dissertation has investigated how labeling a product as a surprise affects product choice. In this chapter, we show that consumers perceive products with surprise labels as significantly more uncertain than products without these labels while keeping information about the product constant. Thus, our research stresses that merely labeling uncertainty (without manipulating the level of information provided prior to consumption) increases consumers’ perceived uncertainty associated with the product and consequently, increases their consumption intention (reflected in their portion choices) upon uncertainty resolution. Importantly, the increase in portion choice we observe in chapter 2 occurs because consumers experience the resolution of perceived uncertainty associated with surprise-labeled products as more rewarding than the resolution of uncertainty associated with products without such labels. Our neurophysiological data provides unequivocal evidence that consumers who received products with a surprise label exhibit a higher activation in the striatum (associated with processing of reward) than consumers who received products without such labels. Relatedly, consumers expect to enjoy surprise-labeled products more than products without surprise label.

These findings have important implications for marketing managers who frequently use mystery appeals to increase product choice. For example, companies often induce a sense of mystery prior to introducing new products (e.g., Apple 2016: “Apple has an October Surprise”; Taco Bell 2016: “Is the Quesalupa Taco Bell’s Super Bowl surprise?”(Bowling 2016; Newcomb 2016). Besides headlines featuring “surprise” about new product introductions, labels of uncertainty may also appear in product labels, such as in “surprise menus” at restaurants or in subscription box services such as [healthysurprise.com](http://healthysurprise.com). In this dissertation we thus have focused on the implications of a marketing variable (labeling) which is easily and commonly manipulated by marketing managers to increase sales. Our results caution managers that labeling something as a surprise may not be enough to increase choice. Instead, the perceived uncertainty induced by “surprise” appeals has to

be resolved prior to product choice. That is, consumers are particularly likely to choose the product if it is labeled as a surprise, provided that they first resolve its perceived uncertainty but have not tasted the product yet. This is because consumers expect higher consumption enjoyment merely from the subconsciously rewarding uncertainty resolution, which in turn boosts their attitude towards the product and increases the amount chosen for intended consumption. Thus, particularly our neurophysiological findings highlight that it is not “surprise” labels per se that increase choice, but the rewarding resolution of uncertainty associated with these labels.

Second, our results also have important implications for consumers and common consumption practices such as gift giving. Specifically, they show that labeling a gift as a surprise may increase initial enjoyment when unveiling the gift and trigger initial desirability of consumption. Yet, as we show in chapter 3 of this dissertation, consumers’ initially positive consumption expectations may not translate into higher levels of actual consumption enjoyment.

Third, and relatedly, our findings show that rewarding activities such as resolving uncertainty affect consumers’ expected consumption enjoyment and thereby increase product choice even though consumers are not aware that this is happening. This finding also hints at the limitations of research methods managers frequently use for market research such as survey-based designs and focus groups, as these designs are unable to capture subconscious effects. That is, consumers are unable to articulate psychological states and experiences they are not consciously aware of. Furthermore, neuroimaging methods allow to measure experiences in real time, thereby avoiding the downside of retrospective evaluations of experiences (Reimann, Schilke, Weber, Neuhaus, and Zaichkowsky 2011). While it is surely too costly and impractical to perform neuroimaging experiments at large scale, these and related neurophysiological methods, such as EEG may reveal additional insights that otherwise remain obscure. Indeed, recent findings suggest that neural data from small groups predict market-level behavior better than traditional marketing tools. Thus, we agree with recent calls (Karmarkar, Yoon, and Plassmann 2015, HBR) that marketing research companies and managers should consider expanding their methodological toolbox to include neuroimaging methods.

## 10.2 CHAPTER 3: SURPRISE APPEALS NEGATIVELY AFFECT CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCE

Chapter 3 extends the findings of chapter 2 beyond a food choice context and examines the effect of surprise appeals during the consumption experience. Investigating the implications of surprise appeals on the actual consumption experience rather than just on product choice is important for managers for two reasons. First, the consumption experience rather than the initial choice determines if consumers purchase a product again and is one of the most important determinants of (un)favorable word-of-mouth. To create brand ambassadors, companies need to make sure that consumers do not

only choose their product in the first place but maximize their consumption experience. Yet, our results show that contrary to common belief, surprise labels do not engender a more favorable consumption experience. To the contrary: Consumers enjoy surprise-labeled products less than products without such label, consume smaller amounts from these products and display a reduced intention to continue consumption. These findings were robust in a variety of consumption contexts ranging from food and movie ads to music consumption. Chapter 3 also provides initial evidence for the mechanism underlying this counterintuitive finding: Surprise labels, and thus, the expectation of an ambiguous (because expectedly surprising) consumption experience, triggers a state of vigilance. This state of vigilance broadens diffuse attention to the environment rather than sustaining attention to the focal consumption experience. Indeed, as consumers are automatically trying to make sense of the surprising nature of the experience, they exhibit an increased alertness to cues in the environment and therefore fail to inhibit and filter information that is irrelevant to the consumption experience at hand. As a consequence, surprise labels decrease consumers' ability to truly get immersed in the consumption experience and thereby decrease consumption enjoyment and amount consumed.

This insight is particularly relevant for companies whose business model is built on subscription services involving surprise samples with the objective of nudging consumers to buy the sampled product (the second time without it being a surprise). As marketing managers invest heavily to maximize consumers' experience and "surprise" is believed to be an effective marketing tool (Redrick 2013), our findings provide important and novel insights. Specifically, they caution managers that not all uncertainty appeals are created equal. While unexpected surprises may be favorable, surprise labels that induce the expectation of surprise, and thus uncertainty, during the consumption experience have the opposite effect. They may decrease consumption enjoyment and thereby reduce consumers' intention for repeat consumption. As discussed in chapter 3, managers may use mindful consumption cues to help consumers refocus their attention on the consumption experience at hand. Further, particularly in consumption situations that may trigger a high need for closure, such as under time pressure, surprise labels will engender negative consumption experiences as high need for closure is associated with aversion to ambiguity. The negative downstream consequences of surprise appeals are thus especially prevalent for individuals high (but not low) on need for closure. We therefore recommend that surprise appeals should, if anything, be only used when consumers explicitly seek and enjoy an ambiguous consumption experience such as when seeking novelty or excitement (e.g. sensation-seeking in an amusement park). A second way to reduce the potentially negative effects of surprise appeals may be to sell "surprising" products to groups because in presence of others, vigilance has been shown to be lower than when consumers are alone (Jun et al. 2017).

For public policy makers, surprise appeals suggest an easy to implement method to reduce indulgence – although at the expense of consumers' well-being (enjoyment).

It remains open to future research if consumers would compensate for the reduced enjoyment in later consumption episodes.

### 10.3 CHAPTER 4: TAKING CARE OF YOU AND ME: HOW CHOOSING FOR CLOSE OTHERS IMPACTS SELF-INDULGENCE

In chapter 4, we switch from an intrapersonal to an interpersonal perspective in hedonic consumption and particularly consider the influence of close others. Specifically, we show that after making a healthy choice for a close other, choosers with a caring responsibility and high power in the relationship (e.g. parent/dog owner) relative to the choice target (e.g. child/dog), are more likely to self-indulge thereafter. Conversely, choosers with low relationship power (e.g. child) relative to the choice target (e.g. parent) are less likely to self-indulge after making a healthy other-oriented choice.

These findings have several economic and societal implications. First, to increase sales of indulgent products such as sweet snacks, marketing managers may consider re-organizing the shelf order in supermarkets. Our findings suggest that the shopper with the highest decision-making power (the parent) is more likely to indulge after choosing something healthy for his or her child, thereby fulfilling his or her personal health goal. This suggests that when marketers stress the importance of virtuous healthy consumption choices for close others (e.g. Lidl campaign showing a mum choosing healthy and fresh food for the child), they may simultaneously help to increase indulgent purchases.

Second, our findings have important implications for policy makers. They identify close others, and particularly the choices we make for them, as a factor that may contribute to unhealthy consumption behaviors such as excessive calorie-intake. As our final pilot study in chapter 4 (with sunscreen) shows, unhealthy consumption behaviors may not only imply unhealthy eating behaviors, but also other risky consumption behavior such as enjoying a day in the sun without protecting oneself against harmful UV-rays. To prevent the negative effects of other-oriented choices, particularly for choosers with high power relative to the choice target, policy makers should remind high-power choosers to not only take care of the choice target's well-being but to also ensure their personal long-term health. For example, companies may remind parents to stay healthy with slogans on packaging (e.g., "remember to not only protect your child, but also yourself against UV-rays"), thereby re-activating parents' personal health goal. Conversely, our findings concerning low-power choosers show that after making a virtuous other-oriented choice, these choosers are also more likely to engage in virtuous consumption behaviors themselves. For consumers (particularly parents) this implies that asking their child to choose a healthy dish for them (the parent) may encourage the child to choose a similar healthy dish for personal consumption. Public policy makers should increase consumers' awareness of this possibility.

