



Shopping under the influence of curiosity: How retailers use mystery to drive purchase motivation☆



Krista M. Hill ^{a,*}, Paul W. Fombelle ^{b,1}, Nancy J. Sirianni ^{b,2}

^a Ricciardi School of Business, Bridgewater State University, 131 Summer Street, Bridgewater, MA 02325, USA

^b D'Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 February 2015

Received in revised form 1 July 2015

Accepted 1 July 2015

Available online 31 August 2015

Keywords:

Curiosity

Uncertainty

Mystery appeals

Affect

ABSTRACT

Mystery appeals are gaining popularity as a shopper marketing strategy. In this practice, firms intentionally restrict information about their offerings in order to pique consumer curiosity and drive purchase motivation. The present research examines curiosity's role in influencing consumer behavior. Study 1 reveals that mystery appeals create more curiosity than other affective states, and that curiosity predicts purchase motivation via a direct path. Exploring the optimal level of information needed to maximize curiosity, study 1 finds that participants are more curious when given moderate information, over minimal information. Next, study 2 demonstrates that shopping in an actively curious state can impact consumer outcomes via an indirect path that is mediated by consumer evaluation of the mystery appeal. This research is the first to identify curiosity as the affective state that is primarily triggered by mystery appeals, and to explain how curiosity directly and indirectly impacts consumer purchase motivation.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The use of mystery as a tactic to attract attention is nothing new in human interactions but is one that is gaining popularity as a marketing strategy. Through the use of mystery appeals, many retailers intentionally withhold information from their consumers, which motivates them to seek such information and thereby, interact with the firm. With this innovative practice, companies such as Bloomingdale's, Groupon, Banana Republic, Ann Taylor, American Airlines, and JetBlue Airways restrict the information they share about their offerings deliberately via mystery products and secret promotions (Andrezejewska, 2013). They do this not to be deceptive but in order to pique consumer curiosity (Loewenstein, 1994). This curiosity allows firms to connect with consumers in new ways that influence behavior significantly.

Despite their emergence in marketing, little academic research has sought to understand why mystery appeals work and how marketers can best use these strategies to affect their consumers' behavior. The

current study proposes that the stimulation of curiosity is the mechanism by which mystery appeals connect with consumers, a process demonstrated here in two controlled experiments. Furthermore, the current study examines ways in which firms can maximize their influence on purchase motivation. Finally, building on extant theory, the experiments illustrate how curiosity can elicit purchase motivation via two different routes. The first is through a direct process in which curiosity is relieved as a result of purchasing the mystery product. The second is indirect, where the effect of curiosity on purchase motivation is mediated by consumers' evaluations of their experience with the mystery appeal.

2. Theoretical framework and hypothesis development

2.1. Mystery appeals

"Mystery appeals" are attempts to connect with consumers by intentionally withholding information about the product or promotion being offered. Traditionally, mystery or uncertainty has been considered aversive (Loewenstein, 1994). However, a different approach is taken in this study, which demonstrates that, consistent with recent research, mystery can have positive effects on consumer outcomes. For example, in one experiment (van Dijk & Zeelenberg, 2007), participants were instructed to choose between money and a sealed package of unknown content. The researchers found that participants who were given some information about the sealed package but understood that the contents would not be revealed if they chose the money, became more curious, and were more likely to choose the package. In another example,

☆ This paper won the "Best Paper Award" in the Consumer Behavior track at the 2013 AMA Summer Educator's Conference. The authors thank AMA reviewers and participants for their helpful feedback and recommendations. The authors also gratefully acknowledge Dhruv Grewal for his guidance and thank the participants at the Innovations in Retailing and Marketing Research Colloquium at Babson College for their valuable suggestions.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 508 531 2307.

E-mail addresses: Krista.Hill@bridgew.edu (K.M. Hill), P.Fombelle@neu.edu (P.W. Fombelle), N.Sirianni@neu.edu (N.J. Sirianni).

¹ Tel.: +1 617 373 5253.

² Tel.: +1 617 373 3260.

Goldsmith and Amir (2010) found that consumers would opt for free mystery incentives with a purchase (as opposed to a known incentive) because they were overly optimistic about the nature of the free gift. Furthermore, Laran and Tsiros (2013) found that consumers preferred to receive free mystery gifts with their purchase (vs. free known gifts) when they were primed to make affective decisions. Like Laran and Tsiros, the current research proposes shopping while in an affective state will increase consumers' preferences for mystery and furthers this work by identifying curiosity as the specific affective state that is induced by mystery appeals and by examining how to maximize consumer curiosity (study 1). Furthermore, while both Goldsmith and Amir (2010) and Laran and Tsiros (2013) looked at consumers' preferences to purchase a product accompanied by a free mystery gift, the present research examines the behaviors associated directly with the mystery product or promotion (study 1 and study 2). Thus, the core product or service purchased constitutes the actual mystery.

A detailed literature review yielded only one study in which participants directly interacted with mystery stimuli. In this work, Menon and Soman (2002) showed participants a digital mystery advertisement and reported the levels of curiosity elicited. Curiosity was associated with more time spent looking at the advertisement and more time spent searching for product information. The current research attempts to rule out alternative explanations by collecting data on additional affective states that might have influenced Menon and Soman's findings. Further, while Menon and Soman (2002) explored information-search-related outcomes, this study addresses an outcome that occurs later in the decision-making process and is relevant to marketing (i.e., purchase motivation).

The current research also explores what occurs when consumers shop while curious (study 2). Past research in this emerging area focuses primarily on the way in which curiosity influences such behavior as purchasing directly. Subsequently, as prior theory explains, affective states often have an indirect effect on behavior and influence several other human processes (e.g., cognition) before behavior changes (Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001). In this research, this indirect effect is explored by examining consumer evaluations as a mediator of the relationship between curiosity and consumer behavior.

2.2. The role of curiosity in consumer behavior

Affective states may influence many aspects of consumers' lives, including their attitudes (e.g., Petty, DeSteno, & Rucker, 2001) and consumption behavior (e.g., Han, Lerner, & Keltner, 2007). According to Lerner and Keltner's appraisal-tendency framework (2000, 2001), specific affective states give rise to specific cognitive and motivational processes. These processes account for the influence that affective states have on judgments, behavior, and decision making. For example, sadness is accompanied by appraisals of experiencing loss, while anxiety is accompanied by appraisals of helplessness. These appraisals then lead to action designed to change one's circumstances (Lazarus, 1991; Lerner, Small, & Loewenstein, 2004). This framework can be applied to the influence of affect on consumer behavior. Consumers experience a given affective state, which in turn activates cognitive and motivational processes that result ultimately in various behaviors. Thus, advertisers often include emotionally evocative stimuli in their campaigns to produce affect that elicits particular behaviors (Pavelchak, Antil, & Munch, 1988). Although it is clear that affective states can affect consumer behavior, how to elicit specific states that lead to specific behaviors is less obvious (Roseman, Spindel, & Jose, 1990). Curiosity is the motivating state among consumers when a marketer evokes mystery (cf. Menon & Soman, 2002). The present study furthers past work by investigating ways in which marketers can elicit this state to affect consumer behavior optimally.

Curiosity, the desire to know, has been implicated as a motivation relevant to human behavior, and leads individuals to seek methods to resolve the arousal it elicits (Loewenstein, 1994). While prior research

has often treated curiosity as an inherent trait measured as an individual difference (Baumgartner & Steenkamp, 1996), this research focuses on consumer curiosity as a temporary motivational state. This is an important distinction for firms, because stimulating a temporary state is possible, while activating a personality trait is not.

According to Loewenstein's information gap theory (1994), curiosity is aroused when people become aware of a gap in their knowledge or when they encounter new, inconsistent, or ambiguous stimuli. For example, some advertisements evoke curiosity intentionally by withholding the ad's sponsor until the end of the commercial. These advertisements create an information gap by withholding the identity of the sponsor strategically until the end of the ad. Like these advertisements, mystery products and promotions are novel stimuli that make consumers aware of their knowledge gap, and thus, elicit curiosity.

Curiosity is a state of high activation and positive valence that is thought to be accompanied by appraisals of uncertainty, which can then lead to feelings of psychophysiological stimulation (Litman & Spielberg, 2003; Loewenstein, 1994). Not surprisingly, people are motivated to reduce the uncertainty this causes. This reduction is often accomplished by seeking the specific information that can address the lack of knowledge. This research proposes that purchasing a mystery product is a direct method to close this gap. Therefore, H1 posits that elevated levels of consumer curiosity will increase purchase motivation.

If curiosity is associated with purchase motivation, the question remains—can firms induce and optimize the degree of consumer curiosity? Loewenstein's information gap theory states that curiosity reflects the curious individual's desire to obtain information that is available yet unknown. Past research has argued that curiosity will be elevated in the presence of information that can close the information gap more easily. Although they did not examine curiosity directly, Laran and Tsiros (2013) found that participants who were offered an uncertain free gift (i.e., they were told they would receive one of two potential gifts) preferred to receive some product information, such as a picture or description of the potential gifts, rather than no product information. Similarly, Menon and Soman (2002) found that consumers would search more for information when they were given a moderate amount of information rather than either limited or full information. This suggests that curiosity is highest when the consumer understands that only a moderate amount of information is needed to obtain all of the information, and filling the information gap is realistic. Here, a moderate information gap is defined as a situation in which several cues about the mystery product or promotion are provided without revealing the product or promotion itself. A large information gap, in which minimal information is provided, is defined as a situation in which only a few cues are offered. This creates a high degree of uncertainty about the nature of the mystery product or promotion. Following this logic, if an individual is only missing a small amount of the information needed to close the information gap, then he or she should be more curious than if little to no information is available. H2 is thus posited as: exposure to a mystery appeal with moderate information will result in higher levels of consumer curiosity by comparison to exposure to one with minimal information.

The optimal arousal model states that affective stimulation typically ranges in intensity from low to high, in which extremes produce discomfort, while moderate levels are highly desirable (e.g., Berlyne, 1967). Based on this, the current study proposes that the satisfaction of curiosity could produce lower arousal (Litman, 2005); for example, after viewing a mystery appeal, a consumer may experience the arousal of curiosity. After the mystery is revealed and the information gap is closed, he or she is left in a neutral, unmotivated state. Thus, in order to maximize the outcomes created by curiosity (i.e., positive arousal), the consumption behavior must occur while the consumer is experiencing the state actively, not thereafter. Thus, H3 states that consumers in an actively curious state will report higher levels of purchase motivation than will those in a neutral/post-curious state.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10492707>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10492707>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)