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Research Report

Decoding the opening process

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Abstract

Five experiments confirmed the hypothesis that observing a box being opened is intrinsically rewarding and that the positive feelings it elicits can increase evaluations of its contents independently of the nature of these contents. Even though a product is already familiar, seeing it in a box being opened can elicit enjoyment and increase evaluations of it. This is true even when the cover of the box is transparent (and so its contents can be easily seen when the box is closed). Moreover, seeing a box being opened increases evaluations of the box even when the box is empty. When the contents of a box are unknown, opening the box can elicit surprise, polarizing evaluations of the product contained in it. When the product is already familiar, however, the opening process influences product evaluations through its impact on enjoyment.

Keywords: The opening process; Surprise; Enjoyment

When we do not know what is in a package, the discovery of its contents can often be a pleasant surprise. Birthday and Christmas presents are obvious examples. In many instances, however, people already know what is in the package we receive and opening it does not reveal anything new. In this case, does the mere process of opening it, or only *seeing* it being opened, influence reactions to its contents? On Yahoo Answers, a lady described her experience of being proposed like this "*The day I finally got my ring [which I had helped to choose] …my husband brought it home in its box and popped the box open… Even though I had already seen the ring, it made me gasp. There's something special about that moment when the box opens and reveals a ring. It can't be explained.*" (Karin, 2011). Our research attempts to provide this explanation.

First, when people do not know what is contained in the box, revealing its contents can be surprising. Whether the surprise is pleasant or unpleasant depends on the valence of the object that is revealed (Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003). (For example, finding a cute puppy in the box could elicit pleasant surprise whereas finding a cockroach is likely to be unpleasant.) Surprise usually occurs when the object in the box is unexpected, however (Vanhamme, 2000). Consequently, it cannot account for the lady's reactions in the preceding example. Rather, her reactions might have resulted from a second source of affect, namely, the opening process itself.

Exploratory behavior is intrinsically rewarding and can elicit positive feelings (Brown, 1953; Butler, 1957; Harlow, 1954; Hebb, 1958). Opening a package may exemplify this behavior and has a positive effect independently of the revealed outcome. To this extent, it could elicit positive feelings of enjoyment even when its contents are already familiar. Moreover, these feelings could occur even when the contents are unpleasant.

Although people may experience positive feelings when they open a box themselves, these reactions could also occur vicariously when this behavior is observed (see Waytz & Mitchell, 2011). In our studies, participants only observed a box being opened and did not open it themselves. This allowed us to control for other extraneous factors that might exert an influence on evaluations (e.g., effort, or the impact of merely touching a product on its evaluation; see Peck & Shu, 2009). We hypothesized that observing a box being opened elicits positive affect and that this affect, once

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experienced, influences evaluations of both the package and its contents. This could result from evaluative conditioning (Baeyens, Vansteenwegen, Hermans, & Eelen, 2001; Galli & Gorn, 2011; Sweldens, Van Osselaer, & Janiszewski, 2010). It could also result from people's misattribution of the affect elicited by the opening process to their feelings about the product, and the consequent use of these feelings as a basis for evaluating it (Schwarz & Clore, 1983, 1988).

In combination, the five studies we report show that (a) seeing a product in a box being opened (rather than already open) increases feelings that the experience is enjoyable and these feelings generalize to the product; (b) when the product contained in a box is unfamiliar, seeing the box being opened can induce surprise and polarize evaluations of the product; however, (c) when the product is familiar, the enjoyment experienced by seeing it in a box being opened has a positive effect on the product's evaluation even when the product is intrinsically undesirable and regardless of the quality of the box itself.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 provided preliminary evidence that observing a box being opened increases participants' evaluations of the product contained in it even when they are already familiar with the product.

Method

Forty Hong Kong undergraduates (25 females) participated for course credit. Participants, run individually, were told that a travel agency would like to obtain feedback about a newly designed commemorative coin. They were first shown a picture of the coin so that all participants would be familiar with its appearance. To avoid the possibility that participants would perceive that product might be "contaminated" by having previously been handled (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2006), the experimenter indicated that she had just received the real product from the manufacturer and put on gloves, implying that because the product was completely new, she wanted to keep it clean. She then took out a box with an opaque cover (see Appendix A, Fig. 1). The box was either open already or was opened by the experimenter. Participants then reported their liking for the coin along a scale from −5 (not at all) to 5 (very much) and indicated whether they would like to buy the coin along a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Finally, they estimated how surprised they were when they saw the coin in the box and reported their enjoyment of the entire experience along scales from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

Results

Participants' liking for the target and their willingness to purchase it were correlated .66 ($p < .001$) and were averaged after converting them to standard scores. Participants liked the target more when they saw the box being opened ($n = 19$, $M = 0.43$, $SD = 0.59$) than when they saw it already opened ($n = 21$, $M = -0.32$, $SD = 0.99$), $F_{(1, 38)} = 8.34$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$. Furthermore, they reported being more surprised by seeing the coin in a box being opened ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.91$) than seeing it in a box that was already open ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.43$), $F_{(1, 38)} = 4.08$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$, and enjoyed the experiment more in the former case ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 0.91$) than in the latter ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.52$), $F_{(1, 38)} = 6.89$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$.

The surprise that participants reported was correlated .38 with enjoyment ($p < .05$). Bootstrapping (Hayes, 2013, Model 4) indicated that both surprise and enjoyment mediated the effect of opening conditions on target evaluations when they were included into the model simultaneously (based on 5000 samples, 95% CI ranged from .03 to .59 in the case of surprise, and from .01 to .49 in the case of enjoyment), indicating that the influence of each factor persisted after controlling for the other.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 1, the effect of surprise elicited by seeing the box being opened and the effect of enjoyment were positively associated. This might suggest that enjoyment is confused with pleasant surprise when the product is positively valenced. To provide clearer evidence that enjoyment and surprise were independent, we presented participants in Experiment 2 with a negatively valenced stimulus rather than a positively valenced one. Many people are afraid of spiders, and unexpectedly encountering one, or even a picture of it, is likely to elicit negative reactions in these persons. Moreover, these reactions are likely to be particularly intense of exposure to the stimulus that is unexpected. Therefore, if unexpectedly encountering the picture of a spider in a box is an unpleasant surprise, it is likely to increase the intensity of people's negative reactions to the stimulus and to decrease their evaluations of it. If, on the other hand, people are already aware of the box's negative contents, the additional increment of surprise elicited by seeing these contents in a box being opened should be relatively minimal and the positive effect of enjoyment should be more apparent.

Method

A pretest was conducted in which participants evaluated eight different postage stamps. A stamp portraying a spider was evaluated −2.65 along a scale from −5 (extremely negative) to 5 (extremely positive). Therefore, this stamp (see Fig. 2) was selected as a stimulus.

Participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk. They were restricted to 184 participants (87 females; mean age = 33) who indicated that their fear of spiders was equal to or greater than 4.0 along a scale from 1 (not afraid at all) to 7 (very much afraid). (An additional 178 participants who were not afraid were excluded from consideration.) In *unfamiliar* conditions, participants were only told to evaluate a product; thus they had no idea what the product was. In *familiar* conditions, they were told that they would evaluate a spider stamp and the picture of the stamp was presented. Then, all participants were shown a 7-second video of an opaque box either being opened or open already. (In the former case, the