

# EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE ANTECEDENTS OF CUSTOMER DELIGHT

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## ABSTRACT

Satisfaction researchers in marketing are in general agreement that the emotion of delight is comprised of joy and surprise. This study reviews the relevant emotions literature in psychology, the neurosciences and philosophy to show that there may be two different kinds of delight - one with surprise and one without surprise. The work of Plutchik (1980) is often cited as the basis for conceptualizing delight as being comprised of joy and surprise. We replicated Plutchik's two studies using more positive complex emotion terms than the original study. It was found that subjects could feel delighted without being surprised and that there were different emotion terms that were considered by subjects to be comprised of joy and surprise. These results were validated in a second study in which consumer emotions and other responses were captured in a live setting during the intermission of an upbeat, fast tempo Irish Dance concert. The results show that consumers could be delighted even when they were not surprised. We show how these findings clarify and explain some unexpected results obtained in past research on customer delight. The implications of these findings for both theory and practice are also discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

There is considerable interest among marketing scholars and practitioners in finding ways to increase customer loyalty. While satisfying customers was considered as an appropriate way to increase customer loyalty, recent research has offered evidence that in many industries satisfied customers were not loyal customers (Reichheld 1994). These studies found that customers who were completely satisfied

were more likely to be loyal than customers who said they were satisfied. The customers who were completely satisfied with a firm have also been labeled as delighted customers. So, in recent years, delighting customers has been proposed as a way to increase customer loyalty towards a firm.

As interest in customer delight has grown, there appears to be a growing consensus among satisfaction researchers in marketing that the emotion of delight is comprised of joy and surprise (Oliver 1989; Westbrook and Oliver 1991; Kumar and Olshavsky 1997; Kumar and Iyer 2001). This conceptualization of delight as a combination of joy and surprise is seen in all the existing literature on customer delight. Although this conceptualization has not been controversial in the academic literature, practitioners have been less enthusiastic about the implications of this conceptualization. A common problem cited by many managers is that this conceptualization suggests that to delight their customers a firm has to pleasantly surprise their customers. Obviously, for firms that have frequent transactions or interactions with their customers, the cost of surprising customers at every transaction is impractical and prohibitive.

There are different ways in which one could respond to the concerns raised by these managers. One response would be to point out to the managers that surprising customers may involve raising the bar on a firm's performance and if the firm did not raise the bar themselves, the competition would raise the bar by improving their performance and take away the firm's customers. The managers typically counter this response by pointing out practical limitations with respect to how high the bar can be raised in a short period of time. Another response would be to point out to managers that firms ought to surprise their customers in an area where the firm

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has some sustainable competitive advantage. This would mean that the competition cannot easily emulate the firm's moves and so the firm will get some time before competition can provide the same level of benefits. The firm can then use this time to find another way to raise the bar. Although this response makes intuitive sense, it also raises an interesting question. If a firm were the only one providing a certain benefit, would the customer continue to be delighted with this benefit after the first time that they saw and enjoyed the benefit? In other words, do they continue to be delighted even when they are not surprised and remain loyal customers, or, as suggested by the above conceptualization, do they cease to be delighted after their first encounter with the firm? If they cease to be delighted and continue to be loyal, it would imply that if customers are delighted once, they may remain loyal for some period of time after that even though they are not surprised on subsequent occasions. This suggestion, though we have not seen any empirical evidence to date, has intuitive appeal for managers because this makes it worthwhile and practical to try and delight customers.

The issue we try to address in this paper is to examine alternative means of delighting customers, i.e., can customers be delighted if they are not surprised? If customers can be delighted without being surprised, it is possible that customers who stayed loyal to a firm after their first encounter with a surprising benefit are loyal because they are still delighted with the firm (even though they are not surprised anymore by the benefits they receive). To explore any possible alternative means of delighting customers we begin, in study one, by delving into the literature in psychology which identified joy and surprise as being the constituents of delight. We follow that with a discussion of two exploratory studies carried out to replicate and extend prior work in psychology with the purpose of gaining fresh insights into the antecedents of customer delight. In study two, we briefly review prior research on the emotion of joy in the

philosophy literature where this emotion has been studied in great detail. We also bring in concepts from the neurosciences area to understand the physiological process through which a consumer might experience the emotion of delight. Based on this review, we carry out a field study that attempts to identify alternative antecedents for customer delight.

## STUDY ONE

### Literature Review

In the psychology literature, emotions researchers have conceptualized the emotion of delight as a complex emotion which is a blend of the basic emotions of joy and surprise (Plutchik 1980). As Plutchik's (1980) research and the circumplex model of emotion appears to be one of the earliest and most common source for labeling delight as a combination of joy and surprise, we review the work which led Plutchik to conclude that delight was comprised of joy and surprise.

Plutchik carried out two studies to determine what emotions resulted from the different combinations of pairs of basic emotions. Basic emotions were supposed to be emotions that were instinctual and universal among all human beings (or even among all mammals) and Plutchik had eight emotions which were considered basic and that made up one layer of his circumplex model of emotion. In one study, Plutchik gave a group of subjects a list of emotions and asked them to name the basic emotions that made up each of these 'complex' emotions (the complex emotions were made up of basic emotions and they could be either primary, secondary or tertiary emotions depending on whether they were comprised of adjacent pairs of basic emotions or emotions once removed or twice removed from each other on Plutchik's circumplex model). Based on converging responses from a majority of respondents, different combinations of primary emotions were said to result in particular kinds of complex emotions. For example, Plutchik's study revealed that subjects indicated that the emotion

of delight would be comprised of joy and surprise. Based on this finding, Plutchik labeled delight as a tertiary emotion comprised of the basic emotions of joy and surprise and this study continues to be the main source for identifying joy and surprise as the constituents of delight.

However, what is seldom noted in the marketing literature is that in an attempt to have greater confidence in the labels that he would attach to various combinations of basic emotions, Plutchik had designed two studies. In the second study, he gave subjects two primary emotions and asked them to name the emotion that they would feel when the two primary emotions were experienced together. Interestingly, in this study there was no convergence in the subjects' responses, i.e., subjects provided various responses to describe the emotion they would experience when they felt joy and surprise together and delight was not a consistent or predominant response from subjects. This suggests that there may be other emotion terms that capture the same feelings as delight.

A close examination of Plutchik's list of basic emotions reveals that the list had only two positive emotion terms, joy and acceptance, and one neutral term, surprise. This could explain why subjects said the complex positive emotion of delight was comprised of joy and surprise. However, when subjects were told to name the emotion resulting from joy and surprise, they had no list to constrain them and hence, they came up with varied responses. Interestingly, when researchers use Izard's DES scale (Izard 1977; 1991), which has three positive/neutral emotion terms, joy, interest and surprise, delight has been found to be associated with joy, surprise, and interest (Oliver and Westbrook 1993). This raises the question whether conceptualizing delight as being comprised of joy and surprise was the unintended consequence of Plutchik's list of basic emotions having only two positive emotion terms. Could there be other positive emotion terms that could describe subjects' feelings when they were delighted? We address this question in two simple, exploratory studies that we describe

below.

## **Method**

**Overview.** In this study, we replicated Plutchik's two studies with one difference - we increased the number of positive emotions included in the list of emotion word combinations shown to the subjects. It was felt that if the feelings of delight were captured by emotion terms or combinations other than joy and surprise, then we might be able to gain that insight by increasing the list of positive emotion terms. Similarly, in the second study, we increased the number of positive complex emotions shown to the subjects. The purpose of this longer list was to try and identify other emotion terms that might capture the same feelings as delight (even if delight was nothing but joy and surprise).

**Study 1a Method.** In the first study, 50 undergraduate students enrolled in a large Mid-western University completed the questionnaire as part of an in-class assignment. The students were given a one page questionnaire which showed twelve pairs of emotions/feelings. They were told that these were emotions/feelings which may be experienced by many consumers. Their task was to suggest an appropriate name for an emotion/feeling produced by the mixture of these two emotions. They were asked "If you were to experience the two emotions at the same time, what is the one word that can capture that feeling. For example, some people might say that when they feel 'surprise' and 'anger' at the same time, they are 'outraged'. Hence, Surprise + Anger = Outrage. Now, please provide a name for the feeling/emotion resulting from the following combinations." The list of emotion words used included eight positive emotion terms, four negative emotion terms, and two neutral terms. The twelve combinations given to the subjects were: fear + anticipation, joy + surprise, sadness + anger, joy + thrill, acceptance + love, anticipation + sadness, exuberance + joy, happy + contented, joy + fear, exhilarated + joy, fear +

disgust, and acceptance + sadness.

**Study 1a Results.** The results from this study matched the results obtained by Plutchik and there was no convergence in subjects' responses for the main combination of interest to us, i.e., joy + surprise = ?. Subjects' responses included emotion terms like ecstatic, pleased, elated, thrilled, excitement, delighted, etc. The fifty responses included twelve different emotion terms. The only emotion term that appeared to capture the feeling of joy + surprise was the term "excitement" which was given by about 13 respondents (about 25% of the respondents).

**Study 1b Method.** In this study, a different group of 48 subjects were given a questionnaire containing two lists of emotion terms or feelings and told that these were feelings experienced at different times by many consumers. List A was a long list of 18 emotion terms (14 positive and 4 negative emotion terms) and list B was a short list of Plutchik's eight basic emotions. Subjects were told that their task required them to think about how they would feel as they experienced each emotion or feeling in list A and then write down

which of the emotions in list B would be felt as they experienced the emotion from list A. They were given the example of outrage and told that some respondents might say that they felt the emotions of anger and surprise from list B when they experienced outrage. Subjects were told that they also had the option of writing that "No emotion from list B" adequately described their feelings as they experienced an emotion in list A.

**Study 1b Results.** Table 1 shows the number of subjects who said that when they experience a certain positive emotion, they would feel joy, surprise, or joy and surprise together.

Of particular interest to us was the subjects' response to the emotion of delight. Of the 48 subjects who completed this task, only 12 (25%) said that they experienced the emotions of joy and surprise when they felt delighted. Almost three times as many subjects (32 subjects) indicated that they experienced joy without any surprise when they were delighted. The other emotion terms that appeared to capture the feelings of experiencing joy and surprise together were thrilled, exhilarated and to a lesser extent, exuberant. It was also interesting to note that

**Table 1**  
**Number of Subjects Experiencing Joy and/or Surprise in Complex Emotions**

Complex Emotions	Joy	Surprise	Joy and Surprise
Thrilled	43	19	17
Delighted	44	12	12
Fulfilled	34	1	1
Enthusiastic	37	6	4
Exhilarated	32	16	10
Exuberant	35	10	5
Pleased	33	3	2
Satisfied	22	1	1
Contented	17	0	0
Grateful	29	5	2

while more than 60% of the respondents felt that most of the positive emotion terms made them experience joy, the only two positive emotion terms which less than 50% of the respondents associated with joy were satisfaction and contentment. Satisfaction and contentment along with fulfilled were also the three terms that the least number of subjects (almost none) felt surprised as they experienced these emotions.

## **Discussion**

The above results offer at least three valuable insights into the emotion of customer delight. First of all, we replicated Plutchik's work and we did find support for Plutchik's idea that if delight were to be expressed as a combination of basic emotions, then joy and surprise were the two basic emotions that constituted delight. Further, as joy and surprise were twice removed in Plutchik's circumplex model, delight would appropriately be termed a tertiary emotion. However, an interesting insight was that about two-thirds of the respondents experienced only joy (and no surprise) when they felt delighted. This lends support to the idea that there may be two different kinds of customer delight, one which involves surprising customers and one which does not involve surprising customers.

A second insight is that the study helps us identify other emotion terms which capture the feelings of customers who are experiencing joy and surprise together. This is an important finding given the present conceptualization of delight as it helps researchers interested in constructing scales to measure customer delight. This has been a problem in the area of customer delight. The results of this study might suggest items for measuring delight subject to a formal, quantitative scale validation effort.

Finally, the study also suggests a clear difference between the emotions of satisfaction and contentment on the one hand and other positive emotions like thrilled, delighted, exhilarated on the other. While one could always argue that the difference between these items lies

in the amount of activation or arousal suggested by the emotion terms, our study shows that the terms also differ in the content or quality of the emotion felt by respondents. Although this study was exploratory and we suggest caution in the conclusions one draws from our results, our study provides a possible explanation for the different behavioral responses observed when customers are satisfied versus when they are delighted.

## **STUDY TWO**

To gain deeper insights into the antecedents of customer delight (assuming joy is one of the constituents of delight) we provide a brief review of the literature in philosophy on the emotion of joy. The review is followed by a discussion of the neurological process by which customers may be experiencing delight and we use this knowledge to draw inferences about the constituents of customer delight. Finally, we describe the results of a field study that sheds some light on the possible antecedents of delight.

### **Literature Review**

Schactel (1959) distinguishes between two kinds of joy - "magic" joy and "real" joy, thus raising the possibility that there may be two kinds of delight - one based on "magic" joy and one based on "real" joy (see results of Study 1b above). Magic joy is a short-lived experience when a person feels that the unexpected fulfillment of a wish or need can (or will) change his/her situation. The person experiencing such joy usually expects the fulfillment of the need to have come through good luck or fate and not through effort (own or other's). The other type of joy, called "real" joy, can result from any ongoing activity which brings an individual into contact, physically and/or mentally, with some aspect of the world around him/her (Schactel 1959; also see Goldstein 1951). This kind of joy is based on the activity which triggers a feeling of relatedness between a person and the stimulus, e.g. customer and a firm or product. Real joy may result from

an event which was caused by one's own effort or by the effort of others. It is not dependent on the unexpected fulfillment of a wish. Thus, the event evoking "real" joy could be high or low in surprise, whereas the event evoking magic joy has to be surprising (and attributed to luck or circumstances).

The above discussion implies that customers can experience real joy on an ongoing basis from some aspect of their experience with a firm's product or service. Real joy is believed to sustain an ongoing activity (pp. 43, Schactel 1959), thus implying that customers receiving real joy from a product experience are likely to come back for the same experience. By the nature of its' origin in ongoing activities, real joy gives customers the confidence and reassurance that the source of joy is stable and will be available when they want to re-experience that feeling. This is in sharp contrast to the experience of magic joy where even as a customer experiences joy, s/he is worried whether there is something that will cut short this experience and bring them back to reality. This is very common in today's world where consumers have become skeptical about any offer that sounds too good to be true.

The biological changes accompanying the feelings of surprise and joy have also been studied by researchers (Tomkins 1962, Izard 1971). The biological changes being discussed here are those controlled by the brain stem reticular system. There are other biological changes like heart rate, perspiration rate, etc. which are controlled by the glandular-visceral system and we do not discuss these changes as they are not pertinent to the idea that we want to convey.

The feeling of surprise occurs when there is a steep increase in the rate of neural firing. It is the increase in the rate of firing that determines surprise and not the density of firing. Hence, a constant loud noise, as seen in many television commercials, may not surprise as much as an unexpected sound even if the sound is of lower intensity than the loud noise. The emotion of joy is activated by a sharp reduction in the gradient of neural stimulation (Tomkins 1962, Izard 1991).

The observations about the rate of neural stimulation in joy and surprise suggests that though delight has been described as the emotion resulting from the simultaneous experience of joy and surprise, it is possible that a person first experiences surprise (increased rate of neural stimulation) and then focuses on the surprising event. Thus, the role of surprise in delight may be to focus one's attention completely on a desirable outcome and to intensify the emotion of joy produced by that outcome. This suggests that while surprise may be one way to evoke delight, there may be other ways to evoke delight, too. Any mechanism by which a person's attention could be completely focused on a desirable outcome which evokes joy is likely to be an antecedent of delight and together with the emotion of joy will evoke delight in a person.

This would suggest that any product or service that captivates a customer and gets their attention could evoke delight if the product or service features have the potential to evoke joy in the customer. Product or service experiences where the customer experiences flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) are also likely to be situations where the customer would experience delight if the product or service experience can evoke feelings of joy in a customer. Flow has been discussed in the context of computer-mediated environments and hence, it might be valuable to point out a potential pitfall in attempts to evoke delight in this manner. As the customer is totally immersed in or captivated by a product/service experience, any disruption in this experience that is attributed to the firm is likely to be very memorable for the customer and could result in negative reactions and behavior towards the firm and its products.

We now describe a study that compares the emotions of consumers who differed in terms of their prior exposure to a certain performance. The expectation was that if they were captivated by the performance, then they are likely to be delighted even if they had anticipated everything in the show and hence may have had low levels of surprise.

## Method

The context chosen for this study was a live Irish dance performance called the "Lord of the Dance" by an internationally reputed group. Two hundred members of the audience for this show in a Mid-Western University town were randomly chosen and given a two page questionnaire at the beginning of the show. The questionnaires were handed out after the patrons were seated and they were requested to complete the survey during the intermission. At the intermission, volunteers went around the auditorium to collect completed surveys (this also served as a reminder to the respondents to complete their surveys). Participants also had the opportunity to drop off the completed surveys in boxes placed near the exit doors of the auditorium.

**Sample Characteristics.** Of the 200 questionnaires that were handed out, 145 completed questionnaires were returned yielding a response rate of 72.5%. The respondents varied widely in terms of age and occupation. Almost 32% of the respondents were in the age group 46-60 years, 21% were between the ages of 36-45, and the remaining respondents were almost equally split (15% in each group) among the age groups 26-35 years, below 25 years, and above 60 years. In terms of their occupations, 21% were students, 18% were business-persons, 11% were University employees, 10% were medical professionals, and the rest came from various professions like teachers (6%), lawyers, etc. 70% of the respondents were females and 30% were males.

**Instrument.** The questionnaire stated at the outset that the purpose of the survey was for the management of the facility to get feedback from patrons so that they could improve the quality of the services offered to the community. The survey began with three questions related to the patrons' overall level of satisfaction with their experience that evening at the venue, the facilities and services provided by the facility, and the

performance they were seeing that evening. Subjects were asked to respond to these questions on a 6-point semantic differential scale where 1 was extremely dissatisfied and 6 was extremely satisfied. Next, subjects were asked a series of questions which was aimed at getting their assessment of the facilities and services provided at the venue. They were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with specific facilities and services provided at the venue, e.g., satisfaction with parking, concession stands, restrooms, quality of the seat, etc.. This was followed by questions assessing the subjects' prior exposure to the show, the extent of their surprise and the emotions experienced by them as they watched the show, the extent to which they were captivated and aroused by the show, and their intentions to return to the venue for other shows in the future. The extent to which they were surprised was measured by a three item 7-point semantic differential scale anchored as follows: 1 (very surprised) to 7 (not at all surprised) (reverse-coded item); 1 (just as expected) to 7 (very unexpected) and 1 (just as anticipated) to 7 (not anticipated at all). Thus, subjects' scores on their level of surprise could vary from 3 to 21. Subjects indicated the extent to which they experienced nine different emotions (e.g., contented, thrilled, delighted) on a 6 point scale where 0 indicated that they did not feel the emotion, 1 indicated they felt very little of the emotion and 5 indicated that they experienced the emotion very much. The extent to which subjects felt aroused and captivated by the show was measured by a four item 5-point semantic differential scale (relaxed (1) - stimulated (5); sleepy (1) - wide-awake (5); indifferent (1) - captivated (5); and unaroused (1) - aroused (5)), and their scores on the extent of captivation could vary from 4 to 20. The survey ended by asking respondents to provide demographic information and requesting them to respond to an open-ended question which asked for their suggestions on changes that could make their experience at the venue more pleasurable.

**Analysis.** The reliabilities of the multiple item scales were assessed and found to be acceptable as the Cronbach alphas for these scales (surprise scale:  $\alpha=0.72$  and arousal scale:  $\alpha=0.89$ ) were greater than 0.70 (Nunnally 1970). Almost 60% (86 subjects) of the sample had seen the show before (either on stage, video or on TV) and 40 % had never seen the show before. Prior to comparing these two groups on the extent to which they experienced the emotion of delight and other emotions, a manipulation check was done to ensure that the two groups differed significantly on the extent to which they were surprised. *Surprisingly*, the group that had never seen the show before did not experience significantly higher levels of surprise than the group that had seen the show before (Mean levels of surprise:  $M_{\text{seen show before}}=11.1$ ,  $M_{\text{never seen show}}=11.5$ ,  $F_{1,143}=0.23$ ,  $p>0.5$ ).

As the purpose of this study was to investigate whether subjects could experience delight even when they were not surprised (or experience same levels of delight irrespective of their level of surprise), it was decided to split the sample into two groups - those who were not at all surprised or experienced very low levels of surprise (i.e., average score on surprise scale was less than 4), and those who experienced high levels of surprise (i.e., average score on surprise scale was greater than or equal to 4). [We also repeated this analysis after splitting the sample on the basis of subjects' response to the one item which asked them about their extent of surprise. We obtained the same results as above where we split the sample on the basis of responses to the 3-item scale.] These two groups obviously differed significantly on the extent of surprise felt by the subjects ( $M_{\text{low surprise}}=8.00$ ;  $M_{\text{high surprise}}=15.15$ ;  $F_{1,143}=199.3$ ;  $p<0.01$ ).

**Results.** The average score ( $M_{\text{surprise for entire sample}}=11.23$ ) of the sample on the 3-item 7 point scale measuring surprise suggests that the overall levels of surprise were moderate. However, the entire sample experienced very high levels of the positive emotions of delight ( $M=4.34$ ), thrill ( $M=4.32$ ), excitement ( $M=4.58$ ), and joy

( $M=4.28$ ). Interestingly, the subject's mean score ( $M=5.91$ ) on the 4-item 5 point arousal/captivation scale suggests that subjects were almost completely captivated by the show and felt high levels of arousal, alertness, and stimulation.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that there was no significant difference in the extent to which the emotion of delight was felt by subjects who experienced high levels of surprise compared to subjects who experienced low levels of surprise ( $M_{\text{delight in low surprise group}}=4.45$ ,  $M_{\text{delight in high surprise group}}=4.20$ ,  $F_{1,143}=1.13$ ,  $p>0.10$ ). Although this result suggests that consumers may experience high levels of delight irrespective of the extent to which they feel surprised, a more stringent test of our notion that consumers could be delighted even if they are not surprised would require us to examine carefully the responses of those subjects who said they were "not at all surprised" and that the show was "just as expected" and "just as anticipated," i.e., subjects with a score of 3 on the surprise scale. We would have to show that (a) these subjects also experienced delight (the more delight they experienced, the stronger will be the support for our contention) and (b) the extent of delight experienced by these subjects is not significantly different than the extent of delight experienced by subjects who were very surprised, i.e., subjects with a score of 20 or 21 on the surprise scale. There were only five subjects who were not at all surprised (score of 3 on the surprise scale) and there were four subjects who were very surprised (score of 21 on the surprise scale). Of these nine subjects, eight provided responses about the extent to which they felt delighted and almost all of them (seven of the eight) reported experiencing identical levels of delight, i.e., very delighted or a 5 on a 1-5 scale measuring extent of delight. The only subject who reported a different level of delight was in the group that experienced "no surprise at all" and this subject also reported experiencing high levels of delight (score of 4 on a 1-5 scale). Although the low number of subjects in these extreme cells on the surprise scale may



make any statistical testing of differences between these cells questionable, the data do show that subjects who were not at all surprised experienced high levels of delight and remarkably, they experienced almost the same levels of delight as those who were extremely surprised.

To gain further insights into possible antecedents of customer delight, we carried out some additional analysis.

**Additional Analysis.** Our exploratory study (see study 1b) and the literature review (see under Study 2) had suggested that consumers could experience delight with or without surprise, though almost all subjects experiencing delight experienced the emotion of joy. Our review of the neurosciences literature suggested that consumers are likely to be delighted if they are captivated by a stimulus that evokes joy. In the context of study 2, surprise did not have an effect on the level of delight felt by subjects. To determine whether joy and captivation influenced the extent to which subjects felt delighted, we regressed subjects' delight scores on the levels of joy and captivation felt by them. The results indicate that both joy ( $\beta=0.46$ ,  $t=5.08$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and captivation ( $\beta=0.29$ ,  $t=3.24$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) had significant effects on delight, with joy having a relatively stronger effect than captivation on the emotion of delight. Together, joy and captivation explained 44.5% of the variance in the feelings of delight experienced by the subjects.

As our additional analysis suggested that captivating consumers could be an alternative antecedent of customer delight in addition to surprise which was suggested by the existing literature on emotions, we performed an analysis to see if the extent to which subjects were captivated by the show was influenced by the extent to which they felt surprised. Results of a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicate that the level of surprise had no effect on the extent to which subjects were captivated by the flow.

## Discussion

The results of the two studies described above offer interesting and unique insights into the potential antecedents of customer delight. In this section, we will (a) discuss the contribution of these findings to the existing literature on delight, (b) explain or clarify unexpected results obtained in prior research on customer delight and (c) discuss the implications for managers involved in making field decisions about efforts to satisfy and/or delight their customers.

**Contribution to Existing Literature on Delight.** Our literature review and empirical studies found that there may be two kinds of delight which in turn, may be based on the fact that there may be two different kinds of joy. An implication of this finding is that consumers can be delighted in two different ways. One way consumers can be delighted is based on the existing conceptualization of delight in the marketing literature. This conceptualization suggests that delight is an emotion comprised of joy and surprise. The other way in which consumers experience delight is when they are captivated (or aroused) by an event which evokes feelings of joy in the consumer. The finding that consumers can be delighted even if they are not surprised is one which has considerable implications for theory and practice in marketing. Until now, even when researchers defined delight as a high arousal positive emotion, it was implicitly assumed that the high arousal was a result of high levels of surprise (e.g., see the hypothesized model of Oliver et al. 1997 where surprise is posited to lead to high levels of arousal). Our findings suggest that surprise and captivation (or arousal) can be independent, separate antecedent paths to delight customers. Our review of the neuroscience literature on the way the human brain processes emotions helps provide a theoretical account of how and why surprise and captivation can be independent, alternate paths to delight, i.e., they both serve the same function - orient the consumers attention

completely to a joy evoking stimulus.

Although in this study, we have treated all the positive emotions as distinct emotions (thus measuring delight with 1 item asking consumers about the extent to which they felt delighted), our results from study 1b suggests a set of emotion adjectives that are very similar in content to the term "delight" and hence may be used to form a multi-item scale to measure customer delight. That would be a useful methodological contribution to the research on customer delight as it will be a substantive improvement to the current practice of measuring delight as the top box of an item measuring satisfaction. In fact, the results of study 1b suggest that in addition to the level of surprise, the emotional content of satisfaction and delight may be quite different, thus highlighting the need for researchers to come up with better measures of customer delight (also see Kumar and Olshavsky 1997).

**Insights Into Results of Prior Research on Delight.** We now consider two prior studies in marketing (Westbrook and Oliver 1991; Oliver et al. 1997) that examined consumer emotions (including delight) and use insights from our study to shed more light on the results of those studies. In the first study, Westbrook and Oliver (1991) examined the emotional content of various patterns of emotional responses to consumption experiences and the correspondence between satisfaction judgements and these emotional responses. They found two groups which experienced positive emotions and they labeled these groups the "happy/contented" group and the "delighted" group. Both these groups reported experiencing feelings of joy and the key difference was one group reported feeling surprise while the other group reported feelings of interest and not surprise. As can be expected and probably based on prior research until then, Westbrook and Oliver labeled the group which reported joy and surprise as "pleasantly surprised" and suggest that this is the "delighted" group while they labeled the group which reported joy and interest as the "happy/contented" group.

However, what is interesting to note from that study is the satisfaction levels reported by subjects in the two groups were almost identical (from Table 3 of Westbrook and Oliver 1991, page 89:  $M_{\text{sat of contented group}}=54.04$ ,  $M_{\text{sat of pleasantly surprised group}}=54.00$ ). Westbrook and Oliver noted that although both the contented and delighted group had similarly high levels of absolute satisfaction, they differed in their emotional antecedents - joy and surprise versus joy and interest. They also state that the emotional composition of the interest dimension suggests enduring involvement and deserves to be studied further.

The results of our study fit in perfectly with Westbrook and Oliver's (1991) findings, though we would suggest a slightly different interpretation based on the insights gleaned from our study. Our results suggest that the two groups experiencing positive emotions in Westbrook and Oliver's (1991) study were both delighted consumers. Unfortunately, there was no measure of the emotion of delight in that study. The satisfaction of both of these groups was measured and found to be extremely high and almost identical. That is exactly what we would have expected if both groups were delighted. Further, our study suggests that joy without surprise could also evoke delight and this kind of delight would be characterized by an on-going relationship and a desire to continue an association. Clearly, our findings and interpretations mesh perfectly with and lend support to Westbrook and Oliver's speculation that enduring involvement may characterize the group that experienced joy and interest.

The second study by Oliver et al. (1997) examined customer delight in two different contexts, a wildlife theme park and a symphony concert. The researchers expected delight to be influenced by surprise, arousal, and positive affect in both studies and further, they expected delight to influence intentions in both studies. However, they obtained very different results in the two studies. In study 1, delight was influenced by surprise, arousal, and positive affect whereas in study 2 delight was influenced only by positive

affect. Further, in study 1, delight did not have an effect on intentions whereas in study 2 delight influenced intentions as expected. Oliver and his colleagues offer various reasons to explain what they termed as "the inconsistent effect of surprise and arousal on delight". They suggest that one reason for the different results could be the different manner in which surprising consumption was measured, i.e., in study one, they measured surprising levels of satisfaction while in study two, they measured surprising levels of performance. The authors speculate that the subtle difference in meaning in the two measures could be responsible for the different results. Another suggestion made by the authors is that the different results could be "simple data artifact."

Our research suggests that Oliver et al.'s findings are consistent with what we would predict based on our theory. As our theory suggests that delight based on real joy is likely to be attributed to someone or something other than luck and is likely to be characterized by desires to maintain an on-going relationship, this kind of delight would be related to intentions. Recall that delight based on real joy was not based on surprise. Similarly, delight based on magic joy was expected to be short-lived and attributed to luck. This kind of delight may or may not be related to consumer intentions and hence is not suggested as a framework for a firm's strategic planning activities. In the Oliver et al. (1997) study 1, it is very possible that different subjects were experiencing different kinds of delight (some may have experienced both kinds of delight). For example, a subject unexpectedly seeing a grizzly bear may experience joy and the fulfillment of a life long desire. This chance event may not lead this person to want to come back to the park. On the other hand, some subjects may enjoy the natural beauty of the park and feel they are in harmony with nature and experience joy. This feeling of relatedness or connection with the source of joy (i.e., the park) may lead these subjects to want to return to the park. Thus, the relationship between delight and

intentions could depend on the kind of delight subjects felt.

**Managerial Implications.** Our research suggests that a very meaningful way for firms to try and delight customers is to try to do it through an on-going activity which physically and/or mentally engages the customer with the firm or its products and services. This on-going activity can then trigger a feeling of relatedness between the customer and the firm and this feeling of relatedness evokes "real joy" and delight. The reason it is desirable for firms to evoke delight in this manner is that customers who experience this kind of delight attribute the source of their delight to either their own effort or to the effort of others but not to luck or chance. This is a very important point for firms to note because if customers attribute the source of their delight to luck or chance, firms will not reap any benefits by delighting their customers. On the other hand, if customers attribute the source of their delight to a firm or its products, services or employees, then the customer will want to continue his/her relationship with the firm and do more business with the firm.

Thus, our research strongly encourages firms interested in delighting customers to not only focus on surprising customers at every transaction but to identify and focus on activities that are at the core of an on-going relationship between the customer and the firm. For example, a hotel can try to delight their customers by leaving a box of chocolate on a guest's bed as that would be a pleasant surprise for the guest when he/she returns to the room after a day full of business meetings. On the other hand, the hotel could try and identify activities that are at the core of the relationship between the hotel and a guest who is a business traveler. These activities are likely to be things the hotel can do to anticipate the business person's needs in the hotel room in a pro-active manner and make those available even without the guest having to ask for it. While it is true that the first time the guest experiences such hospitality, he/she may be surprised but the hospitality

becomes the basis of an on-going relationship between the hotel and the customer and in future, the guest will continue to be delighted as long as the hotel nurtures this relationship by pro-actively engaging in activities that focus on the hospitality provided to the guest (even if these activities do not lead to surprising outcomes for the guest). In fact, it may be more feasible and fruitful for the firm to identify such activities and attempt to delight their customers than trying to surprise the customer each time (e.g., with a chocolate on the bed).

A firm could also think of ways to have a customer totally engaged in the consumption of the product or service and enjoy having this relationship with the firm or even a brand. In such cases, the firm's activities lead to an on-going relationship, which is often interactive, between the customer and the firm and the sense of relatedness emanating from these activities triggers feelings of delight in the customer. In recent times, consumer researchers have turned their attention to such activities and the sense of engagement resulting from such activities has been termed "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). We speculate that as flow implies the consumer is immersed and engaged in an enjoyable task, such tasks would evoke feelings of delight that are based on "real joy" and hence the consumer will want to come back to maintain that relationship with the firm or its offerings.

The results of our study offers managers, for the first time, a strong theoretical reason to pursue customer delight as a strategic objective and not just a tactical device aimed at getting short-term gains like a short-term jump in sales or market share (e.g., by offering a one-time deal that is too good to be true). As we pointed out in the introduction to this paper, managers have always found it difficult to base a business strategy around the idea of constantly surprising the customer. Most managers believe that there are practical limitations to implementing a strategy which calls for surprising the customer at every transaction. The results of our study suggest that firms may not have to constantly surprise their

customers at every transaction to keep them delighted. In this respect, we disagree with Oliver et al.'s (1997) speculation "that only the most unexpected levels" of satisfaction (as in their study 1) or performance (as in their study 2) will initiate the delight sequence. Our research actually suggests that it may be more desirable to evoke delight by having customers totally engaged with your products (and their performance) instead of attempting to surprise them at every interaction with the firm. In fact, this conceptualization of delight may make the concept of delight meaningful even in a business-to-business context. Typically, we do not expect much emotional response in evaluating business-to-business transactions. However, we feel in business-to-business contexts, it may be meaningful to explore customer delight using Westbrook and Oliver's (1991) notion that enduring involvement with a product or a firm may influence consumers' emotional responses.

Finally, from a strategic perspective, delighting customers could be made a goal in which every department of the firm can play a role because *any ongoing activity* which brings the customer into contact with the firm or its offerings has the potential to be a source of delight. Thus, firms can set goals for each department to identify ways in which they can delight their customers (may be external or internal customers). This might imply that firms high on inter-functional coordination will have more opportunities to delight their customers than firms that are low in inter-functional coordination (see Market Orientation literature for more on this construct, e.g., Kohli and Jaworski 1990, Narver and Slater 1990).

To summarize, we undertook this research to explore alternative antecedents to delighting customers. We feel we have identified some alternatives and hope our research offers insights for researchers and managers interested in exploring the construct of customer delight.

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