

# DELIGHT ON THE NILE: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF EXPERIENCES THAT PRODUCE DELIGHT

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## ABSTRACT

The authors investigated the concept of delight using an ethnographic approach. Specifically the analysis focused on the antecedents of delight, as experienced during a tour to Egypt. Results of the analysis showed that participant characteristics and situational variables play a role in producing delight. Experiences occurring during the trip produced positive affect, arousal and surprise which resulted in delight. Implications for managers and future research are given.

## INTRODUCTION

Amazement and delight at the tomb of Neferatri:

Saturday October 18, about 25 of us are sitting on benches in an area under a roof without walls. We are awaiting our turn to see the tomb of Neferatri. Baset, a trip leader and Ph.D. Egyptologist, steps in front of the group. Attention turns to her as she begins to tell about Neferatri's tomb: "It was discovered at the beginning of this century. The frescos, wall and ceiling paintings, were on the floor as water from moisture in the air brings salt to the surface of the rock, the salt expands and pushes the frescos off the wall. They were in thousands and thousands of little pieces. I was here as a graduate student. We put the pictures back." Baset assures us that the colors are original, have not been restored or touched up. We enter the tomb and are dazzled by bright, vivid, bold fresh colors that come alive, colors so fresh they couldn't have been painted more than a few minutes ago. I hear: "Hard to believe these are from 3000 years ago!" As we walk away from the tomb others say: "that was a real treat, the colors don't seem possible." "Real stuff."

The topic of our paper is "delight", a concept that has only recently received attention in both popular and academic publications. Our report on delight starts with a brief review of what has been written on the topic, with particular emphasis on the seminal academic article by Oliver, Rust, and Varki (1997). Second, the methodology will be

reported. Third, we will analyze how some participant characteristics and different types of experiences produce positive affect, arousal and surprise, three elements that combine to yield delight (Oliver, Rust and Varki 1997). The paper ends with discussion, summary and possible avenues for future research.

The setting for our research is a trip to Egypt, and the major contribution of this paper is to suggest how the consumer's background and different types of experiences combine to produce the basic elements that result in delight. Oliver, Rust and Varki (1997) have presented and found evidence in support of a theory of delight in which positive affect, arousal and surprise result in delight. Our analysis focuses on the antecedents of positive affect, arousal and surprise.

## LITERATURE ON DELIGHT

### Trade Publications

Most of the limited number of articles on delight primarily occur in trade publications. Delight is discussed in a wide variety of fields, and appears to have as a common theme the idea that delight is beyond mere satisfaction. Articles include: 1) using delight in a restaurant setting to keep customers returning (Cohen 1997); 2) delight as an organizational goal (Jackson 1997); 3) delight as a part of customer service (Raphel 1997); 4) the role of delight in credit management (Allen 1997); 5) delight as a tool to retain insurance clients (Paterson 1997); and 6) delight within distribution channels (Anderson 1997). The trade publications provide little insight on the basic process of delight. Those sources view delight as a very high level of satisfaction.

### The Oliver, Rust and Varki Model

The only academic article found on delight is the seminal piece mentioned earlier by Oliver, Rust and Varki (1997). The authors give delight both a theoretical and an applied perspective, stating that "delight appears as resulting from a

'blend' of pleasure and arousal (p. 318)." Based on their review, they present and test a model which has both a "delight sequence" and a "satisfaction sequence" leading to intentions.

The model was tested using two consumption experiences - a recreational wildlife theme park and a symphony concert. The direct and indirect effects on both delight and intentions were not consistent for the two studies, leading the authors to state that "this indicates the probable effect of moderating variables on the impact of delight on behavioral intention (p. 329)." They conjecture that the effect of delight may differ in different settings.

The model proposed in Oliver, Rust and Varki is essentially an abstract psychological model of the process of delight that can occur within consumption experiences. Our observations suggest that consumer characteristics and some general types of consumption experiences can trigger the antecedents of delight (positive affect, arousal, and surprise), which, in turn, lead to delight.

## METHODS

### Ethnography

In October of 1997 one author had plans for a trip to Egypt with his wife. Given an interest in learning about how consumption experiences contribute to satisfaction and dissatisfaction, this author (hereafter I) planned and took notes over the duration of the trip. After returning from the trip, both the field notes and recall of the trip experience pointed to a number of instances in which the participants experienced delight, the focus of this report.

Our primary method was participant observation (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Hunt 1991), an inductive, ethnographic approach. Similar methods have been employed in recent studies of consumption experiences (Arnold and Price 1993; Price, Arnold and Tierney 1995; Sherry 1990; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Swan and Trawick 1997). The method was appropriate as very little is known about the production of delight. Inductive methods are often effective when the research objective is to discover how basic social processes occur.

### Research Setting

The Metropolitan Museum of Natural History sponsors the two week trip that includes a seven day boat cruise on the Nile River. The main focus of the trip is on the pharaonic Egypt of pyramids and temples. A second theme of the trip is the surprising continuities between elements of past and contemporary Egypt. Some 52 people were on the trip. The trip leaders, all PhD holders, included two Egyptologists, Hisham Mahfouz and Baset Youssef, and a research scientist from the Museum. A travel director, Alice Neal, handled arrangements. Most of the guests were couples from about age 50 and up.

### Data Recording

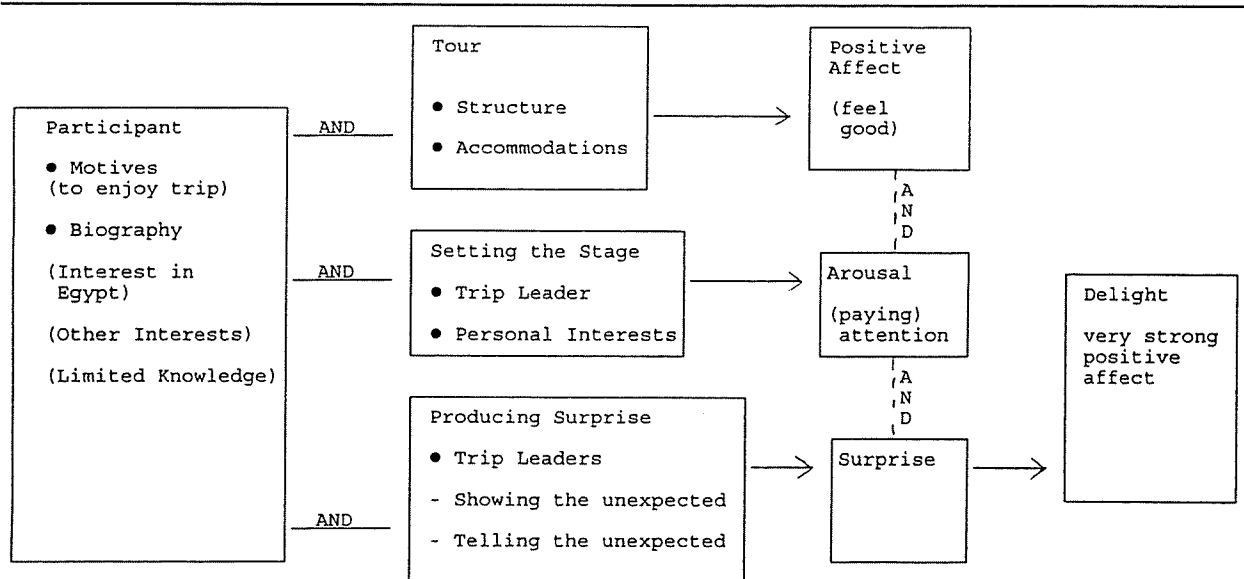
During the trip some other participants also wrote notes; however, my note taking was more extensive than the others. On some occasions when someone noticed or asked about my note taking, I explained that I am a college professor, that people in my field study recreational activities, and that I hoped to write articles using the notes. No one objected or seemed uncomfortable. I did not observe differences in the other participants' behavior between occasions when I did or did not take notes.

Some expressed an interest in my notes and I promised to write an account of the trip and share it. I did write and send a story of our trip to all participants. Data for our analysis employed the field notes, story of the trip, written material provided to participants by the Museum, and post-trip notes some participants sent after receiving my story of the trip. The story and field notes were transcribed and entered in a word processing system. Most names of individuals in this report are pseudonyms.

### Analysis And Measurement

The concept of delight has only very recently been the topic of systematic inquiry (Oliver, Rust and Varki 1997), so it is not surprising that a widely accepted definition does not exist. Oliver et. al. drew from the psychology literature and discussed delight as an emotion with a combination of high pleasure (joy, elation), and high activation,

Figure 1  
Production of Delight



or surprise. They conceptually define delight as an emotion combining high arousal or activation and high positive affect. Their operational measure of delight used a set of "How frequently did you feel:" affective items (contented, happy, cheerful, pleased, excited, enthused, stimulated, elated) and arousal (astonished, surprised) items. A problem with that approach is the same measures included both delight and its components. They also employed a single item direct measure of delight (how frequently did you feel delighted).

In our report, delight was inferred from the behavior of the other participants. Specifically, we identified delightful experiences as those where some of the participants expressed surprise, astonishment, interest, pleasure, excitedly called others attention to something, smiled, or focused their attention on what a trip leader was saying. Another indicator of delight was what people said that was positive about an experience after it was over such as "wasn't that great!" While we do not claim to be able to measure degrees of delight, we believe that delight is often a quite visible emotion and that the events we identified were delightful to at least some of the participants.

In summary, we define delight as strong, very positive affect in response to an ongoing experience.

## MODELING DELIGHT

The Oliver, Rust and Varki (1997) study found evidence that delight has three direct antecedents:

1. Surprising consumption ----- > Delight
2. Arousal or heightened activation ----- > Delight
3. Positive affect ----- > Delight

They also discuss some other variables and linkages that we will not cover. Our analysis will both confirm the portion of the Oliver, Rust and Varki (1997) model given above and develop new insights concerning some specific situational elements that produce delight when the situation triggers surprise in a content of positive affect and arousal. In addition, we will note that some background experiences of the participants were also important. Our model is shown in Figure 1. It is important to note that Figure 1 is not a "causal model." We will present an account of how the variables and processes shown in Figure 1 combine to produce delight; however we are not claiming that Figure 1 represents a causal structure.

We will present experiences during the trip that highlight each of the elements. In order to present a clear report, we will include a separate section on each of the elements. It is important to note that each of the delight instances we present probably contained all of the elements. In particular, our separation of arousal, positive affect and surprise is an analytical and reporting necessity. Next, we turn to the results of our study.

### **PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS**

We found that delight is related to participant characteristics including *motivations to enjoy the trip* and *biography*, that is one's personal history of experiences (Berger 1963). Biography included an interest in Egypt, but limited knowledge of it. Motives and biography combine with other factors to produce delight.

#### **Motives**

The trip was selected by the participants in anticipation of an enjoyable experience. One of our travelers wore a t-shirt that summarized his motives: "I Am Retired, My Job Is Having A Good Time." The motivation of enjoyment when combined with pleasant occurrences during the trip helped to produce positive affect, a point we develop more completely in the next section.

#### **Biography**

Participants' personal history or biography also helped set the stage for delight. At lunch Paul tells of his interests in Egypt: "I wanted to cruise the Nile." I asked: "What do you like so far?" At first Paul didn't answer, then he says: "Pyramids blew my mind - it was the first one (pyramid) - A major dream for me. We do (he and his family) Disney World, family reunions..." Paul's friend adds: "I read books on Egypt before coming." The strong interest in Egypt results in most participants giving full attention to the trip leaders as they "show and tell."

A second important element of biography is that while participants are interested in Egypt, their knowledge is limited. Evidently, only a few participants had visited Egypt prior to our trip.

Limited knowledge provides many opportunities for surprise. As a boy, I rowed a skiff up and down Bay St. Louis using the common oar of our culture. I see an Egyptian who rows with what to my eyes are strange oars: instead of a handgrip, shaft and blade, what corresponds to the shaft and blade part is a straight plank, like a 1x4 inch plank you will find at **HomeQuarters Warehouse** store, set between two wooden pins. The end of the plank serves as the blade; I see it placed in and out of the water in a rowing motion. Even more exotic, between the pin and the oarsman's hand is a bulbous, mandolin shaped wooden piece about 20 inches long. I guess that it may be solid wood and serve as a counter balance to the long "straight plank" part, and the mandolin shape keeps the oar from sliding out of the pin.

### **THE TOUR AND POSITIVE AFFECT**

The tour was structured and conducted to produce happy travelers. The tour director and trip leaders worked diligently to please the participants. The accommodations, food and service probably reflect some of the best that the hospitality industry offers. Our main observation is that much of the trip was quite enjoyable and positive affect occurred so often, that it is a background contingency.

#### **Accommodations: A Source of Positive Affect**

An example of accommodations providing a pleasant background experience is the buildings and gardens of the Mena House, located at the foot of the great Pyramid of Cheops. The Mena House is "a paradise of flowers, shrubs and trees on its grounds, with the great Pyramid of Cheops thrust above its buildings and gardens reminding me of peaks of the Tetons in the American west." On the Nile Queen, my notes on the food and service include: "The service staff accords us deference and a quality of service that is far beyond my usual station in life. Our cruise boat dining room has the appointments - china, silver, crystal, folded white cloth napkins - that I imagine is only exceeded by state dinners at the White House."

### **Structure of The Tour: Positive Affect**

Obviously the places visited and the means of transportation provided addition background for delight. The group saw a wide variety of pyramids, tombs, and temples, including the very famous. The cruise down the Nile provided the opportunity for many experiences, from viewing the daily lives of Egyptians to a comment by one traveler: "The most lovely, significant sunsets of my life."

In summary, positive affect frequently occurred on the tour and it is a background contingency that, combined with arousal and surprise, produce delight. We suggest that positive affect followed from the participants' motives and the elements of the trip: leaders, places visited, and accommodations and service which often met or exceeded participants, expectations.

### **TRIP LEADER AND PERSONAL INTERESTS PRODUCING AROUSAL**

As participants, many of us have a long term interest in the sights and history of Egypt and our attention was frequently focused on what a trip leader was showing and telling. Clearly, participant interests and a trip leader taking center stage produced arousal. Personal interests of the participants are a second source of arousal. Viewing one of the temple walls, a traveler who is a physician showed how the tools depicted in a panel are surgical tools that he recognized as ancestors of contemporary instruments.

### **Trip Leader Performances Produce Arousal**

Performances by trip leaders are a common source of arousal. Often we departed the hotel or ship and boarded a couple of buses to see a temple, pyramid or other attraction. Hisham or Baset was at the front of the bus and he or she told what the 20 of us would soon see. On arriving at the site, our tour leader motioned us to follow and we walked over to an area. Baset gathered us around her, took the stage, and told about what we were viewing, often pointing to a scene on a temple or tomb wall. Hisham did the same with his group. Our attention was aroused as we focused on her narrative.

An example of the tour guides setting the stage is the comment by Baset as the bus pulls away from the Mena House: "We will cross the whole city (Cairo). It will be very rich and....colorful." At the entrance to the Tomb of Saphth, Baset talked to the leader of a just arrived group to ensure that they held back until my group entered the tomb. Hisham, at the Great Temple of Abu Simbel, primes the group with statements such as: "Isn't this great!" "What a Megalomaniac (describing Ramesses II)" and "You will see Ramesses smiting his enemies."

### **Participant Interests Produce Arousal**

Interests that participants have beyond an interest in Egypt and occurrences that are relevant to their interests result in arousal. Individual interests are also important in determining arousal in response to tour leader performances. To clarify the main point of this section, individual interests can result in arousal in conjunction with or apart from leader performances.

About a half dozen of us, including myself, are birders, people who have an interest in observing and identifying species of birds. None of the trip leaders participate in birding.

On some occasions while the Nile Queen was cruising the river, the birders could be found up on deck, in a little group, looking for birds with binoculars and trying to identify new birds, birds not seen previously on the trip. Identification involves using a field guide of birds of Egypt. Since many of the birds of Egypt do not occur in the United States, identification of new birds is a common activity. Arousal, heightened attention, occurs whenever a bird is seen that could be a new bird.

Aboard the Nile Queen I see "snow white little egrets and larger blue herons against the green rushes." Companions respond "Birds in this light (so nice to see)." I also comment: "Nature, in the form of birds, is delightfully present at the river's edge where water and earth meet." I go on to describe "large Gray Herons, blue-gray in color; hunched down Squacco Herons, white with a bit of rust color; Moorhens small cock birds; ducks; colorful black and white Pied Kingfishers; and Black Kiks, large dark, hawklike birds that soon soar over the river on long narrow wings."

## TRIP LEADERS PRODUCING SURPRISE

In the context of surprising consumption, surprise was created by the guides in two ways - *showing* the unexpected and *telling* the unexpected. Limited knowledge of Egypt also contributes to rendering events as unexpected.

### Showing The Unexpected

Two experiences illustrate the guides showing the unexpected. At Djoser's Pyramid Hisham instructs us to look in the small opening of a small rectangular stone building: "Look, but don't say anything." I am first. I look in, and to my surprise, staring intensely back at me is a black stone man with white eyes and black irises. I chuckle, "Oh wow!" Someone asks: "What is it?" I reply: "Can't say, it's worth looking!" People step up, look, and voice surprise and enjoyment. Hisham: "What you see there is King Djoser keeping an eye on what's going on in the outside world." At the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities Hisham takes the group to a case containing a very lifelike seated statue of a scribe, with papyrus writing paper on his lap. With a flashlight he shines a beam of light on the scribe's eyes. I report: "The eyes come alive! The Scribe is looking at us!" Hisham says: "The eyes are of quartz-look how fine-quality work. (There is) nothing else like it in ancient Egypt." Replies a group member: "Like real eyes!"

### Telling The Unexpected

During the trip, our guides telling the unexpected to create surprise are numerous. At Djoser's Step Pyramid Hisham states "(it is) the oldest stone building in the world." At the Great Temple of Abu Simbel, Hisham, in telling the group where to go in the temple, exclaims, "You will see Ramesses smiting his enemies!" In her narrative at the Temple of Hathor at Dendera, Baset states "Still today women who can't get pregnant, come here, touch the stones. In Roman times women would come, spend the night, get pregnant, and pay the priest." She hints that the priestly role was more than spiritual in terms of enhancing fertility. At the back wall of a Temple dedicated to Cleopatra and her son Caeserion

fathered by Julius Caesar, Baset says, "Cleopatra brought Mark Antony here during their cruise on the Nile. Caeserion was sent by Cleopatra to the Red Sea, but the Romans caught him and killed him to eliminate an heir of Caesar. "At the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities Hisham takes the group to a flat rectangular gray stone object about a foot high. It is a cosmetic palette of the first King of Dynastic Egypt, Narmer. Hisham states, "This is your newspaper. The first political statement in history."

## DISCUSSION

### Producing Delight

It is clear from the Egyptian trip that both psychological and situational factors affected the production of delight. Characteristics of the participants of the tour (motives and biography) influenced positive affect, arousal, and surprise. Accommodations and the structure of the tour (including transportation) created positive affect for the tour members. The trip leaders and individual personal interests set the stage for the person to be aroused by many of the experiences that occurred. The trip leaders, through showing and telling the unexpected, created surprise. Together, the interaction of these variables resulted in delight.

What implication does our analysis have for theory development about delight? We have shown that in addition to psychological variables, there are also situational variables which could affect the antecedents of delight. This may explain why results were not consistent in the two consumption experiences in the Oliver, Rust and Varki (1977) article. Thus their model should be expanded to incorporate personal and situational factors. In addition, this study suggests that delight is a social process. Sociological theory and methods may be fruitful approaches for basic research on delight (Holt 1995). Specifically, insights from the theory of symbolic interaction (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934) and ethnographic methods (Prus 1996) informed our effort.

### Managerial Implications

For managers the implications are clear. To

create delight managers must manipulate and/or take advantages of situational variables to cause positive affect, arousal, and surprise leading up to the purchase decision. While this article dealt with the tourism industry, the principles could possibly apply to many purchase settings. Such things as unexpected "free" items (not necessarily expensive), unusual decor, novel presentations, and things that heighten the senses are examples.

### SUMMARY

Using an ethnographic approach we have discovered that participant characteristics and situational variables impact on the antecedents of and result in delight. Future research in this evolving area should incorporate these variables into the Oliver, Rust and Varki model to gain a fuller understanding of delight and the role it plays in intentions to purchase or repurchase.

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