MISGUIDED PREFERENCE FOR MYSTERIOUS CONSUMPTION
Ruoo Li (University of South Carolina) & Eva C. Buechel (University of Southern California)

ABSTRACT
We show that consumers are willing to pay a premium for mysterious consumption and prefer mysterious product offerings over comparable non-mysterious ones. We also show this preference to be misguided: Consumers overestimate the benefits associated with mysterious consumption. Moreover, upon reveal, consumers are less satisfied with mysterious product offerings than non-mysterious ones. Wishful thinking during the anticipation stage of the mystery-reveal seems to underlie these effects.

INTRODUCTION
We examine a unique and unexplored type of surprise, namely anticipated surprise. We study this type of surprise in the context of mysterious consumption. Mysterious consumption represents an increasingly popular and market relevant example of anticipated surprises. Once purchased, a surprise is impending and expected, but the nature of the surprise is still unknown (i.e., it is a mystery).

H1: People exhibit higher WTP and greater preference for mysterious consumption than comparable non-mysterious consumption.

The anticipation associated with mysterious consumption, we argue, leads to wishful thinking with regards to the surprise (Lee & Weinstein, 1980). As a result, we predict that:

We anticipate mysterious consumption to be desirable. Surprises amplify emotional responses (Mellers et al., 1997), and curiosity associated with mysterious consumption. Moreover, upon reveal, preference to be misguided: Consumers overestimate the benefits over comparable non-mysterious consumption.

H2: People overestimate the desirability of, and their hedonic response to, mysterious consumption.

The increased expectation resulting from the anticipation stage leads to a hedonic contrast effect (Noverovsky & Ratner, 2003) upon reveal such that:

H3: Upon reveal, people are less satisfied with the mysterious offerings than non-mysterious ones.

STUDY 1: WTP
Supporting H1, participants were willing to pay significantly more for mystery boxes than for non-mystery boxes (both average pre-selected and self-selected) in a between-subject design.

STUDY 2: CHOICE
Supporting H1, participants preferred mystery boxes to average and above average non-mystery boxes. When elicited in joint evaluation mode, preference for mystery boxes did not extend to self-selected boxes; participants preferred selecting their own content.

STUDY 3: PREDICTED AND EXPERIENCED HEDONIC RESPONSE
Supporting H2, participants overestimated their hedonic responses (index: happiness, excitement, disappointment, [l] liking) upon reveal of the mystery box content. By contrast, they accurately predicted their hedonic responses for the (identical) pre-selected box and the self-selected non-mystery boxes.

STUDY 4: EXPERIENCE UPON OPENING (REAL) BOX
Supporting H3, participants were significantly less happy, were more disappointed, and rated their box less favorably after opening a mystery box than after opening an identical non-mystery box, and after opening an identical (unannounced and therefore unanticipated) surprise box. A representative box is on physical display.

CONCLUSION
- Preference for mysterious consumption
- Overestimation of benefits associated with mysterious consumption
- Less satisfaction with mysterious consumption offerings than non-mysterious ones upon reveal; anticipation of surprise seems to adversely affect satisfaction
- Present testing generalizability and robustness of effect
- Present research reveals downside of surprises -- with possible implications for other types of anticipated surprises (e.g., birthday gifts, raises, engagement rings, etc.)

REFERENCES
Wishful Thinking: Half of the participants in the mystery and non-mystery conditions also indicated their expected box ratings prior to opening the box. Supporting H2, average expected box ratings were significantly higher for mystery boxes (M = 4.09) than for non-mystery boxes (M = 3.43; F = 12.59, p = .001).

GENERAL PARADIGM
Snack box includes a pre-determined number of snacks from 20 possible well-known snacks.

Mystery Box: unknown content

Non-Mystery Boxes: known content
1. Pre-selected content (pre-tested to be average; above average)
2. Self-selected content by participant

Happiness Disappointment Box Rating
Mystery 5.29* 2.59 4.11 6.06
Non-Mystery 5.75 2.05 4.47 3.8
(Unanticipated) Surprise 9.58 2.05 4.47 3.8

Choice Share Mystery (%)
N = 140 M N E


Disappointment

N= 228

Box Rating

N = 228

STUDY 3: EXPERIENCE UPON OPENING (REAL) BOX

WTP

N = 228

STUDY 2: CHOICE

Choice Share Mystery (%)
N = 270

STUDY 1: WTP

Supporting H1, participants were willing to pay significantly more for mystery boxes than for non-mystery boxes (both average pre-selected and self-selected) in a between-subject design.

STUDY 2: CHOICE

Supporting H1, participants preferred mystery boxes to average and above average non-mystery boxes. When elicited in joint evaluation mode, preference for mystery boxes did not extend to self-selected boxes; participants preferred selecting their own content.

STUDY 3: PREDICTED AND EXPERIENCED HEDONIC RESPONSE

Supporting H2, participants overestimated their hedonic responses (index: happiness, excitement, disappointment, [l] liking) upon reveal of the mystery box content. By contrast, they accurately predicted their hedonic responses for the (identical) pre-selected box and the self-selected non-mystery boxes.

STUDY 4: EXPERIENCE UPON OPENING (REAL) BOX

Supporting H3, participants were significantly less happy, were more disappointed, and rated their box less favorably after opening a mystery box than after opening an identical non-mystery box, and after opening an identical (unannounced and therefore unanticipated) surprise box. A representative box is on physical display.

CONCLUSION

• Preference for mysterious consumption
• Overestimation of benefits associated with mysterious consumption
• Less satisfaction with mysterious consumption offerings than non-mysterious ones upon reveal; anticipation of surprise seems to adversely affect satisfaction
• Present testing generalizability and robustness of effect
• Present research reveals downside of surprises -- with possible implications for other types of anticipated surprises (e.g., birthday gifts, raises, engagement rings, etc.)