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Of Expectations and Experiences: The Moderating Effect of Valenced Expectations on Enjoyment of a Positive vs. Negative Experience

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Contradictory hypotheses exist regarding the impact of expectations on enjoyment of experiences.

Theory 1: Expectations drive experiences. Positive expectations result in increased enjoyment of experiences while negative expectations result in decreased enjoyment of experiences (Lee, Frederick and Ariely 2006; Siegrist and Cousin 2009), suggesting individuals make enjoyment judgements prior to their actual experience.

Theory 2: Expectations have a comparative influence on experiences. Actual experiences are contrasted against expectations to determine enjoyment (Klaaren, Hodges and Wilson 1994; Schwartz 2000; Schwartz et al. 2002; Wilson and Klaaren 1992), suggesting individuals make enjoyment judgements after their actual experience.

Through two studies, we sought to address this discrepancy by considering the interactive role of valenced expectations and experiences on enjoyment. Results indicate that the valence of expectations moderates the impact of experiences on enjoyment. Positive expectations resulted in individuals making enjoyment judgements prior to their actual experience (consistent with Theory 1). Negative expectations resulted in individuals making enjoyment judgements after their actual experience (consistent with Theory 2).

Study 1
Study Design
Participants (n = 124) were asked to first read a positive (negative) review of “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt.” They then watched a more (less) enjoyable scene from the show. The two scenes were selected from the pilot episode shortly after the program originally aired.

Results
• A significant 2 × 2 between subjects interaction existed (F (1, 120) = 4.45, p < .05).
• Negative review condition: Participants who watched the less enjoyable (humorous) scene reported significantly lower levels of enjoyment (M = 2.72) than participants who watched the more enjoyable (humorous) scene (M = 3.99, F(1, 120) = 10.15, p < .01).
• Positive review condition: Participants who watched the less enjoyable (humorous) scene reported enjoyment levels (M = 4.59) consistent with those participants who watched the more enjoyable (humorous) scene (M = 4.67, F(1, 120) = .04, p = .85).

Study 2
Study Design
Participants (n = 104) were told that a new comedy entitled “The Pitch” was created by a previously successful (unsuccessful) producer. They then watched a more (less) enjoyable scene
from the show. The same scene was used in both conditions but edited to be more or less enjoyable.

Results

• A significant $2 \times 2$ between subjects interaction existed ($F (1, 100) = 4.28, p < .05$).
• Unsuccessful producer condition: Participants who watched the less enjoyable (humorous) scene reported significantly lower levels of enjoyment ($M = 3.19$) than participants who watched more enjoyable (humorous) scene ($M = 4.54$, $F(1, 100) = 8.48$, $p < .01$).
• Successful producer condition: Participants who watched the less enjoyable (humorous) scene reported enjoyment levels ($M = 3.59$) consistent with those who watched the more enjoyable (humorous) scene ($M = 3.51$, $F(1, 100) = .02$, $p = .88$).