

MISGUIDED PREFERENCE FOR MYSTERIOUS CONSUMPTION

Ruou 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 'mystery consumption'. Mystery 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). We anticipate mysterious consumption to be desirable. Surprises amplify emotional responses (Mellers et al., 1997), and curiosity associated with uncertainty can be exciting and motivate purchase (Hill et al. 2016; Ruan et al. 2018; Shen et al. 2015). In line with previous research, we predict:

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 & Qiu, 2009; Weinstein, 1980). As a result, we predict that:

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 (Novemsky & Ratner, 2003) upon reveal such that:

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

GENERAL PARADIGM

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

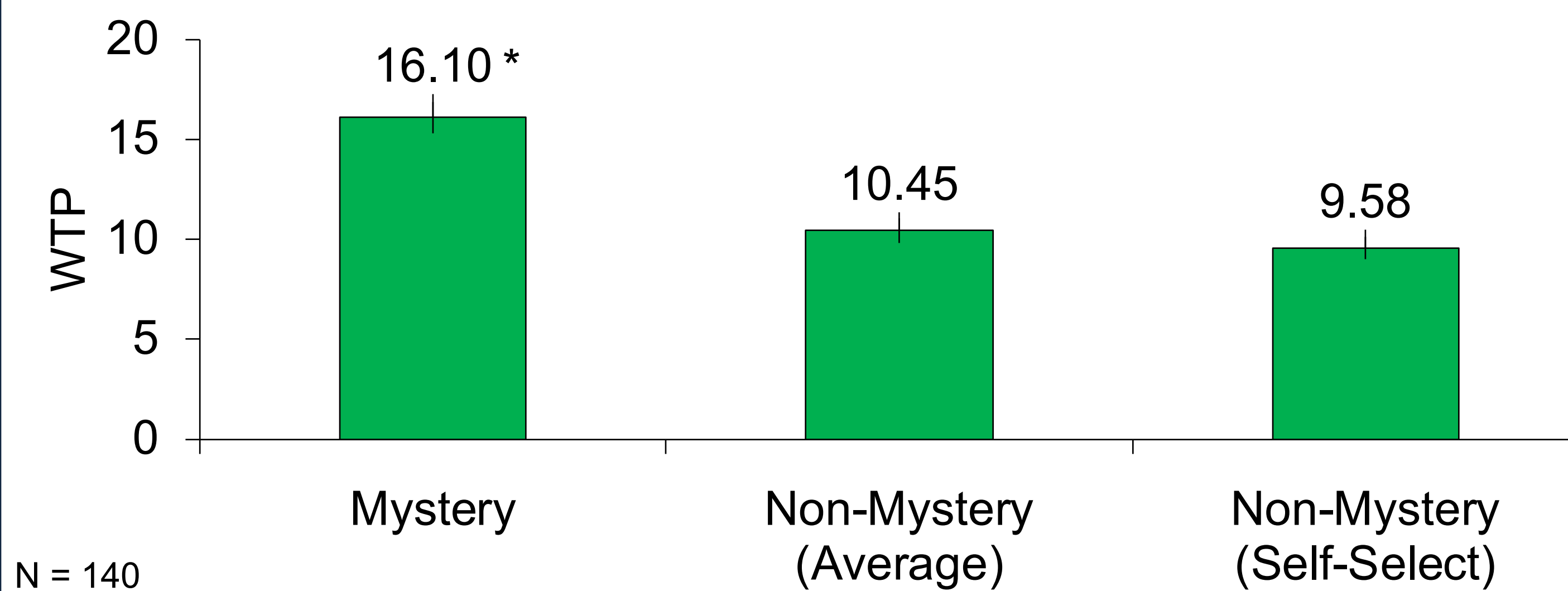
Mystery Box: unknown content

Non-Mystery Boxes: known content

1. Pre-selected content (pre-tested to be average; above average)
2. Self-selected content by participant

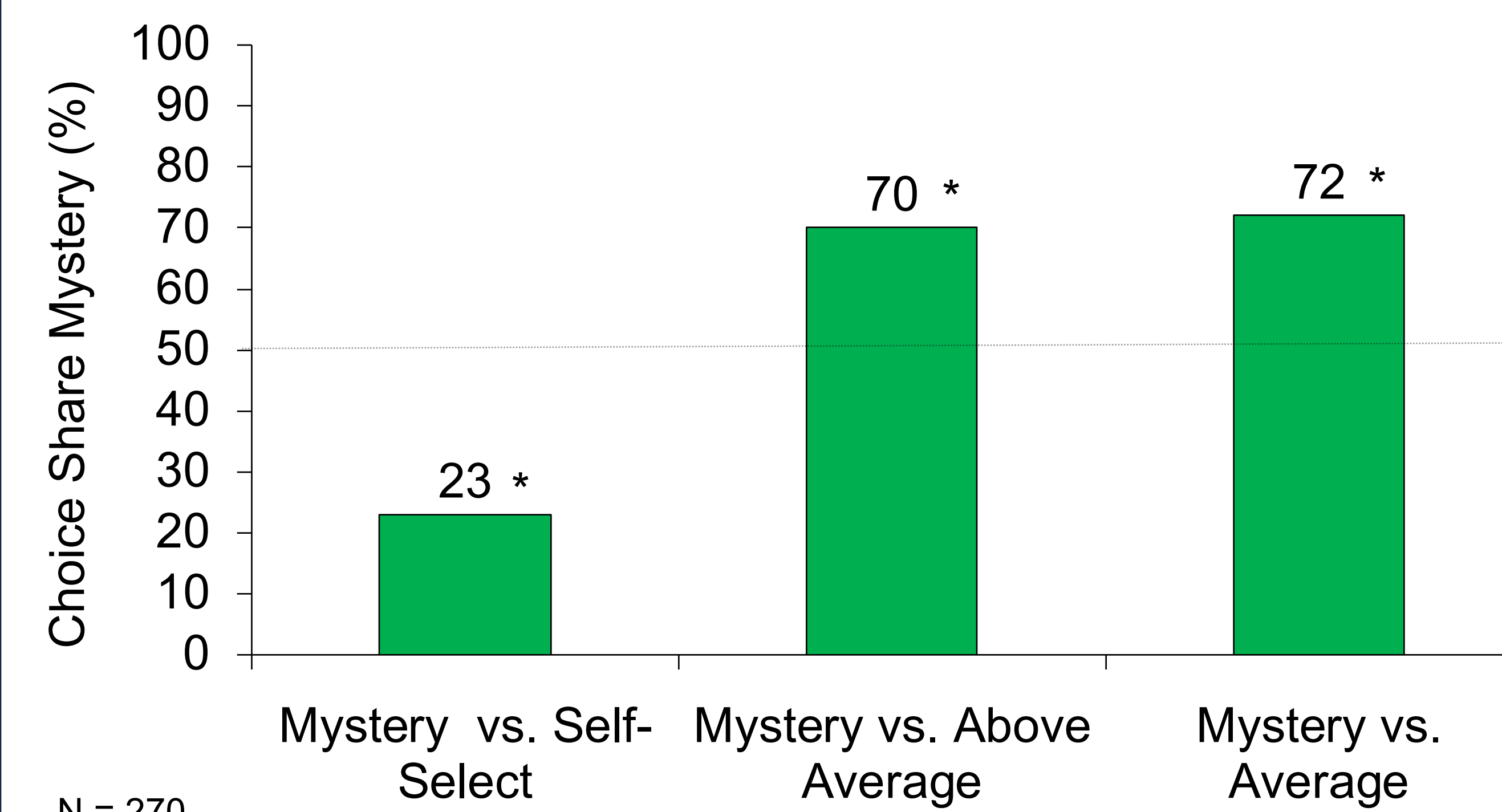
STUDY 1: WTP

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.



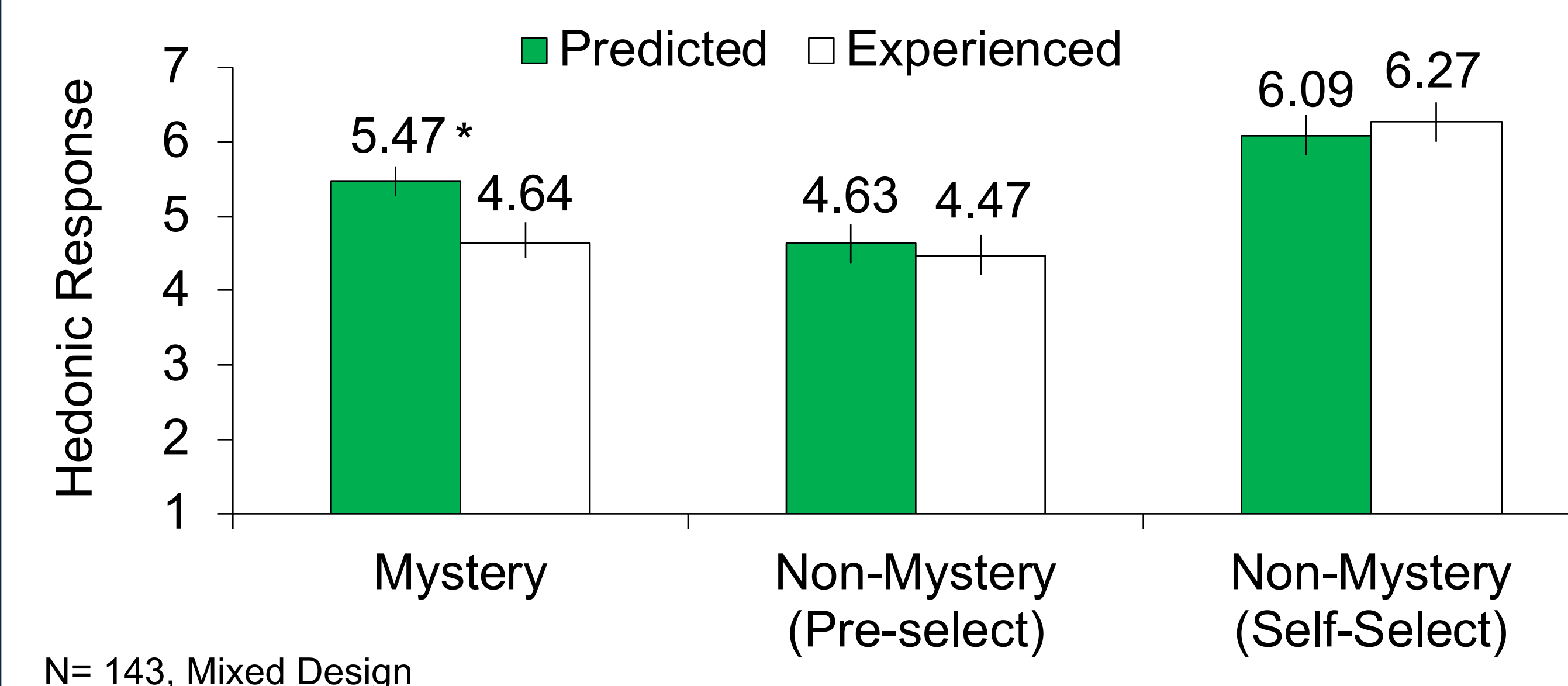
STUDY 2: CHOICE

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.



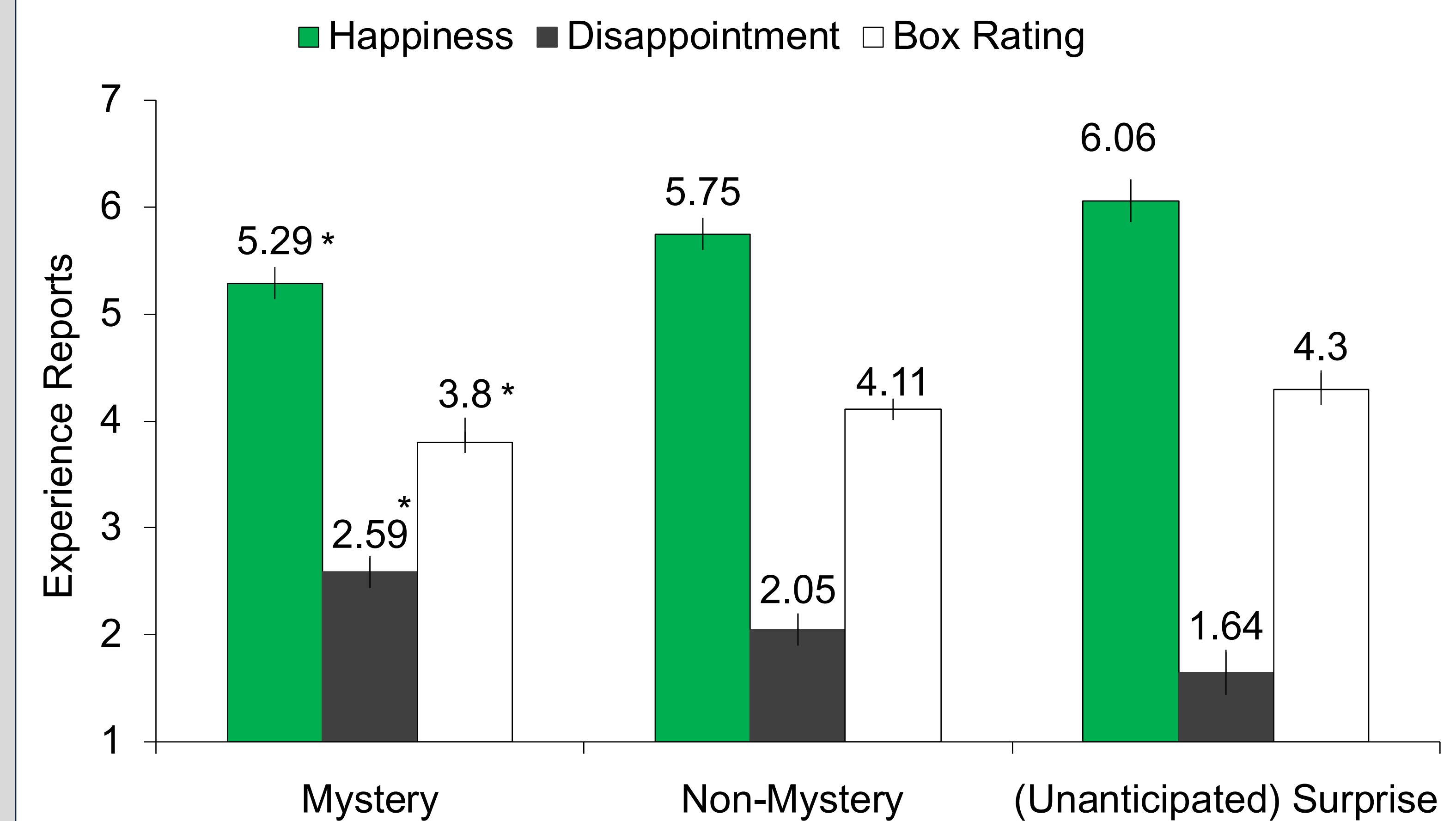
STUDY 3: PREDICTED AND EXPERIENCED HEDONIC RESPONSE

Supporting H2, participants overestimated their hedonic responses (index: happiness, excitement, disappointment [r], 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.



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 ($M = 3.43$; $F = 12.59$, $p = .001$).



N = 228

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
- Currently 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.)

Hill, K. M., Fombelle, P. W., & Sirianni, N. J. (2016). Shopping under the influence of curiosity: How retailers use mystery to drive purchase motivation. *Journal of Business Research*, 69, 1028-1034.

Lee, Y. H., & Qiu, C. (2009). When uncertainty brings pleasure: The role of prospect imageability and mental imagery. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36, 624-633.

Mellers, B. A., Schwartz, A., Ho, K., & Ritov, I. (1997). Decision affect theory: Emotional reactions to the outcomes of risky.

Novemsky, N., & Ratner, R. K. (2003). The time course and impact of consumers' erroneous beliefs about hedonic contrast effects. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29, 507-516.

Ruan, B., Hsee, C. K., & Lu, Z. Y. (2018). The teasing effect: An underappreciated benefit of creating and resolving an uncertainty. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 55, 556-570.

Shen, L., Fishbach, A., & Hsee, C. K. (2015). The motivating-uncertainty effect: Uncertainty increases resource investment in the process of reward pursuit. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41, 1301-1315.

Weinstein, N. D. (1980). Unrealistic optimism about future life events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(5), 806-820.