The Peculiarly Persistent Pleasantness of Bizarre Experiences

From the director of a cruise ship to the host of a dinner party, people strive to create experiences that audiences will want to return to. Not only must the audience enjoy the event, but they must remember the event as being enjoyable. Our project reveals one possible route to that goal: making an experience more bizarre. Bizarre stimuli tend to be processed and remembered differently from more mundane stimuli (Hunt, 1995). This is true when stimuli differ from their local context, called *primary distinctiveness,* and also when stimuli differ from someone’s entire life experience, called *secondary distinctiveness* or bizarreness (Schmidt, 1996). In this project we examine the impact of bizarreness.

           While primary distinctiveness influences retrospective enjoyment largely by changing which parts of an experience are recalled later (Montgomery & Unava, 2009), secondary distinctiveness has more extreme consequences for stimuli processing (Worthen, 2006) and may have more direct effects on retrospective enjoyment. Bizarre elements of an experiences may shift in valence over time as well as in prominence in memory. In this project, we demonstrate that bizarre experiences are perceived as more pleasant in retrospect than during the initial experience compared to mundane experiences.

**Studies 1 and 2**

The first two studies in our project provide correlational evidence that bizarre experiences become more enjoyable in retrospect. In Study 1, 289 participants recounted an autobiographical event and reported their retrospective enjoyment of the event (3-item scale, α = .94), the bizarreness of the event (3-item scale, α = .79), and how long ago the event occurred.

The bizarreness and retrospective enjoyment of experiences were correlated r = .32, p < .05. Critically, regression analyses revealed that bizarreness was a better predictor of retrospective enjoyment for experiences further in the past, (*β*bizarreXdaysago = 1.3, *p* < .01). Study 2 (N = 185) replicated these results using students’ retrospective enjoyment of research participation sessions.

**Studies 3-5**

          In Studies 3-5, we manipulated the presence of bizarre or mundane stimuli between-subjects and participants rated their initial and retrospective enjoyment of the stimuli, leading to a 2 (bizarre/mundane) x 2 (online rating/retrospective rating) mixed design. In Study 3, 83 participants viewed a set of 12 paintings and sculptures from the MoMA: of which 2 paintings (pretested to be equally enjoyable) were either bizarre or mundane.

Participants initially reported equal enjoyment of either set (mbizarre = 47.4, mmundane = 48.3, *p* > .1), but after a 6-week delay participants who viewed the bizarre paintings reported greater retrospective enjoyment of the set (mbizarre = 54.1, p < .05) whereas those who viewed the mundane paintings reported marginally lower retrospective enjoyment of the set (mmundane = 43.2, *p* < .1; Interaction *p* < .05)

Studies 4 (N = 43) and 5 (N = 98) replicate the relative improvement of retrospective enjoyment for multiple different bizarre vs. mundane foods in scenarios where the bizarre experience (e.g*.*, marmite) is initially less enjoyable than the mundane experience (e.g*.*, butter).

**Studies 6 and 7**

Where Studies 3-5 show that bizarre experiences improved retrospective enjoyment *relative* to mundane experiences, Studies 6 and 7 demonstrate that the *presence (vs. absence)* of a bizarre element in an experience increases retrospective enjoyment. In addition, Studies 6 and 7 provide evidence for two mediating variables: how frequently participants discussed the experience after it occurred and the ease of recall of the experience during the retrospective evaluation.

Students enrolled in an introductory marketing class participated in three one hour research sessions a month apart. In each session, participants complete 6-10 different studies. We tracked 54 students’ enjoyment of each study and the session overall for each of the three sessions. At the third and final session we asked for their retrospective enjoyment of the first and second sessions as well. The manipulation of bizarreness was introduced mid-way through the second session by asking half the participants to complete a bizarre 5-minute “Apple Study” (the remainder left 5 minutes early). In the apple study participants were instructed to stare at their computer screen for 160 seconds as the screen flashed varying shades of red, while varieties of apples (*e.g.*, Fuji, Macintosh) appeared in 10 pt. white font in the center of the screen. They then went into a small room, lit with red light where they were asked to quickly rate the appearance of several apples.

The inclusion of the bizarre apple study did not change participants’ initial enjoyment of the session, (mbizarre = 4.32, mbizarre absent = 4.38, *p* > .1), nor their mean enjoyment of the other studies in the session (mbizarre = 4.35, mmundane = 4.20, *p* > .1), and the apple study itself was no more enjoyable than the studies surrounding it (mapple study = 3.86). After a one-month delay, however, participants who did not experience the apple study reported lower retrospective enjoyment of the second session as compared to their earlier evaluation (mbizarre absent = 3.63, *p* < .05) as well as compared to those who did the apple study (mbizarre = 4.32, *p* < .05; Interaction *p* < .05). The retrospective enjoyment of participants who completed the apple study was no different than initial enjoyment (*p* > .9). The interaction was mediated by both the reported frequency that participants talked about their second session in the lab and their ease in recalling the second session one month later (*p*s < .05).

Study 7 (N = 102) replicated the methods and results of Study 6, with two exceptions. Instead of leaving the lab early, participants in the mundane condition completed a task in which they read about different apple varieties. For the results, instead of the bizarre condition persisting in its pleasantness while the mundane condition declined, the bizarre condition became more pleasant in retrospect while the mundane condition was equally pleasant online and in retrospect.

**Conclusion**

           To summarize, seven studies demonstrate that bizarre experiences become more enjoyable in retrospect compared to mundane experiences. If you want an experience to be fondly remembered, make it a little weirder.

**References**

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