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How Emotions and Context Shape Consumer's Product Experience

Meet your kings: context and emotion



Human experiences, environment, context and emotions influence liking and choice – and must be taken into account in consumer research

ABSTRACT

As we go throughout our lives, forming memories through experiences, we begin to create expectations that help us better navigate future situations. Perception, context, and emotion all play foundational roles in how interpret our realities. Because each consumer brings their own collection of experiences, emotions, and expectations with them into research, removing bias in consumer testing is almost impossible. Instead, we must choose to either minimize or control sources of bias, or embrace different environmental contexts to understand their influences on consumer behavior. Different research approaches can be specifically designed to either neutralize or capitalize on biases to form a better understanding of the consumer journey. Curion's qualitative and quantitative research capabilities, e.g., ethnography, observational research, needs analysis (JTBD), emotion and benefits assessment, In-Context Testing (LifeLabs), Home Use Testing (HUTs) and Central Location Testing (CLTs), vary in the extent that they either embrace or control contextual bias. This allows us to take the Human Experience into consideration while forming authentic, comprehensive insights that enable us to support developing products with general appeal, others that delight specific consumers, or still others designed for specific usage occasions.

INTRODUCTION

Humans are an adaptive species. We learn from our experiences, evolve our expectations, and approach the future with a different perspective. But how can research be objective when all consumer research participants can't help but have subjective points of view that bias their perception? By recruiting consumers that align with the client's objectives, by thoughtfully designing research to understand or minimize bias, and by leveraging qualitative and quantitative methods aimed at understanding the influence of environmental context, we can leverage human experience to tell more holistic, dynamic product narratives.



HOW OUR EXPERIENCES SHAPE OUR PREFERENCES

As humans, we understand the world around us by piecing together information gathered from past experiences. We organize and store this information so we can better navigate similar situations in the future. All these pieces of information are stacked and layered together to create an understanding of what's happened to us. We then form predictions based on this past experience to better help us achieve or avoid certain expected outcomes. Simply defined, an expectation is "anticipation of future consequences based on prior experience, current circumstances, or other sources of information" (Tyron). Once we experience a situation we have encountered before, we respond based on our prior expectations. We then re-evaluate this response against reality and create a re-informed expectation that better aligns with our latest experience. Every time we encounter something new, this cycle repeats. We first create an expectation, live the experience, act according to prior learning and then form an updated expectation. On a broad scale, this cycle describes all human perception and behavior.

For instance, if a child grew up exclusively eating fresh-baked, chocolate chip cookies at their grandmother's house, these experiences shape the perception of what they believe a cookie to be. If they go to a friend's house and are offered a cookie, they will expect a chocolate chip cookie just as gooey, fresh, and delicious as the one served at Granny's. When the child is then given a crumbly sugar cookie, they may be very disappointed, but their understanding of what a cookie is will expand to include different flavors and consistencies. When the child goes to the mall for the first time and visits The Great American Cookie, they might expect the cookies to all be either sugar or chocolate chip. After looking over rows of double chocolate chunk, butterscotch, mint chocolate swirl, red velvet, and caramel variations, they'll start to perceive cookies as a broad genre of baked goods.

Separating people from their expectations is impossible, as expectations are what drive one's perception of every product they encounter. The impact of expectation is so powerful, it can transform the way we experience products. In her article, The effect of wrapper color on candy flavor expectations and perceptions, Debra Zellner demonstrates the overwhelming effect of expectation on our perceptions. Consumers' experiences observing connections between certain colors and flavors cause them to automatically assume certain wrappers indicate how products taste. Zellner's research found that color-induced expectations aligned with flavors associated with these colors, for instance red being indicative of cherry. However, in the study, expectations varied when it came to what kind of product was wrapped. Beverages wrapped in green were expected to be lemon or lime flavor, while candies wrapped in green were more closely associated with mint. While participants reported that the candy's wrapper color did play a role in the flavor expectation, they mentioned that the color of the candy or product itself played the most integral role in expectations. Zellner attributes this finding to the theory that people's judgements and evaluations of products are more strongly influenced by aspects of the stimulus they find most integral to the product – for instance color of the product rather than color of the packaging. Curion has found a similar influence of packaging on perception, and even product performance, in their work. The same product in higher quality packaging may be perceived to perform better (Zellner).

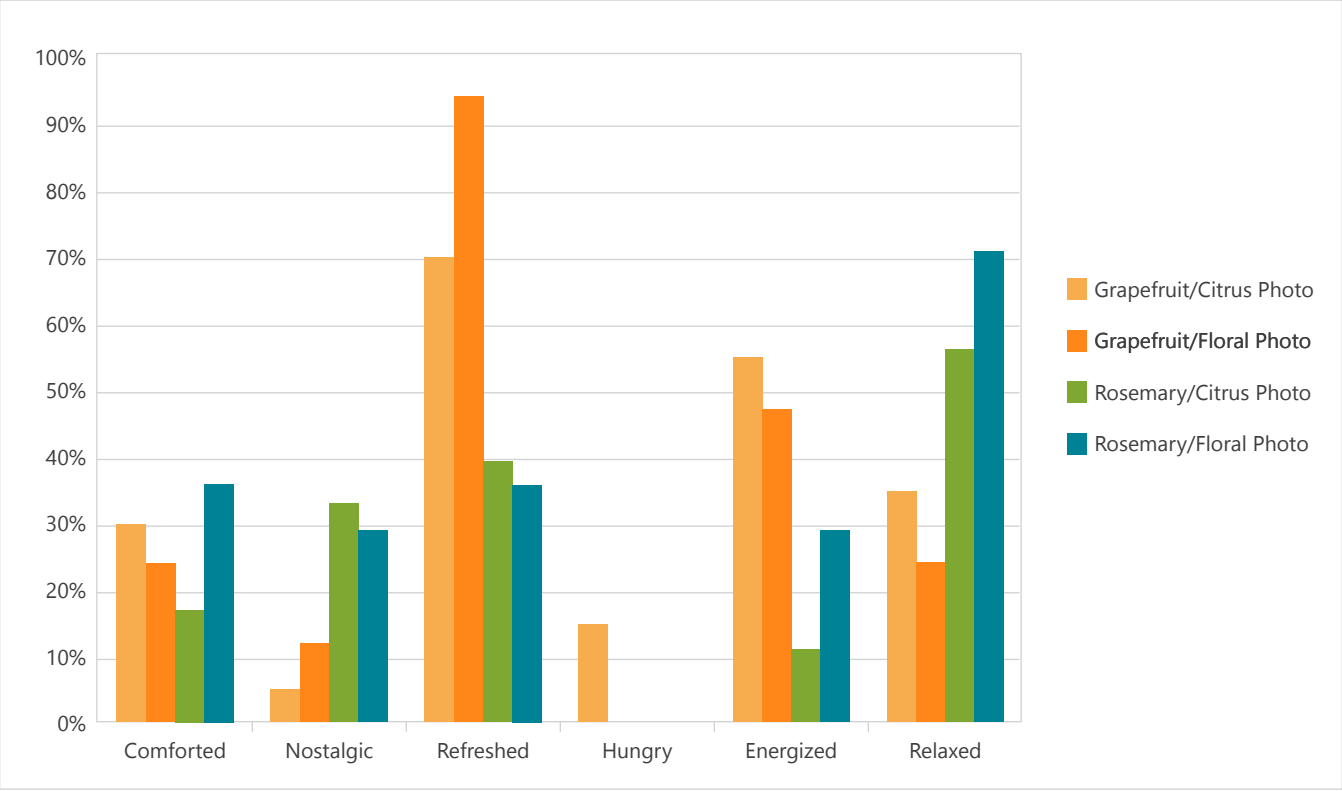
In 2001, Frederic Brochet's PhD dissertation provided yet another mind-blowing example of the power of human expectation. While competing in Amorim Academy's yearly contest devoted to identifying the most impressive contribution to the science of wine, Brochet dyed a white wine with red food coloring and served it to 54 oenology (the science of wine) students. Brochet gave 27 female and 27 male students one glass of red wine and one glass of white wine and then requested they describe the flavor of both wines. For the white wines, the students used words such as "honey," "floral," and "peach." While describing the red wines, the students turned to words like "cedar," "cherry," "chicory," and "raspberry." The next week, Brochet repeated the study, but this time, both the white and the red wine he offered the students was the same white wine – one colored with red food dye. The students described the red wine using the same terms commonly used to describe reds, including "cherry," "raspberry," and "cedar." The wine's red color set an expectation in the minds of the students that couldn't be offset even by the wine's actual flavor (Pomeroy).



Andrew Livermore, VP of Partnerships at Curion, has repeated this experiment many times for demonstrations at conferences and dinners, much to the anger of the wine experts! It can also be easily achieved with jellybeans or fruit loops. People find it hard to believe that the little red and green loops are the same flavor and will rate them differently, unless you cover their eyes...

Context also plays a pivotal role in setting expectations and impacting the consumer experience. Because humans are so deeply rooted in memories and expectations, our opinions and emotions impact our interpretation of products based on context. In research administered by Andrew Livermore of Curion, fragrances (either grapefruit or rosemary) were paired with pictures of either flowers or citrus fruit. People sniffed the fragrance while they answered the questionnaire which had one of the pictures in the background. The study results demonstrated that the background context (pictures) created an expectation of how the fragrance would smell and this in turn changed their perception of the fragrance and the emotions that they felt.

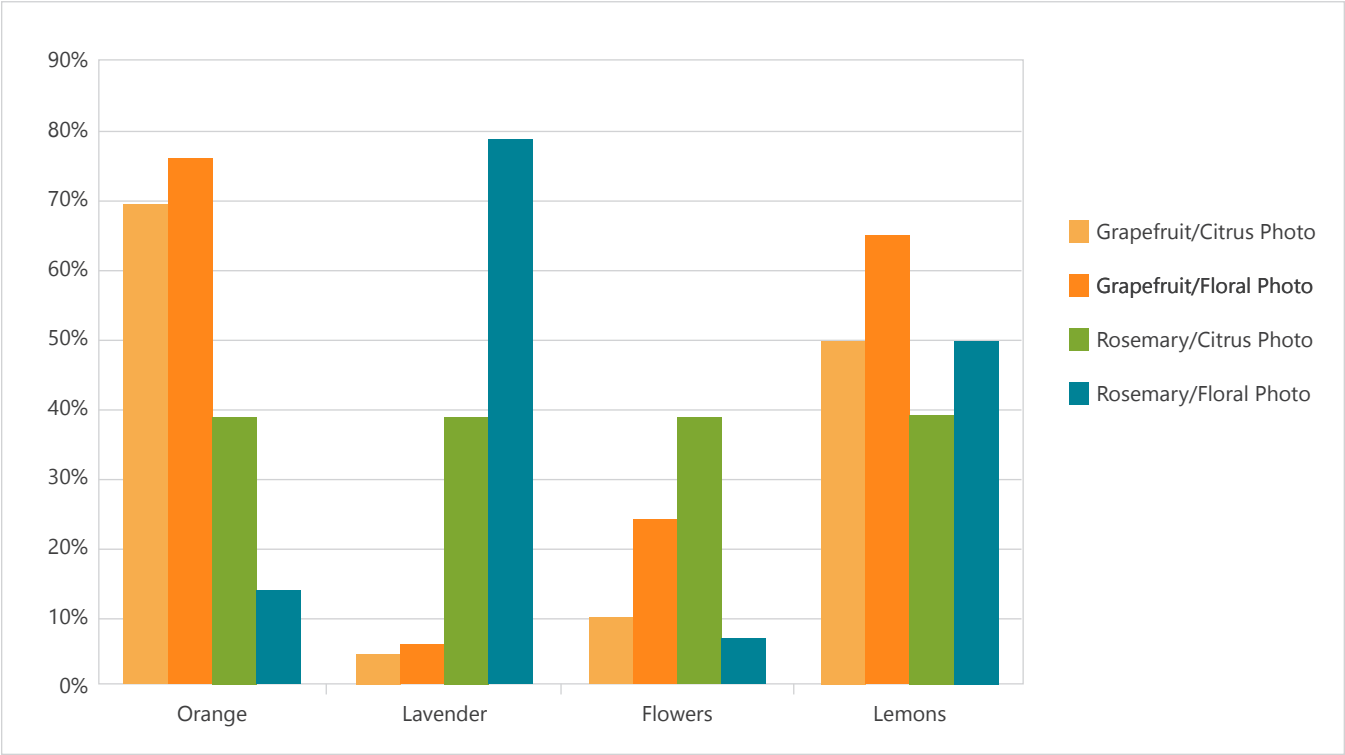
In the graph below, grapefruit paired with the citrus photo (yellow) and grapefruit paired with floral photos (orange) elicited very different reactions from participants. Participants were more likely to find the grapefruit scent more refreshing when with the floral photo than they were when it was paired with the citrus photo. When grapefruit scent was paired with a photo of citrus, it elicited hunger in participants, while the grapefruit scent paired with a floral photo had no such effect. Rosemary paired with the citrus photo (green) and rosemary paired with the floral photo (blue) also sparked very different reactions from participants.



Not only does context impact emotional interpretation, it also shapes our perception. The graph below illustrates the effect of various combinations of scents and photos on participants' identification of scents. When grapefruit scent was paired with the citrus photos (yellow), it is

more likely to be identified as orange or lemon than when paired with flowers. Grapefruit scent paired with the floral photo (orange) is associated with orange and lemon but also more likely to be perceived as floral. When paired with a flower photo, rosemary (blue) is far more likely to be identified as lavender. When rosemary is paired with citrus (green), participants are confused as there is no clear pairing.

As reflected in the graphs above, context and imagery greatly affect perception and can result in entirely different scent experiences. Because we are so intertwined with our own expectations and



affected by external stimuli such as context, research must take into consideration each layer of the emotions and experiences each consumer tester enters with and attempt to either neutralize its impact or understand its effect on consumer liking.

As we navigate our realities and form perceptions about the world around us, we make decisions based on emotional responses (Damasio, 2005, 2022; Barrett, 2009, 2018). Like all animals, we are driven to approach those things that provide us with pleasure, such as food and warmth, because they make us feel good, and to avoid things which bring us displeasure or pain such as thirst or cold. Further, emotions may be calming or relaxing, leading us to stay in place, or they may be energizing, leading us to take action. Human's big brains create more complex emotions to help guide our behavior, but the principal is the same. This is the mood circumplex, which has been identified as a universal structure for mood and emotion (Rusell, 1980; Posner et.al., 2008).

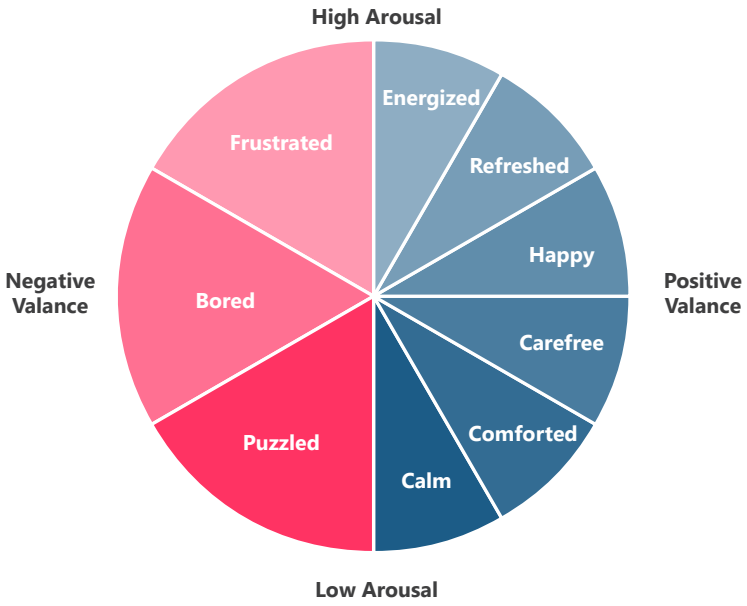
Research shows that our emotions are the primary motivators of our actions and help us determine what we need to pay conscious attention to. We judge whether information is relevant or not based on if it is able to create a meaningful emotional response. We act because we feel compelled based on context and emotion. Every decision we make, from what sandwich we want at the deli



to where we want to live and who we want to marry, is catalyzed by preferences and biases formed by emotions and context. Emotion is so central to our ability to make decisions, people who have damage to the parts of their brain associated with emotion find themselves incapable of making even the smallest, inconsequential decisions. (Damasio, 2005, 2022; Barrett, 2009, 2018).

Because our emotions are inextricably bound to our ability to make decisions and to our human experience, consumer testing without the influence of consumer emotions is not possible. By understanding and embracing the nature of emotions and their role in consumer-decision making, researchers can deliver even more meaningful insights to empower higher levels of consumer connection. Research recently executed by Curion demonstrated the spectrum of emotions evoked by product usage – and the nuances of the experiences that result. By adapting the Mood Circumplex model to reflect emotions experienced by consumers in reaction to products, Curion researchers were able to identify 39 unique descriptors that reliably define the emotions induced by finished products and their components. Curion's proprietary emotional profiling approach provides a way to accurately understand and measure consumers' emotional reactions to products.

Products can either elicit active emotions (high arousal) or deactivated emotions, and either be negative or positive. Examples of high arousal, positive emotions include energized, refreshed, and happy, while high arousal negative emotions tend to leave consumers frustrated. When consumers experience low arousal, positive emotions, they are left feeling calm and comforted. Low-arousal negative emotions are often described as puzzled or bored. Using the emotional circumplex as it relates to product use uncovers the broad spectrum of responses catalyzed by product experiences and highlights the fundamental role of emotion in driving product liking.





RECRUITING CONSUMERS TO ALIGN WITH CLIENT OBJECTIVES

Because of how inextricably tied humans are with their experiences, as well as the inevitable bias of context and emotion, the process of recruiting consumers for research must take into consideration each of these factors. As humans, we bring our emotions, fears, passions, and aversions into every situation we enter – including when we're sitting down and testing products. If twenty random consumers sit down to test a product in twenty different environments, there will probably be a variety of interpretations of the product and its effectiveness.

Even across such a wide range of life experiences, expectations, and contexts, it will still be possible to find a common thread of experience. Creating a screening process that aligns with the objectives of the study is one of the foundations of effective research. When we recruit consumers based on common qualifiers and screen to align with the goals of the study, such as product users, those that use it for a particular occasion, or are of similar age, sex or sociodemographics, the variability reduces, and it is easier to focus on the effectiveness of the product. Further, if we place these consumers in a specific environment or context (i.e., we focus on the usage occasion), the product itself can take center stage.

Leveraging Curion's comprehensive consumer database, encompassing over 500,000 consumers, clients are able to recruit as granularly or as broadly as needed in order to align with study objectives. One study required the recruitment of 1,800 consumers who purchased a soft drink at a certain large fast-food restaurant at least three times a week. Because this type of consumer had such a wide range of experience with drinking soft drinks at this particular restaurant, their expectations were primed to be able to differentiate even the slightest adjustments in ingredients. Being able to recruit on a granular level was pertinent for accurate study results and to gain an understanding of whether changing soda brands would alienate part of their target audience.

BRANDS CREATE EXPECTATIONS

Branding is a classic example of the impact of context and emotion on choice. Even though brand-loyal consumers may like an alternative product, their emotional ties to the brand may mean that they don't want to switch brands. For instance, no matter how a Nike pair of shoes may perform compared to Adidas, brand-loyal customers will opt for what they know and love. According to Harvard Business Review, emotional connections to brands lead to increased consumer loyalty and



profitability and should be the focus of marketing (Magids et.al). The role of Alienation Testing is to assess the degree that a product change will impact sales to loyal brand consumers, and it can measure the risk associated with change – even if change objectively improves the product.

People have emotional ties to brands which can have a powerful effect on product perception. In one of the most famous research initiatives launched in 1975, Pepsi went into malls and blindly taste-tested consumers to see if they preferred Coke or Pepsi. At this period in history, Coke was overwhelmingly the dominant player in the soft drink industry. Far fewer consumers were familiar with Pepsi – the new kid on the block needed a bold way to gain the attention of consumers across the globe. Their goal? To test as many consumers as possible and prove to the market at large that when it came down to it, consumers preferred Pepsi products over Coke. They began their mass-market approach to consumer testing in Dallas, Texas – ground-zero for Coke-loving consumers. When the brand was not revealed, the results showed that consumers, not just in the South, but in the rest of the country as well, preferred Pepsi to Coke by a wide margin. This was not the case when the products were branded. As a new market player in 1975 with a lot to gain but little to lose, a blanket-testing approach proved to be widely effective for the soda company ("The Pepsi Challenge").

Despite this, and while Pepsi Cola has made great inroads, Coca-Cola is still by far the world's leading soft drink. This reflects the value of one of the world's leading brands, regardless of product liking, the emotional connection attached to the brand translates directly to market share. If a restaurant was considering changing the soda in their soda fountain from Coke to Pepsi, in spite of the quality of the product, they would be likely to alienate a significant portion of consumers. This is where alienation testing comes into play.

DESIGNING STUDIES THAT BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND CLIENT GOALS

The environment where the study takes place can also be a pivotal tool in extracting the most powerful, objective-aligned insights. Depending on the client goals, external bias can either be neutralized as much as possible by executing the study in a controlled environment, or capitalized on, revealing clearer understanding of consumers' in-context product journey. Because consumer testing is so case dependent, consumer-centric research depends on the ability to build an approach around clearly defined project objectives. Curion has developed a wide range of cutting-edge capabilities and methodologies that connect companies with their consumers in the settings that fuel the most product understanding.

When it comes to developing products meant for specific usage occasions and environments, the approach to research varies. The approach will either embrace the uncontrolled human emotions, environment and context, or opt to control all variables in a very confined framework. Either way, the goal remains the same, develop successful products of quality with great appeal.

Ethnography and Observational Research

Observations of consumers in their natural environment, e.g., at home or shopping, provides a better understanding of frustrations, unspoken motivations and needs. It is important foundational research that establishes the base for consumer driven product innovation; it can, and has, led to break through innovations. A famous example is The Swiffer. P&G researchers videotaped people cleaning their bathrooms and observed that people hated touching the end of their toilet brushes and mops, and thus the famous brand with the detachable head was born. This kind of testing can be done in person or, increasingly, digitally through video, online communities, and other interactive activities. Highly skilled moderators can guide these activities.



Ethnography is best used for consumer understanding and discovery of new opportunities for innovation in the early stages of innovation research, or in later stages of development, to understand consumer product and packaging usage activities, such as home cleaning, personal care, purchase decisions, and food preparation. Observational approaches offer in-depth insights into customers' behavior in natural environments and helps uncover unarticulated needs that may not be well known and may present unique innovation opportunities to better satisfy consumers. They provide insight into usage of existing products to identify consumer frustrations and opportunities for improvement.

Needs analysis: Jobs to be Done and Emotion & Benefits testing

The central problem of consumer goods companies is how to create products that are well liked by consumers, superior to and differentiated from the competition, and purchased repeatedly. At the foundation of these approaches is a deep qualitative understanding of consumers' core emotional, functional, and sensory needs and frustrations. This understanding is based on the, in context, behavioral and observational methods such as ethnography (above). Gaining a deep understanding of what consumers want to accomplish and the emotions associated with success (and failure) allows companies to provide them with solutions that meet their most important needs and are differentiated from the competition.

Jobs to be Done is a methodology that focusses on understanding consumers most important needs and frustrations. This approach to research places emphasis on the jobs or tasks that consumers want to achieve. Gaining a deep understanding of the "job" consumers want to accomplish, along with their needs and frustrations at each step along the way, provides valuable insight into areas for optimization and innovation. Companies can leverage the Jobs to be Done theory to create better, more consumer-aligned solutions. Just as emotional profiling highlights consumers' emotional responses to products, JTBD uncovers consumers' most important needs and frustrations throughout the product journey. Understanding these product themes can pave the way to well-differentiated product offerings, claims that resonate with the consumer, and increased purchases, repurchases, and brand loyalty.

One of the most impactful ways brands can gain insight into consumers' emotional worlds as they interact with products is through emotional profiling. Curion's proprietary emotional profiling methodology provides a concrete, measurable way to gauge consumers' emotional responses to products and highlight the connection between product liking and choice. Because emotion is the primary-driver of product liking, clients leverage emotional profiling to improve product choice predictions, develop more compelling products, and adapt claims and communications to reflect emotional nuances.

One global company came to Curion with a desire to establish an ongoing program to assess perceived emotions and benefits related to existing innovations. Driven by the understanding that emotions are the primary diver of product liking, the client wanted to leverage emotional understanding to predict consumer choice and liking, create more consumer-aligned product claims, and elevate product development. To ensure the study accurately captured the clients' global consumer base, the test was launched in the US and in Asia. The study highlighted which



products elicited desired emotional responses and the effect of these responses on product-liking.

Understanding the emotions associated with products, and consumers most important needs and frustrations, can help brands better align their messaging, claims, and packaging with the actual product experience, leading to a more cohesive and pleasurable consumer journey.

In-Context (LifeLabs) and Home Use Testing

Many clients decide to embrace inevitable contextual bias and launch in-context tests to understand how consumers interact with products in the environments where they are used. In Home-Use-Tests (iHUTs), context is a welcomed factor that helps clients understand how products perform in a complex real world environment. Instead of white-washed cabinets, consumers are surrounded by taped up wedding invitations, their favorite pizza restaurant's number written on a dry-erase board, and the fragrance of the candle their mother gave them for Christmas. There's no avoiding the bias, or even attempting to counteract it. Instead, home-use tests capitalize on real-life context to help form a more comprehensive understanding of how consumers interact with products.

One large beauty company used our in-context, home-use tests to illuminate ingredient direction for a shampoo. Since the client's goal was to leverage context biases to uncover more nuanced product insight, the test was executed at the homes of participants. Consumers tested the products as they went throughout their day-to-day lives, simply replacing their regular shampoo with the two client shampoo prototypes and following usage instructions. After trying each shampoo at least three times throughout the week each along with the supplied conditioner, the participants filled out an online survey detailing their experiences. Through the personal, authentic window into consumers' lives provided by our in-context, home-use test, the client was able to confidently adjust their product ingredients and ensure a consumer-aligned product experience.

Our digital testing solutions, built to unlock holistic product narratives remotely and expedite research timelines, are designed to support a wide range of client goals. The onset of the pandemic provided the perfect opportunity for Curion to optimize and refine its Digital Toolkit Solutions to further capture the layers of consumers' product experience. Participants are able to respond to and interact with stimuli onscreen, record videos of themselves experiencing products, to highlight unfiltered, in-the-moment insights, and to participate in interview sessions remotely to extract genuine insights from consumers in their own environment. Though the world has opened back up since, the pivotal progress made in digital research has continued to supplement holistic product understanding.

Our Digital Solutions Toolkit's ability to capture the holistic nature of the consumer experience is demonstrated by recent research conducted to inform a new product offering for a large pizza company. The client wanted to understand the product from a consumer's perspective in order to identify key needs and inform positioning and messaging direction. Leveraging the Digital Solutions Toolkit, consumers provided feedback on their mobile devices throughout each stage of the product experience. From answering questions related to emotions, purchase motivators, and current offering perceptions before ordering, to documenting consumption time, additional products ordered, and how well the product met expectations, participants recorded the entirety of their consumption journey while in an in-context setting. Our digital solutions uncovered a comprehensive product narrative that encompassed consumer perspectives from every angle.

Curion's LifeLabs methodology takes capitalizing on human experience to understand in-the-moment product insights to the next level. By inserting opportunities to test products throughout consumers' day-to-day lives, LifeLabs provides authentic insights that bring products to life. In research developing a chocolate snack, Curion made the product available to target consumers either at their work place, in a chocolate store, at a conference and in a conventional research setting. Findings indicated the major impact of context is on consumer expectations and emotions. The snack was perceived differently depending on the setting, in the workplace or at the conference it was perceived as less healthy and a guilty indulgence. Not only that, as with other products, liking was increased when the product was consistent (congruent) with the context in which it is used (the chocolate shop or CLT). Alignment or appropriateness between the product and environment (contextual congruency) was key to the effects observed. This knowledge can help developers define the positioning and branding of the product, or to design more appropriate products.



Central Location Testing (CLT)

Research methodologies that take place in a controlled lab setting, also known as Central Location Testing, seek to reduce external variables as much as possible through double-blind studies, unbranded testing, neutral test environments and test kitchens with critical control factors. Using the blank slate of a lab as a background, researchers introduce products and instructions according to criteria carefully curated by industry-leading scientists and researchers. Depending on the type of study, consumers answer questions while interacting with products to provide objective, clearly defined insights. While no human can be completely separated from their emotion, experience, and expectations, CLTs provide an environment that minimizes the impact of emotions and expectations to focus on the product and its features in isolation – and to make sure that the best product possible, in and of itself, gets out the door.

Depending on the clients' goals, however, CLT tests can be designed to combine controlled variables with in-context testing opportunities. To help a large beverage company understand how their ingredients affected athletes' performance in real-time, Curion set up a fleet of stationary bikes in our multi-purpose rooms so the client could capture mid-workout insights. The client was able to understand how their product affects consumers in-context while experiencing the benefits of a controlled research environment. Throughout the study, NASM certified personal trainers oversaw and monitored each participant's heart rate, ensuring optimal speed and resistance for their fitness level. This carefully designed study provided the nuanced direction necessary to effectively optimize their ingredients and better-align their product with consumers' needs.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research seeks to extract deeper understanding of consumers' motivations, attitudes, product usage and perceptions through conversation or observation. Usually characterized by talking with or observing small numbers of consumers, qualitative research is a critical step to acknowledging the fullness of each consumer's journey. If a researcher sits down with a consumer and asks them, "What expectations are you bringing to the table for this new packaging design?", the consumer will likely stare blankly back at the researcher, unsure of what they even said. Often consumers aren't aware of the biases, expectations, and other factors that influence whether they like or don't like products. Carefully constructed qualitative questions can peel back the layers on consumers' preferences to help uncover a narrative. Skilled qualitative researchers are able to have what seems like a completely normal conversation while absorbing all kinds of relevant information pertaining to consumer behavior, product usage, and expectations. Curion's qualitative researchers are specifically trained to ask questions that take into consideration human experience, preferences, and bias, and uncover nuanced product insights.



IN SUMMARY

The approaches we describe can unlock comprehensive product understanding throughout the different stages of product development and innovation – from the fuzzy front end of understanding consumer needs, motivations, and frustrations to developing insights, claims, concept, package and product development to post market surveillance.

Uncovering true insights depends on companies' abilities to understand how the consumer interacts with the product in a wide range of environments, from the lab to the home and beyond. Different research approaches can be specifically designed to either neutralize or capitalize on biases to form a better understanding of the consumer journey. This allows us to take the Human Experience into consideration while forming authentic, comprehensive insights that enable the development of products either with general appeal, or that delight specific consumers in specific usage occasions.

Though separating humans from their experiences, emotions, and expectations is impossible, our research capabilities allow us to continue extracting meaningful insights that propel product development and innovation. By carefully recruiting the right consumers based on the client's objectives and designing research to either control bias or to understand its nature and impact, we create a framework to uncover comprehensive product narratives. Through the lens of well-executed qualitative and quantitative research, the complexities of a consumer's experience unfold to tell a story. Rather than understanding human experience and bias as a threat to the integrity of research, we should view it as an integral ingredient to a holistic product and consumer narrative.

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