



When Beauty Backfires: The Effects of Server Attractiveness on Consumer Taste Perceptions

Lily Lin^{a,*}, JoAndrea Hoegg^b, Karl Aquino^b

^a Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, Canada

^b University of British Columbia, 2053 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z2, Canada

Abstract

The current research tests whether and how being in the presence of attractive individuals alters consumers' evaluations of their expected dining experience and the taste of the products consumed. Our results uncover a novel phenomenon in the domains of physical attractiveness and taste perception: attractiveness does indeed impact taste perception, but its influence varies as a function of the valence of the food consumed. When the server is attractive, good food tastes better but bad food tastes worse. Six studies demonstrate this effect and, importantly, show that it occurs for male, but not female consumers and only if the male consumers are low in need for cognition. The implications of this work and potential avenues for additional research are discussed.

© 2018 Published by Elsevier Inc. on behalf of New York University.

Keywords: Physical attractiveness; Taste perception; Expectation disconfirmation; Environmental cues

Introduction

Is the taste of a meal influenced by the attractiveness of one's server? Many restaurants appear to think so when they employ attractive individuals to enhance customers' overall dining experience. There is evidence from retail and service settings supporting the potential effectiveness of this strategy. For example, positive environmental cues such as attractive colors in store designs (e.g., Bellizzi, Crowley, and Hasty 1983), unique shelf arrangements (e.g., Parker and Lehmann 2011), and pleasant sounds and smells (e.g., Hermann et al. 2013; Morrin, Dube, and Chebat 2007) have all been found to affect consumer behavior and enhance the consumption experience. In the current research, we test the presumption that the positive visual cue of an attractive server can influence food taste, but challenge the notion that the effect will always be positive.

The question of how physically attractive individuals influence consumers' evaluations of products and services has been

explored before in marketing. Research has shown that attractive spokespersons can be effective in persuading consumers to purchase products (e.g., Baker and Churchill 1977; Caballero and Price 1984; Kahle and Homer 1985; Reinhard, Messner, and Sporer 2006), and even the mere knowledge that a product has been touched by an attractive individual can lead shoppers to evaluate the product more positively (Argo, Dahl, and Morales 2008). The restaurant industry has long attempted to capitalize on the expected relationship between physically attractive employees (e.g., hosts, servers, bartenders) and customers' dining experience. American coffee chain Marylou's Coffee developed such a reputation for hiring predominantly young attractive female servers that it came under investigation for potentially engaging in discriminatory hiring practices (The Economist 2012). This business strategy may be justifiable as prior research shows that customers often view attractive employees as providing better service than unattractive employees (Hornik 1992; Lynn and Simons 2000; Parrett 2015). What is less clear, however, is whether positive reactions to the physical attractiveness of the server will carry over to evaluations of the taste of the food or beverage served, and whether such effects are always positive.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lily.lin@sfu.ca (L. Lin), joey.hoegg@sauder.ubc.ca (J. Hoegg), karl.aquino@sauder.ubc.ca (K. Aquino).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2018.04.003>

0022-4359/© 2018 Published by Elsevier Inc. on behalf of New York University.

According to the *expectation disconfirmation model* (e.g., Deliza and MacFie 1996; Oliver 1981; Saunders 2015; Swan and Trawick 1981), cues in the retail environment can dramatically shape consumer expectations. When the environmental cue is positive (e.g., upscale furnishings, attractive displays), positive consumer expectations (e.g., the product will perform well) are likely to result. As long as the actual product experience aligns with expectations, or even if it is ambiguous, it will be evaluated positively (Hoch and Ha 1986). However, when the product experience violates expectations generated by the environmental cue (e.g., the product is expected to perform well but fails), consumers' evaluations of the product will contrast away from their initial expectations (e.g., Darke, Ashworth, and Main 2010; Swan and Trawick 1981).

Based on the expectation disconfirmation model, the current research shows that the presence of physically attractive individuals can affect consumers' expectations about their consumption experience which then influences taste perceptions. An assimilation effect results if the actual consumption experience is consistent with the positive expectations (i.e., the food is pleasant tasting); however, a contrast effect results if the actual consumption experience is negative (i.e., the food is unpleasant tasting). We also consider two possible boundary conditions of these effects. First, we test whether the effect occurs only among male consumers. Second, we test whether it is moderated by the male consumer's need for cognition (NFC). By addressing these questions, our work contributes to research on the effects of environmental cues on consumer evaluations and on taste perception. We extend work on the effects of retail environment cues on consumer judgment (e.g., colors, noise, crowding; Bellizzi, Crowley, and Hasty 1983; Huang, Huang, and Wyer 2017; Morrin, Dube, and Chebat 2007) by identifying a new and important environmental cue—the attractiveness of servers—that influences not merely expectations of quality, but actual perceptual experience. By doing so, our study aligns with the growing body of research on cross-modal sensory effects (Krishna, Elder, and Caldara 2010; Raghuram and Krishna 1999; Wang et al. 2017), which considers how a match between stimuli across two modalities (e.g., sight and sound; taste and sound) impacts judgments.

Conceptual Development

Environmental Cues in Retail and Service Settings

It has long been known that sensory cues such as colors, orderliness, and sound in the consumption setting can influence consumers' purchasing behaviors and judgments. For instance, colors in store displays can impact people's attraction to these displays (Bellizzi, Crowley, and Hasty 1983). Sparse versus cluttered shelving arrangements can alter people's attention and increase product evaluations (Massara, Porcheddu, and Melara 2014; Parker and Lehmann 2011). Positive auditory cues such as music can also have a substantial influence, enhancing perceptions of service quality (Morrin, Dube, and Chebat 2007) and altering purchase patterns (North, Hargreaves, and McKendrick

1999). Music has also been shown to interact with ambient scent to alter impulse buying behavior (Mattila and Wirtz 2001).

The appearance of a salesperson or server falls under the category of sensory cues. Although this type of cue is not a part of the physical servicescape, it is an integral part of a retail or service setting, and marketers know this. For several years, the clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch employed attractive models to stand in their stores as a way to attract consumers (Tuttle 2016). Likewise, Thai airline Nok Air employs attractive flight attendants who presumably improve the overall customer experience and branding of the airline (Inocencio and Cha 2013). Although less common, there are also examples of when the use of physical attractiveness as a sensory cue can backfire. Dining establishments like Hooters and Twin Peaks, known for hiring young attractive female servers, have settled multiple lawsuits as a result of the practice (Morrison 2012; Shamsian 2015). Physically attractiveness can also have unintended implications in domains outside of retailing. Research has shown that while being physically attractive generally leads to preferential treatment (e.g., earning higher income, Mobius and Rosenblat 2006), it can also have negative consequences for the attractive individuals (e.g., less likely to be selected for certain types of jobs; Lee et al. 2018). Recent examples have also shown that marketers that utilize cues deemed as culturally more attractive (e.g., skinny models) can face backlash from the public when such images are inconsistent with the positioning of the company (e.g., clothing for plus size consumers; Racco 2017).

Despite the wealth of evidence that attractive servers generally enhance the overall experience, to our knowledge no work has examined whether this cue has an effect on sensory perceptions like taste, an outcome that is of obvious interest to restaurants since repeat consumption is less likely after an unsatisfactory dining experience.

Effects of Physical Attractiveness on Taste Perception

The sensory experience of taste is the result of a stimulus coming in contact with tongue receptors that detect five different tastes: sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami (Ikeda 2002). Taste perception is actually quite complex because it can be influenced by other sensory aspects of the stimulus (most notably smell and appearance), as well as external cues such as marketing communications or prior beliefs (Allison and Uhl 1964; Elder and Krishna 2010; Plassmann et al. 2008). For example, brand labels and advertising messages can alter consumers' perceptions of taste quality (Allison and Uhl 1964; Braun 1999; Hoyer and Brown 1990). Subtle variations in the color of orange juice can lead consumers to perceive identical samples as tasting different (Hoegg and Alba 2007). Price cues can also impact taste. An fMRI study showed that pleasure regions in participants' brains became more active when participants believed they were consuming a more expensive wine (Plassmann et al. 2008).

One of the commonalities within marketing research on taste is that the marketing cues studied (e.g., labels, color of juice, price) are effective at influencing consumers' expected experience. Based on the expectation disconfirmation model, when the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10153292>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10153292>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)