



How context interferes with similarity-attraction between customers and service providers



Aaron D. Arndt^{a,*}, Kiran Karande^b, Myron Glassman^c

^a Old Dominion University, Strome College of Business, Department of Marketing, 2040 Constant Hall, Norfolk, VA 23529, United States

^b Old Dominion University, Strome College of Business, Department of Marketing, 2032 Constant Hall, Norfolk, VA 23529, United States

^c Old Dominion University, Strome College of Business, Department of Marketing, 2146 Constant Hall, Norfolk, VA 23529, United States

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ABSTRACT

According to the similarity-attraction effect, customers should prefer service providers who are perceived to be similar; yet cosmetic features such as visible tattoos are often prohibited in professional settings, suggesting that they do not provide an advantage for service providers. This research explores the extent to which contextual factors interfere with the similarity-attraction effect for any particular cosmetic feature. The findings of three experimental studies demonstrate that sharing a cosmetic feature with a customer is not enough to elicit the similarity-attraction effect; a shared cosmetic feature must also be (1) salient, (2) unique among a set of service providers, and (3) the only salient shared cosmetic feature. The implication is that the similarity-attraction effect will be over-estimated in controlled experiments that do not account for contextual information.

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1. Introduction

Tattoos, facial hair, and many other body decorations are frequently prohibited in the work place (King et al., 2006); yet a growing number of consumers worldwide are getting tattoos. For example, an estimated 23% of U.S. consumers over the age of 18 have at least one tattoo (Pew Research Poll, 2010). Given that customers prefer service providers whom they perceive to be similar to themselves, called the similarity-attraction effect (e.g., Kleinbaum et al., 2011; Montoya et al., 2008), it is logical that customers should prefer service providers who share cosmetic features, that is, decorations worn or displayed on a person's body. The similarity-attraction effect is considered "one of the most robust phenomena in attraction literature" (Montoya et al., 2008, p. 64), and some researchers contend that salespeople can develop customer rapport and trust by attempting to resemble customers (e.g., Cialdini, 2008; Gremler and Gwinner, 2008). This leads to the question: why would organizations prohibit service providers from displaying so many types of cosmetic features if those features could enhance the similarity-attraction effect with so many consumers?

According to Montoya and Horton (2013), the extent to which a stimuli leads to the similarity-attraction effect depends on contextual factors such as information salience, the number of stimuli used to manipulate and assess similarity, and the proportion of similarity to dissimilarity. Indeed, Milberg et al. (2014) demonstrated that the similarity-attraction effect depends largely upon choice set; hence, customer attraction to a service provider based on the similarity of a particular attribute depends on the service provider's other attributes and the attributes of other service providers. However, most research on the similarity-attraction effect has isolated the effect of one or two shared characteristics, generally demographic or attitudinal, in a dyadic relationship (e.g., Boshoff, 2012; Dwyer et al., 1998; Jones et al., 1998). Hence, sales and service research has largely overlooked the importance of contextual information. This is a considerable research gap because the similarity-attraction effect between customers and service providers will be artificially stronger and more consistent when controlled experiments isolate effects, rather than including contextual information. Hence, shared traits that elicit the similarity-attraction effect in isolation may not lead to perceived similarity in a real-world scenario when other contextual factors are included.

The first contextual factor to consider is information salience. Cosmetic features must be salient to be relevant. Features that are ubiquitous among a group are not salient differentiators among

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: aarndt@odu.edu (A.D. Arndt), kkarande@odu.edu (K. Karande), mglassma@odu.edu (M. Glassman).

group members and should be largely ignored. For example, when the norm among service providers is to wear a tie, customers will not differentiate between service providers based on whether they are wearing a tie, unless a particular tie is unique in some way. According to [Grewal and Sharma \(1991\)](#), customers process unexpected information more deeply than expected information, which makes unexpected information more salient. Consequently, the first research goal is to investigate whether cosmetic features are more likely to trigger the similarity-attraction effect when they are less expected for a particular industry context. The second contextual factor that should be considered is the appearance of other service providers. Even if a shared cosmetic feature elicits the similarity-attraction effect in isolation, it is not clear whether that same feature would remain salient if other service providers also shared that same cosmetic feature. Consequently, the second research goal is to investigate whether shared cosmetic features must be unique in order to elicit the similarity-attraction effect.

The third contextual factor that should be considered is the influence of competing salient information. In a real-world situation, customers may share a variety of unique characteristics with service providers. Although it may seem intuitive that sharing multiple unique cosmetic features would increase similarity over sharing a single unique cosmetic feature, research in social psychology suggests that increasing the number of shared stimuli does not increase similarity-attraction ([Byrne et al., 1973](#); [Montoya and Horton, 2013](#)). Multiple sources of stereotypical information often interact in complex ways, in some cases suppressing less salient information or forming distinct compound stereotypes which are subject to different stereotypical inferences than the individual sources of information comprising the compound stereotype ([Goldberg, 2003](#); [Roccas and Brewer, 2002](#)). Hence, it is possible that increasing the number of unique cosmetic features will alter or interfere with the interpretation of any one feature. However, research has not yet examined compound stereotypes based on multiple cosmetic features. Thus, the third research goal is to explore the interaction of multiple distinctive cosmetic features on similarity.

Three experimental studies were conducted to answer these research questions. Study 1 investigates the similarity-attraction effect in contexts where a cosmetic feature is expected (automobile services) and unexpected (dentistry). Study 2 then explores whether a shared cosmetic feature must be unique among a set of service providers to induce similarity-attraction. Finally, Study 3 investigates the similarity-attraction effect in the presence of two unique and salient cosmetic features, a beard and a tattoo.

2. Study 1

Study 1 investigates the influence of context on information salience using tattoos as the shared cosmetic feature. [Montoya and Horton \(2013, p. 69\)](#) define information salience as “the degree to which the information regarding the target is consciously available immediately before the attraction assessment.” People are more likely to make use of information that they notice to make stereotypical judgments ([Hastie and Kumar, 1979](#)); hence, information salience directly relates to the strength of the similarity-attraction effect ([Montoya et al., 2008](#); [Sunnafrank, 1992](#)). Indeed, the results of [Montoya and Horton's \(2013\)](#) meta-analysis showed that similarity/dissimilarity information salience has a main effect on similarity-attraction.

In order for a cosmetic feature to be salient, it must be visible and somewhat unexpected. For example, many people associate Harley-Davidson with tattoos, so customers likely expect visible tattoos on Harley-Davidson salespeople and pay relatively less attention to whether any one particular salesperson has a tattoo.

In contrast, customers might pay particular attention to a Mercedes-Benz salesperson with a visible tattoo, because they do not generally associate Mercedes-Benz with tattoos. Visible tattoos likely are more expected in blue-collar professions than in white-collar ones ([Dean, 2010](#)), so tattoos should be more salient in white-collar professions. Because unexpected tattoos are more salient, they should have a stronger effect on similarity-attraction.

H1. Customers with tattoos will perceive service providers who have visible tattoos as being more similar than service providers without visible tattoos, but only when service provider tattoos are unexpected.

2.1. Study 1 methodology

Study 1 used a between-subjects experimental design with 2 service industry expectation levels (high, low tattoo expectations) $\times$ 2 service employee visible tattoo presence (yes, no). Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four scenarios (high/low tattoo expectations $\times$ service employee with/without tattoo), then shown a picture of a service employee (shown in [Appendix A](#)), after which they answered a series of questions, including whether they had one or more tattoos.

2.1.1. Professions

According to [Dean \(2010\)](#), tattoos are more expected and accepted in blue-collar industries than in white-collar professions. As such, we selected a blue-collar industry to represent a context where customers would expect to see service employees with visible tattoos and a white-collar industry to represent a context where customers would not expect to see them. We chose automotive repair as the blue-collar industry and dentistry as the white-collar industry, because both settings create relatively similar decision-making considerations for customers. First, people generally cannot ignore major dental or automotive problems; both problems also involve significant financial and performance risk. Second, customers rely on an expert opinion to diagnose their dental or automotive problems. Third, businesses in both industries tend to be small and have one or a few experts (i.e., dentist or service manager), supported by multiple assistants. These similarities enabled us to use similar details in both scenarios.

2.1.2. Scenario

In all scenarios, respondents were told to assume that they had just moved to a new city and started having engine trouble or tooth pain. Since they just moved, they did not have a regular automotive shop/dentist office, so they picked a place “around the corner.” The service manager/dentist recommended an option that they considered expensive.

2.1.3. Service provider photographs

After presenting the scenario, we showed respondents a photograph of the service provider (service manager or dentist), with or without a tattoo. The photographs were created using stock photography, manipulated using Adobe Photoshop. The photographs were refined over a series of informal interviews and pretests until the pretest respondents asserted that all four of the photographs looked highly realistic, with no reason to doubt that the person pictured was a service manager or dentist. The face was identical for all four conditions but their shirt colors varied, dark blue for the service manager and white for the dentist, to emphasize the blue- versus white-collar distinction and to increase the realism of the photograph. Furthermore, the name tag was altered to either say “service manager” or “Dentist D.D.S.” The photographs are shown in [Appendix A](#).

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