



The use of mimicry to improve evaluation of unsought beverages



Wojciech Kulesza^{a,*}, Dariusz Dolinski^b, Marta Migon^c, Aidana Rizulla^d,
Małgorzata Gamian-Wilk^b, Tomasz Grzyb^b

^a SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Poznan Faculty, Department of Psychology, Kutrzeby 10, 61-719 Poznan, Poland

^b SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty of Psychology in Wrocław, Ostrowskiego 30b, 53-238 Wrocław, Poland

^c SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw Faculty, Department of Psychology, Chodakowska 19/31, 03-815 Warsaw, Poland

^d Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Faculty of General and Applied Psychology, Masanchii 39/47, UK 4, Almaty, Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

In the present paper we explore if interaction with a second person may change the experience and perception of the taste of distasteful beverages. The aim of the current research is to explore the impact of mimicry on flavor perception of unsought beverages which are beneficial, but due to factors such as unpleasant taste may be perceived negatively and thus avoided. In the first study, the participants were either mimicked or not mimicked by the confederate. The second study focused on measuring the amount of mimicry engaged in by the participant. The research reported here demonstrates that (1) mimicry of others can be used to influence their willingness to purchase an unsought product and to increase the price they are willing to pay for it, and (2) the level of non-conscious mimicry by a consumer can be used to predict their willingness to purchase an unsought product.

1. Introduction

Perhaps the most elementary question in the field of social sciences – and particularly social psychology – is how one person is affected by the mere presence of others. The primary aim of the present study is to explore the utility of the impact of presence and behavior of others on the perception of an unsought beverage. Such drinks may, on the one hand, be beneficial or useful, but on the other hand, due to their physiological properties (such as taste and flavor) they are perceived negatively and often avoided, which may in turn be detrimental to the health of consumers. There are many examples of unsought beverages as treatments available to consumers (e.g. drinks for preventing dehydration, fish oil with Omega-6). From this perspective, discovering mechanisms for removing the negative associations with such beverages as well as exploring procedures that positively affect consumers' tendency to purchase, increase willingness to pay, and boost satisfaction with them would be significant.

The research reported herein approaches this issue in two ways. First, we seek to understand how one of the most recently explored and powerful phenomena in the field of social psychology, *id est* mimicry, can be used to predict consumers' willingness to purchase an unsought beverage. Second, we investigate the use of mimicry to influence consumers' opinions toward such drinks.

1.1. Social psychology, social influence, and eating/drinking behavior

Since the birth of the discipline, social psychologists have long sought to understand how people form relationships with others, and equally importantly how others shape our behavior, opinions, and attitudes. Examples include Triplett's (1898) experiments on social facilitation and how the presence of others changes one's behavior, Ringelmann's (1913) on social loafing and why the presence of others reduces our tendency to put effort into collective activities, Asch's (1956) studies on conformity, and, last but not least, Le Bon's (1960) work on crowd psychology, exploring how one's behavior changes when in a large group.

The impact of mere presence is also true in the context of food/beverage perception, i.e. how the presence of others may change our behavior, taste, and flavors of the beverage/food. For example, an important concern for many people is to avoid being seen by others as eating excessively, because those who do so are perceived as lacking in self-control, unattractive, lazy and overweight, and in the case of women as less feminine (Vartanian, Herman, & Polivy, 2007). This concern becomes especially strong when one is highly motivated to make a positive impression on others. It has been shown that women eat less in the presence of a desirable male than in the presence of a less desirable partner (Mori, Chaiken, & Pliner, 1987), and in the presence

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: wkulesza@swps.edu.pl (W. Kulesza), ddolinsk@swps.edu.pl (D. Dolinski), mp.migon@gmail.com (M. Migon), arizulla@mail.ru (A. Rizulla), m.gamian@wp.pl (M. Gamian-Wilk), tgrzyb@swps.edu.pl (T. Grzyb).

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of a stranger of the opposite sex than in the presence of one of the same sex (e.g. Mori et al., 1987; Pliner & Chaiken, 1990). Diary studies concerning the aforementioned social facilitation have shown that people eat more in the presence of others than when they eat alone (e.g. Bellisle, Dalix, & de Castro, 1999; de Castro 1990; de Castro, 1991; Patel & Schlundt, 2001; Redd & de Castro, 1992), the number of eating companions determines the extent of increased intake, and this effect is especially strong when those companions are close friends or family members (see: Herman, Roth, & Polivy, 2003 for review). On the other hand, it has been demonstrated in studies that in the presence of others we tend to eat less: when a confederate did not eat at all, participants ate minimally (Conger, Conger, Constanzo, Wright, & Matter, 1980; Roth, Herman, Polivy, & Pilner, 2001). McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, and Morales (2009) demonstrated that people choose larger portions when following another consumer who first selected a large quantity of food, while this portion was significantly smaller if the other person was obese rather than thin.

Interestingly, the presence of other people is not limited to the physical aspect of being in the same place. The aforementioned modeling effect is just as strong when the model is physically present as when participants are only informed about the amount of food eaten by a supposed other participant (Feeney, Polivy, Pilner, & Sullivan, 2011; Vartanian, Spanos, Herman, & Polivy, 2015). Other studies show that imagination of the presence, symbolic presence, and priming with relationships in such places also changes the behavior of targeted people. For example, putting labels associated with affect and family ties in a menu (e.g., 'Grandma's home-baked potatoes' vs. 'baked potatoes') generates greater sales (Guéguen & Jacob, 2012). In the present paper we explore the impact of mimicry on the taste and flavor of an unsought beverage.

1.2. Mimicry: Definition

The origin of the term "mimicry" finds its roots in Greek as a description of behaviors among people. It has come to be used by biologists to describe the tendency of individual animals and plants to behave and look similarly to others ("Mimicry, 2013). Since the birth of psychology it has been described as a process between perceiving and performing (Oberman, Winkielman, & Ramachandran, 2007). In the field of social psychology, mimicry is defined as a non-conscious (Chartrand & van Baaren, 2009) and innate (Meltzoff & Moore, 1989) tendency for one person to facially, verbally, posturally, or emotionally mimic another during a social interaction (e.g. Lakin & Chartrand, 2012; Swaab, Maddux, & Sinaceur, 2011).

Chartrand and Bargh (1999) first explored the nature of mimicry through a series of elegantly designed experiments. In the first study, participants were asked to engage in two sequential discussions of a set of photographs with two confederates that they did not know. During the interactions one of the confederates shook their foot, while the other rubbed their face. They also alternated smiling or keeping a straight face based on what the confederate had done in the previous session. As expected, in the presence of the foot-shaker the participants shook their feet more, when conversing with the face-rubber, the participants rubbed their faces more, and participants smiled more when the confederate smiled.

Following these studies it was assumed that the phenomenon of mimicry is adaptive in nature and must deliver some tangible benefits to those who utilize it during social interactions (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). To verify these assumptions, Chartrand and Bargh (1999) conducted a second experiment. This time the participants engaged in a single photo description session with a confederate who either intentionally mimicked the participant's mannerisms and posture or did not. As predicted, participants in the mimicked condition reported the interaction as having gone more smoothly and found their partner to be more likable than those in the control condition.

1.3. Implications of mimicry

There is a large body of literature showing a link between mimicry and consumption, preferences, and behavior in restaurants. For example, in a study by Harakeh, Engels, van Baaren, and Scholte (2007) a confederate interacted with participant in either a warm and friendly or cold and distant form. Afterwards, during the break he went out to smoke a cigarette, and the smoking behavior of participants was recorded. As predicted, in the first experimental condition the participants smoked a similar number of cigarettes to that of the confederate, whereas participants in the second condition smoked less. A similar pattern of results has also been found in research concerning social modeling of alcohol consumption. In Collins, Parks, and Marlatt's (1985) study male participants were paired with confederates who were warm and friendly or behaved in an unsociable manner while modeling either light or heavy alcohol consumption (drinking a small vs. a large amount of beer during the experiment). The amount of beer consumed by participants was recorded. Findings indicated that modeling occurred in the sociable condition, but not in the unsociable conditions. These findings led to the interesting conclusion that participants' feelings about the confederate and their interaction predicted mimicry behavior—the more participants liked the confederate and the conversation, the more they imitated the confederate's smoking behavior. If generalizable, the degree of mimicry performed might be an indirect and unobtrusive method for reliably measuring individuals' opinions about people and products. This last result is especially important for us since it was one of the starting points for our research.

In a restaurant setting by van Baaren and colleagues (van Baaren, Holland, Steenaert, & van Knippenberg, 2003) the waitress repeated the customer's order, either using their words or only using short phrases such as, "okay" and "coming up." The results showed that tip amounts were significantly higher in the first condition. In work by Jacob, Guéguen, Martin, and Boulbry (2011) customers who were mimicked spent more money and offered more favorable judgments of a store, its products, and sales clerks. In another study by Kulesza, Szypowska, Jarman, and Dolinski (2014) results showed that customers who interacted with a salesperson which was both attractive and mimicked them spent the most money, and they also gave the highest customer service ratings.

Tanner and colleagues (Tanner, Ferraro, Chartrand, Bettman, & van Baaren, 2008, experiment 2) focused on the consequences of being mimicked and what the downstream impacts of this might be for shaping purchaser preferences. Participants entering the research lab were informed that they would be participating in a marketing study for a new isotonic drink (the second point of reference for our study). The participant was seated together with the confederate, and the assistant informed them that after hearing about the drink and answering some questions regarding sports drinks they would be provided with a sample to taste, then asked to share their opinions on it. During the study the confederate mirrored the gestures of the participant and either verbally mimicked or anti-mimicked them. The results revealed that those participants who were mimicked offered significantly higher ratings of the beverage than those who were not. This study was a third point of reference for the present research.

2. Research overview

As the literature review above shows, previous research has taken the path of using products that are at least slightly positive. Thus, the change driven by mimicry has two possible tracks: mimicry could (a) make perceptions of the initial opinion more positive and improve initial attitudes; or (b) it could reinforce initial positive attitudes. The only way to test this is to examine products which are perceived negatively. In the event the initial opinion is positive, the change would be exactly the same for either track: after mimicry, the initial attitude would be more positive. In contrast, when the initial attitude is

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