Psychological Contagion: Changing Evaluations Without Contact

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Placing pictures of items together is common. However, this could decrease consumers’ evaluations without awareness, where negative products could affect consumer evaluations to products located nearby without contact. It further examines how psychological contagion can be attenuated when visual boundary is placed between a discomfiting dish and a target dish.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Contagion has been regarded as one of the biggest concerns for the foodservice industry (Tse, So, & Sin, 2006). Previous contagion studies mostly concern threats to food and sanitary safety, which are influenced by physical factors, external factors (e.g., disease) and food poisoning (Eves & Dervisi, 2005; Tse et al., 2006; Walczak, 1997; White, 1972). Apart from the physical contagion effect (Argo et al., 2006; Morales & Fitzsimons, 2007), another type of contagion effect would rather invisibly affect consumers’ evaluations and behaviors, that is, the psychological contagion effect. As food items and consumers’ demands are becoming more diversified, restaurant managers are faced with pressure to be innovative, and meanwhile embrace new, strange and foreign foods presented on the menus. Therefore, it is almost inevitable that a restaurant will offer dishes that make some people uncomfortable (e.g. internal organs for some Westerners, blue cheese for some Easterners), and these dishes could induce a psychological contagion effect, contaminating and influencing a consumer’s evaluation of a dish. Such an effect can also be induced by the proximity of two items and/or images on a menu.

Lines, border, frame and confined area are all boundaries. The nature of boundary is the dictation of things belonging, and the senses of belonging results from the functional values of boundary, where boundary are able to tell you where to start and stop (Cutright, 2012), which can help you to process and focus on the elements in a given space (Burris and Branscombe 2005). Hence, elements located at different boundaries are considered to be separated and the mutual effect between these elements will be discouraged. Accordingly, boundary can be an effective way to block the contaminating effect elicited from the negative source object. Therefore,

Hypothesis 1: Consumers will give a lower evaluation to a menu item displayed next to a picture of a negative source item than the one displayed next to a picture of a neutral source (control) item.

Hypothesis 2: Consumers will give a lower evaluation to a menu item that is placed next to a negative source item in the same visual boundary than to the one that is separated from the negative source item by a visual boundary.

Study 1

Study 1 adopted a 2 (source item: positive vs. negative) × 2 (boundary: vertical vs. horizontal) between-subjects design. We chose Smelly Tofu as the negative source item and Steamed Tofu as the positive source item. A manipulation check showed that Smelly Tofu was rated below the middle point (M = 2.81) while the Steamed Tofu was rated above the middle point (M = 4.02). Another three dishes that are usually appeared on Chinese menus were selected, one target item (Cold Shredded Potatoes) and two fillers (Cold Lotus Root and Poached Enoki Mushroom). The target item was positioned at the top left corner, with the target at the top right corner next to the source. The two fillers were under the source and the target.

The boundary was manipulated by putting the source item and the target item on the same-colored or different-colored background. Specifically, in the vertical condition, the source item and the target item were in different colored zones, whereas in the horizontal condition, the source item and the target item were in the same colored zone. To make sure participants saw the source item before the target, they were asked to rate the dishes in a zigzag order.

The results revealed a significant interaction on the evaluation of the target (F(1, 55) = 4.03, p = .05, indicating that when the target and the source were in the same colored zone, the target next to the negative source (M = 3.49) was evaluated lower than that next to the positive source (M = 4.81; F(1,55) = 4.32, p<.05) (M = 4.81; F(1,55) = 4.32, p<.05). However, no difference was found on the target when it was in the different colored zone with the source. Thus the color boundary eliminated the contagion effect. Thus, both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were supported.

Finally, we conducted a follow-up study to replicate the findings of Study 1 and to demonstrate the generalizability of the psychological contagion effect (regardless of the relative location of the source item and target item). The experimental design of follow-up study was identical to Study 1, except that follow-up study was conducted with a new target item, which was placed at a different direction of the source item: Cold Lotus Root (underneath the source item) replaced Cold Shredded Potatoes (on the right side of the source item). Consistent with the findings from Study 1, the results supported both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2.

Study 2

Besides menu layout (e.g., different background colors used in previous studies), product packages could serve as boundary as well. Accordingly, Study 2 was conducted by using a type of product package, transparent plastic covers, as surrogate of boundary to extend the boundary effect. Moreover, to demonstrate the general applicability of the psychological contagion effect, a different food type, sushi, and non-students samples were used.

First, two manipulation checks were conducted. Results confirmed that Octopus sushi was a good representative of negative source item (M = 3.19, N = 84). Moreover, by using the same measurements of boundary effect as the pretest, transparent plastic covers were agreed to be a boundary (M = 5.42, N = 41). Therefore, the manipulation of negative source and boundary effect were both effective.

Second, an independent-sample t-test was conducted to test Hypothesis 2- that boundary could hinder the psychological contagion effect. The analysis supported the prediction and revealed a significant main effect of boundary (p < .01). Specifically, when boundary was present (i.e., a transparent plastic cover wrapped the Octopus sushi), feeling of dislike was blocked by the boundary, and the evaluation of the target item was significant higher than when the boundary was absent (4.17 vs. 3.34). Hence, Study 2 utilized another strategy, using product packages as boundary, to supported Hypothesis 2.
REFERENCES