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When Consumers Take Their Sense of Smell for Granted
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present series of Experiments is to investigate the effects of ambient odor on consumers’ product evaluations. The results of our studies show that ambient odor indeed has an impact on subsequent judgments. We moreover showed that when consumers have insufficient processing resources, ambient odor influenced subsequent judgments even when it is perceived as incongruent with the object of evaluation.

Consistent with prior studies (e.g. Mitchell, Kahn, and Knasko, 1995; Bone and Jantrania, 1992) our results indicate that the effect is dependent on the level of congruence of the ambient odor with the to be evaluated product: ambient odor is likely to influence subsequent judgments when it is perceived as appropriate for the evaluation. When the odor is inappropriate, it is less likely to influence subsequent judgments.

However, we were able to extend existing research on ambient odor by showing that the impact of this congruence effect is moderated by the availability of cognitive resources that consumers are willing to allocate to the judgment task. That is, while congruence of the odor has an impact when availability of processing resources is high, it seems to be irrelevant when availability of processing resources is low.

In 3 experiments, where we used a variety of factors related to a manipulation of cognitive resources (Need for Cognition, task motivation, and levels of arousal) we showed that when cognitive resources are scarce, pleasant odor has a positive impact on judgments–even when this odor is highly inappropriate for judgments.

We moreover showed (see Experiment 3) that these effects also hold when ambient odor is perceived as unpleasant. That is, when confronted with the odor of a spoiled banana, participants who had a limited amount of cognitive resources available consistently rated the to be evaluated product as more negative compared to a control condition. They could not partial out the influence of the inappropriate unpleasant odor. In contrast, when sufficient processing resources were available, evaluations were more negative when odor was congruent with the to be evaluated product (i.e. a banana), but not when it was incongruent. Here too then, availability of processing resources resulted in an appropriate discounting of the influence of unpleasant odor.

Our results are congruent with the framework of schema-congruency literature (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1993; Meyers-Levy and Tybout, 1997) that explains context effects (such as ambient odor) by assuming the moderating role of both congruency of the context (ambient odor) with the target as well as the availability of cognitive resources when performing the task.

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