Scents and Semantics: Do Fragrance Names Influence Consumer Perceptions of Scented Products?

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Previous research on scent perception has focused on the effects of ambient scents (i.e. scents in the environment) on consumer decision making; however little work has examined how consumers process olfactory attributes that are integral to products. The proposed research investigates the effect of manipulating the descriptiveness of the label given to a scented product has on overall product evaluations. Results indicate that for scents that are familiar, hedonic ratings are significantly higher when the scent is labeled with a more abstract name. In contrast, hedonic ratings for unfamiliar scents are significantly higher when the verbal label is more concrete.

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channel and ‘direct’ discourse and which, thus, operate as mechanisms of bringing power relations into being. This should be of interest to both producers and regulators.

Through deep interviews with consumers, executive representatives from leading actors in food production, chief state-regulators of food labeling, and retail merchants, this research seeks to further deepen our understanding of how regulative forces in consumer culture and control mechanisms in the supply chain, reach out and intervene with individual subjects’ food disposal tendencies.

Further, this research takes as a starting point the discursive power model presented by Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder (2006). This model highlights forces which produce discourses and practices and seek to define “normal” consumer behavior in “certain consumption contexts” (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006; see also Thompson 2004). Concerning food freshness one interesting and important question to ask is through which discourses subjects’ perception of freshness is constituted and why.

By exploring different subjects’ perceptions of freshness and the best before dates, and drawing on high level theoretization of desire (Baudrillard 1998; Deleuze et al. 1988; Deleuze and Guattari 2004; Deleuze 2006), as well as power (e.g. Foucault et al. 1998), the aim is to illuminate the relation between flows of institutional forces (in a constituting, productive sense, seen from the collective level) and the subjects and objects these adhere to. The aim is also to bring other actor groups into consumer research than merely the consumer while conducting consumer research.

References
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Take a moment and think about the type of products you use or consume throughout your typical day. Now, think about how many of those products are scented. Scent is an integral attribute of numerous consumer products and is used to differentiate products both across and within product categories. The importance of fragrance attributes in the marketing of consumer products is clearly evident by the ever increasing variety of scents being offered. Take for example the laundry detergent category where Tide®, the market leading detergent brand, offers consumers over 15 different scents just for liquid detergent including Mountain Spring, Tropical Clean, Vanilla & Lavender, Soft Ocean Mist and Glacier just to name a few. With all of these fragrance variants inhabiting the marketplace, how do consumers make their choices?

Very little work in consumer research has focused on how consumers process olfactory attributes that are specific to products. Of the research that has been done with scents in the consumer domain, the main focus has been on how ambient scents (i.e. scents in the environment and do not emanate from a product) influence consumer decision making. Findings from these studies demonstrate that ambient odors can affect both variety seeking and information search (Mitchell, Kahn, and Knasko 1995) as well as overall product judgments (Bosmans, 2006). Moreover, ambient scents can also enhance consumers’ ability to recall brands (Morrin and Ratneshwar, 2003). But whether fragrance attributes inherent to a product affect product judgments has received limited attention; therefore, the broad goal of this research is to better understand the factors that shape the perception of olfactory product attributes.

Previous research in consumer behavior has shown that verbal labels are one factor that plays a role in the processing of sensory information and manipulating these labels can influence consumer evaluations. Framing of attribute information in either positive or
negative terms has been shown to affect taste evaluations (Levin and Gaeth, 1988) and more recent work by Hoegg and Alba (2007), demonstrates that verbal labels (brand names) can influence taste discrimination. Miller and Kahn (2005) also show that manipulating the typicality and specificity of color and flavor names affects hedonic ratings and ultimately consumer choice decisions. Although verbal labels have been shown to affect the perception of various sensory attributes (i.e. color, flavor etc.) no research has investigated the effect that verbal names of olfactory attributes have on consumer product evaluations.

Work in psychology, however has illustrated the general malleability of odor perception and shows that indeed, semantic framing of a scent can strongly shape a person’s perception. The same odor stimuli labeled with a positively or negatively valenced label evokes different hedonic ratings (Herz and von Clef, 2001). For example, the scent of pine needles is rated more pleasant when it is labeled “Christmas tree” compared to when it is presented again to the same subject but labeled “spray disinfectant”. Based on this work and findings in consumer research, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the perception of a scented product can be influenced by semantic framing. The work presented here seeks to investigate the effect that changing the descriptiveness of the label given to a scented product has on the overall evaluation of the product.

To test this, a study was conducted in which participants evaluated six different commercially available scented candles. The stimuli were prepared by placing shavings from each candle into 2 ounce plastic cups which were then covered with a lid. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two descriptive label conditions: concrete label condition (e.g. rose) or abstract label condition (e.g. soft floral). Each subject evaluated three candles whose primary odor characteristics were familiar to participants (cinnamon, rose, and powder) as well as three candles whose primary odor characteristics were unfamiliar (citronella, jasmine, and honeysuckle). Pretests were conducted to determine scent familiarity. After smelling each candle, participants made various hedonic evaluations as well as willingness purchase ratings.

Results of the study indicate that verbal labels do influence overall product judgments; however the effect is moderated by odor familiarity. For familiar scents, participants’ hedonic ratings were significantly higher when the scent was labeled with an abstract name as compared to a concrete name. However, when the characteristics of the odor were unfamiliar, hedonic ratings were reversed such that odors were evaluated more positively when labeled with a concrete name as compared to an abstract name. A similar pattern of results was also seen with willingness to purchase measures.

In summary, the results from this work demonstrate that scent perceptions are in fact malleable. Whether or not the changes in hedonic judgment are a result of changes in the actual perception of the sensory information needs further investigations. In subsequent studies, we will attempt to understand the mechanisms that underlie these changes in scent evaluations.

Selected References

Cross Physical Sense: How Weight Influences Consumer Stress and Importance Rating
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Weight is an integral part of consumer sensory perception, and a central attribute in product design. For example, to make laptops feel less heavy, colors like white or silver are often used. The location of cookie images on a package could be used to influence how consumers perceive the weight of cookies, which in turn, influence their evaluations of the package (Deng and Kahn 2009).

However, prior consumer research on weight concept has been largely focused on how sensory experience in the other domains influences judgment of weight. In this research, we propose that consumers’ physical experience of carrying heavy objects (e.g., carrying a bag of groceries) can influence judgments “irrelevant” to the weight perception. Further, we propose that the experience of carrying heavy weight might influence judgments across domains by two routes (1) activating a physiological state shared by the physical sense of heavy; (2) activating the associated semantic concepts that linked to the weight concept. These two routes, in turn, determine whether these effects are reciprocal: When there is a shared physiological state, the effects are more likely to be bi-directional than when only semantic links are shared.

Specifically, in this study, we investigate how carrying weight influences the judgment of stress and importance. We choose to work on these two kinds of judgments based on the following justifications. First, in daily language, there is ample evidence that we often use sensory experience of weight to describe and understand the emotional experience of stress (heavy steps; my spirits sunk) and the abstract concept of importance (heavily weighted). These may reflect a co-activation of these constructs in our mind. Second, judgments of stress and importance might be differentially linked to “heavy” via one of the above-mentioned routes: Stress, as a basic emotion, is associated with physiological reactions; importance, on the other hand, is primarily a semantic construct. Therefore, these two concepts are good