Crush on You: Romantic Crush Increases Consumers’ Preferences For Strong Sensory Stimuli

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We show that romantic crush could enhance consumers’ subsequent preference for products or services that elicit stronger (vs. weaker) sensory stimulation (e.g., a louder store music, a more strongly-flavored food). This is because people in a romantic crush have an unsatisfied desire for sensory stimulations from their desired social target.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Romantic crush is formed by desiring for another person whom one finds powerfully attracted to and wants to spend a lot of time with. It is a universal experience which is often expressed in movies, songs, romance novels, and even social media apps (e.g., Crush Notifier on Facebook). However, given the prevalence of this experience, relatively little attention has been given in understanding the effect of this experience on consumer preferences.

Romantic crush has some distinct features from other desirable experiences. First, during a crush, people are romantically attracted to a specific another. This longing can be very profound. To this extent, romantic crush is the same as romantic love. However, in a crush, the desired intimacy and sensory contact with the target person is absent (Furman and Collins 2009; Oettingen and Mayer 2002). Due to the lack of enough sensory stimulation from their desired person, people in a crush may fantasy about having sensory contact with this person (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, or kissing this person; Furman and Collins 2009). Second, not only does a romantic crush differ from a typical romantic love, it also differs from other affections, like those between family members or close friends. The latter kinds tend to be mutual. Third, a romantic crush is also different from the desire for other non-human end states (e.g., a dream job). The latter is more abstract and does not involve the desire for sensory intimacy.

In our view, the experience of romantic crush is a positive, passionate, romantic feeling for another person. This experience is unilateral and characterized by the lack of intimacy and sensory stimulation from the desired other. This experience, once activated, can be powerful, even if it may be short-lived or never acted on.

Drawing on the growing body of literature on compensatory consumption (e.g., Lee and Shrum 2013; Lisjak et al. 2015; Rucker and Galinsky 2013), we propose that when the experience of romantic crush is salient, the unsatisfied desire for intimacy and sensory stimulation (from the desired another) may lead people to have a general preference for products and services that can elicit strong (vs. weak) sensory stimulations (e.g., a louder store music, a strongly scented hotel room).

We conducted a pretest and six experiments to test these propositions. The results of pretest showed the predicted similarities and differences between romantic crush and other related experiences (e.g., stable romantic relationship, mother’s love, and desiring for a dream job).

Study 1 was conducted on participants who self-reported as being single. We compared participants’ choices for products and services between those who were having a romantic crush and those who were not. Participants were presented with multiple pairs of options and were asked to make a choice. In each pair, one option elicited a strong sensory stimulation whereas the other elicited a weak stimulation (e.g., strong vs. weak-flavored coffee; an iPad cover of smooth vs. rugged texture). Results showed that participants who had a romantic crush were more likely to choose the options eliciting stronger sensation than those who did not.

Study 2 replicated the effect of Study 1 by manipulating the salient experience of romantic crush. Participants were asked to write a detailed story about a personal experience (romantic crush, desired job and shopping trip). To avoid any potential interference across the sensory domains, we employed five sub-studies to examine the effect of romantic crush on each of the five senses respectively. Again, we found that after participants imagined and described a personal experience of romantic crush, they would prefer products or services that can elicit stronger (vs. weaker) sensory stimulation.

Study 3 tested the mediating role of the unsatisfied desire for intimacy and sensory contact with the desired person. This study had two conditions: romantic crush versus stable romantic relationship. The results showed that participants who imagined romantic crush (vs. stable relationship) vividly expressed a greater preference for a higher level of sensory stimulation when watching a 4D movie. This effect was mediated by the desire for intimacy and sensory contact with the imagined social target.

In Studies 4 to 6, we employed a more natural and easy-to-implement manipulation of romantic crush: the exposure to posters depicting crush-related images and statements. In Study 4, we compared the crush-themed posters condition with a no-poster baseline. The results showed that participants in the crush condition preferred a tight (vs. loose) hug from “Mickey Mouse”, a dark (vs. light) colored T-shirt, a high (vs. low) volume store music, a strongly (vs. lightly) scented candle, and a strong (vs. weak) flavored coffee. Moreover, after viewing crush-related posters, participants had a general preference for stronger sensory stimulation, as compared to their counterparts in the baseline.

Studies 5 and 6 then used real behavior as DVs, and included the experience of mother’s love as the control. Specifically, in Study 5, participants were asked to self-pick tea leaves to make their own cup of tea; the actual amount of loose leaf tea was measured as the DV. As expected, participants in a romantic crush condition took greater amount of tea leaves (i.e., preferring a stronger taste). Study 6 measured participants’ real choice between two types of gift cards. As predicted, those in the romantic crush condition were more likely to choose the 4D movie (rather than the bookstore gift card, indicating a preference for stronger sensory stimulation.

Taken together, we have identified a novel antecedent of consumers’ preference for stronger (vs. weaker) sensory stimulation, namely, the salient experience of romantic crush. This research contributes to the literature of subjective experiences, sensory marketing, and compensatory consumption. (926 words)

REFERENCE
