

Does touch affect flavor? Study finds that how a container feels can affect taste

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Does coffee in a flimsy cup taste worse than coffee in a more substantial cup? Firms such as McDonalds and Starbucks spend millions of dollars every year on disposable packaging, but a new study from the April issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* suggests that trying to skimp in this area might not be worth it – and may negatively impact consumers’ perceptions of taste and quality.

In a series of four experiments, Aradhna Krishna (University of Michigan) and Maureen Morrin (Rutgers University) find that many people do indeed judge a drink by its container. Specifically, the firmness of a cup seems to have an impact on consumer evaluations of the beverage contained inside.

“We found that the nondiagnostic haptic qualities of a product package or serving container can affect how a product is evaluated; that is, such cues can indeed have an effect on product evaluation,” the researchers write.

Not everyone has the same sensitivity to touch, though, the researchers explain. They first performed a pretest to determine which participants were strong autotelics – the sort of people who like to touch things before they buy them – and which participants were not particularly inclined to touch products (low autotelics).

Participants then evaluated the feel of the cups while blindfolded or in an evaluation in which they could both feel and see. Perhaps

unsurprisingly, the largest difference in ratings for the firm and the flimsy cups was in the blindfolded condition among those most sensitive to touch.

However, the researchers also found that those who like to touch are least influenced by touch in taste evaluations. Indeed, in a taste test of the same mineral water from both a flimsy and a firm cup, it was low autotelics who gave the most negative evaluations of the taste of the water in the flimsy cup.

The results were similar when participants were just told about the containers in a written description and did not actually feel them: Low autotelics expressed a willingness to pay more for a firm bottle of water, while high autotelics did not.

The researchers explain: “High (vs. low) autotelics receive more pleasure from touching objects, tend to touch them more, and are more consciously aware of the potential effect of haptic clues on product judgment. As a result, they are more capable of adjusting for such clues in their product judgments when they are nondiagnostic in nature.”

Source: University of Chicago

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