

How color in photos can make food look tastier

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The photo on the left of a poke bowl does not look as fresh and tasty to viewers as the one on the right. It all has to do with color saturation. Credit: The Ohio State University

An appealing photo of a pizza or other menu item can help a restaurant increase sales—especially if the right filter is used, a new study suggests.

Photos high in color saturation make food look fresher and tastier to viewers, which increases their willingness to order the [menu items](#),

researchers found.

Color saturation refers to the intensity of the color in the image—the vividness and richness of the reds and greens and blues.

But how well color saturation works to make food appealing depends on the visual distance of the food in the photo—and even on whether consumers plan to dine alone or with others.

In the cutthroat restaurant business, these results provide a simple method to increase sales, said Stephanie Liu, lead author of the study and associate professor of hospitality management at The Ohio State University.

"On Instagram, it means using the 'X-Pro II' filter on your food photos rather than the 'Earlybird' filter," Liu said. "It is not difficult and doesn't cost a dime, so it is an easy win for restaurant marketers."

The study was published online recently in the *Journal of Business Research*.

The researchers did two online studies. In one study, 267 participants were asked to imagine themselves browsing through options on an online food ordering platform.

They were shown photos of a poke bowl, a Hawaiian dish featuring chunks of raw, marinated fish, vegetables and sauce over rice. They were from a fictitious restaurant named Poke Kitchen.

Study participants were randomly assigned to view one of the four different photos with either high or low color saturation and either close or farther away visual distance.

The photos with high color saturation were edited with professional graphic design software to be 130% more saturated than the low-saturation photos. The up-close photos were 130% larger in radius and appeared nearer to the observer than the more distant photo.

Participants were asked to rate how fresh the food in each photo looked, how tasty it looked and how likely they would be to purchase it.

The food in the more highly saturated photos looked fresher and tastier to participants, and that led them to be more likely to purchase the food, results showed.

But color saturation had a stronger effect when the food appeared more distant in the photos, Liu said.

"When the food is shown close up, it is already easy for the viewers to imagine how fresh and tasty the food would be," she said. "Color saturation is not as necessary."

The second study involved 222 online participants. In this case, the participants were asked to imagine they were browsing Instagram and came across images of pizza from a fictitious restaurant near their home named Pizza City. They were shown photos either high or low in color saturation.

People in the study were also told they would either be eating alone or with family that night and were again asked to rate the pizza on perceived freshness and tastiness and on whether they would likely purchase the menu item.

As in the previous study, the food in the [color](#)-saturated photo was always seen as fresher and tastier and one that people would be more likely to buy. But that effect was stronger for people who were told they

would be eating alone and weaker for those who would be eating with family.

"When people are eating with others, the social experience is a big part of what people look forward to," Liu said.

"But when they anticipate eating alone, they focus more on the food itself. They want the food to be fresher and tastier and that's why [color saturation](#) is more important in this context."

These findings are more important now than ever before, with people ordering online and looking at photos to help them decide what to eat, Liu said.

"Restaurants have to post pictures of their [food](#) on social media and online ordering platforms," she said.

"They should be paying as much attention, or maybe more, to the [photos](#) they post as they do to the text. Color saturation is one key element they need to focus on."

More information: Stephanie Q. Liu et al, Marketing online food images via color saturation: A sensory imagery perspective, *Journal of Business Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.06.061](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.06.061)

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