

Title:

An ambient scent guides likeability ratings

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Abstract:

Subliminally perceived smells can guide social preferences. Li, Moallem, Paller & Gottfried (2007) demonstrated odors to influence social likeability judgments in a valence-consistent manner. Smells were below detection threshold and were sniffed from glasses. In order to apply their findings to ambient air fragrances, we scented our lab for an experimental group with a pleasant vanilla-caramel smell which was not detected by participants. A control group participated under unscented conditions. The $n = 14$ in each group were parallelized for gender and age (20-34, 35-50). Participants rated the likeability of 20 neutral facial expressions, also systematically combining gender and age-group, on a 9 point hedonic scale. Nobody commented on an odor.

Likeability of faces was remarkable higher in the odor than in the control condition (m 5.92 to 5.11, $d = .91$, 1-tailed $p = .02$). In a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ design with odor, gender and age group of participants as between-subject and gender and age group of faces as within-subject factors, the odor – besides its significant main effect – did not interact with any of the gender or age sources. Hence, the odor influenced all participants and targets equally.

In conclusion, scent was re-assessed to have a strong affective impact even if it is released into a room. Because human olfactory attention is especially low (Sela & Sobel, 2010), cognitive control processes interfere generally late. Hence, the ambient scent effect might be more robust than Li et al. (2007) suggested. Especially a vanilla scent's potential to facilitate consumer-service contact (see also Saint-Bauzel & Fointiat, 2012) and its role in branding are discussed. The results imply that sales people in a scented salesroom might be perceived as more personable by shoppers compared to an unscented room.