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The Effects of Shape-taste Congruence on Product Evaluations

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Online grocery shopping has grown rapidly in recent years globally. For example, in the United States, its market value has more than doubled from US\$12 billion in 2016 to US\$26 billion in 2018, suggesting that consumers are becoming increasingly comfortable ordering food online (Magana, 2019). In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic is pushing even more consumers to buy essential products digitally, rapidly accelerating the online grocery space (eMarketer, 2020). However, a key barrier to consumer adoption of online grocery shopping is that consumers cannot taste, smell, or touch the food online as they can in stores. As a result, online stores need to rely on alternative sensory cues to make up for the absence of these senses. These sensory cues can subconsciously affect consumers' taste experiences and purchase decisions. A key interface to provide sensory cues during a consumer's online grocery shopping experience is the online product background. In online shopping environments, consumers often need to make judgments based on peripheral cues, such as the display background or packaging, when they cannot directly experience the products. Therefore, online visual background plays an indispensable role for people to infer the taste of a product (Togawa, Park et al. 2019).

The present research shows that product evaluations can be intensified rather than be improved by the congruency of background shapes and tastes perception. To be specific, for sweet products, shape-taste congruency improves evaluations, while for sour products, shape-taste congruency decreases evaluations. Furthermore, we explore the mechanism using the concept of the positive affect of customers as well as the possible moderating role of customers' individual characteristics (i.e., design sensitivity). Three experiments were conducted to examine the impact of shape-taste congruency on product evaluations (study 1), the mechanism underlying the relationship (study 2), and to explore the moderating effect of consumers' design sensitivity (study 3). Finally, conclusions and suggestions are drawn and directions for future research are highlighted.

Keywords: *online grocery shopping; shape-taste congruence; positive affect; design sensitivity; e-commerce*

REFERENCES

Available upon request

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Jurui Zhang, PhD, is Associate Professor of Marketing at the College of Management at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research interests include social media, social networks, and e-commerce. Her work has appeared in top marketing journals including *Marketing Science*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Journal of Marketing*.

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