

# The Effect of Context Variety on Liking over Time

Bowen Ruan, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Minzhe Xu, University of Florida

## ABSTRACT

We investigate how variety of consumption contexts influences how much people like an item over time. In four studies, we find people like a poem (Study 1 and 4), a music clip (Study 2), and a cake (Study 3) more when they are exposed to various contexts, even imagined ones, than when they are exposed to the same context. We further show that perceived richness mediates this effect (Studies 3 and 4) and that this effect holds despite people's overall experience being worse (Study 4).

## THEORY

Different consumption contexts serve as cues that encourage people to interpret an item from different perspectives, which may lead to an increase in perceived richness of the item. Crolic and Janiszewski (2016) show that people like food richer in its flavors more over time. Thus, when people perceive an item to be richer (in its meanings, flavors, etc.), they may also like it more over time. Based on the analysis above, we propose that people will like an item over time when there is variety in the consumption contexts than when there is not.

Importantly, the effect we propose is not a simple carry-over effect, i.e., context variety increases how much people enjoy a consumption experience and this increase is then carried over to the liking of the item consumed. To rule out this account, we examine negative consumption contexts. Variety (vs. no variety) of negative consumption contexts will make a consumption experience more negative (Frederick and Loewenstein 1999). However, it may still increase the perceived richness of the focal item consumed, which, in turn, makes people like the item more over time.

## IMPLICATIONS

- The role of context in consumption experience
- Perceived richness of an item
- Distinction between liking and overall experience
- Interpersonal/intimate relationship

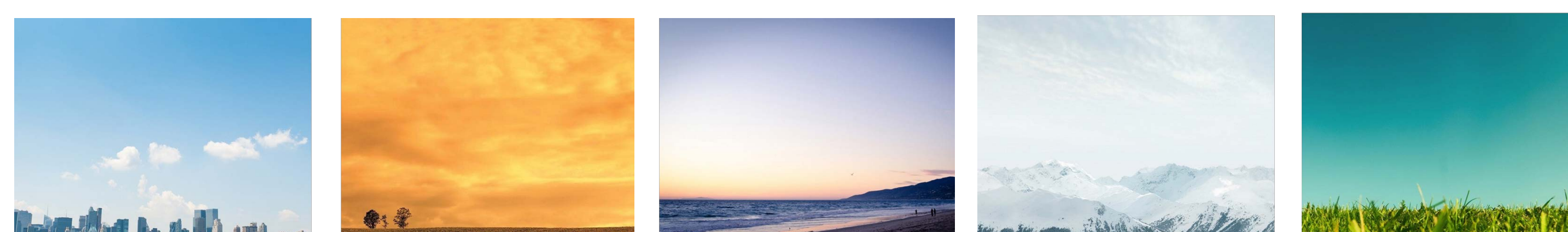
## REFERENCES

1. Crolic, C., & Janiszewski, C. (2016). Hedonic escalation: When food just tastes better and better. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 43(3), 388-406.
2. Frederick, S., & Loewenstein, G. (1999). Hedonic Adaptation. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (pp. 302-329). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

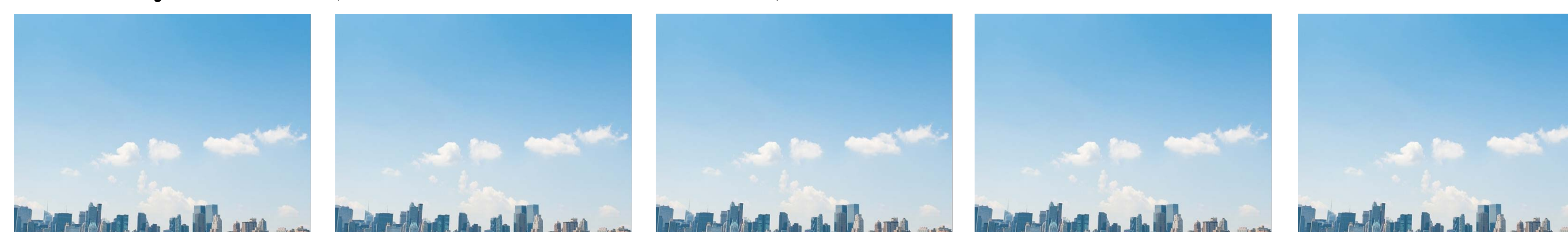
## STUDY 1: POEM

- Participants were asked to read the same poem five times, each time with either the **same** or a **different** background picture.

### Variety condition



### No-variety condition (one of the five sub-conditions)

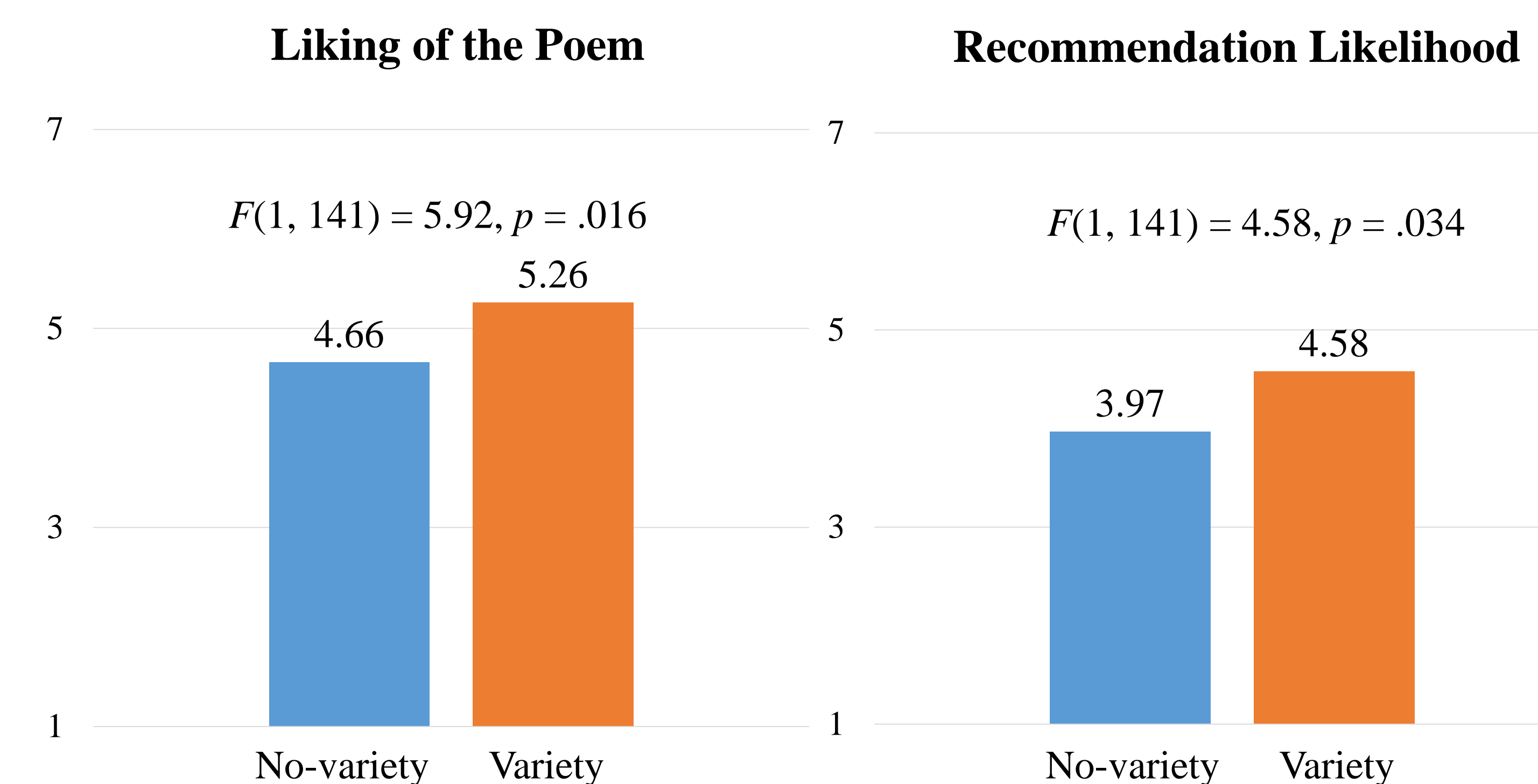


### Lost Time by Rabindranath Tagore

On many an idle day have I grieved over lost time./But it is never lost, my lord. /Thou hast taken every moment of my life in thine own hands.

Hidden in the heart of things thou art nourishing seeds into sprouts, /buds into blossoms, and ripening flowers into fruitfulness.

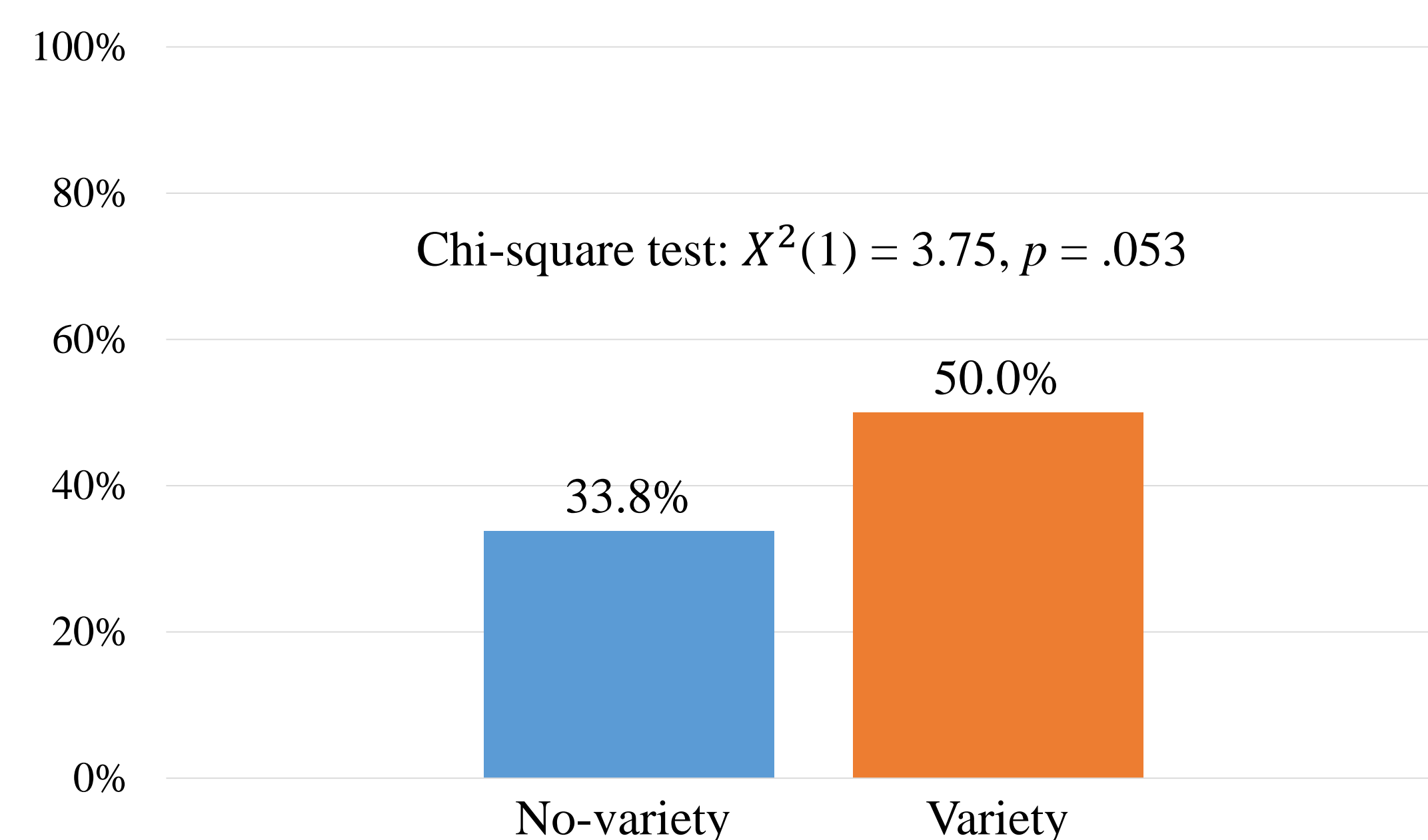
I was tired and sleeping on my idle bed /and imagined all work had ceased. /In the morning I woke up /and found my garden full with wonders of flowers.



## STUDY 2: MUSIC

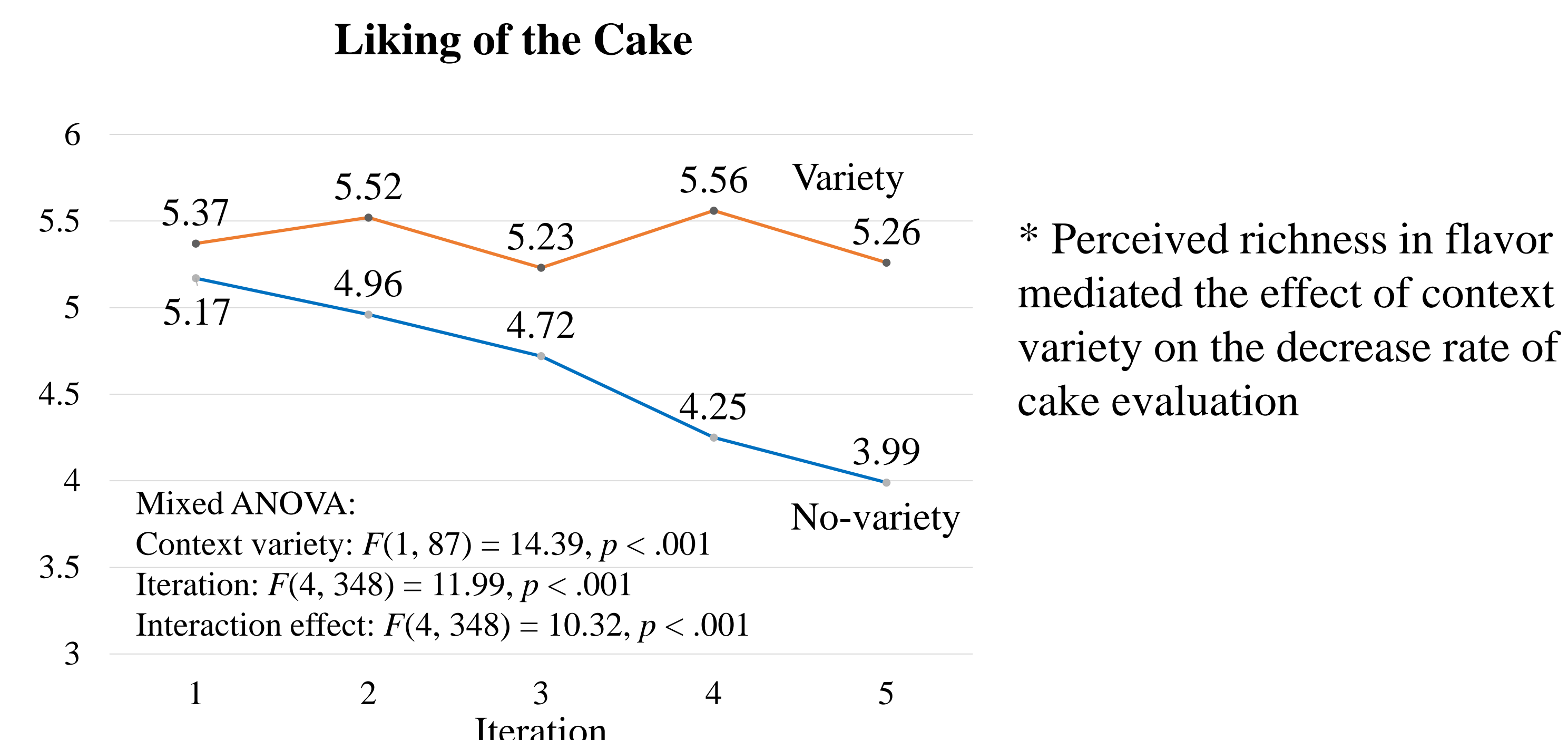
- Participants were asked to listen to the same music clip five times, each time looking at the **same** or a **different** picture.

### % of Ps Who Chose to Listen to the Music Clip Again



## STUDY 3: CAKE

- Participants were asked to eat five pieces of the same cake, each time imagining the **same** or a **different** scenario.



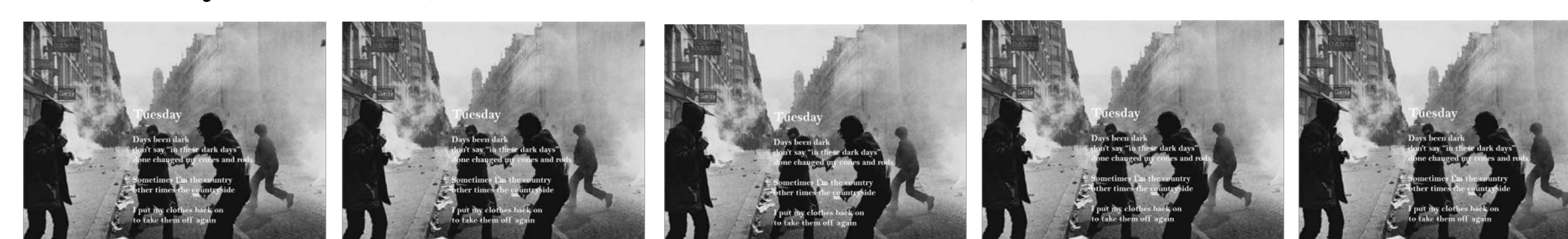
## STUDY 4: POEM IN NEGATIVE CONTEXTS

- The procedure was similar as in Study 1, but the background pictures were negative.

### Variety condition



### No-variety condition (one of the five sub-conditions)



### Tuesday by Fady Joudah

Days been dark/don't say "in these dark days"/done changed my cones and rods  
Sometimes I'm in the country/other times the countryside/I put my clothes back on/to take them off again

