Abstract

How do pretty aesthetics (defined by classical aesthetic principles, e.g., order, symmetry, balance) impact food healthiness judgments? In 11 studies (N=4,301), people perceived prettier food as healthier, specifically because classical aesthetic features make it appear more natural (e.g., pure, unprocessed). This pretty=healthy bias impacted financially consequential behavior.

Perceived naturalness mediated the effect; expressive aesthetics, which do not evoke naturalness, did not produce the effect; and reminders of artificial modification, which suppress perceived naturalness, mitigated it.

The effect was not attributable to price, taste, freshness, or care.

Theoretical Background

Beauty might seem pleasurable and thus unhealthy

- Aesthetics activate reward center (Chelnokova et al., 2014; Reimann et al., 2010); gratify (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008)
- Pleasure and instrumentality are believed to be mutually exclusive (e.g., Finkelstein & Fishbach, 2010; Okada, 2005; Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006)

Beauty might seem natural and thus healthy

- Classical aesthetics (symmetry; order/regularity; balance/harmony) reflect patterns found in nature (Palmer, Schloss, & Sammartino, 2013)
- Natural things are more likely categorized as healthy (Rozin, 2005; Rozin et al., 2004)

Study 1: Prettiness Increases Healthiness

- Evaluate ugly vs. pretty avocado toast
- DV: Healthiness (healthy, nutritious, good for me, low fat, low calorie)
- Mediator: Naturalness (natural, pure, unprocessed)

Study 2: Prettiness Boosts WTP via Healthiness

- Bid on ugly vs. pretty bell peppers
- DV: WTP
- Mediator: Healthiness

Study 3: Only Classical Aesthetics Cause Effect

- Rate ugly vs. classical.pretty vs. expressive.pretty banana toast

Study 4: Modification Disclaimer Quells Effect

- Evaluate ugly vs. pretty vs. pretty+modification disclaimer

Conclusions & Implications

- Reveals pretty=healthy intuition; support natural=healthy belief
- Raises questions about potentially related prettiness-based inferences, e.g., potency, safety
- Points to disclaimers as an effective intervention