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Love is Blind: The Ironic Effect of Fans' Experience on Taste Perception

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Abstract: Many consumers may proclaim a love for a certain sensory experience (e.g., the taste of chocolate for “chocoholics”). These fans may have a wealth of experience consuming the product they love. In three studies, we find that these fans’ love actually blinds them in their ability to report nuances about the products they consume because of the use of top-down information processing. However, when presented with novel brand information, fans switch to a more bottom-up approach which allows greater discernment of the consumption experience. Prompting mindful consumption can also impact a fan’s ability to report a product’s nuances more accurately.

Keywords: Sensory perception; Experience; Mindfulness; Branding

Declarations:

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There are certain product categories that incite such strong liking that consumers proclaim themselves fans, for example by saying they are “coffee lovers” or “chocoholics.” Fans are consumers with a high liking for a person, idea or in this case sensory experience (Thorne and Bruner 2006). They may go beyond ordinary measures to acquire objects associated with their fanaticism (Chung et al. 2018). Fans of a specific sensory experience, such as chocolate, are likely to seek out the products they “love,” resulting in greater familiarity and greater experience with that product’s consumption (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). With increased consumption experience, these consumers would be assumed to possess a discerning taste for the products in that category and accurately report subtleties across similar products. In a pilot study, fifty MTurk participants stated that they believed that chocoholics (i.e., chocolate fans) can easily identify differences, detect subtle nuances, and judge the qualities of chocolate better than the average consumer. Additionally, these participants stated that they would trust a chocoholic to give an accurate appraisal of chocolate they had just eaten (all M 's >5.11 , p 's $<.001$). However, in this research we find the opposite, that is, we find that these consumers’ love for the product “blinds” them, making them less likely to accurately report nuances of unbranded products in the category they like (e.g., strength of chocolate in terms of percentage of cacao). In life, we often come across unbranded products (e.g., a pot of coffee at a conference, a board of cheese at a party), and when this is the case, fans of the product may be unable to accurately report what they just tasted. This is not due to an inability to detect nuances in the stimuli because we find that under certain circumstances, fans are able to accurately report their perceptions. We suggest that this counterintuitive effect is driven by differences in information processing between fans and nonfans.

There are two general mechanisms that help people sort through the constant flood of sensory inputs to select a few streams to process more thoroughly than the rest. Bottom-up mechanisms, also described as attribute-based or data-driven processing, refer to processing sensory information in real time (Fiske and Taylor 2021; Gibson 1966; Krishna and Elder 2021). It occurs as our sensory receptors receive new information and does not require the use of prior knowledge or experiences. In other words, bottom-up processing is data driven and emphasizes the importance of the stimulus itself. However, it would be too cognitively taxing if people were to process all sensory information in this manner. Taking in all the sensory information regarding a cup of coffee we pour for ourselves at a conference breakfast may be a wasteful use of cognitive resources. Instead, people often engage in economically prudent thought processes, acting as cognitive misers (Fiske and Taylor 2021), and processing sensory input in a top-down approach. Top-down processing, also described as attitude-based or category-driven processing, refers to perceiving the world around us by drawing from what we already know to interpret new information (Gregory 1970; Krishna and Elder 2021). Throughout our lifetime, we construct elaborate knowledge structures, or schemas, which consist of past experiences, prior knowledge, emotions, and expectations. We then use these schemas to form hypotheses upon the arrival of new sensory input, which guide product evaluations (Peracchio and Tybout 1996), and to make inferences beyond the information presented (Kardes et al. 2004).

Top-down models of perception incorporate perceivers' expectations (derived from knowledge, context, or past experiences) into the model of how they interpret sensory information (Gregory 1970). It would thus follow that fans of a particular product category would have a richer cognitive structure in that domain from having more relevant experiences and thus be more likely to engage in top-down processing when evaluating a product from that

category. As such, stimuli from the domain of their experience would be related to prior knowledge, matching it against a set of stored exemplars (Honeck et al. 1987; Peracchio and Tybout 1996), thus “blinding” them to subtle sensorial differences. However, on occasions when fans process the stimuli in a bottom-up approach, which helps them process the sensory information in real time, they can more accurately report these nuances, which nonfans are less likely to do (given their low involvement in the domain).

Past research on mindful/mindless food consumption has suggested that eating regularly consumed foods happens in a more automatic process with little attention paid to the consumption experience (Creswell 2017; Hong et al. 2014; Hong et al. 2011), which, in turn, leads to little acceptance of sensory information (Hong et al. 2014). However, research has demonstrated that mindful meditation, or instilling the practice of paying more attention, weakens top-down control, inducing people to process sensory information in a more bottom-up manner (Fabio and Towey 2018). Thus, we hypothesize and show that encouraging mindful attention amongst fans will encourage bottom-up processing, thus making fans more likely to accurately report nuances in the stimuli. Furthermore, past research has also demonstrated that the presentation of a novel stimulus increases attention to that stimulus (Balkenius 2000). An unfamiliar brand, such as one from a different region of the world, may serve as such a cue for novelty. We propose that when presented with novel brand information, fans of a particular sensory experience (e.g., chocolate) will be more mindful to the consumption experience to integrate the new product information with their existing knowledge, thus also facilitating bottom-up processing. This increased awareness and attention to product consumption will lead to more accuracy in reporting of their sensory perceptions. We therefore hypothesize that when

presented with novel brand information (vs. no brand information) fans will be able to report their sensory perceptions more accurately. To summarize our theorizing, we hypothesize that:

H1: Fans (vs. nonfans) of a particular sensory experience are less accurate in reporting of their sensory perceptions when presented with an unbranded product.

H2: This effect disappears when fans are presented with novel brand (vs. no brand) information, due to increased awareness and attention to product consumption.

Our research generates several theoretical and managerial contributions. First, we answer Peracchio and Luna's (2006) call for research to examine the accuracy of judgments between experts and novices, given their likely differences in sensory information processing. Consumer experts, as defined by previous literature, have engaged in education regarding the appropriate ways to consume a product and/or the vocabulary used to describe consumption (Latour and Deighton 2019; Mantonakis et al. 2017; Rocklage et al. 2021). According to this definition, sensory fans differ from experts in that fans have a high level of experience consuming the product, but may have little, if any, training and formal knowledge. We thus fill a gap by studying consumers who have a wealth of product experiences, but very little formal education on the product category and thus seem to fit neither the novice nor expert categorization. We expand on literature on expertise and familiarity by demonstrating a downstream negative consequence of increased experience, namely that increased liking and thus experience leads to a decreased ability to accurately report perceptions of the consumption experience unless something such as novel brand information, induces fans to be more mindful of the consumption experience. This suggests, both theoretically and managerially, that consumers may have different perceptual experiences when consuming a product in a blind taste test versus when it is on the market. This finding leads to an important managerial implication: a product's fans may

be the least able to report their perceptions of it in blind market testing. Finally, we add to existing literature on mindful/mindless eating by showing that the presence of novel brand information can induce more awareness of a consumption occasion.

We present 3 studies to test our hypotheses. Study 1 provides an initial test of our main effect of brand information on perceptions of strength using cheese, a fictitious brand description, and measurement of liking to identify cheese fans. Study 2 replicates the findings of Study 1 on recruited (rather than measured) chocolate fans and a real but unfamiliar brand (Moser Roth). This study finds mindful attention mediates the impact of brand on perceptions of taste strength. Study 3 uses a fictitious coffee brand and a mindful attention manipulation to demonstrate that inducing more attentive consumption can incite more accurate reporting of sensory experiences by fans.

1 Study 1

1.1 Method

1.1.1 Sample

One hundred and thirty-five undergraduate students from a large American university participated in a study for course credit. Six participants were unable to eat cheese due to dietary restrictions and were removed from the data leaving a final sample of one hundred and twenty-nine ($M_{\text{age}}=20.58$, 43.4% male).

1.1.2 Procedure and Stimuli

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Brand/Unbranded) \times 2 (Strong/Weak Taste) between-subjects design with liking of cheese as a measured variable to identify cheese fans and nonfans. A sharp cheddar cheese was used in the Strong Taste condition and a mild cheddar cheese in the Weak Taste condition. In the Brand condition, participants read

a description of the fictitious brand Brookside Farms (see Appendix). In the Unbranded condition, participants did not read any brand name or description.

All participants were told that they would taste some cheese and received two small cubes of cheese. They were instructed to inform the research assistant if they were unable to eat the cheese due to dietary restrictions. After consuming the cheese, participants in all conditions completed an online survey. The survey included a measure of taste strength and cheese liking as well as several demographic items. Participants were probed for suspicion and thanked before being dismissed.

1.1.3 Measures

Participants completed a measure of their perceived strength of the taste of the cheese on a 100-point slider scale: “Please rate how strong you found the taste of the cheese using the sliding scale below where 0=Barely Detectable and 100=Strongest Imaginable” (adapted from Green et al. 1996). Participants then answered a general item regarding how much they are a fan of cheese: “I generally enjoy the taste of cheese. 1=Not at all, 7=Very much”

1.2 Results

A mixed ANOVA with Brand and Taste Strength as fixed factors and cheese liking as a continuous variable revealed a significant three-way interaction, $F(1,121)=5.11, p<.05$. Additionally, the Brand X Taste Strength interaction was marginally significant, $F(1,121)=3.89, p=.05$. All the other effects were non-significant (all F 's <1.68). Contrasts showed for cheese fans (+1SD), after reading the Brookside Farms brand description, they correctly rated the sharp cheddar as being stronger tasting than the mild cheddar ($M=80.08$ vs. $57.82, F(1,121)=10.35, p<.01$), supporting H1. When the brand description was absent, the cheese fans rated the sharp and mild cheddar as being equal in strength ($M=73.90$ vs. $70.94, F(1,121)=.22, ns$), supporting

H2. For nonfans (-1SD), participants who read the Brookside Farms description rated the sharp and mild cheese equally ($M=63.80$ vs. 65.85 , $F(1,121)=.08$, *ns*) as did those in the Unbranded condition ($M=76.74$ vs. 67.18 , $F(1,121)=2.34$, *ns*). See figure 1.

Insert figure 1

1.3 General Discussion

Study 1 demonstrates that fans of a sensory experience, in this case the taste of cheese, are unable to accurately report sensory perceptions of an unbranded product. Unfamiliar brand information, however, causes participants to be able to report their perceptions more accurately. Conversely, nonfans are not able to detect any differences in taste. Study 2 expands these findings by using a real but unfamiliar brand from a different category (chocolate) and recruiting (vs. measuring) fans. Additionally, we find evidence for the process behind our effect.

2 STUDY 2

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Sample

Two hundred and five undergraduate students ($M_{age}=19.90$, 50.7% male) at a large American university took part in the study in exchange for tasting chocolate. Recruiting took place as students were exiting another unrelated study they had completed for course credit. A research assistant first asked them if they liked chocolate and if they answered yes, the research assistant asked them if they would be interested in participating in a short (5-minute) study, where they would get a small chocolate bar to taste and evaluate. Fans tend to reorganize other activities to engage in consumption experiences related to their fanaticism (Hill and Robinson

1991), thus identifying participants willing to give up additional time to taste chocolate seemed an appropriate way to recruit chocolate fans. No additional incentives were provided to ensure that the sample consisted entirely of fans.

2.1.2 Procedure and Stimuli

Participants were assigned to one of the conditions in a 2 (Brand/Unbranded) \times 2 (Strong/Weak Taste) between-subjects design. All participants were given a small chocolate bar and a paper survey. We used milk (weak, or 50% cacao) and dark (strong, or 70% cacao) chocolate bars from a German brand called Moser Roth, which was unfamiliar to most participants ($M=1.54$, $SD=0.76$, 1=not familiar at all, 7=very familiar). In the branded conditions, participants were given a chocolate bar wrapped in branded packaging, whereas participants in the unbranded conditions received a bar packaged in a black foil pouch without identifying brand information (see Appendix). After eating the chocolate, participants in all four conditions completed a survey that included items for evaluating the strength of the chocolate, followed by a measure of mindful attention. The survey concluded with demographic questions and a suspicion probe.

2.1.3 Measures

Participants rated the strength of the chocolate on 3 items (“Please rate how well the following words describe the chocolate you just tasted: strong, assertive, overwhelming” 1=Strongly Disagree, 7=Strongly Agree; $\alpha=.94$). Afterwards, participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with five statements aimed to measure their attention to the chocolate (I could really taste all the flavors of the chocolate; I could really feel the texture of the chocolate; I noticed the subtle flavors of the chocolate; I took a moment to appreciate the color and smell of

the chocolate before eating it; I appreciated the way the chocolate looked) on the same 1(Strongly Disagree) to 7(Strongly Agree) scale ($\alpha=.95$, adapted from Framson et al. 2009).

2.2 Results

2.2.1 Perceived Strength

An ANOVA revealed a significant 2-way interaction, $F(1,201)=4.07, p=.04$. The main effects of Brand and Strength were not significant (all F 's < 2).

As expected, only those chocolate fans in the branded condition were able to correctly rate the strong chocolate as stronger than the weak chocolate ($M=5.43$ vs. $4.76, F(1,201)=5.53, p=.02$) supporting H2. Furthermore, participants who received the branded chocolate rated the strong chocolate as stronger than those receiving the unbranded, strong chocolate. ($M=5.43$ vs. $4.74, F(1,201)=5.87, p=.03$). In contrast, fans in the unbranded condition did not evaluate the strong and weak chocolates any differently ($M=4.74$ vs. $4.89, F(1,201)=.26, ns$) supporting H1. Furthermore, receiving a branded chocolate did not impact perceptions of the weaker chocolate, as we did not find differences across Brand conditions. See figure 2.

Insert figure 2

2.2.2 Attention to the Product

A similar analysis with the attention to product measure revealed a significant effect of the brand condition, $F(1,201)=5.70, p=.02$. The effect of the strength condition and the interaction between the brand and strength conditions were nonsignificant (all F 's < 2). As expected, fans in the Branded condition reported higher levels of attention to the chocolate than fans in the Unbranded condition ($M=4.78$ vs. 4.21).

2.2.3 Mediation

Given that the main purpose of the Weak Taste condition (i.e., milk chocolate) was to serve as a baseline and that we did not find differences across Brand conditions in the perceived strength of this weaker product, we focused our mediation analysis on perceptions of strength for the stronger product (i.e., dark chocolate). Given that brand elements can serve as cues for novelty (Pieters and Wedel 2004) and that novelty increases attention (Balkenius 2000), we expected the attention on the product to mediate the effect of Brand condition (Unbranded vs. Brand) on perceptions of strength. We used the SPSS PROCESS macro (Hayes 2017) with 5,000 bootstrapped samples to calculate standard errors and 95% confidence intervals of the effect of brand condition on strength perceptions. Results supported our hypothesis that the attention on the product mediates the effect of brand condition on the perceived strength of the dark chocolate (mediated effect=.25, SE=.14, 95% C.I.=.01 to .56). In other words, we find evidence to support our prediction that the reason why fans correctly evaluate the strong chocolate as stronger when presented with a brand is because they pay more attention to the consumed product.

2.3 Discussion

Results support our theorizing that for fans, an unfamiliar brand results in more accurate sensory strength perceptions of the product because more attention is given to the consumption experience. Additionally, this study recruited (rather than measured) fans and used a real but unfamiliar brand of chocolate. The brand manipulation was introduced via branded/unbranded packaging.

In our final study, we find additional process evidence using a different stimulus (coffee), as well as offer actionable recommendations for product development researchers. We introduce a mindful attention manipulation, which prompts fans to pay attention to the product being

consumed. We hypothesize that this will in turn produce more accurate reporting of their taste perceptions for an unbranded product.

3 Study 3

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Sample

Two hundred and ninety-one participants were recruited in high traffic areas at a mid-sized American university. Our participants were a wide variety of students, faculty, staff, and community members. We encouraged participation by fans by telling participants that they would be drinking coffee, having “do you like coffee?” sign and offering a raffle for coffee shop gift cards for participation. Even with these encouragements, fifty-seven participants rated their general liking for coffee as at or below the midpoint of the scale and were removed from the sample leaving us with a sample of two hundred and thirty-four fans ($M_{age}=25.28$, 50.0% male, 3 participants did not disclose demographics) for final analysis.

3.1.2 Procedure and Stimuli

Participants were assigned to one of the conditions in a 3 (Brand/Unbranded/Mindful Attention) \times 2 (Strong/Weak Taste) between-subjects design. In addition to the Brand and Unbranded conditions which were like that used in Study 1, this study included a Mindful Attention condition (see Appendix). In this condition, participants did not view a brand description but read a mindful attention prompt (adapted from Arch et al. 2016). All participants were given a 2oz serving of coffee and a paper survey. We consulted with a local coffee shop to determine the best way to manipulate the strength of the coffee. In the Weak (Strong) condition, participants tasted light (dark) roast coffee brewed with a lower (higher) concentration of beans.

3.1.3 Measures

After tasting the coffee, participants completed the same taste strength ($\alpha=.73$) and attention ($\alpha=.70$) measures from Study 2. They also completed a measure of general coffee liking and demographic items.

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Manipulation Check

An ANOVA on the attention index comparing the Unbranded and Mindful Attention Condition showed a significant main effect, $F(1, 150)=9.34, p<.01$. Fans who had read the mindful attention manipulation reported being more attentive to the coffee than those that had not read the manipulation nor a brand description ($M=4.59$ vs. 4.04). This demonstrates that our manipulation was successful in making participants more attentive to the stimulus.

3.2.2 Perceived Strength

An ANOVA on the taste strength index revealed a significant Brand \times Strength interaction, $F(2,228)=3.05, p<.05$. Replicating previous results the coffee fans in the Brand condition accurately rated the strong coffee as being stronger than the weak coffee ($M=3.51$ vs. $2.69, F(1,228)=12.65, p<.001$) further supporting H2. Those in the Unbranded condition did not rate them differently ($M=3.11$ vs. $2.64, F(1,228)=3.71, ns$) finding additional support for H1. Finally, fans who read the mindful attention manipulation also rated the strong coffee as stronger than the weak coffee even though they were presented with no brand information ($M=3.86$ vs. $2.56, F(1,228)=30.70, p<.001$). See figure 3.

 Insert figure 3

4 General Discussion

This research introduces the concept of sensory fans: consumers, such as chocoholics, who love a certain sensory experience. This group of consumers represent a valuable opportunity for marketers, given that in any product category about 10% of the consumers account for more than 50% of the profits (Yoon et al. 2014). We find a downside to this fanaticism, namely that their love for a specific product blinds them, making them less susceptible to certain sensory inputs in their consumption experience. We find in 3 studies, using different products and both measures and recruitment of fans, that fans were less able to accurately judge the strength of a taste experience when consuming an unbranded product. However, when presented with novel brand information (or given a mindful attention prompt), these participants accurately reported the nuances of the taste experience. Additional research is needed to better understand sensory fans as consumers. For example, prior research has shown that bottom-up processing could lead to certain judgment bias (e.g., direction-of-comparison effect) given the greater cognitive effort required to process all attributes (Mantel and Kardes 1999), so future research could explore whether more cognitively taxing experiences with the stimulus overcomes sensory fans' blindness.

We conceptualized sensory fans as different from experts or enthusiasts. While Latour and Deighton (2019) describe the stage-gate development from which novices become taste enthusiasts and then experts, we argue that there is a large section of consumers who fit into none of these categories – sensory fans. Unlike sensory enthusiasts or experts (Latour and Deighton 2019; Mantonakis 2017; Rocklage et al. 2021), sensory fans have a wealth of consumption experience but may have little formal knowledge regarding the product or the “correct” way to consume it. Latour and Deighton (2019) state that novices cannot become experts “simply by accumulating enough of the underlying experiences” (p.2). However, our findings are consistent

with prior research which has shown that experts are more likely to engage in top-down processing, whereas novices are more likely to engage in bottom-up processes (Fiske and Taylor 2021). Thus, it is plausible that sensory fans are not too dissimilar to experts. Therefore, further research is needed to understand to what extent sensory fans are like experts, which could result in an expansion of the definition of expertise. Relatedly, future research could also investigate the effects of sensory fans gaining formal education regarding the sensory experience and thus becoming experts. We hypothesize that additional training, and development of analytical skills and verbal lexicons to better understand and describe the consumption process (thus turning fans into enthusiasts) would allow for better discrimination and more accurate reporting of sensory experiences; however, this needs to be tested empirically.

Fans' love may be confined to a taste category (chocolate) or to a specific branded product (Reese's peanut butter cups). Additional research needs to better understand how sensory fanaticism occurs at both superordinate and subordinate levels. Fans may have a general love of an overarching product category (as seen in our studies with the general categories of cheese, chocolate, and coffee), but is this fanaticism stronger or weaker for more narrowly defined products? This may depend on the substitutability of products in the category, perceived rivalry of brands, and even consumers' individual experiences with a brand or product. It is likely that fans of a narrowly defined subordinate category (e.g., Reese's chocolate peanut butter Christmas trees) may find products outside of that category as novel even if they are subsumed within a larger superordinate category (e.g., chocolate). Additionally, brand descriptions may signal to consumers the product's category and could potentially be used to manipulate whether the product is part of the fan's category of interest. Thus, a better understanding of fanaticism in relation to product category is needed to further understand our effects. Relatedly, future

research should also explore whether these effects expand to consumers who love a brand (Bagozzi et al. 2017; Batra et al. 2012). Additionally, while fans were “blind” to experiences with unbranded products in our research we would expect our findings to replicate with brands they are highly familiar with, though this needs to be empirically tested.

Finally, our research studied fans of taste experiences reporting the strength of the product and using brand information as a cue of novelty. However, we believe that fans of other sensory experiences (e.g., lavender scent) would show similar effects. There are also fans of more complex activities such as sailing or horseback riding (Hill and Robinson 1991); however, it is likely that these activities need to include more formal training regarding the “correct” way to perform them to find success and avoid injury. Therefore, it may be that fans in these types of activities closely resemble enthusiasts (Latour and Deighton 2019). Additionally, we only explored judgments of taste strength. We hypothesize that other taste judgments such as sweetness or saltiness would follow similar patterns. Additional research should seek to test this hypothesis. Finally, we use unfamiliar or fictitious brand information as the cue of novelty. In the marketplace, familiar brands often display cues of novelty such as “New” labels. Future research should explore sensory judgments when exposed to novel information from a familiar brand. A taste experience outside the expected boundary level may also alert a fan to novelty and thus create more mindful consumption. For instance, a cheese that is sharper than anything experienced previously may surprise a fan and cue them to a novel experience. In Study 3, we brewed coffee both weaker and stronger than that normally served at the coffee house, which could be perceived as outside the normal boundary of strength for coffee but did not find a difference in our effect. Future streams of research should attempt to understand the generalizability of our effect.

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Fig. 1
The Impact of Brand on Perception of Cheese Taste Strength for Cheese Fans and Nonfans (Study 1)

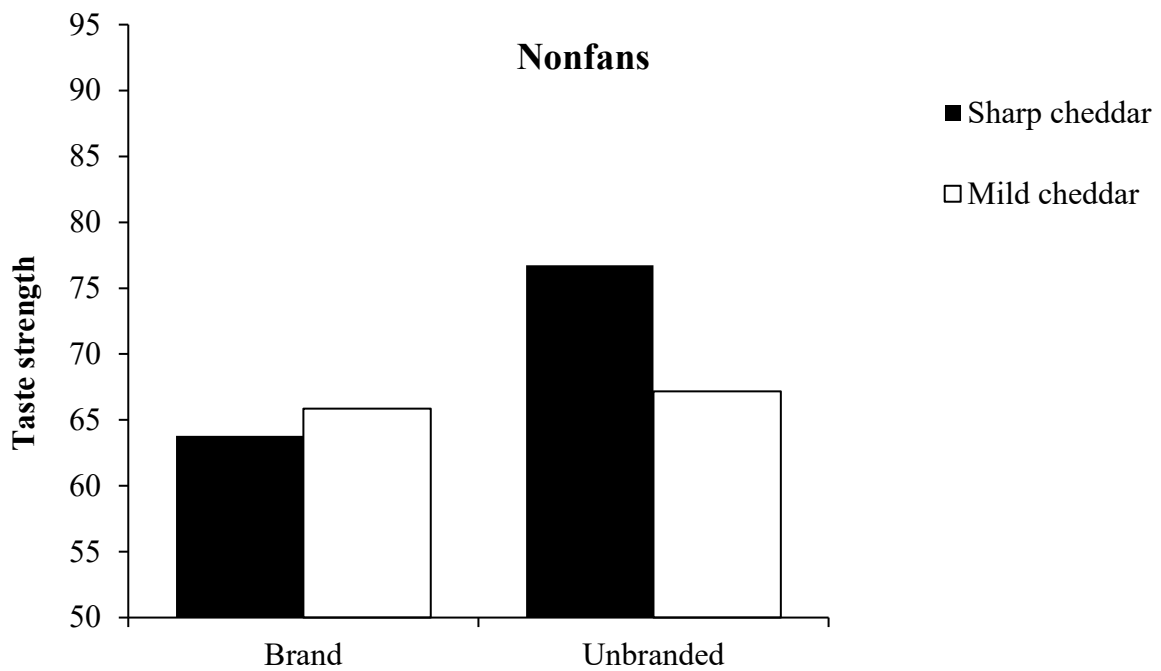
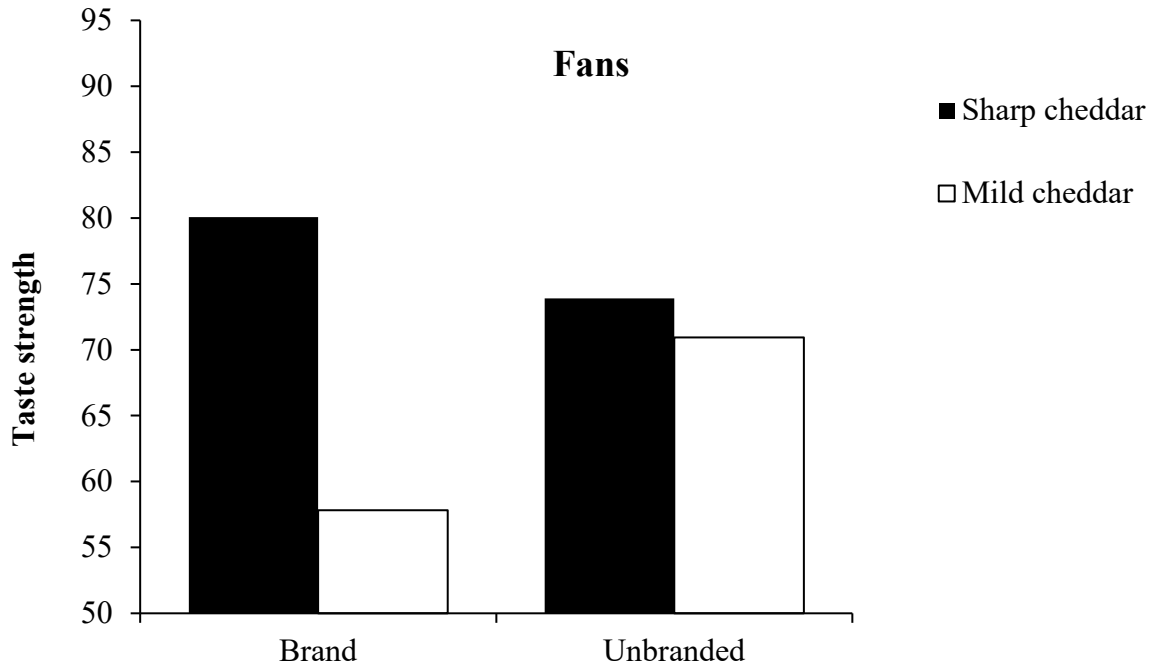


Fig 2
The Impact of Brand on Perception of Chocolate Taste Strength for Chocolate Fans (Study 2)

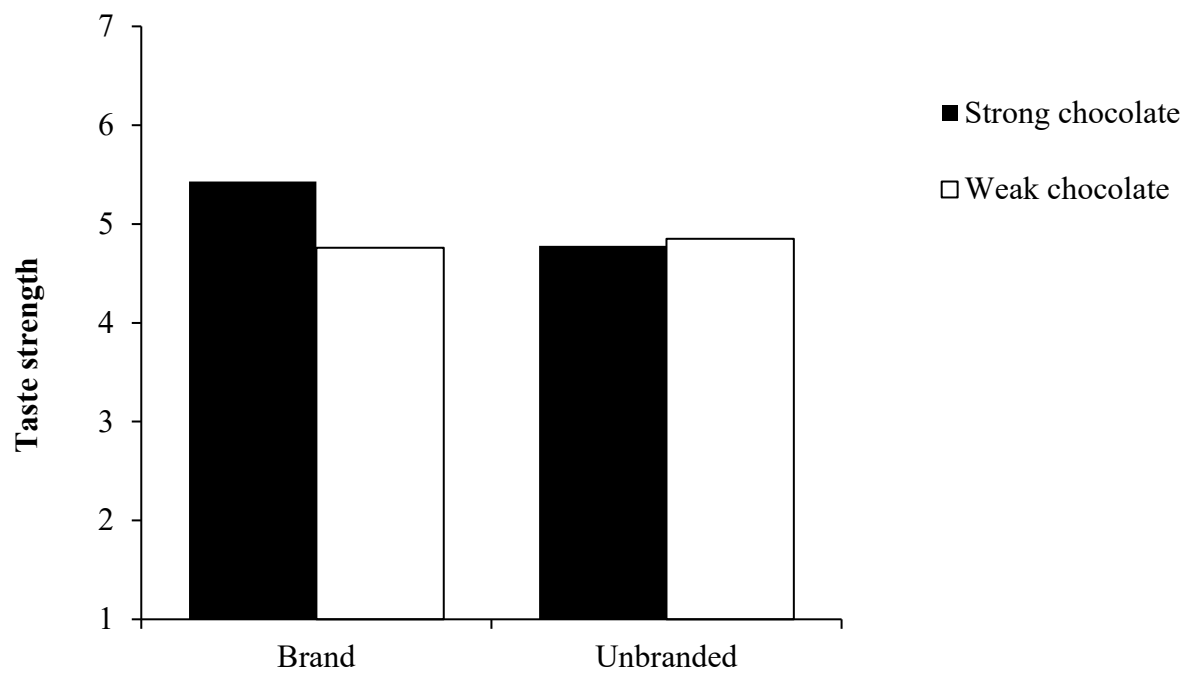
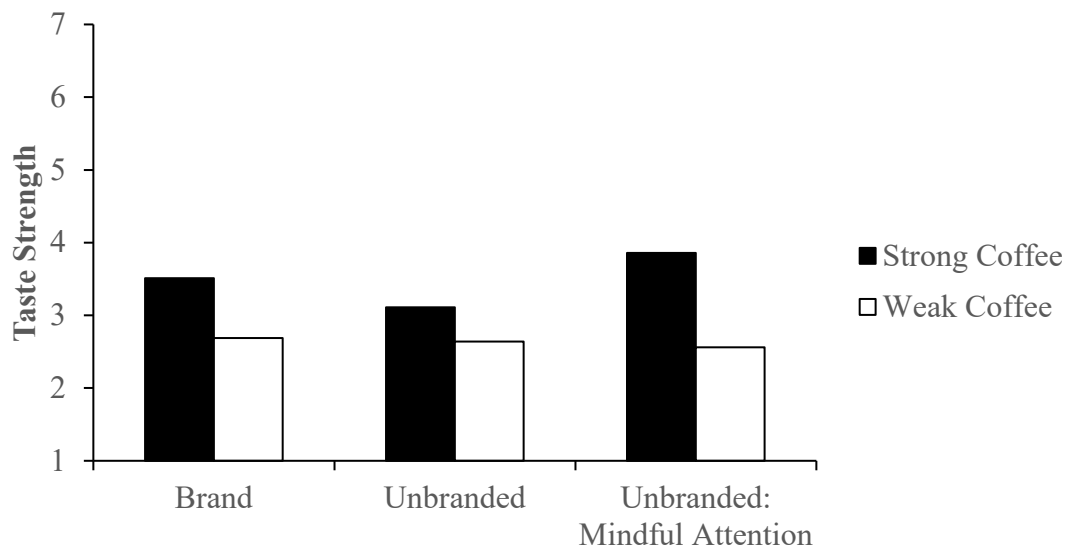


Fig 3
The Impact of Brand on Perception of Coffee Taste Strength for Coffee Fans (Study 3)



APPENDIX

Study 1: Brand Description

Brookside Farms is a producer of high quality cheese. All the advertisements and packaging feature animated cows and farmers. The cow and farmer are both usually smiling happily and typically the farmer has his arm around the cow's neck. Brookside Farms is also known for making generous contributions of dairy products to food banks and homeless shelters.

Study 2: Product Packaging

Unbranded	Branded
	

Study 3:

Brand Description:

Brookside is a producer of coffee. They are sold in exclusive coffee boutiques at a premium price. They are known for only sourcing the highest quality coffee beans in the world and controlling their roasting process to ensure each bag of ground coffee is to their standards. A gold, embossed monogram B on the bag identifies Brookside brand coffee.

Mindful Attention Prompt:

While you are drinking the coffee, it is very important that you **focus your attention** on the sensory experience of drinking the coffee. Focus on various sensations you experience such as color, texture, scent, and flavor while drinking and fill your head with the details of these sensations.