

Researcher's Investigation on Psychology behind the Obsession with Pumpkin Spice Everything

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Introduction

Here's a fun experiment for you to try. Order a pumpkin spice latte from your neighbourhood coffee shop. Ask a friend to try it while holding their nose without telling them what it is. Do they have any idea what it is? What happens if they can smell it?

If your study participants are anything like mine, they won't know what they're drinking until you say the magic words: pumpkin spice. According to Johns Hopkins University experts, who explain the appeal of the flavouring that characterizes fall, this is understandable [1].

According to Sarah Cormiea, a Johns Hopkins doctorate candidate investigating human olfactory perception, and Jason Fischer, a professor of psychological and brain sciences, it's not so much the taste of pumpkin spice as it is the scent and its connections. Smell is the sense that is most closely linked to memory of all the senses. "Odor perception has a type of particular access to the memory system in the brain," Fischer explains. He explained that the region of the brain that analyses scents is "right up against memories in the brain."

In fact, simply the words "pumpkin spice" conjure up odours and memories of autumn. When things like leaves changing colours and kids returning to school reinforce the statement, it can be especially appealing [2]. From Cheerios to hummus, supermarkets are stocked with pumpkin spice-flavored goods. McCormick & Company, based in Hunt Valley, initially produced its pumpkin pie spice combination in 1934. It was the company's fourth best-selling retail spice during the fall two years ago.

Starbucks, on the other hand, takes credit for the fad, which they attribute to the launch of their pumpkin spice latte in 2003. Pumpkin spice, a mix of cinnamon, nutmeg, clove, and ginger, is sprinkled on top of the drink. According to a press release on their website, "for nearly two decades, the return of pumpkin at Starbucks has signified the start of the fall season and generated a cultural phenomenon surrounding fall flavours and products." Starbucks outlets started serving pumpkin spice lattes and other seasonal beverages and treats earlier this year [3].

"Isn't there a reason (the pumpkin spice latte) isn't offered all year?" Cormiea wonders. "It's because people are enthused about it and want to buy it." Despite the link between fragrances and memories, Cormiea claims that naming odours is difficult, much as naming an acquaintance whose face they know at a party. When they hear something I've said that changes.

She discovered that adding names to odours "changes how individuals experience it" in experiments with research volunteers. Once you have the label, something snaps into place."

According to Fischer, there's another mechanism at work when it comes to pumpkin spice and other wonderful things: "the familiarity effect." He explained that "the more you are exposed to something, the more it ingrains itself in your preferences." "So simply by tasting pumpkin spice every year, over and over, it develops a sense of familiarity." When you add in all the other wonderful connections with fall, it's no surprise that it "may actually cause us to find some sort of nostalgic comfort in it." Advertisers are well aware of the familiarity effect, which is at the root of various nostalgia-driven culinary trends such as the current demand for "birthday cake"-themed foods.

"It's not simply because birthday cake is a good dish; it's because you can utilize all those positive associations by co-opting it," Fischer explains. "You can use them to your advantage."

"Otherwise, they'd just call it vanilla," Cormiea remarked.

A Fells Point school was evacuated in 2017 when pupils sensed an odd odour they couldn't place. It turned out to be an air freshener with a pumpkin spice aroma. Perhaps things might have gone differently if the students had been told it was pumpkin spice.

According to Cormiea, people take their sense of smell for granted. However, it performs an important – if underestimated role in daily life.

Those who lose their sense of smell, such as those suffering with COVID-19's long-term consequences, are at risk of missing gas leaks, fires, and spoiled food. Additionally, a loss of smell has been linked to a sense of emotional separation as well as memory issues [4,5].

"I've seen a lot of studies where people are asked, 'If you were to lose one of your senses, which would you choose?'" she explained. "It's common for people to claim they'd give up their sense of smell. And I'd want to say that this isn't the best course of action."

Back to the experiment: After the first taste, my research participant reported he was drinking hot chocolate while holding his nose. He declared it "gross hot chocolate" after the second sip, which allowed him to smell the liquid at the same time. He had no idea it was a pumpkin spice latte when he ordered it.

References

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