

Can a rude waiter make your food less tasty?

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Have you ever experienced poor service at a restaurant or hotel? Findings from a new study suggest that for certain people, a rude waiter or clerk can influence how tasty the food seems or how attractive the rooms appear.

Researcher Jaehoon Lee of Southern Illinois University was eager to investigate when poor [service](#) influences a consumer's opinion of other aspects of a product or service. He hypothesized that an individual's [social class](#) would predict his or her response to poor service—and a series of experiments supported this theory.

Lee discovered that lower class [individuals](#) are more likely to assume that food will be less delicious if the waiter is inattentive or rude, while higher class people—those with better jobs, more money and more education—do not typically make this assumption.

"This is because lower class individuals tend to perceive situations as interconnected and holistic," says Lee, a professor in the marketing department at Southern Illinois University. "People who have less economic resources, for example, may turn to others for help and feel more dependent, so are more attuned to external circumstances."

This holistic view of life creates what is known as a "carryover effect" in which poor service leads to negative judgments about other aspects of the consumer experience. Individuals from higher classes, however, are less likely to experience this effect because they typically focus on their own internal state, ignoring influences in the environment. They prefer an analytical thinking pattern in which people are independent and free to pursue goals and interests because they possess an abundance of social and [economic resources](#). This analytic thinking pattern leads them to believe that poor service is not connected to the quality of the food or other aspects of a consumer experience.

Lee discovered this connection between social class and thinking patterns in a study in which participants read about a scenario related to celebrating a special occasion with a significant other. The participants were told to imagine that they had a dinner reservation at a nice restaurant that was 20 miles away. After placing their orders, the waiter

informed them that the restaurant was out of the vegetarian entrée they had selected. They picked another item on the menu, but the waiter said that the restaurant was out of all vegetarian entrees.

Then the participants were asked to rate how much they agreed with the statement "The food is likely to be delicious." Lee found that participants from lower classes were more likely to disagree with the statement that the food would be delicious than higher class individuals.

In another experiment, participants read a scenario about celebrating a special occasion with their significant others. They had reserved a nice hotel for the weekend, and the hotel was 400 miles away. When the participants arrived at the hotel, there was a long wait to check in. The clerk answered several phone calls while the participants tried to check in, and then their room was occupied by another guest. After reading about this poor service experience, participants were asked to rate how clean they expected the rooms to be. Lower class individuals predicted that the rooms would not be clean, while higher class [participants](#) predicted that the cleanliness of the rooms would be acceptable.

"All of the studies showed that low class individuals were more likely to experience the carryover effect," Lee says. "I was particularly interested in studying this because the number of Americans who identify themselves as working class or lower class has increased significantly in the last 15 years."

According to a Gallup poll in 2015, 48 percent of Americans identified with the working class, compared to only 33 in 2000.

"Marketers and practitioners have focused their attention on upper class consumers, but this means a large proportion of consumers are being neglected," Lee says. "These consumers have different psychological thinking and judgement patterns than analytical high-[class consumers](#),

and marketers should keep this in mind."

This study will appear in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* in April, 2018.

More information: Can a rude waiter make your food less tasty? Social class differences in thinking style and carryover in consumer judgments, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2017). DOI: [10.1002/jcpy.1020](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1020) , onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jcpy.1020/abstract

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