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Capitalism and the Senses: Recreating Consumer Experience

Business has shaped our sensory experiences of the world. In the late nineteenth century food manufacturers, flavorists, and perfumers in the United States and elsewhere began experimenting with new technologies to measure, define, and standardize something seemingly personal and intangible—the senses. They sought to create sensory perceptions just as they had begun to mass manufacture consumer products by quantifying color perception and analyzing olfactory sensation based on chemical components. It became not only possible, but also crucial, for manufacturers to elicit the desired response from consumers by determining the right smell, the right sound, the right touch, and the right look of their products. The creation of such new sensations was an important, and much neglected, dimension in the evolution of modern capitalism. This paper explores the creation of this brave new world of the senses by focusing on the use of color as a key driver of demand in the United States food industry from the 1870s. With rapid industrialization and market expansion, firms began developing manufacturing and marketing strategies based on systematic management, large-scale operations, and knowledge of modern science. Mass production and standardization allowed unprecedented product variations, including color, scent, and texture. In this new era of consumer capitalism, appealing to the senses, and reinventing what consumers wanted, became an important component of corporate strategies to create demand for their brands. This was not just a new marketing strategy—the social and cultural consequences of the corporate management of the senses were profound and far-reaching. Business reshaped how people perceived the world.
