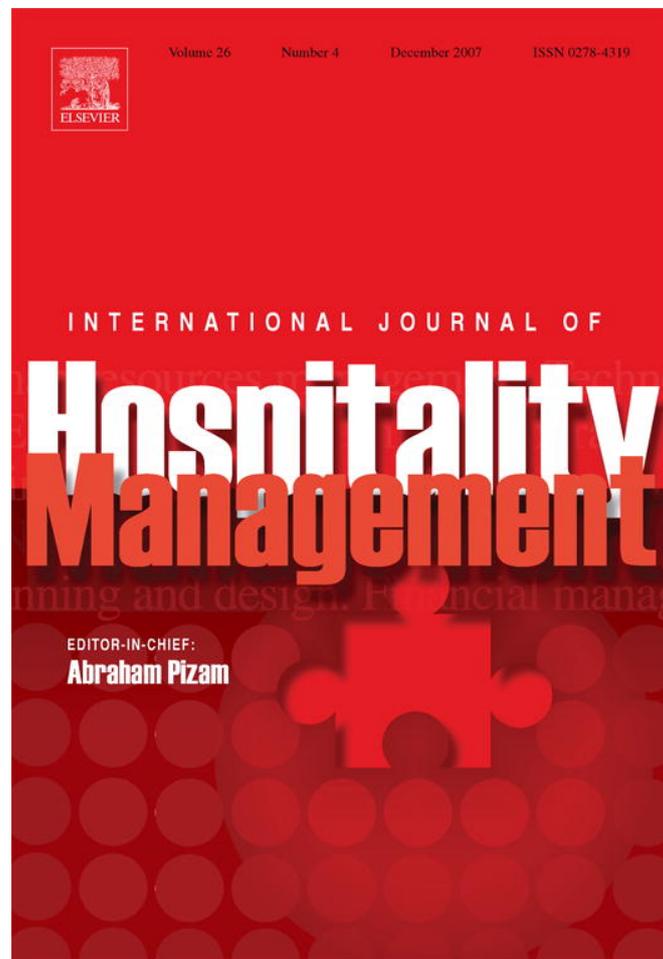


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Research note

The effect of touch on compliance with a restaurant's employee suggestion

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Abstract

Numerous experimental studies have shown that touch increases compliance with a request made by the “toucher”. Customer's behavior is also affected by tactile contact. Waiters or waitresses in a bar or in a restaurant were evaluated more positively and received higher tips when they slightly touched the customer than when no tactile contact was used. A new evaluation of the effect of tactile contact was made in a restaurant with 256 patrons. When presenting the menu to a patron, the waiter or the waitress was instructed to make or not make (control condition) a suggestion about a meal. In half of the cases, when making this suggestion, the employee slightly touched the patron on the forearm. Results showed that, compared to a control condition, the suggestion had a positive effect on patron's choice especially when the patron was touched by the employee. Theoretical and practical implication of tactile contact are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies have shown that a brief tactile contact between a solicitor and a solicitee is related to compliance with a request. It now appears that touch increases compliance with various requests. When asked for a dime, passers-by complied in 51% of the cases when touch was used and 29% of the cases when no contact was made (Kleinke, 1977). Brockner et al. (1982) showed that a request to return a dime left in a phone booth accompanied by a light touch on the arm increased compliance from 63% (no-touch

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control situation) to 96%. In the same way, the percentage of a petition signing increased from 55% (no-touch control condition) to 81% when a slight touch was made during the request (Willis and Hamm, 1980). Helping behavior is also affected by tactile contact. Guéguen and Fischer-Lokou (2003) found that touched people who were solicited by a confederate in a street accepted more favorably to look after a large and very excited dog for 10 min because the confederate wanted to go into a pharmacy where animals were prohibited.

It had been found in various studies that touch increased the response rate to a survey. Willis and Hamm (1980) found that when shoppers in a supermarket were asked to take the time to complete a brief rating scale, they agreed more favorably when they were lightly touched by the solicitor on the upper arm before the request. Guéguen (2002a) found that the touch of a female confederate who asked women in a street to answer a questionnaire was associated with significantly higher compliance compared to a solicitation without tactile contact. These effects on compliance with a request for answering to a survey were replicated many times (Guéguen, 2002b; Hornik, 1987; Hornik and Ellis, 1988). It has also been observed that people are more persistent when executing a difficult task consisting in answering a long questionnaire about very private subjects (Nannberg and Hansen, 1994). Finally, it had been found that a slight contact on the forearm of a student by the teacher during a corrective exercise in the classroom led the student to agree more favorably to demonstrate the solution of the exercise on the blackboard (Guéguen, 2004).

Tipping behavior is also affected by touch. When patrons were touched by a waiter or a waitress, they became more generous and left a higher tip (Crusco and Wetzel, 1984; Hornik, 1992b; Lynn et al., 1998; Stephen and Zweigenhaft, 1986). In these experiments, only patrons of restaurants were tested but a recent study found that tipping behavior of bar's customers was positively affected by touch (Guéguen and Jacob, 2005).

The effect of touch on consumer behavior had been widely demonstrated in social psychology literature. Smith et al. (1982) found that tactile contact had an influence on marketing requests. In a supermarket, shoppers were approached by a demonstrator near the frozen food section of a supermarket and were asked to sample a new food product (a pizza). In half of the cases, the shoppers were briefly touched during the request and the other half were not touch. Results showed that tactile contact increased the probability of tasting the food sample and increased the probability of buying the product. This effect was replicated by Hornik (1992b) and Guéguen and Jacob (2006). Hornik (1992a) found that touching customers in a store resulted in increasing their shopping time, their evaluation of the store and the amount of shopping. Kaufman and Mahoney (1999) found that patrons of public taverns in the US who were briefly touched by the waitress when asking them if they wanted a drink, consumed more alcohol than patrons who were not touched.

As we can see, tactile contact is highly related with greater compliance with various requests addressed in various contexts. Customer's behavior is also positively influenced by tactile contact: customers touched by a requester tend to comply, to give a tip or to consume more favorably than customers who were not touched.

The objective of the present study was to test the effect of touch on waiter's food suggestion in a restaurant. Given the positive effect of touch on compliance with a request, we hypothesized that patrons in a restaurant would agree more favorably to a meal proposition suggested by a waiter or waitress who touched them during the initial interaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Two hundred and fifty-six restaurant's customers (141 males and 115 females) who acted as participants were randomly assigned to three groups (two experimental conditions and a control condition). All of them were seated alone at a table in a restaurant in the medium-size (more than 70,000 inhabitants) city of Vannes, which is located in the west of France on the Breton Atlantic Coast. The restaurant menu was composed of mainly sea food and fish. The experiment was conducted during 3 continuous weeks in July 2004.

2.2. Procedure

Two waitresses and a waiter, regularly employed, were trained by the experimenter to act similarly in the two experimental conditions and to touch a patron in the appropriate way. Upon arriving in the restaurant, the patron was picked by the waiter or the waitress. If a table was free or if the patron had reserved a table, the waiter or the waitress invited the customer to seat down. After the patron was seated at a table, the employee said: "I will be back to give you the restaurant's menu. Would you like to drink an aperitif before eating?" The waiter/waitress waited until the customer gave his/her response and then the waiter/waitress left. About 1–3 min later, the waiter/waitress came back to the table with the restaurant's menu in his/her hands and the aperitif if the patron ordered one. Then the employee said: "Here is the restaurant's menu sir/madam". According to a random distribution, when presenting the restaurant's menu, the waiter/waitress slightly touched the customer on the forearm for 1 s. In the two suggestion conditions, the employee then said to the customer: "Today, I recommend to mister/madam to order one of the chef's specialties, la choucroute de poissons". In the control condition, no suggestion was made by the waiter/waitress but the dish was present in the menu. Then after smiling, the employee said: "I will now let you select your dish". The waiter/waitress then left the customer's table. After a mean of between 5–7 min, the waiter/waitress returned to the customer's table and asked him/her if he/she had made a choice. If the response was positive, the employee noted the customer's choice. If not, the employee left the table for five more minutes and returned to the table to obtain the customer's choice. During these various interactions between the employee and the customer, no further suggestions were made and no further tactile contact was used. The waiters/waitresses were instructed to proceed in the same way with all the customers.

3. Results

One dependent variable was measured in this experiment: the customer's compliance with the waiter's or the waitress' suggestion. Preliminary data analyses were conducted for male and female patrons and for male and female waiters. Because no differences were found between male and female patrons, and male and female waiters, their data were combined.

The different rates of compliance obtained in the three conditions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Compliance with the waiter's suggestion in the three experimental conditions

Touch—suggestion (<i>N</i> = 83)	No touch—suggestion (<i>N</i> = 89)	No touch—no suggestion (control <i>N</i> = 83)
59.0% (49/83)	41.6% (37/89)	20.3% (17/83)

The overall difference between the three conditions was statistically significant ($\chi^2(1, 256) = 26.24, p < .001$). Two-by-two comparisons showed that touch condition is statistically different than the no-touch suggestion condition ($\chi^2(1, 256) = 5.24, p < .03$) and the control condition ($\chi^2(1, 256) = 26.29, p < .001$). The difference between the no-touch suggestion condition and the control condition was also statistically significant ($\chi^2(1, 256) = 9.16, p < .005$).

4. Discussion

Our results and analysis show that in a restaurant, tactile contact engaged by a waiter or a waitress toward a patron led him/her to follow more favorably a suggestion made by the employee. As well, the suggestion without any previous contact had a positive effect on the customer's choice: the suggestion led the customers to command more favorably the target dish.

The effect of physical contact on compliance confirms many previous studies on the effect of touch on consumer behavior. It had been found that touch increases tips in a restaurant or in a bar (Crusco and Wetzel, 1984; Guéguen and Jacob, 2005; Hornik, 1992b; Lynn et al., 1998; Stephen and Zweigenhaft, 1986) or increases the selling rate of products (Guéguen, 2001; Guéguen and Jacob, 2006; Hornik, 1992a; Smith et al., 1982). It seems, with this new experiment that another customer behavior (agreeing more favorably to a suggestion made by a waiter or a waitress) is also affected by tactile contact and confirms the power of touch on compliance.

These findings could help explain the theoretical effect of touch. Several studies have found that touch had a positive effect on the evaluation of the “toucher” (Fisher et al., 1976; Hornik, 1992a, b) suggesting that, in return, this positive evaluation could increase the compliance with the “toucher's” request. Takemura (1993) found that evaluation and compliance were positively correlated. This theory could explain our results. Touch led the customer to have a positive opinion of the waiter or the waiters and then to have confidence in his/her suggestion. Numerous studies have shown a positive effect of touch on helping behavior but the factor mediating such effect remains still unknown. Future researches should thus try to investigate this theoretical aspect of confidence.

These results suggest that the waiter or the waitress in a restaurant could have an important effect on patrons' choice and behavior. The effect of tactile contact also suggests that the relation between the customer and the waiter or the waitress could be reinforced by non-verbal behavior that led the customer, in return, to agree more favorably to the waiter's or the waitress' suggestion. Of course good quality service is important but our data show that the social interaction between the customer and the employee is also important. These findings have some practical interest for restaurant managers as it would be in their interest to encourage their employees to use a slight tactile contact when they suggest a menu item to their patrons.

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