

Power and Consumer Choice

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Abstract. This paper examines the influence of dispositional power on consumer indulgent choice. Building on the approach-inhibition framework, we showed that high-power people chose chocolate more than low-power people. The link between power and indulgent consumption has broad implications for consumer behavior and for understanding the psychological state of power.

Keywords: Power, Indulgent Choice

1. Introduction

Power is the fundamental concept in social science just as energy is the fundamental concept in physics (Russel, 1938). Each day people wear different hats such as being a boss vs. an employee, a teacher vs. a student, and a parent vs. a child. These hierarchical roles are found to be significantly associated with power (French and Raven, 1959). However, even within the same role or relationship, some people may personally feel more powerful than others (Lammers et al., 2009) due to their personality traits, physical characteristics, and status (Keltner et al., 2003). Their powerfulness can be seen through their posture or nonverbal behaviors (Carney et al., 2010). Such a sense of power is found to affect human behavior in several aspects in sociology, psychology, organizational behavior, as well as consumer behavior (Rucker et al., 2011). The current research could contribute to the psychological and consumer behavior literature in which power has been relatively unexamined. Most works have come from Rucker and Galinsky (2008, 2009, 2011) who focus on power and conspicuous and compensatory behavior involving the self and other. Following the approach-inhibition theory, this study instead examines the effect of power on consumer indulgence.

Power can be defined as a person's capacity to control the resources of themselves and others', without social interference (Galinsky et al., 2003). Those who possess power depend less on the resources of others when compared with those who have no power and thus they are able to satisfy their own needs and desires more easily (Galinsky et al., 2003). This definition is related to freedom, efficacy, dependence, and control (Keltner et al., 2003). According to Keltner et al. (2003), power increases behavioral approach tendencies both because high power is associated with the control over other people's rewards (i.e. social power) and because high power is associated with the freedom to act without interference (i.e. personal power). Research on power suggests that having power leads to positive emotion, approach-related behaviors such as risk-taking, and attention to rewarding aspects of the environment. In contrast, having low power leads to negative emotion, inhibition-related behavior, and attention to threats (Anderson and Berdahl, 2002). Consequently, we predict that the powerless would be less likely to indulge themselves as compared to the powerful.

2. Power and Indulgence

Indulgent choice is defined as a choice that allows consumers to enjoy a desired pleasure (Oxford, 2003). It has been known that indulgent options are difficult to justify (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000) and associated with guilt (Lascu, 1991). Consuming indulgent options may cause anticipated regret, cognitive dissonance, and rational self-perception that require internal or external justification (Khan et al., 2004). Thus, when exposed to indulgent choice, people may respond by restraining their desire or rationalizing it. On the one hand, to suppress the effect of the external environment in order to deliberately evaluate the item, consumers must arduously construct counterarguments regarding such abstract concepts as the affordability

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and practicality of the item and the future impact of purchasing it (Malter, 1996). On the other hand, consumers may justify the purchase of indulgence by adopting tactics that reduce the guilt or negative attributions or facilitate the purchase. These include reward justification (O'Curry and Strahilevitz, 2001), effort requirement (Kivetz and Simonson, 2002), and donation to charity (Strahilevitz and Myers, 1998). In addition to guilt-reducing mechanisms, Khan and Dhar (2006) proposed a licensing effect whereby committing to a virtuous act prior to indulging tends to reduce the negative self-attributions associated with the purchase of indulgent goods. This licensing effect is operated by providing a temporary boost in the relevant self-concept and thus works as a guilt-reducing mechanism (Khan and Dhar, 2006). Sela et al. (2008) found that a licensing and effort manipulation could reverse the effect of larger assortment that causes people to select options that are easier to justify (virtuous and utilitarian options). Apart from these justification mechanisms, priming methods could also influence the purchase of indulgent items. Maimaran and Simonson (2008) found that priming 'boldness' constructs (e.g. adventurous, change, extreme, risky, unique, unusual), which are relevant to power, lead people to choose more 'bold' options which include indulgent, hedonic choice.

From the approach/inhibition theory of power, having power leads to approach tendencies since power is associated with rewards (Keltner et al., 2003). Anderson and Berdahl (2002) empirically found that people with high power perceive the same environment as more rewarding while those with low power perceive it as more threatening. Similarly, Menon and Basal (2007) found that high power people have greater self-oriented action thoughts while low power people have greater ruminative thoughts. According to Keltner et al. (2003), those feeling powerful tend to act in a disinhibited, self-serving behavior while those feeling powerless tend to inhibit their own behaviors. This suggests that those feeling powerless could overestimate their threatening emotions (Anderson and Berdahl, 2002) and engage in a thoughtful processing which lead to reluctance to indulge. In contrast, a feeling of powerfulness typically experienced along with confidence and controllability may serve as a license to indulge by bypassing the negative self-attributions and empowering people to indulge in a hedonic choice.

3. Study 1

Study 1 provided an initial test of our hypothesis that low and high power would lead to a relative greater choice for the hedonic, indulgent product.

3.1. Method

Participants and design: a hundred and six undergraduates were randomly assigned to a 2 (power: low, high) between participants design.

Procedure: Participants were asked to participate in two unrelated studies in exchange for 50 baht. First, they completed the power manipulation portrayed as a study of human characteristics. Power was manipulated following an experiential prime procedure used by Galinsky et al. (2003) with an additional control condition. Participants were asked to recall a particular incident in which they had power over another individual or individuals (high-power condition) or someone else had power over them (low-power condition). Second, they were given photographs of chocolate cake and tropical fruit which represent indulgent and non-indulgent choice and asked if the experimenter gave snacks to them which one they would like to choose. Finally, they completed a questionnaire asking them to evaluate the snacks, rate their preference and food habits.

Choice and measures: after completing the power manipulation, they were asked to make a choice between two dishes (chocolate cake vs. tropical fruit) and rate the extent to which they like the dish they chose. They were also asked to evaluate the choices on two 7-point scales (1=bad, dislike 7= good, like), rate their propensity to feel guilty when buying indulgent food on a 7-point scale (1=never 7=always), rate the extent to which they are health conscious, chocolate fanatics, and fruit fanatics on a 7-point scale (1=seldom would describe me 7= usually would describe me) (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999), and whether they are on a diet. Finally, respondents indicated their gender, age, height and weight. These measures were collected to serve as covariates in the various analyses. Of these measures, chocolate fanatics ($\beta = 2.61$ Wald's $\chi^2 = 24.01$

$p = 0.000$) and fruit fanatics ($\beta = -1.18$ Wald's $\chi^2 = 10.43$ $p = 0.000$) covaried significantly with the dependent measure in this experiment and health conscious also interacted significantly with the power condition.

3.2. Results

Manipulation check: Two independent judges blind to condition coded the priming writing how much power the participant seemed to have in the situation using a 7-point scale (0 = no power at all, 6 = a lot of power). A third judge settled any disagreements about relationship classification. Since the control writing almost never involved power and often did not involve any one relationship, it was not included in this coding. As expected, participants described themselves as having more power in the high-power essays ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.59$) than in the low-power essays ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(105) = 8.28$, $p = .000$.

Choice: we predicted that the relative preference for the more hedonic item over the utilitarian item would be greater in the high power condition. Logistic regression was used to test our predictions. The key dependent variable was indulgent choice, coded as 1 if participants selected chocolate cake and 0 if they selected tropical fruit plate, which was regressed on power condition, fruit and chocolate fanatics, health consciousness, gender, guilt proneness, and diet. There was a significant main effect of power condition on indulgent choice. Participants were more likely to make an indulgent choice when they were primed with high power (65%) compared to the low-power group (40%, $\beta = 4.25$, Wald's $\chi^2 = 8.41$, $p = 0.004$).

4. Study 2

Study 2 aims to replicate the results of study 1 by measuring power and measuring relative preference for the advertising slogans with hedonic versus utilitarian value.

4.1. Method

Participants and design: a hundred and twenty eight undergraduates participated in this study. Using a within-subject design, participants were exposed to eight taglines of four products. Power was measured as an individual difference.

Procedure: Participants completed a study ostensibly interested in consumers' evaluation of advertising taglines. Subsequently, a sense of power was measured.

Measures. Participants indicated their preference toward the hedonic-focused or utilitarian-focused taglines using a 15-point scale (where -7 = Strongly prefer the hedonic-focused slogan, 7 = Strongly prefer the utilitarian—focused slogan, and 0 = indifferent between two slogans). For example, chocolate taglines are “A moment of enjoyment” (hedonic value) and “Gives you energy” (utilitarian value). Car taglines are “Definition of luxury” and “Precision crafted performance”. Taglines for air freshener are “Welcoming scent of home” and “Get odours out”. Finally, taglines for shampoo are “Soft and Silky Hair” and “Healthy, natural clean”. After that, they completed the generalized sense of power scale ($\alpha = .84$) which used in past research (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with eight items such as ‘In my relationships with others, I think I have a great deal of power,’ on a scale from 1 (‘Strongly disagree’) to 7 (‘Strongly agree’).

4.2. Results

Multivariate regression revealed significant effects of power among hedonic versus utilitarian value on the four products' taglines with $F(4, 126) = 3.84$, $p = .005$. A separate regression on each product showed that only taglines of shampoo was not significantly affected by individual power $F(1, 126) = 1.08$, $p = \text{NS}$). For the remaining three dependent measures, there was a negative relation between individual power and preference toward utilitarian value at the $p < 0.05$ level. Simple slope analyses of three regressions found that low-power people prefer taglines that highlight the functional aspects of the product to those emphasizing the hedonic aspects of the product and the reverse was found for high-power people (air freshener: $z = 2.38$, $p = .02$; car: $z = 2.18$, $p = .03$; chocolate: $z = 2.25$, $p = .025$).

5. Conclusion

The results of this study provide support for our predictions. When people feel powerful, they are more likely to select hedonic, indulgent goods than when they feel powerless. This finding suggests that marketers may need to be careful when selling and advertising indulgent products to low and high-power individuals. When selling indulgent products to high-power targets, marketers may focus on a power-related message. However, when their targets are low-power individuals, marketers may want to downplay such messages or frame the message so that the product would enhance their power. Future research could provide underlying processes as to why states of power lead consumers to different choice and preference between utilitarian and hedonic products. In addition, further studies are required to explain the difference between this study and previous studies finding that low-power people are more willing to pay for high-status products (Rucker and Galinsky, 2008, 2009). These results may be driven by different underlying processes. Rucker and Galinsky (2008, 2009) proposed that lack of power is aversive and the powerless therefore prefer products associated with status to compensate for lacking power. On the other hand, in this study, I propose that behavioral approach/inhibition systems and the characteristics of hedonic/indulgent/vice products may explain why low-power people prefer utilitarian products and high-power people prefer hedonic products.

6. References

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