The Role of Power in Consumer Persuasion

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The present research examines the effect of consumers’ power on attitude change and introduces a new mechanism by which power can affect advertising effectiveness. In line with prior research that suggests a link between power and approach tendencies, we hypothesized that having power increases confidence relative to being powerless. As a result, we predicted and found that power-holders were more reliant on their thoughts in response to an ad than consumers in a relatively less powerful condition. Consequently, the effect of the direction of the thoughts on attitudes was greater for consumers with high (vs. low) power.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been an increased interest in studying the effects of power over different consumer behaviors and cognitive processes, including the context of consumer decision making (Flurry and Burns 2005; Roeddder-John 1999; Webster 1996), marketing (e.g., Berthon, Pitt, Ewing and Bakkeland 2003; Hunt and Nevin 1974, Rosenberg and Stern 1971) and purchasing behavior (Joy, 2001; Ruth, Ones, and Brunel 1999; Rugimbana, Donahay, Neal, and Polonsky 2002), choice of selling and influence tactics (Anderson, Lodish, and Weiz 1987; Gaski and Nevin 1985; Keith, Jackson and Crosby 1990; Kim and Hsieh in press; Mallalieu 1998), and budgeting (Henry 2005).

Despite this importance, very little research has been done relating power and persuasion (e.g., Festinger and Thibaut 1951; French and Raven 1959). The present research provides a first and initial step to address this gap by examining whether power can influence consumer attitudes by affecting the confidence people have in their own thoughts.

Building on previous research demonstrating that power is associated with approach tendencies (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003), we argue that greater levels of power might be associated with increased confidence in one’s thoughts. Because power singles action, individuals can be confident in and rely upon whatever thoughts they have in response to an advertisement.

This reasoning leads to the prediction that if power does influence the confidence with which people hold their cognitive responses to an advertisement, we would expect high power to increase thought effects on attitudes relative to low power (Britol, Petty, and Tormala 2004). One way in which the direction of the thoughts (favorable or unfavorable) in response to the ad can be manipulated is by varying the quality of the arguments contained in the ad (study 2). Another approach to vary thought-direction consists of asking consumers to think about positive and negative aspects of a given proposal (study 3). If power does influence the confidence with which people hold their cognitive responses to advertisement, we would expect power to increase thought-direction (e.g., argument quality) effects.

This finding would be important because it would a) suggest an entirely unexplored role for power in the persuasion process, b) introduce a new variable for the existing work on self-validation, and c) provide a completely new mechanism for the literature of power.

Experiment 1

Eighty-two participants were first exposed to a printed advertisement promoting a new cell phone containing either strong or weak arguments. Argument quality was varied in this study to lead participants to generate mostly positive or negative thoughts toward the consumer product. After participants read the ad and wrote their cognitive responses about it, power was experimentally induced using the same role-playing technique described in experiment 1. Finally, all participants reported their attitudes toward the product.

If power does influence the confidence with which people hold their thoughts, we would expect power to increase the argument quality effects, that is, more persuasion with the strong than the weak ad. In line with this self-validation hypothesis, we found that the effect of argument quality on consumer attitudes was greater when consumers had high rather than low confidence in their cognitive responses. Thus, with relatively high confidence, consumers relied on their thoughts in forming attitudes, but with relatively low confidence, consumers did not use their thoughts to judge the product (producing a lower attitude-thought correspondence). Experiment 3 turned to examine the proposed a mechanism as well as test the plausibility of rival explanations.

Experiment 2

In order to manipulate the direction of participants’ thoughts (i.e., negative or positive), sixty-eight participants were asked to write arguments supporting or opposing a new university policy. After listing their arguments, we manipulated power by asking participants to remember two situations in which they had power over others (high-power condition) or two situations in which they had power over them (low-power condition). Then, participants rated the confidence they had in their arguments about the policy and their attitudes towards the policy.

We predicted and found a significant interaction between power and direction of thoughts generated. High-power participants reported more positive attitudes toward the policy than low-power participants when they wrote pro-arguments, and high-power participants reported less positive attitudes toward the policy than low-power participants when they wrote counter-arguments. It was also confirmed that power affected participants’ confidence in the validity of their own thoughts and this in turn mediated the observed differences in attitudes.

Discussion

Across different manipulations of all the variables, we predicted and found that power can influence consumer attitude change by affecting the confidence with which consumers hold their own thoughts in response to an ad. As a consequence of the link between power and confidence (study 1), power was shown to increased argument quality effects in a classic paradigm of persuasion consumer research (study 2) and the persuasive impact of the direction of thoughts on a traditional self-persuasion paradigm (study 3). Of most importance, we demonstrated for the first time that the effects of power on consumer judgment can be mediated by
changes in thought confidence (Experiment 3). Taken together, these findings are important not only because they provide an entirely unexplored role for power in the persuasion process, but also because they highlight the importance of power as a new variable to consider when studying the consumer of persuasive attempts.

REFERENCES