Empowered Consumers = Benevolent Consumers? the Effects of Priming Power on the Appeal of Socially Responsible Products

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It is well documented that consumers frequently encounter and buy products that have a corporate social responsibility (CSR) association. Past research has looked at many factors that affect consumers’ willingness to purchase a product with a CSR-association. However, the role of power in consumer evaluations of CSR-associated products has largely gone unexamined. Potentially, power can prime two opposing goals - a self oriented goal, or a social responsibility goal. In this work we find evidence for the latter. Specifically, we find that priming power leads to both increased favorable evaluation for socially responsible products and an enhanced purchase intention for such products.

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benefiting both galleries and their development. This created controversy among art galleries and some refused to sell. Central to all these acts is an attempt to convert economic capital into commodified and reified cultural capital, since position-taking and legitimacy in this field requires both forms of capital.

An important characteristic of these acts of legitimization involves performative consumption. The new buyers are asked to be part of this neo-bohemian lifestyle through their “consumption performances”. This performative lifestyle, as our opening quote depicts, became central to the value dynamics in the neighborhood. Our interviewees suggest that recently opened shops in the neighborhood were mostly one-of-a-kind design stores and boutique shops selling non-mainstream clothing and decorating, replacing hardware stores and even some art galleries. Even the daily activity of having lunch has been affected by such value dynamics, and one of our informants maintains that she can longer find a good place to lunch within her budget.

This example brings us to our final theme, the cultural politics of consumption. We find mechanisms of both inclusion and exclusion in this urban space and show how consumption plays a key role in this. We also problematize the relationship between these new developments and the neighborhood, to show how the exclusionary mechanisms can also impede the capital conversion process, since it diminishes and alters available resources. Through these four themes we build an understanding of the mutual effects of changing neighborhood, consumption lifestyles, and public and private meanings of community.

References

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Cause related marketing or marketing of products that have social cause attached with them seems to be a good way to respond to consumer expectations of social initiatives and this has led to the popularity of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to influence consumers and differentiate product offerings. There is a general assumption that consumers will reward firms for their support of social programs and this has led many firms to adopt social causes (Levy, 1999). Till date research in cause-related marketing domain has looked at consumer’s response to these endeavors based on the fit between cause and company (Barone et.al.,2007), consumer’s perceptions of company’s motivation (Dacin & Brown, 1997, Barone et.al., 2000), consumer attitudes toward such firms(Berger, Cunningham, and Kozinets,1996; Ross, Stuts, and Patterson 1990-91), and its products. However, the impact of power on consumer benevolence has largely gone unexamined.

Potentially, there are two very distinct, and opposing, possibilities associated with elevated power. On one hand, “power” has been associated with corrupting people and exerting negative influence (Kipnis, 1972; Fiske,1992). On the other hand, power can also elicit social responsibility goals that increase the salience of others in decision-making (Chen et.al., 2001). The latter goals elicit behavior that enhances and reflects attentiveness and responsiveness to others’ needs. We hypothesize that enhancing the salience of social responsibility goals for consumers by empowering them can enhance the relative importance of consumers in the process of buying socially responsible products. This should lead to increased purchase likelihood for products that support pro social endeavors. We introduce the construct of “power” as a variable that can influence the way message for a socially responsible product is perceived and...
processed. Support for why power would lead to socially responsible behavior is derived from Keltner et al. (2003) theorizing on the effects of elevated power. The authors in this paper posit that elevated power activates the behavioral approach system (BAS), which regulates behavior associated with rewards (e.g., Carver & White, 1994; Sutton & Davidson, 2000). This is because increased power is correlated with increased resources, which in the consumption or consumer behavior context are the monetary resources available to spend on products. Powerful individuals are also aware of the abundance of social resources such as esteem and praise that are available in their environment. This has message framing implications for promotion of a cause-related product. Thus, such a message, by eliciting high power for prospective consumer can also elicit the realization of control of not only the ability to make a difference but also the realization of positive social rewards from the environment by enacting in a responsible way. This should enhance approach tendencies for socially responsible products. Across our studies we find evidence for positive influence of power on consumer responsiveness towards products that promote social causes.

In Study 1, we exposed participants to GAP (RED) advertisements. The computer based study presented the advertisement as a banner ad that is usually seen on various websites. The two conditions that participants were exposed to differed on power dimension. In one frame the tagline read “We Can Make a Difference. You can help” (original GAP commercial). This frame was meant to put the corporation i.e. GAP in position of power to make a difference in lives of people suffering from AIDS. The other frame was the consumer empowering frame where the tagline read, “You Can Make a Difference. We can help.” (manipulated commercial). In each condition, participants reported the extent to which they felt powerful relative to the corporation. In addition they indicated their liking and purchase likelihood of the product in the two conditions. We expected the consumers to feel empowered in the condition where the tagline put the onus of helping needy on them and respond favorably towards the product. Our results were consistent with our hypothesis. However, there was no difference in the appeal of the tagline across two conditions.

In the second study we replicated the effect using a rather unknown European brand “Mobistar”. This was done in order to take care of the potential confounding effect of liking and familiarity with the GAP brand. We get much robust effects in this study. The consumer empowering frame is certainly the preferred frame for consumers as they report feeling more power in this frame. This is evident in the significantly enhanced purchase likelihood in the consumer empowered frame. Further, we see the enhanced appeal of the tagline and enhanced overall opinion for the brand in the message that places consumers in the position of power. Participants also report liking the product better.

In sum we find that the construct of power can be used in consumption domain to influence evaluations of products that promote a social cause. This work shows that empowering message frames have the ability to influence consumer behavior in a way that it leads to win-win situation for all involved. The results presented here also have a number of important managerial implications. It provides marketers a unique opportunity to frame messages for cause-related marketing so as to garner maximum support for a cause. Typically, it is assumed that only those who are in position of power by virtue of their abundant resources such as financially sound individuals have the power to pursue social responsibility goals and make a difference in improving others’ lives. This work shows by priming power, social responsibility goals can be evoked in any individual and their response for cause-related marketing can be much enhanced.

References