Power and Choice: Do Powerful Consumers Prefer Bold Options?

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This paper examines the influence of consumers' sense of power on their choice behavior. Building on the approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003), we speculated that elevated power would increase consumer preference for bold versus timid options. Two studies using different manipulations of power and different instantiations of bold/timid choice problems provided consistent support for this effect. Moreover, a third study revealed that this effect of power on choice disappears when consumers’ sense of responsibility is made salient.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Power is a basic feature of social life (Russell 1938). Most societies are organized in a hierarchical fashion, with some members enjoying more power than others. Even so, people regularly experience feelings of being both powerful and powerless, regardless of where they stand in the social hierarchy. Being asked for one’s expert advice, for example, may induce a psychological state of feeling powerful, whereas being evaluated by one’s peers may evoke a sense of powerlessness. The evident ubiquity of power in our everyday life prompts a critical question: Do people make different consumption decisions when feeling powerful versus powerless? Although the role of power in consumer behavior has received relatively little attention (Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Dwyer 1984), recent developments in psychological research suggest that possessing versus lacking power can have a significant influence on how people think, feel, and act in a variety of social situations (Fiske 1993; Guinote 2007; Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003; Overbeck and Park 2001; Smith and Trope 2006).

The approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al. 2003) posits that power influences the relative activation of the behavioral approach and inhibition systems—the two fundamental action tendencies that regulate behavior associated with rewards and threats respectively. The theory holds that elevated power activates the behavioral approach system, whereas reduced power activates the behavioral inhibition system. Building on the approach/inhibition theory of power, this paper proposes that power significantly and predictably influences consumer preferences in a number of decision contexts. In particular, we focus on decision contexts in which consumers choose between extreme versus compromise options (Simonson 1989), hedonic versus utilitarian options (Dhar and Werttenbroch 2000), enriched versus impoverished options (Shafir 1993), and unique versus standard options (Maimaran and Wheeler, forthcoming). These four types of decisions share a common characteristic: they all involve a choice between bold and timid options (Maimaran and Simonson 2008). Bold options (i.e., extreme, hedonic, enriched, and unique options) are defined as less conventional, more distinctive, and more self expressive, whereas timid options (i.e., compromise, utilitarian, impoverished, and standard options) are more conventional and less self-exppressive. We propose that a heightened sense of power increases consumers’ tendency to make bold choices. Furthermore, power often comes with a sense of responsibility (Overbeck and Park 2001). This sense of responsibility can raise the perceived constraints that a powerful individual feels (Smith and Bargh 2008), and lead to reduced approach-related tendencies. Thus, we expect that the effect of power on choice of bold versus timid options would disappear under conditions of high responsibility.

Studies 1 and 2 tested the main effect of power on choice of bold versus timid options. Power was manipulated using a scrambled sentence task (Smith and Trope 2006) in study 1 and a writing task (Galinsky et al. 2003) in study 2. Using different types of choice problems, these studies offered converging evidence that when consumers’ sense of power is elevated, they are more likely to choose bold options over timid ones. However, reducing consumer’s sense of power did not increase their preference for timid options. Moreover, the observed effects were not mediated by consumers’ mood.

Study 3 tested the moderating role of responsibility. Power was manipulated using a role-based procedure adapted from (Galinsky et al. 2003), and responsibility was manipulated by telling a group of respondents that they were highly responsible for the outcome of the project and the wellbeing of others. As expected, power had a significant effect on choice of bold versus timid options in the low responsibility condition but not in the high responsibility condition.

REFERENCES