Mere Influence Effect: When Motivation to Influence Drives Decision

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People are motivated to influence and control the environment around them. In domains as different as actual presidential elections, charitable giving of real consequences, and program evaluations, we find that the motivation to be influential, independent of hedonic consideration of the choice options, can systematically affect decision making.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Power and Spending on Oneself versus Others: From Psychological to Economic Value”
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Power—defined as asymmetric perceived control over resources or people—has been a central force in the study of organizational behavior. However, only recently has power been brought into marketing to understand consumer behavior. For instance, recent work suggested that states of powerlessness increase consumers’ desire for products associated with status. This effect is argued to occur out of a desire to compensate for a lack of power via the demonstration of status to others.

The present work proposes that power, even for non-status products, can have a considerable effect depending on who a product is being bought for. Specifically, we hypothesize that psychological states of power and powerlessness can also provide information with respect to the value of one’s self versus others.

Why would this occur? Based on work suggesting that increased power leads to greater value associated with one’s own thoughts and goals, we hypothesize that a state of powerlessness accentuates one’s feeling of dependence on others, making others more valued to an individual, consistent with work suggesting the powerless are better at taking the perspective of others and more sensitive to their immediate environment than the powerful. In contrast, a state of powerfulness signals that one is important and thus is of greater value.

If our hypothesis concerning differential value is correct, we propose that power should asymmetrically affect how much consumers are willing to spend on purchases for themselves versus others. When purchasing an item for another individual (e.g., gift certificates, chocolates), low-power individuals should spend more on the item than high-power individuals. However, when purchasing an item for themselves, this spending propensity should reverse: high-power individuals should spend more on the item than individuals in a state of low power. These ideas are tested across three experiments, using multiple power manipulations and dependent measures. In addition, we focus on relatively mundane objects, in order to avoid any status-seeking motive by low power participants.

In the first experiment, participants were randomly assigned to imagine themselves in a role of high power (i.e., a boss) or low power (i.e., an employee). Subsequently, as part of an ostensibly unrelated task, they indicated the amount they would spend on gifts (i.e., certificates for the movies, a casual restaurant) for themselves or another person. When purchasing items for themselves, high-power individuals were willing to spend more than low-power individuals. In contrast, when purchasing items for another person, low-power individuals were willing to spend more than high-power individuals. Thus, the findings of experiment 1 support our differential value hypothesis.

In our second experiment we tested the hypothesis that the effects were dependent on people explicitly considering who would receive the gift. We hypothesized that when the recipient (self, other) was not made salient any effects of power would be attenuated. Participants were assigned to low or high power via an episodic recall task. Subsequently, participants took part in a bidding study. Participants were told they would have an opportunity to bid on several objects (i.e., a mug, a t-shirt) and that they would be able to purchase the object if they bid more than an undisclosed reserve price. We randomly assigned participants to (a) bid on the object for themselves, (b) bid on the object for another person, or (c) no instructions on the target of the bidding. Replicating Experiment 1, when bidding on the object for themselves, high-power individuals bid higher than low-power individuals. In contrast, when bidding for another person, low-power individuals bid higher than high-power individuals. Finally, when the recipient of the object was not made salient, there were no differences in bidding behavior among low and high power participants.

The final experiment sought to provide evidence for the notion that it was the enhanced psychological value of others or one’s self that led to the differential spending of high and low power individuals. Power was manipulated through a real hierarchical role whereby participants were assigned to the role of an employee or boss in an upcoming task. It was made clear that in the upcoming interaction the boss (employee) had complete control (no control) over the employee (boss) in terms of how the task would be conducted. However, prior to this task, participants took part in a study on purchasing behavior. In this study, participants were randomly assigned to a task that allowed them to purchase a number of chocolates for themselves or another person. When participants were purchasing for themselves, individuals purchased significantly more chocolates when assigned to the high as opposed to low power condition. In contrast, when participants were purchasing for another person, individuals purchased more chocolates when assigned to the low as opposed to high power condition. In addition, mediation analyses revealed that high power increased self-importance and self-importance uniquely mediated the effects of power on spending on self. In contrast, low power increased dependence on others, and dependence on others uniquely mediated the effect of power on spending on others.

Overall, these studies support our proposition that perceived control, through power shifts the psychological value placed on oneself and others and consequently affect how much people are willing to spend on themselves or others.

“Mere Influence Effect: When Motivation to Influence Drives Decision”
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People want to make sure that they live a meaningful life and they have control over the environment around them. One way to realize these dreams is to show that their actions can have some impact on others, the environment, and the world. We propose that this motivation to influence, independent of hedonic considerations of the choice options, can systematically affect decision making.

To demonstrate the mere influence effect, imagine a person is voting for one of two presidential candidates. In a close election, voting for the leading candidate (i.e., the slightly favored candidate as revealed by the poll) will most likely help to maintain the trend.
and increase the leading candidate’s winning margin. If the person votes for the challenger (i.e. the slightly disfavored candidate), however, her vote could potentially be the “critical vote” that reverse the result. Voting for the challenger thus has a higher likelihood of making an influence. On the other hand, in a large-margin or one-sided election, it is highly unlikely to change the election result with one more vote for the challenger. Comparatively, voting for the leading candidate is an influence-maximizing action because the voter can at least entertain herself that she is on the winning side.

Based on the above reasoning, we predict that in a close competition, those who care more about influence are more likely than those who care less to vote for the challenger, whereas in a large-margin or one-sided election, the reverse would be true. More generally, we propose that the motivation to make an influence can systematically affect decision making independent of hedonic considerations of the choice options. We demonstrate the mere influence effect on decision making in four studies.

In the first two studies we showed that in a close competition higher motivation to influence leads to greater preference for slightly less favored option (by others). In study 1, participants were asked to vote for two traffic control programs varying in cost and effectiveness. We manipulated the influence potential of the voting results. We found that if the voting result was the sole determinant of which of the two traffic improvement programs to implement, participants were more likely to favor the slightly less supported program; whereas when the voting result was said be an unimportant piece of information for the policy makers, participants were equally likely to support both programs. Study 2 adopted the same context but manipulating influence by priming participants’ need to influence. Those who were primed with high need to influence were more likely to favor the slightly less supported program than those low in this need.

Study 3 and 4 further demonstrated that the margins of the competition moderate the effect of need for influence on consumer preference. In study 3, participants were informed that $100 (real money) would be donated to a foundation to save endangered animal species and they were asked to vote for an animal species (from two candidates) as the beneficiary. Participants were further informed of the “voting statistics” based on previous participants’ votes. Half of the participants were told that the supporting rates were 49% versus 51% for the two animals (a close competition), the other half were told 31% versus 69%. Our proposition was supported. In the small margin conditions (counterbalanced options), those who had stronger motivation to influence were more likely to vote for the less favored animal and the reverse was true in the large margin condition. In the final study we asked more than 2000 randomly selected senior citizens to recall their actual voting behavior in the past 4 US presidential elections. We also measured their individual levels of motivation for influence and other individual characteristics. Consistent with our theorizing, in the 1996 (Clinton vs. Dole) and 2008 (Obama vs. McCain) presidential elections, which we pretested (and were predicted by national polls) to be easy wins, those who had stronger motivation to influence were more likely to vote for the leading candidates; whereas in the 2000 (Bush vs. Gore) and 2004 (Bush vs. Kerry) presidential elections, which were predicted to be close games, those who had stronger motivation to influence were more likely to vote for the challenging candidates.

Overall, these studies support our proposition of the mere influence effect. The fact that people are motivated to influence others and the environment is consistent with a general psychological tendency of seeking control to cope in an uncertain world.

Control motivation is a dynamic and ubiquitous force that potentially reacts to everyday events. Violation of the basic need for control can provoke distress that initiates efforts to reassert control. Considering the abundant of opportunities people encounter in contemporary society to acquire goods and services, could consumer spending be an avenue via which control-deprived individuals attempt to recover their sense of control? This research examines whether control deprivation results in compensatory shopping behavior. In contrast with self-control that has been the focus of recent literature, “control” here refers to a more general notion involving control over external circumstances. We propose that people shop and spend more when they experience a weakened sense of control. This hypothesis runs counter to the view that control deprivation would engender passivity and withdrawal that could lead to reduced spending.

Experiment 1 was designed to establish the effect of control deprivation on compensatory shopping in a field setting—a local supermarket. Regular shoppers (N=192) were recruited as they entered the store to participate in a short study in exchange for a $2-coupon. Before they commenced shopping, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: they were asked to write about (1) an incident in which they experienced a loss of control (LC condition), (2) one in which they experienced a sense of control (HC condition), or (3) a typical day during the past month (baseline condition). After shopping, they handed their receipts to a research assistant to redeem the coupon.

Consistent with our hypothesis, LC participants spent significantly more than participants in both the HC and baseline conditions. Importantly, expenditure was not significantly different between the latter two conditions, thus indicating that control deprivation increased spending. Further analysis revealed that LC participants bought more items, particularly utilitarian products, than both the HC and baseline participants. However, the number of hedonic products purchased did not differ across conditions. To rule out the alternative explanation that differential spending across conditions was due to different emotions induced by the control manipulation, participants’ writings were content analyzed by two independent raters for ten different affective states (i.e., anxious, fearful, sad, ashamed, frustrated, angry, disgusted, contented, happy, and excited). After controlling for these emotions (separately or in clusters through factor analysis), the control manipulation exerted the same effect on spending. Together, these results suggest that increased spending (particularly in potentially order-restoring utilitarian products) can serve as a strategy for individuals to regain a sense of control.

Experiment 2 was designed to conceptually replicate this effect within a controlled lab environment, while testing the underlying mechanism by relying on an individual-difference factor: need for cognitive closure (NFCC). Prior research has shown that, compared to low-NFCC individuals, high-NFCC individuals are more motivated to reach firm conclusions swiftly, and more averse toward ambiguity and unpredictability. Therefore, we expect high-NFCC individuals to be more sensitive toward control deprivation and to exhibit a higher tendency to compensate through spending when their sense of control is reduced.

In experiment 2, after completing the NFCC-Scale and a filler task, participants (N=60) were manipulated to experience either a momentary sense of control or not using the same recall task in experiment 1. As a token of our appreciation for their participation, they were then invited to shop at a store in the lab purportedly un-
related to the experiment. A variety of eight items comprising both hedonic and utilitarian products with prices ranging from $0.50-$5 (e.g., chocolates and school supplies) were offered for sale; participants were told that these products were experimental stimuli from previous studies sold at discounted prices. While each participant shopped, a research assistant (blind to the assigned conditions) recorded the number of items examined by the participant and rated the participant’s involvement on a five-point scale.

As hypothesized, LC participants spent more than HC participants. LC participants also bought more utilitarian products than HC participants. In addition, LC participants examined more items in the store, and were more involved in the shopping process. Furthermore, there was a significant interaction effect between control and participants’ NFCC scores. In particular, among high-NFCC participants, those in the LC group spent significantly more than those in the HC group. However, among low-NFCC participants, there was no significant difference in spending between both LC and HC participants. The interaction between control and NFCC also significantly predicted the number of utilitarian products purchased, with the pattern of interaction similar to that found for expenditure.

In sum, our findings demonstrate a compensatory mechanism that operates in response to control deprivation. In particular, shopping seems to serve as a strategy that individuals adopt when their sense of control is undermined. What remains uncertain however is which aspect(s) of the complex shopping process (e.g., browsing, selecting, spending, and consuming) help consumers regain their sense of control. Additionally, future research should also appraise the efficacy of consumer spending as a compensatory strategy. Specifically, personal control could be measured after spending to evaluate whether control is restored to initial levels before control deprivation.

“Power and Choice: A Compensatory Theory of Control”
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Research has shown that the provision and exercise of choice is an important means through which consumers experience control and its corresponding benefits, such as increased motivation, better mood, and greater satisfaction. More recent findings have demonstrated that choice is not always beneficial: Participants who chose one option from among undifferentiated alternatives were only as satisfied as those who were randomly assigned the same option, and participants who chose from among differentiated but undesirable alternatives were even more dissatisfied. While prima facie, these results seem to undermine the relation between choice and control, they actually provide additional evidence that the effects of choice on consumer well-being depend on the associated perceived control. When choosing among undifferentiated alternatives, participants felt less in control of the eventual quality of the outcome, which mitigated their satisfaction; when choosing among differentiated but undesirable alternatives they felt in control of an aversive outcome, blamed themselves for it, and experienced greater dissatisfaction.

Choice is not, however, the only way in which individuals can attain perceived control. The literature has suggested a theoretical link between control and power that in power has been defined as the capacity to control other people. Indeed, recent research has empirically proved that powerlessness leads to perceived loss of control and power to the experience of control.

Although choice and power both seem to provide a sense of control, their interactive effect on people’s welfare has not been studied in prior research. What if people could achieve a sense of control both through the exercise of choice and the provision of power? We hypothesize a compensatory hypothesis for this interactive effect of power and choice according to which power and choice compensate for each other in satisfying people’s need for control.

We tested this hypothesis in two studies. Study 1 investigated whether the absence of choice affects high-power participants less negatively than neutral-power participants. We used a recall task to either provide participants with a sense of power or leave them in a neutral state. Participants then engaged in an alleged second study, in which they imagined having dinner at a restaurant where they could choose their menu or where the chef had chosen a fixed menu. Participants indicated how much they liked the choice process they had experienced and how satisfied they thought they would be with the meal. Results support our compensatory hypothesis. High-power participants liked choosing their own meal as much as having the chef choosing it for them, whereas neutral-power participants liked choosing their own meal more than having the chef choose it for them. High-power participants also thought they would be as satisfied with the self-chosen meal as with the chef-chosen meal, whereas neutral-power participants thought they would be more satisfied with a self-chosen than with a chef-chosen meal. Providing further support to the idea that those in power were less affected by the loss of choice, high-power participants reported greater liking for the choice process and greater expected satisfaction than neutral-power participants in the choice-choice condition, but not in the self-choice condition.

Study 2 provided direct evidence of control as the mechanism for this compensatory effect. Following prior research, after manipulating power and choice we provided participants the opportunity to regain perceived control with an anagram task. We predicted that, relative to higher-power participants, lower-power participants would attempt to regain perceived control by persisting more on the anagram task when deprived of choice. Participants were first randomly assigned to a high- or low-power condition by telling them that they would simulate either the role of “Boss” or “employee” in an organization. Next, they participated in a taste-test for the snack options in their fictional organization’s cafeteria. Participants in the choice condition chose which snack to eat, whereas those in the no-choice condition tasted a randomly selected snack. The last task was described as simulating a challenging situation at work consisting of unscrambling twenty anagrams which varied in difficulty (length). We measured persistence by recording how long participants spent on the last three anagrams, since persistence is most evident with fatigue. Consistent with prior literature, participants persisted longer on the final anagrams when they were randomly assigned a snack compared to when they had choice. The effect of choice was, however, weaker for high-power than for low-power participants: whereas the choice method significantly affected persistence in the low-power condition, it did not affect persistence in the high-power condition. Consistent with our theory, this interaction was stronger for the more difficult, 7-letter anagram, than for the easier, 3-letter anagram.

In summary, two studies support the hypothesis that choice and power compensate for each other in providing consumers with a sense of control. Lower-power participants were more sensitive toward a loss of choice than higher-power participants and, consistently, tried harder to regain control when deprived of choice.