Looking Up Or Looking Down Makes You Indulge More: the Fit Between Store Shelf Cues and Consumer Dispositional Power

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This paper demonstrates the interplay between height at which a product is placed on a shelf and consumer dispositional power in determining indulgent choice. Two experiments support that high-power consumers choose indulgent options more often if placed on low (vs. high) shelf positions, the opposite is true for low-power consumers.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Massive marketer resources are devoted to product displays in retail environments acting on the belief that product display prominence, position and accessibility influence choice. This research adds to our understanding of the role of display-related cues in product preference by demonstrating the role of a product’s vertical position in a display (i.e., high or low relative to the consumer) in driving indulgent choice. Specifically, we draw on research on the ergonomics of self-perception and power (Yap, Wazlawek, Lucas, Cuddy and Carney, 2013; Van Kenckhove, Geuensand, and Vermeir, 2012; Huang, Galinsky, Gruenfeld and Guillory, 2011) supporting that the shelf height at which a product is placed (i.e. a high or low product shelf position) cues a sense of power or lack thereof by causing head movements (downward/upward). More importantly, we diverge from most prior research on embodied cognition in the retail context to propose (and demonstrate), based on extant research on the person-environment fit (e.g., Chen, Langner, & Mendoza-Denton, 2009), that it is not the environmentally-induced sense of power (or lack thereof) per se that drives consumer choice between indulgent and prudent options but the match/mismatch with the more enduring dispositional sense of power consumers bring to the retail setting. Finally, we provide evidence for affective instead of cognitive appraisals as the process theorized to drive this interactive effect of environmental and dispositional power on indulgent choices.

Study 1 (N=86) provides support for our prediction that power-altering shelf position cues interact with consumers’ dispositional power to influence indulgent choice. Participants recruited through a mall intercept were randomly assigned to one of two shelf position conditions (Low = 47 inches, High = 78 inches). The top shelf of each display contained four boxes each of chocolate cake and mixed fruit. Participants were instructed to imagine that they were in a supermarke, trying to make a choice among two snacks of equal price from a display. After completing this task, we elicited respondents’ dispositional power using Anderson and Galinsky’s (2006) “generalized sense of power” scale. A logistic regression with snack choice as the outcome variable, shelf position, dispositional power (continuous variable), and their interaction as independent variables, and ratings of fruit and chocolate fanaticism, as well as gender, as covariates revealed the expected interaction (Wald’s $\chi^2$= 7.67, p<.01). None of the main effects was significant (Wald’s $p$>.10). In line with our prediction, high power participants chose chocolate more often in the low shelf position than in the high shelf position condition (66% vs. 41%; $z= 2.38, p<0.05$) whereas low power participants were more likely to choose chocolate when the snacks were in a high position than a low one (72% vs. 47%; $z = 2.96, p<.005$).

Study 2 (N=80) replicates Study 1’s finding with a different manipulation of shelf position, while at the same time, providing evidence for the use of affective instead of cognitive appraisals as the process theorized to underlie these power effects. In this study, we kept the shelf height constant across conditions, manipulating shelf position by placing the snacks either on the top shelf (high) or the second from the bottom shelf (low) of a single five-shelf 70 inches display. Apart from recording snack choice, Study 2 assessed the influence of shelf position on respondents’ power feelings as a manipulation check using the approach-related items in Levav and Zhu (2009; 5-point scale: powerful, confident), as well as the extent to which their choice was driven by (a) “the rational side of me” versus “the emotional side of me,” and (b) “thoughts” versus “feelings” (7-point scale). Serving as a manipulation check, we identified a significant effect of shelf position on approach-related power ratings ($r=0.5$); looking up to the top shelf resulted in higher ratings ($M_{top} = 3.05$) than looking down ($M_{knee} = 2.50$; F (1, 79) = 3.61, p<.06). The same logistic regression with snack choice as the outcome variable revealed a significant interaction between the shelf position and dispositional power (Wald’s $\chi^2$= 6.2, p <.05). As in study 1, high power participants chose chocolate more often when these were placed in the lower position than in the upper position (76% vs. 50%; z = -3.97, p<.001). However, low power participants were more likely to choose chocolate when these were in the top rather than lower position (75% vs. 59%; z = 3.00, p<.005). Finally, we identified a significant interaction of how much choice was based on feelings (r = .61) between shelf position and dispositional power (t = -1.912, p <.05). Simple slopes analyses revealed that high dispositional power respondents were more likely to make a feelings-based choice when choosing from the lower position (M = 5.37) than the higher position (M = 4.39; t = 2.27, p<.05). Conversely, low dispositional participants were more likely to make a feelings-based choice when choosing from the higher position (M = 5.41) than the lower position (M = 5.04), though not significantly so (p > .20). A simple logistic regression of snack choice as the outcome variable and feelings-based choice as independent variable revealed a significant positive relationship (b=3.30, Wald’s $\chi^2$= 3.61, p <.05) between feelings-based choice and indulgence.

In doing so, this paper advances our conceptual understanding of the contingent role of the ergonomics of self-perception in the consumption domain. By including dispositions/traits consumers bring to the consumption context, we identify a key moderator of the link between consumers’ physical or bodily-induced power states and their choice behavior. Indulgent choices at the FOMOT depend not only on cued cognitions of power but on the fit consumers experience between such sense of power and that, which they are more enduringly disposed to. This research can be seen as an example of the dispositional boundary conditions circumscribing the embodied cognition-choice relationship.

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