Does Priming a Sense of Powerfulness Encourage Consumers to Buy Healthy Foods?

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High (low) power individuals are more likely to buy healthy (tasty) food when the message is baseline, non-assertive; High (low) power individuals are more willing to buy tasty (healthy) food when the message is assertive. The reactance/motivation elicited by the assertiveness of the message is the underlying mechanism.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Growing concerns about obesity and the associated health conditions including type II diabetes behoove researchers to study how consumers make food-related decisions. This research aims to further explore what factors influence individuals’ perception and choices when they make decisions on what types of food to purchase and consume. We investigate how sense of power and message framing jointly influence individuals’ willingness to engage in healthy eating and healthy food consumption in an effort to have an impact on the growing obesity epidemic.

In general, high power increases the processing fluency, directs consumers’ attention to an option’s positive features, and leads to a higher level of construal and a tendency to see “big picture. On the other hand, low power concentrates on the lower level of construal and shorter psychological distance (e.g. Magee Milliken, &Lurie, 2010). Healthy eating focuses on the long-term benefits of the food consumption, while indulgent eating focuses on the immediate benefits of food. As a result, we can infer that high power individuals are more likely to consume healthy food than indulgent food, while low power individuals are more likely to consume indulgent food than healthy food.

Recent research on message framing finds that an assertive (non-assertive) message is more effective in communications involving hedonic (utilitarian) products, (Kromod, Grinstein, &Wathieu, 2012). Previous research also indicates that imperative and forceful messages tend to be perceived as a threat to personal freedom and foster reactance toward the message (Quick &Considine, 2008).

Healthy food consumption, which requires effort to comply, is normally easier for high power individuals. Tasty food consumption, which brings instant joy, is more preferred by low power people. This is because of the matched construal level between food types and power levels as we stated earlier. We suggest that when the food is promoted with an assertive tone, it can backfire because it raises reactance for people. When the reactance is activated, the consumption pattern will be reversed. However, when construal level of the product type and the individual’s power states are inconsistent, assertive messages could be more motivating than baseline non-assertive messages. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1A: High power individuals will exhibit higher purchase intention toward healthy (tasty) food when the message is non-assertive (assertive); low power individuals will exhibit higher purchase intention toward healthy (tasty) food when the message is assertive (non-assertive).

Hypothesis 1B: The reactance/motivation elicited by the assertiveness of the message is the underlying mechanism.

STUDY 1
We proposed a one way (Assertive vs. Non-assertive) between subject design. 91 American undergraduate participants (M =20.6, 53.1% Male) participated for partial course credit. At the beginning of the lab session, we measure participants’ chronic sense of power (Anderson, John, &Keltner, 2012). Then, participants were presented with a print ad about chocolate. We manipulate the assertiveness of the message at the bottom of the ad by saying “You must try our chocolate” or ‘it’s worth trying our chocolate”. Then we ask participants to report their purchase intention. The spotlight analysis results showed that there is significant interaction effect of chronic power and message assertiveness on purchase intention. For one standard deviation above (below) the mean on chronical power, in other words, high (low) power participants, they were more likely to purchase the chocolate truffle product when the message is assertive (non-assertive).

STUDY 2
We proposed 3(Powerful vs. Powerless vs. Control) x2(Assertive vs. Non-assertive) between subject design. 244 American undergraduate participants (M =21.1, 56.3% Male) participated for partial course credit. We manipulated sense of power by using headlines of “we all feel powerful in the morning” or “we all feel powerless in the morning” (Adapted from Dubois et al., 2012). In the control condition, we do not have headline. We manipulate the assertiveness of the message as in study1. Then we ask participants to report their purchase intention and the motivation/reactance. For participants primed with powerlessness, the non-assertive message is preferred for healthy food consumption (p<.01). For participants primed with powerlessness, the assertive message is more preferred for healthy food consumption (p=.19). For control condition, the pattern resembled low power condition. The effect in high power group is partially significantly mediated by motivation/reactance to buy products from the brand.

STUDY 3
A 2(Powerfulness vs. Powerlessness) x2(Assertive vs. Non-assertive) x2(chocolate vs. salad) between subject design was adopted. 231 North American adult participants (M =28.3, 60.5% Male) from Amazon Mechanical Turk participated and financially compensated for $1.60. Study 3 adopted same design and similar stimuli with study2, only replaced cereal picture with chocolate truffles and salad pictures. We also included several potential process measures from previous literature and alternative explanations including information process fluency measures, message compatibility, ad perception, and ad evaluation. The results showed that when manipulated with powerlessness (powerless) feeling, participants were more likely to purchase the chocolate (salad) when the ad presented with assertive message, and were more likely to purchase salad (chocolate) when presented with non-assertive message. The mediation analysis results show that motivation/reactance to buy from advertised brand significantly mediate the moderation effect.

Study 4. We propose a 2(High vs. Low) x2(Assertive vs. Non-Assertive) x2(Positioning: Tasty vs. Healthy) between-subject design. 244 American undergraduate participants (M =21.9, 58.2% Male) participated for partial course credit. We used a pretested role-imaging task in an educational context (Garbinsky, Klesse, &Aaker, 2014) to manipulate participants’ sense of power. Half of the participants were presented with the tasty (healthy) version of a yogurt where we added a headline saying “Sander’s Mixed Berries Yogurt, The Tastiest (Healthiest) Yogurt!” The rest of the design was the same as study 3. Results showed that when the product was positioned as tasty, participants primed with high (low) power were
more likely to purchase the yogurt if it were assertive (non-assertive) message. When the product was positioned as healthy, the pattern reversed. Motivation to eat, and motivation to buy are significant mediators.

Across four studies, we showed that under high (low) power, individuals are more likely to consume healthy (tasty) food when the message is non-assertive and tasty (healthy) food when the message is assertive.

REFERENCES