How Accepting Hierarchy Impacts Information Processing

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This research explores how accepting hierarchy impacts consumers’ preference for affective and cognitive information. A higher (vs. lower) extent to the acceptance of hierarchy (i.e. Power Distance Belief) induces instrumental (vs. consummatory) consumption motive, which results in preference for cognitive (vs. affective) information.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The current trend of marketers trying desperately to connect with consumers emotionally, the so-called “sadvertising” (Fera 2014) makes Aristotle’s (1354/1954) question new again: do people follow their hearts or heads? In this research, we aim to advance understanding on this important consumer decision.

Persuasive information can be put into two categories: affective information (i.e., information appealing to the heart such as feelings and emotions) and cognitive information (i.e., information appealing to the head such as attributes and beliefs of the object) (See, Petty and Fabrigar, 2008). To answer the call for more information processing research focusing on the global consumer and richer classifications of cultural differences (Johar, Maheswaran, and Peracchio, 2006), we identify Power Distance Belief (PDB hereafter) – the extent to which individuals accept and accept hierarchy and inequality in society — as a new factor that impacts the reliance of affective and cognitive information. More specifically, we hypothesize that consumers with low PDB rely more on affective information and prefer affective ads whereas consumers with high PDB rely more on cognitive information and prefer cognitive ads. We further postulate that this PDB effect is mediated by consumption motive with low PDB inducing consummatory motive whereas high PDB inducing instrumental motive. Given the acceptance of one’s position in a hierarchy as the core of PDB, high PDB requires individuals to accommodate to socially conferred positions in a hierarchy. The external regulation of social judgments induces an external perceived locus of causality (Heider, 1958; Botti and McGill, 2011) and promotes instrumental motive for high PDB consumers’ behaviors (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The instrumental motive then induces a preference for products presented with cognitive information (Dhar and Wertherbroch, 2000). In contrast, low PDB releases individuals from external regulation of social judgments and promotes a more internal perceived locus of causality, which consequently induces consummatory motive for consumption behaviors (Deci and Ryan, 1985). The consummatory motive drives a preference for products presented with affective information (Dhar and Wertherbroch, 2000).

We propose external monitoring as a moderator for the PDB effect based on the classic motivation research findings that external regulation undermines consummatory motives and enhances instrumental motive (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan, 1999; Fishbach and Choi, 2012; Maimaran and Fishbach, 2014). More specifically, we predict that salient external monitoring tends to regulate low PDB individuals’ behavior by enhancing their instrumental motive. In contrast, high PDB individuals’ baseline tendency to regulate their behaviors with external regulation is already high (Friesen et al., 2014), salient external monitoring should have little effect on high PDB individuals’ motive.

Across one content analysis and five experimental studies, we test the central proposition of the impact of PDB on consumers’ preference for affective versus cognitive information.

The pilot study analyzes print ads from US (PDB =40) and Japan (PDB =54), providing ecological support for the hypothesized PDB impact.

Study 1a and 1b demonstrate the main proposition by manipulating both PDB (Zhang et al., 2010, study 1c) and information type (i.e., affective vs. cognitive) across different product categories, thus supporting the internal validity of the main proposition.

Study 2, 3 and 4 provide convergent evidence for the proposed mechanism of consumption motive underlying the PDB effect. The bootstrapping analysis in study 2 supports the proposed mediation of consumption motive statistically. Mediation analysis was tested separately for affective and cognitive ads with Hayes (2013) Model 4 (with IV= PDB, Mediator = consumption motive, DV = Product Evaluation). The confidence intervals of the indirect effect of PDB on product evaluation through consumption motive didn’t include zero for both affective and cognitive ads (affective ad: indirect effect = -.12, Boot SE = .08, CI’s: -.33, .01; cognitive ad: indirect effect = .12, Boot SE = .07, CI’s: .02, .29), indicating consumption motive mediates the effect of PDB on product evaluation for both the affective and cognitive ads. By manipulating consumption motive, study 3 further confirms the causal path between the proposed mediator and the dependent variable. Study 4 examines a boundary condition of the PDB effect by manipulating external monitoring. As expected, the PDB effect manifests when external monitoring is non-salient and attenuates when external monitoring is salient. With actual and fictitious ads, across different product categories including products and services, and with both student and non-student participants, the converging results demonstrate the robustness of the PDB effect on the persuasiveness of affective and cognitive information and support the proposed process. Moreover, study 1a, 1b, and study 2 repeatedly show that the PDB prime doesn’t impact situational self-construal. Study 2 demonstrates that the PDB effect is not mediated through self-construal. The experimental findings are consistent with recent PDB research (Gao et al., 2016; Lalwani and Forcum, 2016) that PDB and self-construal are orthogonal theoretical constructs and exert impacts on consumer behavior via different mechanisms.

Our research makes several significant contributions. First, our research enriches the growing body of evidence on consumers’ motivated reasoning during information processing by identifying PDB as a new factor that influences consumers’ selective preference for cognitive versus affective information. Second, this research broadens the cross-cultural persuasion research beyond the heavy reliance on the IND COLL framework (i.e., individualism-collectivism at the cultural level and independent-interdependent self-construal at the individual level). By including PDB, this research greatly enhances the predictive accuracy of cultural orientation on persuasive effectiveness. Third, this research contributes to the PDB literature (Gao, Winterich, and Zhang, 2016; Lalwani and Forcum, 2016; Winterich and Zhang, 2014; Zhang et al., 2010) by uncovering a novel link between PDB and consumers’ processing of affective versus cognitive information and identify the underlying mechanism and a boundary condition.

REFERENCES


