Meaning in Life, Powerlessness, and Nostalgia: Using Nostalgia to Mitigate the Effect of Powerlessness on the Search For Meaning in Life

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Across four studies, we examine the effect of powerlessness on nostalgic preference and the underlying mechanism of the motivation to search for meaning in life. Further, we find that we can mitigate this effect by providing an alternative source of meaning in life. Theoretical and managerial contributions are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Meaning in life refers to thoughts and feelings connected to the self-perceived significance of one’s own life (Steger and Frazier, 2005). When one’s life meaning has been threatened, he/she will be motivated to restore their meaning in life. Previous research has established numerous threats that might undermine one’s perception of meaning in life, such as interpersonal rejection (Zadro, Williams, and Richardson 2004). The present research suggests an important and very common threat: one’s feeling of powerlessness.

Individuals experience feelings of powerlessness in everyday settings. This ubiquitous feeling of powerlessness can result in an aversive experience associated with uncertainty, self-doubt, and negative emotions (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee, 2003). To alleviate this aversive experience, consumers tend to restore a sense of power by purchasing status-related products (Rucker and Galinsky, 2008). While the need to restore power is certainly an important individual motivator, we suggest that another motivator might be just as influential: restoring one’s meaning in life. Despite the ubiquity of instances where one might feel powerless in society, as well as the power of the search for meaning in life as a motivator, we are aware of no research that explore the relationship between feelings of powerlessness and the search for meaning in life. The present research addresses this gap by examining whether feelings of powerlessness can influence one’s motivation to search for and restore meaning in life.

One way an individual who feels powerless might attempt to mitigate that feeling is through consumption activities. Prior research has shown that nostalgic products can activate consumers’ memories of the significant events they have experienced and enhance consumers’ perceptions of connectedness with important others (Wildschut et al., 2010). We suggest that both of these experiences should help consumers perceive their life as meaningful. Therefore, we predict that the motivation to search for meaning in life resulting from feelings of powerlessness will increase consumers’ preferences for nostalgic products.

We conducted four studies to test these propositions. Study 1 measured the individual differences in power and examined its relationship with preference for nostalgic products. We recruited 111 participants at QQ Survey, a Chinese website similar to Mturk. Participants first completed a scale to measure their sense of power and then reported overall attitudes toward an advertisement for instant noodles that was manipulated to elicit feelings of nostalgia versus a control. Results showed a significant power × nostalgia interaction (β = .61, t(107) = 2.11, p = .037). As hypothesized, increased feelings of powerlessness were positively related to preference for the nostalgic noodle product (β = .44, 95% CI = .887, .002), but not the control (β = 0.17, 95% CI = -.199, .534).

Study 2 used a controlled experiment to test the main effect again. We recruited 196 participants at QQ Survey and randomly assigned them to the high-power, the low-power, or the control condition. We primed power firstly by asking participants to find out at least 10 words from a 10 × 10 grid. The words were related to high power (e.g., boss and control), low power (e.g., subordinate and submissive), or irrelevant to power (e.g., music and paper). Then participants were asked to choose between two concerts, one playing nostalgic music and the other playing non-nostalgic music. A Chi-square test suggested a significant effect of power (χ²(2) = 23.32, p<.001). Low-power participants were more likely to choose the nostalgic concert than high-power participants (100% vs. 60%, χ²(1) = 24.12, p <.001) and the ones in the control condition (100% vs. 70.83%, χ²(1)= 16.39, p <.001). No differences were found between the high-power condition and the control condition (χ²(1)= 1.27, p =.18).

Study 3 aimed to test the underlying process. Forty eight participants were recruited. We first manipulated power by asking participants to recall an experience in which they had high power or low power. After that, participants indicated to what extent they wanted to search for meaning in life. Then they were asked to make a choice among four real snack products, two nostalgic and two non-nostalgic. A Chi-square test on the product choice showed a significant effect of powerlessness on nostalgic preference (χ²(3)=3.46, p=.06). Next, we used a bootstrapping approach to test the mediating process. Results indicated that after controlling for the effect of emotion (β = 0.25, p =.32), low power led to a stronger motivation to search for meaning in life (β = -1.05, p =.002), which then increased the likelihood of choosing nostalgic products (β = .94, p =.03). Power had no direct effect on choice (β = -.91, p =.23). Further, the mediating effect was negative and had a 95% confidence interval that excluded zero (β = -.98, 95% CI=[-3.29,—.10]). These results support the proposed mediation process.

Study 4 aimed to examine a boundary condition. We recruited 176 participants from Mturk and randomly assigned them to two power: low power vs. high power) × 2 (meaning in life: reading vs. no reading) between-participants design. Participants were first assigned to either read an article that suggested that merely reading can provide meaning in life, or read nothing. Then participants were made to feel powerless or powerful by imagining that they are an employee or a boss. At last, they were asked to choose a soup brand among the four real soup brands, two nostalgic and two non-nostalgic. A logistic regression revealed a significant power × reading interaction (β = 5.76, p =.016). More importantly, low-power participants who were not provided the article were more likely to choose the nostalgic soup brands than high-power participants (72.1% vs. 52.2%, χ²(1)= 3.74, p =.053). However, in the reading condition, there was no significant difference.

In conclusion, the four studies provide consistent evidence that consumers who feel powerless will prefer nostalgic products, and that this effect is mediated by motivation to search for meaning in life. These studies provide a new explanation for how individuals cope with feeling powerless. Beyond the theoretical contributions, this research also provides important implications on marketing practice.

REFERENCES


