

POWER, SELF-CONSTRUAL, AND BRAND PREFERENCES

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of coercive power on brand preferences and the moderating role of self-construal. The results of the study show that interdependent self-construal moderates the effects of coercive power on brand preferences. When interdependence and independence were added in the same model, there is no significant moderating effect of independence on brand preferences. For brands associated with status, participants who are low in interdependence indicate a higher preference in the low power condition compared to the high power condition. For brands not associated with status, participants who are low in interdependence indicate a higher preference in the high power condition compared to the low power condition. These results are not valid for those high in interdependence. There is no difference in brand preferences between the low and high power conditions for interdependents.

Keywords: Power, Self-Construal, Brand Preferences

Introduction

Power is broadly defined as asymmetrical outcome control via an individual's ability to withhold or administer rewards and punishment to others (Briñol et al. 2007; Fiske and Berdahl 2007). Power has been called one of the most pervasive and inescapable social forces affecting our behavior, perception, and choice (Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012). Feelings of powerfulness and powerlessness have been shown to affect the ability of consumers to pursue goals (Guinote 2008), the amount of money consumers spend on themselves versus others (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2010), feelings of social distance (Lammers et al. 2012), and willingness to take action (Magee, Galinsky, and Gruenfeld 2007).

The majority of research on power's effects in consumer spending focuses on general social power and looks at how states of high versus low power affect behavior and perceptions, the field has typically been agnostic to the type of power being exercised or experienced. French and Raven (1959) identified five sources of power: Coercive, reward, legitimate, referent, and expert power. This research focuses on coercive power which is defined as the ability to gain compliance through the distribution (or threat) of punishment (French and Raven 1959).

The way in which power holders yield their power is dependent on cultural and chronic identity traits such as self-construal that influence the type of chronic goals a power holder may have (Howard, Gardner, and Thompson 2007; Torelli and Shavitt 2010; 2011). A goal of the present research is to specifically understand how self-spending propensities of consumers', who have independent versus interdependent self-concepts, vary at different stages of coercive power. We also examine the moderating roles of the status of the brand in these relations.

Conceptual Framework

States of Power

People experiencing high power are motivated to achieve (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003). Elevated power is associated with higher levels of self-efficacy, or assessments of one's own effectiveness, and competence (Falbo and Peplau 1980). The association of elevated power with control and self-efficacy suggests that people who feel powerful are less likely to engage in socially normative behaviors (Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003). People who feel powerful are more likely to assume that others will think and feel the same way that they do, even when others do not have the same information.

Previous research demonstrated that being powerless is an aversive state, and those in low power tend to spend more for high status products than those in high power (Rucker and Galinsky 2008). According to the compensatory model of consumption, the acquisition of status can increase one's felt sense of power. Rucker et al. (2011b) induced participants into a low- or high-power state and then gave them a pen that had been advertised in terms of either status or performance. After receiving the high status pen, low-power participants felt more powerful, but when the pen was associated with quality they did not.

According to the BAS/BIS Theory, high-power states should make people more self-oriented and make them feel more valuable, whereas low-power states should shift attention and value to others. Consistent with this idea, Rucker, and colleagues (2011a) found that when purchasing for others, low-power participants purchased three times as many chocolates as high-power participants. In contrast, when purchasing for self, high power participants purchased twice as many chocolates than low-power participants. In another study, when participants had been given a pen to keep (i.e., it was their own possession), high-power participants indicated the pen was of greater value compared to baseline condition. In contrast, low-power participants indicated the pen was of less value relative to baseline condition. Importantly, no effects emerged when participants were asked to evaluate the same pen when they did not own it (Dubois, Denton, and Rucker 2011). Given the evidence above, we anticipate that states of power will affect consumers' preference for brands differing in status.

Power, Status, and Spending on the Self

Previous research has shown that power has an effect on status consumption. For instance, Rucker and Galinsky (2008) found that placing consumers in a state of low power increased their desire to acquire status-related products. When products had an association to status, low-power participants were willing to pay more for objects associated with status compared to high-power and baseline participants. In contrast, when products had no association to status, power had no significant effect on participants' willingness to pay. Rucker and Galinsky (2009), further found that low power participants preferred a more visible, larger logo on a high-end piece of clothing than high power participants. Findings by Wong and Shavitt (2010) suggest that this status-seeking account might be most prevalent among those with a vertical individualism cultural orientation. Wong and Shavitt indicated that those with a vertical individualism orientation might accept poor treatment from an individual high in the social hierarchy, whose authority they would recognize and accept, but feel threatened when it came from an individual lower in the social hierarchy who had no right to disrespect them. Another study by Rucker and Galinsky (2012) revealed that for products unrelated to status, having power lead to more spending on oneself compared to those low in power. For products associated with status, a state of low power lead to more spending on oneself than a state of high power.

What about the effects of high power on consumption? Are there any conditions in which the powerful would be more attracted to luxury objects than the powerless? In the high-power states, consumers should attach greater value to items that are self-expressive or respond their personal needs and goals. In support of this idea, Rucker and Galinsky (2009) found that individuals having a personal sense of power were persuaded by hard-sell advertising that emphasized utilitarian properties of products. They held more favorable attitudes towards a high quality product of low status, and displayed less concern for visible, conspicuous consumption.

Self-Construal and Power

Self-construal refers to the way in which people see themselves as being defined interdependently with others or independently of others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Those with interdependent self-construal (interdependents) see the self as being connected to and defined by connections to others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Those with an independent self-construal (independents) understand the self as being separate and different from others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Interdependents emphasize the value of attending to others and creating social harmony while independents emphasize the value of attending to the self and expressing unique attributes (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Torelli and Shavitt (2011) argue that those with independent self-construal have a personalized sense of power while those with interdependent self-construal have a socialized sense of power. A personalized sense of power suggests the power holder is motivated to influence others in order to pursue self-centered goals and advance their own status and power through the use of force and other behaviors (Torelli and Shavitt 2011). A socialized sense of power suggest that the power holder will pursue pro social goals and be motivated to avoid negative outcomes for others by providing help (Torelli and Shavitt 2011). Those with a socialized sense of power will engage in behaviors that allow them to attain goals related to social responsibility (Torelli and Shavitt 2011). How a power holder chooses to use his or her power is largely informed by the chronic goals and motivations that he or she has as a result of his or her culturally imbued values and self-construal (Howard, Gardner, and Thompson 2007; Torelli and Shavitt 2010). Previous research has indeed shown that interdependent self-construal moderated the effects of power on dispute resolution (Howard, Gardner, and Thompson 2007). Howard and colleagues (2007) found that in the case of dyadic conflict, powerful individuals holding an interdependent self-construal were more generous in resolving disputes with opponents. In intergroup disputes, powerful interdependent teams of negotiators were actually less generous than independent teams. Therefore, we anticipate that self-construal will affect consumers' reactions in different states of coercive power (low vs. high).

Study

Study was run using brands as non-status vs. high status items. We had 2 brands from 3 product categories: sunglasses (Coppertone, Gucci), jeans (Levis, Calvin Klein), and watches (Citizen, Rolex).

Manipulation of the coercive power was accomplished using a three stage process. Participants assigned to the high-power condition received the following instructions: "Please take 5 minutes during this section to recall, visualize, and then write about a specific incident in which you had power over another individual or individuals. By power, we mean a situation in which you controlled another person or persons through the ability to give undesirable assignments (e.g. at work, home, or in a club/organization), physical force, the threat of distasteful work, threat of punishment (like a fine, firing, grounding or expulsion), or by making things difficult or unpleasant in the face of non-compliance. Please describe this situation in which you had power, the punishment, why/how you were in a position to control the punishment, and how you used the punishment to gain compliance." Then, they were given the following instruction "Continue thinking about the situation in which you had power to gain compliance from others through threat of punishment like giving undesirable assignments, physical force, possibility of giving distasteful work or making things difficult or unpleasant in the face of resistance. Please reflect on and describe how you felt in this situation." Finally, they had answered some questions about the coercive power such as: "I could/did give others undesirable assignments or work", "I could/did make work or things difficult for others." (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree).

Participants in the low-power condition were given different instructions: "Please take 5 minutes during this section to recall, visualize, and then write about a specific incident in which someone had power over you. By power, we mean a situation in which someone controlled you through the ability to give undesirable assignments (e.g. at work, school or in a club/organization), physical force, the threat of distasteful work, the threat of punishment (like detention, grounding or expulsion), or by making things difficult or unpleasant in the face of non-compliance. Please describe this situation in which someone had power over you through the use or threat of punishment, what that punishment was, how the other person used it to gain compliance from you, and what you did."

Then, they were given the following instruction, “Continue thinking about the situation in which you were subject to someone who had power over you through the ability to give you undesirable assignments, the use of physical force to make you do something, threat of giving you distasteful work/tasks, through threat of punishment (like grounding, expulsion, fines) or making things difficult or unpleasant in the face of non-compliance. Please reflect on and describe how you felt in this situation.” Finally, they had answered some questions about coercive power: “Could/did give me undesirable assignments or work?”, “Could/did make work or situations difficult for me.” (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). To ensure that our power manipulation induced different states of power, immediately after the manipulation participants were asked how powerful they felt (on a 7-point scale where 1 = extremely powerless and 7 = extremely powerful).

The instructions were then as follows: “Imagine a situation where people would visit you at your home. Below are two brands of a specific product that you could have. Think about how your friends, family, or acquaintances will view you and how using this brand will make you feel. Please indicate your level of preference for each brand by allocating 100 points between them. Your allocations must add up to 100 points.”

Design and Procedure. We drew the participants from an online panel (N=102). The average age of participants was 33.5; 56% were men. After power manipulation, participants evaluated the brands, then completed the 24 item self-construal scale (Singelis 1994) (a 7-point scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree), which consists of statements measuring both independence (5 items; $\alpha=.70$) and interdependence (5 items; $\alpha=.80$). Consumption setting was public.

Results

Manipulation Check. As expected, there was a significant main effect of coercive power on feelings of power ($t(99) = 78.62, p = .000$). Participants in the high power condition reported feeling more powerful ($M_{\text{High power}} = 4.85$) than the participants in the low power condition ($M_{\text{Low power}} = 3.20$). These results confirmed that the manipulations succeeded in affecting relative states of power.

Preference. We examined the hypothesis that self-construal interacts with the effects of power manipulation on willingness to pay. Factor score values of self-construal were used in analyses. The status variable was coded such that high status brands had a value of 1, and other (low-status) brands had a value of zero. We ran repeated measures Glm including the interdependence and independence measures of self-construal, power manipulation (high versus low coercive power), status and all the interaction effects. The results revealed a significant main effect of status ($\beta = 21.12, t(86) = 5.64, p = .000$), a two-way interaction of power manipulation and interdependent self ($\beta = 8.22, t(86) = 1.99, p < .05$), and a three-way interaction of power manipulation, interdependent self-construal, and status ($\beta = 16.20, t(86) = 2.78, p < .005$). In order to gain further insights into the three-way interaction, we ran two separate regression models for non-status and high status brands. Results revealed significant two way interactions of power manipulation and interdependent self-construal for both high status brands ($\beta = 7.97, t(86) = 1.93, p < .05$), and non-status brands ($\beta = -8.22, t(86) = 1.99, p < .05$). No other significant effects emerged.

We followed the post-hoc probing procedure (Aiken and West 1991) to further examine the interaction, plotting mean willingness-to-pay for participants in the low and high power conditions. We included interdependent self-construal as a moderator. We find that participants low in interdependence in the low power condition indicated a higher preference for brands associated with status compared to those in the high power condition ($M_{\text{Low power}} = 61.23, M_{\text{High power}} = 51.41, t(86) = 1.86, p < .1$). For participants high in interdependence, preference for brands associated with status was not significantly different between the low and high power conditions ($M_{\text{Low power}} = 60.19, M_{\text{High power}} = 66.31, t(86) = 1.01, p > .1$). Figure 1 illustrates the slopes.

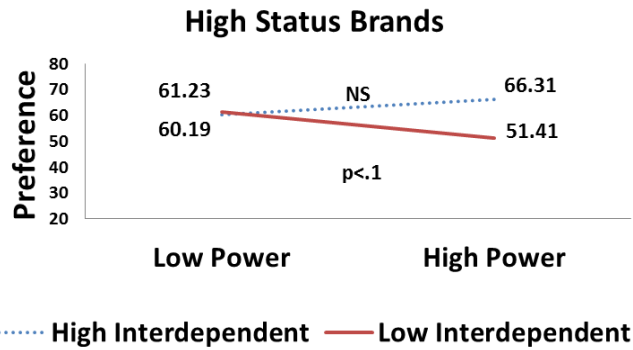


Figure 1. Effects of Coercive Power on Preferences for a High Status Brand: Interdependence as Moderator

For brands not associated with status, participants who are low in interdependence indicated a higher preference in the high power condition compared to the low power condition ($M_{\text{High power}} = 48.59$, $M_{\text{Low power}} = 38.82$, $t(86) = 1.83$, $p < .05$), but for participants who are high in interdependence, there was no effect of power on preference for non-status brands ($M_{\text{Low Power}} = 40.36$, $M_{\text{High power}} = 33.69$, $t(86) = 1.10$, $p > .1$). Figure 2 illustrates the slopes.

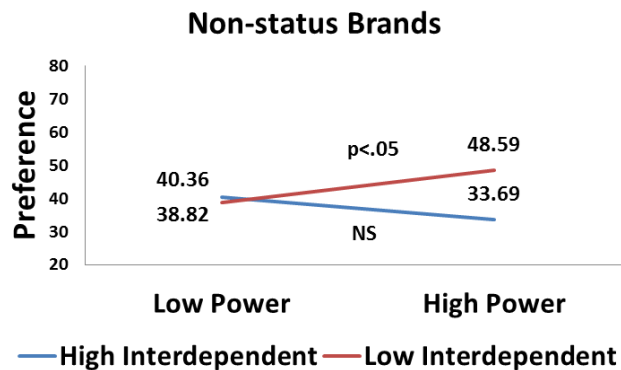


Figure 2. Effects of Coercive Power on Preferences for a Non-Status Brand: Interdependence as Moderator

Discussion

This study shows that interdependent self-construal moderates the effects of coercive power on brand preferences. When interdependence and independence were added in the same model, there is no significant moderating effect of independence on brand preferences.

For brands associated with status, participants who are low in interdependence indicate a higher preference in the low power condition compared to the high power condition. This finding is consistent with prior research which showed that being powerless is an aversive state, and people tend to compensate for the lack of power by acquiring status products and display them (Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Rucker and Galinsky 2009; Rucker et al. 2011b). This result is not valid for those high in interdependence. There is no difference in brand preferences between the low and high power conditions for interdependents. Interdependents associate power with benevolence and helpful behavior (Shavitt, Torelli, and Riemer 2011), but they do not associate it with personal status. While experiencing power, interdependents seek for harmony and inclusion within the group. For this reason, they may not need to acquire status products to compensate for the lack of power.

For brands not associated with status, participants low in interdependence indicate a higher preference in the high power condition compared to the low power condition. A state of high power increases the value of the self that spills over into how consumers behave. When there is no possibility of conspicuous consumption, when the items are not associated with status, propensities of power will be more prevalent than psychological needs of power (Rucker et al. 2009; Dubois, Denton, and Rucker 2011).

Based on this, a higher preference in the high power condition might be expected. Once more, there is no difference in brand preferences between the low and high power conditions for interdependents. Interdependent people experiencing elevated power will be more other focused, seeking harmony and inclusion within the group (Shavitt et al. 2011). Therefore, they would try to find ways to fit in with others, and preference would not be higher in the high power condition compared to the low power condition.

Additional issues are worth investigating further. Spillover effects might be examined by investigating consumers' evaluations of the non-status vs. high status products. Since the consumption setting was public in this study, the effects at a private setting are not known yet. Also, this study focused specifically on the effects of coercive power. The effects under the other types of power should further be investigated.

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