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Looking Better By Making Others Look Worse: the Competitive Spillovers of Sustainability

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With two extensive eye-tracking studies, we reveal that the introduction of a new attribute in a product assortment can increase the attention given to competing products. Moreover, we demonstrate that this increased attention, reflecting a verification search, negatively affects consumers' attitudes and choices for competing products.

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Low-Power State Promotes Variety-Seeking

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We propose that low-power state promotes variety-seeking. This effect occurs because consumers in low-power state desire sense of control and variety-seeking is a way to restore it. Furthermore, the effect is reduced when consumer knowledge in a certain consumption domain is high and when the low power state is stable.

Variety plays a critical role in consumer choice, and companies often stimulate purchase by constructing an assortment. Previous research examines factors influencing consumers' variety-seeking tendency from multiple perspectives, such as personality traits (Ariely and Levav 2000; Berlyne 1970), product characteristics (Gourville and Soman, 2005), and environmental factors (Levav and Zhu, 2009). However, how consumers' internal psychological factors affect variety-seeking remains an open question worthy of further exploration.

Contributing new insights to existing work on the topic, the current research tackles this question by examining how power states, one of the key psychological states of consumers, impact variety-seeking. We propose that low-power states promote consumers' variety-seeking tendency which is rooted in the compensatory value of variety-seeking. As an important basis of social hierarchy, power refers to asymmetrical control over valuable resources (Magee & Galinsky, 2008) which can affect consumers' thinking, feeling, perception, and behavior (Guinote, 2017). Low power is an aversive state. Consumers in low-power state often feel out of control in relation to their own or others' behaviors (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Previous research suggests that loss of control leads to many negative consequences. When people are in low-power states, they are motivated to change this aversive condition. Previous studies have shown that offering multiple choices can enhance consumers' sense of autonomy and happiness, and even the mere exercise of making choices can improve consumers' sense of control (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). Similarly, the behavior of seeking variety can make consumers think that they are independent and autonomous (Kim & Drolet, 2003), and such autonomy serves as an important component of sense of control. Therefore, we argue that if consumers have the motivation to fulfill a need for control, they will choose variety. Our hypothesis is supported to an extent by Inesi et al. (2011), who note that when consumers are deprived of control, they prefer a large choice set to small one, as a large choice set (vs. a small choice set) contains more various items. We hypothesize that need for control mediates the effect of low power state on variety-seeking.

However, if consumers have an alternative means to increase their power state, they will not seek variety. We probe the moderating role of consumer knowledge. For consumers in low-power state, knowledge, as a source of power states (French and Raven, 1959), can compensate for a lack of sense of control. When choosing knowledge as an alternative means to enhance sense of control, they would therefore be less likely to choose variety. In contrast, consumers in high-power state make decisions based more on their own preferences than on their level of consumer knowledge, hence, the level of knowledge will not affect their variety-seeking tendency. We hypothesize that consumer knowledge moderates the effect of power state on variety-seeking, such that when consumer knowledge is high (vs. low), consumers in low-power state show a lower variety-seeking tendency.

Furthermore, stability is an important factor that has been shown to influence the extent to which consumers strive to change or maintain their power state (Maner and Mead 2010). If consumers in low-power state choose variety to restore sense of control, we predict that they would seek variety only when the current state is unstable, because they think that they can struggle out from the aversive state. However, consumers would less likely to choose variety when they find it is hard to change the current state. Hence, the effect of low-power on variety-seeking will be moderated by whether one's sense of power is stable. That is, they choose variety when the low-power state is unstable.

Study 1

This pilot study gave a correlational evidence for the relationship between power and variety-seeking. We analyzed transaction data from jd.com, a popular online ecommerce platform in China. We use consumers' level of membership as a proxy variable to measure power states (Magee and Galinsky, 2008). 1702 reviews concerning ten products, including transaction information and consumers' level of membership from jd.com were captured through R software during late January, 2018. Membership level, from registered member to diamond VIP member, was coded from 1 to 5 (1 = lowest membership level, 5 = highest membership level). Results indicated that membership level was negatively correlated with variety-seeking ($r(1702) = -0.34, p < 0.001, Fisher's Z = 0.35$). However, from a correlational analysis we could not claim there was a causal relation between power state and variety-seeking. There might be a number of alternative explanations for this correlation. For example, high membership level may represent an experienced consumer for whom a tendency toward variety-seeking might be reduced, or it may represent consumers with a strong internal tendency toward variety-seeking. Therefore, we conducted four experiments to test for a causal relationship between power states and variety-seeking by manipulating power states directly.

Study 2

Study 2 aimed to provide direct evidence that consumers in low-power state (vs. high-power state) were more likely to seek variety, by manipulating participants' power state. Following Garbinsky, Klesse, and Aaker (2014), 100 students were assigned into high-power (vs. low-power) condition by manipulating power states through role play. We measured variety-seeking by counting the number of different colors participants chose. A general linear model analysis was performed with power states (high-power state = 2, low-power state = 1) as the independent variable and variety-seeking as the dependent variable. Results demonstrated that the main effect of power state was significant ($F(1,96) = 7.21, p = 0.009, \eta^2 = 0.07$), and participants in the low-power state were more likely to choose variety than those in the high-power state ($M_{\text{low-power state}} = 4.33, SD = 0.99$ vs. $M_{\text{high-power state}} = 3.61, SD = 1.58$). The results held when we added appealing and liking as covariates.

Study 3

Study 3 aimed to provide convergent evidence for the main effect by using different experimental context, and probe the underlying mechanism of need for control. 180 participants were first asked to complete an episodic priming manipulation of power (Galinsky et al., 2003), and then were asked to complete a chocolate shopping

decision task. We directly measured need for control (Burger and Cooper, 1979; Consiglio et al., 2018). Two research assistants majoring in English rated the participants' recall tasks ("To what extent, did the participants' recall task reflect his/her power states?" 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). A one-way ANOVA was performed on the average of the two RAs' scores. The results showed that the power state of participants in the high-power group was significantly higher than that of participants in the low-power group ($M_{\text{high-power state}} = 4.61$, $SD = 1.60$; $M_{\text{low-power state}} = 2.29$, $SD = 0.57$; $F(1,174) = 164.19$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 2.73$). A general linear model analysis indicated that the main effect of power state was significant and participants in low-power state were more likely to choose variety than those in high-power state ($M_{\text{low-power state}} = 4.23$, $SD = 1.40$; $M_{\text{high-power state}} = 3.56$, $SD = 1.52$; $F(1,174) = 9.27$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$). Furthermore, the indirect effect of need for control was significant (95% CI = [-0.40, -0.03]), indicating that the mediating effect of need for control was significant (see Fig. 1).

Study 4

Study 4 examined whether consumer knowledge moderates the effect of low-power state on variety-seeking. 120 university students were randomly assigned to two groups (low power state vs. high power state), with measuring consumer knowledge (Clarkson, Janiszewski, and Cinelli, 2013). The scenarios and measurement of variety-seeking were consistent with those in Study 3. The results indicated that the interaction of power states and consumer knowledge was significant ($B = 0.20$, $t = 2.41$, $p = 0.02$, Cohen's $d = 0.41$), the main effect of consumer knowledge was significant ($B = -0.33$, $t = -3.87$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.70$), but the main effect of power state was not significant ($p > 0.1$). Further spotlight analysis illustrated that in the condition of low consumer knowledge (vs. high consumer knowledge), consumers in low-power state showed a higher variety-seeking tendency ($B = -1.04$, $t = -4.53$, $p < 0.001$, [-1.50, -0.59]), but consumer knowledge did not affect the variety-seeking tendency of participants in high-power state ($B = -0.23$, $t = -0.04$, $p = 0.37$, [-0.72, 0.27], *ns*). Furthermore, in the condition of low consumer knowledge, participants in low-power state showed higher variety-seeking tendency than those in high-power state ($B = -0.57$, $t = -2.875$, $p = 0.01$, [-0.97, -0.17]). However, in the condition of high consumer knowledge, there was no significant difference between consumers in high or low-power states in variety-seeking tendency ($B = 0.11$, $t = 0.56$, $p = 0.58$, [-0.28, 0.51], *ns*).

Study 5

Study 5 examined the moderating role of stability. 201 university students were randomly assigned to 2 (power: low vs. high) \times 2 (stability: stable vs. unstable) between-subjects design. We manipulated power and stability using workplace contract. After that, participants saw a list of six activities and were asked to choose six activities they would like to do over the next week (adapted from Etkin, 2016). Participants could choose six different activities or the same one(s) many times. The results of MANOVA showed that there was a significant interaction of power and stability ($F(1, 197) = 6.23$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$), but no main effect of power ($F(1, 197) = 0.19$, *ns*) or stability ($F(1, 197) = 0.40$, *ns*). Planned contrast revealed that for low-power participants, when they were in unstable condition, they showed higher variety-seeking tendency ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.62$) than they were in stable condition ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.69$, $F = 4.89$, $p = 0.03$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$). But there were no significant differences between stable ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.69$) and unstable condition ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.88$, $F = 0.19$, $p = 0.03$) for those in high-power states. The results

still held if we put marital status as a covariate ($F(1, 197) = 6.55$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$).

General Discussion

Variety-seeking is an important characteristic in contemporary society and it is influenced by numerous factors. The current research explores whether, why, and when power state affects variety-seeking. Five studies, including secondary data from jd.com and experiments using different contexts, provide convergent evidence that variety-seeking can be used to compensate for lacking sense of control.

Our research extends the literature on power states, variety-seeking, and consumer knowledge in several ways. First, we enrich the related research on compensatory consumption (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Previous literature on compensation consumption has focused mainly on symbolic or status products (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Rucker, Hu, & Galinsky, 2014), but our research demonstrates that consumers also perform strategic compensation for ordinary products through variety-seeking. Second, we contribute to the power states literature by showing that a lower-power state promotes variety-seeking behavior. Third, we demonstrate that consumer knowledge moderates the effect of power state on variety-seeking, providing a more nuanced understanding of how power state affects variety-seeking and how consumer knowledge influences decision making.

Our results also have managerial implications for businesses and marketing managers. First, in market segmentation, companies can consider the strategy of increasing the variety of products if consumers have the characteristics of low-power states (such as low income and low social status). Companies can enhance consumer knowledge of target groups if they do not want consumers to switch to competitors due to variety-seeking. Second, although many sellers always emphasize variety in their promotion activities, our results suggest that such advertising strategies may not be effective for consumers with rich knowledge in a certain domain. For those in high-power state and with rich consumer knowledge, a single and deep strategy is better than one of variety.

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