



The Cake Looks Yummy on the Shelf up There: The Interactive Effect of Retail Shelf Position and Consumers' Personal Sense of Power on Indulgent Choice

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Abstract

This paper advances our understanding of consumer responses to retail product displays by examining the interplay between the vertical shelf position of choice options and consumers' personal sense of power in determining their preference for indulgent options. Six experiments show that when consumers choose from assortments placed on a low shelf position, requiring them to lower their heads, those higher (vs. lower) in personal power are more likely to choose an indulgent option over its prudent counterpart. In contrast, when choosing from assortments placed on a high shelf position, requiring consumers to raise their heads, those lower (vs. higher) in personal power are more likely to choose an indulgent option. This effect hinges on a mismatch (vs. match) between consumers' personal sense of power and that triggered by the products' retail shelf position, increasing affective discomfort and guiding consumers, thus, towards indulgent choices.

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The retail environment is a key determinant of product choice. Proctor and Gamble's now famous "First Moment of Truth" (i.e., FMOT) refers to the paramount importance of the first three to seven seconds consumers behold a product on a store shelf before its selection, underscoring the critical role of shelf displays in shaping consumer choices. Not surprisingly then, a small but growing body of research has started to examine how different shelving-related cues influence attention (Atalay, Bodur, and Rasolofoarison 2012), consumer inferences (Valenzuela and Raghuram 2009) and even brand choice (Chandon, Hutchinson, Bradlow, and Young 2009). While these works, together, implicate product shelf location as a driver of consumer response, the effects of consumers' shelf location-induced physical move-

ments on their product choices remain, to the best of our knowledge, unexamined.

Vertical head movements are an integral part of the retail shopping experience; consumers routinely look up or down to locate products on store shelves. Might such vertical movements actually influence consumer choice? This paper contributes to our understanding of how shelf displays affect consumer behavior by demonstrating that consumers' directed movements (i.e., looking up or down) to locate a product on the shelf interact with their innate, personal sense of power to influence their likelihood of making an indulgent choice. Specifically, we draw on both research on the ergonomics of self-perception and power (Beck, Cañamero, and Bard 2010; Huang et al. 2011; Lance and Marsella 2007; Ramseyer and Tschacher 2014; Yap et al. 2013) and the broader literature on trait-context fit (Chen, Langner, and Mendoza-Denton 2009; Josephs et al. 2006) to propose and demonstrate that consumers with a lower [higher] personal sense of power are more likely to make indulgent choices from high [low] shelf positions, which require them to make upward

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[downward] head movements, cuing, contextually, an increased [decreased] sense of power.

In doing so, this research makes three conceptual advances. First, it documents the role of consumers' movement-induced sense of power as a retail-based influence on product choices. It is the first, to the best of our knowledge, to take a motivational perspective on consumer reactions to retail shelf position, in contrast to the perceptual and cognitive perspective taken by extant investigations into this retailing domain (see Valenzuela and Raghurir 2015 for a recent review). Second, and more specifically, it suggests that such product choices are driven not just by the previously examined context-based inductions of power (Briñol, Petty, and Wagner 2009; Huang et al. 2011; Yap et al. 2013) but in fact by its match or mismatch with the personal sense of power consumers bring to these retail contexts. In doing so, this research advances our current understanding of consumer reactions to retail shelf position by implicating the consumer as a key moderator of shelf position – preference link. Finally, the paper implicates a mismatch-induced increase in affective discomfort as the driver of the interactive effect of shelf position and consumer's personal power on their likelihood of indulgent choice. Next we draw upon prior research on consumers' sense of power, and its link to head movements to derive our basic predictions. We then present six studies that test these predictions and end with a discussion of our findings.

Power and Vertical movement

Power, construed typically as “asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations” (Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012, p. 353), is a fundamental concept in the social sciences (Russell 1938). High power is connected with approach-related, positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors, with greater attention to rewarding aspects of the environment (Anderson and Berdahl 2002; see Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012 for recent review). Power comes either from individual dispositions (e.g., personality traits, physical characteristics, chemical levels) or/and situational contexts (e.g., authority/status/role, social interactions; Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson 2003), and can be activated (see Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012 for recent review) cognitively (e.g., priming; Smith and Trope 2006), structurally (e.g., role playing) and/or physically (e.g., posture; Hall, Coats, and LeBeau 2005).

Interestingly, a growing body of research documents the contribution of people's directed physical movements to their sense of power and self-esteem (Carney, Cuddy, and Yap 2010; Huang et al. 2011; Koo, Kwon, and Shavitt 2012; Ostinelli, Luna, Ringberg 2014; Van Kerckhove, Geuens, and Vermeir 2015). For instance, drawing on the notion that humans and other animals express high power through open, expansive postures, and low power through closed, contractive postures, Carney, Cuddy, and Yap (2010) show that short and simple high-power poses (as opposed to low-power poses) change behavior in ways consistent with an enhanced sense of power (see also Yap et al. 2013). Similarly, Huang et al. (2011) define body postures as one of the most proximate correlates of the manifestations of power while Ostinelli, Luna, Ringberg (2014) demonstrate that just by

imagining oneself moving upward versus downward, the self is also judged as more versus less worthy.

This is consistent with a diverse, and even more germane to our retail context, body of work, ranging from psychotherapy (Ramseyer and Tschacher 2014) to robotics (Beck, Cañamero, and Bard 2010), that documents the psychophysiological consequences of upward versus downward head movements. This research builds on the established premise that somatic biofeedback from facial and postural movements contribute significantly to emotional experience (Laird 1974; Izard 1993) to causally link head raises to a host of approach-related emotions such as pride and joy and head lowering to the avoidance-related feelings of shame, embarrassment, humiliation, and sadness (Shafir, Tsachor, and Welch 2016; Mignault and Chaudhari 2003). More specifically, some research (Lance and Marsella 2007) associates upward [downward] head turns with both greater [lower] dominance (i.e., how controlling and dominant versus controlled or submissive one feels) and arousal (i.e., how energized or soporific one feels) (Mehrabian and Russell 1974). As well, this is reflected in a causal connection between, more generally, expansive, upright physical postures, of which a raised head is a key component (Riskind and Gotay 1982), and more positive thoughts (Wilson and Peper 2004), more energy, and greater motivational levels and slumped, slouched postures, of which a lowered head is a key component, and lower motivational levels, greater helplessness and even depressiveness.

Notably, high power is characterized by an approach, achievement-oriented motivational state, accompanied by dominance, arousal and, more generally, positive emotions (and low power, with the converse; Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012). Thus, it seems reasonable to expect, given the aforementioned causal links between vertical head movements and these components of power, that upward [downward] head movements will produce, contextually, an increased [a decreased] sense of power. This is underscored by recent research (Van Kerckhove, Geuens, and Vermeir 2015) linking consumers' upward head movements with their preference for desirable, over feasible, products, which suggests that the effects of vertical movements on level of processing might be due, at least in part, to accompanying changes in consumers' sense of power (Koo, Kwon, and Shavitt 2012). More generally, the use of upward [downward] vertical head movements by humans (and other animals) to signal dominance [submission] to relevant social others (Mignault and Chaudhuri 2003) may also cause such movements to serve as self-signals of power (Bodner and Prelec 2003) reinforcing the causal link between vertical head movements and consumers' experienced sense of power.

In sum, we argue that consumers' upward [downward] head movements necessitated by products on a high [low] retail shelf will produce in them, implicitly, directly, and quickly (Huang et al. 2011), an increased [decreased] sense of power relative to when the products are at eye level, requiring no vertical head movements. More formally,

H1. When a product in a high [low] shelf position causes consumers to raise [lower] their heads, such a movement is likely to induce in them an increased [decreased] sense of power.

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