

Research Report

Consumer desire for control as a barrier to new product adoption

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Abstract

This research examines the relationship between desire for control and acceptance of new products. We hypothesize that desire for control—the need to personally control outcomes in one’s life—acts as a barrier to new product acceptance. Three experiments provide support for this hypothesis. This effect holds when desire for control is high as a dispositional trait (Studies 1 and 3) and when it is situationally induced (Study 2). We also identify an intervention to increase new product acceptance based on the idea that new products threaten one’s sense of control. Specifically, framing new products as potentially enhancing one’s sense of control increases acceptance of new products by those high in desire for control (Study 3). This finding offers some evidence for the underlying process and helps guide managerial actions.

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Desire for control is an innate motive or need to personally exert control over one’s surrounding environment and to produce desired results (Kelly, 1955; Leotti, Iyengar, & Ochsner, 2010). This desire has been identified as a fundamental motivator of people’s decisions and behaviors (Higgins, 2011; Leotti et al., 2010; Miller, 1979). Individual dispositions and situational factors can influence the degree to which a person desires control. A natural corollary of this motive is that the more people desire control, the more likely they are to avoid situations that require relinquishing control (Burger, 1992; Hui & Bateson, 1991).

In a consumption context, higher desire for control has been shown to increase consumers’ preference for larger assortment sizes (Inesi, Botti, Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2011), “lucky” products (Hamerman & Johar, 2013), and high-effort products

(Cutright & Samper, 2014). In this research, we examine whether desire for control influences one other important type of consumption decision, namely the willingness to accept new (vs. traditional) products (Gourville, 2006). The term “new products” refers to any product that is perceived as novel or unfamiliar by an individual consumer. We posit that consumers perceive a loss of control associated with the potential consumption of a new product. As a result, we hypothesize that high desire for control acts as a barrier to the acceptance of new (vs. traditional) products. We further propose that this obstacle to new product acceptance can be overcome by framing new products as having the capacity to increase one’s sense of control.

Desire for control and new product acceptance

Firms spend billions of dollars developing and marketing new products. Nevertheless, new products face persistently high failure rates. Over the past few decades, 40% to 90% of new products across different product categories have failed (Castellion & Markham, 2013; Dillon & Lafley, 2011; Gourville, 2006). These

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odds have remained stable over time, suggesting that transient factors such as the economic climate cannot fully account for such high failure rates (Gatignon & Robertson, 1989; Mukherjee & Hoyer, 2001). Research has revealed that more stable, psychological factors can often act as barriers to new product acceptance. For example, consumers tend to be less accepting of a new product if they are unable to mentally simulate its use (Zhao, Hoeffler, & Dahl, 2009), or if it is incongruent with consumers' extant product category schemas (Jhang, Grant, & Campbell, 2012).

We identify another potential psychological barrier to new product acceptance—the degree to which consumers desire control. As explained, desire for control is the need to *personally* exert control over one's surrounding environment. Both dispositional and situational factors can influence an individual's desire for control. Individual differences in desire for control can be reliably measured (Burger & Cooper, 1979). Prior work has shown that when situational factors reduce people's sense of control, a drive state is created that momentarily increases the desire for control (Cutright & Samper, 2014; Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009). The desire for control construct is distinct from risk aversion, which is defined as the likelihood of engaging in risky activities or decisions (Blais & Weber, 2006; Hammond & Horswill, 2001; Skinner, 1996; Woodward & Wallston, 1987). Desire for control is also different from locus of control, which is one's *belief* about whether events are controlled by external sources (i.e., luck, higher power) or the self (Rotter, 1966). Locus of control does not necessarily capture one's *desire* to personally control those events. Self-efficacy is one's belief in one's *ability* to influence events (regardless of whether one desires to personally control these events) (Bandura, 1977). Need for cognitive closure is the need to find an answer to end information processing specifically (Roets & Van Hiel, 2011). Therefore, desire for control is conceptually distinct from self-efficacy and need for cognitive closure as well.

Although we focus on documenting the effect of desire for control on acceptance of new products, we speculate that two complementary explanations might account for this effect. First, using a new product may entail changing prior routines or behaviors (e.g., Hoeffler, 2003), thereby reducing one's sense of mastery and control over the external environment (Skinner, 1996). As a result, consumers with higher desire for control may be less accepting of new products. Relatedly, new products are also often incongruent with consumers' prior cognitive categories or schemas (Jhang et al., 2012). Products that do not fit preexisting cognitive categories are harder to make sense of and cause more uncertainty (Jhang et al., 2012; Kagan, 1972), resulting in a lower sense of control over the environment. In sum, given that new products could pose a threat to one's perceived sense of control, we propose that consumers with higher desire for control will be less likely to accept new (vs. traditional) products. In contrast, a perceived threat to control posed by new (vs. traditional) products should not impact acceptance among consumers with lower desire for control. We test these hypotheses in our studies. If people with high desire for control are less willing to accept a new product

because it threatens their sense of control, then framing the product as one that increases a sense of control should attenuate this effect. This finding would also provide process support for our proposed explanation. We test this proposition in Study 3.

Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to provide an initial test of the hypothesis that higher levels of trait desire for control are associated with lower rates of acceptance of new (vs. traditional) products.

Participants and method

Two hundred and sixty-four MTurk participants ($M_{\text{Age}} = 35.37$, $SD = 12.49$, 54.2% females) were randomly assigned to either the new-product or the traditional-product condition. At the start of the session, participants completed Burger and Cooper's (1979) Desirability of Control Scale, which is the most widely used measure of desire for control (see Appendix I). Then they completed a filler task consisting of over 50 additional personality items (Singelis, 1994; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). All participants were then presented with information about a product—toothpaste—that consisted of a headline and four bullet-pointed pieces of information. Three of these bullet points were held constant across conditions (minty taste, non-fluoride, animal-friendly development processes). In the new-product condition, the headline read "The New Formula Toothpaste," and the first bullet point described the toothpaste as keeping teeth white with a *new* whitening formula. In the traditional-product condition, the headline read "The Classic Formula Toothpaste," and the first bullet point described the toothpaste as keeping teeth white with a *classic* whitening formula. A separate pretest confirmed that the manipulation influences the product's perceived newness and familiarity as expected, but does not impact its perceived quality or status, or feelings of disgust. Details of this pretest, as well as subsequent pretests, are presented in the technical appendix.

As a measure of acceptance of the product, participants indicated whether they would consider buying the toothpaste on a dichotomous "yes" (coded 1) versus "no" (coded 0) scale. Participants were also asked whether they could guess the purpose of the study, which none of them were able to do.

Results and discussion

A logistic regression with condition (−1: traditional; 1: new), desire for control (mean-centered), and their interaction as predictors indicated greater willingness to buy the traditional product than the new product ($\beta = -0.366$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.48$, $p = .034$). Importantly, this main effect was moderated by desire for control ($\beta = -0.580$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.83$, $p = .028$). As shown in Fig. 1, spotlight analysis revealed that, as predicted, among participants with higher desire for control (1 standard deviation above the mean), willingness to consider the new product was lower than that for the traditional

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