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Research Report

Oppositional brand choice: Using brands to respond to relationship frustration ☆

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Abstract

Within close relationships individuals feel a variety of emotions toward their partner, often including frustration. In the present research we suggest a novel way in which individuals respond to frustration with their partner is through their choice of brands. Specifically, we introduce the concept of *oppositional brand choice*, which we define as occurring when individuals choose a brand for themselves that is in opposition to the one they believe their partner prefers. Importantly, we posit that this effect is specific to individuals who are low in relationship power. Across several studies, including a subliminal priming lab study, we find that people who are lower in relationship power and are frustrated with their partner make significantly more oppositional brand choices. Further, we find that this effect is not due to a shift in underlying brand preferences. The current research has implications for theory in brand choice, close relationships, emotions, and social power.

Keywords: Oppositional brand choices; Emotions; Social power

Imagine you've come home after a long day of work to find that your partner has left dirty dishes in the sink and clothes on the floor — again. Or, imagine that your partner borrowed your car, only to return it to you with an empty tank of gas. It is the third time this month that this has happened. How would you feel? What would you do to respond to this feeling?

Within close relationships, individuals feel a variety of emotions toward their partners (Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001), and respond to these emotions in different ways. For example, when individuals are happy with their partner, they may engage in loving and affectionate actions. When individuals are afraid of or disgusted with their partner, they may engage in actions which push their partner away or separate themselves from their partner (i.e., avoidant behaviors, Hazan & Shaver, 1994). In the present research, we explore a novel way in which individuals respond to frustration with their partner, namely through their brand choices.

Frustration may be considered a (milder) form of anger (Berkowitz & Harmon-Jones, 2004); and anger is a unique emotion in that it is the only negative emotion associated with approach tendencies (Carver, 2004; Harmon-Jones & Sigelman, 2001; Lazarus, 1991). Whereas sadness and anxiety are associated with rumination and aversive motivational states, anger, and by extension frustration, is associated with action and an appetitive motivational state (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Lazarus, 1991). As such, within the context of close relationships, frustration may lead individuals to want to act out against their partner (Berkowitz, 1989; Braiker & Kelley, 1979). However, because close relationships are those of repeated interactions in which individuals become mutually

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dependent upon one another (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 2004), people generally want to avoid hurting their partner or the relationship. Individuals who are frustrated with their partners thus face two conflicting desires: wanting to actively respond to frustration with their partner and not wanting to harm the relationship. In the present research, we propose one way in which individuals can, and do, actively respond to frustration with their partners in a relatively harmless manner is through the brand choices they make for themselves. Specifically, we propose that individuals respond to frustration with their partner by making *oppositional brand choice*s. We define oppositional brand choices as ones in which individuals choose brands for themselves that is in opposition to the one that they believe their partner prefers.

Importantly, we suggest that not all people within close relationships will respond to frustration using brand choice in the same manner. Specifically, we posit that the effect of frustration on oppositional brand choices will depend upon power in the relationship. Power can be defined as the ability to control outcomes, deliver rewards and punishments, and influence others while resisting influence over oneself (e.g., Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Emerson, 1962; French & Raven, 1959; Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Power in close relationships can be thought of similarly — the ability to control relationship outcomes (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012). Correspondingly, individuals who are relatively high in relationship power should be able to achieve their goals and get their preferred outcomes within the context of the relationship. Furthermore, research has shown that higher power individuals are more likely to express their own attitudes and opinions (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006). Using the opening example, higher power partners are more likely to tell their partner that they are frustrated with dishes left in the sink or clothes on the floor, which avoids situations reoccurring in the future. Therefore, partners who are high in power are not only more likely to achieve the outcomes they prefer, but are also more likely to make it known when their needs have not been met. Thus, within the context of a close relationship, higher power partners have multiple outlets through which they can achieve their desired outcomes and also express their frustration when they do not.

On the other hand, lower power partners have less control over the outcomes within their relationship (Fiske, 1993). Lower power partners are also less likely to directly express their emotions and opinions when their needs are not met (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006). Again using the opening example, lower power partners are less likely to tell their partner that they are frustrated they had to put the dishes away or refill the gas tank — even if it is the third time this month. Because lower power partners have fewer means by which they can achieve their desired outcomes and express their emotions, we propose that they will use brand choices as an outlet for their frustration. Research has shown that lower power individuals are more likely to be aware of the preferences, attitudes, and feelings of their high power partners (whereas high power individuals are less aware of others' preferences; Fiske, 1993), and so making a brand choice that is in contrast to the one they believe their partner prefers carries more meaning for someone who is lower in relationship power. Therefore, we hypothesize that greater frustration will be associated with more oppositional brand choice for those who are lower in relationship power.

Although extensive research has focused on the brand as a relationship partner (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier, 1998), in the current research we investigate how brands are used between partners. Specifically, we explore how brand choices may be used to navigate conflicting goals in close relationships — that of actively reducing frustration toward one's partner without hurting the relationship. We highlight who is most likely to use this strategy – those lower in relationship power – and that this effect occurs when individuals are consciously or non-consciously frustrated with their partners. Finally, we highlight that lower power individuals who are frustrated with their partner are not shifting their underlying brand preferences, thus distinguishing this effect from one that would flow from Balance Theory. By doing so, we contribute to the literature on close relationships, emotions, and social influences on consumer choice.

Study 1

In order to test our hypothesis, in this study we manipulate emotion and examine the number of oppositional brand choices made across different emotion conditions depending upon relationship power. We use this strategy, instead of merely asking people if they make oppositional brand choices when they are frustrated with their partner, because research in emotions has demonstrated a "cold-to-hot" empathy gap, such that when individuals are in a "cold," or unemotional, state they mispredict their reactions when in a "hot" state (Loewenstein, 1996).

Method

Two hundred ninety-two participants (M_{age} = 32.0 years, SD = 10.2; 52% men; $M_{relationshiplength}$ = 74.7 months, SD = 89.0) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk completed the study in exchange for financial compensation. We randomly assigned participants to an emotion condition (emotion: control, happy, frustrated).

Participants were told that there were several unrelated tasks involved in this study in order to minimize hypothesis guessing. All participants were given six target and some filler brand pairs and asked to indicate which brand their partner preferred (see Appendix for target brand pairs). Participants indicated how confident they were in their partners' preference for the selected brand over the non-selected brand in only the six target brand categories (1 = Not at all sure, 7 = Extremely sure). Across the six target brand categories, the mean confidence in partner's preferences was high (M = 5.66, SD = .88), which indicates that most participants were aware of their partner's preferred brand, and suggests that choosing a brand that is in opposition to their partners' preferred brand would be (at least somewhat) intentional.

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