



From conformity to reactance: Contingent role of network centrality in consumer-to-consumer influence



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ABSTRACT

Central consumers in a group often are influential, because their social prominence commands conformity from other members. Yet, there can be another contradictory effect of centrality, such that other members regard it as a threat to their attitudinal freedom and express reactance instead of conformity. Whether a group member conforms or reacts to the evaluation of a more central member might depend on the strength of their relationship, which determines the social cost of disagreeing. We provide evidence of such an interaction between centrality and relational strength with an experiment where participants with preexisting affective ties of varying strengths taste a snack in groups (Study 1) and a field study where participants connected by instrumental ties consume a complex service (Study 2). A scenario-based experiment manipulating centrality and strength of ties provides further evidence that reactance underlies the observed effects (Study 3).

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1. Introduction

By sharing their opinions, information, and personal experiences with a product, consumers influence one another (Cohen & Golden, 1972; Zhu & Huberman, 2014), some more than others (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996; King & Summers, 1970). A well-established goal in marketing research is to understand these disparities in influence, to be able to leverage the most influential consumers (Godes, 2011; Libai et al., 2010). One popular approach to this challenge is to consider any group of consumers as forming networks, whose structure determines the consumer-to-consumer influence processes (Lee, Cotte, & Noseworthy, 2010). Because social ties are unevenly distributed, some consumers occupy central positions, whereas others remain peripheral, and the differences in their influence are significant (Friedkin, 1993). Marketing studies regularly confirm that network centrality (i.e., being connected to many other consumers) confers influence on a consumer, yet to the best of the authors' knowledge, these studies focus solely on products consumed individually (e.g., studying how social relationships influence a focal consumer in selecting a piano tuner, Reingen & Kernan, 1986). Network positions likely also affect consumer-to-consumer influence processes in co-consumption contexts though, in which all parts of the network synchronously share the consumption experience (e.g. a group of colleagues eating at

a restaurant). This article seeks to fill a gap by analyzing the influence that two consumers have on each other, as a function of their relative network centrality in a co-consumption group. With their co-presence, the social asymmetry associated with vastly different centralities becomes particularly salient and exerts situational pressure on peripheral consumers to conform with the evaluations of central consumers. But this pressure does not necessarily result in conformity. Because it conveys a potential threat to attitudinal freedom, it might spark reactance (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004; Mourali & Yang, 2013).

By demonstrating the ambivalence of centrality, which may drive either conformity or reactance, this paper contributes to a network approach to consumer behavior. Prior research conceptualizes influence as either positive (peripheral consumer aligns attitudes or behaviors with those of a more central consumer) or non-existent (peripheral consumer ignores the opinion of the more central one), which is consistent with the practical aim of activating favorable influences. But this approach ignores the prediction of reactance theory that influence attempts might backfire and induce consumers to diverge radically from their source. To examine the conditions in which such “boomerang effect” may be likely, this research builds on prior findings that suggest reactance depends on the cost of resisting (Miron & Brehm, 2006). We argue that, for a focal consumer participating in a co-consumption episode, the cost of disagreeing with a highly central participant depends on the strength of their relationship, a network dimension that determines attachment, mutual binding, and constraints on action (Granovetter, 1973). With these considerations, the current research responds to a call from Lee (2014) to address the role of centrality in

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relation to tie strength, providing support to the notion that studies of consumer networks cannot separate structural and relational dimensions.

Accordingly, the current article presents two co-consumption studies, among groups of people who know one another with varying intensity. The studies both consist in analyzing all pairs of members (all dyads) within those groups, measuring the dyadic difference in their satisfaction with the consumable, the dyadic difference in their centrality scores and the strength of their tie. In Study 1, participants consumed a new snack together and then evaluated the product (shared condition). Another set of participants tasted the same product but had no possibility of communicating with or seeing any others (solitary condition). The results confirm the predicted interaction effect between centrality and tie strength on product evaluation only in the shared condition. Study 2 then confirms this interaction in a very different context, with a high involvement, utilitarian service consumed over several months (i.e., business education). Last, in study 3, a scenario-based experiment, centrality and tie strength are manipulated in order to provide further evidence that centrality generates threat to attitudinal freedom and that both variables interact to affect reactance behaviors.

2. Network centrality and consumer-to-consumer influence

Centrality is one of the most frequently considered network characteristics, because of its demonstrated effect on social power and structural influence (Marsden, 2002). High network centrality affects a variety of marketing outcomes, including new product adoption (Katona, Zubcsek, & Sarvary, 2011; Kim & Park, 2011), product-related information-seeking behavior (Lee, 2014), and shopping behavior (Gentina & Bonsu, 2013). In a similar vein, centrality appears correlated with opinion leadership (Gentina, Butori, & Heath, 2014; Lee et al., 2010; Risselada, Verhoef, & Bijmolt, 2015). Central consumers are influential, first, because the number of others they reach in their daily social interactions is greater than the number reached by more peripheral consumers. Centrality also confers a “social hub” position (Goldenberg, Han, Lehmann, & Hong, 2009), such that the person serves as a passage point for information that flows throughout the network. With broader information sources, central consumers thus tend to be perceived as better informed, and their advice is more sought after by other consumers (Lee et al., 2010). Finally, centrality provides preferred social status (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993), such that central consumers enjoy more integration and acceptance in the network (Gentina et al., 2014). Their influence thus stems from the inclination of peripheral consumers to conform to their opinions, as part of an integration strategy (Van den Bulte, Wuyts, Dekimpe, Gijbrecchts, & Pieters, 2010).

3. Pressures to conform to central consumers when consumption is shared

Centrality in networks was found to influence consumer behavior in a variety of settings, from selecting a piano tuner (Reingen & Kernan, 1986), to choosing to prescribe a new drug (Iyengar, Van den Bulte, & Lee, 2015), to deciding to affiliate with a social media platform (Goldenberg et al., 2009; Katona et al., 2011). In these contexts, social interaction has the potential to intervene in consumers' thinking, either before (decision making) or after (evaluation) consumption. The consumption episode itself is not shared with others though; in prior studies, centrality does not operate *during* consumption.

Yet extensive literature on small group dynamics suggests that synchronous interactions with other consumers during consumption should affect the role of network centrality. Confronting other group members, especially peer group members (Childers & Rao, 1992), results in significant attitude changes, due to social pressures to conform with what is perceived as the majority opinion (Asch, 1955; Kaplan, 1987). Imagine a set of five consumers going out for dinner in a group. A reasonable prediction asserts that all of them refrain from sharing

aspects of their judgments that they deem socially inappropriate when evaluating the meal (Ramanathan & McGill, 2007). Yet such a view is structure-blind, in that it ignores preexisting ties among the group, which may produce very different social positions for the individual members. As some in the group may already know each other well, and others may not, the shared experience generates a temporary social structure, assigning a specific centrality level to each participant, presumably with consequences for their perceived attitudinal freedom.

Assume that in this example, a consumer B is a friend of all other participants, but consumer A is friendly only with B and barely knows the others. Given the unique group composition at that dinner, B has a much more central position than A. According to a network approach, the typical pressures for conformity in small groups will have a disproportionate effect on A. First, A lacks information to determine accurately what is socially appropriate for the group and perceives B as better equipped in this respect. Second, with her high centrality, during that dinner B will have a stronger influence in defining appropriateness, not just appraising it (Friedkin, 1993). Using B's opinion as a proxy for appropriateness and conforming to it thus will be an appealing strategy for A. Third, because she is more central, B is likely to fill more of the conversational space and can be more outspoken in sharing her opinion (Lee et al., 2010). As research shows, central nodes in a network are more prone to assertiveness (Brass & Burkhardt, 1993). Overall, these arguments suggest that during shared consumption, peripheral consumers feel pressure to conform with the opinions of more central others.

4. Interaction between centrality and strength of ties

If centrality generates pressure to conform, then a reasonable prediction would be that less central consumers tend to respond to this pressure by simply conforming to more central ones. Following Asch's seminal work (Asch, 1955), the conformity literature has grown extremely strong, providing various explanations for that kind of response to normative pressure (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). However, pressure to conform can also backfire and result in reactance, defined as a motivational state directed toward restoring freedom in response to perceptions that this freedom is under threat (Miron & Brehm, 2006). Following threats to attitudinal or behavioral freedom, people often react by asserting it “more forcefully than they would otherwise” (Kray, Thompson, & Galinsky, 2001: 948). For example, smokers might smoke more in response to pressures exerted by a spouse to quit the habit (Miron & Brehm, 2006). Marketing studies observe reactance among consumers opposing the norm or experts' recommendations (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004; Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005).

Because the situational pressure to conform and the urge to reassert freedom are countervailing forces, reactance theorists often focus on isolating the conditions in which one prevails over the other (Miron & Brehm, 2006). A key factor is the extent to which negative outcomes might result from reacting (Crawford, McConnell, Lewis, & Sherman, 2002; Heilman, 1976). Considering our case, negative outcomes lie in the social cost of disagreeing, which should depend, according to network theories, on the strength of the tie, a multifaceted notion that captures the “amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services” between two persons (Granovetter (1973: p. 1361).

An intuitive take on the issue would be that disagreement is easier to express when the tie is strong, as intimacy might allow greater possibility to speak one's mind openly and thus freely express disagreement. Weak ties, on the contrary, supposedly command more restraining in the course of social interactions, less self-exposure and transparency in confiding, because reciprocity on the other end of the relationships isn't guaranteed (Granovetter, 1973). However, there is also considerable support for the reverse argument that social cost of disagreeing should increase with tie strength. With a strong tie, further interactions,

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