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Research Report

Yes, we have no bananas: Consumer responses to restoration of freedom☆

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Abstract

When stockouts restrict consumers' freedoms, two independent responses can occur: product desirability, or a reactance-based increase in the desire for the unavailable option, and source negativity, or general frustration with the source of the restriction. In four studies, we provide a novel investigation of consumer responses to *stockout-restoration* and examine how these two forces combine to affect consumer responses after freedoms are restored. To do so, we investigate two moderators that influence the activation and strength of product desirability and source negativity, respectively: trait reactance and attributions. While all consumers experience source negativity in response to stockouts, only consumers high in reactance experience product desirability, leading to differential responses to stockout-restoration. Compared to an in-stock condition, high reactance consumers respond positively to stockout-restoration, while low reactance consumers respond negatively to stockout-restoration, in terms of store and product evaluations and store choice. However, when high reactants attribute a stockout to the store, thereby increasing source negativity relative to product desirability, they respond negatively to stockout-restoration.

Keywords: Reactance; Restrictions; Restoration; Freedom; Stockout

Consumers respond to restrictions of freedom such as space constraints (Levav & Zhu, 2009; Xu, Shen, & Wyer, 2012), unsolicited recommendations (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004), and product unavailability (Fitzsimons, 2000; Verhallen & Robben, 2005) with reactance motivation (Brehm, 1966). This motivation can elicit positive responses, including an increased desire for restricted versus available items (Worchel & Brehm, 1971). Some firms have successfully capitalized on such positive responses. For example, Nintendo's resurrection of the video game industry in the 1980s has been credited to "a controlled dearth of game cartridges" (Berry, 1989; Wolpin, 1989, p. 38), and consumers consistently line up for new and scarce iPhones (Petrecca, 2012). Some firms have even advertised that their products are "disappearing at a store near you" (Elliott, 1993). Independent of reactance, however, restrictions also elicit negative responses, including negativity toward the source of the restriction (Clee & Wicklund, 1980; Fitzsimons, 2000). Negative responses were widespread when the launches of Microsoft's Xbox and Nintendo's Wii were accompanied by significant shortages (Huang, 2007; Robischon, 2005). Thus, prior work has shown *product desirability* (positive) and *source negativity* (negative) responses to restrictions of freedom.

We investigate positive and negative consumer responses to *restoration* of freedom. We use the context of stockouts, which are common, costly marketplace restrictions (Anderson, Fitzsimons, & Simester, 2006; Jing & Lewis, 2011; Schary & Christopher, 1979), and explore responses to *stockout-restoration*, when formerly unavailable products become available. We consider how product desirability and source negativity responses to

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stockouts impact product and store evaluations post-restoration. In other words, what happens when Xbox or Wii consoles become available following a shortage? Do consumers forgive or punish the firm? Do they like or dislike the product?

Responses to restoration

Prior work argues that "reactance will be reduced by the restoration of freedom" (Worchel & Brehm, 1971, p. 294). Supporting this prediction, some studies find decreases in product desirability post-restoration (Worchel & Brehm, 1971), though others do not (Schwarz, 1984). However, some of these studies may not have induced reactance (Schwarz, 1984), and others lack control conditions (Pallak & Sullivan, 1979), complicating interpretation. Further, prior work has focused solely on product desirability after restoration. Thus, it is unclear if the product desirability and source negativity instantiated by stockouts are eliminated or persist after restoration of freedom.

We extend this work by arguing that product desirability and source negativity might 1) persist and 2) jointly influence responses to restoration, and provide a framework to predict when and how they do so. First, since chronic goals—such as the pursuit of freedom—can influence behavior even after they are (temporarily) satisfied (Fishbach, Eyal, & Finkelstein, 2010; Moore, Ferguson, & Chartrand, 2011), product desirability and source negativity might persist and influence product and store evaluations post-restoration. Second, halo effects demonstrate spill-over between and among overall attitudes and attribute-specific attitudes (Kardes, Posavac, & Cronley, 2004; Wirtz & Bateson, 1995), suggesting that the product desirability and source negativity elicited by stockouts might jointly influence both product and store evaluations post-restoration. Such joint influence is particularly likely in our studies, as the stockout and restoration share an origin (a local store).

Specifically, we suggest that responses to restoration will be jointly driven by the relative strengths of consumers' product desirability and source negativity responses to stockouts, and that the stronger of these two forces will dominate (Chowdhury, Olsen, & Pracejus, 2008; Fiske, 1980; Taylor & Thompson, 1982). If product desirability outweighs source negativity in response to a stockout, responses to restoration should be positive; if source negativity outweighs product desirability in response to a stockout, responses to restoration should be negative. Thus, either positive or negative responses to restoration—in terms of product and store evaluations—are possible. To investigate when these occur, we identify two moderators that should influence the activation and strengths of source negativity and product desirability, respectively: trait reactance and attributions regarding the stockout (Fig. 1).

Trait reactance should determine whether a stockout activates product desirability; high reactants experience product desirability when restricted, while low reactants do not (Hong & Faedda, 1996). Further, while product desirability is a motivational response uniquely linked to reactance and the goal to restore freedom, source negativity is a generalized affective response to restriction, independent of reactance (Brehm, 1966; Wicklund, 1974, 2001). Thus, all individuals should respond to stockouts with source negativity, but only high reactants should simultaneously be motivated by product desirability. Relative to an in-stock condition, then, high reactants should respond to stockouts with negative store evaluations and positive product evaluations, while low reactants should respond to stockouts with negative store evaluations and neutral or negative product evaluations. Further, since source negativity—but not product desirability—is activated for low reactants in response to stockouts, relative to an in-stock condition, low reactants should respond negatively to stockout-restoration. However, relative to an in-stock condition, high reactants should respond positively to stockout-restoration; although both product desirability and source negativity are activated for high reactants in response to stockouts, we argue that product desirability will play a greater role in determining responses to restoration, due to its motivational nature (Brehm, 1966).

In addition, reactance and attributions should interact to predict responses to restoration. While reactance should determine the activation of source negativity and product desirability, their relative strengths should be influenced by attributions. We examine product popularity and store failure attributions for stockouts, which should strengthen product desirability (Verhallen & Robben, 1994; Ge, Messinger, & Li, 2009) and source negativity (Bitner, 1990), respectively. Since high reactants experience both product desirability and source negativity in response to stockouts, the stronger force should drive responses to restoration. Thus, high reactants should respond positively to restoration following popularity attributions and negatively to restoration following store failure attributions. In contrast, since low reactants do not experience product desirability in response to stockouts, there is no motivational force to strengthen; thus, popularity attributions should not affect their responses to restoration. Rather, source

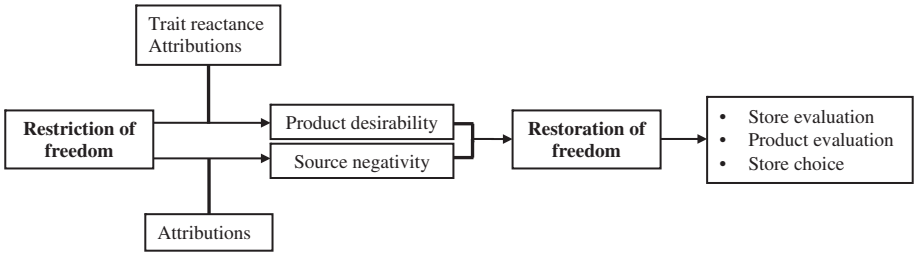

Fig. 1. Responses to restriction and restoration of freedom.