

The limited effects of power on satisfaction with joint consumption decisions

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Abstract

We conduct three experiments in which participants in dyads choose between two restaurants, each of which is preferred by only one participant, and one participant has the power to decide which restaurant both will patronize. We find that the power to make a joint decision increases satisfaction with the choice only when those involved have a competitive decision orientation, a weak or anonymous relationship, and the outcome they choose is subsequently available. Participants who have a cooperative orientation are satisfied whether or not they have power and whether or not the resulting choice is consistent with their initial preferences.

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Decisions involving two or more consumers are both significant and pervasive. Families jointly or collectively make major decisions such as where to go on vacation, the types and brands of automobiles they buy, the home furnishings and appliances they purchase, and the home and neighborhood in which they live. They also make a variety of mundane decisions ranging from grocery purchases at the supermarket to the television programs they watch in the evening. Joint consumption decisions extend beyond the family to include friends making plans for the weekend, neighbors selecting the design of a shared fence, roommates deciding what to cook for dinner, and employees choosing a gift for a departing colleague.

A major emphasis in prior research on joint decisions has been on power, which is defined as a person's ability to influence or determine the behaviors of others (Anderson and Berdahl, 2002; Dépret and Fiske, 1993; Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson, 2003; Torelli and Shavitt 2010). Although a child might influence the

brand of breakfast cereal a family buys, for example, the parent makes the final selection because of his or her legitimate authority and ability to pay. Similarly, the most popular teen might have the most influence over what a group of friends does on Saturday night, the host might determine the menu for a dinner party after a discussion with those invited, and the boss has the final say as to what restaurant is patronized for an office luncheon. Power is a relative concept because it is defined by the relationship between individuals rather than existing in any absolute sense (Cook and Emerson, 1978; Emerson, 1962) and it is derived from various sources including the ability to coerce or reward others, expertise, a legitimate role or office, and social attractiveness (French and Raven, 1959).

Power is inherently satisfying because it enables consumers to make choices that are consistent with their preferences (Botti and McGill, 2006; Botti and Iyengar, 2004; Payne, Bettman and Johnson, 1993), which leads to a sense of personal freedom and autonomy (de Charms, 1968; van Prooijen, 2009), and positive emotional states (Keltner et al, 2003). Yet power also has a darker side in interpersonal contexts (Su, Fern and Ye, 2003). Power provides freedom to those who have it but simultaneously reduces the autonomy and control of those who have choices imposed upon them. The absence of power is associated with negative

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affect, attention to threats and punishments, and inhibited social behaviors (Keltner et al., 2003). When people are powerless they feel vulnerable and uncertain (Rucker and Galinsky, 2008). The use of power increases interpersonal conflict (Thomas, 1976), reduces procedural justice (Brockner and Wiesenfeld, 1996), and can have negative consequences for interpersonal relationships (Corfman and Lehmann, 1987).

The objective of the present research is to examine the conditions under which the use of power is satisfying to consumers involved in a joint consumption decision. Our thesis is that power is satisfying only when those involved care little about the outcomes that accrue to each other, which is atypical of most joint decisions. We examine two characteristics of these decisions that lead consumers to care about their partner's outcomes, the first of which is whether they have a cooperative versus competitive decision orientation. Within a dyadic context a competitive orientation is one in which there is a desire to satisfy oneself but little or no desire to satisfy the other, whereas a cooperative orientation is characterized by a desire to satisfy both oneself and the other (Thomas, 1976; Tjosvold, 1985). Consumers tend to have a cooperative orientation, perhaps because they are cooperative by nature (Stapel and Koomen, 2005) or because the decision relates to a shared consumption experience in which the satisfaction of one consumer depends on the satisfaction of the other (Deutsch, 1949). The second characteristic we consider that leads consumers to care about the outcomes that accrue to their dyadic partner is a close interpersonal relationship. Consumers who make joint decisions with their spouse or a family member, for example, expect balance or equity in the relationship over time (Macneil, 1978). As a consequence they place less importance on the outcomes associated with any individual decision even when they have a competitive decision orientation and even when the other party uses power to get his or her way.

We test our hypotheses related to the effects of power on satisfaction in three experiments. Studies 1 and 2 involve participants who make a joint decision after interacting via a popular text-messaging program. In study 1 the dyads are composed of friends and acquaintances, whereas the dyads in study 2 are randomly selected and anonymous. Our use of a computer-mediated methodology reflects the growing reliance of consumers on online communication via instant messaging, social networking websites, online communities, and multi-player internet games (Grossman, 2006). The decision environment also enables us to track all aspects of the dyadic interactions between participants, and to ensure that the decision orientations of the participants within the dyads are uncorrelated with their relative power, the degree to which their preferences are shared, and the strength of their relationship. In natural settings the factors are typically confounded—a cooperative orientation is more likely when the parties involved share power, have similar preferences, or a close relationship. Further, power is used much less frequently in cooperative versus competitive decision processes *in situ*. In the third study we use a scenario-based design to assess the independent effects of the power to choose and the preference-consistency of the resulting choice on satisfaction.

Hypotheses

Effects of power, decision orientation, and relationship strength on satisfaction

Consider a simple example in which two friends (X and Y) are selecting a restaurant for an evening out. X has the power to make the final decision, perhaps because X is paying, it is X's birthday, or the friends alternate as to who selects each time they go out and it is X's turn. To ensure that there is no obvious choice that is preferred by both, we assume that preferences are different for the two options. As a result, one of them must accept a less-preferred choice if their initial preferences do not change as a result of their discussion. The fact that X and Y are friends means that X is concerned about Y's satisfaction and how the decision-making process affects their relationship. Any satisfaction that X derives from selecting the restaurant that he or she likes is affected by the knowledge that the choice is not preferred by Y. The friendship between X and Y means that they see their outcomes as intertwined because the decision is part of an on-going stream of interactions. Participants in such a relationship expect decision "wins" and "losses" to balance out over time, leading to less emphasis placed on the outcomes associated with a given decision (Macneil, 1978; Su et al., 2003).

If X and Y are merely acquaintances, rather than friends, they may have a cooperative orientation toward the decision despite a weak relationship because they are cooperative by nature (Loewenstein et al. 1989; Stapel and Koomen, 2005) or because they want to create a good impression (Danheiser and Graziano, 1982). Alternatively, a cooperative decision orientation might exist simply because the decision results in a shared experience—X realizes that his or her dining pleasure will be diminished if Y does not like the restaurant they patronize together (and vice versa). Based on the same reasoning a cooperative orientation is likely when roommates select a video game to play together, a television program to watch in the evening, or a club or bar to visit on the weekend.

When X and Y have a cooperative orientation their goal is to make a mutually satisfying decision. A cooperative orientation requires that both parties are actively involved in the decision process in order to understand and respond to each other's preferences (Alper, Tjosvold and Law, 1998; Thomas, 1976). It also reduces the coercive use of power, which is designed to achieve compliance without regard for the underlying preferences of the influence target (Boyle et al., 1992). Although X might have the power to coerce Y because he or she is Y's boss or because he or she is paying for the meal, X is not interested in imposing his or her preferences on Y if the goal is mutual satisfaction. The power to decide (and therefore X's ability to impose his or her preferences on Y) is not inherently satisfying because the objective is to have both agree on or at least accept the final choice.

It is only when X and Y have both a competitive orientation and a weak relationship that the power to choose is expected to enhance decision satisfaction. In our example, X would force his or her preferences on Y only if he or she does not care about Y's satisfaction with the restaurant choice. Either a cooperative decision orientation or a strong relationship within the dyad will lead the

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