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How Consumer Power Affects Recommendations in the Online Environment

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We find that consumers with power exercise influence by generating recommendations in the online environment. Four studies demonstrate that power predicts the tendency to generate online recommendations and systematically affects recommendation content. Powerful consumers' need to influence mediates this effect and the perceived potential for influence moderates it.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Online recommendations exert a strong influence on consumer choice (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006). Most research on online recommendations has focused on how they affect receivers (Senecal and Nantel 2004). Less work has examined the factors that facilitate or deter consumers from generating recommendations (Berger 2014).

We propose that consumers' perceived power affects their proclivity to post online recommendations and influences recommendation content (e.g. instructions vs. opinions). Consumers who feel powerful are more likely to express their views freely compared to those who lack power (Anderson and Berdahl 2002). Accordingly, we hypothesize that those with high power will generate more online recommendations than those who lack power (**H1**).

Power can be associated with an influence over others (Lammers, Stoker, Rink and Galinsky 2016). Since powerlessness is aversive and, in contrast, high power promotes confidence, optimism and self-importance (Anderson and Galinsky 2006; Rucker, Dubois and Galinsky 2011), people with power strive to maintain their powerful states (Garbinsky, Klesse and Aaker 2014). In offline interactions, power can be identified through status and is relatively stable. In the online environment, consumers have less means to display power. Providing others with recommendations that include instructions is a form of acting directed at gaining influence. We therefore hypothesize that recommendations provided by those with high power will include more instructions to influence others, compared to recommendations provided by those with low power (**H2**). We further hypothesize that the need to influence others will mediate the effect of power on the likelihood to post online recommendations (**H3**). Finally, we predict, the potential influence of a recommendation will moderate the effect of power on the generation of online recommendations such that consumers with high power will generate more recommendations when those have a high potential for influence compared to when the potential for influence is low (**H4**).

We tested these hypotheses in four studies. Study 1 (N=180, *Mage*=23.08, 52% females) tested H1 and H2. Participants performed a power manipulation and two other tasks (Galinsky, Gruenfeld and Magee 2003). Then, participants rated the likelihood that they would post an online recommendation to future participants about the tasks they performed. Those willing to recommend, wrote their recommendations. As expected, participants primed with high power (68%; 65 out of 94) were more likely than those primed with low power (51%; 45 out of 86) to post recommendations ($\chi^2(1, N = 180) = 5.75, p = .016$). Next we analyzed recommendation content. Recommendations rated as instructions were dummy coded as 1 ("follow instructions!"), and recommendations rated as opinions (e.g. "fun game"), were dummy coded as 0. The recommendations of those primed with high power (vs. those with low power) were more likely to include an instruction as opposed to an expression of opinion ($\chi^2(1, N = 110) = 4.98, p = .026$).

Studies 2 and 3 tested our mediation hypothesis (H3). In study 2 (N= 146, *Mage* = 37.19, 55% females) we manipulated power by allocating participants to power roles (Anderson and Berdahl 2002). Participants then indicated the likelihood of posting an online recommendation about a restaurant experience. An ANOVA showed that, as expected, those in the high power role (*M*_{high}=3.78, *SD*=1.56) were more likely to post a recommendation than those in the low

power role (*M*_{low}=3.17, *SD*=1.86; $F(1,145)=4.37, p=.038$). The results of the mediation analysis (PROCESS, model 4) showed that both power (95% CI [.20, 1.06], *B*=.63, *SE*=.21, $p=.004$) and need to influence (95% CI [.30, .72] *B*=.51, *SE*=.10, $p=.000$) significantly affected the likelihood to generate online recommendations. Importantly, participants' need to influence mediated the effect of power on the likelihood to recommend (95% CI [.0.11, 0.63]).

Participants (N=70, *Mage*=31.69, 51.4% females), who hold high power positions (managers with over 10 employees, N = 32) or non-managerial positions (Control, N=38) participated in Study 3. Participants were asked whether they would post an online recommendation about an excellent hotel they had stayed at, on a site like TripAdvisor.com. As expected, participants' power position predicted the tendency to recommend ($t(70)=2.20, p=.031$). Participants' need to influence was measured using two items: "how important is it for you to be recognized for your recommendation?" and "how important is it for you to receive as many likes as possible following your recommendation" anchored on a 1-7 scale ($\alpha=.88$). Mediation analysis (PROCESS, model 4) showed that need to influence mediated the effect of power position on the likelihood to recommend (95% CI [.03, .79]).

Study 4 (N=135, *Mage*=25.54, 68% females) tested our moderation hypothesis (H4). We manipulated power using a modified dictator game and operationalized the potential to influence by either making participants feel their recommendation is the only rating of the game available (high potential to influence) or that many others have already posted their rating of the game (low potential to influence). An ANOVA revealed no main effects, and as expected, a significant interaction between power and the potential to influence ($F(1, 134)=4.74, p=.031$). Participants with high power were more likely to post recommendations when their potential to influence was high (*M*=3.38, *SD*=.27) than when it was low (*M*=2.56, *SD*=.26, $F(1,134)=4.77, p=.031$). Among participants with low power, there was no significant difference between potential to influence conditions.

Our research offers both theoretical and practical contributions. First, despite the abundance of research on power, little is known about its consequences in the online environment. Second, the power literature has focused mainly on its negative consequences (Zimbardo 1973). We show how power can be harnessed to help others. Last, by demonstrating that consumers' power can boost the quantity, and influence the content of online recommendations, we offer marketers a practical tool to promote their offering.

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