The Effect of the Sense of Power on Chinese Consumer’s Uniqueness-Seeking Behavior

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Abstract

This research examines how the sense of power influences Chinese consumer’s uniqueness seeking behavior. The authors propose that Chinese consumers experiencing a sense of power are more likely to seek uniqueness, whereas those experiencing a sense of powerlessness tend to seek conformity because power increases self-focus, which reduces the pressure to conform to others. This effect is supported by three studies. In Study 1, a survey dataset from four hundred and twelve adult Chinese consumers revealed a positive correlation between consumers’ generalized sense of power and their need for uniqueness. Study 2 confirmed that Chinese consumers having (vs. lacking) power tend to choose less (vs. more) popular product options. Study 3 further demonstrated that Chinese consumers primed with high power generate more uniqueness-featured advertisement slogans than those primed with low power. Research implications in customer segmentation and marketing communications are discussed.

Keywords: Power, uniqueness seeking, need for uniqueness, need for conformity, Chinese consumer
Introduction

Uniqueness seeking is an important force that drives consumer behavior. Particularly in a “mass-world” era where everything we see, touch, and buy is available in abundance in the same form to us and everyone around us, having a sense of distinctiveness contributes to self-identity and enhances self-esteem and social status (Codol 1984; Maslach 1974; Tesser 1988). In exploring the drivers for people’s uniqueness-seeking behaviors, extant literature has identified two primary factors. The first one lies in the individual differences in consumers’ chronic need for uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter 2001). That is, people who possess a high need for uniqueness are more motivated to purchase and own products that help provide a sense of distinctiveness than those with a low need for uniqueness. The second factor emphasizes the situational conditions that may temporarily affect people’s need for uniqueness. For instance, Snyder and Fromki (1980) found that when situational pressures make individuals feel overly similar to others, people are motivated to seek uniqueness.

There is an inherent interaction between the aforementioned two factors in driving uniqueness-seeking behavior. The differences in individuals’ internal needs for uniqueness may predict how people react to situational pressures. To evaluate this impact, extant research often
treats individual differences in the need for uniqueness as a moderator, arbitrating the relationship between situational pressure and uniqueness motivation. Interestingly, little research has examined any other superordinate factors, which has spontaneously incorporated the influence of both the individual differences and situational cues. In this study, the authors identify and investigate one of these factors: consumer’s sense of power.

Consider the following situations. A man is having dinner with his supervisors. The restaurant offers only two kinds of drinks, e.g., Coke and generic soda. Assuming all his supervisors order Coke, what would the man choose? Now imagine that the man is having dinner with his subordinates and that everyone else has ordered Coke. How would his choice be different from that in the previous case? Extant literature on uniqueness seems unable to answer these questions because in both cases, the situational pressure (in terms of choice similarity) is identical, and the individual difference is not applicable. The only difference lies in a sense of power (or powerlessness) experienced in the two different situations.

Power is central to social life and to theoretical inquiries in the social sciences. An important question in the literature on power has to do with its consequences. Some integrative frameworks have been developed to investigate the effects of power on affect, cognition, and
behavior (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson 2003). However, the effect of power has received only sporadic attention from consumer researches (Rucker & Galinsky 2008). According to the optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer 1991), social identities derive from a fundamental tension between two competing social needs—the need for conformity and inclusion, and a countervailing need for uniqueness and individuation. Examination of high power, low power, and equality may suggest how people’s social identities are influenced by their relative power (Oyserman 2006). The present research aims to fill this void by exploring the impact of the sense of power on consumers’ uniqueness-seeking behavior.

In what conditions will people be more likely to seek uniqueness: experiencing a sense of power, or a sense of powerlessness? In addition to the major research gap mentioned above, the authors are particularly interested in this question for three reasons. First, measuring consumers’ chronic state of power implies a new psychographic basis for marketers to segment the market when the uniqueness of the product makes a key strategic marketing decision. Second, a sense of power may be activated temporarily through environmental cues that make people feel powerful or powerless (Keltner et al. 2003). Thus answers to the above question shall provide useful insights for salespersons wishing to influence consumers’ preference over unique versus popular products at the point of sale. Third, China is an example of a high power distance society
(Hofstede, 1980, 2001). Given the high degree of unequal distribution of power in the Chinese society as a whole, the disparity in the sense of power is more likely to be detected in surveys or be primed experimentally.

In the next section, the authors first review the relevant literature and propose a conceptual framework, which was tested using different measures of power across three studies. In Study 1, the authors demonstrated that Chinese consumer’s generalized sense of power is positively related to the need for uniqueness. In Study 2, they manipulated power through an episodic priming task and examined how high or low power perception affects Chinese consumers’ uniqueness-seeking behavior. In Study 3, the authors manipulated power through a hierarchical role setting and demonstrated that participants primed with high or low power generate more or less uniqueness-related words for an advertisement development task, respectively. The general discussion and marketing implications are presented at the end of the paper.

**Literature review**

*Power and its influence on consumer behavior*

As a key foundation in the architecture of people’s social hierarchy, power is often defined as asymmetric control over valuable resources and outcomes within a specific situation and set of
social relations (Fiske & Berdahl 2007; Keltner et al. 2003; Magee & Galinsky 2008; Thibaut 2007). This definition of power implicitly involves both control over and independence from others in obtaining important outcomes. As a control mechanism, power often involves exerting influence on others, driving others to do things that will help the powerful accomplish their own objectives. Thus, many people have defined power as the capacity to influence others (Copeland 1994; French & Raven 2001; Weber 1947). As an immunizing mechanism, power is the capacity to be uninfluenced by others. Without power, one’s outcomes are constrained by others. With power, one is relatively free of such forces, at least within the context of the specific power relationship (Galinsky et al. 2008).

Research shows that both individual differences in people’s sense of power and temporary, situational factors thrust people into feeling powerful or powerless. On the one hand, power is a relatively stable psychological state that reflects individual differences in how people view themselves in both formal social hierarchies such as the workplace, and in informal hierarchies such as family structure (Anderson & Berdahl 2002). On the other hand, individuals are likely to have experiences of feeling temporarily powerful or powerless throughout the day (Keltner et al. 2003). For example, interviewing a job applicant, giving advice to students, or setting a curfew
for one’s child might evoke the psychological state of feeling powerful (Rucker & Galinsky 2008).

A great deal of research has demonstrated that power has a number of far-reaching effects on individual’s motivation, information processing, and consumption behavior. For instance, those with greater power are more likely to express their private opinions and true attitudes, whereas low-power individuals’ attitudes and opinions are shaped by their high-power counterparts (Anderson & Berdahl 2002; Berdahl & Martorana 2006; Brinol et al. 2007). Compared with low-power individuals, high-power individuals tend to be more optimistic (Anderson & Galinsky 2006), be more confident about their choices (Brinol et al. 2007), engage in more risk-taking and action-oriented behaviors (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee 2003), and focus less on the details but more on the “big picture”, i.e., the gist of information (Guinote 2007; see also Smith & Trope 2006).

In terms of consumption, having a sense of power has been found to influence what consumers buy, how they buy, and their responses to prices. Recent research has found that high power leads to a greater preference for products that offer utility (e.g., performance, quality), whereas powerlessness fosters a compensatory motive to restore power by increasing their desire
to acquire status-related products (Rucker & Galinsky 2008). Power also influences how people spend their money and how they respond to various decision strategies. Individuals experiencing a state of power spend more money on themselves than on others, whereas those experiencing a state of powerlessness spend more money on others than on themselves (Rucker, Dubois, & Galinsky 2011). Consumers in a state of high power are more satisfied with choices when adopting a choosing strategy than when adopting a rejecting strategy (Mourali & Nagpal 2011). Consumers’ sense of power interacts with comparative references in shaping their perceptions of price fairness. High-power consumers perceive stronger price fairness when paying more than other consumers do, whereas low-power consumers perceive stronger unfairness when paying more than they themselves have paid in previous transactions (Jin, He, and Zhang 2013).

**Power and uniqueness-seeking behavior**

By definition, power is an individual’s actual or perceived relative capacity to modify others’ states by providing or withholding resources, or administering punishments (Keltner, et al. 2003). When Person A has more control over what happens to Person B than Person B has control over what happens to Person A, Person A is regarded as the person to have power over Person B. Thus, power involves differences in dependency (e.g., Emerson 1962; Thibaut & Kelley 1959).
Person A is less dependent on Person B to obtain what Person A wants (i.e., asymmetrical dependency; Depret & Fiske 1993). In this way, feeling dependent on others is associated with being powerless, and feeling independent from others is associated with being powerful (Lee & Tiedens 2001; Overbeck & Park 2001). Those who have power are generally more able to “be themselves,” whereas those without power must accommodate social norms and what others dictate (e.g., DePaulo & Friedman, 1998; Keltner et al., 2003). Thus, power-holders may be more likely to seek uniqueness.

A greater sense of distinctiveness from others may be fostered by greater independence from others (Stapel & Koomen 2001). In a specific social group, high-power positions, when compared to low-power positions, are generally occupied by fewer individuals. This structural difference may further increase the tendency for power-holders to feel distinct (Lee & Tiedens 2001). Therefore, the sense of power is linked to the feeling of being unique.

Consistent with this idea, the social identity theory suggests that group leaders become psychologically distant and separate from the rest of the group over time (Hogg & Reid 2001). Smith and Trope (2006) argued that the greater independence and sense of distinctiveness associated with power predisposes those with power to adopt a more distal perspective. On the
basis of construal level theory (Trope & Liberman 2003), Smith and Trope (2006) further proposed and verified in a series of experimental studies that the psychologically distant perspective associated with power may predispose power-holders to form more abstract construals of the available information, to better see the forest beyond the trees. Accordingly,

H1: Consumers with a greater sense of power are more likely to seek uniqueness, whereas those experiencing a sense of powerlessness tend to seek conformity in consumption.

Empirical findings from multiple research streams suggest that the reason why power-holders have a stronger sense of distinctiveness may be attributed to their greater focus on themselves rather than on others. For instance, extant research demonstrates that having power, as opposed to lacking power, leads to a greater reliance on one’s own thoughts (Brinol et al. 2007), and increases the tendency of expressing one’s own opinion in a group discussion (Anderson & Berdahl 2002). Power also tends to reduce awareness of others and their individuating features, unless those features are instrumental for power-holders to accomplish their goals (Galinsky et al. 2008; Magee & Galinsky 2008). In negotiations, high-power parties typically respond less to their counterparts’ emotional displays than do low-power parties (Van Kleef et al. 2006). Furthermore, Galinsky et al. (2006) found that, in an experimental context,
high-power individuals are less likely to spontaneously adopt another’s visual perspective, less likely to take into account another person’s background knowledge, and are less accurate in judging others’ emotions through facial expressions.

The above research offers consistent evidence that power affects the extent to which the self or others are focal, i.e., having power reduces the focus on others and increases the focus on self, whereas lacking power increases the individual’s focus on others (Rucker et al. 2011). According to the optimal distinctiveness theory, individuals simultaneously require a certain level of similarity to, as well as differentiation from, others, and one’s social identity is a reconciliation of opposing needs for assimilation and differentiation (Brewer 1991; Lynn & Harris 1997). Optimal distinctiveness theory further argues that people attempt to satisfy the former need by assimilating themselves with in-group members while they attempt to fulfill the latter need by differentiating themselves from out-group members (Brewer & Pickett 1999, 2002; Ruvio 2008; Pickett, Silver, & Brewer 2002). Driven by the need for assimilation, individuals who seek conformity often tend to follow other people’s opinions or behaviors rather than follow their own needs, and they are highly dependent on others when making judgments and choices. In contrast, driven by a need for differentiation, individuals who seek uniqueness want to be uninfluenced by others and free from social pressures, and their attitudes and choices are more dependent on their
own interests rather than the interests of others. On the basis of this theorizing, we propose the following:

**H2: Self- versus other-focus mediates the impact of the sense of power on uniqueness-seeking.** Greater sense of power enhances focus on oneself which consequently results in more uniqueness-seeking.

In summary, the powerful are immune to the influence of others; thus, they are less affected by others’ attitudes and expressions. In contrast, social forces such as other people’s preferences and choices may have more influence on the attitudes and intentions of low-power consumers. Therefore, it can be predicted that consumers experiencing a sense of power will shift their focus from others to the self and are more likely to seek uniqueness in consumption, whereas those experiencing a sense of powerlessness tend to be other-focused and are more likely to seek conformity. The authors tested these hypotheses through three studies.

**Study 1: Chronic sense of power and need for uniqueness**

Power perception is determined by both individual differences in people’s sense of power and situational factors that temporarily thrust people into feeling powerful and powerless. The first study focused on the chronic nature of power from the personality trait aspect, and provided an
initial test for the hypothesis that a consumer’s sense of power is positively related to his or her need for uniqueness.

**Method**

Four hundred and twelve adult Chinese consumers (62.5% females) participated in this survey study for monetary compensation. Respondents were asked to take a personality test. The generalized sense of power was measured as an individual difference using the 8-item scale (see Appendix) reported in past research (Anderson & Berdahl 2002; Anderson & Galinsky 2006; Rucker & Galinsky 2009). After filling in the questionnaires for power measurement, respondents were asked to complete a scale of need for uniqueness adopted from Tian et al. (2001) and a scale of need for conformity (Kahle 1995). For all items, respondents were asked to report the extent to which the sentences best described them (1 = “strongly disagree”, 7 = “strongly agree”).

**Results**

The data show that both the measurement for need for uniqueness ($\alpha = 0.85$) and need for conformity ($\alpha = 0.75$) demonstrate high reliability. The measurement reliability for generalized sense of power is also acceptable ($\alpha = 0.72$). A regression analysis was conducted, with need for
uniqueness as the dependent variable, and generalized sense of power as the independent variable. Consistent with the hypothesis, a chronic sense of power is found to have a significant positive impact on the need for uniqueness ($B=0.41$, $p<0.001$). However, there was no significant relationship between individuals’ generalized sense of power and their need for conformity ($B=-0.01$, $p>0.10$). This finding supports the authors’ prediction that consumers ‘chronic sense of power is positively associated with their need for uniqueness.

As predicted in H1, Study 1 reveals a positive correlation between the chronic sense of power and people’s need for uniqueness, which provides a basis to further investigate the impact of power on influencing uniqueness-seeking behavior in consumption. However, the correlation result shows only indirect evidence for the proposed hypothesis. Therefore, in the next two studies, experimental designs were introduced to further examine the impact of power on uniqueness seeking.

**Study 2: Power and less popular choices**

Power perception can vary within the same individual, depending on the situation (Rucker & Galinsky 2008). When a situation temporarily provokes people to feelings of power or powerlessness, how would such temporal feelings about power affect people’s subsequent
choices? Study 2 examined this particular question. Following previous arguments, the authors predicted that consumers experiencing a sense of power would be more likely to choose less popular products to differentiate themselves from others, whereas those experiencing a sense of powerlessness would be more likely to choose popular products to conform to others.

**Method**

Sixty adult Chinese consumers participated in the experiment for monetary compensation. Six people failed to follow the elaboration instructions; thus, the subsequent analysis was based on the remaining fifty-four people (33 females). The study was a web-based between-subject experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to either a high- or low-power condition. By comparing participants’ choices in two different power conditions, the authors examined whether the high-power group participants were more likely to exhibit distinctiveness by choosing the less popular products (Lynn & Harris 1997).

Following previous research (Galinsky et al. 2008; Rucker & Galinsky 2009), the temporary power sense was manipulated by a recall task. In particular, those in the high-power condition were given the following instructions:
Please recall a particular incident in which you had power over another individual or individuals. By power, we mean a situation in which you controlled the ability of another person or persons to get something they wanted, or were in a position to evaluate those individuals. Please describe this situation in which you had power—what happened, how you felt, and so forth—in no less than 100 words.

Similarly, those assigned to the low-power condition were given these instructions:

Please recall a particular incident in which someone else had power over you. By power, we mean a situation in which someone had control over your ability to get something you wanted, or was in a position to evaluate you. Please describe this situation in which you did not have power—what happened, how you felt, and so forth—in no less than 100 words.

Participants were given 10 minutes to complete this task. Then, they were presented with a decision-making scenario:

You are having dinner with your classmates, and there are altogether eleven people. The restaurant offers only two kinds of drinks: Coke and generic soda. Nine persons ordered Coke, and one ordered generic soda. It is your turn to order. What would you choose? Coke or generic soda?
The decision is a trade-off between a popular and an unpopular choice. Participants were asked to indicate their choice using a binary scale (i.e., 1 = Coke, 0 = soda). At the end, participants were thanked and debriefed. No participant correctly guessed the nature of the experiment.

**Results and discussion**

As shown in Figure 1, 73.1% participants in the high-power condition selected the less popular option (i.e., soda), while only 46.4% of those in the low-power condition did so, resulting in a significant difference ($\chi^2(1) = 3.97, p<0.05$). This result suggests that, as predicted by H1, consumers experiencing a sense of power are more likely to choose less popular products than those experiencing a state of powerlessness.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

There may be an alternative explanation for the observed effect of power perception on people’s choices. That is, feeling powerful or powerless may change participants’ emotional states, which consequently results in different choices (Galinsky et al. 2003). The authors further analyzed whether there were any differences in participants’ mood responses by comparing the mood measures between the high- and low-power conditions. Specifically, participants were
asked to report how they felt after recalling the power-related experiences with 7-point scales (1 = feels very bad, 7 = feels very good). The average mood score for the high-power group was 4.65 (SD = 1.36), and that for the low-power group was 4.18 (SD = 1.54). The difference is not statistically significant (t(52) = 1.20, p > 0.10). Thus, the competing explanation can be excluded.

In short, Study 2 replicated the previous findings found in Study 1 and provided additional evidence for H1 by taking a different measure of power perception through experimental manipulation and examining a choice-based, uniqueness behavior. The study shows that temporarily priming consumers with high power may stimulate their preference for seeking a less popular product because the less popular product makes them feel more distinct.

**Study 3: Power and thinking distinctively**

With regard to uniqueness-seeking behavior, it is reasonable to speculate that before high- versus low- power consumers choose between popular and unique products differently, they have already comprehended and presented these products differently in their minds. In other words, the sense of power first makes consumers think differently before making them behave differently. Study 3 examined whether the sense of power makes people think of products in terms of uniqueness and differentiation (as the product is a means to achieve uniqueness). Thus,
instead of presenting consumers with products and asking for their choices, the authors invited consumers to develop product slogans and examined how power affected the attributes consumers naturally emphasized in performing this task. According to H1, it is predicted that consumers primed with high power would employ more uniqueness-related words while producing the slogans, whereas those primed with low power would produce slogans involving more conformity-related words.

**Method**

Sixty-five adult Chinese consumers (37 females) participated in this experiment in exchange for monetary compensation. The study was a web-based, between-subject experiment. Participants were randomly placed into a high- or low-power condition, using a role-playing task (Galinsky et al. 2008; Rucker & Galinsky 2009) introduced below.

Specifically, participants assigned to the high-power role condition were told the following:

“*You are the boss of a company that develops and produces toys. As the boss, you will be in charge of directing your subordinates in creating something called a Tangram. You will decide how to structure the process of creating the toy and the standards by which the work is to be evaluated. As the boss, you will instruct and direct employees. You have complete control over*
the instructions you give your employees. In addition, you will also evaluate the employees at the end of the session in a private questionnaire—that is, the employees will never see your evaluation. The employees will not have the opportunity to evaluate you. Your evaluation will determine whether the employees receive a bonus reward at the end of the session. Thus, as a boss, you will be in charge of directing the creating, evaluating your subordinates, and determining the rewards your subordinates will receive.”

In contrast, participants in the low-power role were told the following:

“*You are an average employee of a company that develops and produces toys. As the employee, you will be responsible for carrying out the orders of the boss in creating something called a Tangram. The boss will decide how to structure the process of creating the toy and the standards by which your work is to be evaluated. As the employee, you must follow the instructions of the boss. In addition, you will be evaluated by the boss at the end of the session. This evaluation will be private, that is, you will not see your boss’s evaluation of you. This evaluation will help determine how the bonus reward, to be revealed at the end of the session, will be divided between the employees and the boss. You will not have the opportunity to*
evaluate your boss. Only the boss will be in charge of directing production, evaluating your performance, and determining the rewards you will receive.”

Next, all participants were given an advertisement picture of a mobile phone and were instructed to generate no less than five slogans for the phone. As an illustration, some sample slogans given by the participants were, “Enjoy your unique lifestyle” and, “Join the three-million user community”. Three independent judges were recruited to peruse the slogans and to evaluate the extent to which the slogans reflected a meaning of uniqueness or conformity. A slogan was categorized as uniqueness related if it contained words such as “unique”, “different”, or other synonyms. Similarly, slogans containing words such as “follow”, “common”, or other relevant synonyms were categorized as conformity related. If a slogan carried both conformity and uniqueness meaning (e.g., “Lead your own life and lead the world”), the slogan was categorized as both uniqueness and conformity relevant. In addition, the orientation of self/other focus was measured to further investigate the possible mediating mechanism underlying the effects of power perception on uniqueness versus conformity seeking. Participants were asked to respond to the following two questions on 7-point scales (Rucker et al., 2011): 1) “When it comes to getting things done, do you depend more on yourself or others?” (1 = completely on myself, 7 = completely on others); 2) “How much do you value people’s opinions versus your own when
making a decision?” (1 = my opinion matters most, 7 = others’ opinion matters most). On the basis of the data, these two items were adequately correlated ($r = 0.59, p < 0.01$). Therefore, they were combined to form an index of self/other focus for future analysis. In particular, a larger value of the index indicates a higher orientation toward other-focus, while a smaller value indicates a higher orientation toward self-focus.

**Results and discussion**

As shown in Figure 2, participants in the high-power condition generated more slogans that reflected a meaning of uniqueness ($M_{\text{high}} = 1.11$) than those in the low-power condition ($M_{\text{low}} = 0.66$), and the difference was significant ($t(63) = 2.05, p < 0.05$). However, no significant difference between the two groups in terms of the total numbers of slogans containing the conformity or assimilation messages was found ($M_{\text{high}} = 0.81; M_{\text{low}} = 0.79; t(63) = 0.05, p > 0.10$). Furthermore, paired samples $t$-test revealed that participants in high-power conditions generated more slogans with an underlying uniqueness message ($M_{\text{uniqueness}} = 1.11$) than those featuring a conformity message ($M_{\text{conformity}} = 1.04$), though the difference was just marginally significant ($t(35) = 1.95; p < 0.06$). For participants in the low-power condition, there was no significant difference between the number of slogans reflecting uniqueness and those reflecting conformity.
(\(M_{\text{conformity}} = 0.79\); \(M_{\text{uniqueness}} = 0.66\); \(t(28) = 0.54, p > 0.10\)). Taken together, these findings support H1 by revealing that consumers primed with high power would be more likely to associate products with uniqueness-related words than those primed with low power.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Study 2 showed that individuals experiencing a sense of power are more likely to choose less popular alternatives, whereas those experiencing a sense of powerlessness are more likely to choose the popular alternative. Study 3 partially replicated the results of Study 2 in that participants in the high-power condition generated more uniqueness-related slogans than those in the low-power condition. However, there was no difference in the average number of conformity-related slogans between the two groups. Why is there such a difference between Study 2 and Study 3?

In Study 2, participants had to make a binary choice between seeking uniqueness (choosing a less popular option) and conforming to the group (choosing the popular option). In other words, the choice was exclusive, and the goal of seeking uniqueness dominated the goal of conformity for the high-power group. This result was the reverse for the low-power group. However, participants in Study 3 were allowed to freely associate both uniqueness and conformity related
words in designing slogans. According to the optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer 1991), individuals simultaneously require a certain level of similarity to, as well as differentiation from, others. In a similar vein, Chan, Berger, and Boven (2012) argue that people do not simply assimilate or differentiate, but can simultaneously do both on different dimensions of choice. Therefore, the goal of seeking uniqueness or conforming to others was not mutually exclusive and could be accomplished at the same time. Consequently, the participants primed with high power in Study 3 may be able to generate slogans with uniqueness-related words without avoiding conformity. As a result, there was no difference in the average number of conformity-related slogans generated by high (versus low)-power groups.

**Mediation analysis**

In addition, to test the mediating effect suggested by H2, the authors examined whether the differences in association of uniqueness as a function of power perception was mediated by self/other focus using a series of regression procedures (Baron & Kenny 1986). The results showed that power perception predicted both self/other focus orientation ($B = -0.58, t = -1.79, p < 0.10$), and distinctive thinking ($B = 0.47, t = 2.05, p < 0.05$). In addition, self/other focus predicted distinctive thinking ($B = -0.21, t = 2.46, p < 0.05$). Further, when both power and
self/other focus were included in a model predicting association of uniqueness, the effect of power was no longer significant ($B = 0.35, t = 1.59, p > 0.10$). However, the effect of self/other focus still reached conventional levels of significance ($B = -0.16, t = -2.08, p < 0.05$). These results are suggestive of full mediation implied by H2: power increased self-focus, which affected the association of uniqueness.

**Conclusion**

Across three studies, the authors have provided consistent evidence that being or feeling powerful affects Chinese consumer’s uniqueness-seeking behavior. The authors used both the chronic individual difference measure and multiple manipulations of power (role assignments and recall-task priming), as well as a variety of dependent measures (e.g., product choice, advertisement slogan creation) to converge on the proposed theoretical perspective. From the individual difference prospective, it was found that Chinese consumers’ chronic sense of power is positively associated with their need for uniqueness (Study 1). The authors also examined how temporarily having or lacking power drives Chinese consumers’ choice in the consumption context, finding that the choice of differentiation or assimilation is affected by power perception. Specifically, consumers experiencing a sense of power were more likely to choose a minority
alternative than those experiencing a sense of powerlessness (Study 2). Consistent with previous
literature, this study demonstrated that high power, relative to low power, was more likely to
have people focus on the self, thus associating more uniqueness-related words in the
advertisement-slogan-development task (Study 3). On the whole, the three studies provide
converging evidence in support of a positive relationship between power perception and
uniqueness seeking.

**Contribution and marketing implications**

The present research contributes to the existing literature in a several ways. An abiding concern
in social psychology has been how power affects the targets of powerful individuals’ actions.
The research interests of some recent studies (e.g., Keltner et al. 2003) lie in how power
influences the behavior of the actor. This issue sets the stage for our own theory in proposing the
impact of power perception on power-holders’ own uniqueness-seeking behavior. Additionally,
previous theories on power and information processing largely focused on two specific areas:
social cognition and primarily person perception (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2000). But in everyday
life, powerful people encounter not just the people below them in the hierarchy, but rather a
whole host of stimuli, many of which are not directly relevant to power. The same holds for
those lacking in power. The present research extends the consequences of power from person perception in a given hierarchical organization or social cognition, to product choice made by consumers.

In cross cultural studies conventionally concentrating on the individualism versus collectivism dimension, Shavitt, Lalwani, Zhang, and Torelli (2006) suggested a re-emphasis on power and power distance by focusing on Triandis’ (1995) horizontal (valuing and emphasizing equality) and vertical (valuing and emphasizing hierarchy) axes. Following this shift, Zhang, Winterich, and Mittal (2010) found that power distance belief (i.e., accepting and expecting power disparity) influences consumers’ impulsive purchases. However, by focusing on power distance as acceptance of power inequality in organizations, current horizontal/vertical approaches do not distinguish between having and not having power. Therefore, it is necessary to isolate the role of high power (versus low power) and equality, and would be more advantageous to treat high power (versus low power) and power disparity as separate aspects of power (Oyserman 2006). In contrast to consumer researches related to power distance, the present research advances our understanding of the effects of power on consumers in the having versus lacking power perspective, which is complementary to the power distance perspective.
Since external cues can activate a sense of power (Keltner et al. 2003), findings from the current research also provide valuable marketing implications for practitioners. First, companies can take active steps to influence Chinese consumers’ preferences to unique products. For instance, marketers can activate consumers’ higher or lower sense of power through advertising and in-store interactions between salespersons and consumers to shape consumers’ preferences toward unique versus popular products.

Second, marketing managers may also enhance the efficiency of market segmentation in China by understanding the power sense of their customers. Specifically, Chinese consumers with a higher sense of power are more likely to favor unique products. Therefore, companies producing or selling niche products might choose people with a higher generalized sense of power as a target market for future marketing campaigns. For example, conspicuous goods satisfy both material needs and social needs. A need for uniqueness (vs. conformity) leads consumers to value a product less (vs. more) when more consumers own it. Extant research indicates that more “snobs” (those with a strong need for uniqueness) may buy a product when its price rises only when a small segment of consumers are “conformists” (those with strong need for conformity)(Amaldoss & Jain 2005). Along this track, the findings in this study further provide a workable method to identify the snob versus conformist segmentation in the China
market on the basis of consumers’ power perception. Marketers can also influence the consumer’s degree of conformism and snobbishness by power priming to boost the price or revenue of conspicuous goods.

Third, recent research shows that positive word-of-mouth (WOM) may be associated with certain psychosocial costs, and may decrease the uniqueness of possessions (Cheema & Kaikati 2010). Consequently, high- (vs. low-) uniqueness consumers are less willing to generate positive WOM for publicly consumed products that they own. As suggested by results from the current study, high-power people tend to seek more uniqueness in consumption; they are thus less likely to recommend the brand they use with positive WOM to peer consumers. To leverage the effect of WOM to acquire new customers (e.g., through a referral reward program), it is advisable to direct more marketing effects toward low-power customers instead of to their high-power counterparts.

**Limitations and future research**

The current study also raises several important issues relevant to further research. First, the sense of power may be derived from multiple sources. The current study examined individual differences and authority-based roles as power sources. Other potential power origins and their
impact on Chinese consumer’s uniqueness-seeking behavior are worthy of further exploration.

For instance, power can derive from knowledge-based expertise or from the ability to provide rewards to others (Keltner et al. 2003). Future studies that further explore the relationships between a sense of power and uniqueness-seeking behavior, which incorporate these variant sources of power, would provide useful knowledge for marketing practitioners.

Second, recent research shows that consumers may achieve their needs for conformity and needs for uniqueness by making choices at different levels simultaneously (Chan, Berger & Boven 2012). Specifically, consumers tend to choose options from brands that are strongly linked to an in-group to satisfy their needs for conformity. Meanwhile, consumers choose a less popular product option from the brand linked to their in-groups to achieve a sense of uniqueness. A relevant topic worthy of future research is this question: how would Chinese consumers with high power (versus low power) behave differently in reconciling the conflicting goals of assimilation and distinction? In addition, people’s need for differentiation may vary significantly when consumption behavior changes from invisible (i.e., private consumption) to visible (i.e., public consumption) (Berger & Heath 2007; Pickett et al. 2002). Future research examining the moderation effect of consumption shall also be a meaningful path.
Third, power is not static but interacts with contextual factors, culture, and individual difference variables (e.g., Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh 2001). It is meaningful to further investigate the moderating effect of cross-cultural factors with regard to the influence of power perception on uniqueness-seeking. The four dimensions of cultural variation derived by Hofstede (1980, 2001) can be a qualified foundation. For example, as the first dimension in this framework, power distance does not measure or represent the extent to which a person has power. We may thus further explore the interaction between consumers’ power and power distance belief in driving their uniqueness-seeking behavior.

Finally, observing one’s own behavior in terms of seeking uniqueness or conformity, may ultimately contribute and shape consumer’s own sense of power. As consumers seek more uniqueness in their purchases, they might feel as if they have greater resources or are more important, which in turn may shape their sense of power. Examining this reverse flow of the effect of consumption on power seems an interesting direction for future research.
References


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Appendix

Generalized Sense of Power Scale Items (Adapted from Anderson & Galinsky, 2006)

In rating each of the items below, please use the following scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree a little</td>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>Agree a little</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In my relationships with others: ________________

1. I can get people to listen to what I say.

2. My wishes do not carry much weight.

3. I can get others to do what I want.

4. Even if I voice them, my views have little sway.

5. I think I have a great deal of power.

6. My ideas and opinions are often ignored.

7. Even when I try, I am not able to get my way.

8. If I want to, I get to make the decisions.
Figure 1 Choosing to assimilate versus choosing to differentiate as a function of power perception
Figure 2 Number of slogans reflecting the conformity versus uniqueness as a function of power perception.